

Galconia

By Nick Creech

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*For Deborah,
and her unfailing wisdom*

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A Way with Dragons - <https://freekidsbooks.org/books/61/a-way-with-dragons>

The Blob, the Frog, the Dog and the Girl - <https://freekidsbooks.org/books/211/the-blob-the-frog-the-dog-and-the-girl>

Three-P - <https://freekidsbooks.org/books/63/three-p>

Annabella - <https://freekidsbooks.org/books/251/annabella-crabtree-hunted>

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Nick Creech is a former newspaper journalist. He has two sons, both now successful and more-or-less responsible adults who still deign to talk to him from time to time in tones of kindly condescension. He has a wife who does the same, mostly.

Since leaving journalism, he has written extensively for children, young adults and people of all ages who just enjoy a story.

BOOK ONE

Prologue

(Two years before)

His Excellency, Osmond von Osmond, fourteenth of the name and eventually to be the 321st hereditary Chairman of Galiconia Enterprises Inc., was sulking. He had, in fact, been sulking for days and he was fully determined to go on sulking for the entire duration of this horrible visit to the most gods-benighted corner of the cluster inhabited only by peons, prisoners and pests. What was the point of being the son of the most powerful man for parsecs in every direction if the most important place in the whole damn universe was not Theta Tauri Minor, the Galiconia headquarters and home world, but this rotten lump of rock that somebody with a nasty sense of humour had named Redux? Who in their right mind would ever want to go there once, never mind revisit it? But that's exactly what His Excellency, Osmond von Osmond, fourteenth of the name, was being forced to do.

Every year, his father, the Chairman, made inspection tours and every year for as long as he could remember, Osmond had been required to accompany him. He could scream as he might, he could destroy whole rooms with tantrums born of genius, he could maim and indeed kill his servants, as he had done on at least one occasion, but his father would remain totally unmoved and immovable. Fight he may, but go he must.

This time it had been bad. Worse than usual. In fact, so bad that his father had commanded Osmond to be frog-marched before him. And then, when Osmond refused to stop shouting, he had commanded him to be gagged.

It was a strange scene: an 18-year-old youth already marked by dissipation, gagged and clamped helpless between two armoured troopers of the bodyguard, extremely large troopers as the house regiment had a most rigorous selection process. His father, too, was tall and as severe as he was slender.

"One thing saves you," the Chairman said. His voice was quiet and so cold that Osmond, despite himself, began to pay attention. His father should properly have had a throne room but instead he chose the more modest surrounds of an office, modest that is except for the pealed-pearl panelling and the huge desk carved from solid synthetic emerald and set on a wide dais, the edge of which was the closest that anyone might approach without being incinerated. The Chairman rose and came to stand in front of Osmond, his arms folded, his gaze remote.

"One thing saves you," he repeated. "You are my only legitimate son. Had you brothers I would long since have sent you into the mines at Redux that you might learn to control yourself, or that you might die of thormalium poisoning. The latter for preference. But you have no brothers..."

Osmond smirked to himself. As if any brother would have survived for long, he thought. And don't think you'll live forever, either. Don't think I'll wait too long. Don't think I won't take what's mine.

"Which leaves me with a problem," his father continued. "You are already dissolute. You are a wastrel. You are a bully. You are a coward. And if not irredeemably stupid, you refuse to learn what you must know to run this company. You are unfit to succeed me. Now. Or ever."

But I shall, Osmond thought. Oh yes. His father regarded him unblinkingly and then sighed. He had not wanted Osmond in the first place but nevertheless, he should have taken some sort of interest in his upbringing. If Osmond was his mother's revenge for being ignored after a token month of marital cohabitation, then it was all too successful. In fact, the Chairman thought, he had failed all along that particular line. He should have found a way to have the dreadful woman eliminated much earlier.

"When I said you had no brothers I was not quite accurate. You have no legitimate brothers, no full brothers. And you have driven me to the point where I have no choice but to make you this ultimatum. You should know that I now have two wills: one that leaves our controlling interest in this company to you, and one that leaves it to... to someone else of my line. If you reform, if you learn what is required to conduct an enterprise on this sort of scale I will destroy the second will. If you don't, I will destroy the first." The Chairman stepped back.

"Take off the gag," he told the troopers. "Let him go."

"What brothers?" Osmond shrieked as soon as his mouth was free. "What gods-poxed brothers?"

"Put the gag back on," the Chairman said. There was a short, futile struggle. Osmond, though 18 and legally an adult, was a weedy, spotty youth with bad breath and lank, unwashed hair. When he was again securely clamped between the guards his father picked up a heavy gauntlet from his desk and smashed him with all his force, twice across either cheek. Osmond started to gag on the blood pouring from the inside of his mouth.

"Listen to me," his father said, so quietly that Osmond could barely hear through the pounding in his ears. "I will say this once. You are coming to Redux. You will behave as befits the son of the Chairman. Or you will stay there until you die, and I will activate the second will. And understand this, Osmond. I know you for what you are. I have long, too long, tried to hide from the truth, but I know you for what you are. If you try to kill me and manipulate the wills, you will fail and you will die in the screamer. If you try to kill my other... heirs, you will fail and you will die in the screamer."

Osmond thought longingly of the illicit nautch chaise, concealed in his quarters back at Galiconia. That would surprise his father: not only the fact that he actually had a nautch chaise, the single most sinful object in the Hyades, but the fact that he had been able to arrange its purchase, importation and concealment within his father's own enclave. Unfit to succeed him indeed... If he succeeded him.

For weeks now Osmond had been ploughing the same narrow, mental furrow, back and forth with no result. His father claimed at least one more, unknown heir, unknown to Osmond, that is, and an heir to whom Osmond was now hostage for his behaviour. The situation was obviously intolerable. The situation obviously had a simple solution. The problem was execution. In every sense of the word.

Osmond glared at the ship display. Redux loomed large now. Hateful, Osmond thought. Just hateful, even if from space it appeared jewel-like with the silver skin of the lucent lapping at the peaks of the various jagged mountains poking through. Oh yes, Osmond thought. Very pretty. But he knew only too well what lay under the skin, a sprawling slum of workers' apartments, mine tunnels and ore dumps covered in a thick coat of tailings dust, with never a splash of water to be had not measured by the millilitre, where the daily allowance was two litres, even for him. Theoretically. And always the dust. Everywhere. In everything. The clogging, choking dust. The gritty, filthy, ever present, ever grinding dust that ate its way through both humans and machines while you watched. The poison dust.

Dostoi slid noiselessly into his quarters and coughed discreetly.

"Tell me again," Osmond said.

Dostoi sighed to himself. He was a small, entirely unremarkable man whose stock-in-trade was obsequious servility. He had once been Osmond's tutor and was now his general factotum, bound, sealed and delivered until such time, if ever, that Osmond should choose to release him.

"Sir," he said. "The facts are these. Your father requires you to perform as he would wish or he will disinherit you. If he disinherits you, you will be at the mercy of his successor and those others of whom we know. Your mother," here Dostoi coughed awkwardly. "Your mother," he said, "has left you independently wealthy, extremely wealthy, but if it comes to open conflict you will inevitably lose. Therefore, we must find and dispose of such heirs as it has pleased your father to designate, and in the meantime you must at least appear to be fulfilling your father's stated wish." Dostoi paused. "And if I might add, sir, it would be... politic for you, if you so decide, to put the best possible face on it."

"Yes," Osmond grimaced. "So you have said. Several times."

Chapter One

Mac bit down hard but couldn't help himself. A whimper escaped; then a great racking sob. He clamped his hands over his mouth, which did something to muffle the sound, but nothing would stop the tears rolling down his face like the rain he had read about but never seen, except on cam. They streamed and they streamed, flooding his fingers and clogging his nose. His whole being was one great aching void. He wished... he wished he were dead too.

From this fragile hiding place he had watched his father die only moments before; his father who had come from nowhere to rescue him and who, when the pursuit had grown too hot, had led the troopers off at a tangent; his father, who had drawn a storm of plasma fire, and who had stood for a moment and then disappeared in a great ball of flame and smoke. His father. Down. Down. Dead.

But black as Mac's mind was, part of it insisted on still working. There came the tell-tale mutter of another agger, and Mac knew they were still hunting him. Despite himself, despite his grief, his tears stopped and he dropped his hands. Had they picked up his lifesign? Or were they just hoping to?

Moving only a millimetre at a time, he slid an eye round the corner of his buttress and then frantically spread the fingers of his left hand as wide as they would go. The agger swooped round towards him and Mac shot up into the air, a fraction before the plasma beam incinerated his hiding spot. He dived, jinked and barrel rolled, plasma bursts spearing past him close enough to singe his hair, and he could sense the agger matching his manoeuvres and closing up behind for the kill. Again he spread his fingers wide and went rocketing up towards the lucent. The firing stopped and it dawned on Mac that the agger was afraid of fracturing the carapace.

It was one tiny thing in his favour. He had seven seconds; seven seconds before he crashed into the sky, seven seconds without being shot at, seven seconds in which to think of something, to make a plan, seven seconds in which to find a way of bringing down a Galiconian agger in full battle configuration with what? With... the whip. He still had the plasma whip.

Subtly Mac slowed, letting the agger draw closer, until he could see the visors of the pilot and co-pilot fixed on him through the canopy. It was a standard 24-man, anti-gravity personnel carrier and Mac knew there would be a squad of fully armoured troopers on board as well as the pilots. It wore Galiconia scarlet and gold livery, and bristled with menace.

Mac spiralled slightly to the left and watched as the agger followed. He went right and again the agger swung itself precisely underneath him. Obviously it planned to pin him against the lucent and then the squad fighter would storm out for the kill.

Two seconds to go before he was trapped and without letting himself think about what he was planning to do, Mac abruptly closed his left fist, dropping hard on to the agger just below, pointed the whip into the air intake and tried to lash at it. Nothing happened. Desperately Mac tried again, but still nothing happened. The whip had to be cracked just so to generate a plasma flash and Mac had had no time to discover the secret. Seized with fury at the monstrous injustice of it all, Mac suddenly flung the handle into the intake with all his force. There was a violent clang as at least one of the turbo-fan blades was severed, and then a raucous graunching as the engine died.

Out of the corner of one eye, Mac saw the two pilots turn to each other in consternation and he knew that this was his only chance. The agger was dead in the air, kept aloft by the anti-grav generator but with no propulsion, and their flighter would never catch him in a million years, not without help, not without a lot of help. But instead of fleeing, Mac felt himself swelling with rage. They had killed his father, his father who had sacrificed everything for him, including his life. With a last glimpse, Mac saw the pilot shouting urgently into his throat com and then he had his shoulder under the starboard rim of the agger and with his hand spread wide was lifting with all his might.

It was ridiculous to think that a boy could kill an agger single-handed and if the pilot hadn't panicked, Mac never would have been able to manage it. But instead of increasing the anti-grav and making the agger lighter, the pilot tried to drop away, playing right into Mac's hands.

It was the agger's great potential weakness. To maximise lift and therefore troop-carrying capacity as economically as possible, an agger's anti-grav field was tightly focused which meant that if ever it were tilted beyond a certain point, it could capsize, turn turtle, and fall out of the sky.

Suddenly, just as the hatch was popped to release the squad's flighter, Mac felt the agger go past the point of no return, hang for a moment longer, and then start to drop. He pulled himself on to the beast's belly and scrabbled desperately for a handhold, knowing he must ride it down as far as he could to hide his lifesign in with the crew's for a few extra seconds.

Ten metres before impact, Mac delicately shaped his left hand and shot away, hugging the ground and zooming through the alleys of the Cantin Quarter, desperate to find the gate with the three shields and the manhole a metre to the left.

Just as he picked up the mutter of more agger fan-jets from somewhere overhead, Mac careered round another corner and a flicker of white caught his eye. There was the gate, and the manhole with someone waving. And then somehow he was down and in and the cover had clanged behind him.

"Quickly," a voice said. "This way. And wear this." Mac, without questioning, took the bracelet held towards him and ran, bent double, twisting and turning, feeling the tunnel trend downward.

At last, whoever it was in front of him stopped. "All right," said a girl's voice. "We're safe now. Put that blocker on your wrist. Never take it off."

"Blocker?" Mac said, breathing hard, harder than the girl he couldn't help noticing.

"Blocks your lifesign."

"You can't block lifesign," Mac said. "Everyone knows that."

"Yes, you can," said the girl. "Or at least, you can change it. They think we're rats, or cockroaches. Come on."

Mac badly wanted to ask questions but the girl hurried on and it was all Mac could do to keep up with her in the dark. Eventually, just when he thought that whatever the humiliation, he would have to ask for a rest, he saw the glow of a light up ahead. They emerged into a small chamber and a man stood waiting for them. He was tall and looked extremely worried. He was wearing an old, unfamiliar uniform.

"Ah," he said quietly. "Hasdrubal D. Macgilliguddy, I believe. Welcome. You are safe here. I am Captain Wright. And this," he said, indicating Mac's rescuer, "is my daughter, Roxanna."

"Sir," Dostoi said, barely controlling his terror. "The boy has escaped."

Osmond screamed wordlessly.

"But Slade has the man, Macgilliguddy," Dostoi added, sidling backwards. After two years on Redux, mostly as master, Osmond was infinitely more dangerous.

"Alive!" Osmond demanded with such menace that Dostoi cringed.

"Yes sir," he quavered. "Just."

Mac quickly glanced around the chamber. As well as Captain Wright and Roxanna there were two other men, each with a blaster not quite pointing at him. They had been watching other possible entrances and had been summoned back by a blip from the girl's reacom. The captain gestured.

"Let me introduce you," he said. "This is Shelby, and this is John Lanfranchi. The reason they have blasters is that they think you might be part of some elaborate plot by Galiconia; that you might be a spy." He gave Mac a quizzical look. "Are you?"

"You mean, did they kill my father to get me in here?"

"It's been done," the Captain said. "Never underestimate the lengths Galiconia will go to..."

"We knew James," he added. "We trusted James. We don't know you."

"Well then, you'd better get rid of me," Mac said. "I can't prove anything, and do you think I care?"

"He did destroy the agger," Roxanna said. "They couldn't have planned for that. No one could plan for that."

"Possibly," the Captain said. "But then Galconia is well aware of this young man's genius in the air."

Mac had had enough. This was the worst day of his life and he just wanted it to end. On top of everything else, his father had died trying to save him and now nothing mattered. Nothing at all. He felt the grief and then anger bubbling up deep inside and had no inclination to try to control it.

"If you think ..." he exploded. "If you think I could watch them kill my dad and use that to come after you, then you had better kill me. That makes me scum. The worst sort of scum. Come on. Shoot. Get it over with. Shoot!"

Shelby lifted his blaster and took aim. Mac glared at him. Shelby's finger began to tighten, but Mac stood firm, determined.

The Captain held up a hand.

"That's enough," he said. "It's not as though we weren't expecting him."

"Better be safe," Shelby said. "Costs nothing to be safe." Still Mac stood defiant.

"That trooper led James into a trap," Shelby insisted. "A trap this brat survived."

"I believe him," the Captain repeated. "And I don't kill children unless I must."

"Bad mistake," Shelby said.

"John?" the Captain asked.

"I don't know," Lanfranchi said. "Maybe he's all right..."

"Roxanna?" the Captain said.

"I trust him. He was terrified at the entrance. Really scared. He wasn't faking." Mac shifted angrily.

"Orville?" the Captain asked of no one in particular.

A disembodied voice came from somewhere in the roof of the chamber. "The readings are good. Let him stay... A new victim."

"You leave him alone," the Captain said sharply, and then, more mildly: "Even if we count John against, that's three to two. Your... father," he said to Mac, "was a friend of mine and I, too, mourn him. You are welcome to stay in his name, if you wish. Roxanna will take you to the mess and find you somewhere to sleep. You will have questions. I will tell you whatever I can tomorrow. In the meantime, we must take precautions. Come," he said to the two men. And without ceremony the three of them disappeared down a tunnel that suddenly appeared in the wall of the chamber.

Mac stared, despite himself. It seemed to have appeared by magic. And as he watched, it vanished again. Roxanna smiled a little.

"It was always there," she said. "It's disguised by a holoc. It's why they've never been able to find us. We holoc our tunnels and they always go right past. Orville invented it."

"Orville?" Mac said.

"My brother," Roxanna said. "But mostly we call him 'Awful'."

Mac closed his eyes. It seemed as though he were enveloped in a huge black cloud of grief. He felt drained. He felt sick. And he couldn't begin to make sense of everything that had happened in the past few hours. Instead of himself lying a corpse in the arena, it was his father who lay dead, back there in the slums. There was a light touch on his arm.

"Do you need food, something to drink?" Roxanna asked. Mac shook his head. "Then I'll take you to where you can rest."

Her touch turned to gentle pressure and Mac followed her down another tunnel that suddenly appeared. After a little way she pulled aside a curtain and Mac saw a small sleeping chamber that had been cut into the rock; just a platform about knee height, with a hollow long enough for a man to lie down and high enough for him to sit up. There was a mat, a blanket and a fatpac hanging from a hook on the wall.

"This was your father's place," Roxanna said. "Those are his things. You can rest here."

Mac sat down on the mat and looked at his boots.

"Make yourself comfortable," Roxanna said. "I'll get you something to drink."

But when she returned, Mac was already deeply unconscious. She set the mug down where he would see it when he woke, and left.

Chapter Two

Hasdrubal D. Macgilliguddy, not unnaturally, hated his name. He supposed there might be worse names but he'd never come across one. The Macgilliguddy, he realised, he was stuck with. It was, after all, the family name – had been for thousands of years – but as for the Hasdrubal... and no one was ever going to find out what the D stood for.

But there was a deeper reason that he refused to answer to anything but Mac. His twin brother had been called Hannibal and if people called him Hasdrubal, the constant reminder of how his brother and his mother had died so casually, so senselessly, that horrible day was more than he could bear.

It had been one of those accidents, totally avoidable but so common as to be taken for granted on Redux. A thormalium hauler had clipped the side of a building trying to take a sharp corner of the g-pass too fast, the load had shifted disastrously and then the whole lot, hauler, thormalium and all had come plummeting out of the sky. Hannibal and Mac's mother, Grace, had been on the beltway underneath. One moment they had been on a perfectly normal journey to Hannibal's havas class, the next, they were dead.

The twins had been eight at the time and Mac should have been there too, but had been grounded for shaving off Hannibal's eyebrows with a laser-razor while he was asleep. It had been a good fight, too, one of their best, their last. James had eventually come to break it up and had decreed that Mac was shot down in flames for a week, including all cam.

The time that followed the accident, with the exception of today, had been the worst of Mac's life. Bustling boomtoid Redux had seemed as grey and lifeless as the morgue where Hannibal and Grace had been cremated. And James, his father, though trying to hide his grief for Mac's sake, clearly would rather have been dead himself.

It had gone on for months, one endless day after another, until at last, Mac, taking his courage in both hands, had said to his father:

"I would rather be dead instead of them."

James had looked at him then, properly, for the first time since the accident.

"So would I," he said.

"But we can't be," Mac said. "And they wouldn't want it. Would they?"

Things had slowly improved for both of them after that. There was the day James smiled, hesitantly as though he had forgotten how, but it was a smile nonetheless. And there was the day the two of them found themselves laughing, actually laughing, at something on the cam. And there was the day, years later when things had reached some sort of equilibrium, when James again caught Mac secretly trying on one of his old gloves.

Mac braced himself but James just shook his head.

"No Mac," he said quietly. "Not you."

"But why," Mac burst out. Ever since he could remember, the one thing he had wanted with all his heart and soul was to fly, and the one thing that had always been anathema was for him to mention the word.

"Why," Mac said again. "Why, why, why! You flew!"

"And I managed to escape," James said. "Before it was too late."

"But you flew," Mac said insistently.

"Do we have to go through this again?" James demanded.

"Yes," Mac said doggedly.

"One in ten thousand, Mac," James said. "One in ten thousand people have sufficient synaptic response to do anything but kanga-hop without killing themselves. And they won't let you have thormalium for kanga-hopping. But if you do have fine enough rates of response then you'll be conscripted into the GDF whether you like it or not, and I will be held hostage against your performance. And last, Mac, close exposure to thormalium is deadly. You know this. A glove can't be shielded and still register your synapses. And there is no anti-gravity field in the first place without the interaction with your body impedance. The more you fly, the more deadly it is. In the end, the exposure will kill you."

"You're not poisoned."

"I am. And I don't have too much longer, Mac."

There was a silence. A long silence. Mac knew all this, but the need to fly burned so bright within him that it blinded him to everything else. Asleep, he dreamed of flying, nothing but flying, and awake he spent most of his time thinking of flying, thoughts that consumed all reason.

"Is that what your father said to you," Mac demanded angrily.

"Yes," James said. "Pretty much."

"So what did you do?"

James looked at him hard. "I ran away," he said. "To the flight academy. And by the time my parents realised, it was too late. They had done the tests, I was in, and they were hostages."

"So is that what you want me to do?" Mac asked very quietly.

James stared at him, stared and stared.

"Mac," he said at last. "Be very sure about this. Once you start, once you pass the tests, there's no going back. And they never let you go..."

"They let you go."

"Do you know why?" James asked. Mac shook his head. "I was a gladiator, Mac. I killed 153 people and when the 154th turned out to be... the Chairman stopped it."

Extraordinary clemency. He was having a good day... His son had just been born. Osmond von Osmond. And he wanted to mark the occasion.

"There's one other thing. Are you happy for me to be a hostage? And before you answer, you should know that the reason I was made to be a gladiator was punishment for the fact that my parents killed themselves. They committed suicide together. Because of me. Because of what I'd forced on them. And when Galiconia no longer had that hold on me I was sent to the arena to die."

As he spoke, James watched his son with narrowed eyes. He understood the compulsion to fly, no one better; the glorious freedom; the vaulting, soaring splendour of it, the speed, the exhilaration, the fear overcome, the ineffable beauty of riding the wind. Oh yes, he understood; still longed for it; still waking dreamed of the quiet, controlled ascent, the sudden slip to the left, the flip, the swoop, the dive, the feeling of being more alive than any other creature in the whole of the infinite universe. Oh yes, he understood. He turned and began to walk away. He had seen enough. But then he felt his hand being roughly seized.

"No," Mac said. "No. I don't want you to be a hostage. Not for me. No. I won't fly. I won't fly." He was weeping.

James felt tears in his own eyes. In the same situation he had made a much different decision; one he could still only bear to think about with the edge of his mind.

He found a chair and sat. Mac stood before him, tears streaming down his face, clutching his hand as though he would never let it go.

"Mac," James said. "I am more honoured, more touched than I can possibly say... That you would give up flying for me... It's the greatest gift you could ever give me; the greatest gift I have ever had." He paused. "But, as it happens, it's probably out of our hands anyway, whatever I say. Galiconia is now so short of flighters they'll start compulsory testing again. It means they may well find you and take you anyway."

"I'll fake it," Mac said. "I won't go. And they can't make me."

"If you fake it, they'll know," his father replied. "Which will be the end for both us. And they can make you go. They can, and they will. They'll put a necklet on me and you'll have the choice of going with them or watching my head explode. And once they've killed me, they'll kill you, one way or another."

"I don't care," Mac insisted. "It's better than being a ..."

"A what? A slave? We're all slaves, except most of us here don't realise it. We do what Galiconia wants. We live as long as Galiconia feeds us. We die when Galiconia no longer has a use for us. To keep this mine going, the Chairman would never hesitate to eliminate all ten million of us and bring in a completely new workforce. He wouldn't hesitate for a second. But he won't have to. The money's good, Mac. Plenty of luxuries. People think they're happy, and compared to the rest of Galiconia, maybe they are."

"So what?" Mac said. "What can we do? Just give in?"

"Pretty much," James said. "Once they test you, you'll fly. We both know that. You want it so much, it's in your synapses. And if they have me, they'll hold me hostage..."

"If they have you...?" Mac interrupted, feeling a sudden surge of... not hope, exactly, but interest, at least.

"I could disappear," James said.

"Join the outlaws? But they don't..."

"They do, Mac. They do exist."

"They're just stories..."

"No," James said. "They're real all right."

"But that would be worse."

"For me, no. I would be free, not wearing a necklet, not working in the mines. But it would be worse for you. They'll never trust you if they don't have me, too."

"But they'd let me fly?"

"They'd make you play g-ball. And if the g-ball didn't kill you, in the end they'd send you to the arena."

"Oh," Mac said, hugely relieved. "But g-ball's what I want to do anyway..."

James looked at his son with new eyes. Mac was a sturdy youth, already showing breadth through the shoulders and strength in the legs. He had the red-blond hair and pale complexion of his long forgotten forbears and a dusting of freckles that softened his snub nose and square jaw. Suddenly James could make out the man Mac would become, if he lived, and he admired what he saw. Whatever he did, Mac would fly. James was in absolutely no doubt of that. And if Mac were any good he would end up playing g-ball anyway. Galconia required its entertainments, would not be denied.

"All right, Mac," James said. "So be it."

Chapter Three

The energy drink Roxanna had left was all right, as far as it went, but Mac was still thirsty; and there was a dull pain in his middle that might have been grief but was probably hunger. He ruffled his hands through his hair and wandered off down the passage towards the glow of a light, his fingers tracing the drilling grooves in the rough rock walls. It was, he knew, an old mine tunnel, twisting and turning as it followed the elusive veins of thormalium.

At the entrance to the lighted chamber, he stopped. It was quite a big room. In the middle were a large table and chairs, battered and much used. One end wall was occupied by some sort of large, cryllic-fronted display cabinet and an unfamiliar machine; the other was filled with the strangest collection of wires, dials, screens and control panels. Someone was seated at a central console with Roxanna standing beside him. They turned and Mac saw that Roxanna was with a skinny-looking young man, seated in an elaborate floater. There was something terribly wrong with his legs. They were withered sticks that clearly would fail to support his weight.

"Ah," he said, waspishly. "Our guest..." Roxanna came towards him.

"Hasdrubal," she said. "Are you feeling better? You should be, you've been asleep for at least 12 hours."

"Thank you, yes," Mac said. " But, please call me Mac."

"Why should we?" the young man said. "And what does the D stand for?"

"This is Orville," Roxanna said. "Awful Orville. Pay no attention. He likes to irritate people. For the fun of it. Are you hungry, Hasdrubal?"

"Mac!"

"We'll call you what we please," Orville said. "We give the nicknames around here." He swung his floater back from the console and came gliding down the chamber.

"That's fine by me," Mac said, beginning to flush. "I'll just go. If you'll kindly show me the way out..."

"So sensitive," Orville said. "Did you ever see anyone so sensitive, Roxy?"

"And don't call me that, either," Roxanna snapped. "My name is Roxanna."

"Or what?" Orville said, tauntingly. Roxanna looked at Mac. They regarded each other solemnly for a moment, and low as Mac was feeling it seemed to him they had reached some sort of unspoken agreement, though what it might be, he couldn't begin to say.

"Or Mac and I will tip you out of your chair," she said.

"You wouldn't dare," Orville said, beginning to shout.

"We would," Mac said. "Why not?" And then: "I've only just met you but already I'm itching to teach you a lesson." He made a threatening move towards him and suddenly

was confronted by a howling space banshee, twice as tall as he was, dripping with blood and reaching for his throat. He glanced at Roxanna, who seemed curiously unmoved, and in an instant Mac twiggled.

"A holoc is not actually a very clever defence," he said over the banshee's screams. Abruptly it vanished.

"Why not?" Orville blustered.

"If I had a blaster," Mac said, "then naturally I would use it, and you, of course, as we know, would be directly in the line of fire with nothing to shield you."

"Got you in one," Roxanna said.

"Look," Mac said. "I'm a guest here and I don't want to fight. I just want you to call me by a name I can answer to. Or I'll go."

"And," Roxanna said. "If Mac is a guest, you're his host. And you're being terribly rude..."

Abruptly, Orville swung his chair round and went back to his console.

"I'm sorry," Roxanna said to Mac. "Try not to mind him. He'll sulk for a while then he'll be all right. Are you hungry," she asked him again. Mac nodded. She led him over to the wall cabinet and Mac saw that it was a standard self-server with the usual selection of meals and drinks. Roxanna gestured.

"Choose what you want and I'll show you what to do." Mac loaded a tray with a slice of pie and good-for-you, a fruit dessert and cup of locaf. Roxanna took it from him and one by one placed each item in the strange machine, and one by one took a duplicate off a small conveyor belt. The originals she put back in the cabinet.

"It's a matter-maker," she said to a mystified Mac. "It will copy anything you place in here." She pointed to the copy-cavity. "Nano-technology. It duplicates atom for atom, I don't understand how. Orville made it. Before he did, we had to steal everything. Things were much more dangerous. Now they half think we don't exist any more."

"Will it copy anything?" Mac asked.

"Anything that will fit inside."

"A glove? Thormalium? Refined thormalium?"

"I think so. The more complex the substance, the more energy it takes, and the more likely we are to be detected. But yes, it should copy thormalium... So eat."

Mac sat down at the table and unwrapped his food. He pushed the button on the pie plate and waited for it to heat.

"Where does the energy come from?" he asked.

"We steal it," Roxanna said. "We tap into the mine's power supply and as long as we don't take too much they think it's just natural low-level leakage."

"So they'd notice if you tried to copy thormalium?"

"Yes," she said. "Probably."

"Water?" Mac asked.

"We get that from the mine too. And we recycle everything we can. But we have to be careful. They're much stricter about water." The only supply on Redux came from the ice of a comet, captured and manoeuvred into close orbit at vast expense and then progressively melted by a fusion reactor and transported below by tanker. The cost was exorbitant, beyond belief, particularly when a new comet was required, but far outweighed by the value of the thormalium that could be mined as a result.

Mac fell silent. There was a lot to think about.

"And Orville," he asked at last. "Why is he in that floater thing? Did he have an accident?"

Roxanna looked at him for a long moment, her face not exactly troubled, but sad, so sad.

"Orville was born like that," she said at last. "It's why we're here. It's why we're outlaws. You know what they do to defective foetuses... My parents decided they weren't going to have that happen to Orville. And we've been here ever since. My mother died having me. My father wanted to take her to the medicals, but she wouldn't let him. She said she would rather die, if it came to it, than watch what they would do to my father and Orville. And that's what happened. She died."

Mac had no idea what to say. He suddenly felt as though he were having to do all his growing up in the space of just a few hours. It wasn't fair. None of it was fair. And it all came back to Galiconia; the Galiconia that allowed the illusion of freedom as long as you were blind to the chains; the Galiconia that gave people jobs, money, entertainment, as long as they never questioned, anything; the Galiconia that would kill your brother, your mother, your father, your grandparents and never even blink, never even notice; the Galiconia that was one vast black secret as big as the cluster, made up of millions upon millions of evils.

"Is the pie all right?" Roxanna asked, watching his face. "You're not eating."

"It's fine," Mac said.

"Can I ask you something?" Mac nodded, his mouth full. "Why are you called Hasdrubal? What does it mean?" There was a silence. Mac stopped eating. He instinctively liked Roxanna. She was dark and small and elfin with roughly cropped hair and a dancer's body, but did that mean he should tell her things? And talking was such an effort...

"I had a brother," he said. "He was called Hannibal. Back on the Earth planet in the beginning times there was an empire, sort of like Galiconia, but much smaller, much, much smaller. My father told me. Just a small part of the planet..."

"What was it called?" Roxanna asked.

"Rome," Mac said. "And there was a place called Carthage. They fought Rome; Hannibal and Hasdrubal. They were brothers and they were generals. They nearly won,

but Rome beat them in the end. My father named us after them because he hated Galiconia. He thought Galiconia is like Rome. It was a gesture."

"Maybe he hoped you would fight Galiconia," Roxanna said.

"And lose? Like Hannibal and Hasdrubal? Everyone who fights Galiconia loses."

"We haven't lost," Roxanna said.

"You will, though," Mac said. "All it will take is for someone to put a hand through one of your tunnel holocs, and then they'll know you exist for sure and they won't stop until they find you."

"They won't find us," Roxanna said. "There are false trails, dead ends, loop backs. They'll never find us..."

"They will," a voice said behind them. "Mac's right. It's just a matter of time." It was Captain Wright. He was standing at the entrance to the chamber. There was a strange expression on his face. Mac had a sudden intuition.

"You mean, they'll find you when they find me," he said.

Chapter Four

"But you said they'd put a necklet on you..."

"Mac, they'll put a necklet on me if you try to defy them. That's what I meant. As long as you're a volunteer and behave yourself and as long as I wear their tracker, I'll be all right... So, tomorrow. Your appointment is at 1000."

"But how do I know you'll be all right?" Mac demanded.

"You don't," James said. "This is Galiconia. Nothing is certain, ever. And it's too late now, Mac. You said you wanted to fly. The arrangements have been made. You knew they were being made. You can't back out now."

"But..."

"No buts, Mac. They'll leave me alone as long as you behave."

Next morning, Mac forgot his misgivings in his excitement and nervousness. Now all he could think about was how terrible it would be if he failed the test. He had to fly. He just had to. He would die if he couldn't, if they rejected him.

At last it was time to go and he and his father took the beltway to RCentral, a good half hour away even on the express lane. Once they had worked their way across, Mac sat on his bag and watched Redux whizz by, the familiar house-blocks and shop-blocks, the huge thormalium processing plants, the mine entrances with their marshalling yards for the haulers scattered about wherever the thormalium veins had come close to the surface, the community blocks with their schools and medical centres, and, of course, the huge, looming cube of the g-ball stadium with the arena, a separate building behind. He felt another thrill of excitement at the thought that he might be one step closer to his ultimate ambition, combat flying, or the nearest thing there was to it outside the arena now that wars, apart from the odd short-lived rebellion, were pretty much a thing of the past.

James stood looking down, watching his son's face. He knew almost exactly the thoughts and feelings flitting through Mac's mind. He had experienced them all himself when he had made the same journey all those years ago. He wondered whether he should have tried harder to dissuade Mac from flying but when the only other choices on Redux boiled down to spending your life in an office, a market or driving a digger miles underground he hadn't had the heart. Redux natives spent their lives in a prison serving Galiconia until the thormalium that was their reason for being killed them at last. Everyone else, the doctors, the nurses, the teachers, the troops, the bureaucrats came in from outside and spent only a maximum of ten years on the planetoid as longer might leave them vulnerable themselves.

It was true, what James had told Mac about the ultimate cost of flying. To fly you had to wear a glove with a refined thormalium charge and this refined charge was far

more dangerous than the raw, unprocessed ore that most other people came into contact with. But in the final analysis it seemed to James that if you were likely to die of thormalium poisoning anyway, then better to die flying, if that was your passion. He knew what Grace, Mac's mother, would have said, but shrugged his shoulders. Life was short, however careful you were. At least on Redux.

The vast conglomerate of Redux Central suddenly came into view and James touched Mac on the shoulder.

"I told you before there was no going back," he said. "But this really is your last chance. We can still disappear. But you must decide now, if that's what you want..."

Mac said nothing and James sighed.

"Just remember," he said. "Don't think. Thinking will interfere with your responses. They have to be as natural as breathing."

The two of them were sitting in a cavernous hall off the main concourse dotted with groups of people, each group much the same: two, three or four adults, sometimes more, but always with a boy Mac's age at the centre. One by one the boys were summoned by a functionary and disappeared down a long corridor and one by one, some quickly some more slowly, they re-emerged alone. One, however, was accompanied by a man in a Galiconian uniform who waited while the boy was embarrassingly hugged and kissed by his relatives who then handed over his bags and left.

"You see, Mac," James said. "Almost no one passes the test and then it's a long way from there to actually flying."

Then man was calling Mac, and he followed him down the corridor. "Don't think," James called after him.

"In there," the man said, and stepped back to let him enter first.

The room was all white and very bright. A group of people stood round a console, some in uniform, some in medic slicks.

"Hasdrubal D. Macgilliguddy," a woman read out.

"All right, Hasdrubal," a man in slicks said, coming towards him. "Unusual name. Come and sit in this chair."

"Please call me Mac."

"If you wish," the man said. "I am Medical Collins. Now..."

The chair was a complicated affair perched on top of a mass of machinery facing a large cam display.

"Climb up those steps," Collins said. "And this glove goes on your left hand. Like this. And the brain scanner sits on your head, like this..." Both the glove and the helmet were connected to the chair by a series of wires.

"All right," Collins said. "That's good. Now try to relax."

A second man spoke. This time he was in uniform, though Mac didn't know it as all he could see was the display.

"The first thing we want you to do, when I say," he said, "is to close your left hand as slowly as you can without moving your thumb and without ever stopping. Is that clear?"

"Yes sir," Mac said.

"Absolutely as slowly as you can. Barely moving, but never stopping."

"Yes sir," Mac said again.

"Begin now."

For a moment Mac panicked and then he heard his father saying: "Don't think." He forced himself to wipe his mind and to let his muscles do what they would without conscious interference. Eventually, after what seemed like hours, the same voice said:

"All right, you can stop now."

To his surprise Mac found, when he opened his eyes, that his thumb was standing straight up while his fingers were touching his palm. He would have been even more surprised had he been able to see the reactions of the group behind him. They were staring at each other, literally open-mouthed.

"Impossible," someone said at last. "The meter must need recalibrating. Check it please."

There was a pause. "It's fine," Collins said. "Spot on."

"Well, it's still impossible. Do it again."

In the end Mac had to do the test three times before they would believe the results, and then they spent another hour testing each finger separately and then in various combinations. Finally the man in uniform who had first spoken came round to where Mac could see him.

"Did I pass?" Mac asked anxiously.

"Oh, you more than passed," the officer said. "To be honest, we've never seen anything like it. But then, with your genes... we'd like to do one more test, one that we very rarely use. The chair you're sitting in is also a simulator..." He pressed a button and Mac suddenly found himself standing while padded arms circled his chest, his middle and his legs, gripping him tight.

"If you're agreeable," the officer said. "What we'd like to do is to see if you might actually be able to fly already, without training. We almost never do this. Certainly, I can't remember it being done. But would you be willing to try? Nothing can happen to you. You'll be quite safe. It might even be fun."

Mac rather wondered what would happen if he didn't agree, but nodded his head. The truth was, he was itching to try.

"Good." The officer pressed another button and the cam display came to life at the same time curving in around and over Mac. He seemed to be standing on a wide, open

expanse. There were some faint buildings in the distance and the lucent glowed familiarly, high overhead.

"Now," the officer said. "We're not going to tell how to do this..." But he got no further. Mac heard the door hiss open and a new voice.

"Major Pearson, what do you think you're doing?" The voice was quiet but somehow full of menace.

"Testing, Colonel," Pearson said, but Mac along with everyone else could hear his sudden uncertainty.

"Have you taken leave of your senses?"

"But sir..."

"This must be handled with extreme care."

"But the results..."

"Are why it must be handled with extreme care, and if this is not obvious to you, Major Pearson, then I fear you are in the wrong department."

"But..." the major tried to say.

"This must be... managed, Pearson. Very carefully managed. Or who knows what we might have on our hands."

"Yes sir," Pearson said stiffly.

"Wait for me in my office," the colonel said. "The rest of you proceed with the normal routine. The sooner this boy is... processed, the better." Mac had the impression that the general had wanted to say "the sooner this boy is behind bars, the better" or something similar, but then anxious hands were pulling at him and a moment later he was being propelled down the corridor towards his father.

Mac needed no second invitation. He broke away and ran to him, reaching up as though to hug him in excitement but pulling his head down so he could whisper unseen.

"Dad!" he hissed urgently. "Something's wrong. They all seemed very pleased and then an officer came in and it all changed."

James drew back a little and looked into his son's eyes. "Ah," he said. "Your results were too good. They're afraid of you, what you might be able to do..." James suddenly straightened as Mac's escort arrived.

"Give us a minute or two, will you please?" James said, and the trooper backed off a little.

"Mac, you must be very careful," he murmured. "They'll watch you with a thousand eyespies and they won't trust you until they've got me in a necklet..."

"Dad..."

"It's too late, Mac. Don't worry about me. I know where to go. You worry about yourself."

The trooper shifted his feet and then moved towards them. "Time's up," he said.

Suddenly Mac felt as though his heart were tearing in two. Suddenly, he couldn't bear to let go. James gave him a gentle push.

"I love you," James said. He turned and left.

Mac felt the trooper's hand on his shoulder but resisted until his father had turned the corner and disappeared. He felt desolate, utterly desolate. And very small. Everything familiar was suddenly gone and he was faced with a world he didn't know and wasn't at all sure, now it had come to the point, that he would like. The corridor down which he was being marched by his guide seemed endless and darkly threatening, particularly when a squad of troops appeared at the double and went thundering past.

A second later they stopped and a voice demanded:

"You! You there! Macgilliguddy! Where is your father?"

Mac turned uncertainly. A large man in full combat armour was striding back to him. He had the three daggers of a sergeant on his shoulder.

"Where is your father?" the man demanded again.

"He left," Mac said uncertainly. "He's gone."

"Where?"

"I don't know. Home, I suppose..."

"You and you," the sergeant said, pointing. "Go with the prisoner to the general. The rest of you come with me. Now. At the double!"

They thundered off leaving Mac surrounded by three hulking troopers and totally bewildered. Prisoner? Was he a prisoner? Why?

"March," one of them said, and Mac continued along the corridor. They came to an elevator and a moment later were shooting up the outside of the building. Redux spread out magically beneath them.

"Tiny," Mac's original guard remarked.

"Grimy," said the second.

"Slimy," said the third, "And can't wait to leave." Mac was startled. It was a practised refrain and Mac had never thought to wonder how Galiconia's minions, posted to Redux, might regard the place. It looked all right to Mac. Very dusty, a bit smoky, maybe, but that was normal wasn't it? Tiny? Surely not tiny? Grimy, a bit perhaps, but it wasn't really slimy. That was just a fungus, the spores of which had arrived on some transport. It was irritating in that it tended to get into everything, but it was just a fungus.

The lift stopped, one floor down from the top, and Mac was marched into a different world, though at first it was hard to make out what it might be. Everything glowed with light; the floor the walls, the ceilings, shimmering and shifting and for the first moments quite disorienting. Had Mac ever experienced a swimming pool, a

lagoon, a tropical reef, then he would have understood, but liquid for Mac had always come by the cupful.

The troopers stopped outside a slightly darker area and one of them reached out to something that Mac guessed was a palm-lock of some sort. A panel slid aside and they entered what, if Mac had known it, might have been an underwater cavern, or the illusion of one. But he scarcely noticed, for there on a large display was an image of himself in the simulator, wearing helmet and glove and infinitesimally closing his left hand. Standing before it were two men, one the colonel who had come bursting in on the test, and the other a small man wearing an elaborate uniform.

"Ah," he said. And then: "Come here, boy."

One of the troopers gave Mac a push and he moved hesitantly forward.

"This is General Alonso," the colonel said.

"General commanding military operations on Redux," Alonso added.

"That means he now commands you," the colonel said. "And you call him 'sir'."

"Where is you father, boy?" Alonso demanded, while glaring at the colonel. Letting the father elude them was all but unforgivable, no matter how taken by surprise they might have been. And, of course, absolutely the colonel should have acted without orders, no matter his orders to the contrary, not wasted time pointing out that the general had failed to authorise the man's arrest.

Mac said nothing, but confused as he was, alone as he was, over-matched as he was, he felt the start of a slow burn, a glow in the pit of his stomach.

"Speak," the colonel said

Still Mac said nothing.

"Listen, boy," Alonso said. "Our records show that your father is your only living relative. Now, he is not at home, he is nowhere visible on eyespy, he is not answering his reacom. For reasons best known to himself, it would appear that he has chosen to disappear..."

"Or you'd necklet him," Mac burst out.

"Ah," Alonso said. "I was afraid that might be it. He is, of course, aware of our methods. Pity. Pity for you, that is." He looked at the colonel who nodded.

"That's all," Alonso said.

The troopers fell into formation, one either side of Mac and the other behind, and with the colonel leading he was marched out of the cavern through the phony aquarium and back to the elevator.

The colonel's office turned out to be regulation military, not some fantasy intended to remind the occupant of a world parsecs away. There was a desk, a number of floaters and the walls were giant screens displaying the Hyades – suns, planets, red dwarfs, gas

giants, dust clouds, the whole panoply of deep space. A section of one wall appeared to be some sort of scale blow-up and Mac could see what he took to be a space ship approaching what appeared to be a small rock, except the surface gleamed silver about the up-thrust mountain peaks.

"Redux," the Colonel said, noting the direction of Mac's gaze. "Us."

He sat down, steepled his hands and contemplated the boy standing before him. Mac fidgeted uncomfortably and then decided he wouldn't. He was still very angry. At last the Colonel waved negligently at a floater.

"Sit down," he said. Mac stayed where he was.

"Suit yourself. The first thing: I am Colonel Slade. As with the general, you call me sir."

"Why should I?" Mac demanded truculently.

"An indication of respect and obedience," Slade said. "Or it could be an expression of pain. An option I would not recommend." The note of menace was subtle but inescapable. Despite his anger, Mac suddenly began to pay proper attention. Slade was a tall man, lean with sharp features and cold, detached eyes. Far too late, Mac sensed imminent danger. What had started out a hopeful, exciting morning had gone completely wrong. His father was now on the run and Mac was up to his ears in trouble he didn't begin to understand. Somewhere, deep inside, he wished he could burst into tears and go home and that everything would suddenly be all right again, back to normal, that he could be just a 15-year-old schoolboy dreaming of becoming a fighter.

"The question," Slade said, "Is what shall we do with you? Ordinarily we would just send you to fighter school, watch your progress and decide on your future in due course. But that, now, is quite impossible."

"Why?" Mac asked.

"Sir," Slade prompted gently. "I won't tell you again."

Mac hesitated and then swallowed his pride. There was far too much that was strange, fearful and unknown without continuing with a fight he knew he could not be allowed to win.

"Why, sir?" he said.

"In that your father was himself a fighter," Slade said with the air of a pedagogue. "I dare say you know something, even quite a lot about it. But I will recapitulate so that you can have no doubt about your position. Flight, individual flight, individual free flight is a great privilege given to very few, those few who have the physical control to be able to master it. And because of their rarity, those few are of great value to Galconia, and equally a great potential danger if left, shall we say, unconstrained. We have learned through hard experience that no one so minded can cause more bedlam and chaos than a rogue fighter. A group of them can be all but impossible to contain without plasma cannon or thermos. Hence, we now go to considerable trouble to make

certain that, shall we say, unscheduled events are no longer a possibility. Are you sure you won't sit down?" Mac shook his head.

"All of which means that, as you have indicated you understand, we look to a flighter's relatives to provide, where necessary, an incentive for good behaviour. An incentive that unfortunately in your case we no longer have. At least for the moment."

"You could just let me go," Mac said. Slade raised an eyebrow. "Sir," Mac added in a tone just this side of insolence.

"Be careful," Slade said. "I am not an unreasonable man and I'm beginning to think it would not be unreasonable for you to spend 10 seconds in the screamer. I don't expect respect but I will have either obedience or submission. Your choice."

"Yes sir," Mac said warily.

"We will not let you go for two reasons," Slade went on, as though nothing had happened. "First, it would be an intolerably bad example, a precedent that we could never countenance. Second, and much more importantly, it would leave us vulnerable to you and your extraordinary ability..."

"But I can't fly," Mac interrupted. This time Slade ignored the omission.

"What makes you think that?" Slade asked.

"Well, I never have... sir," Mac said.

"I wonder," Slade said slowly. "I was only a lieutenant at the time but I always thought it was a mistake for the Chairman to let your father live."

"He earned it," Mac protested.

"A foolish indulgence," Slade said. "I wasn't on Redux then or I might have done something about it." And what I would have done, Slade thought regretfully, would have been to take the man's hands. It was a simple equation: No hands, no flying.

Mac glared.

"Well, it makes no difference now," Slade said. "None at all. And now that flighter school is out of the question there are three possibilities left: a penal team, the arena, or we can just kill you quietly. And if it were up to me it would be the last."

"You want to kill me?" Mac said uncomprehendingly.

"However," Slade went on. "General Alonso, in his wisdom, has decreed that as you are still too immature to provide anything but a ritual kill in the arena and that as we have no shortage of ritual... subjects then it would be a waste not to send you to a penal team." Slade moved a hand to the press-pad on his desk.

"And, most unfortunately, my hands are tied," he said.

"My master will indeed be interested," Dostoi said. He turned from the display where Mac was standing in the simulator gaping at Colonel Slade castigating the room at

large. The same Colonel Slade, but in the flesh, flicked some imaginary dust from his impeccable uniform and crossed his legs.

"But how is it?" Dostoi asked, "That you did not feel it necessary to arrest the father."

Slade smiled. "The general is very strict. Initiative is absolutely discouraged, particularly when it might reflect credit on the person showing initiative."

"Ah," Dostoi said. "That again."

"With Alonso, always," Slade said.

"He was a childhood friend of the Chairman," Dostoi remarked.

"But he is no friend to His Excellency, Osmond von Osmond the fourteenth?"

"No," Dostoi said.

"That's what I thought."

On the other side of the cluster, on Redux II, the only other source of thormalium that had yet been found, a discreet alarm sounded and the Chairman turned to study the display of his console. A name was flashing: Hasdrubal D. Macgilliguddy. The Chairman immediately dismissed the woebegone mine executive standing before him, to the manager's great relief, and turned to examine the documents now presented on his display. They were the boy's application for and acceptance to flight school and then his immediate transfer to a penal g-ball team. The Chairman became more and more agitated as he read.

Two things made it possible for Galiconia to rule the Hyades with a rod of commerce. One was the thormalium monopoly, the second was the hypercom network that meant the CAW could be everywhere, and nowhere, simultaneously. The Chairman delved deeper and was soon watching the same scenes that Slade had been displaying to Dostoi only moments before but several dozen light years away. To say that the Chairman was now thoroughly alarmed was greatly to understate his concern. He reached for the handset intending to put an immediate stop to the nonsense he had just witnessed, and then paused. That the Chairman of Galiconia Enterprises Inc. and master of, if not the universe, then a moderately large cluster had suddenly become interested in the fate of an obscure boy on a slave planetoid could only mean one thing to anyone with half a brain. Or at least to Osmond.

He summoned his personal pilot, a relatively new promotion.

"I need to leave for Redux within the hour," he stated without preliminary.

"But your excellency..." the hapless man began.

"There is a problem?" the Chairman said coldly. The pilot quailed.

"Sir, we were scheduled to be here for a month... the main drive has been pulled down..."

"Well put it back together again."

"Sir..."

"How long?"

"If we abandon the service, which is overdue as it is..."

"How long?"

"At least a week," the pilot said miserably. "Your excellency," he added a moment later as though using the title might protect him from what looked like very quickly developing into a fire-storm.

"What else is available?" the Chairman demanded quietly. Things were too serious to indulge in temper.

"We could commandeer any of the transports, sir," the pilot said.

"I said, what else is available," the Chairman repeated, his voice rising. There were limits, after all, and his personal pilot should know that the Chairman did not travel in transports. Transports were far too slow for anything except transporting thormalium.

The pilot looked at his feet.

"Find something," the Chairman said and pointed at his console.

Two minutes later the pilot looked up. The Chairman was standing there, arms folded, glaring at him. The pilot gulped.

"Sir," he said. "There is a deep-space scout due to touch and go in three hours."

"Good," the Chairman said. "Make the arrangements."

"But sir..." the pilot said.

"What now?"

"There would be room only for you and two attendants."

The Chairman considered. There was a risk in not taking his personal body-guard, but, in his judgment, there was a greater risk in not moving with all possible speed. He made his decision.

"Make the arrangements," he repeated. "Put The-All-Sun-and-Moon back together and follow with the directorate."

"When, sir?"

"When do you think? Or is thinking beyond you?"

Chapter Five

Captain Wright pulled out a chair and sat down at the battered table. He opened his mouth but before he could speak, Mac jumped in.

"It's all right, sir," he said. He had never felt so forlorn and empty, so miserable, but on one thing he was clear. "I understand," he went on. "I know I can't stay. Just show me the way out."

"Don't be ridiculous," Roxanna said angrily.

"I'm not being ridiculous," Mac said. "But Galconia is not going to let me go, and if they find me here, they find you."

"But they won't..." Roxanna started to say.

"They will," Mac said. "Sooner or later. They know I exist even if they've forgotten you exist. They won't let me go. I've made them too angry."

"Father, tell him not to be stupid," Roxanna demanded.

"So I can speak now?" Captain Wright asked mildly. "Before any decisions are made, I need to show Mac something. Or rather, Orville will. And it will be a shock, Mac," he warned.

They gathered round one of Orville's displays and after a moment Mac realised that he was watching himself, himself and his father fleeing the Galconian troops.

"But how...?" he said.

"Orville has tapped into the CAW," Captain Wright said. "We can see everything they can see. We know everything they know, or at least everything on the CAW. And there isn't much that doesn't find its way there. Records are the weakness of all bureaucracies... Now watch."

And despite his mounting horror, Mac did. Right up to the moment his father was blown away. He couldn't help it. He shut his eyes tight. He couldn't bear to watch that again. But a hand gripped his arm.

"Watch," Captain Wright said again.

The display was split now. One half showed Mac's battle with the Agger and the other Mac's father crumpled on the ground.

"Watch very closely..."

One of James's legs twitched, and then he half raised a hand.

"He was alive," Mac whispered disbelievingly. "He was still alive."

"Is still alive," Captain Wright said. "Keep watching."

On one half of the display the agger crashed to the ground and a vague shadow disappeared into the Cantin Quarter, on the other half of the display a second agger set

down beside James and in seconds he was roughly bundled into a medi-pod and disappeared.

"Show him Orville," Captain Wright said. "This is now real time," he added to Mac. The displays dissolved back into one and revealed what appeared to be a hospital prison ward. There were three pods. Two medicals were bent over the one at the far end. The other pods were empty.

"That's your father," the Captain said. "Zoom in, Orville. And turn up the volume."

"...waste of time," one of the medicals was saying. "What's the point of going to all this trouble? As soon as he can walk again they'll send him straight to the arena."

Mac felt his spirits soar. It could only mean one thing. His father was going to recover. One of the medicals moved to a nearby trolley and Mac could now see his father's face dimly inside the pod through the celgel. His eyes were closed and he looked absolutely lifeless but the heart monitor pinged steadily.

"No," the other medical was saying. "Not this one. I heard something about some sort of exchange..."

Mac looked questioningly at Captain Wright, who signed to Orville to cut the sound.

"Not an exchange," the Captain said. "They'll give you a choice: turn yourself in and you and James will both be sent to the arena, where you'll have some sort of chance, maybe. Or, if you don't, they'll put your father into the screamer and leave him there till he dies."

Roxanna was looking at him, her eyes huge.

"All right," Captain Wright said. "Let's all sit down and take this slowly. Sit here, Mac." He pulled out a chair, thrust Mac into it and held him there.

"Please," Mac said. "I have to go. I have to go to him." He started to struggle.

"Which is just what they want." Captain Wright said quietly. "Stop it, Mac. Stop it and think." He gripped Mac hard until eventually he stilled.

"Now listen," Wright said. "Just listen to me. There is a lot you don't know. So much. And you two," he said to Orville and Roxanna, "Come here, sit down and be quiet for once in your lives." He paused.

"Your father, Mac, and I are old, old friends. Older than Roxanna, older than you, older than Orville. In fact, Orville would not be here without James. How to tell you...?"

"This uniform I'm wearing, do you know what it is?" Mac shook his head.

"It's the uniform of the Galiconian Navy. I was a captain commanding one of the fleet. In fact, I commanded the Chairman's ship... You know about thormalium, Mac? That's what lets you fly, its anti-gravity properties. But do you know that the whole Galiconian economy depends on thormalium? No thormalium and the cluster grinds to a halt. All the transport for a start. Not space, but everything else. Without thormalium they'll have to re-invent the wheel."

"No flighters?" Mac said.

"No. But that's the least of it. Thormalium is vital to Galiconia, the corporation. Without it, Galiconia can't exist. That's the only reason, Mac, that the Chairman spends so much time here, and on Redux II. Do you think he likes it on this horrible little dump? Even with all the luxury that money can buy? Of course not, but basically he has one responsibility in life and one only. To guarantee the supply of thormalium, and if necessary to withhold it. Thormalium is what makes Galiconia possible. It's what makes the Chairman possible. It is the source, the true source, of his power and his only reason for being. Without the hold that thormalium has given chairmen down the centuries, Galiconia would never have come into being, and even if by some miracle it had, it would have disintegrated long ago.

"And because this present Chairman has to spend so much time here, so, naturally, did I."

"But..." Mac began.

"Please don't interrupt. I'll answer whatever questions you have afterwards.

"I saw your father's first fight in the arena. It was ugly, Mac. Ugly. Ugly. Ugly. Like all arena fights, but James was something else. He flew... like an angel. Like a scalpel. Like a feather falling. Like the greatest artist who ever lived, flinging light at the sky. And the crowd went berserk. We'd seen him play g-ball, of course, but this was different. We'd never seen anything like it. That match was displayed again and again throughout the cluster and James was an instant hero, the people's champion. And his next fight was the same and the one after that, and the next, until the Chairman as a gesture of solidarity with the people had to summon your father to his box to congratulate him, reward him. And, of course, I was there too.

"Ever the gracious host, the Chairman introduced us and James and I shook hands. I saw he was wounded badly and was in time to catch him when he fell. In the confusion with the medicals I managed to slip away and went with him to the infirmary.

"We became friends, Mac, which is not so surprising. We were both fliers, of different sorts, but fliers. We were both trapped. Admittedly James's situation was far worse than mine, but we were still trapped. And I fell in love with James's concubine. Your mother," he said, nodding to Roxanna and Orville.

"They kept sending women to James, hoping that he would form an attachment and that they would gain a new hold over him. He was too strong, but for my sake he would ask for Louise to come to massage him and she and I would be able to spend time together afterwards. And then she fell pregnant, with Orville.

"We were twice damned. In the first place we would never be allowed to stay together. And in the second, the scans were not good and Orville was marked for termination. It was James, Mac, who told me what to do, where to go, how to survive. And through his contacts in that horrible world to which he was condemned he was able

to bribe enough people so that I could slip away with Louise, the last time she came to visit him.

"I was afraid for him, but he said not to worry. He had already been sentenced to the arena and if he managed to keep on winning he was sure his popularity would keep him out of the screamer. Which it did."

The three young people looked at each other. It was clear to Mac that much of this was also new to the other two.

"I'm not proud of the story," Captain Wright went on. "But it is the truth and it explains why and how James knew to come to us when he had to make a run for it. It also explains, Mac, why we will, must, help you so long as we're still alive.

"And there's one other thing. Your mother, Mac, was Louise's cousin. Grace, your mother, was my wife's cousin. So we are all family. We are all family."

There was a long silence. Roxanna was the first to recover.

"So we must be... second cousins?" she said. "I am pleased."

"Speak for yourself," Orville hissed.

"Oh, do stop being ridiculous," Roxanna snapped back.

"Both of you stop it," the captain said, and then to Mac: "Welcome to the family. If you can stand it that is?" Mac smiled a fraction. His brain was running on about five different levels, but underneath everything came the powerful base thump, over and over: he's alive, he's alive...

"I can stand it," he said.

"Good," Captain Wright said. "Now there is still a lot I haven't told you. About the plan, for starters."

"What plan," Orville demanded. "I don't know about any plan..."

"Is there some reason you should?" Roxanna asked sweetly.

"I need to know everything..." Orville started heatedly, but his father overrode him.

"James's plan," he said. "Your uncle's plan. To get us out of here. So that we can stop living like rats. So we can be free."

They all fell silent at the thought. A reverential silence.

"How?" Orville said at last, and then: "There's nowhere..."

"But there is," Wright said. "Maybe not totally free, but out near the edge Galconia's control is mostly nominal. It's not like here where you can't move without half a dozen eyespies tracking you. Here it's all about the thormalium but out there..."

"Out there!" Orville said. "Out there is light years away. You must have gone nuts. Just how are you planning to get there?"

"You forget yourself, Orville," Wright said with some force. "And you forget that I am a fully qualified and ticketed hyperspace navigator and pilot."

"Sorry," Orville mumbled. "But we don't have anything for you to pilot," he added in a slightly louder voice.

"No," Wright said. "Not unless we steal something."

"Steal a ship?" Orville said. "How could you possibly do that?"

"Not me," Wright said. "It was James's idea. Simple. Brilliantly simple. So simple that it took someone really brilliant to think of it. The details are a bit complicated though."

"What a surprise," Orville said, almost back to normal. "Just to get into the spaceport... all the security. And you know what happens to stowaways..."

"What?" Roxanna asked.

"They get fired out the rubbish chutes," Orville said gloomily. "Without a suit."

"Nobody said anything about stowing away," Wright snapped. "Sometimes, Orville, I dream what it might be like if ever you could think before you opened your big mouth." Roxanna snorted and Mac grinned to himself. He would never admit it, but he rather liked Orville. "I said steal. And as it turns out getting in is the easy part, the brilliant part."

"So how?" Orville demanded.

"You're so clever, Orville, you tell me," his father said. "You know everything, or at least you tell me you do."

"I only know everything that's in the CAW," Orville said defensively. "I never said I knew *everything*..."

"So where is the one place Redux Resupply is never, ever guarded?"

"I don't know," Orville was forced to admit at last.

"At the atmolock, of course," his father said with some triumph.

"But..."

"There is absolutely nothing," Captain Wright said, "to stop a flighter putting on a space suit, slipping through the lucent by one of the access locks, flying round the outside – there's still gravity, you know, on the outside – waiting for the right moment as a ship is landing and quietly sneaking inside. Eh, Mac?"

The boy nodded slowly. "Piece of cake," he said doubtfully. "I guess."

"The reason no one has ever done it," Wright went on, "Is that no one has ever thought of it, until James did."

"But how do the rest of us get inside?" Roxanna asked.

"That's where it gets a bit more difficult," Wright said and as Orville opened his mouth added sharply: "Not a word..." He paused.

"As we know," he said. "Security at the spaceport is tight, but what the guards are looking for, really all that they're looking for, are stowaways, desperate people trying to smuggle themselves on to a ship in ones and twos. They will not be looking for properly

uniformed and documented transport workers delivering certified cargo to a certified freighter, a freighter that will just happen to have been taken over by one of us."

"Whoa," Orville said. "How do you expect to be able to organise that?"

Captain Wright looked at his son searchingly. "Can you do it?"

Chapter Six

Guards removed Mac from Slade's office and he was bundled into an agger, his first time in the military version of an anti-grav transport. After a short flight he found himself on the landing grid of what appeared to be some sort of prison. It was a grim, windowless building fused out of the local rock. Behind them loomed the huge cube of the g-ball stadium and the lesser cylinder of the arena.

Inside, the walls, floor and ceiling were the same glazed stone as the exterior. It was sombre, cold and absolutely cheerless. Mac shuddered. He couldn't help it. He was now very tired and so much had happened that he could barely think. He was taken to a waiting room and then to an office, where his escort handed over a CAWtell, and then finally he was escorted by two men dressed in different uniforms to a small room with a bunk, a cupboard, a table and a chair. Behind another door was the abluter.

"You will stay here tonight," one of the men said, not unkindly. "Food will be brought in a minute. And your bag. The rest will happen in the morning."

And as the man had promised, food and Mac's possessions did arrive, but by that time he was fast asleep, if only to escape the nightmare world in which he suddenly found himself.

In the morning he tried very hard not to wake up, but eventually his gnawing hunger forced him out of the bunk. Last night's food was cold and greasy but welcome for all that and by the time he had eaten, cleaned himself and put on fresh inners, Mac was feeling something like his usual self. But as he waited for he knew not what to happen the events of yesterday came crowding back.

If he hadn't been locked in this room, Mac might have tried to pretend it was all a ridiculous mistake but his spartan surroundings were convincingly real. He had never felt so alone, so lonely, even when his mother and Hannibal had died – a train of thought that led inevitably to his father and Mac wondering what had become of him. He could only hope with all his being that James was still free and all right. A moment later, he realised that as long as they kept him locked up then logically James must still be safe. It was some small comfort.

At last he heard footsteps in the corridor outside and was standing ready by his bag when the door opened. The same two uniformed guards from last night appeared.

One of them nodded approvingly. "Come," he said. "Leave your things."

This time Mac was taken to a large gym, a room about twice as big as the gym at school. Most of the equipment was familiar to Mac and there was a group of some 25 men all doing chin-ups amid a strong smell of sweat, watched by another group of three standing aside at the far end. Mac was marched up to them.

As he got closer he could see that the obvious leader of this second group was a huge man with a craggy, scarred face and a badly broken nose. The other two were smaller but equally tough looking.

"What's this then?" the big man said.

"New recruit, coach," Mac's guard replied.

"...Some sort of joke?" the coach demanded. "He's a kid. He'll be eaten alive."

"Orders," the guard said and held out a CAWtell.

"Take him somewhere else and bring him back when he's grown a body." The coach turned away dismissively but the guard persisted.

"You can read this or not," he said, waving the tell. "But the boy stays."

The two men stared at each other until eventually the coach took the tell and slipped it into a reacom. They all waited patiently while he scrolled through the document. At one point he looked hard at Mac for a moment and then went back to reading.

"All right," he said at last. "He stays."

"Put your print on it," the guard said. The coach pressed his thumb to the reader, removed the CAWtell and handed it back. Without another word the guards about-faced and marched off. They were watched out of the gym in silence. There was the sound of someone hawking and spitting derisively.

"Back to work you motherless slackers," the coach roared. The others, all in team sweats, had quietly stopped their chin-ups. They guiltily jumped for the bars. "Keep them at it," he said to his two assistants. "And you come with me," he added to Mac.

Outside the gym he turned and held out a hand. "So you're Jim Macgilliguddy's boy," he said. "I'm Boss Bassinger. Call me coach." Mac shook the proffered hand. It felt like a giant steel clamp.

"Did you know my father?" Mac asked.

"No," Bassinger said. "But he did this to me." He pointed to his nose. Mac's face fell.

"It's all right," Bassinger chuckled. "No hard feelings. All in the line of duty. And your dad was the best fighter I ever saw, by a long shot. Couldn't lay a glove on him." He pointed up the corridor. "Team quarters up there. Coaches' across here. Come with me." A large hand fell on Mac's shoulder and he was urged forward. He began to feel himself warming to the big man but there had been so many unpleasant surprises over the past two days that he tried hard to stay indifferent. Unsuccessfully. In short order he found himself in Bassinger's comfortable living room and seated in a floater that in an instant had moulded itself to his body.

"So," Bassinger said when he too was sitting down. "You're in a pretty pickle."

"Please," Mac said. "I don't understand what's happened. I don't know where I am. And I don't know what I'm supposed to do." To his shame he felt his eyes pricking with tears and surreptitiously tried to wipe them away.

Bassinger held out a swipe. "It's all right," he said. "You've had a rough time. I can see from your file that those Galiconia bastards have been treating you like a bag of dirty sweats." Mac took the swipe and dried his eyes.

"What's a penal team," he asked, at last. "Is it for punishment?"

"In a way, I suppose," Bassinger said. "Punishment for not having guarantors. My father died. Of old age. He was my only relative, so here I am. Your father has vanished, so here you are. The g-ball league has free teams and penal teams. Your dad was captain of one of the free teams but his parents, your grand-parents, committed suicide, so because they had acted against Galiconia..."

"By killing themselves?"

"Oh yes," Bassinger said. "Hostage suicide is a crime to be seriously discouraged. Consequently your father didn't end up here or in one of the other penal teams, he was sent straight to the arena. By rights they should probably have sent you there..."

"But I can't fly," Mac said.

"So they sent you here. To see what might develop if they give you some sort of chance. If they don't like what they see, then off to the arena you'll go."

"But what am I supposed to do?" Mac asked.

"That's easy," Bassinger said. "Learn to fly. Learn to play g-ball. Learn to survive. Look Mac, it works like this. Penal teams have a crew of maybe 25, not counting the coaches. You work hard, you fly well, you get extra privileges, food, accommodation, some luxuries. You work your way up to reserve you get better privileges. You make the starting seven, better again. The team wins, you all share more goodies. In the unlikely event that the team wins the championship, the lucent's the limit, for a while, anyway. You survive long enough, like me, and you get to be a coach. All quite simple, really. We're in jail, but there are much worse jails, I can promise you."

"But I haven't done anything," Mac said desperately. "Why should I be in jail? It's not fair."

"No," Bassinger said. "Of course it's not fair. Nothing is in Galiconia."

There was a long silence. Mac dabbed at his face again. Life on Redux had always been hard but this was suddenly all too much.

"Okay," Bassinger said. "So the real world has hit you between the eyes with a shovel before you were ready for it. Believe me, kid, it always does. And then you have a choice. You either get up again, or you don't. Question is, what sort are you?"

"I don't know," Mac said miserably. "What can I do?"

"Learn to fly, kid. Make yourself strong. And then when you get a chance, you can grab it."

"Which is a problem," Bassinger said. "Teaching you to fly. I've never heard of anyone being sent to a g-ball team who hadn't least gone through basic training. People

who come to us can all fly, we just teach them to fly better, if we can. If we can't, they don't last long. Your responses must be something really special. Or they just want to lose you quietly... Which is it, do you think?"

"Both, maybe," Mac said slowly. "They were going to let me try to fly the simulator... before some colonel came bursting in and stopped it. And then my father disappeared."

"They were what?" Bassinger demanded.

"I was supposed to fly the simulator, or try to." Bassinger whistled and then said:

"You must really be something out of the box." Mac shrugged and there was a pause. Bassinger was tapping his teeth thoughtfully and then he grinned.

"Okay," he said. "Here's the deal. If you're what they seem to think you are then I sure as hell want you flying for me. So I guess I'll have to be the one to teach you. Couldn't trust you to any of the other bozos around here."

Suddenly Mac's world seemed brighter, as though someone had thrown a switch. "When?" he demanded.

Bassinger ruffled Mac's hair. "No time like the present," he said. "And while we're private like this, just call me Boss. Now, come with me."

The equipment room was a strange mixture of order and chaos. The shelves of the main wall were stuffed with neatly stacked items, whose purpose Mac could only guess at, while the back wall was piled high with a jumble of discarded bits and pieces, suits of some sort and Mac could see a ball and what looked like battered helmets. In the centre of the room was a strange looking machine.

"Stand here," Boss said, positioning him. "Are you right-handed?" Mac nodded. "Then put your left hand in the cavity and hold still... It will take a minute or two."

"What is it?" Mac asked.

"A glove-maker. We have our own unit because gloves often get damaged in combat." He pressed a pad and Mac watched as the tips of his fingers slowly began to turn black.

"Don't worry," Boss said. "It's actually a second skin being formed to your hand while matching your neural pathways. People think you can use any flying glove but that's a myth. You can't. If you don't have your own glove you can't fly. That's lesson one. Best to wear your glove at all times. If you take it off never let it out of your sight, not unless you've got one of these machines close by."

"You said combat?" Mac asked.

"You've followed g-ball on cam? What would you call it?"

"Uh... combat," Mac said.

"Unarmed combat. The only difference between g-ball and the arena is that in the arena they have plasma whips. Okay. You're finished," Boss said. "Show me."

Mac offered his now black hand. Even with his brand new glove it felt no different. Boss inspected it carefully, turning his hand this way and that.

"But I can feel you," Mac said. "Just like it isn't there."

"That's right," Boss said. "And that's a trap. Lesson two. When you're flying you can't use your left hand for anything but flying. Seriously. If you try to pick your nose or scratch your ear, you'll crash. If you try to do anything with your left hand, anything at all, except fly, you will crash. And people do, all the time. They forget, and they crash. Now look here..."

Mac stared at his palm where Boss was touching the glove.

"See that?" And after a moment Mac discerned a faint tracery in the shiny black material, not a difference in colour or texture exactly, but more a delicate change in the quality of the gloss.

"Those are the pathways," Boss said. "The slightest hint of damage, get yourself a new glove. Now here..." he indicated a slightly raised portion on the back of Mac's hand "...is where the thormalium goes. But not yet. That comes last.

"All right, next you need a training suit." He considered Mac a moment and reached up to a shelf. "You're quite big for your age. This should fit. Strip and put it on."

Mac struggled into the awkward garment. It was sort of floppy and clinging at the same time, with feet and helmet all attached. His left hand emerged uncovered but his right disappeared into a mitten attached to the sleeve. Mac couldn't imagine what it was supposed to do.

"And finally," Boss said. "Thormalium..."

"Excuse me," Mac said. "But I don't understand something." Bassinger raised an eyebrow.

"You said I can only fly with my own glove. But the simulator had a glove and nothing like this..."

Boss spat with contempt. "That simulator of theirs is just a toy. They like to amuse themselves by pretending they're flying but it's nowhere near the real thing. Their glove picks up some of the impulses and if you're very patient you can just about go up or down or sideways, but that's all. And it can register your rate of muscle response. But not the neural changes which are what really matter. Don't believe it's your muscles that control flight, it's the nerve impulses you send to the muscles that are the key. It's what you think, not what you do..."

"But..." Mac said. "I'm sorry, sir. But James, my father, when I was going for the test said not to think..."

"Don't call me sir. I don't like it."

"I'm sorry," Mac said again. "It was a gesture of respect."

"Coach or Boss," Bassinger said, but failed to hide a slight flush of pleasure. "We're both right," he went on. "When you want to run, you just think 'run'. That's what

I'm saying. You don't think contract this muscle, now relax that muscle, now contract this one. That's what your father was saying. Coming to the same point from different places. So what do you know about thormalium?"

Mac shrugged. Boss went to a large cabinet and opened it wide. It was full of delicate racks and each rack contained dozens of minute vials. Bassinger picked one out and held it for Mac to see.

"Slot this into your glove, on the back there, and twist it to activate... that allows the gas to combine with air, oxygen. Once it's activated you can fly, but the oxidising gas is poisonous and ultimately deadly. I don't understand how it works but I know it's this process of decay that gives a counter-gravitational field which some people, a few, maybe you, can somehow control. The glove itself has a faint magnetic field which interacts with your synapses to harness the thormalium field. I don't know how that works either. Ultimately you can either do it or you can't. The thormalium field uses your body's electrical impedance as a conduit, which is how it doesn't just happen to rip off your hand but takes the rest of you with it. Questions?"

"How long does it last?"

"The half-life is 73 standard days. In 73 days, once activated, half this will be gone. In another 73 days half of what's left will be gone, and so on. For g-ball we replace the charges very frequently, certainly before each match, for that extra edge." Mac nodded. "These supplies are supposed to be strictly accounted for but because we go through so much, I'm afraid things have become rather lax." And Bassinger winked broadly. "If you take my meaning." Mac nodded again, not quite sure that he did, having no idea that thormalium fetched a very fine price on the black market, whatever a black market might be.

"Enough talk," Boss said. "Come with me." And Mac flapped along behind in his awkward training suit as Bassinger led the way to the practice hall.

Mac and Bassinger climbed a flight of steps to a landing set about a metre above the floor of the corridor. In front of them was a plain door which Boss pulled towards him and swung all the way back against the wall. He had to, as the lining on the inside of the door was so thick it was the only way there would be room to get through the doorway. Mac pushed his finger into it and felt it slowly compress.

"Micromass," Boss said, watching him. "Energy absorber. Come and look." Mac followed him into the practice hall, which was the largest room he had ever seen, apart from the stadium. The floor trembled beneath him and he saw that with the door closed they were completely enclosed in the light blue micromass which receded into the shadowy distance. The ceiling glowed with concealed lighting.

"Absolutely," Boss said as Mac looked up. "The ceiling is lined too. You can go up just as fast as you can come down. Micromass will absorb up to 50 clicks an hour, but

after that you'll start hurting yourself. With a practice suit you'll be good for maybe another 10, but best to think you have no protection at all. People who rely on it always kill themselves, sooner or later. The roof here is about 35 metres high. Take off about 2 metres for micromass and that means that if you accelerate up as hard as you can you'll be doing something over 100 clicks when you hit. Your horizontal speeds can be much greater than that. Get the point?"

Mac nodded.

"You won't like the suit. Everyone hates them. But if you are what everyone thinks you might be, then you won't be wearing it for long. Give me your right hand..." Mac held it out and Bassinger turned it over and pointed to two small switches on the inside of his wrist that Mac hadn't noticed. He flicked the red one and Mac heard a hissing and felt the suit stiffen around him to the point where the only things he could move freely, if at all, were his eyes and his left hand.

"The other one deflates it," Bassinger said. "All right. Now the left hand." Mac held it out. Bassinger took it and then paused. He held up the thormalium cartridge.

"As soon as I put this in and twist it," he said. "You're live. You'll be able to fly. And crash. Usually, trainees are put in a harness on short tethers so they can't do much damage, but we don't have that sort of gear here. We have to trust to your readings. When I put this in, do nothing, think nothing, move nothing. The first thing you have to master is to be able to stay exactly where you are. Any questions?"

Mac shook his head.

"Are you sure you want to do this? If you don't, we can think of something..."

"I'm sure," Mac said. "It's the one thing I've wanted to do all my life. I can't wait."

"All right," Boss said. "But remember, do absolutely nothing, until I tell you." He snapped the cartridge into Mac's glove and gave it a sharp twist but keeping a tight grip the while on Mac's hand. Nothing happened. Then Mac began to feel a glow from the heat generated as the liquid began to decay.

"Is it growing warm?" Boss asked. Mac nodded.

"Okay." Slowly Boss eased his hold and then stepped back a pace.

"Well," he said, and then: "Be careful when you talk... Are you feeling all right?"

"Sure," Mac started to say.

"Don't nod your head," Boss interrupted sharply.

"I'm fine," Mac said.

"So. Register how your body feels now. Register being at rest." He paused. "Now nod your head."

Very cautiously, Mac moved his chin down as far as the inflated helmet would allow and then back. Nothing happened.

"Good," Boss said. "Do it again." Mac did. "And now, very slowly, put your left arm down by your side." Again nothing happened and Bassinger began to look a little less concerned.

"Next step," he said. "I want you to think light. I don't want you to leave the ground. I just want you to feel your weight grow less. I can't tell you how to do it. Everyone has to find it for themselves. And be very cautious. You're just as likely to go shooting up and smash into the roof. Just a fraction. Just so you can feel yourself slightly less heavy..."

Mac paused. He had no fears, no worries, no doubts. What was welling up inside him was pure delight. It was the moment he had been born for and he wanted to savour it to the full. This was the minute, the second, the instant he would first fly. He felt his body growing less heavy, as Boss had instructed, and then the joy of it bubbled up irresistibly inside him and he allowed himself to rise off the ground, so slowly that Bassinger at first failed to notice. And then at last when he had risen till he was eyeball to eyeball with the big man, Mac said:

"Is this what you meant?"

Bassinger gaped at him. And then walked around him as though he couldn't believe that Mac was floating there peacefully, nearly a metre off the floor, in perfect control. He whistled.

"Guess they were right about you," he said. "Live long enough, you see everything." He turned suddenly serious.

"Listen Mac," he said slowly. "You're going to be a fighter, no doubt about that. I can't do what you're doing now... I've only ever seen your Dad do what you're doing now. So maybe you'll be as good as him, better even. But to get there, you have to stay alive. And if the rapture don't kill you, there'll be an awful lot of other fighters who'll be trying. Already you're too good. After just two minutes, you're too good... Other fighters can't do what you're doing... Just floating, perfectly controlled. As soon as the rest of them see you, they'll be after you. They'll maim or kill you any way they can. If they let you come to your full measure, none of them will be able to fly against you. It's a matter of self-preservation, Mac. They either get you while they can, or they know you'll get them."

"Everyone?" Mac asked. "Even the people here? The team?"

"Well, maybe not the Reds, Mac. But watch your back and don't trust them. There'll be a lot of jealousy here, too."

"What rapture?" Mac added. "What's that?"

"Do you know anything about the beginning times?" Bassinger said. Mac looked blank. "They couldn't fly then, of course, not anti-grav anyway, but they had things called parachutes. Big cloth bags that used to catch the air and let them float down from the sky. And then they got to doing what they called free-falling, sort of like flying but

much cruder. They would glide down for a minute or two and only open their parachutes at the last second. Except it sometimes happened that in the rapture of the moment, of 'flying', they would forget where they were and smash into the ground. Well, the rapture of really flying can be a thousand times more dangerous. Forget what you're doing and you'll die."

"So can I do something else now?" Mac asked impatiently.

"Put yourself back down on the ground then, if you're so smart," Boss said. And Mac did, but bounced slightly. "Hmm!" Bassinger added. "See... Now rise up till your feet are level with my head... Slowly... Slowly. I said slowly. All right. Now, change from standing vertically to lying horizontally..."

Mac found this greatly more difficult than he could have imagined. With nothing to push against, with nothing providing resistance, without even any momentum it seemed impossible. And then suddenly, without any warning, he hit the floor with a thump. His suit and the micromass absorbed the shock but he was still somewhat winded and deeply embarrassed. Boss laughed with genuine amusement.

"What happened?" Mac asked in a small voice as he struggled to his feet.

"You forgot you were flying," Boss said. "Don't worry. That's an impossible trick. Even the best never manage it, but I wanted you to see how easy it is to forget what you're really doing. How easy it is to crash. You have to learn to split your mind in two. One part is your pilot and never stops flying; the other part does whatever else you have to do."

"I feel stupid," Mac said.

"Better stupid than dead. Look boyo," Bassinger went on. "Flying is about the most difficult physical thing anyone can do, so difficult most people can't even begin to try. You're a natural but you're going to have pay your dues, just like everybody else. Now you practise rising and falling... no higher than you were then... saying your 13 times table. When you can do that, you can try something else. I'll be back." Bassinger paused at the door. "And don't be tempted," he added. "There's a long way to go."

Mac did as he was told. At first, anyway. He rose and fell reciting... four thirteens are 52, five thirteens are 65... until he was thoroughly bored. He eyed the huge hall with almost irresistible longing. The desire just to zoom off was almost more than he could bear. To stop himself he decided to have another go at lying down in mid-air. Time and again he tried, and time and again he crashed to the floor. The concentration required to try to change his position inevitably destroyed the concentration required to stay in the air. It was deeply frustrating and Mac was getting more and more angry with himself. For the life of him he couldn't begin to get the hang of it. He fell again and lay on the floor, panting. Then he had a sudden idea.

This time instead of struggling to his feet before rising off the floor he decided to lift straight up while lying horizontal. As he did so he found that he could sort of leave his feet lagging behind so that in due course he was upright again. And, of course, once he had the key, the rest was easy. The secret was all in the relative motion of different parts of his body. Slowly, he began to twist and turn, somersault and roll, cartwheel and jack-knife, all without touching the ground, gymnastics made easy, and he couldn't remember when he had ever had so much fun.

At last he heard the door begin to open and he swung himself to a stop, standing on his head, three metres above the ground.

Boss Bassinger came in and his jaw dropped. Mac did a little swoop and landed neatly on his feet, just in front of him. Bassinger had never seen anything like it. He had been away longer than he had meant and was somewhat anxious that Mac might have been tempted beyond endurance and done himself a mischief, but here he was not only undamaged but pulling stunts that nobody had even thought of.

"Show me," he demanded. "What have you learned to do?" So Mac ran through his rapidly increasing, but still slow, repertoire and at the end Bassinger applauded, rather less ironically than he had meant.

"Very good," he said. "I mean it. Really good. Come with me." And as he spoke, Boss rose into the air and somewhat erratically circled near the roof. After a moment's hesitation, Mac joined him.

"Last lesson," Boss said, "and then it's up to you and how much practice you do. Now, to fly straight and level at a constant altitude, it's a matter of falling but not falling; of balancing gravity with your anti-gravity. Does that make any sense?"

"I think so," Mac said with his new-found confidence. "You mean, like this...?" And he was suddenly moving away, not fast, but straight and level.

"Good," Boss called. "Now turn to your left and come back." Mac banked and drew to a halt beside Bassinger, who was still circling erratically.

"Well boyo." Bassinger said. "I don't believe what I've seen, but as I've seen it I guess I have to."

"You were right," Osmond said. "We can make a killing on this boy. Who did you say he is?"

"Hasdrubal D. Macgilliguddy," Dostoi replied. They were in Osmond's quarters on the top floor of Galiconia Central, except it appeared to be a mountain meadow, complete with snow, a stream and breath-taking tromp-l'oeil views. The value of the water required to achieve the effect on this lifeless, waterless planetoid was mind-boggling. Osmond had paid for its transport himself but was determined that one day he would bill it to Galiconia. He was reclining on a sumptuous couch, a display and Dostoi hovering about him.

"He is the son of James Macgilliguddy," Dostoi continued. "The most famous gladiator of the day. Your father freed him to celebrate your birth."

"Then we'll give the boy some time," Osmond said. "To find his feet. But not too much. Wouldn't do for the word to get around. Make sure it doesn't. And make sure Castel understands our interest."

"And... Alonso?"

"Get rid of him. He can never keep his mouth shut and this is too good a chance to mismanage. We could clean out every book-maker in the cluster if we play it right."

"The Chairman won't approve his dismissal."

Osmond smiled remotely. He was experimenting with a detached, imperturbable manner. "Explain to General Alonso that he has health problems which require an early, indeed immediate retirement... Health problems that will surely prove fatal in the event of delay, any delay. And then see to it that he has a sad accident on the way home to the bosom of his family."

"He may go to your father, anyway."

"Not if he's frightened enough. Make sure he is."

"You want Slade to replace him?"

"But only acting. Until you get something on him. Now, the other matter..."

Dostoi shifted uneasily.

"Still difficult, sir," he said. "But we are making some progress."

"What?"

"We eliminate possibilities."

Osmond felt his carefully cultivated imperturbability slipping. With an effort he kept his voice even.

"It's been two years, Dostoi. Two years of threat. Two years of uncertainty. Two years of suffering my father's smug hypocrisy. Two years of this... this place. I begin to think you're not up to the job, Dostoi."

"As your excellency pleases," Dostoi said. "As always I have done my best. If the secret is known to anyone but your father..."

"Someone must know!"

"We are trying..."

"Try harder!"

"Too hard and you will be executed." I, also, Dostoi added under his breath.

There was a long pause. Or I might be executed anyway, Dostoi thought. He was under no illusions. He had once made a bad error, a gambling debt too large for him ever to hope to repay which had then been on sold to a most unsavoury group of debt collectors. The debt collectors, who had sundry other lines of businesses of a criminal nature, including political assassination, had subsequently threatened him with an

equally unsavoury death unless he obliged them with a signal service. Which was how it came to pass that Osmond had cammed him first substituting the certified toxin-tasting plate with a fake and then inserting the poison into the stuffed falbert liver that had ultimately killed Osmond's own, intoxicated and therefore careless, mother. Ever since, Dostoi had been in thrall to Osmond's slightest insanity and had quivered at his slightest frown. Any boy who could calmly countenance the death of his mother to gain a slave was beyond any rational expectation, and Dostoi had been made well aware that the recording would be sent to the appropriate authorities in the event of any unfortunate accident to Osmond himself. Nor would Dostoi have been at all comforted to know that the assassination Osmond had allowed to proceed, that of his own odious mother, had actually been procured via a complicated chain of cut-outs at the behest of the Chairman himself, Osmond's father, and at the time still anointed husband of the woman in question.

"Very well," Osmond said. "Discreetly then. But don't fail!"

Chapter Seven

Mac had never felt so exhilarated in all his life. High was the word. As high as the wonderful, wild blue sky, or at least the blue ceiling of the training hall. As high as a kite. Higher, much higher. As high as the glorious edge of space. He had known all his life, at least ever since he could remember his dreams, that to fly was his destiny, what he'd been born for. But even his most powerful imaginings were just faint shadows compared with the reality, the actuality, the gorgeous, gorgeous, living, being, fact of flying. He was besotted with it, drunk with it. Consumed totally.

"Enough," Bassinger said. He had entered some minutes before and had stood quietly watching the boy as he practised. Mac had been flying by himself all afternoon and already he looked as though he had been flying all his life. His face fell and Boss grinned despite himself. The boy's delight was infectious.

"Enough," he repeated. "There's plenty of time. I want my dinner. And first I need to talk to you. There are things you need to understand. Now."

They were back in Bassinger's quarters and Mac was trying hard to pay proper attention but a dreamy look kept flooding his face.

"Listen to me," Boss said in his gravelly rumble. "Hear what I say. If you don't you'll die. Soon. You have far too much talent. You're way, way too good. After a day, you fly an order of magnitude better than anyone I've ever seen, except your father... Another week and even he wouldn't be able to match you."

"But isn't that good?" Mac asked.

"Not if you're killed because of it. And you will be, sooner or later, probably sooner, unless we can think of a way to protect you."

"But why?" Mac asked, beginning to feel alarmed, finally.

"You upset the balance. With you, the Reds become unbeatable. You destroy the market..."

"Market?" Mac interrupted.

"The gambling market..." Mac looked puzzled. "Betting, boy. Betting on the games. It's huge. The whole cluster, give or take, bets on the games. Big. And Galconia takes its cut. You come along. You destroy the market and I can tell you that a lot of very powerful people, legitimate and not, are going to be very upset. And it doesn't take any brains at all to realise there is a very simple solution." Bassinger paused.

"You can't play. Ever. Your first game will be your death warrant. We may be able to keep you alive for a little while but they'll be hunting you from that day on and they'll get you one way or another."

"But I have to fly," Mac said. "I have to." There was a rising note of desperation in his voice.

"I didn't say you couldn't fly," Bassinger said gently. "I said you couldn't play."

"But why not?" Mac whispered. He was very close to tears. "I don't fly better than you, or anyone..."

"Oh yes you do, Mac. And you know it. Look, Mac. Look here." Bassinger fiddled with a control panel and a display came to life. There was the familiar sight of a cauldron, a cryllic cased cube, 50 metres a side, surrounded by a huge crowd of tiered spectators in the round, stacked thousands on the hundred thousand, the whole covered by a huge domed roof.

"This was our last game at the end of last season," Boss said. "On Traxia. For a place in the conference play-offs. We lost. The Atomics ended up winning the Hyperbowl and are cluster champions. They're the best, Mac, the best. The champions. Watch. Watch how they fly."

Mac knew g-ball intimately. Because it involved flying he had been a passionate spectator all his life. It was a savage game, only one step down from the arena and best described by the four "nos": no rules, no referees, no weapons, no mercy. There was a ball, about the size of a head, which made it difficult to carry and protect one-handed, and there was a hole, slightly larger than the ball at the mid-point of each of the two end walls. If a goal were scored, the ball would drop from the hole down a transparent tube to emerge again in the middle of the floor, where the game would instantly restart with a fight for possession. The two teams of seven were locked in the cauldron for one hour or until one team had no one left fit to fly or had surrendered. In the event that both teams had members still flying at full time, most goals won.

Tactically, the essence of the game was strength in numbers. For instance, the notion of a dedicated goal keeper had been abandoned for so long that the word was now quite forgotten, even by the archaeological dictionaries. A lone man was too easily taken out. Most teams now used, or at least started with a two-two-three formation, two attackers, each with a wingman, and a defensive delta. This would be varied to suit circumstances as they developed, making the captains' on field leadership vital and their elimination often decisive. Consequently most captains chose to position themselves at the point of the delta where they could be twice protected.

Mac watched as the two teams warmed up, each at one end of the cauldron, and then as the giant overhead display flicked over to 60, assumed their game formations. The great claxon roared, the ball appeared in the middle of the floor and the flighters charged. Already, now that he was watching the actual flying critically rather than the flow of the game, Mac could begin to understand what Bassinger was getting at.

Even in the warm-ups the members of both teams had looked jerky and uncoordinated. There was none of the fluid ease which Mac had already begun to

experience, none of the unconscious agility he knew he possessed. The men here were all concentrating fiercely on flying, everything else was secondary.

"You see, Mac," Bassinger said. "Even the best of us fly like transports, a lot of us like ground tanks. Lumbering. Slow to manoeuvre. You're a dancer. Already you dance. They will break you. Permanently. They have to. You'll make them look ridiculous. The word will be out on you after the first time you play."

"But what can I do?" Mac asked. "They'll make me play. That's why they sent me here. And they don't care. They want me to die. They said so. Or near enough."

"I don't know," Bassinger said. "We'll try to think of something. But in the meantime, don't let anyone but me, or my number two, see you fly. No one. Do you understand? The longer we can keep it a secret, the more you can train, and the better you get the longer you may survive."

"But," Mac said. "That doesn't make sense. I need to get worse, not better."

Mac and Bassinger looked at each other for a long moment.

"It might work," Bassinger said at last. "But only if you never, ever let anyone see what you can really do."

Mac shrugged and then lowered his head in defeat. "I couldn't do it," he said. "Not now. Not now that I really know. I'd go mad. It would be like crawling, only crawling, when I need to run like the wind."

Bassinger turned back to the game that was still showing on the display. Already there were three limp bodies lying on the ground. No one had actually been killed in the encounter but it had been one of the uglier games of the season.

"Supposing this," Bassinger said as another fierce collision sent a fourth man spiralling down. "Supposing you train with the team during the day, and at night I let you into the hall and you can do what you like. If anyone comes you get very bad again very quickly and you can tell them I've ordered you to do extra practice because you're so bad. How about that? At least it will give us time to think."

"Thank you," Mac said. "Thank you, sir." And then: "Why are you doing this?"

Bassinger looked at him. "I don't know," he said. "I admired your father... I don't like what they're doing to you... Already you're the most beautiful flier I've ever seen... I don't know."

They stopped outside the entrance to the mess hall. Mac had missed lunch rather than give up flying time. He was now ravenous but also nervous and apprehensive. Like any 15-year-old boy he found the thought of being thrust into the middle of a large group of robust, hardened flighters intimidating in the extreme.

"Don't worry," Bassinger said. "Most of them won't even notice you. I'll introduce you to Chen. And I'll warn the others to leave you alone..."

"Chen?" Mac asked.

"The skipper. For the rest, Mac, don't speak unless you're spoken to and then as little as possible. Don't tell anyone your name. Leave it at Mac. And just do what the others do, but badly." He pulled the door open and they were hit by the bustle and noise of a busy cafeteria, thirty or so hungry men eating, talking, banging plates and cutlery, and from time to time shouting with laughter. Bassinger pushed Mac before him to the centre table where a group of four very solid individuals, each with battered, worked-over faces, were talking together.

"Chen," Bassinger called. "New recruit." The obvious leader of the four looked up impassively at the coach. Somewhere in his ancestry long ago there had been a Tartar, not that Chen had the least idea of what a Tartar might have been. He had a broad, flat face which looked as though someone had tried to beat it back into shape with a hammer, and the top half of one ear was missing. It made him appear particularly menacing, which was why he had never bothered to have it fixed. The rest of the room gradually fell silent and listened with interest.

"He's a boy," Chen said. "What are you talking about? Recruit?"

Bassinger shrugged. "His name is Mac and like it or not, he's here to stay." Chen hawked noisily but at a look from one of the others at his table, refrained from spitting.

"I don't like it," he said. "We need flighters, not boys."

"So teach him," Bassinger said.

"You trying to get us killed?" Chen demanded.

"In the first place, I didn't ask for him," Bassinger rumbled, a hint of threat in his voice. "And second, I didn't say he was in the team, just the squad. And anyone who messes with him has me to answer to. Clear?" Chen turned away and went back to his meal.

"Over there," Bassinger said, pointing to an empty table. "And get yourself some food."

The cook had looked at Mac curiously as he ladled out some sort of stew, and Mac tried very hard to be invisible as he took the tray to the table. He sat hunched over the plate with his eyes lowered, concentrating on the food and wishing he were somewhere else, anywhere else. The chair next to him scrapped and Mac flinched.

"Mac what?" the strange man said as he sat down.

"Just Mac."

"Mac what?"

"I don't know," Mac said desperately.

"You don't know your own name?"

Mac hunched even lower and wondered miserably how Bassinger expected him to get out of this. Then a third voice spoke.

"Leave him alone, Castel." Mac looked up to see one of the assistant coaches, a nuggety little man, with greying hair.

"Or what?" Castel demanded, but Mac could tell his heart wasn't in it.

"Or you'll be dealt with."

Castel made a show of thrusting back his chair and Mac glanced at him for the first time. His appearance confirmed Mac's instinctive dislike: a perpetually glowering face, narrow eyes, disappearing chin and a raw-boned, awkward but powerful body.

"And stay away from him, Castel," the little man added. He watched as Castel slouched off, and then sat down in his turn.

"Boss told me..." he said. "Who you are. I knew your father. We used to fly together." He smiled, and his face creased like a walnut. He held out a hand. "Welcome to the Reds. I'm Branco Sorrel."

"Hi," Mac said, and lowered his eyes again.

"Out of your depth?" Mac nodded.

"Don't sweat it," Branco said. "Just let things ride till they start to make sense. They will. Eventually."

Mac looked up.

"Did you really fly with my father?"

"I did. Indeed I did."

"And was he as good as they say?"

"Better."

"Then how did he lose in the arena that last time. Who beat him?" It was the one question Mac had never been able to bring himself to ask his father for fear of what wounds he might open, but he longed to know the truth

"Nobody."

"But what happened?"

Branco scraped back his chair and stood up.

"Please," Mac said. "What happened?"

"Have you ever seen a duel?"

"No," Mac said. "I was never allowed to watch. My father said it wasn't fit for anyone to see, especially boys. Especially his boys... boy."

"Boys?"

"I had a brother. He's dead."

"Well," Branco said. "James was right, but sometime I'll show you."

"A fight?"

"What happened to James. You should know what sort of a man your father is.

It's all in the CAW." He turned to go.

"But please...sir. What am I supposed to do now."

"Finish your dinner."

The room rose by some signal indiscernible to Mac and the men began to file out. Uncertainly he got to his feet, unsure whether to follow or not. Then Branco motioned to him.

"We're having an evening session tonight. That's why we could leave you in the hall this afternoon. Listen, Mac. This is going to be tough on you for a while. You have to be a klutz and that means we have to be hard with you to make it look real. We can't mollycoddle you. The rest of the crew will start to punish you if we don't. They won't tolerate anyone they think is going to be dangerous in the cauldron, dangerous to them that is. You have to fly badly to protect yourself but that means we have to treat you badly. We can't reward you for incompetence. We can't be nice. Do you understand?"

Mac looked miserable.

"I know," Branco said. "But nothing's fair. Some basic orientation. The season, as you probably know, is due to start in a month. So, in the lead-up we do gym work in the morning: basic strengthening, flexibility, wrestling and general hand-to-hand. If you can't fight, you can't play g-ball. In the afternoons we usually go to the training hall and fly. Today it was the pre-season medical and fitness check. Evenings, usually, you can do what you like. There's a rec room as well as the mess, but most of the time you'll be working with either Boss or me, or by yourself. We don't want you too close to the crew when you don't have to be. This is a penal team and some of them, like Castel, are ugly customers, and all the time bored. They get a certain amount of, shall we say, entertainment but never as much as they'd like. Stay away from them."

"Don't worry," Mac said. "I don't want anything to do with them." Branco smiled his walnut smile.

"It could be worse, young fella. It can always be worse. Go and suit up."

The whole crew, less the coaches, were standing just inside the training hall, all wearing practice suits but uninflated. There was a series of hoops suspended from the ceiling at different heights in a random pattern. Mac sidled in behind the rest and stood right at the back as inconspicuously as possible. He could hear Bassinger rumbling away but could not see him for the bulky bodies in front.

"Tonight," Bassinger said. "I would like to see something approaching a g-ball team. One that all but made the playoffs last year. Not a bunch of useless amateurs flying like my grandmother with an itchy arse. We have one month, gentlemen. Those who don't apply themselves and find some form fast know what to expect. Now. Follow the leader. And Chen make them work."

Mac wondered what happened to those who didn't make Bassinger's grade and then thought he would rather not know. He watched as Chen lifted off and flying quite fast made for the first hoop. One by one, led by the starting team, the rest of the crew set off in his wake. As he shuffled forward, last in the line, Bassinger roared at him:

"Boy! Inflate your suit." None of the others had but belatedly Mac realised he was now on show. Bassinger winked at him, a broad conspiratorial wink, and Mac suddenly felt a bit better.

All right, he thought. If I'm on show I'll give them something to look at. And instead of following on behind the flying crocodile he let himself shoot straight up in the air until he crashed into the ceiling with nicely calculated force, then he plummeted straight down again to roll at Bassinger's feet.

This could actually be fun, Mac suddenly realised. To be convincingly bad without hurting himself he would have to develop his control very rapidly and it would all be good training. He grinned to himself and began to feel happier about the situation. Bassinger roared at him wordlessly and pointed at the first hoop. Mac weaved off towards it and after three attempts managed to get through, except his inflated suit stuck half way and he was left swinging helplessly from the ceiling. The rest of the crew stopped to watch and the commentary was not kind. Mac felt himself flushing, even though he had done it quite deliberately. He had never liked being laughed at. Get used to it, he told himself grimly.

Branco came up to untangle him.

"Good," he said. "But that's enough for the moment. Don't draw any more attention to yourself. Just be hopeless, not funny."

Bassinger was roaring at him again. "Fifty laps, boy. Fifty. And touch every corner. I'll be watching."

Resignedly Mac set off, bumping and bumbling his way round the outside of the hall, allowing himself alternately to drift up and then slide down. But play such little games with himself as he might and even if it was flying, he eventually began to get bored. After 12 laps he started to sneak looks at the crew. They had finished the warm-ups and were now working on passing drills and again, as he had been when Bassinger had shown him the beginnings of a game on display, Mac was surprised to see how... pedestrian the flying really was. It didn't make sense to him. He had watched musicians, many musicians, on cam and it seemed to him that if a man could learn to play complicated scores on a complicated instrument with touch and finesse, then it should be possible to learn to fly the same way. What he had yet to realise was that it takes a degree of talent even to play music badly and great talent, still rare enough, to play it well. And while musical talent had been bred into the species for ages upon aeons, flying was a relatively recent accomplishment, completely alien and, therefore, had acquired little history in the human genome. For the most part, flying was still at the

musical stage of banging on bones, and until his own initiation and his realisation of the possibilities Mac had ever been an uncritical spectator.

Another ball went down and Mac found the temptation to stoop after it and claim it triumphantly before it hit the ground almost irresistible. He turned away and touched another corner, and another, and another... Twenty-three laps and still he bumbled along, growing more and more frustrated. Oh to crank up and zoom, soar, show these... these stones what flying could be, should be... Thirty-five laps and the crew were now working on tackle drills, blocks and pass interference. Mac came round yet another corner and found that he was suddenly close to the action, almost caught up in it. He dropped down almost to floor level to get out of the way and then came a desperate shout. Both Branco and Bassinger were yelling at him. He couldn't make out the words and instinctively he stopped dead to listen, hovering about five metres off the floor.

A blur flashed past just in front of him and a figure crashed into the floor and bounced high, limbs flailing, before falling back. Had Mac not stopped on the instant, he would have been taken square in the back. The next moment a furious Bassinger had pinned the man to the wall and was shouting full into his face.

"What the hell are you doing? What was that? Scumbucket...!"

Castel, for it was Castel, groaned.

"He's hurt," Branco said, coming up beside them.

"I should care," Bassinger said. "Scum," he repeated. "Dirty rotten scum. Trying that on a kid..."

"He's passing out," Branco interrupted.

"Good. You, and you two take him off to the medicals."

"No need to be gentle," Branco added quietly.

The tableau began to fracture, but Mac was still floating stationary above them. He noticed many of the crew watching him curiously.

"Boy," Branco called urgently. "Come down. Now."

Mac did as he was told and remembered to look awkward. People were still watching him. Branco marched over.

"I didn't do anything," Mac said apologetically.

"Oh yes, you did," Branco said, the worry plain in his voice.

"What?" Mac said. "What did I do?"

"You nearly killed a man..."

"But..."

"...By doing something I can't do, that Boss can't do, that no one on the team can do, that no one in the crew can do. By doing something I have never seen anybody do."

"But what?" Mac said. "I didn't do anything."

"You stopped dead. In mid-air. Dead."

"But what's so hard about that?"

"And then you just hung there, for god knows how long. For minutes. Without moving. Without moving at all."

"So what?"

Branco regarded him wonderingly. "We can't do that, Mac. None of us can do that. We can go up, we can go down, we can turn left, we can turn right, some a lot better than others, but we can't do that."

"I'm sorry," Mac said, beginning to catch his anxiety. "I didn't know."

"Well the cat's out of the bag, now."

"But it was just..."

"They're flighters, Mac. They know. They know what they've seen."

"Sir," Dostoi said. "This is interesting." They watched as the scene in the training hall played itself out.

"Amazing," Osmond said.

"Yes sir. It is."

"I've never seen anyone do that. Have you?"

"No sir."

Osmond thoughtfully stretched out full length and then gently submerged. What was the point of being Osmond von Osmond, fourteenth of the name, if he couldn't have a bath when he felt like it instead of the dreadful dry ablut everyone else had to suffer. He surfaced and spouted like a mythical whale.

"Castel?" he asked.

"Broken bones. A week in the pod."

"Fool. I should have him..."

"We may need him, sir."

Osmond scratched at his groin and Dostoi delicately averted his eyes. Pig, he thought to himself.

"So we proceed as planned?" Osmond asked. "He plays the first game."

"Yes sir. Except security is now a problem. As long as Bassinger was going to keep the boy a secret he was doing the job for us."

"But now?"

"The word will get out. Inevitably."

"Unless...?"

"A black-out...?" Osmond submerged again.

"A black-out will cause speculation of itself," Osmond said as he re-emerged.

"Not if the cover story is convincing." Osmond raised an eyebrow. "Sir," Dostoi added. Sir Pig, he thought to himself. Something must have showed.

"If you're tired of working for me, Dostoi," Osmond said in a very quiet voice. "Suitable arrangements can be made."

"No sir," Dostoi said, cursing himself. "It is my pleasure to serve you, to continue to serve you after so many years."

"I wonder," Osmond said thoughtfully. "Sometimes I think you know too much."

"But you need someone who knows, sir. And have I ever given you cause to doubt my loyalty?"

There was a long, rather menacing pause.

"A cover story?" Osmond said at last.

"Yes sir," Dostoi said, being very careful to hide his relief. As Osmond had mostly abandoned the undisciplined tantrums of his youth so he had become increasingly dangerous. The Chairman had ceded him more or less sovereign control of Redux some time before, sovereign so long as the quotas were maintained, and Osmond had grown into the part; that is to say that he relished having a genuine use and target for his incipient sadism.

"Sir," Dostoi said. "If it were to become known that the Reds have been locked down and are under punishment discipline for attempted mutiny then not only is there a credible reason for the crew being incommunicado but their odds would lengthen, would they not?"

"Dramatically, I should think." Osmond rose from the bath, stark naked and dripping expensively. Dostoi handed him a silken towel. "Well done, Dostoi," he said. And as Dostoi turned to go, he added:

"And tell Bassinger to have the boy train with the team from now on. Let's have them learn to work together. Let's maximise the point spread."

Chapter Eight

"This is bad," Bassinger said. "Bad for the boy. Very bad"

"Yes," Branco said. They were sitting in Bassinger's comfortable living room. "We should have known. When they sent him here." There was a long pause.

"I never knew his father," Bassinger said at last. "Played against him a couple of times, but that's all. He chewed us up, of course, but how good was he really?"

"Very," Branco said. "Brilliant. In the cauldron he never showed a quarter of what he could really do. He didn't need to and he was smart enough to know that it would get him killed. But I used to watch him fly for himself. It was... poetry... music... dancing... glorious. He was the best. The best there has ever been. By a parsec. Until now, that is. A team sometimes gets a hotdog. But we know what happens to them. They never last long. No one ever laid a hand on James. Never. And he only ever did just enough."

"He was pretty special, I suppose, in the arena."

"That was still way less than what he could really do without the harness to cramp him," Branco said. "He was absolutely the best. To see him fly free was like watching a god."

"So," Bassinger said after a respectful pause. "So what do we do about the boy? How good do you think he is?"

"Two gods," Branco said. "You saw what he did and how long has he been flying? He's going to be better than James, inevitably. If he lives long enough..."

There was another lengthy pause.

"So let's do this," Bassinger said. "You take him for a week; you're a better flyer than I am. And you teach him what you can and then let him work the rest out for himself. And that will give us three weeks to build the team around him before the first game... I'll clear it with Dostoi and I'll start working out a strategy."

"And the game?" Branco said.

"He should be fine. For the first one. If he doesn't freeze..." The two men looked at each other reminiscently. "It's the second one I'm worried about," Branco added.

The new regime suited Mac perfectly. It was bliss, at least for a week, and he couldn't get enough of it. He was in the training hall every morning long before Branco, chafed through the afternoon when team training denied him access and then would beg to be allowed to stay late into the night. He barely ate and he barely slept, even when he was nominally in bed. His head whirled with tricks, manoeuvres, new moves to try, and with the absolute wonder of a long-held obsession suddenly allowed to come to full flower. He was drunk on flying, absolutely, hopelessly intoxicated.

Branco's repertoire was exhausted in the first half hour and thereafter Mac was left to delight in his own devices. Occasionally Branco offered a criticism but for the most part he would watch in silent wonder as a miracle took place before his eyes; a chrysalis assuming his full shape, form and power. It was breath-taking to watch. Even so, towards the end of the week he began to insist that Mac's practice become more structured, that he choreograph moves and sequences into a pattern that would take him safely through a g-ball game where the seven opposition members would have only one aim – to knock him out of the sky by whatever means.

And Branco also tried to frighten Mac, or at least to get him to understand the danger he was facing, but nothing he could say would dampen the boy's passion and in the end he gave up. Better, he decided, to let Mac go on feeling invulnerable rather than to gnaw away at his confidence.

He and Bassinger would review Mac's progress every evening and the two of them worked hard to devise team tactics to take advantage of his astonishing development.

"You'd think he'd been flying all his life," Branco said at one point, and Bassinger arrived at the truth of it.

"He has," he said. "In his head."

"But he's so fast," Branco said. "You know speed is the last thing to come but he does everything at a million clicks an hour. He's going to run rings around our boys. They won't like it. Him being put straight into the team... Some of them will never make the line-up unless everyone else is podded... And then making them all look stupid. There's going to be trouble, Boss. And there's already a lot of bad feeling about the lock-down. Once they work out that's because of Mac, too..."

"Well, we're just going to have to deal with it," Bassinger said.

"But how? Whatever we do, someone will get to him."

There was a long pause, a gloomy pause. Both men were under no illusions about the members of the team. Some were decent enough, though perpetually angry at having been condemned to what was near enough indefinite prison, but the rest were thugs, at best, with only one redeeming feature: they could fly, after a fashion.

"Well, maybe that's what we have to do," Bassinger said at last. "Let them try. Let them try to kill him. And when they fail..."

"If they fail..." Branco interrupted.

"When they fail, perhaps we can make a championship team out of them."

"You think?" Branco said. "You think we can take the Cluster?"

"We'll never have a better chance. If Mac can pull it off I'll make Chen see the possibilities, and he'll deal with the others."

Mac's halcyon honeymoon with himself ended with the first day of the new week. Morning gym was cancelled – Bassinger half-hoped that this might count as some small

thing in Mac's favour – and the crew was assembled in the training hall. No one was wearing a suit and they were dressed in a motley selection of old game leotards and battered practice helmets. Branco's cast-offs were too big for Mac and bagged around his bottom making him feel even more self-conscious.

Bassinger looked him up and down and sensed his deep discomfort.

"Go and put on your ordinary clothes," he said, which was part of what made him a good coach. "No need to hurry."

He waited till the padded door had closed behind the boy and then addressed the crew.

"I'll say this once," he rumbled quietly, and there was instant silence. "Anyone touches Mac outside the hall and I, personally, will escort you to the arena. Inside the hall, just once, this morning only, you can do anything you like to him. Seven on one. As of now, the boy is in the starting team..." There was a growl from the men.

"... Orders from above, and I don't have to be told how you feel about that. This is your chance, your one chance, your only chance to make sure that it doesn't happen." The door opened again and Mac, blissfully unaware that he was a lamb being fed to the lions, slipped inside.

Bassinger threw him a g-ball. "I want you to put that in the goal at the other end. The team, all seven, will be out there, trying to stop you."

Chen smiled gently and motioned to the other six regulars on the starting team, all of them fresh, uninjured at the start of a new season, and relishing the chance of showing those above how much their orders meant, never mind giving an uppity boy what he no doubt richly deserved if he was beloved of those above. And then there were those rumours about his real name...

The team took off and began to circle about half way down the hall in their favourite defence pattern.

Bassinger went over to Mac and in a voice that no one else could hear, said:

"Work fast. Work clean. Work simple. They're out to teach you a lesson... If they can. Can they?"

"No sir," Mac said. "I don't believe so."

"All right. Go."

Mac stood a moment watching. Five of them, with Chen in the centre, were flying lazy circles, evenly spaced top to bottom and side to side, and the remaining two had fallen back to pick up any possible breakthrough. To a spectator it would look formidable, if not impenetrable, but what Mac saw were gaping holes that presented little if any challenge. He knew that all seven, positioned as they were, could not react fast enough to gain sufficient speed to stop him.

Mac took off, went high to the ceiling and then into a screaming dive. To the team it looked like he would try to skim through underneath and they too began to dive,

planning to intercept him at his lowest point and pound him into the floor. At the critical moment, Mac used his momentum to pull back vertically and into a maximum power climb. He caught a glimpse of Chen's startled face as he roared up and past, a metre or two in front of him. Mac levelled off as the front rank struggled to pull out and turn and watched as the two full-backs came at him, one from each side in a pincer movement. Just as it seemed to them they must have him, just as they were about to close and crunch him between them, Mac simply stopped and they crashed into each other. He banked, dived and a moment later put the ball into the goal-hole with a satisfying slam dunk. He saw Bassinger waving at him and allowed himself a victory roll as he flew back to the other end of the hall.

Chen and the team followed and there was a lot of quiet muttering as people digested what they had just seen.

"Mac," Bassinger said. "Do the walk loop thing."

Mac wasn't aware that Bassinger, or Branco for that matter, had any idea of this particular trick which he had spent some time mastering early one morning. He looked questioning.

"Do it," Bassinger said.

Mac shrugged and then began to walk forward, except that as he did so he lifted off the floor. His feet kept walking and his body gradually became horizontal. He walked on till he was upside down and vertical and kept on walking until he had come back down the other side and was again standing on the floor. There was whoop or two and some involuntary applause.

"Anyone else care to try?" Bassinger demanded, and then: "Anyone else want to have a go at tackling him?" There was an eloquent silence.

"Right," Bassinger said. "That's why he's on the team."

"We don't want him," a voice shouted urgently from the back. "That's Macgilliguddy's boy. Has to be. We don't want his sort..." There was a grumble of approval.

"Scum," another voice yelled.

"Bad blood..."

"Get rid of him..."

"Or we will..."

"Enough," Bassinger roared. "Shut your faces. Shut your stupid faces. It's not the boy's fault his father was forced to be a gladiator. It's not his father's fault either. Most of you are on your way to the arena, whether you know it or not, and what will you say then? The boy stays. The boy is on the team. Anyone who doesn't like it can leave now. With my blessing. But there's only one place for you to go. And you know it."

Chen stepped forward.

"His father was James Macgilliguddy?"

"Yes," Bassinger said, watching him narrowly.

"And Macgilliguddy killed 153 people?"

"Yes." Bassinger said. "What would you have done? What will you do?" They stared angrily at each other. Then Chen grinned wolfishly.

"I will kill 154," he said.

"But what did they mean?" Mac said. "Scum? Bad blood?" Training had finally finished for the day and Mac had been subdued and distracted ever since the confrontation over his father. He had slipped away at the end and hurried to his room. He felt exposed, in danger. Suddenly the joy of flying had been replaced by a pulse beat of fear. Fear of the crew, of what they might do if they caught him alone and unable to fly. Fear of the future. Why was he so quickly in the team? What did it mean? Who was sending the orders? Fear of failure, of defeat, of dying; however well he might fly, sooner or later the opposition would figure out a way to catch him. And he was still a boy and they were men, hard men, vicious men. What could he do then? How could he fight them? He couldn't. He would have no chance, not if ever they caught him. And most of all, there was the fear of what he was being forced to learn about his father, of what other flieters thought about him.

He had known that James had killed people, a lot of people, 153 people, but he had never really considered what that truly signified. He had accepted his father as some sort of soldier, a very fine soldier who had been victorious in battle after battle, that was all. He had never thought of James as a cold-blooded killer, but that, apparently, was the reality. And it was a reality that was deeply shocking to Mac. He loved his father, admired him, respected him, wanted to be like him... And now it seemed his father was just a killer. A murderer.

"What did they mean?" Mac said again. "Why do they hate me?"

Branco's face was troubled as he looked down at the boy who had thrown himself on the bunk, face to the wall. He was at heart a kind man and he had quickly conceived an affection for Mac.

"They don't hate you," he said. "They're just very afraid of people like your father. Of you."

"But why?" Mac asked. His voice was muffled.

"They fear being sent to the arena. It will happen to many of them. And they know they will have little chance of surviving, that they will be cut to pieces to entertain the mob."

"But they can fight, can't they. They might win."

"Have you ever seen an arena fight, Mac?"

"No. My father... my father would never let me. Even on cam."

"May I sit down?" Branco asked. Mac turned to face him and nodded. His eyes were damp.

"In the arena the weapon they use is the plasma whip. Whatever flesh it hits, it cuts through and cauterises at the same time. A sadist can cause excruciating pain before he chooses to kill. Many of the gladiators are sadists. And the whip, Mac, is a very difficult weapon. Very difficult. So those who survive the longest become the most skilled with the whip and almost unbeatable. Your father was unbeatable so being sentenced to fight him was to be sentenced to death. In the end, no matter that he flew so beautifully, it seemed he was just an executioner. No one could stand against him. No one."

"Then how was he beaten?" Mac demanded. "If he was so... good, why was he defeated?"

"If you come to my room, I'll show you," Branco said. "I think it's time you see what happened."

The arena appearing on Branco's display was quite different to a g-ball cauldron. Mac's schooling on what was next best to a slave planet had been rudimentary at best or he might have recognised that what he was looking at had roots stretching back to the beginning times.

There was a round, open area some 30m in diameter surrounded by tier upon tier of staggered seating. Half way up, the tiers were separated by a layer of boxes, a wide segment of which was reserved for the Chairman. It was clear that he was in attendance with a large retinue and that every other seat had been taken by a restless, raucous crowd. A fanfare sounded and the crowd quieted somewhat. Two doors opened on opposite sides of the arena at ground level and two groups of guards marched forward. They halted at about ten paces from each other and opened out. Mac gasped as he recognised his father, dressed in a black, skin-tight suit, his right hand holding what looked like a batten about the same length as his forearm. His opponent carried a similar batten and was dressed in a red leotard. It was clear that she was a woman and Mac watched the shock of realisation on his father's face.

The two groups after a ceremonial salute to the Chairman broke into activity and the two combatants were locked into identical harnesses with tethers leading to an a-g anchor that Mac hadn't noticed, hovering about 15 metres above. The guards marched out and James and his opponent began to rise into the air on a cryllic platform, still tethered to and preceded by the anchor.

"I don't understand," Mac said. "What's happening?"

Branco froze the image.

"In a minute they are supposed to fight..."

"In those harness things?"

"It's so there is no escape. Those things they are holding are plasma whips. They have a range of four metres. The floor will drop away. And then they will fight, except..."

"Except what?"

"You'll see in a minute."

"You mean they have to fly hooked up to that anchor thing?"

"Yes."

"But what if you can't fly."

"They give you a glove, anyway," Branco said grimly. "That's part of the ... entertainment."

"But that's just ... murder," Mac said, horrified.

"Execution. Public execution."

"You mean my father was just a..." Mac couldn't bring himself to say the word.

"No," Branco said gravely. "That was for others. Your father was a true gladiator. Because of his gifts, he was always used to punish other flighters. They could all fly. They all fought. It was never fair, not after the first few bouts, not once your father had mastered the whip, but it was always a fight. They always had a chance. They could have won, if they were good enough. And your father always killed as quickly and cleanly as he could."

"But the other one there, she's a woman. How could he...?"

"Watch," Branco said.

The platform stopped rising and the two combatants stood before the Chairman's box. Instinctively the woman had moved as far away from James as the platform would allow. There was another fanfare and a herald stood forward at ground level. He wore a strange over-robe that aeons ago people would have recognised as a tabard, and he carried a staff of office.

"Morgana of Honshos..." his voice was amplified somehow and reached every seat in the arena. "You stand accused of sedition and rebellion in that you incited the population of your home planet to wilful withholding of Galiconia's rightful tribute, taxes and privileges. How do you say?"

The camera swung in close on the woman and Mac saw that she was rather older than he had first thought. She looked fearful but there was also a determination there, a determination not to weaken. She opened her mouth to speak but nothing came and for a moment it appeared she would be unable to master herself.

"You have only the right of conquest," she managed to say at last. Her voice too was amplified, and grew louder as she found strength. "You are thieves, bandits, brigands. You are the sweepings of the galaxy. I curse you. I curse you to the black hole." There was a murmur through the crowd, a growing murmur.

The herald lifted his staff and waited for silence, but was forced eventually to raise his voice. "You are hereby sentenced to trial by combat," he called above the crowd noise. "In the event you prevail, you will be freed. In the event you die, your death will be proved to be just." The rolling cadence of the formula was designed to conceal the lack of logic. The herald looked to the Chairman who was seen to nod and there was a final fanfare.

Abruptly the floor began to fall away and James and the woman were left floating, Morgana jerky and uncertain, snagging her harness. The crowd fell silent, but rather than the usual expectancy and the instinctive anger of moments before there was now an odd air of disapproval, disapproval that with the right trigger might flare into something more potent. For a long minute nothing happened, then James moved at last.

He rose slowly and unthreateningly until he was poised vertically in front of the Chairman's box, as close as the tether would allow. Then he swung his right arm and his whip landed on the floor of the box with a clatter. Two guards whom Mac had not yet noticed sprang to the alert and trained their magma blasters on his father.

"I do not fight women." James's voice rang through the arena like a clarion. The crowd noise suddenly acquired a note of approval. "I do not fight women," James repeated. "Do as you will." He bowed his head in submission and floated there peaceably, waiting for what might happen. The Chairman gestured and four more guards stepped out of the shadows and stood with their weapons aimed and cocked. The crowd came suddenly to life and began to boo. There were cries of "no" and "shame and let him go". The noise rapidly built to a roar and rubbish rained down to the floor below, though miraculously none appeared to hit James where he still floated, composed and resigned. He lifted his head then and stared the Chairman full in the face. Mac felt his heart bursting with pride and love. This was the father he knew, the father he loved. This was the man he wanted to be.

Hardly daring to breathe, Mac watched as the Chairman lifted his hand. Even though he knew his father had obviously survived he was totally gripped by the moment. Surely the hand would fall, the blasters would flare and his father must die but the roar of the crowd built to a fury of outrage and the hand hesitated. James had long been the hero of the arena, a man forced again and again to fight to the death, yet a man who had ever offered courage and skill and such decency as was possible, and who through it all had somehow stayed honourable. Here was the proof.

The noise grew to a tempest, feeding of itself, and abruptly the hand disappeared. A moment later the troopers stood down and disappeared into the shadows at the back of the box.

The noise of the crowd quickly abated and when it was no more than a dull mutter, the Chairman stepped forward. He waited for silence.

"We hear the wisdom of the people," he said at last. "James Macgilliguddy you have served us well and faithfully. In honour this day of the birth of my son, I declare you a free man. You may go. Live well."

There was a great roar of approval from the crowd and a continued buzz of excited comment and speculation as the cryllic platform descended and the two combatants were released from their harnesses. No one had ever witnessed anything like it. It was sensational, unbelievable. As he was about to disappear down the passage from the arena for the last time, James turned and bowed deeply. There was another huge roar from the crowd, then he vanished and abruptly it was over.

Mac sat for a long time, dazed and trying to absorb the miracle he had just seen. He was flooded with surging waves of emotion, waves of love, of joy, of retrospective fear, but most of all relief. Relief that he was who he thought he was, the son of James Macgilliguddy, fighter, gladiator, honourable man. And around the edges he felt a sense of shame that he had ever doubted, doubted so easily.

At last he turned to Branco, eyes shining.

"You see," Branco said. "The crew only remember that he killed people like them, 153 of them. But it wasn't like that."

"Thank you," Mac said.

"Nothing to thank me for. You needed to see."

"What happened to the woman. Morgana?"

"I don't know," Branco said. "I can guess."

"She..."

"...Wouldn't have been allowed to survive. Quietly shoved out an airlock in deep space, I should think."

"Who was she?" Mac asked. He wasn't really interested but it was easier than talking about the rest, which was still overwhelming.

"I don't know much about it," Branco said, content to let Mac set the pace for a while. "Something about a planet where women used to run the government. Honshos. Then Galiconia took them over. The usual thing. They introduced thormalium. The economy became dependent on it. Galiconia controlled the supply and soon enough everything else. It's the way they always do it. But on Honshos there's still trouble of one sort or another from time to time."

"She was a flier?"

"I guess," Branco said. "It looked like she knew a bit about it. Galiconia usually recruits locals once a planet is... conquered."

"The whip thing," Mac said, still looking for distraction. "How does that work?"

"Do you know what a whip is?"

"Sort of..."

"Well," Branco said. "When you lash with a whip, if you do it right, it cracks. When you lash with one of these, and you do it right, there's a flash of plasma."

"And that cuts? Plasma cuts?"

"Yes."

"So why," Mac demanded, "why can't a gladiator just cut through that tether with the whip and fly out of the arena? Why couldn't my father?"

"Two reasons," Branco said. "If someone did get free the marksmen would get him. But no one ever could anyway. Those tethers are maxalloy. Plasma will cut it but it takes time. You would have to hit it in the same place I don't know how many times to get through with just a whip flash."

There was another long silence.

Mac spoke at last. "But even if my father was... a good gladiator, the crew don't know that. They still hate me."

Branco looked uncertain. "Boss thinks he can talk Chen around. And if Chen's on side, the others will follow. We hope."

"So what should I do?"

"Work on your flying. That's all you can do. We'll worry about the rest."

"Most satisfactory," Osmond said. He and Dostoi were reviewing Mac's introduction to the team. "I've never seen that walking thing before, have you?"

"No sir. The boy must have thought of it himself."

"So," Osmond said. "To business. I had thought to lay 50 million, but now... What would you suggest?"

"Sir," Dostoi said, horrified. "Fifty million is far too..."

"I think a hundred. What do you say to a hundred?" Osmond mused. Dostoi nearly fainted. Osmond, as he well knew, was already wealthy beyond the dreams of avarice but to risk 100 million centa on a g-ball game, a two-horse race, was sheer madness, even for him.

"I think a hundred," Osmond continued. "They play Tanglewood first up. Good team. You should be able to get me average odds of 3-1 against. That'll turn a pretty profit."

"Sir!" Dostoi protested. His anxiety was palpable. "Sir, if the Reds don't win..."

"How can they not?" Osmond interrupted. "You've seen what the boy can do. If ever there was a sure thing, this is it. And then, and then..." He licked his lips. Dostoi was beside himself. He didn't care a damn if the silly fool lost everything he possessed, except for one thing. He knew very well who would get the blame and the thought of the consequences was terrifying. With difficulty, he held his peace.

"I want the money well spread," Osmond continued. "I don't want people smelling a rat. Just a few hundred thousand here, a few hundred thousand there, spread it as far as you can. And Dostoi, there must be nothing to connect it to me. Nothing, do you understand?" Dostoi nodded despairingly.

"Any hint that I'm involved and part two of the plan won't work. I'll hold you responsible. Part two is the beautiful bit, the piece de resistance. Part two is where I absolutely cream the cluster. I can't wait. Go on, Dostoi. Get busy. Go!"

Chapter Nine

"So," Captain Wright said. All of them, including Shelby and Lanfranchi, were standing behind Orville, who was stationed at his console. The big display showed a view from the space side of the lucent. As they watched, a section of the carapace slid back and a freighter came noiselessly into view, positioning itself precisely in the centre of the atmolock with small bursts from its attitude jets. It slipped from sight and the carapace slid closed. The whole operation had taken perhaps two minutes.

"So," Wright said again. "What do you think, Mac? Possible?"

"Except for the eyespy," Mac said. "That makes it hard. If anyone's watching..."

Orville interrupted. "If anyone's watching what they'll see is some other ship entering. All freighters look the same, at least for that length of time. I'll just splice it in. That's easy. This is more difficult." The view swung and shifted to one of the ore-processing factories. A steady stream of haulers from the mines funnelled to the far end of the building, paused briefly over a giant chute while their loads tumbled into the maw, and then moved off to complete the circuit.

Less often, a smaller transport would leave from the other end of the building and head for Redux Resupply.

"Follow that one, Orville," Wright said, pointing. "All the way, there and back..."

Orville zoomed in and they all watched intently as the dirty little hauler made its way to the spaceport. It disappeared inside and Orville switched to another view which showed the hauler pulling to a halt at a laser barrier that protected a tunnel and the start of a conveyor. The hall was brightly lit and completely sealed apart from the hauler entrance at one end and the tunnel at the other.

As they watched, the driver emerged holding a CAWtell. The sergeant in charge inserted it into his reacom and expanded the display to peruse it while other guards swarmed around the transport checking inside, over and under, and paying particular attention to the destructo-seal on the cargo container. At last the sergeant waved them away, the driver got back in, a giant claw descended and the hauler was borne off into the tunnel which emerged into the huge cavern of the main spaceport, where at a rough count more than 70 ships were waiting to be loaded.

The hauler stopped briefly, its cargo container was swept up into a freighter and then it was moved on to a loading point where it received an empty container removed from one of the ships. Two minutes later it had been deposited outside the spaceport and was on its way back to the factory.

"Damn," Captain Wright said. "That's all very tight. Does this go on 24 hours straight; does anyone know?"

"Yes," Shelby said.

"How do you know?" Wright asked.

"We were drivers once," Shelby said.

"Before the mines, before James found us and sent us to you," John added.

"So you can actually drive a hauler?"

"Sure," Shelby said. "And John. They're simple, once you know."

"Well that's something," Wright said. "Not much, but something."

"I don't mean to be rude," Mac said. "But what about my father? I'm not going anywhere without him. And without him, and without me, you don't have a flighter, never mind anything else."

Wright put a hand on his shoulder. "It's all right, Mac. We're not going anywhere without him either. But he's badly hurt. It will be weeks before he can leave that pod. So we've got time, time to figure this out and time to plan how to free him. Nobody's leaving anybody."

"And let's hope that doesn't give them time to track down this young man," Lanfranchi said looking at Mac. "Time for us is time for them."

It was a gloomy end to the meeting.

"What we have to do is get into a cargo container," Orville said. He, Mac and Roxanna were sitting at the table, still glum.

"What I have to do is to find a way to rescue my father," Mac said.

"No, I'm serious," Orville said. "The container is the key. They didn't search it. They just checked the seal..."

"The destructo-seal..." Roxanna interrupted.

"So, if we were inside," Orville continued remorselessly. "There wouldn't be a problem. They wouldn't find us, would they?" Mac and Roxanna just looked at him wordlessly.

"And," Orville concluded triumphantly. "It solves the problem of me. My chair."

Mac felt guilty. He had been so consumed by his own immediate worries that he had given no thought to Orville's plight, nor to anyone else if it came to that.

"But how do we get into a container?" Roxanna demanded.

"I don't know," Orville said.

"And how do we make sure our container goes to the right ship?"

"I don't know," Orville repeated. "That is, I don't know yet. I'm going to talk to Shelby," he added, and glided off.

Mac and Roxanna sat there, each lost in their own thoughts.

"Are you hungry?" Roxanna said at last. Mac shook his head. "You should help yourself when you are."

"Yes," Mac said. "Thank you." And then to stop the depressing treadmill of his thinking, he added:

"It must be terrible for you, having to live your whole life down here, in the mines." He didn't know quite why this should burst out now, but as soon as he said it he realised the thought had been worrying him at some subconscious level ever since the situation had become clear to him. "There's nothing to do," he added.

Roxanna looked at him gravely and then smiled. "I dance," she said. "Orville gets me stuff to study from the CAW, and I dance. One day, I'll..." She stopped. "It's not so bad, down here. It's all I know. The alternative's worse."

"One day, you'll what?" Mac asked.

"One day, I'll tell you."

"Have you ever been up top? On the surface?"

"Oh yes," Roxanna said. "Not often. It's dangerous. But sometimes your father took me. To the markets and things. And your mother, before she died."

"My mother?"

"Yes. She was like my aunt, remember? I was so sad when she died. I cried and I cried. I loved her."

"So did I," Mac said. "And my brother." There was a long silence.

"But what about school?" Mac asked at last.

"My father teaches me. And Orville. Or he used to until Orville was old enough to hack into the CAW. That's where he spends all his time, plugged into the CAW. Because of his chair..."

"Maybe he could learn to fly," Mac said. It was just a casual thought but Roxanna's eyes gleamed with sudden excitement.

"Could he? Do you think he could? Could he really?"

"I don't know," Mac said. "It depends on him. His synapses..."

"Could we try?" Roxanna's face was alight. "Oh please. Can we try? It would mean so much to him. He would be free..."

Mac began to catch her enthusiasm and jumped to his feet meaning to go in search of Orville. Then he sank down again. "It's no good," he said despondently. "We don't have a glove for him, and we can't make one. And there's no thormalium. Only what I'm using and I need that to get to my father." Roxanna's face fell.

"It was a great idea," Mac said. Roxanna looked at him.

"How did you get a glove?" she asked

"I put my hand in a glove-maker..."

"A glove-maker?"

"A machine."

"Orville can make one," she said, excited again. "I know he could. He can make anything." And then she pointed at the matter-maker. "We can just copy your glove in that..."

"No," Mac said. "They have to be tailored to your own nerve patterns."

"But we can make thormalium there."

Mac looked at her in astonishment. He remembered her telling him that but it was only now that the full realisation of what it meant hit him between the eyes like a ton of ore.

"The matter-maker," Mac said. "Did Orville really invent it? Just him? No one else?"

"Yes," Roxanna said.

"He didn't just copy it from a plan somewhere? Something he found on the CAW?"

"No," Roxanna said, looking puzzled. "I'm sure he didn't."

"And your father didn't see what it means? Or my father?"

Roxanna shrugged. "What does it mean?" she said.

"I don't know much," Mac replied slowly. "I'm just..." He gestured. "But I do know that Galiconia depends on the thormalium monopoly to survive, to rule the Hyades. And if you can make thormalium wherever you like, whenever you like, with Orville's machine... well, you don't need Galiconia, do you?"

Roxanna looked at him, stunned.

"I can't believe it," Mac said. "I can't believe they didn't see what it means."

"I can," Roxanna said. "Nobody really takes Orville seriously. He's always inventing things, gadgets, gizmos. You should see his workshop. Most of his stuff is useless, or downright annoying, but some of it's really good. The holoc tunnels, and the lifesign blockers, things like that. But we just sort of take it all for granted."

Mac shook his head. "I can't believe it," he said again. "Surely my dad..."

"Why?" Roxanna demanded. "Your father hadn't flown for a long time, until... the other day. And none of the rest of us ever have. We don't think about thormalium. Not the way you do. There's no reason to. It's just there."

Abruptly Mac jumped to his feet. "Where's your father. I have to talk to him. We have to find him."

"Find who?" a voice asked, and Mac turned to find that Orville had silently glided in. Behind him was Captain Wright.

"Sir," Mac said urgently. "Sir. The matter-maker. Orville's matter-maker. We can use it to destroy Galiconia. We can make thormalium. We can beat them at their own game."

Captain Wright raised an eyebrow.

"Sit down, Mac," he said, pulling out a chair himself.

"We can, Sir. We can," Mac was beside himself with excitement. Orville grinned quietly to himself, not unnoticed by his sister. She gave him a searching look, but he said nothing.

"Mac," Captain Wright said. "There is an ancient tale. A king, a particularly vain king, decreed a new set of ceremonial robes, finer than anything ever seen, to be made for a state banquet..."

"But..." Mac began to interrupt.

"Hear me out," Captain Wright said. "...And the king's tailors were in despair, for how could they create anything more elaborate than the monstrosities they had already racked their brains to make for him. At last, the oldest and wisest of the tailors conceived a plan. Came the great day and the court was assembled to witness the king being robed in his wonderful, new garments. The tailors entered, their arms held high, six of them, at least, bearing the great train.

"The courtiers looked at each other but said nothing, none being willing to be the first to speak and so make a fool of himself. The tailors arranged themselves before the king and the head tailor said: 'See, your majesty, what we have fashioned for you. Cloth so fine it's as though the weave does not exist. Jewels so splendid they are blinding. Please your majesty discard those old rags you're wearing and try these wondrous garments for their fit, their softness, their magnificence.'

"The king stripped his clothes and the tailors began to invest him with the new robes, as the courtiers oohed and aahed and exclaimed at the splendour of each new item. At last the king stood before them, fully arrayed basking in the applause of the amazed throng. Until a page boy came in to tend the fire. 'Why is the king standing there naked,' he asked in a piercing voice. 'Why is the king naked?'

"Well, Mac," Captain Wright said, smiling as kindly as he could. "You are not that boy. I'm afraid the king is wearing clothes still."

"Oh," Mac said after a moment. He was very crestfallen.

"Think, Mac," Captain Wright said gently. "Think what would happen if you took Orville's matter-maker and set up shop producing cut-price thormalium. The first thing would be that you'd find yourself in an inter-planetary court facing fines, penalties and punitive damages of billions upon billions for violating the perpetual patent and copyright for the process of refining thormalium, a process owned by guess who. The second thing would be your quiet disappearance down a very deep thormalium mine, never to be seen again.

"It's quite true. Orville did build this matter-maker from scratch. And as far as we know it's the only one in existence, but the principle is known to some. For reasons I hope are clear, Galiconia chooses not to permit them, that's all." He paused.

"You're quite right, Mac," he added to ease Mac's disappointment. "If the practical problems could be overcome, matter-makers might well bring down Galiconia. They would change everything. Manufacturing, buying, selling, everything. The whole economy of the cluster would have to change in ways that I, for one, could not predict,

and as Galiconia is primarily an economic entity it would have to either adapt or perish."

"Practical difficulties?" Mac said, trying to hide how foolish he felt. "I don't understand. It works, doesn't it?"

"It does," Captain Wright said. "But you can't beat the basic equation, $E=MC^2$. It takes a lot of energy to make one, simple atom. Redux runs on fusion so we can steal enough without it being noticed for small things, like a piece of pie. But to supply a planet with all the thormalium it consumes on a daily basis would take a chain of reactors."

And here was a new worry. Mac lifted his left hand and pointed to his glove, which, of course, he had no intention of ever taking off in the foreseeable future. "So this is all the thormalium, refined thormalium, I'm ever going to be able to get?"

"Not necessarily," Captain Wright said. "James and I thought about that quite a lot. There is a black market in thormalium just about anywhere you go. Sooner or later there is always a black market for anything of significant value, but illegal thormalium is prohibitively expensive for the likes of us. We have hardly any money at all. But, James and I figured that if we could steal a ship there would be enough excess power from the onboard fusion reactor for us to be able to make small quantities of thormalium. Enough for us to be able to finance ourselves, more or less indefinitely."

"But how can you power the ship and the matter-maker all at the same time," Mac asked.

"A nice juggling act," Orville butted in. "But possible. Especially if we could hole up somewhere from time to time."

"What I don't understand," Roxanna said hesitantly. "Is how Galiconia got to run everything in the first place. Who would let it happen?"

"Now there's a question..." Captain Wright said. "But it's simple enough really. A small research company – it wasn't called Galiconia then – discovered the secret of refining thormalium, and what it could do. And anti-gravity is a very potent force with a million applications. For instance, inter-planetary ships can now just stop when they reach gravity and descend gently down to ground level without any re-entry problems. Or just park and send down shuttles. Planetary transport has been revolutionised and... so many things. Elevators... Chairs..." he said, looking at Orville's. "Medicine... So many things. Believe me, thormalium quickly became indispensable and in any unregulated market a company with an essential product will, soon enough, become sufficiently powerful that it dictates to the government, and then takes over the government and, ultimately, abolishes it. Which is what Galiconia has done throughout the cluster. If people want thormalium they have to have Galiconia. Even if they don't want thormalium, Galiconia is now far too powerful to resist. Has been for at least a thousand years."

He stopped and smiled at the serious expressions on everyone's face.

"It's just the way it is," he said. "There's no changing it. Maybe once there was a chance, if anyone had realised what would happen, but not now."

There was a respectful silence and at last Captain Wright rose to go.

"Wait," Roxanna said. "I forgot... Mac said that maybe he could teach Orville to fly..." Her father hesitated and then kept going. Orville looked surprised. He turned to Mac and smiled:

"That was nice of you," he said.

"So what do you think?" Roxanna demanded. Orville glided over to a storage cabinet.

"Look here," he said. Mac and Roxanna followed him and peered over his shoulder.

"That..." he said, pointing. "That is a portable synapse calibrator. And that, beside it, is a portable glove-maker."

"Wow," Mac said.

"Your father brought them," Orville continued. "He thought I might be able to fly too. That it might compensate for my legs. But my readings were low. We tried anyway, but I couldn't do it. I broke an arm..." He shrugged. "But thanks for thinking of it."

"I never knew about this," Roxanna said, puzzled.

"You were still small," Orville said. "No reason you should."

Mac was growing more and more excited. "Does the glove maker still work?" he demanded.

"Sure does," Orville said. "And look." He pointed again to a rack of brand new, untouched thormalium vials, partly concealed behind the glove-maker.

Mac gave a triumphant whoop. He suddenly felt one of his greatest worries lift from him. It was now clear he could stay airborne as long as he needed.

"Do you have weapons in your chair," Mac asked. The three of them were eating lunch. Mac and Orville were now noticeably friendly, but Roxanna was rather withdrawn, even stiff.

Orville paused with his fork half way to his mouth. "What sort of weapons?" he said. He and Mac both looked down. Orville's chair was mounted on a cylindrical base which held the a-g and propulsion units. There was a recess for his legs and duplicate controls were mounted on each arm.

"How high will it go?" Mac asked.

"As high as you like, as high as you can."

"So it could be sort of a one-man agger?" Mac said.

"A PT, you mean," Orville said.

"What's a PT?" Roxanna asked, curious despite herself.

"Oh you know that," Orville said, impatiently. "Personal transports. The GDF use them sometimes but flighters are far more flexible."

"And dangerous," Mac added. "A PT can't get near a good flighter. No contest. They're too slow and too clumsy. They just use them for patrols sometimes. And they don't have weapons."

"What sort of weapon are you thinking of?" Orville said again.

"A plasma cannon, maybe? Or a blaster," Mac said. "Is there any room in the base of your chair? What's your propulsion system?" he added.

"Compressed gas," Orville said absently. "Same as a PT."

Abruptly, Roxanna scrapped back her chair, pointedly, marched over to the recycle unit, dropped in her remains and banged the lid.

Mac turned to look and found himself gazing at an expressive back.

"What's wrong with you?" Orville said, jerked out of his reverie.

"Nothing," Roxanna snapped.

Mac and Orville looked at each other with the age-old expression of mystified males.

"Well, if nothing's wrong, why are you slamming things around?" Orville demanded. Roxanna stared at them. One level of Mac's mind was noting that she really looked remarkably pretty even when she was angry, but mostly he was feeling guilty without the vaguest notion of why he should.

"What have we done?" Orville said, looking more and more hunted. Despite their constant bickering, he was desperately fond of Roxanna and hated her to be genuinely upset.

Roxanna glared at him. "Always," she said coldly. "You just assume. Always. How dare you?"

"Assume what?" Orville said helplessly. "We haven't assumed anything."

"Always," Roxanna repeated. Mac and Orville looked at each other again. "You assume that because you can't do it, I automatically have no right to try."

"Do what?" Orville said.

"Fly," Roxanna snapped and stamped her foot.

Orville laughed with relief, which was a bad mistake. "Girls don't fly," he said, which was a worse mistake. And he said it in that tone of voice that has enraged women since time began, which was his worst mistake of all. Roxanna picked up the plate of pasta he was still eating, pasta with some sort of tomato sauce, upended it over his head and stormed from the room.

Mac tried his best but in the end he couldn't help himself. He grinned at the ludicrous sight of Orville with strands of fettuccine straggling through his hair and down his face,

and then burst into laughter. Orville snarled at him wordlessly but in a minute he too began to laugh.

"Women do fly," Mac said. He was standing outside the drawn curtain that screened Roxanna's chamber.

"What?" said a voice.

"Women do fly. I know they do." The curtain was ripped back and Roxanna stood before him. Had Mac more experience he would have bet anything that Roxanna's face would be tear-stained and puffed, but no. She was standing there four-square, hands on hips, clear-eyed and crisp.

"How do you know?"

"There's a planet called Honshos," Mac said. "Somewhere out... somewhere. But women fly there. Or they used to..."

"How do you know?"

"I... I just do. If you wanted to..."

"I do," Roxanna said.

"Um..."

"Now."

"*All right*," Mac said. "Way to go..."

It was not a success. Orville used Mac's reflexes to recalibrate the measuring glove but Roxanna's reactions proved to be only average, far too low to contemplate flight training. She was disappointed but not devastated.

"Thank you," she said. "It was good to try."

"Are we forgiven?" Orville asked.

She looked at him and smiled. "You've still got sauce on your collar."

Orville brushed at it crossly. Then he, too, grinned. The smile transformed his narrow face and Mac was suddenly made to wonder what it must be like, condemned to an a-g chair buried deep in a web of disused mine tunnels. He couldn't imagine how he might endure day after day, week after week, month after month, year after year entombed in a prison within a prison. He looked at Orville, and at Roxanna, with new respect. He was beginning to think his cousins, sort of anyway, were rather special.

"Does he look any better, do you think?" Mac said. The three of them were gazing at a display where Orville had patched in a view of James in his medi-pod.

"He might be," Roxanna said doubtfully. "Hard to tell."

"It's still only three days," Orville said comfortingly. "And he was really banged up when they brought him in. The plasma burst didn't get him directly. If it had..." he stopped suddenly. "But half a building fell on him..." he added after a pause.

"How am I going to get in there?" Mac said. "How am I ever going to get in there?"

"And how are we ever going to get into the spaceport, if it comes to that?" Roxanna added.

"I'm working on it," Orville said shortly. "I'm working on it..."

"What does your father... What does my uncle do to stop from going mad?" Mac asked.

"He writes," Roxanna said.

"He writes," Mac said blankly. "Writes what?"

"A history of the cluster. When Orville broke into the CAW, he found complete records for thousands of years. So Dad's writing a history."

"But..."

"He knows," Roxanna said. "He hopes what he does will survive and that other scholars will take it on."

"And the others, Shelby, Lanfranchi?"

"They work. They keep the place running. They improve it. It's much better now than it used to be. They help my father. They're smart. They all think the history is worth doing. Valuable. Or that it will be. One day."

Mac hesitated and Roxanna regarded him with a hint of impatience.

"I get by," she said. "I told you, I'm training to be a dancer and we're not as cut off as you think. We can see anything on the CAW, and everything's on the CAW."

"Do you watch g-ball?"

"No," Roxanna said. "I hate g-ball... No, I never watched you play." Mac looked disappointed. "It's too brutal," she added.

"Not always," Mac said defensively.

"Always," she said, but touched his arm to take the sting from it.

"Can I watch you dance then?" Mac asked after a moment.

"Maybe," she said.

When at last Mac was invited into Orville's workshop, he was amazed. The chamber was almost a cavern it was so big and contained a collection of tools astonishing in their variety. Mac recognised items ranging from plasma lathes to a small blast furnace, but there were many more machines he could not begin to name.

"I can make anything," Orville boasted. "Anything from a nano-circuit to a magma blaster."

Mac turned slowly and whistled. "But where did all this come from? How did you get it? It's... brilliant."

"James, your dad, helped. He brought a lot of the delicate stuff for me. Some of it I made, and the rest we stole, from the mine workshops..."

"But wouldn't someone notice? Wouldn't they come looking?"

"Nah," Orville said complacently. "Once you get into the CAW you can do anything, as long as you're careful, as long as you're not stupid. If an order comes for, say, that blast furnace to be dismantled, loaded on an a-g pallet and parked for collection, and if it disappears overnight, well then it's been collected, hasn't it? Particularly if the CAW says it has."

"Wow," Mac said with genuine admiration. "You've got a nerve."

Orville grinned happily. "It passes the time," he said. "But there's one thing I haven't got."

"What's that," Mac said.

"I've been thinking. What you said about my chair. And about rescuing your father. What we need are these." He pointed to the picture on a screen set into his main work bench.

"What's that?" Mac said again.

"It's a portable plasma cutter," Orville said and paused. "We have a pallet-mounted unit for work here, but not the little portables. We need two," he added.

"Why?" Mac said. "And why two?"

"So I can adapt one into a miniature plasma cannon to mount on my chair. And so that you can take the other and cut through the wall into your father's hospital ward."

"Cut through the wall?" Mac said wonderingly.

"Cut through the wall," Orville repeated firmly. "I've been over and over it, and this is the only way in. They've doubled security, Mac. Somebody thinks you're going to be coming and they're waiting for you. So, we bypass all that and attack from where they'll never think of guarding. Look..." He fiddled with some controls and the picture on the screen changed and zoomed in on a blank wall.

"That's where Uncle James is," he said. "Just on the other side of that wall."

"How do you know?" Mac asked and then answered his own question. "The CAW. You know everything that's on the CAW."

"Yep," Orville said. "I do."

"But I can see eyespies up there, along the top," Mac said.

"Of course. But come the time and they'll only see what I want them to see."

"How will I know to cut in the right place?"

"No problem..." Orville said.

"And how will we get cutters?"

"You're going to steal them."

"Steal them?"

"Because I don't have time to make them."

Small, hand-held plasma cutters were an everyday item in the thormalium mines, used mainly for fairing tunnels so the ore-trains wouldn't snag, but simply by reason of being in more or less constant use, 24 hours a day, they would not be so easy to procure and there was a definite risk involved.

"Couldn't you make them, one, at least?" Mac had asked again, but Orville had shaken his head.

"I could," he said. "But it would take too long. By the time I had one ready James would be out of hospital and who knows what they have in mind for him then? Our best chance is to rescue him while he's still in the ward. It's our only chance, I think. I really believe that, Mac," he had added.

Which was why Mac, dressed in black and hooded to hide his face and give-away red-gold hair, was slipping silently along just below the roof of an active tunnel, trying always to stay hidden, deep in shadow. He came to a T-junction and looked at the tiny display on his right wrist which showed two dots on a 3-D grid. The yellow dot moved left and down and Mac turned accordingly to bring the red dot which represented himself back into sync.

Another three junctions, one with five tunnels leading in different directions, and Mac was thoroughly lost. Without Orville's follow-me he knew he would have no hope of making his way back to the seeming dead end and the holoc where Roxanna was waiting. Suddenly Mac heard the sound of approaching voices and began to sweat. His cover in the shadows was fairly minimal, the last junction where he might find a hiding place was already well behind him and he felt sure he must be spotted. Something made him glance again at his wrist to see the yellow dot flashing urgently and moving towards the noise.

Mac didn't know what to do. He felt sure Orville was making a mistake but knew, despairingly, that this was now his only chance. Staring alternately at his wrist and the way ahead he sent the red dot after the yellow as fast as he dared. As he darted around another corner the voices were now so loud that he knew he had only seconds before he must be discovered. Suddenly the yellow dot started flashing again and swung hard left. Mac looked up and found a dark disused tunnel mouth right beside him. He whisked inside, his heart pounding, and tried to bury himself in the roof. He dare not go deeper into the dark for fear he would crash into something and betray himself with the noise.

Footsteps crunched just outside his hiding place.

"So what did happen to that damn boy? I wanted to back him again..." a voice said.

"Flying down a black hole, for a bet." There was a laugh.

The voices moved on and Mac dared to breath again. Had they been talking about him, he wondered? His face felt clammy with sweat inside the hood and he wished he were somewhere else.

The yellow dot flashed twice and then moved on, Mac faithfully tracking it. Two more junctions passed and Mac began to hear the rumble and squawk of machinery at work. Abruptly he came to a place where the tunnel had been widened to form a sort of work bay and holding area. He could see various pieces of jumbled equipment and benches where men had left outer clothing, and their food for the shift. The yellow dot flashed again and Mac drifted after it towards the back wall. There were racks for tools but they were all empty. His heart sank and he felt the start of a brain freeze. Grimly he set himself to reason a way through it and eventually saw the beginnings of a plan. The yellow dot was flashing at him again, but he ignored it and drifted back the way he had come, down the tunnel to the first corner. There he hung as close to the ceiling as he could get, motionless and barely breathing.

"What's he doing?" Roxanna said, whispering into her reacom.

"I don't know," Orville said. "He's just stopping where he is."

"We should have made him take a reacom," Roxanna said.

"Too risky," It was her father's voice. "He must be waiting for something..."

"But what?" Roxanna said. "He must be in trouble. It's been over an hour. I should go and see..."

"Don't you dare move," Captain Wright said. "I'm not having you captured too. And get off the air."

"But..." Roxanna started to protest.

"He's moving," Orville said. "He's moving again. Yes. He's all right. But he's very close to people again. I'm picking up lifesign."

It had been a wearing wait, but at last the crew Mac could hear working at the face trooped back to the lager for a meal break. Mac gave them five minutes to settle and then glided noiselessly past the bay and on to the mine face. There, as he had hoped, he saw several plasma cutters lying where they had been dropped, and choosing the two least battered he strapped one to each leg.

The return journey, once back past the lager, was uneventful though at one point Mac did hear a convoy of ore haulers in the distance. But even so he felt exhausted with stress and tension when he finally slipped through the holoc and found Roxanna faithfully waiting for him. As he dropped down to his feet she rushed over and hugged him. Then she stood looking deeply embarrassed.

"I was so worried..." she said.

Chapter Ten

"Well, young fella," Shelby said. "I must say you've got some gumption. That was a good effort. And the agger. Especially the agger."

"Not bad," Lanfranchi agreed. "Not bad."

The two men were busy in Orville's workshop, stripping, cleaning and generally checking over the two plasma cutters. Mac, who felt a proprietary interest, was helping; that's to say he was standing there with his arms folded, frowning judiciously. But it was clear, even to him, that the two men were well practised at what they were doing.

"Seen you play g-ball, too," Selby said.

"Yeah," Lanfranchi said. "You're all right..."

"We've decided," Shelby said.

"Like your old man, you played like your old man," Lanfranchi said.

"And we owe him," Shelby said.

"Big time," Lanfranchi said.

"So now we owe you."

"Yep."

"So you can count on us to help get him out."

"You can," Lanfranchi said. "And I'm sorry if I was..."

"Suspicious," Shelby said.

"But we know what..."

"Those bastards are capable of," Lanfranchi finished. Mac flushed with pleasure. Their approval was gratifying of itself but their promise of willing, practical aid was much more so.

"Thank you," he said. He made no secret of inspecting them closely as they worked. They came from the same mould, tough practical men who had knocked around the cluster all their lives. Shelby was the older and the smaller of the two. He reminded Mac a bit of Branco and he felt a pang. Branco had been a good friend and Mac knew he was unlikely ever to see him again; and Boss. Lanfranchi, on the other hand, was one of those people who could merge into a crowd and never be remembered. Mac admired the way his hands moved, sure and knowing.

"Do you always do that?" he said after a bit.

"What?" Shelby said.

"Finish each other's sentences," Mac said. "I thought you were married just then."

The two men grinned.

"Might as well be," Lanfranchi said.

"We've been together a long time," Shelby said.

"Together?" Mac asked. "Together together?"

"Yep," Lanfranchi said.

"You got a problem with that, Mac?" Shelby said, his voice held a slightly different note.

Mac could have kicked himself. So stupid. Sometimes he was so stupid. Having just been accepted by the two men, the last thing he wanted was to alienate them again.

"No," he said quickly and then paused.

"Please," he added. "I really don't have a problem. I was just surprised, that's all..." And he could have kicked himself again. "I don't mean it's *surprising*," he rushed on. "I just mean I wasn't expecting... oh, I don't know what I mean... But I really don't have a problem."

Shelby turned from the bench to look at him, as did Lanfranchi.

"That's all right," Lanfranchi said.

"We know what you mean," Shelby said.

"You mean that we don't look the part," Lanfranchi said.

"And no reason we should when you think about it," Shelby said.

"Is there?" Lanfranchi added.

"No," Mac said. "I'm sorry."

"No harm done," the two men said together. They turned back to their work.

"Can I ask something, please?" Mac said after a bit.

"Sure," Shelby said.

"How do you come to be here? I know about the Wrights. But what about you?"

The two men looked at each other for a moment and then Mac had the impression that an unspoken signal had passed between them.

"Been together a long time," Shelby said.

"Long before we ended up on Redux," Lanfranchi said. "But even now, even in the year C8221 they still don't like people like us. Not on the working planets anyway, and that's all we know."

"So we kept moving on," Shelby said. "Until we ended up here. End of the road, you might say."

"We were hauler drivers to start with," Lanfranchi said. "But there was trouble. More trouble. Always trouble."

"Always," Shelby said. "As long as we stayed together. Always trouble..."

"Didn't people, bosses, try to separate you?" Mac asked.

"Sure, they tried all right, didn't they John?" Shelby said.

"But we found ways. It was never us that caused the trouble in the first place so we still had some right on our side and there was always bribery. And nobody really cared as long as we weren't bothering them."

"So they just kept moving us on," Shelby said.

"And here we are."

"But how. What happened?" Mac said.

"We started as hauler drivers... Then they sent us to a mine crew," Lanfranchi said. "Working the face. Lowest of the low."

"We were all right as long as we stayed together," Shelby said. "But one day they cut me out..."

"We got careless..."

"And they took me to an old tunnel..."

"They beat him," Lanfranchi said. "And they were..."

"But John found me. John found me and he killed them. All of them. With a cutter. Like this one." Shelby held up the tool he was reassembling. "Twelve of them."

"Don't ask me to feel sorry," Lanfranchi spat. "What they were going to do..."

"James, your father, was driving an ore train. This was after he'd been freed from the arena but long before you were born. We knew each other. We had passed the time of day. Talked. He saw us coming out of the tunnel... Running..."

"And he guessed," Lanfranchi said.

"Or enough to know that we were finished," Shelby said. "That it was the arena or Cram for us... That there was nowhere left."

"So he hid us for the rest of the shift and when he could get away, he brought us to the captain," Lanfranchi said.

"We owe James," Shelby said.

"Big time," Lanfranchi said.

"So what does the D stand for?" Orville said. "Dagobert? Dabney? Dewitt?..."

"Dewittless," Roxanna said. "Him, not you Mac," she added.

"Dauncey? Didier? I know, Dumpster."

"Oh very funny. Leave him alone, Awful."

"So what?" Orville demanded.

"The D stands for..." Mac began, drawing it out. "Don't-mess-with-me." All three of them smiled.

Mac had been living with his cousins for only a few days but already it seemed to him they had known each other forever. Since Hannibal's death, Mac had been a solitary child, a solitary youth. He and Hannibal had been as close as puppies in a basket, twins in the fullest sense of the word, and in those first months it had seemed to Mac

disloyalty of the first order to his brother's memory for him to think of having other friends. As time passed it became the natural state of affairs and he had simply got out of the way of it.

Now, after all that had happened, all that he had been through, alone, the pleasure of not only finding a family but people he liked and admired and with whom he could be comfortable and unguarded was intense indeed. If only his father were not locked in a pod at RCentral, then things for Mac would have been as close to perfect as they were ever likely to get. He had not yet reached the point where he felt able to call Captain Wright Uncle Winston, but he was working on it.

"Captain," Mac said. "Excuse me..."

"Why Mac. What brings you here?" Mac was standing at the entrance to the small chamber that Wright used as a study and bedroom. There was a bunk, a desk, and a wall of shelving stuffed with tells.

"I wanted to ask you, sir..."

"Do I have to be sir?"

"I wanted to ask you... Captain, if I could read your history."

"It's not nearly finished, Mac. It's barely begun."

"But I don't know anything," Mac said. "I don't know anything about Galiconia, about the cluster, how it all works... I don't know anything," he finished lamely.

"Didn't your school...?" Mac shrugged. "No I suppose not..."

"Well," Captain Wright said. "I don't think my history is really the place to start, not yet anyway. But there is plenty here to get you going." He gestured at the stacked tells. "Do you have a reacom?"

"No, sir... Captain," Mac said. "All my stuff got left behind." Wright opened a drawer and pulled out a well-worn pocket info-system with an expandable display.

"Take this one," he said. "Your father brought it for me when we first... came here. I keep it for sentimental reasons. It still works fine. It's programmed with our network, but we don't use that unless it's vital. There's always the chance that someone might pick up a transmission."

Mac took the folded reacom reverently and Wright turned to the stacked tells.

"This might interest you," he said. "It's a study of key Galiconia planets. It will give you an idea of what we're really up against..." The word planets jogged Mac's memory.

"Have you heard of a planet called Honshos?" he asked.

"Indeed," Captain Wright said. "You'll find it in that tell... And here's one you'll enjoy. Take this one: The Development of g-ball ." Wright winked. "All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy, you know."

Mac grinned.

"What happened on Honshos?" he asked.

"The usual," Wright said. "A rebellion and the Gadai ruined the place as punishment."

"The Gadai?"

"Department of Galiconia Administration Discipline and Intelligence. They actually run the cluster pretty much, apart from here and Redux II.

"By the way," Wright added. "Have you looked at your father's stuff?" Mac shook his head. It had seemed disrespectful to open his bag without his permission.

"You should," Captain Wright said. "I doubt there's anything too personal there. He kept that bag here as a last resort, in case he had to run for it without being able to go home first. Which, of course, is just what happened. He'll have a spare glove there and you're going to need that, if nothing else, to get him away. Aren't you?"

Mac nodded. The matter of a glove for his father was a problem he had been shelving. He nodded again. It was time for his little family interlude to end, to get serious again. Time was running out.

Captain Wright watched his expression change.

"Yes," he said. "We still have a long way to go. Dinner. We'll go through it all with everyone at dinner... And anytime you want another tell, please." And Wright gestured expansively.

Mac laid his father's fatpac on the bed-ledge, the bed-ledge that he was now using himself, and hesitated. It seemed wrong even though he knew James would want him to, and in the event the contents were unsurprising, exactly what one would expect in a get-away bag. There was indeed a spare glove, three in fact, each with a fresh charge of thormalium not yet activated. The only other item that was at all unusual was a tiny holocube on a maxalloy chain. Mac sat looking at it. Twice he reached for it and twice he pulled his hand back.

"You should open it," Roxanna said. She was standing at the entrance to the alcove. Mac looked up, his expression unreadable.

"Father told me to come," Roxanna said, and then: "You should open it."

"I know what it is," Mac said.

"Are you afraid?" Roxanna asked.

"Yes," Mac said. There was a silence.

"No," he said. "I'm not afraid. I just don't want to."

"You have to look sometime."

"Who says? Why?"

"You just do," Roxanna said softly. "To..."

"To what?" Mac demanded, his voice rising.

"Don't get angry," Roxanna said, still very softly. "Please don't get angry. You have to look at it to stop them haunting you."

They stayed still for a long time, regarding each other gravely: the dark, pretty girl with the soft, green eyes; and the sturdy boy with the ancient nordic colouring and a body rapidly broadening and thickening into a man's. A rigorous month in the g-ball gym had done much to accelerate Mac's physical development.

At last Roxanna turned and left.

Mac repacked his father's bag item by item, except for one of the gloves and for the holoc cube. The glove he put ready for use and the holoc he slipped over his head.

He then went to find Orville and the glove-maker. It was time he had spares of his own.

"Sure," Orville said. "You know where it is. Help yourself... And then you can help me."

"Do what?" Mac asked but Orville just grinned and wouldn't say.

Later, with three brand new gloves in hand, Mac went to find Orville in his workshop.

"So," he said. "What are we doing?"

Orville pointed to a small round hole with a flared aperture in the base of his floater.

"Test firing," he said.

"Wow," Mac said admiringly. "You didn't waste any time. Will it work?"

"Dunno," Orville said. "That's what we need to find out. Bring that old canister for a target. Hope it's not too hot."

"What do you mean?"

"I have a theory," Orville said. "Thormalium ore is refined with a three-stage interrupted heat treatment to give a gas which with oxygen gives off heat and decays to a volatile compound. So what would happen if you exploded a thermo, say, and the heat caused a large amount of the gas to be released straight into the atmosphere?"

"I don't know," Mac said. "What would happen?"

"You might get a chain reaction. Enough radicalised thormalium producing enough heat to radicalise more thormalium, and so on."

"And what would happen then?"

"Well, there would be huge gravitational shearing, wouldn't there? Between normal gravity and the anti-gravity. Might rip the whole place apart."

"Wow," Mac said. "And you think your cannon...?"

"Nah," Orville laughed. "We're safe."

The two tracked through the old tunnels until they found a long straight stretch well away from the others. Mac counted out 50 paces and set the target on the ground.

"Right," Orville said, when he returned. "You'd better stand behind me... Ready?"

"Fire away," Mac said.

Orville sighted carefully and pressed a button. Flame shot from the base of the floater and then totally unexpectedly it rocketed backwards, collected Mac and crashed into the far wall of the tunnel, leaving the two in a heap on the floor.

They sat up slowly, looked at each other for a long minute and then burst into laughter.

"And I'm supposed to be smart," Orville said at last. "Talk about stupid..."

"Well," Mac said. "If you reversed it you could have jet propulsion..."

"What I actually have to do is to ground the floater first..."

"So let's try again," Mac said, and Orville was proved correct. With his floater resting solidly on the floor of the tunnel, the small plasma cannon worked perfectly and they played with it all afternoon.

"So it boils down to this," Captain Wright said. "We have the beginnings of a plan to rescue James but we are no closer, at all, to being able to escape Redux."

The six of them were seated round the dining table, the remains of a meal pushed to one side. Orville was looking defensive.

"I can get three of you away, maybe, and the two flyers," he said. "But someone has to drive the hauler in, and out, and I have to stay to manipulate things on the CAW. To get the fliers in, to get the container to the right ship. But to do that, I have to stay..."

"Absolutely not," Captain Wright said. "We all go or no one goes."

"And there's the problem of the destructo-seal," Shelby said. "We'd have to steal one. Somehow. And the accounting's very strict..."

"If one goes missing there'll be hell to pay," John said.

There was a gloomy silence.

"Let's talk about James," Wright said at last. "Fooling the eyespies and cutting through the wall is viable, but only if there is no one in the ward to raise the alarm."

"I can use the CAW to seal the door," Orville said. "We wait until the ward's empty and seal the door."

"How long will it take to cut through?" Wright asked.

"At least five minutes," Lanfranchi said. "That fused stone is tough and it looks at least 60cm thick."

"So we're depending on no one noticing the door has been sealed for five minutes?" Wright asked. "What are the chances?"

There was silence.

"A diversion," Roxanna said at last. "We could make a diversion." They all turned to look at her.

"And another thing," Roxanna said. "If two people can follow a ship through the atmolock, why can't we all?"

"Because we can't fly..." Orville began to snap and then trailed into silence. "It could work," he said beginning to become excited. "We'd need space suits for everyone... We can do that... And we'd need some sort of a-g for the non-fliers... a-g small enough to go through the access locks... I can make something, a-g lifejackets, or something... Let me think..."

"What sort of diversion?" Mac asked. "What did you have in mind?"

"I don't know," Roxanna said. "Something noisy, I suppose. Confusing. Something that will get everyone's attention."

"A bomb?" Shelby said. "An explosion?"

"It could be," Roxanna said.

"But how would we get it there? We're all marked."

"I'm not," Roxanna said. "They don't know about me. I don't exist."

"Get out," Orville said. Mac and Roxanna were mooching around his workshop, fiddling. Orville had been shutting himself up for days and their curiosity had finally got the better of them.

"Don't touch that!" Orville snapped, looking over his shoulder. "I said don't touch that, you'll lose your hand..."

"What does this do?" Roxanna said.

"Don't touch it. Go away. Get out! I'm busy."

"So what are you doing?" Mac asked. "Can we help."

"No you cannot."

"But what are you doing?" Roxanna demanded.

"You'll see when I'm ready."

"So tell us now," Roxanna said. "What's that tube thing you're making?"

"When I'm ready," Orville said. "And for the last time get out."

"Oh, all right," Roxanna said. "Come on, Mac. We could..."

"I've actually got reading I should do. Your father gave it to me," Mac said. What might have been a look of disappointment flitted across Roxanna's face as she turned away.

"Okay," she said. "See you later." Mac had a sudden insight into how lonely Roxanna must be, how lonely she would have felt all her life. That she would accept Mac removing himself without the slightest protest when obviously she wanted company spoke powerfully to the long, hard conditioning of a life spent shut up in the mine tunnels, with only the briefest of escapes and those at very rare intervals. The four men she lived with were all more or less self-sufficient in their different ways, which

meant that she must be too, like it or not, and Mac had the strong feeling that she didn't like it much at all. Not all the time anyway.

"Or we could have a game," Mac said. Roxanna was two up in the modified version of 3-D chess they had been playing.

"That's all right," Roxanna said. "You go do your reading." And somehow Mac found that he had been left feeling a total heel.

Again they were meeting over dinner and when they had finished, Captain Wright called them to order.

"Excuse me," Orville said and glided away to his workshop. He came back a moment later with a box in his lap and pulled out an object that he handed around.

"Like I said," he remarked. "An a-g life-jacket."

When it was his turn Mac found he was looking at a light-weight harness with straps for shoulders and crotch that connected to a small capsule.

"How does it work?" his father asked.

"Someone put it on," Orville said. "John...?"

Lanfranchi loosened the straps and struggled into it with Shelby's help.

"It needs to be tight," Orville said. "He took another harness from the box. "John's the biggest. Roxanna, you're the lightest. Why don't you try too." When they were both ready, Orville did something to the end of each capsule and then gave Lanfranchi a push. He floated up off the floor and then stopped. Orville did the same to Roxanna and she too rose into the air and hung there. Orville looked pleased.

"Neutral weight," he said. "The capsule is small thormium generator that adjusts automatically to the weight in the harness. You can't do anything but float or maybe bounce from wall to wall, but look..." He gave Roxanna another small push and she floated well away from the table. "See. There's very little resistance. So we link everyone together and Mac and James tow us over the lucent and in through the lock."

"Wow," Mac exclaimed and there was a general buzz of comment and exclamation.

"Well done," Captain Wright said at last. "Well done, Orville! Here's the start of a plan we can really work on, that actually might succeed."

"And I have this, too." Orville took something else from his box and placed it on the table.

"Oi," Roxanna said, still floating some way off. Mac went to retrieve her and found, as Orville had said, that there was next to no resistance as he pulled her back to the table.

Orville switched off both harnesses and Roxanna and Lanfranchi came back to earth.

"The capsules are self-adjusting," Orville said. "Doesn't matter what your weight is. But you have to be careful of one thing. Don't switch them off, or let them be switched off, if you're up high. Gravity will resume normal service on the instant."

"And what exactly is this?" Captain Wright said, after a moment, pointing at the cylindrical object Orville had placed on the table.

"Ah," Orville said. "I call it my crowd-pleaser... It's harmless but whenever anyone presses this..." He held up a palm-size control unit. "It does this..." There was a deafening explosion, a blinding flash of light and the whole room seemed to shake.

"I'm sorry," Orville said for the umpteenth time. Minutes had passed. "Confined space... Worked better than I thought... Sorry, I'm really sorry..."

"Lunatic..." Captain Wright said. He could still barely hear for the ringing in his ears and he had to squint and shade his eyes to be able to see.

"Good diversion," Roxanna said.

"Well you said a bomb," Orville protested.

"And it goes on doing it?" Shelby asked, impressed despite himself.

"Every time you press the button," Orville said holding up his hand again.

"Nooo!" five voices howled, simultaneously.

"I wasn't going to," Orville said, offended. "You must think I'm really stupid."

There was a silence almost as deafening as the crowd-pleaser had been.

"So, anyway..." Orville said eventually. "That popping off every few seconds in the lobby of RCentral ought to be entertaining, don't you think?"

"I do not," Captain Wright said in his most clipped voice. "I most certainly do not. Think of another diversion, Orville. One that does not depend on Roxanna walking into the middle of a hornet's nest and giving it a good kicking. You really are a lunatic, Orville. She's your sister. Kindly remember that. She is your sister and she is not expendable!"

Orville was deeply crest-fallen. The three of them had retreated to his workshop and were sitting staring at the crowd-pleaser.

"It's a beautiful bomb," Roxanna said. "Really beautiful. I love it."

"A waste of time," Orville said. "And I don't have any other ideas."

"Couldn't Shelby or John do it?" Mac said, knowing very well they couldn't. Even so much as a partial image of either of them caught on an eyespy could trigger an alarm in the CAW and the hunt would be on, a hunt that might well lead to all of them.

"Don't worry," Roxanna said. "I'm going to do it. I want to do it."

"But..."

"Father doesn't always get what father wants," she said with a toss of her head. "And I don't see why I'm never allowed to have any of the fun."

"It probably won't be fun," Mac said. "And you might get caught."

"I'll just be another one of the crowd, ducking for cover."

"No you won't," Orville said. "You heard him. He'll never let you do it."

"He'll have to," Roxanna said. "Or I'll just walk out of here and give myself up anyway... "

"That's crazy," Mac said.

"Of course it is. That's the point. I'm a rebellious, frustrated, female adolescent, boiling with hormones, capable of anything. How can I be anything but crazy?"

"You threaten that and he'll chain you up," Orville said.

"No he won't. He loves me, but he has to learn to let me be me..."

Chapter Eleven

The ready room smelt of danger, powerful danger. The six other members of the starting team were prowling about, mumbling wordlessly, smacking fists into palms, head-butting locker doors. Every so often two would slam into each other and grunt threateningly. Mac cowered in his corner. He thought he had come to know the team, and if not to like them, at least to feel reasonably comfortable around them. But game day was something else.

Branco dropped down beside him. Over the past month Branco had been his constant shadow, trying to pass on a lifetime of experience, protecting him from the worst elements in the crew, teaching him survival. Mac had been a sponge and had some notion of how much he had grown, both mentally and physically, but now he felt a frightened boy again, just a frightened boy who wanted his father.

"Don't let it throw you," Branco whispered. "It's the same for everyone, the first game. Doesn't matter how old you are, or how big you are, we're all scared. You'd be stupid not to be. The trick is to harness your fear. To use it. Don't be afraid of it. Don't be afraid of the fear. Fear is good, the right sort. There is fear and then there is fear of the fear and that's what will paralyse you. Let it wash through you, clean you out, strengthen you. Don't be afraid of it. Use it."

Bassinger shouldered his way through the squad.

"It's time," he shouted. "Listen up! Listen up..." The room grew silent.

"Do like we trained!" Boss went on, stabbing the air to emphasise each point. "Don't get cute. Do like we trained! Don't get fancy. Do like we trained! Don't think. Do like we trained! Got it? Do like we trained! And then smash them... What did I just say?"

There was an indistinct mumble.

"I want to hear it," Boss said. "What did I just say?"

"Smash them." The chorus was muted.

"Louder," Boss shouted.

"Smash them!"

"Louder," Boss shouted again, and this time it came as a roar. To his surprise, Mac found himself on his feet and bellowing with the rest of them.

"Smash them! Smash them! Smash them!"

"Game on!" Boss yelled. "Game on! Take 'em out Chen."

The team muscled its way to the door, feet thudding, and down the corridor to the cauldron. A moment later Mac found himself staring up at an enormous crowd ranged rank on rank up the walls of the cube. It seemed like a million people were all staring down just at him. The noise was deafening but Mac couldn't hear a thing.

A solitary voice called through the silence from behind him. "Use it, Mac!" Branco shouted. "Use it or you're dead."

Slowly the noise began to penetrate Mac's brain and with it a fear such as he had never dreamed. What was he doing here? What in the Hyades was he doing here? He turned, seeking somewhere to hide and saw Branco mouthing at him. Bassinger was standing beside him, his face creased with concern.

Suddenly Mac felt a slap across his face. It was Chen, who picked him up bodily by his shirt front and snarled into his face, nose pressed to nose.

"Fly, boy! Or die! Die now...!"

Chen hurled Mac skywards and shakily he did begin to fly.

Dostoi hugged himself with secret glee. Like every other citizen of Redux, indeed the cluster, who could possibly get to a display he was engrossed in this the first match of the season, the match on which Osmond von Osmond, fourteenth of the name, had staked a large part of his most considerable fortune, the match that was supposed to be won by the genius boy, the genius boy who was so terrified that his quaking was quite plain to the cam.

Dostoi's reacom vibrated in his pocket and reluctantly he left the spectacle of Osmond's imminent humiliation and crossed to his master's private chambers. Though perhaps, he thought, on reflection, it might be even more entertaining to be personally present when disaster struck.

And Osmond was fraught, indeed frantic, a sight deeply gratifying to Dostoi who, though well aware which side his bread was buttered, truly loathed the boy, now a man, on whom unkind fate forced him to dance attendance.

"Lay off the bet," Osmond stuttered. "Get money on Tanglewood. We've got to lay off the bet..."

"I'm sorry, sir," Dostoi said with a fair approximation of distress. "It's too late. Impossible. Far too late. The game has started."

And it had. The giant clock had ticked over to 60 and was counting down.

After much thought and discussion with Branco, Bassinger had decided on a radical new team formation to take advantage of Mac's much superior flying. Instead of the usual 2-2-3 line-up Bassinger had decided on a previously unheard of 6-1 configuration; six of the team hunting as a pack with Mac standing out, left not only to take care of himself but free to take whatever advantage might present itself to him.

In match-practice training, after initial hiccups, the system appeared to work well. The six-man wedge – an arrow-head of three, with a man above, one below and a tail-gunner – was an effective steam-roller in the initial scrimmage for the ball and strong in defence. The theory was that once they had the ball they would get it to Mac and leave

him to do the rest. Alternatively, if the enemy should devote men to trying to neutralise Mac, they would find themselves tied up in knots while the wedge did the business.

Mac had revelled in the whole process. If anything could beat flying for its own sake, then it was flying with a purpose. Alone with the ball, threading his way through the path the wedge cut to the goal-hole was intensely enjoyable, and bamboozling as many as seven of the opposition all at once was even more satisfying. But there was one catch to the scheme, as Branco had soberly pointed out. If ever anyone laid hands on Mac he would be dead meat in very short order. He was simply not yet big enough nor strong enough to protect himself at close quarters

Branco and Bassinger had argued for a long time as to whether or not Mac should have a wing-man, but the matter was settled soon after they began training in earnest. Even in Mac's earliest days none of the others could begin to stay with him, and in fact slowed him down to the point where he was more, not less, vulnerable to attack. It quickly became clear that Mac's best protection, his only protection, lay with himself.

Though his talent, flowering at an astonishing rate with the intense training, was obviously, obvious in theory at least, a huge advantage to the team, the rest of the Reds still treated Mac with intimidating reserve. They could have adopted him as a mascot, a talisman, instead they kept a wary distance. Maybe he would prove the best thing since vice bread. On the other hand, he could well turn out to be a fatally weak link. If Mac failed to perform then the Reds would find themselves heavily out-numbered and likely to be massacred.

Mac had been introduced to each of the other six on the team but apart from Chen, none had found occasion to speak to him again after an initial, mumbled greeting. There was no encouragement, no banter, no joshing. It was all cold formality, and the barest minimum of that. Another boy might have resented or been demoralised by such treatment, but Mac was too intoxicated by the pure joy of flying to pay it much mind. He had long been solitary and didn't need anyone to tell him he was playing strong, doing good.

And at last, it was the night before the match with the visiting Tanglewood. He was called to Bassinger's room and found both Boss and Branco waiting for him.

"We just wanted to congratulate you," Bassinger said. "You have exceeded all our expectations..."

"Our wildest dreams..." Branco interjected.

"...And then some," Bassinger continued.

"Your father would be very proud," Branco said.

"Yes," Bassinger said. "He would be. I'm very proud."

"So," Branco said. "How are you feeling? Are you up for the game?"

Mac hesitated. The truth was, he didn't know. Now that the long-anticipated moment was finally here. He didn't really know what he felt. Both coaches, as a matter of course,

had tried to prepare him psychologically. They had spoken to him of the crushing burden of expectation the huge crowd of spectators would impose. They had spoken to him of the fear, the inevitable physical fear that would seize him. They had spoken to him of the euphoria of pulling off a successful move that could blind him to retribution. They had spoken to him of fatigue and how to combat it. But the one thing they couldn't do was to give him any intimation of the real thing, what it would feel like when he was finally out there.

And what Mac was feeling was stark, freezing terror. He no longer seemed to exist. His whole being had been squeezed down mercilessly until it was now just a tiny little speck, so small it was next to vanishing.

The clock ticked over and if the noise had been loud before, the roar now was a solid, heaving monster.

The Tanglewood skipper had quickly assessed that Mac was no threat whatsoever and had signalled for his whole squad to contest the initial scrimmage. The two teams, the Reds minus Mac, crashed together in a mad scramble for the ball and Tanglewood, with the advantage of the extra man, quickly prevailed. One of the Reds was already bleeding badly from a gashed eye-brow as a Tanglewood rapidly moved the ball down the left vector, gaining height for a dive on the goal-hole.

Chen, forced to abandon the game plan after only seconds, sent half his men on the oblique to try to cut off the attack and himself led the remainder in a dash to defend the goal. It was to no avail and Tanglewood notched an easy score to wild abuse from the home crowd. The ball would take 20 seconds to make its way back under the cauldron floor for the restart in the centre and Chen seized a moment to round on Mac, where he still circled in catatonic confusion, unaware of the derision of the crowd, unaware of anything but fear.

This time Chen did not touch him.

"Your father would be so proud," he spat into Mac's face and sped off. Again, Mac could barely hear for the noise, but the words came dimly through, and the venom. Somebody else had said that. Only yesterday. His father would be so proud. His father who had risked everything, who was even now on the run, solely to give Mac the chance to fly. His father would be so proud. So proud to see him now. So proud...

What if he were watching?

What if he were actually watching?

A spark of shame began to burn in the little space into which Mac had been crushed. Violent, flaring shame, that spread with a searing pain, that consumed him, that cauterised the fear, that flamed yellow and red... The Reds...

This time, by knowing what to expect – that no one would bother to mark Mac – and by a dint of dirty fighting, the Reds had actually got hold of the ball. Chen barrelled out

of the scrimmage, surrounded by enemy and fighting desperately for altitude. Automatically Mac segued into a move they had practised more times than he could remember. Diving vertically, he swooped under the pack, rolled on his back and screamed, "Chen!"

Whether Chen had heard him or not Mac couldn't tell, possibly the ball was simply knocked from under his arm, but either way, it dropped neatly into Mac's grasp and in a blink he had boomed and zoomed and was heading for the goal-hole.

The slam-dunk was greeted by absolute silence. Amazement gripped the whole of the vast stadium and nobody breathed for a count of ten. Then the cauldron erupted. If the noise had been phenomenal before, it was nothing to the roar that cascaded over Mac now, but to him it was a distant mutter. Already he was racing back for the centre-pop, the confused Tanglewoods milling about behind him.

Bassinger and Branco stopped pounding each other on the back and formally shook hands. Their expressions were identical: pure relief.

"You see," Osmond said, suddenly complacent. "You see how foolish it was for you to worry."

"Sir," Dostoi protested, stung by the injustice of it despite himself. "Sir, it was you..."

"Laying off the bets," Osmond over-rode him. "That would have been a sad error. How fortunate I didn't listen."

This time Dostoi fumed in silence, and prayed to all the gods, past, present and future, for some one of them to take umbrage, do his duty and dispose of his appalling master.

The rest of the match was a complete rout. Mac was a hawk among sparrows, fast, sure, untouchable. Try as Tanglewood might to bottle him up, he dazzled them with aerobatics they had never imagined were possible, let alone tried. They simply had no counter to anything he did from the breath-takingly swift to the impossibly slow. In the end Tanglewood more or less surrendered and were making only a feeble pretence of going through the motions, solely concerned with protecting themselves from the rest of the Reds, who were as merciless as outlanders in a space-bar brawl.

The final score was 37-1, but the crowd paid no attention as the clock marked zero. They didn't want the game to end. They were having far too much fun and long after the two teams had headed into the tunnels they were still roaring: "Reds, Reds, Redux...! Reds, Reds, Redux!" And then for variety: "Mac attack!" stamp, stamp. "Mac attack!" stamp, stamp, the stadium vibrating to the double impact of hundreds of thousands of feet.

Half way along the tunnel, Chen stopped and turned. He looked Mac hard in the eyes, nodded and held out his hand. They shook, and the rest of the team cheered. Mac entered the ready-room in triumph, borne on the shoulders of his team-mates, but exultant as he was his most abiding memory of the past hour was the blind, unreasoning terror he had felt at the beginning.

Branco and Bassinger and the rest of the squad were waiting for them and the room instantly broke into a raucous victory celebration. The game had been grand, the win was the best the Reds had ever achieved and the future was suddenly rosier than ever they could have dreamed.

Mac was passed from hand to hand, bruised and pounded by the exuberant embraces, repeatedly doused in brew, cheered and celebrated. It was good, he supposed, good to have won, good to have finally been accepted as part of the crew, but somehow, the drunker and more exaggerated the party became, the more uncomfortable he began to feel. At last he managed to slip away and more or less conceal himself in the shadows of a far corner.

Branco joined him a little while later.

"It's normal," he said.

"What?"

"The let-down. That's why they're drinking too much. Nobody likes the feeling. All that adrenalin in the system and nothing to use it on."

"I was... so afraid," Mac said. "So scared."

"But you beat it."

"I didn't. It was Chen. What he said."

"He told me," Branco said. "I asked how he managed to unfreeze you..."

"I was so scared," Mac said again. "I couldn't do anything."

"But," Branco said. "Now you know you can beat it. Maybe you needed help, but that's all right. We all do from time to time, one way or another. Be grateful the help was there, not angry or ashamed that you needed it."

Osmond was riding a cloud of delicious anticipation: anticipation of the whole night to come that he would allow himself in his nautch-chaise; anticipation of collecting on the great killing he had made with the book-makers; and most of all, anticipation of the greatly more colossal killing that was now in the bag.

"That went well," he remarked to Dostoi. "Yes, I think we can fairly say that went very well. By my calculation, we, that is I, should collect something over 370 million..."

"Yes, sir," Dostoi said woodenly. After a moment of pure horror when the boy had so effortlessly scored that first goal, he had taken himself firmly in hand.

"So," Osmond continued. "Together with the initial stake of 100, I will have 470 million available...?"

"Yes sir," Dostoi said. Or 469 if you gave me a miserable million, he thought. A commission of a fraction of one per cent. A tip really. But enough to see me rich for the rest of my life. And for a moment he allowed himself to day-dream.

"The next game, then," Osmond said. "What odds on the Reds...?"

Dostoi roughly hauled himself out of a large, sunny courtyard with a grape vine, comfortable chairs and a spectacular luncheon, laid for two. He shrugged.

"Your guess is as good as mine, sir," he said. "Fifty to one on? A hundred to one? I really doubt that you'll be able to find a book-maker prepared to lay the Reds to win at all."

"Excellent," Osmond said. "So you'll need to be very careful how you spread the money. One sniff of a plunge and that will be it."

"How much money?" Dostoi said. "Sir..."

"All of it."

"All of it?" Dostoi was aghast. "Four hundred and seventy million? All of it?"

"All of it," Osmond repeated complacently.

"But, sir..."

"All of it," Osmond said again. "And Dostoi, if I should find that any has stuck to your fingers in passing..."

"That is cruel, sir. How could you think that I might...?" Dostoi tailed off, aware that Osmond knew he had been thinking just that.

"Sir," Osmond said. "I must counsel you that 470 million is a huge risk, a huge risk whether you lose, or whether you win."

"I can't lose," Osmond said. "The Reds will not be permitted to win, therefore I can't lose. That's the whole point, Dostoi."

"In which case, sir, there will be a huge outcry. The fix will be obvious. If the Reds lose... If that boy is playing and the Reds lose, then nobody will believe the game wasn't fixed."

"But so long as the cash can't be traced back to me, as long as there is no breath of suspicion pointing to me, then I don't care what anybody thinks. And that's your job, Dostoi. You make sure that not one single centillo has my name on it."

"Oh sir...", Dostoi said, almost whimpering with anxiety.

"A chance like this comes along once in a lifetime, once in a lifetime. And I have no intention of missing it. Money is power and I want all the money there is. And don't think I've forgotten the other business. Because I have not. When this little project is out of the way, Dostoi, we are finally going to find my... brother, and we are going to kill him. Which will be the final surprise for my father."

"The final surprise?"

"Send in General Slade." Dostoi failed to conceal a start.

"I said general, I mean general. It's time I confirmed his appointment. You don't agree...?"

Dostoi nodded dutifully.

"And I'll want to see Bassinger. And Castel. But separately."

Bassinger had divined Osmond's intention the instant of his summons. He was far too wise in the ways of Galconia and indeed of g-ball to be the least bit surprised.

Branco divined Osmond's intention the instant he saw Bassinger's face.

Mac needed to hear the explanation twice before he began to understand.

"I have to tank?" he said for the third time.

"You do," Boss said.

"Or what?"

"I've been told to put Castel on the starting team." He and Branco exchanged glances.

"What does that mean?"

"It means," Branco said. "We don't know for a fact, but it means that if you don't do what you've been told, Castel has orders to clobber you. To put you out."

"But he's on our team..."

"Sort of," Bassinger said. "He's really on Osmond's team."

"Osmond?" Mac said. "Osmond von Osmond?" Things were getting weirder and weirder.

"Osmond," Branco said patiently. "Osmond will bet against the Reds next game. He will bet that Far Haven beats us. He will get very good odds because he's betting against you. After what you did on Saturday everyone thinks that any game in which you play must be a forgone conclusion so they won't bet against you. There will be so much money on the Reds to win, that the odds on us losing will be huge. If you don't perform, Osmond will win a fortune. If you do perform, Castel has instructions to take you out."

"But that's cheating," Mac said.

"Of course it is," Bassinger said. "Actually it's fraud. So Castel will have to make it look like an accident or the commission will investigate."

"He will probably try to set you up so that Far Haven actually hits you," Branco said. "That way a fix is much harder to prove."

"The commission is supposed to be independent," Boss said. "So Osmond has to make it easy for them not to have to investigate."

"But won't they investigate if... if I tank?" Mac asked.

"Smart boy," Branco said. "You're going to have to make it look good. People will have to think your first game was a flash in the pan. That it was a fluke. You're going to have to be clever."

"I don't want to tank," Mac said.

"We don't want you to tank, either," Bassinger said. "But you have to. You don't have a choice."

"I don't want to tank," Mac said stubbornly.

Branco sighed. "Then you'll be hit, Mac. And you'll be hit hard. Castel will make sure of it. He doesn't like you. He's made that plain. He wants revenge for what you did to him that day at training. And he'll make sure you get badly hurt, if not killed. He doesn't care. He'll enjoy it. He's that sort. Osmond doesn't care. He has too much to lose. And he's that sort, too"

"I'm not going to tank," Mac said. Neither Branco nor Bassinger noticed the change of verb.

"You have to," Bassinger said. "And we're going to have to practise you making it look right."

Because they were a penal team, and because life was so hard on Redux and the people needed a weekly release, a weekly chance to see a game live, the Reds usually played at home. In terms of the premiership it was obviously unfair, but in terms of Galconia's best interests there was no argument, and the Reds thus most often had the advantage of their own crowd.

All week, not only on Redux but more or less throughout the cluster, the only topic of conversation was Mac's freak performance against Tanglewood. Camclips of the highlights were played over and over again, which meant pretty much the whole game was on a constant loop. Had Mac been at all aware of the intense adulation he had aroused it might well have gone to his head, albeit his head was as level as it was possible for any 15-year-old boy's to be, but locked inside the Reds' team quarters and with Bassinger controlling the cam he had no idea that he had become an instant celebrity of heroic proportions, that tickets for the Far Haven game were already selling at twice the list price on the black market, that book-makers throughout the cluster had long stopped taking money on the Reds to win.

Instead, Mac was locked in a battle of wills. Bassinger and Branco insisted, privately, to Mac that he had no choice but to throw the game and Mac was equally determined, privately, that this was the last thing he would ever do, whatever the consequences; and although Mac co-operated in the closed-door training sessions where Branco tried to turn him into a believable klutz who had had one magic moment in his life, his resolve only hardened. Why he should be so determined to play to his ability he couldn't really say. He just knew that the thought of prostituting his talent was

something he could never stomach. Had Mac known the word anathema then he would have used it without hesitation.

Though the rest of the squad were deliberately kept uninformed of the pressures at play, they were all sufficiently experienced to know that something was wrong. For one thing, Castel had been named in the line-up. No one had been more than superficially injured in the first game, thanks to Mac, and ordinarily Castel would have been playing at only 11th or 12th drop. For another thing, the mood of the coaches, particularly Bassinger and Branco, was glum in the extreme and catching. And finally, it was clear that Mac was out of sorts, and that he took great care never to find himself anywhere near Castel.

As the week went on, things in the Reds' camp became more and more strained, and it was a relief for everyone when game day came around.

As the Reds filed into the ready room they paid no mind to the small, nondescript man who stood loitering near the door, except that Bassinger lagged behind and eventually allowed the door to close between him and the squad.

"So," Dostoi said. "The boy knows what he must do?"

Bassinger nodded.

"And he knows what will happen if he doesn't?" Bassinger nodded again.

"He knows he will die in the screamer?" Bassinger nodded a third time.

"Good. I shall tell my master."

Bassinger stood watching a long time as Dostoi moved off down the corridor and as he turned the corner, Bassinger spat with all the force he could muster.

Inside, Bassinger sought Mac out where he was changing in a far corner and sat down.

"Did you see that man?" he said. Mac looked puzzled.

"Waiting by the door," Bassinger said. "That was Dostoi. Does Osmond's dirty work. I hear what you've been saying to us Mac, or rather not saying. I know what you're thinking. You're going to fly like you always do. You have no intention of throwing the game. So you should know what Dostoi just said to me. He said that if you don't tank and that if Castel doesn't get you, then you'll die in the screamer."

Mac lowered his eyes, and was hit by a sudden thought.

"Is he... threatening you, too?" he asked. Bassinger looked at him grimly.

"I should lie, Mac," he said. "For your sake I should say yes. Would you throw it if you thought I were in danger, and Branco?"

"I... I don't know," Mac said. "Yes."

"I don't believe you," Bassinger said. "But thank you for saying it."

"I would," Mac said. "But you're not, are you?" It was a statement not a question. Bassinger sighed.

"No," he said. "Osmond can't touch us without the commission getting involved, and he won't want that. But Mac, your father would tell you, James would tell you: tank. It's just a game."

"It's not," Mac said. "It's..." He wanted to say it was an evil man manipulating public events for his own ends, stealing yet more wealth with which to oppress, imprison and persecute, but he didn't have the words. "It's wrong," was all he could find to say.

Like everyone else, Far Haven had watched and rewatched and watched again the cam of Mac's first game, and the squad, the coaches, their supporters had not the least idea of how to combat his soaring genius. In the end the best game-plan they could contrive was to concede the centre-pop unchallenged and to ring their goal-hole in a tight, seven-man defence, hoping that somewhere along the line this might cause a mistake that they could then use to their advantage. The weakness of such a scheme, of course, was that it was directed wholly at Mac and took no account of the other six members of his team, who would be free to engage them as they chose.

As the visiting team, Far Haven emerged into the cauldron first and were greeted with wild, derisive delight by a hundred thousand people expecting a slaughter, a massacre, a disembowelment. Glumly they began their warm-up and as the Reds emerged, retreated to the immediate area of their goal-hole.

By rights, Mac should have been even more nervous than for his first game, as this time the noise as they entered the cauldron was even greater, and more, it was a tide of explosive adoration directed solely at him. But instead of fear, he was possessed by a cold, surging, irresistible anger, and barely registered the uproar.

Kill him would they? Kill him they might. Kill him they would. But first, first, he would fly. He would fly as he had never flown before, and if it were to be the last time he ever would fly then so be it. But first he would fly. Like an eagle. Like an angel. Like an avenging god.

Chen looked at the Far Haven formation with satisfaction. He and Bassinger, who despite Osmond's machinations still had to play the part of a coach bent on victory, had spent hours discussing first what they might do if they themselves had to face Mac, and then how to counter the counter. A tight, stacked defence was the obvious ploy and Chen slipped contentedly into the counter-play he and Bassinger had devised.

Flipping hand signals at his men, Chen swooped on the ball, slipped it to Mac and led the charge. With all the momentum and with Far Haven expecting the worst and half-way to surrender before they had started, the Reds made quick work of the

defensive ring and Mac slam-dunked the ball seconds later without having to do much of anything.

Castel swung round as he did so and eyed him narrowly.

Osmond was apoplectic.

"He should have dropped it," he raged. "The idiot should have dropped it."

Dostoi waved his hands placatingly.

"It was too simple," he said. "He can't drop easy ball. He has to make it look real."

"But the spread..."

"It's all right," Dostoi said soothingly. "I didn't bet to zero. Have to let them have a couple of goals..."

"How many?"

"Three. They can score three. And Castel will move on two."

Osmond chewed his fingers.

"You'd better be right," he said. "You had so better be right."

Shriver, the Far Haven skipper, surveyed his already battered forces. The stacked defence had proved a signal failure and he motioned for plan B, a swarm on Mac in an attempt to at least blot him out of the game. Which, of course, was an equally flawed concept. Mac toyed with the swarm, to the mirth of the crowd, and the Reds' remaining six easily over-powered the Far Haven's three-man defence, leaving one man groggily spiralling down to the floor, and with goal two following in short order.

The Reds circled back for the next centre-pop and Shriver signalled his one remaining ploy: to somehow get the ball and to keep it all costs. The Far Havens formed into a flying ram and charged. Chen flipped a signal and the Reds dived to meet them, Mac staying high and to the rear. The two teams met with an audible crunch and a scream from one of the Far Havens as his arm was broken. Mac, biding his time, watched as the ball was ripped backwards and forwards and finally, as it eluded everyone's grasp, began to fall. Instantly, he rolled into a vertical power dive swooped narrowly under the struggling pack and trapped the ball just above the ground. At the same moment Castel's shoulder cannoned into the small of Mac's back and drove him into the floor.

Osmond sighed with mingled relief and satisfaction as the Far Havens took advantage of what Castel had managed to make look an accidental collision as both he and Mac went for the loose ball. The Havens had one man out with a broken arm but the Reds were two down, Mac and Castel, who was also lying on the floor apparently

out cold. In short order the Far Havens had recouped the two goals they were down, and had piled on three more.

Osmond began to smile contentedly. Depending on the final spread he stood to make between three and four billion, bankrupting every book-maker in the cluster in the process. It was a thought to make anyone smile and as for the boy, well serve him right and as it had all looked more or less above board the Galiconia G-ball Gaming and Betting Commission, in other words, his father, would have no excuse to become involved. It was shaping up as a great day. A brilliant day. Osmond positively grinned.

The cams had lingered on the crash only long enough to confirm that both the Reds were out of action, seemingly for the duration, before rushing off to follow the action. Bassinger and Branco, however, kept their eyes glued to the two bodies lying on the floor. Eventually they saw Mac struggle to lift his head, and then to sit up. At the same time, Castel began to inch towards him, confident that no one in the vast crowd would spare him a glance with the Reds fighting desperately to hold back the deluge.

The two coaches grew frantic as they realised that Castel was quite uninjured and merely biding his time to finish the job. Powerless to do anything to help, they watched as Castel slid round and cocked his leg for the kick that would break Mac's neck.

It never came.

With a final shake of his head, Mac rolled over and straight up into the air. He looked down at Castel, poised to strike, and bared his teeth into something that might have been a smile, or a snarl.

"Catch me if you can," he shouted into the roar of the crowd and saw from Castel's eyes that his words had been understood. The man sprang to his feet and with cold calculation set off in pursuit.

Mac was hurt quite badly. His vision was blurred, his nose bleeding profusely and his back was stiff and aching, but his mind was clear enough. As far as he was concerned all pretence was over. He didn't care what the commission or anybody else for that matter might think. Castel had tried to kill him with a cowardly sneak attack and he would now pay. Time enough to worry about the match later.

Feigning more pain than he really felt, Mac flew erratically about the cauldron, allowing Castel to stalk him until it was plain what was happening. The crowd began to turn from the contest and to point at the two Reds engaged in their own private war, the one apparently hunting the other. The other team members began to be distracted and the game gradually came to a halt as they were drawn to watch. Chen started towards them and then shrugged. Private duels between team members were not unknown and combatants were best left to sort it out themselves. Now that he thought about it, it seemed more and more improbable that the collision had been an accident, and if Mac was out for justice, then fair enough. On the other hand, if Castel managed to finish the

job then Mac was never going to last long anyway. Hotdogs never did, no matter that Mac was far and away the best Chen had ever seen.

Gradually Mac began to straighten out and gain height. Then, when almost at the top of the cauldron and with Castel almost on his heels, he dropped into a dive, a dive that Castel instantly matched.

Judging his moment, Mac waited till they were at near terminal velocity and Castel was actually reaching for him before flipping into a backwards somersault that dropped him precisely on to Castel's back where he could grip with his legs like a rider in a saddle. The crowd roared with excitement, then groaned in unison as, using his forbidden left hand, Mac grabbed Castel's left arm and wrenched it back.

The effect was astonishing. Instantly the two lost all semblance of flight and became a tumbling mess, twisting and turning, completely out of control, dropping like a stone. Castel fought grimly but with Mac's vice-like legs gripping him around his middle from behind and with both of Mac's hands hauling at his left arm, there was little he could do except realise that this crazy boy was going to ride them both to their deaths. He screamed and was still screaming when he smashed into the floor.

Again, judging his moment to the split second, Mac had waited until he knew Castel could not possibly save himself and then had kicked free, both stabilising and stopping his fall almost instantly.

He supposed as he surveyed Castel's broken body beneath him that he ought to feel something. He had, after all, deliberately killed the man. But then Castel had been trying to kill him and had got no more than he deserved. Kill or be killed was the harsh law of the cauldron, and of the arena.

His reverie was broken by Chen yelling in his ear.

"Now you win us the game. Or I'll do the same to you."

Dostoi glanced towards Osmond with appalled anticipation, and he was not disappointed. Osmond was as white as the froth on the ocean wave Dostoi had once seen, long ago, and he appeared to have fainted.

Gently, Dostoi prodded his master but got no reaction. He stood there for what seemed like hours, savouring the situation. All that money, all that money, and all of it gone.

Chapter Twelve

The Reds' ready room was funereal, with not the hint of a victory celebration despite the fact that they had finally beaten Far Haven 25-7. All the members of the squad knew enough of the ways of g-ball to work out approximately what had been going on, and if not privy to the exact details knew there was trouble ahead. They stood gathered in small groups, not saying much, just waiting. Mac was sitting by himself, quarantined by a wide arc and dabbing at his still bleeding nose with a compress. In one form or another every man in the room had much the same thought. Mac's injuries would soon be the least of his problems.

Branco dropped to the bench beside him. He said nothing, there was nothing to say, but he did drape his arm over Mac's shoulders and Mac found tears starting. He was more grateful than he would have thought possible for the show of overt support.

Time passed.

Some of the men began to change out of their game gear and disappear into the abluters. Others packed their kit bags. But still they waited.

Mac buried his head in a towel, if only to shut out the eyes that kept finding him. Sympathetic eyes. Curious eyes. Hostile eyes. All unwelcome.

Time passed.

A buzz of conversation gradually took over the room. It was beginning to seem that nothing would happen after all. Several of the squad began to look inquiringly at Bassinger. Time to go. Surely it was time to go. People fidgeted impatiently. Then it happened.

The door crashed open and six huge troopers with full armour and blasters erupted into the room. Bassinger stepped forward flanked by Chen and Branco, who hurried across to join them.

"You," the lead trooper said, pointing at Mac. "Out. Now." The man bore the daggers and sun badge of an over-sergeant.

"Your authority...?" Bassinger started to say, but the sergeant casually swung the butt of his blaster and the big man went down in a crumpled heap.

The sergeant surveyed the room for more resistance, confident there would be none. Mac got to his feet without a word and walked forward. The troopers surrounded him and the last Branco saw of him, Mac was being marched from the room looking like a small child against the bulk of his escort.

Bassinger swore and spat out a tooth.

Mac was taken to a small cell, bare except for a bench of hard, fused stone. It was cold and Mac, still dressed in his sweaty, game leotards, quickly began to shiver. He

was also hungry now, and thirsty. Curiously, he found that he was not afraid, at least for the moment. He had kept faith with himself, and he had defended himself against the assaults of a would-be murderer. The knowledge sustained him. They would kill him now, in the screamer, but he had fought them first, and he had won. That was something. That was quite a lot.

He curled himself into a ball on the bench and despite his many discomforts, eventually he fell asleep.

Osmond regained consciousness some hours later to find Dostoi fussing about him, which was right and proper, though unbeknownst to him Dostoi had actually been doing his best to prolong the faint with discreet applications of a nasal soporific on the theory that time might lessen the ferocity of Osmond's reaction. It was a vain notion. Dostoi recoiled as he watched the full horror, the catastrophic enormity of the situation again hit Osmond between the eyes. Osmond wanted to scream. He wanted to break things. He wanted to kill people, tear out their livers with his bare hands. He would kill people. He would kill people now. How dare they do this to him, Osmond von Osmond, fourteenth of the name. It was intolerable. It was monstrous. It was unforgivable. And by all the gods of the Hyades he was just the man to deal with the unforgivable.

Then the thought of the billions he had lost because his stupid minions had been unable to control a no-account boy overwhelmed him again, and he began to whimper. Dostoi hid a new surge of alarm and manoeuvred his way out of Osmond's line of sight. In his experience, Osmond's fits of tragic self-pity were invariably the prelude to his most savage rages. Dostoi cowered behind Osmond's couch and eyed the door longingly.

Eventually, Osmond fell silent. Dostoi waited with bated breath.

"You have failed," Osmond said at last, turning to fix Dostoi with a terrible eye.

"Sir," Dostoi protested cringing. "Sir, I did my best..."

"And failed," Osmond repeated.

"Oh sir..." Dostoi stammered, almost in tears.

"Where is that boy?"

"Colon... General Slade has him."

"Tell Slade to bring him to the screamer. Now. And Dostoi, you come too." At which, Dostoi nearly wet himself as he rushed from the room.

Mac found himself seized and, still befuddled, he was frog-marched through an echoing maze of corridors, all leading downwards. He expected a dungeon or some other ancient torture chamber but instead was thrust into a glaring white room, the ceiling, walls and floor of which all seemed to merge into one another. In the centre of the room was a large dome made of cryllic and big enough to hold six or seven people.

To one side there was a number of floaters, also in white. A group of men was waiting for him, some in uniform. General Slade stepped forward.

"Ah," he said. "We meet again. How unfortunate for you."

Mac said nothing. Another man, much younger, skinny and with bad skin also stepped forward. Without a word he marched up to where Mac was held immobile by two of Slade's house troopers and slashed him across the face with some sort of belt. Mac felt blood begin to seep from his nose again.

"Do you know who I am?" the man shouted.

Mac said nothing. And again Osmond, for it was clear to Mac who the man must be, slashed him across his face with the belt.

"Do you know what you've done?" Osmond screamed, spittle flying. Slade made no attempt to hide his distaste as flecks of saliva fell on his uniform.

Mac smiled through his bruised lips. "Yes," he said. "I do."

"And you think that's...amusing?" Osmond was now screeching and literally frothing at the mouth.

Mac smiled again. Abruptly, Osmond swung on his heel and pointed wordlessly at the dome. Slade motioned to his troopers and Mac found himself being hauled forward. Other troopers appeared around him and his clothes were torn away. A hatch to the chamber was flung open and Mac was swung around to face Osmond for one last time. He was now standing by a floater and for the first time Mac noticed a large lever with a calibrated scale poking through the floor. Osmond now appeared relatively calm, though there was a pulse pounding erratically on his forehead.

"You will find..." he said coldly to Mac. "You will find that however amusing you think your... escapade that the humour in the situation is about to vanish. Do you have anything to say?"

Mac stood there, stark naked, his arms twisted painfully up behind his back, feeling the fear, now that it had come to the point, surging sickly within him.

"I would still rather be me than you..." he managed, staring fixedly at his tormentor. And despite himself, Osmond dropped his eyes.

Slade applauded mockingly.

"Bravo," he said. "But ill-advised."

Osmond, for his part, simply gestured at the machine and Mac was flung through the hatch.

He landed on some sort of grey, metal mesh which covered the floor of the dome. The hatch slammed behind him and the fear pounded hard now, almost uncontrollably. Mac had no idea what would happen and tasted his own bile as his gorge began to rise and the fear threatened to overwhelm him completely. He stood and turned to see Osmond, Slade and others, seated in the floaters as though an audience to his performance, staring at him through the cryllic.

Then the mesh began to glow faintly and he felt a strong tingling sensation. Suddenly the fear was gone, burned out of him by unimaginable, unendurable agony. It started with his feet where they touched the mesh and shot up through the nerves of his legs to his groin. He leaped as though scalded, landed awkwardly and fell, and wherever he touched the mesh as he writhed and rolled, his nerves screamed with induced agony. And whatever resolve Mac may have held privately, he found himself screaming along with his nerves. He couldn't not. There was no resisting the awful, excruciating pain that lanced through him wherever he touched the mesh, a pain that went on and on and on.

Osmond watched critically then leaned to the lever and shoved it viciously all the way forward. Mac, his eyes rolled far back in their sockets, grasped for the last shreds of will and set himself to beat his own brains out on the cryllic of the dome.

Osmond smiled. He well knew the stages of disintegration and had no intention of letting Mac die too soon or, for that matter, of allowing him to find refuge in insanity. He eased back on the lever. There was a definite skill to inflicting maximum torment for the longest possible period. Osmond's personal record was 47 minutes and some seconds, a time only bettered by the chief interrogator. Osmond had a mind to beat that record with Mac, if for no other reason than that the melody of the screamer was intoxicating. He sometimes thought of himself as a musician improvising upon a theme of pain. Osmond considered Mac with a knowing eye and again judiciously reached for the lever...

But, unbelievably, as he did so the door crashed open to reveal, of all people, his father, the Chairman, storming thunderously into the room followed by two attendants.

"Stop that," the Chairman roared, pulled the lever from Osmond's hand by main force and slammed it back to zero.

Mac lay twisted on the floor of the screamer. The complete cessation of pain had brought merciful oblivion. On the other side of the cryllic the room was frozen in a weird tableau.

Osmond gaped at his father, open-mouthed with shock and amazement.

Here! The old man was here! Here, now!

"You fool," the Chairman said. "You purblind fool. I thought you might have learned something, that you'd made progress, that you now had some idea about running a mine at least, and then I find this." He gestured contemptuously. "What do you think you're doing? What!"

Osmond stammered incoherently. It was humiliating. Too humiliating. His father shouting at him in public. In front of his, Osmond's, people. For two pins and a bucket of spit he'd shove his father in the screamer. Teach *him* some respect. Osmond gestured wordlessly.

"Are you so stupid...", the Chairman went on inexorably. "Are you so stupid as to think that you can hide your... idiot part in the game this afternoon by mangling this boy and throwing him out with the trash? Is that what you think? Because if it is, you prove yourself irredeemably incompetent."

"Why?" Osmond burst out, unable to contain himself. It was a sad error.

"Why?" the Chairman repeated mockingly. "I can't believe you ask that. I really can't believe you ask that... Because, my poor fool of a son, if the boy disappears into RCentral, never to be heard of again, it brands you before the whole cluster as the man who tried to fix the match... and failed!"

Osmond gulped.

"It's obvious to anyone who knows anything about g-ball," the Chairman continued. "Someone tried to fix the game. The boy had to kill one of his own team... The book-makers aren't fools even if you are. They know how much was laid against the Reds, and then the boy had to kill one of his own men before he could win the game... There is only one question, Osmond. Who? Who tried to fix the game? They guess it was you. Of course they do. But if you kill the boy, you prove it. You prove you tried to fix the game, that you failed and that in your impotence you were reduced to taking petty revenge. You will be a laughing stock the length and breadth of the cluster. You'll be finished for all time. Finished! We may control the board, but understand that it could never endorse you as chairman after this. An irritating formality no doubt, but prudent... a last safeguard against a grasping, unqualified, unthinking, unmitigated imbecile – you – taking power."

The room drew breath, and apart from the Chairman everyone there contrived to be looking anywhere but at Osmond. Dostoi was torn between horrified glee and residual terror. The thought of how Osmond might behave when left at last to his own devices was petrifying. As things stood Dostoi was now thrice damned. He would still be held accountable for the failure of the fix. He would also be held accountable for failing to point out the consequences with which the Chairman had just excoriated his master. And, no doubt, he would be held responsible for the Chairman's unannounced and so untimely arrival.

It was an intriguing train of thought, though. Just what was the Chairman doing here anyway? Why had the Chairman suddenly appeared out of nowhere, and just at the critical moment? Where had he come from? Why had there been no warning? It was all very strange. It was more than strange, it was unprecedented. Something most peculiar was going on and Dostoi had a very strong feeling that it would be much to his advantage to discover just what. Surreptitiously he pulled out his reacom, expanded the display enough to be able to read discreetly and punched into the CAW.

"Get a pod," the Chairman ordered. "Make sure the boy lives. For Osmond's sake." Slade motioned to one of his troopers with a series of hand signals and the man left the room. There was a swirl of movement as he returned with a pod and pair of medicals,

who took charge of Mac. They worked with practised swiftness – Osmond liked to keep them busy – and as they were leaving, it clicked. Dostoi had it. Suddenly it all made sense. Suddenly he understood why the Chairman had appeared from nowhere at just this moment, and what, precisely, he was doing. The revelation was like a solar flare at close range. Dostoi stood transfixed with the magic of his intuition. He was right. He was sure he was right. It couldn't be anything else.

He touched Osmond on the arm. "Sir," he said. "I need to speak with you."

"It can wait," the Chairman said dismissively.

"No sir," Dostoi said again to Osmond. "It can't. It's urgent."

"I said, it will wait," the Chairman snapped, turning in irritation.

Greatly daring, Dostoi swung Osmond round.

"I must speak to you now, sir. Now!"

Osmond stared at Dostoi. He was so enraged by all that had happened that he could barely breathe, but something in the urgency of Dostoi's attitude communicated itself to him.

"Excuse me," he said with cold formality to his father and moved away, Dostoi in his wake. They stood in a far corner, heads close together. Suddenly, Osmond turned to stare at his father and kept on staring.

"Are you now graciously pleased to continue our conversation?" the Chairman demanded.

"Oh yes," Osmond said. "Delighted." His voice was suddenly silky and subtly provocative.

"But things have changed, Father. I'm afraid things are very different. Yes. I'm afraid they are. Very different..."

"Stop blathering," the Chairman snapped.

"But I enjoy it so much," Osmond said. "Blathering. Particularly now. Don't you enjoy blathering, Father? You must. You do so much of it. About me, for instance..."

The Chairman said nothing, but his eyes narrowed warily.

"Why are you here, Father?" Osmond's voice was still lazy, still silky, still inordinately pleased with itself. "Why exactly now? You appear out of nowhere and here you are. No announcement. No warning. But here you suddenly are. I wonder where you've come from, Father? I wonder when you left?"

The Chairman still said nothing but his expression had changed to one of non-committal interest.

"Shall I tell you, Father, as you seem so unwilling to share? According to the records on the CAW that Dostoi here has just thought to access, you were on Redux II. You left 56 days ago. Why? Why, father? What happened 56 days ago?"

Still the Chairman declined to speak.

Osmond suddenly straightened and began to bite off his words like the crack of a plasma whip:

"I'll tell you what happened. Fifty-six days ago, your son, your other son, my half-brother, the boy in the screamer, was assigned to a g-ball team. And when you realised, you set out to save him."

The Chairman, still impassive, turned to Slade.

"You," he said. "Arrest my son."

"Certainly, your excellency," Slade said politely. "Which one do you mean?"

Osmond smiled delightedly.

"Very good, general," he said. "You are on the ball."

The Chairman turned to the trooper nearest him and pointed to Osmond.

"Put that man in irons," he barked. The trooper stood woodenly and gave no sign of having heard. In fact, he hadn't.

"He's deaf, father," Osmond said. A bad day, a terrible day, the worst day had suddenly become most enjoyable. Osmond felt himself expanding, blossoming. "And mute," he added. "A convenient innovation of the general, here. Or should I say a convenient reversion. You're a student of history...?" he inquired expansively. "Seraglios, I think they were called. They had deaf-mutes in the seraglios. Hear no evil, say no evil, do no contradictory orders."

The Chairman barked at another trooper but the reaction, that is to say the total lack of reaction was exactly the same. The Chairman made a sudden decision and moved swiftly for the door. It was blocked by a large trooper, blaster at the present, well before he got there. Slade made another series of signals and two more troopers moved into position behind the Chairman's attendants.

Osmond ostentatiously selected a floater and seated himself with some ceremony.

"So Father," he said. "Here we are. I think you should be seated too. I think we have matters to discuss."

"Not here, you idiot," the Chairman said coldly, and pointed to the eyespies. "Not unless you want a record on the CAW."

The Chairman surveyed Osmond's mountain meadow with extreme distaste. A folly for a fool was his private summation, yet a fool who now held all but one card, he had to remind himself, and that last card was bluff. Again, as he had done many times before, the Chairman pondered the wisdom of rushing to Redux. The impulse had proved a mistake in that it had revealed the identity of the boy; but had he not come the boy, his other son, would undoubtedly be dead and it was clear, now, that his initial

calculation had been correct, that no orders from afar could have protected the boy without simultaneously exposing him. The Chairman had under-estimated if not Osmond, then certainly Dostoi.

Osmond led the way to a small, pleasantly furnished dell.

"The deaf-mutes, my personal guard, are most useful, I think," he said conversationally. "Slade has been working on the idea for years. Proteins that block the speech receptors in the brain, or somesuch. But the real killer, you should forgive the expression, is that once they are brought to taking the proteins if they stop, they die. So you see, their loyalty to whoever supplies the proteins is guaranteed. Absolutely. Neat, isn't it?"

The Chairman, however, said nothing. If the obvious flaw in the arrangement was not obvious to Osmond, then far be it from him to point it out.

Osmond gestured to a pair of couches and waited until his father was seated. The feeling of control, of power, of mastery was quite wonderful, intoxicating.

"I have decided," Osmond said. "The boy will die. He will be publicly sentenced for the deliberate, cold-blooded murder of his team-mate and will be sent to the next arena." The Chairman considered.

"I will inherit, Father," Osmond said. "I will be the only heir, legitimate or otherwise, and I will inherit, whatever your wills might say."

Still the Chairman said nothing. Then he smiled. Osmond was finding his silence increasingly irritating.

"Did you hear what I said?" Osmond demanded.

The Chairman inclined his head.

"And you have nothing to say?"

The Chairman smiled again.

"You've lost, Father! You've lost."

The Chairman sat back and folded his hands.

"What?" Osmond shouted. And again: "What?"

"A dangerous assumption," the Chairman said at last.

"What assumption?" Osmond's thin veneer of control had quite vanished, mist burned off by his father's disdain.

"That I haven't taken precautions." Osmond stared at him. Stared and stared. Of course his father had taken steps to protect himself, to protect his legacy. Of course, he had. He couldn't not have.

"What precautions?" Osmond whispered. "I don't believe you."

The Chairman shrugged.

"I don't believe you," Osmond repeated.

"Of course you do," the Chairman said. "Even you could not be so foolish as to think I wouldn't have."

There was a long silence. Then the Chairman spoke.

"You will release me and you will release the boy."

There was another long silence.

"I don't think so," Osmond said at last. "The boy dies. You stay here. Indefinitely. Until you tell me what you've done. And perhaps I shall... encourage you."

"You wouldn't dare." It was a mistake. Osmond suddenly realised he had indeed won.

"Why not, Father?" he said innocently. "Why ever not?"

"Because you could never believe anything I might tell you."

"But," Osmond said with relish. "Your... stories would be so entertaining." His voice suddenly hardened. "The boy dies. You stay and we shall see just what precautions you have taken. Or not."

The Chairman allowed himself a small sigh of irritation. He had overplayed the hand; he must be getting old. If Osmond could read him, then he was certainly getting old. Unfortunately, this was not the time to retire. The key, now, was Hasdrubal D. Macgilliguddy. So long as the boy, his second son, lived the Chairman's two wills were still in play. If the boy died, when the boy died, Osmond would inevitably call his bluff.

The pod kept Mac unconscious for two days. The medicals, from long observation, knew that this was the most effective treatment for the physical shock caused by extreme torture, torture that inflicted no actual damage of itself but which took the body to the limits of endurance and far beyond. The medicals also knew that the psychological trauma caused by the screamer was infinitely more difficult to treat. Most patients who survived a session at all were so brutalised mentally that their minds refused to function and retreated into the atavistic safety of total incomprehension.

On the morning of the third day the pod was cracked and the two medicals who had originally treated Mac looked to see what, if anything, there might be left of him. After a minute or two, Mac's eyes opened slightly and then wide, but they remained vague and unfocused.

"Can you hear me?" one of the medicals said. She hated this part of the job and was counting the days to the end of her tour on Redux. Mac's eyes flickered slightly. The woman wondered what the boy had done to land in such trouble. He was a nice-looking boy, she thought. Even the red-blond hair rather suited him. Give him time, she thought, give him time to get used to us.

"I'm Medical Cleary," she said, talking gently. She knew Mac was unlikely to understand her, but she hoped the murmur of her voice would be comforting. "And this is Medical Timms," she went on. "We're here to help you. We know it's very difficult

for you but we'll try to help you get up and move to a more comfortable room. Now, what we'd like to do is to take an arm each and help you sit up. Do you think you can do that?"

For an instant Mac's eyes began to focus and then went opaque again.

"Well then," the woman said. She had been watching carefully. "Maybe there is somebody home." She took one of Mac's arms and Timms the other, and together they brought him to sit up. He swayed dizzily but after a moment came some way to supporting himself.

Abruptly a sharp voice barked from behind them.

"That's enough molly-coddling," Slade said. "The troopers will take over."

The woman, Cleary, rounded on him angrily.

"The boy is half dead," she protested, but Slade merely smiled dismissively.

"He'll be all the way dead come the next arena," he said coldly, and to the troopers. "Take him to the cells."

Mac next came to lying cramped and twisted on a hard, cold floor. He lay for a long time just staring at the grain of the stone a few inches in front of his eyes. It made no sense. Nothing made any sense. Fatigue overwhelmed him and he slept again, but this time it was genuine sleep not the deep, black unconsciousness of the past days.

He dreamed: nightmares out of the cauldron, out of the arena, that all ended on that faintly glowing mesh with the screaming, shrieking horror of the pain. Every nerve in his body on fire. Again. Forever. He woke himself at last and the relief flooded through him as the pain stopped. He began to think. Hesitantly. Unwillingly. But it was thinking, nonetheless, and it was himself who was doing it. He suddenly scrambled for a corner and sat there, curled into a ball, hugging his knees, pressing his back into the protection of the wall. There was a sound outside the door and he cringed. Somebody flung some prison overalls at him and Mac realised that he was still naked. He clutched them to him as a trooper came in and placed a plate and a cup on the stone ledge that was both bed and bench. The door slammed and Mac buried his head in the cloth.

Sometime during the night, for night it was though the cell glared white, Mac roused himself and pulled on the overalls. They were far too big and from somewhere he summoned the energy to roll up the legs and the sleeves. He felt marginally better. Sometime later he investigated the cup and drank off whatever liquid it held. The bread on the plate was so coarse it might have been sand. Mac tried to chew a corner but gagged and stopped. Had he the energy, he would have burst into tears. The bravado, no, not bravado, the courage that had led him to fight through the game against Far Haven and beyond was now a small, broken thing, a weightless little bird crushed beneath the heel of calculated oppression. He slept again, huddled in the corner. Again the nightmares came. Again he was forced awake by the remembered pain. He

wondered dully if he were condemned to be tortured for the rest of his life. He wondered how long that might be. Not long, he hoped. Let it not be long.

He failed to realise that he was thinking properly again.

The door slammed open and Slade stood before him, flanked by two of his deaf-mutes. His uniform, as always, was immaculate.

He made a signal and his men moved into the cell, seized Mac and swung him to his feet. Mac found himself struggling feebly and for some reason persisted until he was allowed to stand on his own, wavering slightly.

"This is a formal proclamation," Slade said and consulted a reacom.

"Hasdrubal D. Macgilliguddy, in that you have been tried and found guilty of premeditated murder, and in that you show no remorse or contrition, you have been sentenced to death by combat in the arena on a date to be fixed." Slade looked up. "That would be in three days time," he said. "Have you anything to say?"

Mac stood mute, as mute as the mutes, but somewhere deep inside a spark had been kindled. Murder? Premeditated? Remorse?

"You should have done what you were told to do," Slade said in his usual, dispassionate voice. "A little humiliation and it would have been all over. Now..." He gestured. "A pity. You really are some sort of flier. I could have used you. A sad waste..." He turned on his heel and the troopers followed him. The door slammed.

Perhaps, at bottom, the fundamental characteristic of the human animal is perversity. Not long before, Mac had been wishing for death. Now that he was confronted with the imminent actuality, his body, his mind, began to rebel. What had been broken, seemingly forever, began to mend itself. The natural resilience of his youth, the hypocrisy of the charges against him, the injustice of all that had been done to him, the sheer, bloody injustice of it all, began to ferment and slowly to bubble.

Chapter Thirteen

The Chairman had been quartered in Alonso's fake aquarium. He detested it, as Osmond well knew, but managed to blot it out by an act of will. The situation was now critical. The boy was scheduled to die in just a few, short hours and once the execution had been carried out the Chairman himself was defenceless. As it was he was tired, old and tired to the bone, old and past it. Never before had he allowed himself to be so comprehensively out-manoeuvred. And by Osmond of all people, Osmond, the son of a dynastic marriage more or less forced upon him, Osmond of the dubious genes, Osmond, the weak, the wastrel, the wicked; but rat cunning for all that. The thought that he had so under-estimated him and that Osmond had defeated him – Osmond! – was more than the Chairman could bear, as was the realisation that his son's failings were as much due to the Chairman's neglect as they were to flawed DNA.

Osmond's mother had also been given to wickedness, but of the vapid variety. This moral vacuum crossed with the Chairman's intellect and the Chairman's subsequent indifference had proved a disastrous combination. Nature compounded by lack of nurture.

The Chairman, as he had so often, wished again that he had taken a different course with his other son, this young flier. How different things might now be had he acknowledged and raised the boy himself; a likeable boy, a boy with courage and intelligence, a boy with a supreme talent. And the Chairman reproached himself for pointless maundering. The arguments were still the same. Osmond's mother, Osmond's maternal grand-father or indeed, Osmond himself would never have let the boy live. His only possible protection had been secrecy, a secrecy so absolute that no one but the Chairman himself and Grace, the love of his life, could know that he was the boy's father; a secrecy that had required them to separate, completely, forever.

The Chairman had long resolved the powerful, conflicting emotions he had been forced to live with when he had sent Grace, ostensibly discarded on account of being anonymously pregnant, to James Macgilliguddy for refuge. As he had calculated, James had taken her in for her cousin Louise's sake, and as he had calculated, eventually they had come to live together as man and wife, but he had been none the less jealous for that. He had tried to comfort himself with the knowledge that Macgilliguddy was the most courageous and honourable man he had ever known, which was indeed why he had been chosen, but it only made things worse. How could not Grace, given time, prefer Macgilliguddy, the invincible warrior, to the Chairman, who was essentially just a bureaucrat?

Then not one but two boys, Hannibal and Hasdrubal, had been born. The Chairman had revelled in the thought of his secret sons, and slowly the pain of being forced to surrender Grace to save them had passed; until the day that she, Hannibal and the secret

of his origin had been crushed by that stupid, incompetent hauler driver. The Chairman had nearly died of the grief he was forced to suppress, a grief far deeper than that of James, who by then had come to love Grace as his wife and the boys as his own, even if he had no knowledge of their true father. The Chairman many times had wondered what James might do if he knew the truth, and many times had been on the point of reclaiming his lost son, Hasdrubal, but each time he had managed to resist, just. Now the sacrifice was all for naught.

Where was James, he wondered, knowing the answer as he did so. The tunnels. James would be in the old tunnels with Wright, a man he had spared all but token pursuit for the sake of family. If only Macgilliguddy could be reached. For the thousandth time, the Chairman racked what he contemptuously thought of as the remains of his brains, but nothing came. Instead, Dostoi, the odious Dostoi, arrived.

There was peremptory knock at the door and he entered without waiting for permission, followed by one of the deaf mutes. Something about the trooper puzzled the Chairman but before he could pin it down, Dostoi spoke:

"Good morning, your excellency," he said, not troubling to veil the sarcasm. "I trust you are well?"

"I should have taken care of you years ago," the Chairman snapped. "Come to that, I never should have hired you at all."

"But how fortunate you did," Dostoi smirked. "Fortunate, that is, for myself and for Osmond."

"What exactly do you want?"

"I bring a request, let us be civilised and call it a request, from my master."

"Let us be civilised by all means."

"He requires you to attend the arena tomorrow. That is, the execution," Dostoi added with relish. "The execution of your other son."

The Chairman glanced away with a pained expression and Dostoi thrilled at his power to inflict discomfort on the most powerful man in the cluster; more accurately the man who had so recently been the most powerful. The trooper shifted slightly and the Chairman looked at him again. There was definitely something about him, a gleam of intelligence in the eyes. The Chairman had the distinct impression that the man, despite being deaf, was aware of what was being said. He made a sudden decision.

"You may tell my son whatever you think appropriate," he said curtly. "You're dismissed, but you can leave this trooper. I have some chores."

"What chores," Dostoi said suspiciously.

"If I am to stay in this..." He waved his hand and Dostoi smirked. "Then I require some re-arrangement."

"Of course," Dostoi said with the air of an emperor granting a last wish. "Re-arrange all you like."

Since his triumph of deduction, Dostoi had been riding high. The imminent threat of the screamer that had so terrified him was now but a distant memory and he had received from Osmond some rather more tangible marks of favour. These fine new robes, for instance, and the rather splendid, yes splendid was definitely the word... his rather splendid new chamber. And money. Oh yes, not the least was money. A sum not as handsome as it might have been perhaps, but welcome nonetheless. The unpleasantness of the failed fix had quite been forgotten and Dostoi was of the firm opinion, newly formed, that life was very much worth living.

The Chairman turned to the trooper and when he was sure that Dostoi was not lingering outside, he spoke, clearly and distinctly:

"You understand me, I think?"

The trooper nodded.

"You read lips?"

The trooper nodded again.

"You were trapped into this?" The man looked about and gestured to the Chairman's reacom that no one had quite dared to take away. The Chairman passed it to the man, who began to manipulate the palm-board with easy speed.

"Special off-planet duty, inoculation, this, obey or no serum, die," the Chairman read when the display was held out to him.

"How often do you need the serum?" he asked. The man flashed five fingers and then two.

"Seven days?" the man nodded.

"Would you tell me your name?" the Chairman asked.

"Tranter," he read.

The Chairman paused and thought.

"Trooper Tranter," he said at length. "I'm guessing that you must greatly resent what they've done to you and that you have little or no loyalty to your superiors?" The man looked at him for a long moment and then spat violently.

"And you class me as one of your superiors?" the Chairman asked, unmoved. The man nodded.

"So shoot me. You have a blaster. Shoot me." Tranter shook his head and typed.

"Hostages," the Chairman read.

"Ah," he said. "Of course." The Chairman's exalted status meant that Galconia's day-to-day methods of operation were rarely drawn to his notice, and that his view of life in the cluster was accordingly coloured. But nevertheless, he thought, the flaw in this abominable scheme is still there. These men have no loyalty, only hate. The question was how to harness it.

Suddenly the iniquity of Tranter's situation forced itself upon him. Here was a man not only deprived of speech and hearing but in the cruellest of ironies forced to endure the deprivation indefinitely in order to keep on living. And live he must because of the hostages held in his name. It truly was abominable... evil. There was no other word for it. And it was an evil that he, Osmond von Osmond, thirteenth of the name, the hereditary Chairman of Galconia, had spent his life propagating in one form or another. One could, and he would, argue that Galconia had brought the Hyades the longest period of peace and prosperity in the whole tawdry history of humanity, but the price for some was high, inordinately high. And the Chairman was suddenly brought to wonder whether the price was, in fact, too high. Abruptly he shook his head. Weak thoughts. Weak, weak thoughts. If history proved anything it was that periods of freedom inevitably led to catastrophic anarchy and that on the other hand, the principle of the greatest good for the greatest number inevitably meant things would be terrible for some.

He turned back to the problem of the moment.

"Sit," he said, gesturing to a pair of floaters artfully arranged near a coral nigger rising artlessly from the floor and doing double duty as a table.

"I am a businessman," he said disingenuously. "And I have a business proposition to put to you. You have no reason to like or trust me, quite the reverse, but if you will do what I ask, you have nothing to lose and possibly a great deal to gain.

"You know who I am," the Chairman went on. "You know that ordinarily my powers are... unlimited. As it stands, I am, like you, a prisoner. If you will do what I ask, there is a chance I may be restored to my position, when I will undertake to free you, to free the other deaf-mutes and to free all the hostages held to your names. And further I will undertake to keep you all supplied with the serum indefinitely. It appears that I cannot now restore your hearing or your speech. I will try, but the rest I can and will do."

Tranter regarded him stonily and then raised an eye-brow.

"The task?"

Tranter nodded.

"I need you to take a message to a man who has taken refuge in the old mine tunnels. I need you to find him and pass the message before the arena tomorrow." There was a long silence.

"Is it possible for you to leave your barracks?" The Chairman asked eventually.

Tranter nodded.

"Tonight?"

Again Tranter nodded.

"Then that is my proposition," the Chairman said. "Take it or leave it."

In keeping with the perverse human animal to which he had reverted, being sentenced to death was the saving of Mac. It killed the immediate past and focused him on the immediate future. His nightmares stopped instantly. His brain rejected the need for them now that it had death to worry about. Apart from anything else the dreams would be arbitrarily ended soon enough anyway and they were now just a waste of precious time.

Mac's first reaction to the sentence was plain, animal fear. Death was not something he had thought much about. Yes, he had been forced to deal with death in the family but facing his own immediate and certain death was a new experience. As time wore on, however, he became more rational and worked his way through to a point where he was almost comfortable. He decided that it all boiled down to a simple proposition: When you're dead you don't know it, so what's the problem?

None, was the only possible answer, but the process of dying was another matter. That he would have to face as bravely as he could, but as death in the arena could be nowhere near as excruciating as his sojourn in the screamer, it was not something to be terribly concerned about either.

It took almost all of the three days remaining to him for Mac to arrive at this point but by then he was almost cheerful. His face had lost the drawn, haunted hollows. His eyes were bright and aware. His mind was healed and whole. He was himself again, but, as the ancient philosopher had observed, in that he had not been destroyed he was now much stronger for the tempering.

Some sixth sense warned him as the door swung open that evening and he was standing composed and defiant as Slade walked in.

The general noted the change in Mac with unwilling admiration. The boy had spirit, there was no denying that, and Slade wondered for a moment if he could possibly have matched him had their positions been reversed.

Expecting a broken wreck, Slade had prepared a formal speech to begin and end the interview. In the event he simply looked at Mac and said, curtly:

"Tomorrow. Nineteen hundred hours."

He swung on his heel and left, followed by his escort.

Sometime later, Mac's daily food appeared and to his surprise he found he was actually quite hungry.

"Might as well make the most of things," he thought grimly.

However he might attempt to make himself inconspicuous, Tranter stood out. House troopers were chosen as much for their physique as anything, and Tranter was a big man, a hard man and obviously military. The swirling crowds around RCentral automatically gave him room as he left the huge, multi-purpose conglomerate that was workplace to more than five thousand people.

Tranter took the beltway down past the g-ball stadium, the arena and on to the end of the line at an ugly complex of workers' apartments. People had thinned out and if they spotted him, tended to cross away from him. Momentarily quite alone, Tranter glanced at the nearest eyespy and stepped into the deep shadow along the wall of one of the buildings. He knew that thanks to a long, trouble-free period on Redux the watchroom was undermanned and slack. He turned to the wall as though urinating and waited for any monitor who might have spotted him to lose interest. Eventually he drifted into the even deeper shadow of a convenient alley and disappeared.

It took him only minutes to find what he sought, one of the abandoned mine-openings that pocked Redux like the scars of old boils. He groped his way inside till he had rounded the first corner and was invisible in the unlikely event that anyone might pass by the tunnel mouth. He then took an illuminator from his pocket, switched on the light and settled down to wait. He had done what he could. Macgilliguddy, if he were still alive, would now have to come to him, and it would have to be within the next six hours.

Tranter thought the whole business the wildest grasping at straws. Why the Chairman should think that Macgilliguddy would somehow, magically, become aware of his presence in the tunnel, he couldn't imagine. And that Macgilliguddy should then choose to come to him seemed even more improbable, but if there were a chance in a thousand, a chance in ten thousand, that this mad enterprise might lead to freedom, then it was worth taking.

In the event, it was not James but Shelby and John Lanfranchi who suddenly materialised about two hours later at the edge of Tranter's ring of light. They were both carrying blasters and they kept their faces in the shadow. Orville's warning system, programmed to detect lifesign acting atypically, had picked up Tranter five minutes after his appearance in the tunnel and Captain Wright had decided to act 30 minutes later.

Tranter held up his reacom and expanded the display. Shelby edged forward, covered by Lanfranchi who had automatically moved to one side to open his field of fire.

"I am deaf-mute," Shelby read. "I have a message for James Macgilliguddy from Chairman von Osmond."

Shelby stepped back and motioned to Lanfranchi. He, too, read the message. Both men looked at each other and raised their blasters.

Tranter shook his head in annoyance pressed a button on his reacom and thrust it forward. It now showed a picture of Grace.

Again the two men looked at each other, and then Shelby nodded. He took a bracelet from his pocket and gestured for Tranter to put it on. Instantly, as far as the CAW was

concerned he was now a cockroach. Shelby also held up a black hood and Tranter reluctantly complied.

The convoy set off, moving slowly because of the blindfold.

They took Tranter to a disused holding bay and Lanfranchi stood guard while Shelby went to fetch James. Lanfranchi allowed Tranter to remove the blindfold. Both men waited impassively.

James was less astonished than Shelby that the trooper had presented a picture of Grace. Grace had escaped to him from the Chairman's harem and if he had never required to know the father of her children, now his children, James would still have been stupid not to have made certain assumptions. He took the presentation of her picture for what it was, an authentication of the trooper's bona fides and a warning. He hurried to the holding bay.

Tranter stood and considered the man before him. The description fitted. He pressed another button on his reacom and held it out.

"There is little time," James read. "Hasdrubal is sentenced to die in the arena, tomorrow at 1900. I can do nothing. You must act. You are his only chance. Osmond 13."

James gazed at the reacom for a lengthy pause, parsing the message. He had no illusions about the Chairman. He knew him for what he was, a ruthless, arrogant man, only moral when it suited him. James, of course, had watched Mac in the two g-ball matches he had been forced to play and had been astonished at the boy's gifts, so proud he had almost burst even though knowing, all the time, that those gifts did not come from him as everyone else assumed. Mac, in fact, was a one-off, unique, the first flowering of whatever strange genetic cocktail had led to his creation.

It had been clear to James that the second game would inevitably mean serious trouble for Mac of one sort or another but he had never thought for a moment that it might lead to execution in the arena.

So here was the first question? Was Mac really in such extreme danger? Or...

Second question: was it a trap to capture James? For whatever reason?

On the face of it, the second proposition seemed far the more likely. For the Chairman to profess that there was nothing he could do to prevent an execution beggared belief. To send a message by a deaf-mute, off-duty trooper could only be an elaborate ploy.

Unless. Unless the Chairman really was under some sort of duress. But that seemed the most unlikely proposition of all. How could the Chairman, effectively all-powerful within the normal constraints of managing billions of people without antagonising them sufficiently to foment a revolution, be under duress.

James had no idea. He held out his hand demanding the reacom.

"Why can the Chairman do nothing?" he wrote. He passed the reacom back.

"He is a prisoner," James read a moment later. He raised his eyebrows. Tranter shrugged expressively.

The whole situation smelt badly of decomposing treachery but James suddenly accepted that whatever the danger, he would have to go. Mac might not be the son of his loins, but he was the son of his heart. He could not not go.

Eventually he nodded to the trooper. And again. The meaning was clear.

Captain Wright was a measured man, a man of learning and high training, a man who had commanded troops in crisis, a man who had renounced position and comfort to live as an outlaw for the sake of his unborn son, a man who rarely if ever allowed himself to grow angry.

"You're mad!" he exploded. He slammed his hand on to the table, and again. "I will not permit it. You two," he said indicating Shelby and Lanfranchi. "Lock him away till whatever it is, is over."

James regarded him calmly.

"I have to go, Winston," he said. "I must. If Mac needs me, I must be there. If it's a trap, well so be it. I've had a good run and I don't have much longer anyway. You know that."

"And our plans?" Wright demanded. "Our escape from this hell-hole?"

"You are my friend, Winston. But Mac is my... son."

"I can't allow it," Wright said again, but his voice was less certain.

"It's not your decision," James said quietly.

Wright lifted his hands helplessly.

"They will kill you. Slowly."

"Perhaps," James said. "But if it were Orville, or Roxanna, what would you do?"

Mac had decided that as it would be difficult if not impossible to sleep during his last night alive, he wouldn't even bother trying. Instead, rather than hour upon hour of fretting, tossing and turning, he would start at the beginning, or as near to it as he could get, and he would relive every memory he had, finishing with the glory of flying. Then, he would prepare himself for the arena.

Naturally, as soon as his head touched the stone of the bench, he fell into a deep dreamless sleep, the most restorative he had yet been granted since being tortured. He woke refreshed and feeling his old self. The door opened and a guard came in with food, a bit better than normal, and a set of fresh leotards.

"You slept very late. Not long, now," he remarked cheerfully.

"Thanks," Mac said with some sarcasm.

He dressed in his new clothes, must look schmick for the crowd, and found, to his surprise that he was actually hungry. Then the time dragged and it became increasingly difficult to hold off the fear that hovered around the edges of his mind. The position he had thought through and which seemed so eminently reasonable proved more and more fragile the closer the moment came. He did not want to die. Not yet. He did not want to die.

Mac knew nothing of the ancient art of meditation and the power it could give, but he found it helped if he fixed his gaze to a spot on the wall and concentrated on his breathing, following each breath all the way in and each breath all the way out...

The door opened one final time. He obeyed Slade's beckoning finger and emerged from the cell. He felt calm again but uncertain of how long it might last. In formal procession, Slade leading and two troopers following, they moved through the corridors until finally they came to an internal beltway that led underground, directly to the arena.

As they sped along Slade turned, curious to inspect the boy. He had half expected that the troopers would at least have to support him, if not carry him, but the boy appeared cool and self-possessed. Slade caught himself wondering if he might have been able to manage such sang-froid had the positions been reversed. It really was a dreadful waste, he thought. Not only was Macgilliguddy brilliant in the air but the boy seemed to have genuine substance. To have recovered so well from the episode in the screamer, an episode which would have finished the majority of people if not physically then certainly mentally, bespoke unusual resilience and spirit. He seemed intelligent too. With a few years' experience he would have made a fine commander of flighters, reporting to Slade, naturally.

The beltway ended and another route march brought them to a large circular room in the centre of which was what Mac took to be an elevator shaft. He guessed it rose to the floor of the arena itself.

Mac was marched over to a glove-making machine and noted he had at least been given a full charge of thormalium.

Slade turned and addressed him.

"Pay attention," he said. "In three minutes we will take you up. You will be locked into a harness and you will be given a plasma whip. The a-g anchor and platform will then rise and you will rise with it; whether you choose to fly or not when the platform drops away is your choice. The whips will activate on a signal from Osmond and you should defend yourself if you can. Questions?"

"How does a whip work?"

"Sir," Slade said automatically. And to his great pride, Mac found himself laughing, genuinely laughing. Slade flushed and then caught himself.

"No," he said. "Perhaps not..." And again, he thought to himself: what a waste, what a criminal waste.

"How does a whip work?" Mac repeated.

"Not something you need to know," Slade said. "This is an execution, not combat. If it were combat, if you knew how to use a whip, I have no doubt it would be the gladiator to die, not you."

"That's..."

"Outrageous," Slade finished for him, and then: "It's time."

Osmond carefully surveyed the Chairman's box, his box, he thought with satisfaction. There was a spattering of ranking officers and Galiconia functionaries, some with their wives, there to enjoy the evening's entertainment, not to mention the banquet traditionally provided to accompany the spectacle of elemental fear and ugly death, a spectacle which always seemed to sharpen the appetite so wonderfully. The back of the box was lined with a reassuring number of deaf-mutes and most important of all, there was his father, pale, even more contained than usual, but present as ordered. Osmond might have been less sanguine had he noticed that when the Chairman entered the box to the obeisance of his nominal guests and the cheers of the crowd, he had eyes only for one particular trooper, a trooper who had allowed his left eye-lid to droop ever so slightly. The Chairman had turned to the front then, if not satisfied, at least content that everything that could be done had been done.

The preliminary bouts had been somewhat tedious, Osmond thought, but the climax of the evening would be all the more sensational. He accepted a delicacy from a concubine passing with a tray and wondered how much it had cost to bring the small mound of what looked like mucus half way across the Hyades. It tasted delicious, however, quite worth the trifling expense and he looked about for another. His father, he suddenly noticed, rather than depressed, as one might have anticipated, appeared expectant. Osmond forgot the molluscs and began to wonder if the old man was up to something and if so, what. But for the life of him he could see no way the Chairman could influence events. He had been sealed in his quarters, the only visitors Dostoi and deaf-mutes, and all his communications had been routed through Osmond's chief censor. In fact, the Chairman had sent nothing personal and had been required to refer all Galiconia matters to Osmond himself. Even if his father had private codes, as he inevitably would, he had made no attempt to use them. If incommunicado meant anything, anything at all, then it surely must apply to the Chairman. Osmond picked his nose and watched carefully. Instead of showing the distaste to which Osmond was well accustomed, his father's expression remained unchanged. Osmond was suddenly very worried and without the least idea of what to be worried about.

He looked for Slade and then remembered the general was otherwise engaged. He beckoned to Dostoi but it was too late. The buzz of the crowd had changed to a roar and he knew that events were underway. There was still time to stop it, but why, why should he? There was no reason, just the prickling of intuition and in the end Osmond simply

shrugged and sat back to let matters take their course. He should be celebrating, not chewing his fingernails. It was after all a day of triumph. With the elimination of the boy, his father would be rendered finally powerless. Whatever wills he might have squirrelled away, only one would count and in any case, it would be quite irrelevant. Osmond in a few short minutes would become the one, undisputed, surviving heir, wills or no wills.

Mac stood where he had been shoved on the circular platform. He was surrounded by guards and craned through the packed bodies for a glimpse of his opponent. The gladiator, or executioner, depending on circumstances, was a compact man, his muscles sharply defined beneath the regulation leotard. He handled the plasma whip with easy familiarity and was known for his surgical excision of body parts. Mac inspected his own whip, thrust into his hand by Slade. It appeared a simple rod, some 30 centimetres long and perhaps three in diameter. One end was hollow and Mac presumed it emitted the plasma and that he should hold the other end. He craned for another view of the gladiator and was relieved to see that at least he appeared to have that right.

The platform began to rise to the floor of the arena. Mac squinted against the flaring lights and flinched at the animal roar of the crowd bearing down. The reality of what was about to happen hammered in on him. He was going to die. They were going to cut him in pieces, still living pieces, for the delectation of a hundred thousand people and billions more on cam. He was going to die. He was going to die.

With a supreme effort Mac lifted his head, squared his shoulders and straightened his back.

The platform stopped, Slade and his deaf-mutes stepped back and the arena guards began to ready the two harnesses tethered to the anchor hovering above.

As the artificial day had given way to artificial night, James had experienced no difficulty in slipping undetected through the murky shadows high up near the lucent until he was directly above the arena. Then, wearing black and a cockroach decoy and carrying one of his old plasma whips modified by Orville to activate on James's command, not the arena's, he drifted lower as the night deepened, mindful of the time and aiming to arrive a minute or so early.

He was precise and as the platform rose into view he was poised at the rim of the open roof, invisible in the glare of the lights to anyone who might have glanced up. His eyes sought Mac and he was enormously relieved to see that the boy still seemed to be functioning. He was upright and standing unsupported. Everything depended on Mac not only being in a fit state to fly but being quick enough to realise that he must.

James watched as a guard reached for Mac's harness and he launched himself into a power dive, but feet first. It was so fast and so unexpected that no one of the vast crowd

was aware of his presence until he smashed into the guard about to place Mac in the harness. Simultaneously, James lashed out with the whip and the crack of the plasma echoed through the arena as the gladiator's head rolled to the ground.

The roar of the crowd began to break into confused shouts and screams.

"Fly, Mac," James shouted desperately. "Fly! Fly!" He saw the boy's head turn and he also saw a man in a general's uniform reaching for a side-arm blaster. Again he lashed out with the whip, and a hand joined the severed head. Mac had now hesitantly taken off and with a savage jerk James pointed to the lucent and the two rocketed up at a maximum climb, disappearing into the lights before anyone had begun to react.

Slade stared at his right hand lying some metres away still holding the blaster. He wondered absently how it could hurt so much when it wasn't even connected to his body. His uniform smoked slightly where it terminated just above his right wrist. The tunic had been his favourite, something about the excellence of the cut, never achieved before or since. The matter of the Macgilliguddys was now personal.

Thirty seconds later he was barking orders and smiled softly when told that a patrolling agger had picked up one lifesign at least.

Then the shock began to kick in. He staggered and found a guard helping him to sit down. At least the shock masked the pain somewhat.

James knew they had only seconds before the pursuit would be on them. He closed up on Mac as they rocketed along and tried to pass him a cockroach blocker but in the dark and confusion of their escape they fumbled it and it fell. James began to shout instructions and saw Mac glance at him in the gloom, then nod. James removed his own blocker and thought to try another transfer, but it was too late. The first agger was almost on them. Reluctantly, he let the decoy drop.

Dostoi was bitterly regretting his fine, new clothes. They made him far too conspicuous. He strove to efface himself amongst the panicked people now shouting and milling about the box and so he missed the complicit glance that passed between the Chairman and one of the deaf-mutes.

Tranter, the trooper, was enjoying himself for perhaps the first time since his enforced conscription. It might never lead to the freedom the Chairman had promised but at least this mayhem he had helped to bring about was some small revenge for what they had done to him. The sight of Slade losing his hand had been particularly gratifying. He grinned inwardly and waited with anticipation for Osmond to realise the second great flaw of the deaf-mute scheme.

Osmond, himself, was shattered. His ascendancy over his father, his victory, his triumph had just disappeared out the open roof of the arena. He sat slumped and defeated and would dearly have loved to burst into tears.

He saw the Chairman, his father, his enemy, regarding him sardonically and felt the rage building. He stormed across the room.

"You did this," he shrieked, the spittle flying. "I don't know how, but you did this!" He turned to the nearest trooper.

"Arrest him," he screamed, pointing at his father. "Lock him up!" Nothing happened. The trooper remained standing stiffly to attention, his eyes fixed woodenly on the far distance. Here and there a head turned.

"Arrest him, I said," Osmond screamed again, but doubt began to engulf him.

"He can't hear you," the Chairman said. "Remember? Dear, dear. Didn't your general, whatever his name is, think to teach you the sign language? Or were you just to lazy to learn?"

It was too much. Osmond lost his head completely, opened his mouth and let fly with one long, wordless, ululating, endless scream. The box about him fell silent and the guests turned to regard the spectacle of Osmond von Osmond, fourteenth of the name, in uncontrolled and uncontrollable paroxysm.

Dostoi found himself seriously considering suicide, on the spot, there and then.

The door opened and Slade marched in. His face was drawn and his uniform smelt charred, but otherwise he was functioning normally again. A medical had given him two swift pellets, one for the shock and one for the pain, and both were back under control. He stood regarding Osmond for a moment, turned to inspect the Chairman, who now was giving nothing away, then walked to a display.

The image he brought up showed an agger firing bursts of plasma cannon apparently indiscriminately. Slade adjusted the controls and the image was overlaid with two white blips, twisting and turning, rising and falling. It became obvious that these were the targets.

Osmond suddenly stopped screaming and moved to stand square in front of the display. Slade, irritated, was forced to move or be knocked over.

"Get the boy," Osmond demanded, an edge of hysteria still plain in his voice. "Get the boy. Kill him. Kill him now."

Slade found he was rapidly losing patience with this increasingly odious young man to whom he had chosen to attach himself. It was beginning to look more and more like a sad mistake.

"If you can tell us which is which," he said curtly, indicating the blips. "Then we might be able to oblige."

Osmond stared at him.

"Kill the boy," he stormed. "Just kill that gods-poxed boy."

"You mean your brother?" The Chairman put in helpfully.

Osmond opened his mouth and then was gripped again by the display. There had been another burst of cannon fire and one of the blips had suddenly stopped moving. The second one darted away and then it too came to a stop.

"One down," Slade said with some satisfaction. "And I hope it was the bastard who took my hand."

"Just kill the boy," Osmond repeated. "Just make sure you've killed the boy."

They saw the agger open fire again at the second blip and then accelerate in hot pursuit. Quickly the two converged and then the blip became lost in the lifesign of the troops on board. Slade switched off the overlay and they watched in disbelief as a new eyespy now showed them an infra-red image of Mac actually riding on the back of the agger.

He moved to the air intake, did something with his arm, and the agger came to a sudden stop, rocking slightly.

"Damn," Slade said, and again. "Damn, that boy is good."

And if they had been disbelieving of what had just gone before it was nothing to the incredulity with which they watched Mac turtle and kill the agger.

Osmond began to scream again.

"He's getting away," he shrieked. "The boy is getting away. You fools. You stupid, stupid fools."

Abruptly the Chairman stepped forward and slapped Osmond sharply across the face.

"Be quiet," he said in a conversational voice. "We've all had quite enough of your nonsense."

Osmond stood open-mouthed. It was intolerable. The whole situation was totally intolerable.

"Don't you ever touch me again," he whispered. "If you touch me again I will have you killed."

The Chairman regarded him pityingly.

"The wills," he said. "Remember, the wills."

Slade reluctantly entered Osmond's meadow and wended his way to the sleeping hollow beside a brook, the mindless chuckle of which he found intensely irritating. He hoped, he hoped very strongly, that Osmond had not taken refuge in his nautch-chaise. It was always an unpleasantly fraught business getting him out.

But as it happened, Osmond was sitting on the grassy bank, his feet in the water of astronomical value, brooding.

"Macgilliguddy is alive," Slade said without preamble. He was pretty much through with courtesy when it came to Osmond. "He will survive," he added.

"I told you to kill the boy," Osmond said listlessly. "The man is irrelevant. If he survives I will kill him in the screamer anyway. He is irrelevant."

"No," Slade said. "He is not. Quite the reverse." You fool, he added to himself contemptuously.

"The boy will come for him," Slade went on. "He will attempt a rescue. Failing that we can offer an exchange."

"He's safe," Osmond said. "The boy has disappeared. You let him disappear. He's safe. Why would he ever put himself at risk, again, even if you did know how to send him a message?"

"The boy still thinks Macgilliguddy is his father," Slade said. "I am coming to know this boy. If I am certain of one thing in the universe it's that he will attempt a rescue. Even if he knew the truth he would still come. He could not abandon anyone who had helped him." Unlike you, Slade thought.

Osmond looked up for the first time.

"You think?" he said.

"I know," Slade replied. "He will come. And we will take him." There was a long silence as Osmond contemplated the fact that all might not be lost after all, that he might not be forced to release his father on the instant and meekly accept whatever punishment would be visited upon him.

"And thank you, sir," Slade added putting heavy emphasis on the "sir". "Thank you for asking." Osmond looked at him sharply and Slade indicated his missing hand. Abruptly the general turned on his heel and stalked out.

Chapter Fourteen

Mac found his attention wandering again. The Throne Wars had been interesting enough but the Vengeva Conventions that resulted were dry stuff. An elite had once considered that artificial intelligence was the next stage of evolution but the vast mass of humanity, when confronted with beings a great deal smarter and more reasonable than they, had been unwilling to be declared redundant and to sink into graceful extinction. They had gone to war but the Thrones, as they had come to be known, had proved too wise, too compassionate and fundamentally too uninterested to participate. They had packed up bag and baggage and departed the Hyades altogether. A full plenary convocation on Vengeva IV had subsequently formalised the protocols prohibiting all A-I experimentation, construction and/or propagation, and it was these with which Mac had been struggling. The temptation to let his mind wander was irresistible.

The time in the tunnels had been kind to him, indeed necessary. The marks of strain on his face had smoothed out and his eyes had lost their wary, hunted expression. More important was the opportunity to reflect and order the extreme experiences to which he had been subjected in rapid succession. At first the pain of many of the memories had been too distressing, but gradually he had been able to re-examine all that had happened, to make sense of it, and to accept.

Pride would have been forgivable. Most boys who had starred in the cauldron, who had survived the screamer and then the arena could not but feel impressed with themselves, but Mac was too conscious of the cost for all this, a cost that he had inflicted on James, his father. What he felt most was guilt; not the guilt of shame, not the guilt that made one want to cringe, to hide, to flee, but the guilt of honour unsatisfied. He would not be able to forgive himself until he had made things right.

He thought of James a lot, and at least three times a day he made Orville show him the pod in the infirmary where James was making slow but steady progress. Soon Mac would be able to set out to save him but in the meantime, the waiting was the best thing that could have happened to him.

However, the train of thought that started with James soon led, as it always did, to the great, so far unanswered question. What had brought James to the arena? How had his father known the date and time of his execution, how had he known to come roaring to the rescue? Mac, naturally, had asked a number of times but was always fobbed off with a vague reference to Orville and the CAW, and when Orville himself had been put on the spot he had been distinctly evasive about just exactly what had tipped him off. When Mac had pressed the point, Orville had retreated into angry irritation..

Mac made a sudden decision. The Vengeva Conventions could wait. He put down the tell and went in search of his uncle.

As usual, Captain Wright was immured in his study. At first his attempt at a history of the Hyades had been a make-work project to ward off insanity. Now it was a genuine passion.

He looked up and smiled as Mac coughed and entered. The boy's face was unusually serious. It was a good face, Wright thought. A good face for a fine young man, though a young man who was far deeper in trouble than he knew.

"Sir," Mac said, and Wright winced.

"Captain..." Mac amended.

"You want to ask me a question." It was a statement and Mac looked surprised.

"You want to ask how James knew to come to the arena to save you?"

"How did you guess?" Mac asked.

"I've been waiting for you. To come when you were ready. It's the obvious question. I told the others, in the meantime, to let you think we found out from the CAW. We didn't."

"But why?" Mac asked. "Why keep me in the dark?"

"As it happens, Mac, the others don't know the whole story either. Only I know the truth. And I have to warn you, my dearest boy, son of my wife's cousin, that you will find the truth deeply shocking. Sit down." Wright indicated a floater by his desk and Mac, without thinking, obeyed.

"Why did you call me that?" he asked after a moment. "Why did you call me the son of your wife's cousin."

"Because Mac," Wright said gravely. "James is not your father." And Wright watched compassionately as the blood drained from Mac's face and the hunted look returned to his eyes.

"I don't believe you," he said at last, and then angrily: "I don't believe you. Why are you saying that? What are you trying to do to me?"

"I know you can't believe me," Wright said. "And it's to your credit that you don't. But it's the truth. When you're ready, I will show you."

Mac sat silent and unmoving. In a short time he had come to feel remarkably close to the Wrights, perhaps because he had had no family for so long, but now he suddenly hated them, hated them all. He hated the captain who was trying to take his father from him, and he hated Orville and Roxanna who had been conniving at the lie. Of course James was his father. If there was one thing certain in the universe it was that James was his father. Who else but his father would have given up so much for him? Who else but his father would ever have attempted that hare-brained but heroic rescue at the arena? Who else but his father would have been prepared to sacrifice his life for him in the subsequent chase? It was impossible. Of course James was his father. How could he not be. If only he were here, he would soon put a stop to this travesty.

"I would think the same, Mac," Captain Wright said. "If I were you, I would want James for my father and I wouldn't give him up for anything. But he's not. James is not your father. I am honoured that he is my friend. I owe him everything. But he is not your father. I debated for a long time whether I should tell you, whether I should just leave things the way they are, but I can't, Mac. You have to know. Your life depends on it. You have to know who is trying to kill you, and why."

Mac looked up, his eyes stormy.

"It's on the CAW, Mac," Wright said, after a pause. "I too wondered at all the unanswered questions. I found it on the CAW."

There was another long silence.

At last Mac spoke.

"Then you'd better show me," he said, which was probably the bravest thing he had ever done. He stood up.

"With your permission, I have to show the others, too, Mac," Wright said. "They have to know. Their lives are also at much greater risk because of it."

They gathered in the mess in a quiet, serious mood and arranged themselves before Orville's bank of monitors. Captain Wright gave Orville the reference and he punched it in.

A large, glaringly white room with a peculiar cryllic dome appeared on the big central display. They watched as a group of men entered and stood waiting, then Mac was dragged in. Wright motioned to Orville and the display froze.

"Mac," he said. "Can you stand to see this?"

Mac nodded grimly and Wright reached out a hand to him, but the boy flinched away. Roxanna watched angrily.

"What are you doing, father?" she demanded. "Why are we watching this?"

"Perhaps you shouldn't," Wright said. "The others need to see, but you should leave. I made a mistake asking you here. Please go."

"I will not," Roxanna said. "Not now." She moved to stand next to Mac, and Wright regarded them both unhappily. The boy again looked at breaking point, as he had when first brought into the tunnels. But he hadn't broken, Wright reflected, not then and he had to hope not now. His daughter on the other hand looked exactly like her mother when defending Orville as a baby, defiant, daring the universe to touch him. Roxanna had grown, he suddenly saw. She had grown so fast and he had barely noticed.

Reluctantly he nodded to Orville, the display unfroze and they watched in mounting horror as the scene unfolded; as Osmond smashed Mac across the face; as Mac was stripped naked yet still defiantly goaded his tormentor; as he was thrown into the screamer; and as Osmond thrust the lever all the way forward.

None of them could stand the sound of Mac's screaming. It was the torment of a soul damned to an eternity of hellfire and despair. They stood there, jamming their hands into their ears. All except Mac. He watched dispassionately, even though the remembered agony was again coursing through his body. One could grow accustomed to anything, he thought absently. Tears were streaming down Roxanna's face and she sobbed brokenly. Shelby and Lanfranchi were both cursing monotonously. Orville threw one stricken glance at Mac before turning back in horror. Wright wondered again at the calibre of the young man, his nephew, who could endure such debasement and then endure it again, standing here with them.

The door to the torture chamber opened and they watched as the Chairman stormed in and Mac was finally dragged from the screamer by the medicals. They watched the byplay between Osmond and Dostoi. And then they listened disbelievingly as the truth of Mac's parentage was exposed, as Osmond's voice boomed from the speakers:

"I'll tell you what happened. Your son, your other son, my half-brother, the boy in the screamer was assigned to the g-ball team here on Redux, 56 days ago. And when you found out, you set out to save him, to save him from the cauldron."

They were sitting at the table, wordless. Even though Wright had already watched the encounter and knew what to expect, he was still shaken, almost as much as the others. Roxanna had her face buried in a swipe.

At last Mac looked up.

"I'm sorry," he said to Captain Wright. "I didn't know anything about what happened after... after..."

"No," Wright said. "How could you?"

"So it's true?" Mac asked, a slight quaver in his voice.

"Yes," Wright said, and then: "I've always known that James was not your biological father. But I only learned the whole truth when I saw that record. James didn't know either, who your real father is, not for sure, not until the trooper came to find him with the Chairman's message."

"The Chairman really is my father?" This time there was a direct plea in Mac's voice.

"Yes," Wright said, and added formally: "You are the son of Grace Albright, sometime concubine to the Chairman of Galiconia, Osmond von Osmond the thirteenth." There was another silence as they all digested his words.

"But you're still family," Roxanna suddenly burst out. She said it so fiercely that her father looked at her consideringly, again aware how much she had grown.

"Our family," Orville said quietly.

Mac understood and was grateful. There was nothing to say about what had happened to him in the torture chamber, or at least nothing that he wanted said, but to

have their support meant a lot, a very great deal, a surprisingly great deal. Mac felt a sudden pricking behind his eyes. Then he looked at them all one by one.

"James is still my father," he said. "James is my real father." It was a solemn avowal and taken as such. Heads nodded.

"You can count..."

"...on us," Shelby and John said.

"We had no idea," Shelby added, looking at Mac with something approaching awe.

"And it means things are rather different," Wright interrupted, aware of Mac's increasing discomfort. "And much more difficult. We now have Osmond junior actively hunting Mac with intent to kill him."

"But why?" Roxanna asked. "They're brothers, half-brothers..." Orville looked at her pityingly.

"Oh," she said after a moment.

"Quite," her father said. "Things are now far more complicated. Even if we do manage to escape Redux, Osmond will hunt us the length and breadth of the Hyades."

"The Chairman?" Orville asked.

"You saw," Wright said. "Osmond has him prisoner. And if I'm any judge of Galconia politics, the Chairman will stay a prisoner until Mac is captured, and then the Chairman's health will probably take a sudden turn for the worse, along with Mac's. Palace coups are common enough in company history, you know."

"So what can we do?" Orville said, glumly.

"I have to leave," Mac said suddenly. "I'll bring them down on you... I have to get out of here."

"You can't," Roxanna said.

"I have to leave," Mac said again.

"I won't let you," Roxanna said.

"Sir?" Mac appealed to Wright, who regarded him with the hint of a smile.

"We'll take a vote," he said. "Those in favour of him going?" There was silence. "Those against?" There was an indignant chorus.

"I've told you before," Wright said. "You're family, Mac. And you're still family even if your father and brother are unexpected additions."

Slade regarded the hook that had taken the place of his right hand with dislike that was rapidly becoming loathing. The senior medical had naturally offered to regrow the hand, but that would have meant a month in a pod. Slade had then been offered a nerve-controlled prosthetic, but that still would have meant two weeks out of action, which in the present delicate circumstances with Osmond in a blind panic and given to outbursts of hysteria, was quite out of the question. Slade had then been offered, with obsequious

apology, the only remaining option: a hook, a device so ancient that its origins were lost in the beginning times. Outraged, Slade had demanded something at least a little more sophisticated only to be told that because such had been obsolete for thousands upon thousands of years, all knowledge of how to make a mechanical hand not connected to the body's nervous system was irretrievably gone. And a hook it was.

Slade was also faced with other grave irritations, not the least the realisation that, in the ancient phrase, he had absolutely backed the wrong horse, whatever a horse might be. Osmond had acquired a façade of governance during his regency on Redux, but now that things were hanging much in the balance and with the suddenly tangible contempt of his father eating at him constantly, this had largely evaporated. Osmond, it had to be said, had reverted completely to type, to the more or less incompetent but vicious nincompoop of his youth.

On the other hand, the Macgilliguddy boy showed distinct potential. Slade could not but admire the way the young man had held himself together in trying situations, extremely trying, and he wondered again if somehow he might work a switch, so to speak. He was a professional, after all, and a good one, and a man liked to have an employer worthy of his talents.

Or the Chairman. Now he, evidently, was a man of some resource. It was not impossible that Macgilliguddy had come to the rescue in the arena purely of his own accord, but unlikely, which left the Chairman. But Slade was confident he had successfully managed to isolate him. He could find no flaw in his arrangements and felt, with some reason he told himself, that if the Chairman had indeed somehow managed to summon Macgilliguddy then it could only have been by magic.

It was a worrying loose end, easily resolved, of course, by questioning Macgilliguddy himself, but Slade had been warned that the man had been so badly injured, rigorous interrogation would certainly kill him, at least for another week.

It was, Slade felt, all most unsatisfactory and for a man of famously sanguine temperament he was distressingly discontented.

He turned again to the Chairman. Something definitely was not right. Despite what logic told him, his instinct still troubled him. The Chairman had somehow been behind the rescue and Slade knew it, despite the fact that it meant doubting his own fool-proof precautions. He rather wished that instead of opportunistically seizing the chance to get rid of that pompous idiot Alonso, he had bided his time and stayed loyal to the senior branch of the family. But it was too late now. The Chairman could never accept him again... Could he...? But the Chairman, too, was a professional, an accomplished professional, a most experienced professional. Perhaps there might be the possibility of a professional arrangement. It was worth exploring. It was certainly worth exploring.

Slade's reacom vibrated and Slade sighed at the summons.

Osmond was pacing his dell, compulsively stripping the leaves from a branch, leaves that had cost a fortune to grow. Slade saluted, a shade ironically, but Osmond was far too agitated to notice. Slade sighed again.

"Well," Osmond said petulantly. "Nothing's happened. You said the boy would try to rescue Macgilliguddy. He hasn't. Nothing's happening."

"Sir," Slade said, keeping a firm rein on himself. "Macgilliguddy is not yet fit to leave the pod..." Or question, he added to himself. "...Nothing will happen until he is..."

"Or ever," Osmond interrupted. "And what am I supposed to do about my father?"

Slade sighed openly.

"Sir, we've been over this a dozen times at least. Like the rest of us, your father will have to wait in patience..."

"But he is pressing me, and as long as the boy is alive..."

"Your father is your prisoner, but as far as the cluster is concerned he is merely paying a routine visit to Redux. When we take the boy, and we will, your father will lose the only bargaining chip he has and you can do what you like with him."

"I should let him go," Osmond said forlornly. "While I have the chance. He might forgive... I should let him go."

"And do what?" Slade demanded. "Let him find the boy? Let him cut you out of your inheritance? Let him take his revenge on you?"

"He wouldn't hurt me."

"Your father is not a forgiving man," Slade said.

"But what if you don't catch the boy? What if he gets away? Goes to my father? What then?"

"He doesn't know that your father is also his father..."

"He might. He might by now."

Slade finally lost patience.

"Sir," he said with an edge to his voice. "He can't go to your father. Not unless he comes here. Or not unless you let your father go, and I would strongly advise that you don't."

"But what if the boy gets away?" Osmond persisted, pulling another branch from the priceless bush.

"He may," Slade said exasperated beyond prudence and immediately wished he had kept his mouth shut.

"What?" Osmond shrieked at him, descending into instant hysteria.

"If we catch him in the act, well and good," Slade said, cursing himself. "But if we don't, I have a plan that will lead us to cleaning out the whole nest of them."

"What plan?" Osmond demanded, but Slade refused to tell him and held firm even in the face of a fit he rated at about nine on the ancient Richter scale. A man required insurance, after all, and in these temperamental times it was well to remain indispensable.

To say that the Chairman was unsurprised when General Slade begged a formal audience was to state the obvious. The Chairman had been expecting just that, confidently.

Slade marched in and had he known the Chairman better, he would have been warned by the fact that the Chairman had his back turned. The Chairman was bored. The Chairman intended to amuse himself. Slade saluted and stood there contemplating the Chairman's immaculately tailored tunic. Nothing happened.

Slade coughed. Still nothing happened.

"Sir," Slade said. "May I address you?" Still nothing happened. Slade waited. He was unfazed. He knew the game. He was not a junior lieutenant. He could wait as long as the Chairman.

"What?" the Chairman said when he had drawn out the silence to the point where any other officer would quietly have effaced himself from the room. First points to Slade, he conceded reluctantly. He had not previously come into contact with the man, until lately a mere colonel, and he was beginning to suspect that he might actually be formidable.

"Sir, are you comfortable?" Slade asked with deference. The Chairman suddenly swung round.

"No," he said. "And nor should you be. You face indictment for treason."

Slade abandoned his solicitous tone.

"Perhaps," he said. "But only if I manage things so badly that I should deserve it."

"I see you have not had your arm repaired," the Chairman remarked, going off at a tangent.

"A matter of timing," Slade said.

"How inconvenient."

"I live to serve," Slade said piously.

"Then, in that you chose to serve my son, you waste your life," the Chairman responded tartly. It was the opening for which Slade had been sparring.

"It is, I believe, possible to have more than one master during one's life." It was delicately put but no less blatant for that. For the first time, the Chairman gave Slade his full attention. There was a lengthy silence as the two men regarded each other.

"The disadvantage of betrayal," the Chairman eventually remarked in a conversational tone, "is that it does rather mark one as untrustworthy. The disadvantage

of a subsequent double-double cross is that the untrustworthiness is categorically confirmed."

Slade considered.

"On the other hand," he said. "I have always held that mistakes should be rectified as quickly as possible."

"Indeed," the Chairman said, and then: "Back in the days when we still had governments, it used to be said that an honest politician was one who stayed bought."

"I am not a politician," Slade observed. "I am a soldier. A professional soldier."

"A mercenary."

"If you will," Slade said.

The Chairman paused. On the face of it, Slade's offer, for offer it was, was irresistible, a swift and tidy resolution of the present impasse. Once released he would need only half an hour to re-establish total control and to throw Slade into the screamer. All of which Slade must know, so what was his game?

"I would need safeguards," Slade said. The Chairman's face had been impassive, nevertheless his thoughts had been clear enough.

"Naturally," the Chairman said

Slade smiled. It was a great pity, but there it was.

"Thank you, your excellency," he said. "Thank you for your time." It was clear that any guarantees the Chairman might choose to give would never be honoured. Both men were prisoners of their mutual distrust. Once again, Slade regretted his hasty decision to throw in his lot with Osmond in the first place.

Mac had retreated to his bunk soon after the meeting in the mess and had kept pretty much to himself ever since. He still religiously checked on James's progress three times a day but avoided meals and conversation. The others, understanding the shock and confusion of having all his fundamental verities over-turned so comprehensively, gave him space and hoped it would not take him too long to work his way through it.

Mac, however, was lost. Bad enough to find that the man he loved and revered above all others was not, in fact, his father, but then, insult to injury, to discover that he was a scion of the ruling family of the cluster, a family he hated, beggared belief. Further, not only was the Chairman his real father, but his half-brother, Osmond, Osmond the odious, was plotting to kill both of them. It was just too much for Mac to absorb, to think about in any coherent fashion. He sat for hours, days, crossed-legged on the bed-ledge staring at the wall trying to make sense of it, trying to think what to do, but try as he might his brain persisted in plodding the same weary, self-defeating circles. He had survived so much, somehow kept his courage in the face of torture, solitary confinement and death, but now his fortitude deserted him and he was lost, lost in a desert of deceit and uncertainty.

Finally Roxanna came. Like the others she had obeyed the unspoken pact to give Mac time, but she could see that he was no nearer to resolving his confusion and had determined to act. The truth was that she was horribly confused herself. First James and then Mac had dramatically disrupted her life. The quiet tunnels – sometimes on her darker days she thought of them as tombs – the quiet tunnels had suddenly been infused with vitality from the outside and her long resignation to a life hidden from everything that made life worth living had been shattered. She couldn't help it. She tried desperately to control the demands welling inside her but nothing could damp the yearning for freedom, for light and air, that now possessed her.

Roxanna was her mother's daughter and her mother, unknown to Roxanna, had been a vibrant, determined woman, smart, brave and the life of the party. Roxanna had never had a party to go to and she ached with the void in her soul that she was now forced to recognise but could not explain.

A void that increasingly Mac had come to fill.

She had watched the scenes in the torture chamber with a horror that had finally overwhelmed her. How could anyone do that to a person? How could anyone do that, do that to Mac? She had conceived an instant and violent hatred of Osmond and would cheerfully have shot him down in cold blood. How dare he? How dare he?

And now Mac was no longer James's boy, but suddenly the son of the exalted Chairman of the whole of Galiconia, the ruler of the entire cluster. And Osmond was his brother.

Mac looked up miserably as she presented herself in front of him.

"I want to talk to you," she said and reluctantly, he made room. She sat beside him so that she was close but not quite touching.

"You've been avoiding me. You don't want to know me any more."

"What?" Mac exclaimed sharply, startled by the accusation.

"Now that you're so important..." Roxanna bored in. "We're not good enough... I'm not good enough..."

"That's stupid," Mac said, floundering.

"No, it's not. I can see it in your face. We're just... outlaws. And you're the big, important son of the Chairman. You can't wait to get away."

"Shut up," Mac said. "Don't talk like that..."

"You can't wait to leave..."

"It's not true!"

"It is true. It is!"

"Shut up!" Mac shouted desperately and he reached to put a hand on her mouth. Her skin was so soft where they touched, and there were tears in her eyes. Suddenly

Roxanna took Mac's hand in both of hers and she was sobbing in earnest. Without thinking, Mac fumbled awkwardly and got his other arm around her and then her head was in the crook of his shoulder and she cried and cried.

"I wouldn't leave you here," Mac said over and over. "I couldn't leave you here."

It was the one right thing to say.

Without the least understanding of why, Mac found that he was suddenly feeling a lot better. There was still no sense to be made of all that had happened to him, but miraculously it no longer seemed to matter. He and Roxanna sat for a long time, both unwilling to break the spell, and spell it was, a magical feeling, a feeling of completeness, a feeling that neither had experienced ever before, healing, restorative, beautiful.

At last, by some signal, they both pulled apart, though Roxanna still kept Mac's hand.

"You were so brave," she said. "In that horrible room. You were so brave."

It was nice, Mac supposed, to be admired but he had to be honest.

"I was petrified," he said. "I nearly wet myself."

"But you didn't."

"I don't really want to talk about it," he said. "I just want to forget."

"You won't though, you won't be able to, not if you bottle it up..."

"I don't want to talk about it."

"But you must."

And so with Roxanna gently probing, Mac did begin to talk and once he had started he found he couldn't stop. It all came out, not necessarily in any particular order, but everything from that first morning in RCentral to James's stunning rescue effort. He talked for hours and the more he talked the more he found that had to be said. By the time he had finished his voice was croaky and he felt drained and empty. Purged. It was only then that he realised the enormous thing Roxanna had done for him.

"I'm sorry," he said at last. "You shouldn't have got me started."

She squeezed his hand, which she had kept in her possession throughout.

"My hero," she said. Her voice was light, but with a deftness beyond her years, contained everything that could not be put into words.

"I'm hungry," Mac said. And for the first time in days, he really was.

It was dinner time and the others were gathered in the mess. They greeted Roxanna and Mac without comment but they were all aware that something was different.

Captain Wright sighed to himself. He wished it could have been avoided but supposed that it had been all but inevitable. It was his fault. He should have realised

sooner that Roxanna was maturing so fast. But then, what could he possibly have done to prevent her being attracted to Mac? And, on the other side, it had to be said that a finer young man would be difficult to find. He really should be grateful.

It was also clear that by some alchemy Roxanna had brought Mac back to himself. The boy could laugh again and looking at the two of them, Wright suddenly stopped reproaching himself and quietly began to rejoice in their good fortune, young as they were. And in his. He accidentally caught Shelby's eye and found himself returning the man's good-natured wink.

Eventually, when they had all eaten and conversation was becoming desultory. Orville turned them to business.

"They've started the countdown on Uncle James," he said. Captain Wright looked at him sharply.

"When?" he said.

"Three days," Orville said.

"Please," Mac said. "I don't understand."

"It means they will open his pod and bring him out of the coma in three days time," Captain Wright said. Mac felt stricken. He had missed his usual visit that afternoon. He should have known. He jumped to his feet and made to do he didn't know what.

"Calm down," Orville said. "We can't do anything till they bring him round. And he'll need time for the coma to wear off."

"They won't give him time," Mac said, fidgeting.

"They will," Lanfranchi said. "I've been podded... too many times..."

"They'll give him the night, at least." Shelby finished.

"So that's when we have to go in," Orville said and then corrected himself. "When Mac has to go in. Four nights from now."

"And have you prepared a different diversion?" Wright demanded, his voice grave. "As I requested?"

"No," Roxanna said. "He hasn't." Wright turned to her.

"I forbid it," he said sternly. "I categorically forbid it."

"Without being disrespectful, Father, you can forbid all you like."

"Go to your room."

"I will not," she said, and held his gaze until it was Wright who eventually dropped his eyes.

"I can't allow it," he said. "For your mother's sake, I can't allow it."

"My mother is dead," Roxanna said flatly. "And from everything I know, you could never have stopped her."

"But you're still a child," Wright said, despite the evidence of his own eyes.

"You wish I were still a child," Roxanna said. "I'm the same age as Mac and you have no problem with him going."

"Mac has demonstrated that he can more than take care of himself," Wright said. "You haven't. And I will not debate this further."

Roxanna drew a deep breath.

"If you won't let me do this," she said solemnly. "I will walk out of here and give myself up." It was the threat she had promised to make but neither Mac nor Orville had believed she would. They looked at her with a new respect.

Captain Wright gazed at his daughter's face. She was suddenly so like her mother in the set of her jaw and the narrowing of her eyes that she was almost a re-incarnation. He sighed. He could, as she well knew, lock her up for the duration, and she, as he well knew, would never forgive him. He had come to the place all parents know and from which they instinctively flee: to keep his daughter he would have to let her go. It was too soon, far too soon, impossible, nevertheless it was what he would have to do. He looked one last time at the little girl he loved so helplessly and surrendered to the woman she was fast becoming.

"Very well," he said.

There was a silence befitting the moment of Roxanna's passage from child to independent individual and then without another word Captain Wright rose, his age suddenly showing, and left the room.

Mac hugged her, Orville hugged her, Shelby and Lanfranchi hugged her, but Roxanna could not rejoice. She gestured meaninglessly at the others and went to find her father. He was standing in the middle of his room, gazing sightlessly at the middle distance. She went round in front of him and then reached for him.

"I'm not her, dad," she said. "I'm not my mother. I can't be my mother."

"No," he said.

"She would let me do this. She would want me to do this."

"Yes," he said.

"I love you," she said.

"I know. I love you." He took out a pocket-swipe then, and blew his nose.

Slade received a series of reports with satisfaction. First, the Chairman's personal battle-cruiser had arrived from Redux II that morning, which would greatly simplify the difficult logistics Slade foresaw in the near future. Besides, it would help Osmond make the proper impression when he returned as ruler to Theta Tauri Minor .

Second, the eyespies that Slade now deemed necessary had been installed in the Chairman's aquarium. Slade still had no notion of how the Chairman had procured the boy's rescue but on the basis of his recent interview with the Chairman he had decided it would be prudent to increase surveillance.

And third, at last he would have something positive to tell that whining master of his, if ever again he should emerge from his nautch-chaise. Sex, drugs, lock and load, Slade thought with disgust, then fell to reviewing his plans to catch the boy.

Even for a flighter, RCentral was a tough nut to penetrate. The ventilation shafts on the roof were the only obvious weak point and Slade had unobtrusively doubled the guard there, and the detail had strict instructions to let the boy in before moving to take him. Slade didn't want him frightened off too soon. One possible entry point was through the main foyer and Slade had run through scenarios involving disguise and the elevator shafts. Any such seemed highly improbable, but again he had stationed extra men at strategic points. Likewise, the few windows in the outside walls of the huge building had also been covered.

Slade supposed that it might be possible to gain access from another location altogether, the arena or the stadium. To successfully traverse the tunnels between seemed unlikely in the extreme, but again, picked men had been carefully placed at all choke points.

Eventually satisfied that his precautions were as comprehensive as possible, Slade set himself to wait in patience. Of one thing he was absolutely certain, when the pod was cracked, the boy would come. Slade didn't know how, or the exact timing, but at some point between the pod being opened and the next morning when Macgilliguddy would be moved to an impenetrable cell, the boy would come. And he, Slade, who had reconciled himself to the tedium of dealing with Osmond the younger, would be ready.

Chapter Fifteen

For Mac, nothing had changed but everything was different. He and Roxanna talked to each other in just the same way as they had before, saying more or less the same things. They never touched, except by accident – accidents that neither were above engineering from time to time when the need was pressing – but between them there now ran a deep, golden thread which meant they pretty much knew what the other was thinking most of the time. For both of them, who had been so alone for so much of their lives, it was an undreamed of luxury, just to know that their thoughts could be shared and understood without the interference of words.

The detailed plan to rescue James was well advanced. Orville had prepared the edit that would fool the CAW into believing that a blank wall was still a blank wall. Shelby and John had surveyed a route through abandoned tunnels that would take the rescue party to a derelict manhole convenient to RCentral and Orville had also made edits to conceal exit and re-entry and anything in between. And finally Mac and Roxanna had rehearsed everything that could be rehearsed until they were sick of it.

Captain Wright had watched them every minute, saying little, paying particular attention to Roxanna, sometimes making the odd suggestion, but they were all reassured by his presence. They felt that if a man of his experience could find little to criticise then they must be doing well enough and their mood was buoyant when they gathered for a last meal.

"Hasdrubal D. von Osmond," Orville said mischievously at one point. "Please pass the bread."

"So I guess that really is your name," Shelby said.

Mac groaned.

"No, it's not. I refuse."

"You can't," John said. "That's your name."

"Not if I don't want it to be."

"So what does the D. stand for?" Orville demanded. "You have to tell us so we can decide if it goes with the von Osmond."

"I'm not telling," Mac said. "I'm never telling. I've forgotten."

"Father knows," Roxanna said, watching the small smile twitching unwillingly at the Captain's face.

"Don't you dare..." Mac protested. "Sir."

"He does know," Orville said. "Come on, father. Tell us."

The captain opened his mouth to speak and Mac forestalled him.

"Please don't," he said.

"I was only going to say that it's nearly time..." Wright paused. "And I want to add this: what we are setting out to do is dangerous in the extreme. We have no choice in attempting to rescue James. It is a debt we must honour. But understand that the chances of success depend on each of you not making mistakes, particularly Mac and most particularly Roxanna. It is unfortunate, so unfortunate, that we must rely on our youngest and most inexperienced person, but there it is. Rely on you we must," he said, looking hard at his daughter.

"Daphne," Mac said, suddenly. "My middle name is Daphne." Orville and the two men exploded. Roxanna looked at him with the gratitude plain in her eyes. Captain Wright regarded him appraisingly. Once again he was brought to realise that there was far more to Mac than his age would indicate. He nodded in defeat. It had been worth a try. He had been prepared to take Roxanna's place himself and risk detection by the eyespies. It would have meant frightening his daughter into withdrawal and destroying her self-respect, but better that than allowing her to destroy her life. Or so it had seemed. It had been a mistake to try, he now conceded to himself. And finally, at last, he let go.

"I don't believe you," Orville spluttered, when he could speak. "Daphne!"

"It's true," Wright said, cutting his losses. "Grace was cross that Mac wasn't a girl. She felt that if she had to suffer twins, then one of them should be a daughter, and Mac was born second, so he got the name."

"And if anybody ever uses it," Mac said. "They're hamburger."

Roxanna found his hand under the table and squeezed it hard.

They had a long march through the tunnels to reach the start point and the plan was timed to coincide with the evening change of shift at RCentral. The more crowded the lobby, the safer Roxanna would be and the greater the confusion. Shelby and John were carrying blasters, Mac had the plasma cutter, anti-flare goggles, two cockroach decoys, and two side-arms, plus one of James's spare gloves, and Roxanna had Orville's crowd-pleaser tucked into a nondescript bag. Each had a reacom but voice transmission was strictly prohibited. They would signal using a system of pulses. Orville and Captain Wright would stay to co-ordinate and monitor reaction.

Roxanna, walking in the middle of the group, took one last mental inventory. She was confident that she would be able to do her part if nothing unexpected happened, but had some rather nameless fears that if she suddenly had to improvise she might be found wanting. She felt the beginnings of panic and forced herself to slow her breathing. She watched Mac moving along in front of her and thought of all the courage he had found within himself even when the situation had been totally hopeless. She was so proud of him and she desperately wanted for him to be equally as proud of her. He would be, she vowed, and found that her nerves had gone.

They arrived at the manhole and settled down to wait for the off. Mac was calm. He had watched on Orville's system as the medicals had cracked the pod some hours before and James had been revealed, covered in celgel. He came to reasonably quickly, confused, dopey but apparently whole again. He had seemed to gain awareness rapidly – he had, after all been podded many times – and Mac was confident he would be able to fly when the time came. He could feel Roxanna's presence beside him and knew that she too was reasonably relaxed. His heart swelled at the thought of what she was doing for him, for him and for James. And then he began to worry that she would be all right. He suddenly found that the thought of the danger to which he was sending her was deeply disturbing. Captain Wright had been right all the time. She never should have come. What had he been thinking? It was mad to allow it. He was about to start a huge fight by sending her back when his reacom vibrated once, briefly. It was the signal. James was alone. The door had been sealed and the CAW was being doctored. They had to go, now. The others had also received the buzz and Shelby was already sliding the manhole cover to one side. Roxanna was climbing out and then it was too late. Without looking back she was moving quietly and surely towards the loom of RCentral.

Mac followed her out and heard the slight scrape as the cover slid closed behind him. He wished he had kissed her, or wished her luck, or at least touched her one last time, but she had already disappeared into the gloom. He twisted the the thormalium vial on his glove, spread his left hand and began to slip upwards. As always, his heart soared along with his body as he left the ground.

Moments later he was working his way round the monolithic bulk of the building, counting buttresses. At the ninth, he rose to the roof balustrade and careful to keep below the edge, knotted a length of filament to the bracket of one of the eye-spies. It unfurled beneath him and the end would mark the point at which he must begin. He unstrapped the plasma cutter and drifted down. It seemed unlikely that he would be able to hear Roxanna's diversion but Orville would signal when it was time to start.

A young woman stepped out into the light of the plaza that swept up portentously to the entrance of RCentral and became just another anonymous worker hurrying to the start of yet another shift. Roxanna kept her head down and worked her way into the thickest stream of people she could find. She knew there would be guards in the foyer but because of the volume of people passing through, identities were checked at the entrances to individual departments, not that internal security was taken at all seriously on Redux anyway.

Her camouflage group streamed up the steps through the giant pillars and into the echoing vastness of the lobby. Roxanna discreetly slowed to take her bearings. After some debate they had decided that the best place for the crowd-pleaser would be near the elevators in the hope that they might be brought to a halt as well. Roxanna spotted the benches they had marked as suitable and she made her way across, trying now to

look like a weary worker coming off shift and needing to sit down for a minute before heading home. A guard caught her eye and grimaced sympathetically. A little less pathos, Roxanna thought to herself, or she might become memorable. She sat down with a little pantomime of relief and wearily deposited her bag at her feet. Slowly she worked it under the seat and then, hoping that no one was paying any attention, got up and headed for the entrance. As she did so, she pressed the transmit button on her reacom and felt it vibrate in reply. Taking a deep breath she fired the crowd-pleaser.

Mac, straining his ears, received a faint sensation, half heard, half felt, that might have been an explosion. The vibration of his reacom confirmed it and he began to cut. In rehearsal they had tried to work to what they estimated the thickness of the wall would be and had calculated it would take Mac five minutes at least to make a hole large enough for James to get through. But the fused stone used for the construction of the building seemed much tougher than the natural rock on which Mac had been forced to practise, and he began to sweat.

"Come on, come on," he prayed. The difficulty was increased by the fact that he could use only one hand to control the cutter. He thought he had become quite proficient but his mounting anxiety made him less accurate, dissipating some of the plasma's energy. Part of his mind wondered whether James was aware yet of what was happening. He hoped so. He hoped that if he ever finally did get through the wall, there would be no confusion.

Orville had checked that his insert loop had been accepted by the CAW, so that Mac would remain invisible to the cams, and then he had switched the view to the giant foyer. He and Captain Wright strained to pick up Roxanna, but failed to spot her in the crowds. It was more reassuring than not, Wright thought. Orville's reacom buzzed and he looked to his father. Wright nodded and watched Orville send the signal. Instantly, what appeared to be a monumental explosion rocked the concourse. Since the experiment in the mess hall, Orville had successfully beefed up the crowd-pleaser by several orders of magnitude.

Orville grinned with satisfaction and Wright ruffled his hair in congratulation.

The strident shrilling of the alarms petrified Osmond, shocked Slade, and greatly interested the Chairman. Slade rushed to the central control room and demanded information. It was slow in coming. RCentral had not had to deal with a genuine crisis for some hundreds of years and the emergency drills had in that time become more and more perfunctory. With the first of the alarms the control room had degenerated into instant chaos, which by the time Slade had arrived, was approaching bedlam. He raged spectacularly for thirty seconds and people suddenly discovered that they had a vested interest, a surpassing interest, in coming to order.

Slade left the main display focused on the concourse where people in a high degree of panic were rushing hither and yon, and scrambling frantically for the exits. Nobody had yet noticed that strangely for such a violent explosion there appeared to be few if any casualties. Other displays Slade ordered to be directed at the roof, the outside of the building and the ward where Macgilliguddy was still held prisoner. Everything appeared normal. Slade demanded all sentries report in but no one offered anything at all out of the ordinary.

The chaos in the foyer appeared to be abating when there was a second, huge explosion which seemed to come from near the elevators. There was a blinding flash of light to go with it but no shattered bodies, no wreckage, no debris, no dust.

The obvious struck Slade between the eyes like a hammer. It was a diversion. Shouting orders he rushed for Macgilliguddy's ward, a squad of armoured troopers thundering behind him. Rounding the first corner in the corridor he ran full tilt into Osmond and both of them went down as did most of the troopers following behind. Slade struggled to regain his feet but Osmond had him round an ankle and, hugging it tight for dear life, refused to let go.

"You have to save me," he wailed. "It's your duty. It's your duty."

Mac had three sides of the hole done and was working on the fourth. He knew he was behind schedule but had no idea by how much. He sensed intimations of a third explosion and willed the flame of the cutter to move faster. At last it was done. He ripped away the goggles and with one leg pushed frantically at the block of stone he had cut, scrabbling for purchase while all the while remembering to fly. The stone wouldn't move. It was too big, too heavy. They had blundered in the planning. He was going to fail. The rescue was going to fail. Then, miraculously, he felt the plug begin to shift. Somebody was levering at it from the other side.

Cursing the still shrilling alarms, Slade raced down the corridor to the medicals' station. It was deserted, an abandoned ship. Without stopping, he ran on to the door of the prison ward and found it locked solid. A trooper rushed up behind him and raised his blaster.

"No, you fool," Slade roared. "The ricochet will kill us." More men caught up.

"You," Slade snarled spotting a sergeant. "Get control to open this door. If they can't do it, get a plasma cutter, anything, but get it open. One squad," he added. "Stay with him. The rest come with me." And breathing heavily from the already long run, he raced for the roof.

Roxanna had rushed about the concourse with everyone else, careful not to fall and be trampled. When the panic showed signs of easing, she had fired the device again, and

then a third time, after which she had been caught up in a rush for one of the exits. Outside, she lost herself in crowd which had stopped and turned to watch. She felt duty-bound to give them something to see, and again. It was rather fun, she thought, astonished at how much trouble she had managed to cause.

Finally James was staring at him through the hole. Without a word, Mac thrust glove, decoy and side-arm at him. He could hear pounding coming from the door.

"Hurry," he said. James pulled on the glove, twisted the vial and began to squeeze his way through the hole. Mac began to hear shouting coming from the roof.

"Hurry," he said again, and then James was through and they were slipping rapidly away into the night.

Light suddenly blazed behind them but it was too late. Mac triumphantly pressed his transmit button three times, three times for success.

The weakness of the whole scheme, Wright and Orville realised, was that because of the loops they had fed into the CAW they had no idea of how Mac might actually be progressing. Was he progressing at all? Had he got James out? Had he been caught? Time ticked by, punctuated by Roxanna's shattering explosions. The two men looked at each other, father and son, and both had the same thought. Too long, it was taking too long.

Then the reacom buzzed and they were both listening for it so intently that they jumped. Again it buzzed, and a third time.

"We've done it," Orville said. "We've done it."

"Not yet," his father said. "Not till Roxanna's safe. Bring her home."

Mac and James slipped down the manhole and there were brief handshakes with Shelby and John. They waited tensely. Nobody spoke. Finally Mac couldn't stand it any more, checked his blaster and went back up to the street. His tension was extreme and he realised that what he was feeling was a totally different sort of terror to any he had known before. If something had happened to Roxanna he would never be able to live with it. He began to move from shadow to shadow towards the corner. Suddenly, he stopped. There was movement. One person. It was Roxanna, walking unhurriedly. His heart sang and the blood pounded. The relief was the most exquisite feeling he had ever known.

Slade stood at the balustrade looking out beyond the glare. He had recovered his equanimity and was quite calm. The boy had done well, again. But not well enough, as he would discover. A junior officer approached him hesitantly.

"Sir," he said. "His excellency requires your presence. He said to say that he... demands you come immediately, whatever the circumstances. His safety must be paramount."

Slade sighed and a moment later turned towards the elevator.

Dostoi admitted him with an expression of pathetic gratitude. Osmond, with the constant shrilling of the alarms and with the repeated explosions and the chaos on the concourse looming larger than life on his giant display, had managed to ratchet up his panic to the point where again he was literally incoherent.

Slade regarded him with contempt.

"The emergency," he said baldly, "such as it was, is over. Macgilliguddy has successfully escaped and you are quite safe." It took some moments for the import of his words to penetrate.

"Escaped?" Osmond shrieked on a rising note. "Escaped!"

"The boy rescued him. It was well done. Ingenious really. It never occurred to me that they might cut in from the outside."

"You say they escaped?" Osmond said wonderingly. "You let them escape? You've ruined me. And yourself!"

"Not in the least," Slade said. The absence of an honorific of any sort was pointed. "I know where they are. We shall collect all of them in due course."

"Where are they?" Osmond demanded.

"In the tunnels," Slade said calmly.

"The tunnels!" Slade winced. Osmond was beginning to shriek again.

"This rock," Osmond continued. "This lousy rock is honey-combed with tunnels. We could search till doomsday and never find them."

Slade went to Osmond's display and brought up a new display. It was a huge three-dimensional grid packed with what looked like twisted worm trails in different colours. Deep in the tangled mass a small light was blinking.

"They are there," Slade said simply. Osmond looked at him disbelievingly.

"I had a trace planted in Macgilliguddy when he was unconscious," Slade said. He looked more closely. "You will note," he added. "That there is no lifesign showing in that area, but there do seem to be a number of rats, or are they cockroaches? These people really are clever."

Their jubilation was intense. Finally, at last, they were all together, and safe. Or so they believed. They stood in a tight group around Orville, touching, clasping hands, hugging each other, talking, laughing, interrupting, eating, drinking. They were all

ravenous from the adrenalin overload. They were all overjoyed to have James back. They all had so much to say. They were all so happy.

It was Orville's moment. It had been his plan, and he had made it work. The innocent pleasure he took in having been able to contribute so significantly to the group despite being a cripple touched them all and their praise was unstinted. At one point, Mac knelt down to bring his eyes to the same level.

"It was brilliant," he said. "Thank you. I can never repay you."

"Yes, you can," Orville said. "Get us out of here, Daphne."

James heard and grinned. "So everyone knows everything now, do they?"

"But it doesn't change anything," Mac said, looking directly at the man he still thought of as his father.

"I never thought it would," James said.

At another point, James noticed that Mac and Roxanna's heads were so close together they should have been touching. He caught Winston's eye. Wright gave a small shrug and James smiled back. Oh well, he thought. Carpe diem, whatever it was that the phrase, old as time, actually meant. There was no telling if any of them would get out of this alive. He knew the escape plan that Orville and the rest were discussing animatedly had small chance of success, but then, he supposed, the rescue they had just pulled off had been equally unlikely.

James drifted away to the table and sat down. One always emerged from a pod physically down. The longer the stay, the more one's muscles unavoidably atrophied, but James felt not only weak but ill. Concentrated thormalium had an insidious and accelerating effect on the body and James accepted that he had little time left. He looked at the glove he was still wearing on his left hand and imagined he could feel the thormalium charge slowly sucking the life from his body. It was an unpleasant thought but he left the glove in place. Galconia was bound to attempt his recapture. His escape had been too blatant altogether and could not be overlooked.

Wright came to join him.

"You know that this time they won't stop till they find us?" James said.

Wright nodded. "But let them have their party. Not often we have something to celebrate."

"Don't think me ungrateful," James said wryly. "I wasn't looking forward to the morning."

"Did we find out any more?"

James shook his head. "The medicals said nothing. Just the usual stuff. Take it easy. Don't rush it... But they were going to kill Mac in the arena. No doubt. So that must mean the Chairman is in trouble himself. I'm betting that Osmond has taken over but can't get rid of his father without getting rid of Mac first."

Wright rubbed his eyes tiredly.

"I came to the same conclusion," he said. "It's all closing in, James. It's getting very tight."

"We have to get out of here."

"I know. Rats in a trap," Wright said. "We're ready to go but they'll be hoping we will. It will be swarming with troopers up there and they'll have triple watch on all the eyespies. Not to mention a double guard on everything at the spaceport. I think we have to lie low, let some of the heat burn off."

"You say we're ready to go. Suits? We have to go outside the lucent."

"We have them," Wright said and indicated an a-g pallet tucked away in a corner

"How?"

"The usual. Orville requisitioned them through the CAW and has been shifting them around every couple of days. Usual Galiconia bureaucratic mess... people just glad to get rid of them rather than try to sort it out. They ended up at one of the mine depots a couple of days ago and Shelby and John disappeared them that night."

"We should break them out," James said. "Try them on. Get people used to them."

"I know," Wright said. "But we've been a touch busy."

James smiled.

"Have I said thank you?" he asked.

"Yes," Wright said. "You have." And the two men clasped hands.

Chapter Sixteen

Slade's voice was crisp and incisive as he addressed his assembled staff officers. He was enjoying himself; a bit of decent soldiering for a change, beat the Hyades out of politics and poncing around after an odious young man who had absolutely nothing to recommend him except that for the moment, for the moment, he was master of all he surveyed.

After Osmond's exhibition the night before, Slade had seriously considered assassination and had only abandoned the idea, regretfully, because he could find no logical continuation that did not end with himself sentenced and also executed. It was such a shame that he and the Chairman had failed to come to an arrangement.

He was interrupted in his outline of Operation Void by the arrival of the sector supervisor from the mine. A junior lieutenant – Pringle? yes, Pringle – ushered him into the briefing room and up on to the stage.

"Sir," Pringle said, nervous before the assembled eyes. "Supervisor Kuo." He saluted and backed away, managing to stumble at the steps. Slade fixed him with a penetrating stare and the poor young man blushed at the thought of what his next fitness report might say.

"Good of you to come," Slade said to Kuo as though the man had had any choice in the matter. "We need to pick your brains."

Slade brought up the 3-D diagram he had shown Osmond the night before. The trace implanted deep in Macgilliguddy's buttock was still flashing. Slade pointed to the tangle of surrounding tunnels.

"You know this area?" he asked Kuo. The man stepped forward and examined the display.

"I know these, sir," he said at last, indicating tunnels in red and green. "But these other ones," and he pointed to the blue tunnels where the trace and the cockroach lifesign were centred. "These tunnels, they don't exist, sir. Never seen them. They're not there."

Slade regarded him with a raised eyebrow. There was mutter amongst the assembled officers.

"Not there?"

"No sir."

"They must be there," Slade said, allowing some of his mystification to show. "They're on the grid. They must be there."

"No sir. I'm sorry sir."

"How long have you been working on Redux?" Slade asked after a moment.

"Eight years, sir. Eight year and seven months. They're not there, sir. Leastways, if they are I've never seem them and nor have my men, sir."

Slade made a sudden decision. "Show me," he said and detailing the three least incompetent of his officers to accompany him, he ushered Kuo from the room.

"See, sir? See what I'm saying?" Kuo gestured. Ahead of them their lights picked out the smooth, unbroken walls of one of the main access tunnels as it stretched before them until it disappeared round the next corner. Slade checked the display on his reacom. According to the grid, there should be two tunnels branching off, one to the left and one to the right, but Kuo was right. There was nothing, just solid rock.

Slade strove to gather his thoughts. Truth to tell he felt uncomfortable this deep underground, claustrophobic, the earth pressing in, weighing heavily. He was not accustomed to being found wanting in any regard, and this weakness irritated him intensely.

"They must be there," he snapped. Kuo shrugged. Crazy general could say what he liked but it didn't change the fact that the tunnels on his grid didn't exist.

Slade marched down the main tunnel, counting his paces, followed by his retinue. He stopped and faced right. Solid rock. Nothing but solid rock. Or was there the faintest shimmer? A familiar shimmer. The sort of shimmer you sometimes got with a... All at once, Slade understood. He stepped to the wall and reached out to touch it. His subordinates gasped. Slade's hook disappeared, and then the rest of his arm, and then the man himself as he stepped forward and vanished. He reappeared a moment later and chuckled with satisfaction.

"These people really are very clever," he said and motioned to his men, who followed him back down the tunnel at the double.

After he had set matters in train and was sure that his orders were being followed precisely, Slade took the time to visit Osmond. He was shown into the meadow where he found the august, would-be ruler of the Hyades submerged in his sunken pearl tub, only his nose above water. It was a particularly unlovely sight. Dostoi, hovering with an armful of what looked like silk, held a finger to his lips. Slade regarded him with disbelief, stepped forward, picked up a large, wet sponge, took careful aim and dropped it. The sponge landed on a small, pinky thing floating on the surface and caused a satisfying eruption as Osmond jack-knifed in shock and sent a tidal wave worth about half a year of Dostoi's salary slopping over the edge. Dostoi winced and edged further away, lest Osmond think he might have had anything to do with it.

"You sent for me," Slade said, adding as a pointed after-thought: "Sir."

Osmond spluttered.

"How dare you?" he said. He had become acutely aware of the fact over recent times that Slade was now a problem. How to deal with him was, however, another matter. As long as his father, the Chairman, nominally retained his authority Osmond had no option but to tolerate this jumped-up corporal whom in a misplaced moment of generosity he had been sufficiently misguided to make a general. Dostoi's fault, wasn't it. Yes, come to think of it Dostoi had been very insistent the appointment be made. Something else to think about. But once the present matter was resolved, then things would change, oh yes, and Mr high-and-mighty too-good-for-his-master General Pompous Slade would learn just how dispensable he was.

And Osmond, lost in a most satisfying daydream, realised too late that Slade, regarding him sardonically, was only too well aware of what he was thinking.

"Well," Osmond demanded.

"We move tonight."

"And?"

"We capture them."

"You are certain?"

"All exits will be blocked. Escape will be impossible."

"I want the boy alive. And the man, Macgilliguddy."

"I will give orders. I will not give guarantees."

"I want them alive. I have something special in mind for them."

"I will give orders," Slade repeated.

"They humiliated me. In front of my father. They must pay. In front of my father."

Slade decided he had had enough.

"Would sir care to take personal control of this operation?" he asked in a dangerous voice and paused. "If not, perhaps sir would be good enough to cease making unreasonable demands." Slade stared hard at Osmond until the pimply young man still standing naked in his bath, dropped his gaze, and the general stalked out.

"How dare he?" Osmond mumbled again, and then more strongly, as Dostoi handed him the silken towel: "How dare he? The man's dangerous," he added. "Is he not dangerous?" Dostoi remained silent. He could predict what was coming.

"How you could recommend him for high office is beyond me. He assaulted me, Dostoi, he assaulted me. You saw it..." An idea occurred to Osmond, an idea that would put Slade back in his place.

"The man is dangerous, dangerous to my person. I can no longer have him in my presence carrying weapons. Issue the order."

"Just the general, sir?" Dostoi was forced to ask.

"Just the general," Osmond said, delighted with the indirect insult he had concocted.

"But sir, that will..."

"See to it, Dostoi. And one other thing, I should be armed. Definitely. In these troubled times, I should be armed. Make sure they put out a blaster with my clothes. Until further notice."

Mac had ceded the bed-ledge to James and slept on a mat in the mess. He was woken by the others arriving for breakfast, a late breakfast. When people had more or less finished, Captain Wright gathered their attention.

"Time to get serious," he said. "We expect," and he nodded to James. "We expect Galconia to make strenuous efforts this time to capture us. They have been baulked twice, and we all know Mac's significance in the scheme of things. So. The holocs may hold, but then again they probably won't, which means we may finally have to trust to the safe route..." Mac looked quizzical.

"Ah," Wright said. "For Mac's benefit... Pretty soon after they arrived, Shelby and John cut us a tunnel that nobody knows about. It bypasses all the other tunnels, both unused and active, and comes out at the base of Hill 60. It is on no map, no grid. It is quite secret."

"But where does it start," Mac asked.

"Right here," Wright said. "Under the table." Mac bent down to look and saw an innocuous grating.

"Now," Wright went on. "If we have to run for it, we're going to have to go all the way. We won't be able to stop until we've hyperated at least once.

"First job, this morning then... We need to try on these suits and we need to get them down the safe route and have them waiting at the end, ready to go. And the a-g belts."

"But what about Orville?" Mac said. "Will his floater fit through the safe route?"

"No," Wright said. "That has always been the flaw. It was only ever supposed to be for a last-ditch emergency. And this might be it."

"It's all right," Orville said. "I'll stay here. I'll make a last stand. Don't you worry about me. I'll fight to the end." Orville assumed a grim, determined expression and Mac looked at him open-mouthed.

"Idiot," his father said. "And you Mac for falling for it."

"What...?" Mac started to say.

"The a-g belt, of course," Roxanna said. "We were going to have to carry him, but now we can just tow him."

They set to, then, to try out the suits. It was frustrating and everybody was not a little snappy by the finish, but eventually Wright had them all suited up, properly adjusted, and was confident that they understood their operation. It was a hot and sweaty business in the warmth of the mess and they were all relieved when it was over so that Shelby and John could load the suits on to a pair of pack frames.

"Are you sure about this, Winston?" James asked. "Are you sure we wouldn't be better to keep the suits with us?"

Wright shrugged.

"If we have to run for it, the safe route is the only way out," he said. "And if we have to run for it, we'll have to move as fast as we can..."

James nodded, but reluctantly.

"And," Wright added. "If things go really bad, Hill 60 is as good a hiding place as any. You or Mac might be able to get there another way."

"No," James said, and found himself being echoed by the boy he would never be able to think of as anyone but his son.

"All or none," Mac said. "Besides, neither of us can fly a space ship."

"But you might be able to stow away," Wright said. "Show them where the tunnel mouth is, Orville. Just in case." And he pointed to the console. Shelby and Lanfranchi moved the table to one side, lifted the grating, passed down the packs and disappeared.

Slade was in a quandary. Two things had become clear to him during his last meeting with Osmond. First, whatever tolerance he might have had for the loathsome young man was all but exhausted. Second, Osmond intended to dispense with his services at the first reasonable opportunity, dispense with extreme prejudice as the ancient phrase had it.

Slade resolved to make a second call. It was a faint hope but nothing yet was irrevocable. Surely practical men, pragmatic men, should be able to negotiate their way to a mutual understanding of mutual advantage.

He stopped outside the Chairman's aquarium, knocked and entered without waiting. The guard, as he had specified since the rescue in the arena, was inside the room not out in the corridor. Slade still had no notion of how the Chairman could have managed to summon help but was taking no further chances. He glanced at the sentry as he came in: Tranter, a good man, rather more switched on than most of them. Was there something a little harried in his expression? Slade turned to inspect him properly but could find nothing to confirm his vague first impression. The trooper was standing rigidly at the present, his face now properly blank, if it had ever been anything else.

The Chairman was seated at a table. Another chair was pulled out almost as though he had been conversing with the trooper, which, of course, was quite impossible. Slade dismissed the thought. It could only be coincidence. He made a gesture that might have been a salute and might not. The Chairman raised an eyebrow.

"I thought you might like to know," Slade said. "That despite last night's heroics, we will have your son, your illegitimate son, in custody quite soon."

"How efficient of you," the Chairman said. "I am impressed. Is Osmond?" The tinge of irony in the Chairman's voice was exquisitely judged. It really was too bad, Slade thought. The Chairman was a man you could respect, one you could work for.

"I trust his excellency has no fault to find," Slade said.

"Which excellency?" the Chairman countered. "And a large assumption in either case?" Slade stood there regarding the man, pensively. If the Macgilliguddy boy was really the Chairman's son then he must take after his mother, he reflected. There was nothing of the Chairman's overbred, aquiline features to be found in the boy's cheerful, open face.

Slade sighed.

"What should I offer you?" the Chairman said, at last, quite aware of the real purpose for this visit. "What can I offer you that you would accept?"

"A guarantee of my life would be a good start."

"The one you rejected last time we spoke like this?"

"You understand that your life is forfeit when I capture the boy?" Slade said.

"And I see you understand that your life is forfeit, if you do not," the Chairman responded dryly.

And there it was. Impasse. Still impasse. On the face of it, the Chairman was just an obdurate old man refusing to compromise out of misguided notions of loyalty and honour, but in actuality Slade simply could not afford to trust him. The Chairman read his thoughts.

"One should always choose one's employer with great care, I hear," he said. "I have never had an employer so I couldn't really say, but perhaps you could apply to my second son. He might find he has a use for you and I dare say you would prefer his style to Osmond's."

"I dare say I would," Slade said. "But given all that's happened, he might not appreciate mine."

"Quite," the Chairman said.

Slade left then, no better off, but no worse off either. And, as a careful commander, he had at least confirmed there was no possible alternative course of action.

When the door had closed, the Chairman made a sign with his fingers and Tranter resumed his chair. They both turned their backs to the eyespy and were soon deep in silent conversation. Time spent learning, the Chairman felt, was never wasted.

James was resting on his bed-ledge, trying to gather what strength remained him for the coming trials. Mac approached noiselessly and stood looking down at him. The man he thought of as his father was drawn, wasted, white, far more than he should have been, even after weeks in a pod.

"I'm not asleep," James said. "Sit." Mac slid to the floor and sat with his back to the wall of the tunnel. Their heads were close together.

"How are you feeling?" Mac asked.

"Should I tell you the truth?"

Mac said nothing and then: "There's been a bit much truth lately."

"I'm dying, Mac."

Again Mac said nothing but the tears became to seep from his eyes and run silently down his face.

James spoke again, but not to Mac.

"Anna," he said. "You come too." And Roxanna appeared.

"I didn't mean to listen," she said. "I was coming and it just seemed a bad time to interrupt." She sat down beside Mac, making sure their shoulders were touching.

"When?" Mac said, working hard to keep his voice normal. He failed.

"Soon," James said. "It's the thormalium... The time comes when if you put on the glove just one more time, then your time will come very quickly. Very quickly. I put the glove on, one more time."

"To save me..." The tears were now plain in his voice.

"Yes. What better reason? But I was dying anyway. It's just been accelerated."

There was a long silence.

"I thought we could only call you Roxanna," Mac said at last, for something to say.

"Except Uncle James," she said. "I love him too, Mac."

"You two make me happy," James said. "You're very young, too young, but these are strange times. We may not have long. You make me happy..."

"I don't know what to call you," Mac suddenly burst out. "I don't know who I am. I don't even know what to call myself, what my name should be any more."

"Call me what feels right," James said.

"But I don't know what feels right," Mac said desperately. "I'm... lost."

"No you're not," Roxanna said. "You're found."

Mac felt the pressure of his emotions building, building inexorably. Grief, love, loss. James dead. Then alive. Now dying again. So much had happened. So much pain. So much fear. So much. So much. Finally, it was all too much. The fury at fate, careless fate, came welling up and he could no longer control it, no longer even wanted to.

"I am not found!" he howled. "I'm lost! I'm lost! I don't even have a name..."

He stormed to his feet and raged off down the tunnel.

Roxanna scrambled to go after him but James put a hand on her shoulder. She resisted but he held her until she relaxed.

"We can't help," he said. "Not yet. He will need you. You're about the only thing he's sure of, but even that's very new and he's frightened that if he leans on you too soon, he'll lose you too."

"It's no fun being grown-up, Anna, and it's happening to you both far too quickly."

"What can I do?" Roxanna said, and then in a very small voice. "I love him... Since he came, when I brought him in... He was so brave..."

"And he loves you," James said. "He does. He just doesn't know it yet. And if you want to keep him, you're going to have to let him find out for himself. And, my dearest Anna, you are well-matched. You are so brave yourself."

Mac blundered wildly on through the tunnels until he found a small cavity someone had thought it worth while to make hundreds of years before. He curled up inside and screamed and then he began to sob in earnest. Everything that had happened to him since the morning of the flight tests, every lousy, miserable thing came bubbling up and burst out in paroxysms of weeping that shook and tore at him. He had felt purged after talking for all those hours to Roxanna, but that had been civilised, and the raw, pounding emotions were all still there, deep down, demanding release and finally erupting. The red-hot larva of anger, pain, grief roiled up from deep in his gut, flooded his mind and over-flowed to sear his soul. It was terrible. Terrible to hear. Roxanna searched until she heard him in his hiding place and then waited, weeping quietly herself as the spasms gripped him.

At last, they began to subside. And finally there was silence. Roxanna waited for what seemed like hours and then timidly went forward. Mac didn't move as her light approached. She made to speak and then stopped herself. He was fast asleep.

She didn't know what to do.

If he thought she had heard, he would be shamed and angry because of it.

If he thought that nobody cared, it would be even worse for him.

In the end she did what she wanted to do, needed to do, and fitted herself into the curl of his back. It felt like coming home.

He woke slowly, aware of how hard the rock floor had become and of a pleasant, puzzling warmth behind him. Roxanna felt him stir and sat up.

"You heard?" Mac asked. His voice was remote.

"Yes," she said. There was silence as Mac digested the import. He sat up.

"A couple of months ago, three? I was just a kid..."

"I never was," Roxanna said. "Not really. Not here."

"At least you know what to call yourself. Even 'Mac' doesn't belong to me any more."

"Yes it does," Roxanna said. "It's a nickname. People earn their nicknames and you've earned Mac."

"I'm sorry," Mac said. "Sorry you heard."

"Are you angry?"

"I... I don't know."

"You shouldn't be," Roxanna said.

"I'm... just empty."

"Can I tell you what I think?"

"What?" Mac said. His voice was still dull, still remote.

"You would have gone mad. All that's happened to you... You would have gone mad without... this."

"Why did you stay?"

"I didn't... want you to be alone. In case you needed something."

"You're not my mother," Mac said. "You're not my anything." He got up.

"We should go back," he said. "Coming?"

"In a minute," Roxanna managed to reply without her voice giving her away. Mac shrugged and walked off. It was the cruellest thing he had ever done in his life, and while he knew clearly enough what he was doing, he had no idea why.

Chapter Seventeen

Orville's alarms sounded precisely at 0100. He had been dozing in his floater in front of the console and came instantly alert. Lifesign was flooding into the tunnels and it could mean only one thing. He pressed a switch to alert the others where they slept, or were trying to, and in moments they were gathered about. Nobody noticed that Mac and Roxanna just happened to be standing on opposite sides of the group.

Shelby whistled as the scale of the attack became apparent.

"There must be thousands of them," he said. "They must have the whole garrison out."

"Looks like it," Captain Wright said. "Most of them anyway. It's what we hoped, James."

"If they can actually find us," James said. They watched in silence for some minutes as the army deployed. Captain Wright waited till he was sure and then spoke.

"There's your answer," he said. Troops were massing at every blue entrance into a red or green tunnel. "They've worked it out." James nodded.

"And they think they have us trapped," he said.

"All right," the captain said. "This is what we have to do. To have any real chance of escape we have to tie down as many of these men as we can. We have to suck as many as possible deep into the tunnels so that when we get to the surface, we have as clear a run as possible. We know what will happen if we're caught. There will be no mercy. We can show none here. We have to fight as though this were our last stand. We have to convince them to commit all their reserves, to pull in their patrols and send them down, too. We need to engage every man we can. It's not going to be pretty. It's going to be damn ugly but make up your minds now. We either do it or we die. Badly."

There was a murmur of assent.

"Orville," the captain said. "You know what you have to do."

"Don't worry," Orville said. "If I can't walk, I can still fight and this is my plan. The rest of you should worry about yourselves." Captain Wright clapped his son on the shoulder.

"Hand out the weapons," he said to Shelby.

Slade considered the grid with satisfaction. Every unit was up to strength. Every unit was properly armed, fed and rested. Every unit was in position. It was, he thought, a fine example of excellent staff work, not that Osmond, who insisted on standing beside him, would have any idea of the organisational skills involved. The Chairman would, however. The Chairman whom Osmond, with the specific intention of some serious gloating, had also insisted be present in Slade's command centre.

"You wish to give the word, sir?" Slade inquired, stiffly. The matter of his side-arm, eventually surrendered to the sentry at the door, rankled deeply and remained unresolved. It was yet another strong indication of the break-down between them. There would have to be words said, hard words, harsh words, words to which Slade was looking forward, but unfortunately now was not the time. Osmond looked at him warily and nodded.

"You see, father," he said. "You're not the only one who knows how to run a battle."

The Chairman smiled gently.

"A battle?" he said. "How many thousand men did you say you were deploying? To catch how many?"

"Proceed," Osmond said angrily.

Slade surveyed the grid on the main display one last time, and then the subsidiary displays which gave views from various helmet cams. He switched on his throat mike.

"This is Redux Actual. Proceed," he said.

Each subsidiary display showed the same thing: the approach of a rock wall and then, an instant later as though by magic, a tunnel. The cams moved forward and one or two turned back to show views of troops following. Then, with violent suddenness, there was a roar and each display flared white before going blank.

Slade was shocked to his core. His staff officers looked to him in horror.

"What's happening?" Osmond said into the silence. "Have we won?" Nobody spoke and then secondary headcams began to cut in and there were scenes of carnage, with troopers dead, dying and wounded littering the tunnels. The noise, the screaming, the shouting, the cursing, was appalling and Slade instinctively reached to turn down the volume.

"Well," the Chairman said conversationally. "I would say round one to my son, my other son, wouldn't you? Perhaps it will be a battle after all."

"RCPs," Slade shouted suddenly into his mike. "Get the men out. Get them out." He was too late. Orville had waited for back-up troops to force their way in to the tunnels and then he hit them too.

"What's an RCP," Osmond demanded. "What's happening? Somebody tell me what an RCP is?"

"A remote combat position," his father supplied dryly. "It means they can kill us, but we can't kill them."

"Kill us?" Osmond said, his voice rising. "They're killing my men..."

"My men," the Chairman said. "*You* are killing *my* men."

James and Captain Wright looked at each other grimly. Roxanna's eyes were huge and staring. Mac watched indifferently.

"It will take them time to bring up the robots," James said.

"I don't think so," Wright replied. "Look," and he indicated one of the displays. "They're much better organised than they used to be."

A round object was gliding towards the cam mounted at one of the RCPs. Orville toggled a switch and a burst of plasma fire engulfed the robot. It emerged unscathed. Orville fired again, but nothing he had would stop its progress. It moved smoothly on till it was filling the cam lens and then the display vanished.

"What happened?" Mac asked, despite himself.

"It exploded," James said. "And took out Orville's post." They watched as one by one the same thing happened to each display, until one by one Orville switched to a different cam. On the main grid myriad lifesign began to inch down the blue tunnels towards them.

"Plan B," Orville said. Mac wondered what that might be. Something interesting, no doubt. His eye accidentally caught Roxanna's and a sudden shaft of guilt speared him. He turned hurriedly back to the displays.

"Let one battlegroup through," Captain Wright said to Orville. "We need to speed this up. I don't want to get caught outside with daylight coming." Orville nodded.

Dimly on the displays they could now pick up formations of troops feeling their way down the tunnels, each group preceded by another robot.

"What will happen now?" Mac asked. Whether he wanted to be or not, he found himself being drawn into the battle, which after all was mostly about him.

"Watch," Wright said and then to Shelby and Lanfranchi: "Time for you to go. Set up a perimeter."

The two men nodded and dropped down into the tunnel under the mess-room floor.

"Anna, should go too," James said. Wright looked at him questioningly.

"Safer there than here," James added.

"But I want to stay here," Roxanna said, looking at Mac. Her look pierced him. Whatever his excuse, he had been despicable to her. And, he realised now, it was the last thing he would want. He had just needed to hurt something, anything, and she had been in the line of fire

"Go," Wright said. "Now." His tone brooked no argument. She picked up her fatpac and then looked back at Mac, her face agonised. He suddenly ran to help her down into the hole.

"I'm sorry," he whispered. "I'm so sorry." And he kissed her quickly on the lips while he had the chance. Who knew if he ever would again? He stood there, watching her back disappear, hoping it had been enough till they could sort things out properly.

The others had tactfully ignored him, and Mac rejoined them at the console.

Captain Wright pointed at the troopers in the tunnel leading least directly to their refuge.

"How long will it take them, do we think?"

"Forty minutes," James said. "At the rate they're going, at least 40."

"Thirty minutes for our people to get out," Wright calculated. "Ten to set up. Orville, stop all the others but that lot."

"Yes sir," Orville said. "With pleasure."

Slade, the Chairman and Osmond, and all the rest of the officers crowded into the command post had relaxed a trifle. Things now seemed to be going more according to plan. Then amazement gripped the group.

The robots leading all but one of the troop detachments apparently developed minds of their own. They rose as one to the roofs of the various tunnels, hovered a moment tantalisingly, and then exploded in unison, in each case bringing down tons and tons of rock and effectively sealing each passage for the duration.

Slade swore. The Chairman suppressed a laugh of surprised pleasure. Osmond shrieked with fury and rounded on the general to berate him.

"Shut up," Slade snapped. "Let me think." Why hadn't they sealed all the tunnels? Why had one been left open? Accident? Had one of the robots failed to fire? Or were they planning to use that one tunnel for escape, to fight their way out? Impossible. Surely impossible? Though Slade had conceived a healthy respect for the capabilities of his quarry, surely that must be beyond them. And if they did get out where could they go? What could they do? But if that wasn't the plan, what was? Was there a plan at all?

Slade stood there, his hands cupping his eyes, the whole room, even the Chairman, waiting on his pleasure.

There was no way out. The one robot had simply failed to explode. That was all. When the troops reached them, they would have to surrender, or die. Either way, no matter.

"Tell them to carry on," Slade ordered but as a belated second thought added: "Withdraw from the other tunnels and reinforce that one. All units..." Slade was a pragmatist. He had been outflanked twice already. Perhaps they were planning to fight their way out. Perhaps they had more surprises. If they did, this time he would be ready.

"And I want them alive," Osmond said. "Tell them I want them alive!"

The room turned to the displays again, particularly the main, where white dots were cautiously proceeding along the blue tube leading to the centre of the matrix, with the rest of the force beginning to concentrate behind. Slade noted that Macgilliguddy was still there at the centre, that was the important thing. As long as the trace was flashing it meant there was no possibility of escape. Slade was more a politician than a fighting soldier. Fieldwork had long been confined to putting out wildfire rebellions. He thus

found himself in an unaccustomed position and was more worried by the turn of events than he cared to admit, even to himself. Had he been less concerned he might have remembered to pay more attention to the cockroaches he had noted earlier.

"Time to go," Wright said. "And I want the room to blow before they actually get here. I don't want them to find the safe route. Let them think we immolated ourselves in one last glorious act of defiance. By the time they realise there are no bodies, we should be long gone."

Orville carefully gauged the distance the advance party still had to travel and his hand flashed over the palmboard.

"It will go up as they walk in the door," he said. He adjusted the cartridge on his a-g belt and pushed himself clear of his floater.

"James in front," the captain said. "Mac, you bring Orville, and I'll come behind." He slipped on his fatpac and took one last, lingering look at what had been his home for so long.

"Let's go," he said.

For some reason Slade found he was holding his breath. He shook his head in annoyance just as the head-cam on his point man recorded a huge explosion just in front. The roof fell in with a roar and dust came billowing back, whiting out the view.

Suicide? They had committed suicide?

Osmond swore and then was standing there, in front of him, pointing a shaking finger in his face.

"Alive!" he stormed. "I told you alive! You..." and his glance fell on the hapless Pringle. "You! Escort the general to his quarters. I'll deal with him later."

Slade barely heard. Something here was not right. There was no possible escape but suicide, glorious or otherwise, didn't ring true. Surely the boy, surely Macgilliguddy would never do that to themselves? Even facing Osmond and his screamer, they would never do that. They were too strong, far too strong.

The man Pringle touched his arm in supplication and Slade turned to the door, still so deep in thought he might have been in a trance. He caught the Chairman's eye and absently noted a certain, unwilling sympathy. Pringle dared to put his hand to Slade's elbow and they moved outside. The door hissed closed behind him with an air of finality. Career gone, dead, buried, finished. Himself to follow in short order, no doubt.

Suddenly Slade stopped short, causing Pringle to stumble. The general groped in his pocket for his personal reacom and feverishly brought up the grid of the mine. An expression of delight spread over his face. A tiny pinprick was flashing in the middle of nowhere, nowhere, a pinprick that had no right to exist at all. Damn, these people were good. But he, General Marcus Alexi Slade, was better.

Leaving Pringle gaping and desperately wondering if he should shoot his commanding officer and then, when it was too late, how he could explain his total failure to obey a direct order from the Chairman's son, Slade set off at the dead run. He stopped only when he had reached the hangar. He was out of luck. He had hoped to find a patrol either coming or going. At this hour of the night or the early morning, depending on your point of view, there was no one on duty at all. The only possibility was the rank of P-Ts hidden in a corner and rarely used. Slade cursed, as he seldom did, with eloquence and passion. To ride a P-T you needed two hands.

He paused. He should call it in, run a proper search and capture, but he was damned if he would. He wanted this for himself. He had earned it. Let Osmond eat it. And the boy deserved it, being honourably outwitted, not hunted down by a squadron of aggers.

Slade moved to the P-Ts. Left hand for altitude, right for the throttle, both twist grips dating from time immemorial. Could he apply enough pressure with his hook to manage the throttle? He could. Well, worth a try. Still one problem. He had to be able to see his reacom to track the boy and his friends, whoever they were. Tape, there must be tape...

Two minutes later Slade was ready and, gingerly applying throttle and altitude, rose shakily into the air. He had last flown a P-T in basic training but his outright loathing of the cranky machines came back soon enough. He had changed the display on his reacom. There were now two flashing pinpricks. One was the trace on Macgilliguddy, the other was himself. Erratically he set out to bring the two into conjunction. He had forgotten only one thing. By Osmond's decree, he was not armed.

Roxanna had insisted that she would take part of the perimeter. Clearly three guards would be better than two. She found herself a convenient cleft between two rocks, some 40 metres away from the tunnel mouth, and settled down to wait, the lights of Redux spread out below her. Time passed. She had no idea of how long the wait might be. She shifted the blaster to a slightly more comfortable position. At least in the tunnels with time to spare, she had become quite competent under John's instruction. That was something. Time passed. She didn't want to think about Mac. She wouldn't think about Mac. It was too raw. Too troubled. But he had kissed her. He had said he was sorry and he had kissed her. She wanted him to do it again. She did. Properly. This time, properly. Time passed. But maybe he wouldn't want to. Maybe he had just felt sorry for her. Maybe it had been like kissing his sister. Time passed. Surely they should be getting close now. Did she really love him? What was love? Was that ache in the stomach love? Or was it just sex? Well, yes. But sex could be love, and love could be sex. Couldn't it? Time passed. A shadow eased across the sky. She did love him. How could she know? She was too young. Everyone said she was too young. But she wasn't. She felt old. Old as this hill...

There was a clink as two stones knocked together.

Was that Shelby? Or John? Not over to her left. Not unless they had moved. She stood up and peered into the distance. She could see nothing. She took a step out from the rocks to get a better view and an arm slid round her throat. Something sharp pressed into her jugular. She could feel the beat of her pulse against it, whatever it was.

James saw the slight lightening of the sky ahead and switched off his light. He groped his way out of the last of the tunnel. Mac and the others followed silently behind him. It seemed clear. He whistled softly and moments later, Shelby and Lanfranchi appeared separately out of the gloom.

"Where's Roxanna?" he whispered.

"Over there," Shelby said, and pointed.

"I'll get her," Mac whispered.

"Suits," Wright said. "Start dressing."

Mac moved quietly away, expecting to find Roxanna every step. She had moved too far away, he thought, then he froze. There was something ahead that didn't look right. A shape, struggling and heaving.

He moved forward cautiously.

Then Roxanna screamed at him.

"Shoot, Mac! Shoot! Shoot now!" Abruptly her voice was choked off.

"I wouldn't advise it," Slade said calmly. "Stand back," he added as the others came rushing across. He eased his grip on Roxanna so that she could speak.

"Tell them," he said. But Roxanna didn't. Instead she pleaded.

"Shoot Mac," she said. "Or everyone will die. You must shoot."

Slade shook his head in admiration. These really were remarkable people.

"He's alone," Roxanna said her voice cracking with desperation. "You must shoot."

Mac laid down the blaster.

"I can't," he said simply. "I love you."

Things happened fast after that. Slade drove his hook far enough into Roxanna's throat to make her moan and end any thought of resistance from the others. One by one they were made to come forward and surrender their blasters. Mac watched horrified as the blood ran thickly down Roxanna's neck, staining her jerkin. Slade made them move back and then stood over the pile of weapons. He pressed the emergency position button on his reacom, now back in his pocket, and already they could hear the first agger muttering towards them.

Roxanna was aware of the flowing blood and the tears that she couldn't help mingling and spreading, but what she was feeling was not fear, but rage. They had nearly done it, so nearly got clean away, and somehow this soldier had found them and

then she had been stupid enough to let him capture her. When Mac came she had tried to fight, tried to make the soldier kill her so that Mac wouldn't have to, but she had failed. He was too strong for her and try as she might to drive the sharp thing, whatever it was, deep into her throat, he had held her easily. And now her family, her friends, were all standing there, meek as children, lambs to the slaughter. Again she struggled, tried to kick his legs from under him, but again he simply widened his stance and choked off her air. If only she could just die, now, right now, the others would be free.

And then it was too late. Troopers had dropped out of the hovering agger and surrounded them. Slade released her and ever the gentleman, fished out his clean, white, carefully pressed pocket swipe and put it to the wound on her neck. His emotions were conflicting. On the one hand there was the undeniable triumph of succeeding where everyone else had failed, but on the other it meant destroying perhaps the finest group of people he had ever had anything to do with. He shrugged unhappily. The fact of the matter was that heroes were bad for business, and that's what this was, business.

He surveyed the rest of the group, now hobbled at knee and elbow. The boy he knew, of course, and Macgilliguddy, but the others were all new to him. Well, time enough to sort it all out later. Macgilliguddy was looking at him quizzically.

"Yes?" Slade said. "You want to say something?" He could afford to be magnanimous now.

"I was just wondering," James said. "How did you find us?"

For answer, Slade pulled out his reacom, expanded the display and showed them the blinking light.

"That's you," he said to James. "We implanted a trace when you were in the pod. But," he added. "I never dreamed you would get this far."

Chapter Eighteen

Osmond, too, had extremely mixed emotions. Still ensconced in the command centre, he had been congratulating himself that now he had ample cause for dismissing a dangerous maverick to convoy duty in the Shinois sector, where shortly thereafter he would meet with a tragic accident, and suddenly here was this self-same maverick returning in triumph having single-handedly, and without a weapon, captured the perpetrators of one of the most costly revolts in at least the past couple of hundred years. A preliminary count put casualties at 126 dead with more than 300 wounded, not that Osmond cared a cluster about losing men. It was the stain on his record that offended him. A thought occurred: in that his father was still, for the moment, only for the moment, officially Chairman, then with a bit of finesse he ought to be able to shift the blame for the debacle. Indeed, and Osmond began to glow with his own genius, it could become a telling reason for his father being required to step down and retire to... the Shinois sector, where, unfortunately, most unfortunately, his health would prove to be fragile.

Cometh the hour, cometh the man, Osmond thought, and by all the gods of the Hyades here he was. Never had one of those silly, ancient proverbs beloved of grandmothers been more apt.

And Slade? What of Slade now? A medal, perhaps two, and then convoy duty... so necessary in these troubled times, the unfortunate legacy of his father.

It was all very beautiful, Osmond thought, and now for the best bit. He turned to summon Dostoi and found the Chairman regarding him thoughtfully. Osmond flushed. He couldn't help it. Then angrily he thrust the automatic guilt to one side. If the old devil had been reading his mind then serve him right, but there was no denying that his moment of greatness was now tarnished.

Mac had eyes for no one but Roxanna. He had struggled with three of the troopers to get close to her, but unsuccessfully. He could see only part of her face as the agger bore them swiftly across the fractured landscape of the city to their fate, yet he could tell that she was in despair. He had never seen anyone look so forlorn.

But, Mac thought bitterly, how could he possibly have killed her to kill Slade? He couldn't have done it in a million years. None of them could have done it, and, anyway, as had been revealed, all it would have bought them would have been a little more time.

He supposed they should have thought of the possibility of a trace but how Orville might possibly have discovered that one fact in all the great mass of information that flowed into the CAW from all over the cluster minute by minute, he couldn't guess. And had they found out, then what? Dissect James with a pocket laserblade, searching for it?

Send him off as a decoy to be killed? Roxanna wasn't to blame. It wasn't her fault. It wasn't anybody's fault.

Suddenly Mac could avoid it no longer, the thing, the thing he didn't want to think about, the thing he had said. He faced it honestly. It had been surprised out of him in terrible circumstances. He hadn't wanted to say it. He had had no intention of saying it. It had been the last thing on his mind. But it was true. It was totally, absolutely, undeniably true. He was in love with Roxanna.

He might only be fifteen, well nearly sixteen now – sixteen sounded rather better than fifteen – and his life expectancy might only be a matter of days, if that, but Mac knew with complete certainty that if he lived for a thousand years Roxanna was and would always be his soul-mate.

Slade wiped the blood from his hook with distaste. It was unfortunate he had been forced to prick the girl quite so badly. When possible, Slade believed in old-fashioned courtesy to women and that he had been put in the position of behaving like a boor was, he realised, his own fault. It had been stupid of him ever to accede to Osmond's prohibition on personal weapons. At the first opportunity, Slade determined, he would take the precaution of procuring and carrying, at all times, a small, stealth blaster.

The agger pulled in to the military port at RCentral where a detachment of troopers was waiting in formation. The lieutenant in charge saluted Slade and spoke.

"Sir," he said. "His excellency congratulates you and instructs that the prisoners be brought to the interrogation room." Slade frowned but stood aside as Mac and the others were efficiently decanted and marched off. Orville, who had been allowed to keep his a-g harness in lieu of his floater, was towed along by a trooper like a housewife with a parcel of swig-meat.

The interrogation room, the same, glaring white expanse dominated by the dome of the screamer where Mac had been tortured, was crowded. Osmond, now feeling the fatigue of his all-night vigil – but such a vigil – required his final triumph to be properly witnessed. As well as his father he had demanded every Galiconia executive above the rank of manager to be routed out of bed and to present themselves forthwith. Now he stood waiting for his trophies, flanked by functionaries, the new Chairman and chief executive-elect assuming the full pomp of his office.

The prisoners were brought in, still hobbled, and paraded in front of him.

Osmond, assuming the regal air that Dostoi had once caught him practising in a mirror, stepped forward and ostentatiously embraced Slade, who did his best not to wrinkle his nose at the accompanying odour.

"General," Osmond said. "You have the grateful thanks of the company, which will be rendered in more tangible form when..."

Medals will be awarded in due course, Captain Wright thought sardonically. Where had he heard that before. He lifted an eyebrow at his old master, the Chairman. He was not much different, Wright thought. Older, the hair silver now, but he was still spare and erect, a hard man, but one who preferred to be fair, given the opportunity, and who evidently had sacrificed everything in an attempt to protect his secret son. Infinitesimally, the Chairman raised an eyebrow in return. Wright was pleased to be recognised. He regretted the disloyalty he had been forced to show all those years ago and was aware that the subsequent pursuit had been the barest minimum that discipline required.

Osmond had turned from Slade and was inspecting the prisoners. He was interested only in the boy and the man, Macgilliguddy, and had them brought forward. The others were of no account, useful only as coercion. Again he felt the glow of genius, of the man and the hour coalescing in golden fruition. His was indeed a plan to savour. The man, Macgilliguddy, looked ill, rather worse than when he had been in hospital, but no matter. A few hours would see the business done.

Osmond prolonged the suspense as he paced before the two. He was enjoying himself thoroughly.

"So," he said at last. "The two greatest fliers of the age, possibly any age, fliers who until recently thought each other father and son. So touching. But of the two of you, who is best? I wonder, which of you is the greatest, the greatest of all time?" He paused portentously. "An intriguing question? A question I'm sure that in your secret hearts even you would like resolved. So it is my pleasure, my delight, to announce that all will indeed be discovered. In the arena. Tonight." The silence, Osmond noted with gratification, was now absolute. The whole room was hanging on his words.

"Tonight," Osmond continued. "You will fight. Each other. No quarter. To the death."

Mac and James looked at each other and smiled. Osmond did too; in fact, he positively grinned.

"Oh, you *will* fight," he said lightly, and then:

"If you don't fight, you will watch all your friends die in the screamer. If you don't fight in earnest, you will watch all your friends die in the screamer. If one of you does not kill the other, you will watch all your friends die in the screamer. If one of you surrenders to the other, you will watch all your friends die in the screamer. If you decide you still will not fight, we will place you both in the screamer after the others and watch you kill each other in your madness.

"You remember the screamer, don't you boy?" Osmond said, speaking directly to Mac. "Just over there. You remember what it's like, I'm sure... You will fight. You will certainly fight."

This time the silence was agonising, as people contemplated the dimensions of the evil Osmond was bent on perpetrating. At last a voice spoke, a small voice, but distinct and clear, a voice that carried.

"You vile toad. You degenerate little worm."

It was Roxanna, and the whole room seemed to sigh in collective agreement.

Mac was thrilled to his soul. It was the most splendid thing he had ever heard, could ever have imagined. He opened his mouth to second her, but then stopped. It was her moment, her glorious moment, and it would be wrong to intrude.

Someone, well hidden in the throng, could suppress it no longer. There was a titter, and then a chuckle somewhere else, and another, and then most people in the room were laughing while trying to pretend they weren't. It was just too delicious. Here was this horrible little man, planning a truly monstrous spectacle, only to be told by a child, well, a young woman really, just what an obnoxious piece of filth he really was.

As laughter swelled, Captain Wright was irresistibly reminded of the king's new clothes, a story he had repeated only recently. However, he, for one, was not amused. He was far too afraid for his daughter, his wonderful, brave, feisty, never-say-die daughter, who was altogether too courageous for her own good. He feared the tempest of wounded vanity that would be unleashed, what Osmond might be driven to do in the face of this public humiliation. The danger to Roxanna was terrifying.

But in the event, Osmond was both so tired by the long night and so crushed by the sudden turn of events that all he wanted to do was to burst into tears. He literally fled from the room with Dostoi tailing reluctantly behind.

Abruptly there was silence again as people realised just how vulnerable they had made themselves. To laugh at a tyrant, particularly a weak, ineffectual tyrant, was ever a recipe for disaster. Quietly, people began to leave, trying to remember how unrestrained their mirth had been, how much might have been picked up by the eyespies for later vindictive examination.

At last the chamber was empty but for the prisoners, their guards, Slade and the Chairman. The two men regarded each other.

"Treat them decently," the Chairman said. It was a command, despite his own impotent position.

Slade nodded, once. Fair enough. He had no inclination to argue. He realised that he himself was now very tired, almost swaying on his feet. Even so, he should have noticed the flickering of the Chairman's fingers and the fact that he was being watched intently by Trooper Tranter, who, once outside, delegated the Chairman to another of the deaf-mutes and quite without orders or permission disappeared on an errand of his own.

They were taken to a small mess room in the holding cells, divested of their hobbles and left, amazingly, to themselves.

"Food will be brought," a sergeant said, as he locked the door.

As soon as they were alone, Mac seized Roxanna in a bear hug and refused to let her go. At last, he felt her weaken and begin to hug him back. Just a little.

"My hero," he whispered into her ear.

"But it's all my fault," she said. She struggled to push him away and said again to everyone in the room:

"It's all my fault. I let him catch me and use me to catch you. I tried to make him..."

"Kill you," James said. "Anna, my darling, we know. And we know how he tracked us. If it's anybody's fault, it's mine. The truth is, we just weren't quite smart enough. It's not your fault. That's the truth, Anna. The truth. But we're not done yet."

Eyes swung towards him.

"There is a way," James said. "A chance. A slim chance. But a chance."

"What chance?" Captain Wright said.

"Mac and I have to talk," James said. He looked for a chair and gratefully sat down. The hollows in his face were becoming more and more pronounced.

"Just us," James said. "We have to talk. And the rest of you have to make sure one thing happens. You have to be in the Chairman's box. It shouldn't be hard. Osmond will want revenge for what just happened. He will want to punish you. He'll want to watch your faces, particularly Anna's. Now, Mac and I have to talk."

The others, with a mixture of expressions on their faces, mostly concern, drifted to the far end of the room. They tried not to watch, or to eavesdrop, to keep up their own desultory conversation, but it was hard not to be aware that Mac was becoming more and more upset. At one point he jumped to his feet, knocking over the chair. At another he exclaimed: "No!" in a loud, angry voice.

"No," he said again. "I won't do it."

Then James reached out and, with both hands on Mac's face, forced the boy to look at him.

In the end, Mac nodded unwillingly. He rose and made James kiss him full on the lips then went to a corner by himself. He sat down on the floor, put his arms round his knees and buried his head.

James got up and moved tiredly over to the others. They had all been without sleep for a long time now and were feeling it, but James also looked desperately ill.

"Well?" Wright said.

"He'll do it," James said.

"Do what James?"

"You'll see."

"James, you can't make him do it. You just can't."

"It's not what you think. He doesn't have to kill me." Wright regarded his friend anxiously. They had known each other for a long time and Wright knew he was not being told the whole truth.

"But you have to die," he said at last.

"Probably," James said. "But I'm nearly dead anyway. You know that. You've seen it before."

"What do we have to do?" Wright asked after an interval.

"Make sure you're in that box. Then be ready for anything."

"Ready for what?"

"I'm not sure, Winston. If I knew I'd tell you. You must be ready."

"And you won't tell us what you're going to do because you know we'd stop you," Wright said. James smiled.

"You can't stop me, Winston. It's not possible. Not unless you kill me now. But I will tell you this, if the plan, such as it is, actually works it will be because Mac will have pulled off the most extraordinary piece of flying anybody ever dreamed of. I couldn't do it. Not even in my prime. But he just might be able to make it work." There was another long silence, then Wright put a hand on James's shoulder.

"My dear friend," he said. "My dear, dear friend."

The promised food arrived, and drink. It was welcome, but Mac refused to join them. Wright, while not knowing precisely what demands James had laid on the boy, could guess that yet again he would be taken to the breaking point and beyond. He felt his anger rising, anger at the unseeing, uncaring universe. That such people as Mac, and Roxanna, should be treated so callously, so cruelly was beyond comprehension. He and the others had had their turn, but the youngsters deserved better, so much better. Suddenly he didn't think he could bear to watch them suffer any more, even while he knew that he must. He touched his daughter on the shoulder and indicated Mac.

Roxanna looked at her father for a long moment, then picked up a platter. She sat down beside Mac, not touching, and set the plate between them on the floor. Neither spoke, though she knew he knew she was there.

At last Mac lifted his head slightly.

"What I said before, I meant it." His voice was muffled and thick.

"What?" she said.

"I love you." He lifted his head more so that his voice came clearer. "I love you."

"I love you," she said simply. They fell silent again.

"Mac," she said. "What is Uncle James going to make you do?"

"I don't think I can do it. It's impossible."

"He thinks you can."

"He hopes I can."

"But do what?" Roxanna said, exasperated. Mac shrugged.

"It doesn't matter," he said.

"Why won't you tell me?" But try as she might, she could get no more out of him. How could he tell her that James would certainly die and so, very probably, would he, trying to save her?

The Chairman paced the stupid aquarium with measured patience. At last the door opened and Tranter slipped in. He exchanged places with the trooper he had left on guard and when the other man had made his exit, the Chairman turned an expressive face. Tranter shook his head in apology. The Chairman felt himself sagging. It had been a very long shot but he had managed to convince himself in a triumph of hope over expectation that it might work.

His sign language was still stilted but eventually he divined that the rest of the deaf-mute guard, particularly the opinion makers, had thought his chances of a successful counter-coup too nebulous to back him. The argument that if they joined him they must prevail had fallen on deaf ears. The joke was Tranter's. He was upset that he had failed to deliver the rest of the troop and was trying to hide it. He had come to respect the Chairman, to grow fond of him, to realise that he was Tranter's only chance of some sort of freedom.

The two men sank into gloom.

Dostoi felt the acid in his stomach bubble and bite. It was a familiar sensation. The leaping uncertainties with which he was now forced to contend had played havoc with his digestion. He longed for release, for escape to somewhere sane, to a world not governed by the vagaries of a man tormented by the realisation of his own manifest inadequacies. Oh for a sunny little court-yard, with a grape vine and a fountain and luncheon laid for two. Oh that Osmond von Osmond, fourteenth of the name, would quietly expire there on his couch, this moment, never to wake again.

Dostoi bit back the bile and trembling ever so slightly touched his master on the shoulder.

"Sir," he said. "It's time."

Osmond woke slowly. His head was thick from the soporific Dostoi had given him and he was slow to remember. Dostoi, watching nervously, could track the progression of Osmond's thoughts by the expression on his face. There. There it was. The laughter. The humiliation. The ignominious flight. Dostoi wouldn't be in that girl's shoes for all the thormalium in the cluster. He knew what Osmond would do.

First he would have her and the others in his box to watch the fight. Then he would force her to watch as he tortured each one of her family and friends to death in the screamer. And then... Dostoi shuddered. He knew to his shame just how bestial Osmond could be.

Osmond stood up to be dressed. Dostoi felt a bath was urgently required, but dared not suggest it.

"Everything is done?" Osmond demanded.

"Yes sir," Dostoi said.

"Everyone who was there this morning has been reviewed?"

"Yes sir," Dostoi said again. He handed Osmond a list of names, to which he had added a couple on his own account. "Their degree of... disrespect has been graded, sir. What will you do to them?" he added, greatly daring.

"Money," Osmond said. "There is still a slight matter of 470 million to be recovered." He looked piercingly at Dostoi, who visibly quailed. Osmond tapped the list.

"Who was the most offensive?" he said.

Without a second thought, Dostoi named a sector manager who had been misguided enough to snub him at a recent company function.

"He can have a taste of the screamer as well," Osmond said and as Dostoi had predicted, went on: "I want all the prisoners in my box. Double guard. I want that girl standing where I can see her face. And I want Slade in the box, too. Do we have a good crowd?"

"Yes sir. Free tickets..."

"Make sure the cam operators know that I want a full record. I want to be able to see everything from every angle. The duel of the age, Dostoi. I shall be enjoying this for a long time."

Somehow they had all fallen asleep, Mac still huddled in his corner, Roxanna with her head on his shoulder. The others were head down at the tables. It was a blessed release, fatigue sparing them from their over-worked emotions, at least for an hour or two. Towards evening, James stirred. He felt appalling, unbluted, ill, desperately afraid for Mac and Anna, both of whom he loved as truly his own.

He watched the two for a long time as they slept. They were right together, he thought. They were so young but damn it, they were right together, so right. Made for each other. And they were starting to know it.

He wondered if he could possibly pull off his part of the plan, if he had the strength left, the eye. He wondered even more if Mac, brilliant as he was, could possibly survive the crash, never mind regroup quickly enough to take advantage. Probably not. Probably not to both. But it was a chance, however remote.

The door crashed open and Slade, immaculate again, stalked in, preceded by the usual hulking troopers.

"You have five minutes," he said. "Osmond has ordered you to his box for the preliminary bouts. He said..." Slade paused delicately, successfully implying that he disassociated himself from what he was about to add. "He said to tell you that he wants your juices flowing. Five minutes."

He turned and left.

Well, James thought. One problem less, at least. There would be no difficulty in getting his people where he needed them to be. Quite the reverse.

Instinctively they all gathered in a group. There was nothing to say. Mac suddenly handed his jerkin to Orville.

"Keep it for me," he said. Then he turned to James and hugged him with angry strength, as though he would never let him go. He was weeping.

The door opened again. Roxanna sought Mac's hand and they touched, but it was only a moment before the troopers pulled them apart to hobble them again.

"I wish I still had my floater," Orville said wistfully.

"Why?" Mac managed to ask.

"For the secret plasma cannon you made me build."

Mac smiled despite himself.

Chapter Nineteen

The closer they came to the Chairman's box, the more roughly they were treated and they were propelled through the door so violently that Shelby actually fell and brought down John, close behind him. The two men struggled to their feet and winked at each other. They had said their goodbyes privately and were both more or less resigned.

"It's been great," Lanfranchi had said.

"And it would have been terrible without you," Shelby had replied. They understood each other perfectly.

The guards shoved them all into a tight group to one side, covertly watching Osmond to see if their handling of the prisoners was sufficiently unpleasant to satisfy him. Roxanna they kept to one side and then frog-marched forward to face him.

Without a word, he took a gauntlet and smashed her across the mouth. Her head hung for a moment, then she gathered herself and spat blood and spittle full in Osmond's face.

Oh my little girl, Wright thought, fear for her pulsing through him.

"Oh Anna," James whispered.

All of them were suddenly possessed of a terrible anger, and a deep pounding pride. They gave a collective growl, straightened and despite their fetters moved threateningly forward. The troopers struggled to restrain them.

Osmond paused, then smiled.

"Pride goeth before a fall," he quoted lightly. The ancient proverbs were rather useful, he thought in passing. One for every occasion. He wiped his face with the cloth offered by Dostoi and looked about, noting Slade, and his father being closely guarded, as instructed, by a large trooper. He turned back to the girl held tightly before him. She was white-faced but seemingly unafraid. That would change, he said to himself, savouring the thought. Oh yes, that would change.

"You will watch," he said to her. "If you close your eyes I will cut off your eyelids. You will watch."

The Chairman winced despite himself and wondered yet again how he had managed to raise such a complete barbarian. Neglect was still the only answer. Nature allowed free rein through lack of nurture, though it was entirely problematic given the nature whether nurture would have had any effect at all. Still, he reflected, he should have tried rather harder.

The noise of the crowd rose as the participants in the first event, what should be just a simple execution, were brought out. One was an arena gladiator, the other a poor fool caught trying to stow away on an outward bound transport. It was his great misfortune

that he had never even managed to get on board, in which case his end, in deep space, at least would have been quick.

As it was, it was ghastly, of a horror unimaginable to someone like Roxanna.

And throughout, Osmond watched her, not the abomination taking place in front of them a few metres away. But he was disappointed. Stoically, through it all, through the whole wretched spectacle, through the blood lust of the crowd and the agony of the victim that seemed to go on for hours, she kept her eyes open and her back stiff. Inside she was frozen and in the first minutes all but collapsed, but then she began to hate, and hate was strength.

Never mind, Osmond thought, as Roxanna gathered her resources and withstood the onslaught of senseless butchery in front of her. If the girl has some steel then all the more interesting to break her. Still it was a touch disappointing. He indulged himself in a selection of dainty pastries as the mess below was cleaned up.

The next event, now that the crowd had been aroused, would be a proper match between experienced fighters, before, finally, the grand climax. He signalled Slade, who signalled the detail and James and Mac were marched out to prepare for their combat. What James's plan might be none of his people left behind could guess, but that there was a plan meant there was still hope, however faint, and hope was strength too.

"Watch," Osmond said to Roxanna. "Or I will do as I say, I will take your eyelids." She lifted her eyes again and gazed fixedly forward, though part of her mind found Osmond's offer reasonably tempting. The resulting blood might obscure her vision, she thought with hard pragmatism. The tears from the pain certainly would.

Two gladiators were rising towards them and when they were at the level of the box, separated to the maximum distance their tethers would allow. The tethers themselves were attached to the a-g anchor with universal joints so wrought that it was impossible for the tethers ever to tangle. Nor, being of maxalloy, could they ever break. The two men, in a throwback to the blood-thirsty beginnings of humanity, were manacled together in a monstrous compact that could only end with one killing the other. Such is progress, Captain Wright thought bitterly. Same witlessness, better weapons.

Even though the combat had yet to start, it was already clear that the two fighters, one in red and one in black, were unevenly matched. While it was impossible for the tethers to be tangled at the anchor end, it was all too easy for someone unpractised with the looping line to get in a mess. It was already clear that black knew how to manage competently. He flew in small circles, the line dropping cleanly away from the swivel on his chest. Also, he handled his whip with easy familiarity. Red, on the other hand, was erratic, struggling to not to tangle his feet, and the more he struggled the more erratic he became. Twice he almost dropped his whip completely.

Osmond raised his hand, as he had for the first horror, and gave the signal. The anchor began to glow, signifying the plasma whips were operational and the men began to circle at the limit of their tethers. Red tried twice to produce a flash from his whip. The third time he succeeded, but in an unexpected direction. He kept working at it and was starting to gain some predictability when black, aware that the more practice he allowed the more the danger to himself, looped high and used the tether to bring him into a threatening dive. His whip flashed, but red had dodged, and copying black's technique, used the tether to swing clear. Still he kept slashing away with his whip and suddenly the match was not so uneven. Red had demonstrated that he was probably the better flier, although black still had the advantage of vastly more experience.

Captain Wright and the Chairman, both of whom had seen James in his prime, both had much the same thought. Was this how James had managed to survive his first encounter, dodging and weaving while he taught himself how to use the plasma whip? And they both began to feel the same, strong empathy for red, who evidently was a brave man and intelligent enough to buy himself time to learn.

Black had come to the same conclusion and bored in, pressing red hard and only narrowly missing with several strikes. But still red attempted no sort of counter-attack, falling back and back but all the time slashing his whip. The noise of the crowd diminished as they became absorbed in the struggle. If the climax they had been promised along with the free tickets was half as good as this, then it would be a great night indeed. Only a very few remembered James and his consummate artistry. What they were seeing now was what they were used to, what they liked and what they expected.

Black made to pause and draw breath. His anxiety was growing. Red's avoiding tactics were proving altogether too successful. But Red, sensing the moment, allowed no respite and switched in an instant to all-out attack. He climbed quickly but instead of using the tether to swing round the perimeter, launched straight across the circle, scraping just above the anchor and diving at black head-on, catching him partially off-guard. His whip flashed and Black screamed and screamed again, screamed in shock, screamed in terror, screamed in agony. The plasma had caught him across the waist. The lower part of his body was falling away, twisting haphazardly. His torso was still tethered to the anchor, cauterised by the flash. The wretched man was still alive.

Osmond licked his lips in excitement. He glanced at Roxanna. Finally, finally her eyes were closed. Osmond licked his lips again.

Red was shocked by what he had done. He retched helplessly as the man screamed on. At last, he brought himself to slash again with his whip and there was silence. The crowd continued to hold its collective breath for a long moment and then broke into a storm of applause. They had found a new champion.

"I warned you," Osmond said. "I will now have your eyelids." He held out his hand a though for someone to slap a knife, a laserblade, pair of scissors across his palm.

Roxanna raised her head, not fearlessly, but meeting the fear and defeating it. Her profile had never been so pure. The breath caught in her father's throat at the sight as he frantically thrust and struggled against the two troopers holding him. Shelby and John were also heaving wildly.

"Take mine," Orville shouted. "Leave her alone. Take mine." His voice was hoarse and strained, cracking with the terrible frustration of hanging there like a piece of dirty laundry, unable to move.

"He will take no one's eyelids." It was the Chairman. He had moved between his son and this small girl-woman who was so much more admirable.

"You dare?" Osmond hissed.

"Dare!" his father spat. "You touch this girl and I will take you to your death." He touched the waist-high rail of the box beside them. Osmond watched his father's hand out of the corner of his eye. The old man would do it, too. He knew that if anything was certain at this moment, his father, taller, heavier and stronger than his son, so much stronger, would, given the slightest excuse, take them both to their deaths before anyone could intervene. He tried to back away, but the old man followed him, refused to let him escape.

"You will regret this," Osmond was forced to bluster.

"Oh I already do," his father said. "And you'll never know how much. Return to your seat, now. Or I will do as I say. And the boy will have everything."

"You wouldn't," Osmond trembled, trying to avoid his father's implacable gaze.

"I would."

Osmond believed him. But there would be a reckoning. Oh yes. Very soon there would be a reckoning.

The Chairman made way for his son to squeeze back into his seat. Perhaps he should kill them both anyway, but something held him back and then it was too late. Osmond was safely in his floater and help would arrive before his father could manhandle him back to the edge. Curious, the Chairman thought. What had made him hesitate was that old man's vice, curiosity. Something told him the game was not yet over and he had a great desire to see the final resolution. Besides, on balance and all things considered, he was not yet ready to die unless it was absolutely unavoidable. He motioned the girl to stand back and took her place. His eye met Wright's and the Chairman nodded. The gratitude of his old pilot, who had once been the nearest to a friend he had ever had, was plain for all to see.

Again the anchor was rising, and with it the excitement of the crowd. If most of them had only a vague notion of who the man Macgilliguddy might be, the boy was another

matter. His fame was recent and still alive. As before, the man was dressed in black, the boy in red and the betting was becoming frenzied. The weight of money was, of course, for the boy but some of the old hands with long memories were keen to back a hunch.

The anchor came to a halt but instead of separating, the two combatants stood there motionless in mid-air, unsupported by the tethers. It was unbelievable, a sight to tell the grand-children: two fliers both of such brilliance that they could do the impossible. They all knew that the boy was a genius, that such was probably within his gifts. Even so, it was amazing to see, and that the other man could do it too was totally unexpected. The last-minute publicity had been correct. What a treat they were in for. This would be a once in a life-time experience.

Still the two stood there, motionless. Then, in unison, they turned to each quarter of the vast arena and bowed deeply, still unsupported, still perfectly controlled. The crowd went berserk, absolutely berserk. It wasn't flying exactly, but it was the most stunning aerial exhibition imaginable. What a battle this would be.

The anchor began to glow, impatiently. Osmond distrusted what he was seeing, but the two weren't finished yet. After their final bow they turned to each other and embraced for a long moment.

"I love you," Mac said to the man he would always think of as his father.

"I love you," James replied. "And I am so proud of you." They clung together, there in mid-air, watched by the huge crowd and billions more on cam. Again Mac made James kiss him full on the lips, a son's last tribute. The arena had fallen silent with astonishment. What they were seeing was unprecedented. Two men, both extraordinary fliers, fated to fight to the death, were embracing. A buzz of speculation began to spring up.

"What do they think they're doing?" Osmond said to no one in particular. His impatience was mounting rapidly. He had given the signal to start hadn't he? Minutes ago. This was not on the program. They were supposed to fight, to kill each other, not canoodle. It was bizarre, quite bizarre, indecent even, but there was nothing he could do. Matters were now out of his control.

The Chairman, for his part, watched wistfully. He wondered what it might be like to have a son who loved him.

"Do it," James said at last. "Do it for me. Do it for Anna. Do it for yourself. Do it." He thrust Mac away from him, and the boy rose slowly, at the same time stretching the tether out to the limit. Then, with one last nod to James he began what would probably be his last flight.

It was like nothing anyone had ever seen before. James had taken up a position beneath the anchor, his back to the Chairman's box. Mac began to circle horizontally at the limit of the tether, rapidly gaining speed, until he was flying so fast he was straining

the anchor's ability to withstand the centrifugal force he was applying. Suddenly James began to slash with the whip every time Mac's tether passed above him, once, twice, three times, always aiming for the same spot. Again. Again. The maxalloy of Mac's tether began to glow. Again. Again.

Osmond suddenly realised what he was seeing.

"They're escaping," he shouted. "They're trying to escape. Shoot them." He turned to Slade but in a moment remembered that the man was unarmed, unarmed by his own order. Still the whip was flashing with monotonous rapidity. Again. Again. At every revolution.

"Quick," Osmond shouted. "Shoot them." But everyone seemed mesmerised. He remembered his own weapon. The boy. Shoot the boy. The whole point was to kill the boy. Still the whip was flashing, a threatening metronome. Shaking, Osmond tried to sight on Mac, but the boy was moving fast, far too fast. The man. Shoot the man. Get the boy later. Osmond shifted his aim and squeezed.

Approaching the speed of light, time elongates, stretches, draws out and that was how Mac perceived the next events. The faster he went, the more time he seemed to have to observe, to gather detail. He saw Osmond stand, flash, draw his weapon, flash, point it at him, flash, hesitate, flash, sight on James, flash, and squeeze, flash.

No! Mac screamed inside. No!

He saw the magma slug take James full in the back.

No! he screamed. No!

He saw James crumple and fall.

No! he screamed. No!

He saw James's body jerk as the tether brought him up short.

No! he screamed. No!

He saw James dead.

No! he screamed.

But he was free. Free. And rocketing towards the Chairman's box, flying faster than he ever had before, the centrifugal force catapulting him away from the anchor as James's last slash had finally severed the tether.

James was dead. Wall it off. Time elongated further. Mac flipped feet first and began to brake as hard as he could. James was dead. Wall it off. He picked the largest of the troopers and slightly adjusted his aim. James was dead. Wall it off. The g's he was pulling tore at him but he bore down harder. James was dead. Wall it off. He saw Osmond gape as he shot past, close to his head. He saw Roxanna, her hand to her mouth. James was dead. Wall it off. And then he was cannoning into the guard.

Time returned to normal.

Mac and the trooper crashed all the way to the back wall of the box, the trooper's body mass absorbing some of the energy Mac had generated and cushioning the rest. James was dead. Wall it off. Mac landed on hands and feet, searching for the guard's lost weapon and scrambling towards it.

"Stop!" a voice roared. "Nobody move! Don't move!" It was the Chairman.

"Don't move," he roared again.

Mac looked up from the blaster he was reaching for. James was dead. Wall it off. The crowd in the box, he saw, were all standing in frozen tableau. Osmond was half twisted round, his blaster still pointing into the arena. A large trooper, almost as large as the one Mac had just taken out, had his blaster aimed at Osmond. Slade had pulled a mini-blaster from his sleeve and was pointing it at the Chairman.

"Osmond!" the Chairman said, clarion clear. "Drop your weapon. Drop your weapon now. Or we both die."

Osmond hesitated. There was the boy, within reach, almost point blank range. He should kill him, now. He should do it. He looked at his father and the trooper standing beside him, blaster aimed unwaveringly at his face. Osmond was in no doubt the trooper would shoot on his father's order, that he would die. Slade might then kill the Chairman in retaliation, but what good would that be if he, Osmond, were already dead. He dropped his blaster, A moment later it hit the floor of the arena with a distant clang drowned by a subsequent explosion. There was screaming. Typical, both Slade and the Chairman thought. The fool had forgotten to option the safety catch. They wondered how many had died. Gradually silence returned.

"An interesting situation," the Chairman said eventually. His voice was now conversational and directly addressed to Slade.

"Shoot him, general," Osmond commanded. "I order you to shoot him."

"Certainly," Slade said after a moment. "But if I do, Trooper Tranter there will inevitably shoot you. Is that really what you wish?"

There was quiet as people began to absorb the dimensions of the impasse.

In the cam control room, the broadcast director made an executive and exemplary decision. Throughout the cluster, screens and displays tuned to the arena went blank as he cut the feed, leaving individual outlets to fend for themselves as best they might. The live audience had little more idea of what might be happening. The interior of the Chairman's box was effectively hidden from view. As panicked marshals began to deal with the aftermath from Osmond's wayward blaster and to clear the arena, most interest centred on whether the bookmakers would pay out and if so on whom.

Chapter Twenty

James was dead. Wall it off. Mac rose to his feet, leaving the guard's blaster where it lay. Well, the plan had nearly worked. James had managed to cut him free, hitting the tether again and again in exactly the same place with the plasma whip, as only he could do, and Mac had then pulled off the most extraordinary piece of flying anybody was ever likely to witness. He had streaked into the box at a zillion clicks an hour, somehow he had taken out a guard, he had even survived the impact and he had so nearly captured the weapon. But the Chairman, his father, had been too quick for him, just. And Slade. And James was dead. Wall it off. Done is done. Wall it off.

Roxanna looked at him fearfully. She couldn't believe that he could possibly be unhurt, but that's what he appeared to be. Except that his face was chalk white and his eyes the coldest stone. She shivered involuntarily. Suddenly she was more frightened than at any time since it had all started. Mac, now, was someone she had never seen before, never known, never loved. Suddenly she was terrified for him, terrified for herself.

At last the Chairman broke the silence.

"General," he said. "Tell your men not to interfere," He indicated the deaf-mutes.

"And if I don't?"

"I will."

Slade considered and it was quickly clear to him that he had been comprehensively outflanked. Again. The evidence, if he needed any, was the fact that Tranter was standing there, threatening Osmond. Undoubtedly, the Chairman had spent his enforced idleness profitably by learning the troopers' sign language. Slade smiled. It was a pleasure, a genuine pleasure to find himself up against a professional. There was, however a difficulty.

"Please do," Slade said. He indicated his hook and then his other hand occupied with the blaster. The Chairman nodded and signed to the troops. Slade nodded confirmation. The Chairman in a short time had become somewhat fluent, he noted.

"So," Slade said and gestured at Tranter and again at his own blaster. "Do you have a proposition?"

The Chairman smiled gently.

"I do," he said.

"Don't listen to him," Osmond blurted. "I order you..."

"Sir," Slade said. "With all due respect..." which is precisely zero, he thought to himself. "With all due respect. You have two choices. You either listen to your father, or both of you die."

"Suit yourself," the Chairman added.

Osmond felt the fury rising, the rage. He had struggled so long. He had overcome such odds. He had fought so hard. And he had won. Everything. Total victory. Within his grasp. And here it was being snatched away from him. Tears squeezed from his eyes. Tears of self-pity. It was so... unfair. It was so unfair.

"Your proposition?" Slade said, when it was clear that Osmond was beyond speech.

"The boy..." the Chairman indicated Mac. "The boy and his people go free. They are to be given safe passage to the spaceport, and the scout ship that brought me. They are to be allowed clearance into orbit and then deep space."

"You're mad," Osmond shouted, recovering the voice. "I will not let him go. I won't. Why should I let him go?"

"Because," the Chairman said impatiently. "The boy guarantees my safety. As long as he is alive and outside your reach, you won't touch me. If you do, you lose Galiconia." There was silence..

"He, they, should go now," the Chairman said. "Only when they are safely in space will it be possible for me to allow Tranter to release you."

The logic of the Chairman's proposal was clear. The question was whether Osmond could ever bring himself to accept it. The Chairman made a subtle gesture and Tranter obediently stepped forward until the muzzle of his blaster was no more than centimetres from Osmond's eyes. His finger began to whiten as it tightened on the trigger.

"Yes," Osmond said. "Yes." The words were wrenched out of him like entrails being torn from his gut.

Slade and the Chairman nodded to each other, and the Chairman began to sign instructions to the guard.

Of many astonishments that day, this was by far the most amazing. In a few short minutes Captain Wright, Roxanna, Orville, Shelby, John and Mac had gone from being victims at the stake to freedom, or what passed for it in Galiconia. Dazed, they found themselves politely rounded up and herded towards the door.

"Wait," the Chairman said. They turned. "You should go straight to Theta Tauri Minor." He was looking only at Mac. "I will join you there."

Mac turned again and lead the others from the room. James was dead. Wall it off. There was still work to be done.

The journey on the beltway to the spaceport was one of the longest of their lives. All of them, Mac included, expected every instant to be stopped and returned to Osmond's house of horrors. But, at last, here they were at the entrance to the spaceport and they were being waved straight through. And now they were out on the ramps, where the ships docked. And here they were at the small scout vessel, fuelled, victualed and ready to go at the Chairman's pleasure. And here were the original crew hurriedly off-loading their personal possessions. And now they were on board and the captain had taken the

pilot's seat. And here they were, gently lifting off and heading for the atmo-lock. And finally they were through and there could be no stopping them now. They were in space and they were cheering and hugging and slapping each other's backs.

Except Mac. James was dead. Wall it off. Wall everything off.

"Now," the Chairman said, when the room was quiet again. "We shall discuss what I want."

Slade raised an eyebrow.

"Your son, your excellency, may have reason not to kill you. That doesn't necessarily apply to me."

"On the contrary," the Chairman said. "I think a moment's thought will show you that it does."

"Indeed?" Slade said.

"Consider," the Chairman said. "If you kill me, then Trooper Tranter here will certainly kill Osmond, and with both Osmond and myself unfortunately dead you will then face the vengeance and retribution of my other son, who will, of course, have all the resources of Galiconia at his disposal. And as you have seen, General, that young man is not easily dissuaded from his chosen course of action. Which brings me to my list of requirements..."

"And if I refrain from killing you but refuse your, as you say, requirements?"

"Then, general, it would be my painful task to shoot this son..."

Osmond who had sunk into mournful apathy suddenly came to life.

"You wouldn't," he protested on a rising note. "You couldn't. Father you couldn't..."

The Chairman cut him off with casual brutality.

"I could, and I would," he said. "And I very probably should. How long was it going to be before I had my little accident? On balance, I dislike killing family members but there are well-defined limits to my indulgence.

"And of course," he continued turning back to Slade. "If you did put me in the position of having to kill Osmond you would then have the choice of having to kill me in turn, in which case the previous conditions would apply, or the choice of suffering the undoubted retribution I would exercise. If I kill Osmond, you will have to kill me just to buy a little more time, no?"

Slade nodded.

"Which is why, despite a great deal of provocation, I shall refrain. It is in both our interests for Osmond to survive, for the moment at least. Thus, I think you'll find that meeting my immediate needs is by far the least onerous option for all of us."

Slade bowed to the inevitable.

"And your requirements are?" he asked with admiration. It was such a pleasure to deal with a true professional, even one that had him by the throat.

"I will, of course, need The-All-Sun-and-the-All-Moon. I will need Tranter, and his family. And I will need a lifetime's supply of your abominable serum. Oh, and in case Osmond should ever start to think again, which is always dangerous for all concerned, it should be clearly understood that if any sort of missile strike should be attempted on my departing ship, then I will thermo Redux to space junk, thormalium or no thormalium."

Chapter Twenty-one

Once before, Roxanna had gone in search of Mac, then to find him curled in a cave, howling like an animal. Now, as he had been hour after hour, he was pacing the scout ship's small hold, his face the colour of corpse, the hollows of his eyes smudged, charcoal, green, mustard.

"Mac," she said. "You must eat. You must sleep."

"I can't," he said. James was dead.

"It's been two days..."

"Leave me alone," he said. James was dead.

"I can't leave you alone," she snapped. "How can I leave you alone? I can't leave you like this."

"I'm all right," he said. James was dead.

"Mac, talk to me. Please talk to me."

"Just leave me alone," he said. James was dead.

"Mac,..."

"Leave me alone," he shouted, and Roxanna did. She had no idea how to cope. Everything she said just seemed to make things worse.

"If he wants to be alone, then leave him alone," Captain Wright said. He was sitting in the pilot's seat, the whole vast panoply of space spread before him. At another time, Roxanna would have been thrilled for him. She had never seen him look so happy. Now she was growing rapidly angry.

"Aren't you forgetting what he did for us? He and James? We have to help."

"If he wants to be alone, then leave him alone," Wright repeated. "Sooner or later he'll sleep..."

"He had to let James be killed," Roxanna said heatedly. "How can he sleep? He had to do nothing and watch James be killed for us. We can't leave him alone. We have to help."

"But he doesn't want us," her father said gently. "He has to find his own way through this. You can't do it for him."

"I can. I can. I can help," she said. There were tears in her voice.

"Let him find his own way."

"But he's lost," she cried. "Can't you see? He's lost."

And then her real fear burst out of her.

"He'll kill himself," she said coldly. "If we don't find a way to help him. He'll kill himself."

But her father just smiled at her indulgently.

"He's tougher than that," he said. "He'll be all right. You'll see."

This time he was standing face to a wall, propped with his head on his crossed arms.

"Mac," she said. His shoulders stiffened slightly, but that was all. She could contain herself no longer. Come what may she had to touch him. She couldn't stand being shut out like this. She went up behind him and put her arms round his chest, her head to his shoulder. He trembled and she could sense him about to pull away. Her hand touched something hard hanging round his neck, under his jerkin, and all at once she remembered what it must be. He straightened and roughly pulled himself free but she knew what to do now.

"The picture, Mac," she said. "I want to see it. The holoc. Show me the holoc." He shook his head and put a hand protectively to his breast. But then she was on him, struggling with him, fighting for possession of the tiny cube, beating at him. He thrust out and she went down but was up again in an instant, tearing at his clothes, refusing to be driven away.

Suddenly he stopped. He let his arms drop to his sides and just stood there. Slowly, Roxanna reached in and withdrew the holoc. She held it in front of his face, balanced on the palm of her hand.

"Open it," she said. "Open it, or I will." Her voice was hard, implacable. Mac looked at her beseechingly.

"Open it," she said again, insistent, demanding. "Open it." She made to reach for it with her other hand, but slowly Mac took it from her.

He paused for a long moment and then opened the cube in half. Out came a 3-D holoc taken when he still had a family. There, apparently sitting in his hand, was his mother, Grace, his brother, Hannibal, himself, and James. Roxanna moved round to stand beside him so that she could see the faces.

When it came it was like a tsunami roaring in across the shallows, hitting the shore and then flooding the coast inexorably until everything was drowned. And with it came the storm. Roxanna pulled him down to the cold floor of the cargo bay and held him, rocking back and forwards while the winds and the currents raged, while the surf wrenched at him, threatened to tear him bodily from this, his rock, and to drown him. But she refused to let him go, to be swept away, she gripped him with all her strength, all her determination, all the fierceness of a lover who will not be sundered from her soul-mate. He was hers and she was his, and nothing would ever sever them.

Later, they were calm.

"Roxanna," Mac said.

"Anna."

"I thought we were only allowed to call you Roxanna?"

"One person is allowed to call me Anna."

"But he's..."

"So now it's you."

"I'm hungry."

Mac looked around the small mess, at his friends, his family, at Anna.

"I'm not going to Theta Tauri Minor," he said.

"But your father..." Captain Wright began.

"I'm going to Honshos," Mac said.

There was silence.

"Then I guess that's where we're all going," Orville said

BOOK TWO

Part One

Chapter One

The one remaining Galconia outpost on Honshos was manned by a garrison of 1000 men and officers, sufficient to protect itself until help should arrive in the event of attack but otherwise excused any duty except to maintain a company presence. Theoretically it was a punishment detail to be staffed by rejects and incompetents. Every city and town, every village and hamlet on the planet had been comprehensively destroyed 20 years before to leave the place a smoking ruin. That, plus the culling and deportation of the vast bulk of the population, made Honshos deplorably uncivilised and therefore, according to the bureaucratic mind, entirely suitable for the correction of delinquents.

However, Honshos remained one of the all-time top-ten most pleasant planets in the Hyades and, so long as one kept to the magically scenic countryside and appreciated the exquisitely balmy weather, being sent there was much the same as being sentenced to paradise. The garrison maintained patrols of its immediate area and general eyespy surveillance but otherwise, within the bounds of lax military discipline, the inmates were free to entertain themselves pretty much as they chose and the range of their pastimes covered the gamut from divination to distillation to dissipation.

Thus, to say that when the alert sounded in the garrison's small command centre there was consternation is to understate the case by an order of magnitude.

Summoned by the duty corporal from his rewarding study of certain unusual aspects of the tri-continental flora of Honshos, Lieutenant Colonel Alkatani, officer commanding, cannoned through the door and panted to a halt.

"A Gadai ship?" he demanded wildly. "A Gadai ship?"

Major Norton, his second-in-command who had arrived seconds before, equally flustered, nodded wordlessly and pointed to the display. There, indisputably, was a large ship bearing the Gadai signature, indisputably on approach for Honshos.

Alkatani didn't hesitate for a second, and ever afterwards was proud to think of this as his supreme moment of independent command. His hand reached out, barely

trembling, flipped up the cryllic cover and hit the panic button. After 20 seconds of strident claxons, he keyed the mike.

"Men," he said. "This is a class one, grade A, acute emergency. I repeat acute. A Gadai ship has been detected on approach. In 45 minutes we face a full-scale Gadai inspection. I do not have to tell you what is at stake here. Every man must do his duty to the utmost. It's on the line here, men. Everything we hold dear."

On another of Honshos's three continents, Li-Morgana was equally troubled. Why should a Gadai ship suddenly be coming here? Apart from the token garrison, with its regular supply ships, Galiconia had not shown the slightest interest in the planet since the ruination 20 years before. And nothing had changed, at least nothing that Galiconia had any business knowing about. It didn't make sense. Her name-ward, Morgana-Li, rushed in.

"I heard," she said without preamble. "Is it really coming here?"

"Just entered planetary orbit." They stood side by side, studying the display and worrying.

On any other planet the two women would have been figures of admiration, both blonde, both tall, both leonine, but here in their own setting they were unremarkable, surrounded as they were by at least a dozen more women equally as attractive. Morgana-Li, sixteen and already rather more than just sweet, was somewhat slimmer than her guardian, to whom she was not related. Otherwise they might have been sisters.

They and their companions watched anxiously as the Gadai ship descended quickly to an altitude of 500 metres, spent two hours in the Honshos atmosphere, rose sharply and accelerated back off into space

In a complete breakdown of any remaining discipline, Alkatani and Norton pounded each other on the back and all but broke out into a celebration waltz. They didn't trouble to speculate on what the meaning of this surprise fly-by might be. All that mattered was the ship had gone. Their only slight reservation was the thought of all that frantic work gone to waste. But then, Norton thought with a nod to the gods of the Hyades, if such sacrifice had been sufficient to buy them this reprieve, it had been well worth it.

"Here," Li-Morgan said. "It looked to me like they might have touched here." She pointed to a spot towards the planet's equator, about three hours flight south-east of New Centre Abbey.

"I want a squadron ready to leave in half an hour, armed and with rations for two days."

Li-Wilhemena looked at her in surprise.

"But sir, why?" she said. "We don't even know that they did touch down."

"Call it a training flight, Will," Li-Morgana said. "But I want to make sure. There has to be a reason for what happened and I want to know what it is." Li-Morgana glanced at her name-ward lingering expectantly.

"Yes, all right," she said and smiled as Morgana-Li raced off to get her equipment.

Half an hour later, the patrol, 50 fliers broken up into three double deltas with Li-Morgana and her name-ward, already a flight hatamoto first dan, in the lead, ascended and headed south-east at flank speed. Discipline was tight and the flying far superior to the standards of the GDF, not that the defence force had ever put much faith in their fliers, preferring the brute force of massed aggers to the vagaries of individual prima donnas, who might be useful as scouts and snipers but who, on balance, were often more trouble than they were worth.

The patrol's route lay over what had once been a reasonably populated area and the procession of wrecked towns and once-prosperous steadings would have been depressing had they all not been long inured to the sight. Even so, Li-Morgana repeated to herself the vow all Samura took on full initiation: "One day. Some day. Our day!"

Here and there, smoke rose into the benign sky, evidence of indomitable regeneration, the triumph of human hope over bitter experience, regeneration that Galiconia would permit until the time, possibly hundreds of years hence, it was decided that Honshos was worth reclaiming. Galiconia Enterprises Inc. only ever admitted one prescription for rebellion: ruination, disengagement that the planet might be rebuilt at the remaining inhabitants' expense, followed by recolonisation. While accepting that rebellion, in the first place, was a failure of administration, long practice had demonstrated that the ruination-regeneration policy was by far the most efficient and economical method of maintaining profitable order throughout thousands of diverse worlds. Indeed, in the event that a whole sector might be growing unruly, Galiconia was not above ruining a couple of planets on spec to encourage a more co-operative and respectful attitude elsewhere.

Li-Morgana had little hope of being able to fulfil the initiation vow herself, but it was her sacred duty to pass it on, and to build for the day, the one day, the inevitable day, the day that they would fight again. She doubted even that her name-ward might see the day, but Morgana-Li's name-ward might and as well as her troops of the time she would be leading the ghosts of the thousands of women who had devoted themselves to the cause.

The small scout ship, the James Macgilliguddy, until relatively recently the property of Galiconia Enterprises Inc., sat comfortably and inconspicuously tucked into a clearing amongst the trees of a picturesque river bank. The ship's crew were ranged before it, indulging in a pleasant picnic on the grass. The scene was idyllic and completely novel to at least three of the six members, who had never seen a river before, not in the flesh so to speak, nor trees, nor grass, nor puffy little white clouds and

bright blue sky. It was warm and languid and all six were feeling lazy and carefree at the end of a long, arduous voyage that had lasted more than a year and which had brought them here, to their destination, by way of every grotty, little sneak-hole in the Hyades. They shared a sense of achievement, and of expectation.

"But what if they don't come?" Orville said, his mouth distressingly full.

Mac shrugged. "Then I'm wrong," he said. "There isn't anyone here worth meeting, after all."

"Do you think they'll come?" Roxanna asked.

Captain Wright also shrugged. "Your guess is as good as mine, or Mac's," he said, and then: "If they are what we suspect, they'll come."

Roxanna picked a blade of grass and inspected it curiously.

"Funny," she said inconsequentially. "I never thought I'd ever see real grass. It's nice. I like it." She smiled at Mac. "Thank you, kind sir," she added. "It was worth coming just to see this."

Mac grinned back.

"What about we go for a swim?" he asked, indicating the river.

"Can you swim?" Roxanna said.

"I was hoping you could teach me."

"I can swim," Shelby said unexpectedly.

"Very well," John said.

"No swimming," Wright said. "Not till we know what might be in the water. And I want a snooze," he added, patting his non-existent belly.

"Come on," Mac said. "We'll go for a walk, then."

"Take a blaster," Wright said. "Just in case."

Mac dived back inside the ship and strapped on a weapon from the rack by the open air-lock, then as an after-thought he went to his cabin and pulled on a glove.

Roxanna inspected him sternly as he returned.

"You promised you'd stop wearing that," she said, the bugle of old battle lines clear in her voice.

"I will," Mac said. "It's not active... Just in case," he added. "You never know. Come on, it's too nice to fight." Roxanna frowned, torn between giving in to the winning smile she loved and the knowledge that eventually the thormalium in the glove would kill him.

"Come on," Orville said. "He has years before he has to worry..."

"It's all right for you..." Roxanna began to say hotly but then surrendered. Mac was right. It was too nice to fight.

"Up," she said to Orville, who twisted the small anti-gravity canister strapped to his chest and pushed himself off the ground to float beside her.

"Anyway," Orville said. "What about me? I have to use it all the time."

"You're just my brother," Roxanna said. But it was true. Orville, for the moment at least, was far more at risk of thormalium poisoning than Mac as the only alternative was to carry him everywhere, at least until he had the facilities to build himself another floater. It was just as worrying.

She took Orville's trace in one hand, put her other firmly in Mac's and the three set off towards the river, leaving the older men behind them in various stages of slumber.

Li-Morgana brought the patrol to a slow hover and raised her farsee. There. Seven clicks, maybe eight, by the trees. That shape. Was that a ship? How could a ship be there? It had gone back off into space. Not a ship. Not a Gadai ship anyway. Too small. Far too small. No Gadai ship could nestle amongst the trees like that. A Gadai would just squash them to matchwood. What then?

She gave a series of signals and with perfect discipline the double deltas behind her reformed into three columns of two abreast and she lead them down into the cut of the river until they were just a metre above the water. Then slowly, pausing at each bend to inspect the way ahead, they flew cautiously on.

The three had gone further than they meant and Roxanna was thinking that her father would be growing anxious, always assuming he had even woken up. She stopped and felt Orville bump gently into her from behind. She was just about to speak when he put a hand over her mouth and pointed. Mac, she saw, was looking in the same direction, towards the river, now a little way distant from the path they were following and more or less screened by thick growth. Her eyes widened.

Then Mac was grinning at her, the light of battle in his eyes.

"Take this," he whispered into her ear, unstrapping the blaster. "And take Orville back to the ship as quickly as you can."

"What...?" she began to ask, but already he was moving further up the path away from both the ship and the strange troop of women fliers she had glimpsed distantly through the foliage.

She looked at Orville and Orville looked at her. They weren't brother and sister for nothing and who was Mac to give orders anyway? With Orville's hand in hers, Roxanna moved quickly back the way they'd come but once they were abreast of the women, she slowed and kept pace. Both were determined to see what Mac might perpetrate and this strange troop was worth studying of itself. They counted 50 fliers and were impressed at their rigid control.

Mac waited until he was out of sight, activated the thormalium vial on his glove and took off. To fly properly again after so long was sheerest intoxication, to fly free for the

first time in his life with nothing but the sky to limit him, no lucent, no practice hall, no cauldron, was to combine the most intense exhilaration with the headiest of wine. For the first few minutes Mac was transported to another plane where all that existed was the music he carved in the warm, caressing air, arpeggios and cadenzas, crescendos and galliards, rhapsodies, scherzos and sarabandes, giges and glissandos, and, at the last, a soaring monumental chaconne.

With a start he finally remembered that he was supposed to be a man on a mission and for the first time he understood the warnings of old Boss Bassinger about the raptures of flying, the danger. He climbed quickly and then smiled. He was not too late despite his expression session. The troop of women still had one bend to round before they were in view of the ship, nor were they flying a cap. In fact, Mac thought, it was working out perfectly. He climbed higher and put the planet's star behind him. He had never had a sun to use as a weapon before, but he had read about it and the idea had always appealed to him.

Roxanna and Orville finally assumed that Mac must be planning some sort of confrontation in front of the ship, and taking care not to be seen from the river, Roxanna started to run, Orville still in tow. She was in time to warn the others, who indeed had been wondering whether they should mount a search party.

"Quick," she said. "Down to the river. They're coming and Mac's up to something."

Wright looked worried.

"I wish..." he started to say, but cut himself short and hurried to catch up as the others were already jogging down to the bank.

They were in time to see the three columns of fliers round the last bend and slow suspiciously. At last, the woman in the lead pointed and they came on.

Neither Li-Morgana nor any of the others had the slightest inkling of trouble. Mac came from out of the glare behind them in a vertical power dive and at terminal velocity described a tight spiral along the centre column, passing between Li-Morgana and the water below her, on his back. He smiled politely at her as he flashed past, only inches away, before he boomed and zoomed.

Roxanna and her father looked at each other with horrified amusement. They loved Mac in very different ways but were often moved by the exact same exasperation. They turned back to the spectacle.

It was a rout. Of those in the centre column, most were so shocked that they ended up in the water, swimming, and those who stayed aloft did so only in the wildest disorder. There were numerous sharp collisions and a great deal of bad language. Mac topped out and took a moment to contemplate the mayhem he had wrought. It was beautiful, just beautiful, something he would have loved to share with Bassinger or

Branco. It took a flier to really appreciate the exact degree of creative chaos he had wrought. Mac had this platoon of would-be warriors absolutely at his mercy and had he been so-minded, he knew he could have taken out every last one of them with only the most token resistance coming his way. His self-satisfied grin abruptly froze. A large fin, a seriously large fin, preceded by a respectable bow-wave was heading for the struggling swimmers. Without a moment's hesitation, something noted by a number of observers, Mac rolled into a feet-first power dive and dropped out of the sky, landing precisely at the apex of the vee. He disappeared with a vast splash.

"But he can't swim," Roxanna said. "He'll drown."

"Which would serve him right," her father replied tartly. "Our first contact, and what does he do? Start a war."

"He really will drown," Roxanna said, starting to strip off her boots.

"And what do you think you're going to do about it? Remember? You can't swim either."

"Well Shelby, then. He can swim..."

"He'll be all right," Shelby said comfortably.

"Watch," John said.

And as he spoke, Mac flew up out of the water wiping at his eyes with his free hand. A moment later, a giant fish also surfaced, but belly-up. Mac, quite recovered from the rapture and beginning to wonder just how much trouble he might find himself in this time, flew decorously back to the bank where he strove to efface himself behind Shelby and Lanfranchi. They were having none of it, however, and Mac found himself alone, isolated and dripping, when a splendid looking woman with draggly wet hair and the square shoulders of her impressive over-robe in ludicrous collapse stalked up the sand from the water. She was followed by another, younger and evidently enraged version of herself. Both wore light breast-plates and had a pair of swords, one long and one shorter, thrust through their waist-bands. Mac lost any remaining inclination to smirk when he realised that the two were being supported on either flank by at least a dozen more women, each still dry and each aiming a serviceable, well-worn blaster exactly at him.

Captain Wright stepped forward.

"Greetings," he said. "May we offer you refreshments? A towel perhaps?"

Oh no, Roxanna thought. He's as bad as Mac. Now he's going to make fun of them. But wiser than his daughter, Captain Wright was making a subtle but definite point: that this well-armed, well-prepared group of women with odds of fifty to one in their favour had just been reduced to a rabble by one lone flier, and that had he, Captain Wright, wished, he then could have destroyed them at leisure.

The point was taken. Li-Morgana gestured and the blasters were reluctantly lowered.

"Congratulations," she said. "You bested us. And far too easily at that." Her name-ward snorted angrily and her troops looked at each other uneasily. They had a fair idea of what that might mean for their immediate future.

Captain Wright waved a hand in modest negation.

"But," Li-Morgana continued. "Even if you do not wear a Galiconia uniform, you fly a Galiconia ship. And we tend to kill men. Particularly Galiconia men."

Mac stepped forward. The mischievous boy was suddenly gone and instead he was the tall young man with the air of command to which his companions were slowly becoming accustomed.

"If we are unwelcome," Mac said. "Then the responsibility is mine. I asked my family to come here with me. I thought we might find... friends."

"And why might you think that?" Li-Morgana demanded with soft menace, and suddenly the blasters were again pointing straight at him.

"Because of our ship," Mac said, untroubled. "Our ship is named the James Macgilliguddy." There was a hiss of sharply indrawn breath, a hiss more felt than heard.

"And who was James Macgilliguddy to you?" Li-Morgana said.

"He was the man who saved me and my friends from Galiconia," Mac said. "And he was the gladiator who refused to fight and execute Morgana of Honshos in the great arena of Redux before the Chairman of Galiconia, Osmond von Osmond, the thirteenth."

"I am Li-Morgana," the woman said. "My name-mother died."

"But not because of James," Mac said. "As I believe you know."

"We know," Li-Morgana said, and then: "Why did you kill the mulwong?"

The question, at a tangent, took Mac by surprise.

"The what?"

"The fish. Mulwong are harmless. They breed in the estuary here. It was only curious."

"I'm sorry," Mac said. "I thought you were being attacked."

"He thought he was risking his life... to save yours," Roxanna added angrily.

Li-Morgana shifted her attention. The girl had moved to stand beside the boy. She was small and dark but very pretty, quite up to Honshos standards, Li-Morgana noted. It was also clear that she was very much in love with the boy. Her misfortune, Li-Morgana thought.

"Why have you come here?" she said.

"The enemy of my enemy is my friend," Captain Wright said.

"But are you the enemy of my enemy?" Li-Morgana demanded.

"Perhaps," Captain Wright said, and then: "Is that fish good to eat by any chance?"

Li-Morgana looked at him hard.

"Very," she said.

"Well then. There should be enough of it to feed all of us three or four times over...
Can I invite you to dinner?"

Chapter Two

Former trooper Ptolemy Tranter, on balance and all things considered, was reasonably grateful to the gods, always assuming that such existed. On the one hand, the said putative gods had conspired to render him a deaf-mute, dependent for his life on the very serum that had produced the condition in the first place, but on the other hand they had also brought him into contact with the Chairman, a man for whom Tranter had developed considerable affection and respect and whom Tranter was proud to serve.

In return, Tranter had saved the Chairman from a position rapidly threatening to become fatal, and had then appointed himself, when not otherwise engaged, the Chairman's chief bodyguard. Subsequently, when it became clear that Tranter was also extremely intelligent, he had naturally assumed the additional position of personal assistant and then chief of staff to the most powerful man in the Hyades, thereby himself becoming extremely powerful. And now, in many respects, Tranter found his affliction decidedly useful. Although an accomplished lip reader in Galiconia standard and numbers of the more common dialects, he never had to understand anything he chose not to, and perforce he never had to speak and therefore commit himself to anything at all.

He rose from his display, knocked at the door that separated his outer office from the Chairman's sanctum, waited till an inconspicuous light glowed green and then entered. The room before him was large to cavernous, panelled in pealed-pearl with a fused blood-rock floor and a ceiling of palest, veined malachite. The Chairman's huge desk had been carved from solid, synthetic emerald, and there were the other usual executive appurtenances: a vast conference table of petrified oak and a more casual setting of couches and floaters about an elaborate occasional table, all in variations of fabulously rare, antique gold leaf.

Tranter, even now, found the effect breathtaking, all the while well understanding that this was the equivalent of the throne rooms of history, designed to humble supplicants with the might and power of the occupant. He knew, further, that this in no way reflected the chairman's own taste, his personal quarters being austere to monkish.

The Chairman looked up from his desk and raised an eyebrow.

"A Gadai anomaly," Tranter signed. "What we've been waiting for. It looks like them."

"Tell me," the Chairman signed. He knew, of course, that Tranter could read his lips but the Chairman valued his fluency with his fingers. Also, one never knew who might somehow be listening.

"The ship dropped into the Falebeen Sector, spent time in the Honshos atmosphere and left. The signature disappeared behind a sun some hours later."

The Chairman sat back in his floater and steepled his fingers, before signing:

"You think?"

Tranter nodded.

"The real Gadai ship is actually, as we speak, so to speak, 14 parsecs away in the vicinity of Rodomontado."

"Orville?" the Chairman said.

"Orville," Tranter signed.

"You think they landed on Honshos?"

"I do."

The Chairman suddenly went off at a tangent.

"Isn't it about time we did something about Orville hacking into the CAW?" he demanded.

"What?" Tranter replied, and they both sighed, for both knew that if the CAW were to function at all then the levels of security could never be set high enough to exclude genuine geniuses, of which Orville happened to be one. Not for the first time, the Chairman found himself regretting the Vengeva conventions which had effectively put an end to all artificial intelligence. A good A-I brain would fix Orville right up. Alternatively, there ought to be a convention that put an end to Orville.

"You may be right," the Chairman signed. "It feels right, but obviously we need confirmation."

Tranter looked at him searchingly.

"If you feel Hasdrubal has gone to Honshos, do you know why?" Tranter signed.

The Chairman thought.

"No," he signed. "Not really. It just feels right. I don't know why."

"We need to know." And it was a measure of the respect that had grown between the two men that Tranter felt free to address the Chairman so bluntly.

Lieutenant Colonel Alkatani – Mali to his friends – was distraught. First the mysterious Gadai ship and now this, just hours later. He looked away from the display of the hypercom link, counted to ten and looked again, but the message was still there. Of itself it was simple enough, but the implications for the way of life that Alkatani had come to hold dear were dire indeed. There was no practical difficulty in arranging for all ten of their remote eyespies to monitor a path centred on a particular latitude – Norton would be capable, should be capable of managing such a simple task – but that someone at headquarters was suddenly taking such specific interest in Honshos boded

very ill for Alkatani's rewarding study of certain unusual aspects of the tri-continental flora.

Had Alkatani displayed more interest in matters military and less in comparative inter-planetary botany he might have realised that the course decreed for the eyespies exactly duplicated the course taken by the Gadai ship earlier in the day. That such a simple connection completely eluded him explained very precisely how it was that he came to be exiled to Honshos.

Shelby and John had come into their own. At some point in their chequered past they had worked as cooks to a mine camp and were well-accustomed to feeding large numbers of people quickly and efficiently. They had divided the Samura into details, some for firewood, some to dig a trench for the fire, some to gut and butcher the huge fish, and already the aroma of the fine white flesh sizzling on the hot stones was making people salivate. A fourth detail emerged from the forest with bunches of some sort of fruit harvested from high in the canopy, and with large ribbon leaves that were torn into sections to use as platters. It was a scene of orderly and delightfully expectant activity.

Captain Wright, Mac, Li-Morgana and her name-ward stood apart in a grouping that was not quite a group. Roxanna and Orville watched from a distance. From time to time Mac smiled hopefully in the direction of the two women but was sternly ignored. The only one of the four who seemed comfortable with the long silence was Captain Wright. At last, when the smell of baking fish was over-powering, he said:

"Shall we eat?"

"I would rather talk," Li-Morgana said.

"You have power to negotiate?"

"I do."

"Then by all means," Captain Wright said a touch wistfully. "Let us talk. But these two should eat." Mac and Morgana-Li were sent away and the two elders began to stroll in the opposite direction. They had moved only a few steps when a shout brought them short.

Li-Morgana had set a token picket and the gunso in charge was flying rapidly towards them.

"Sir," the gunso said, pointing to her wrist monitor. "Eyespies coming."

"How long?" Li-Morgana asked quietly.

"Sir, ten minutes."

Li-Morgana surveyed the scene. Although Wright had brought the ship as close as possible to the trees it was only partially screened.

"We can't do much about that," she said, pointing. "But get everyone and everything else under cover."

"Yes sir," the gunso started to say, but Captain Wright interrupted.

"Allow me," he said, and without waiting for assent called to Orville in a carrying voice: "Holoc protection. Fast, please." And he pointed upwards.

Orville put down the mulwong steak that Roxanna had just brought him and she took him at the run back to the ship. A minute later they had re-appeared, Orville bearing a compact machine. They moved to one side until they had a clear view of the forest behind and then Orville set his device on a tripod and peered into a small screen. A moment later, he straightened and waved.

"Now," Captain Wright said. "Perhaps we can talk in peace."

"May I ask what that is?" Li-Morgana said, not troubling to hide her curiosity.

"Certainly. It's a modified holoc projector. Modified to provide digital camouflage. All the eyespies will see is more forest. And because Orville is really very clever it also disperses the infra-red signals our heat creates."

"And our lifesign?"

"We have become little forest creatures. Birds, perhaps."

Li-Morgana digested the information.

"Who is Orville?" she asked at last.

"My son," Captain Wright said. "His legs are crippled. But his brain is quite extraordinary. Unfortunately the lack of a properly equipped workshop is limiting his talents, but he had no difficulty modifying a standard holoc projector to his own design on our little ship. Useful, I think?"

"So what other secrets do you have?"

"Secrets?" Wright smiled gently. "If I've just told you about it, it can hardly be a secret, now can it?"

Li-Morgana kept her face impassive.

"You were the Gadai ship?" It was a statement more than a question. Captain Wright nodded. "And now they look for you?"

"I doubt it very much," Wright said. "A routine check...The Gadai ship, if anyone was watching, has quietly disappeared out into the nebula."

"So," Li-Morgana said. "Your Orville is a CAWman as well...?"

"An engineer. Yes. He is. Anything technical ... And you have secrets too, I think."

Li-Morgana stopped and turned to look at him.

"We have secrets," she agreed. They started walking again.

"The boy," she said. "He flies well."

Captain Wright laughed with genuine amusement.

"Match him if you can," he said. Li-Morgana frowned.

"We can match him."

Wright laughed again. "You can't," he said flatly. "Not in a million years."

"We can," Li-Morgana snapped, and then: "Is this a challenge?" She shifted the katana and wakizashi in her sash.

"Would you like it to be?"

Again Li-Morgana stopped. "Challenges end in death," she said.

Captain Wright regarded her carefully.

"Come," he said. "If you will." And he led Li-Morgana back towards the fire where now nearly everyone was seated and engaged with charming chunks of fish accompanied by the fruit from the forest, fruit that had a sort of sweet, sour, lemony flavour and which complemented the fillets wonderfully well.

"Mac," Captain Wright said. "I'm sorry to interrupt your dinner. But we need a demonstration. One of your practice routines, I think."

Mac searched for a clue in the captain's face and eventually was rewarded with a slight nod. Very well. Full on it would be. He activated his glove and rose to stand vertically at about head height. He smiled at Shelby and John who began to clap a complicated, syncopated rhythm. Mac took the beat for a bar or two and then began to dance. In mid-air.

Almost instantly the Samura abandoned eating to gape in astonishment. They were all fine fliers but what they were seeing in degree of difficulty transcended anything they could attempt by a vast gulf, by chasms and mountain ranges, by planets, suns and black holes. To dance in mid-air, with no resistance, no floor and the only control the synapses of the left hand was little short of miraculous; something that Mac had perfected through the long reaches of space where he had had only the little ship's minimal artificial gravity and its tiny hold for a training room.

After a couple of minutes, Mac caught another nod from his uncle and brought the routine to a close with the grandest of grands jetes and a cartwheel that segued into the splits, all still in mid-air.

There was silence as Shelby and John dropped their hands. A second or two later, there was a spontaneous roar of applause from all the assembled company, all except one. Morgana-Li's jaw was clenched and her hands gripped her arms so tight that they showed white. Mac straightened and bowed, itself a feat that none of the women could begin to attempt, and dropped back down to the ground.

For the first time, Li-Morgana allowed herself a small smile.

"Perhaps not a challenge," she said. Wright nodded with masterly tact.

"What is the young man's name?" she went on and Wright sighed. This was where the fencing stopped and the difficulties began. To tell truth or to lie? Always the question. In the end he prevaricated.

"One of his names is Macgilliguddy," he said. "James Macgilliguddy raised him."

"And taught him to fly?"

"He needed no teaching."

"And his other names?"

"Are his," Wright said. "And his to divulge should he choose."

"Then you do not have the power to negotiate?" Li-Morgana was suddenly cold.

"I have the power, but as yet I know little of you either. You have given me a name, but other than that I know only that you lead an armed troop and that you recognise the name James Macgilliguddy. Oh, and that your people like to eat barbecued fish after a swim."

"What do you seek here? Why have you come?" The questions were blunt and carried an edge.

"Sanctuary," Wright said, which was true as far as it went. "My nephew..."

"Your nephew?"

"Near enough. Technically we are some sort of cousin. My nephew... believes that you will grant us sanctuary to fulfil the debt of honour you owe to James, the man he thinks of as his father."

"Again!" Li-Morgana said, not troubling to disguise her mounting irritation. "Again we come to the question of his name. Debt of honour or no, I will not grant sanctuary to someone who has insufficient honour of his own to stand by his name."

Captain Wright kept his face impassive but cursed inwardly. He should have lied.

"In exchange for sanctuary," he said. "We offer certain advantages."

"We need nothing."

"We offer a way to manufacture thormalium."

"We have our own source."

Wright studied the woman's face, and gambled.

"You have what you captured before the planet was ruined," he said, and for a long moment thought he had lost.

"I am Li-Morgana," she said at last. "Shoga of the Samura of Honshos."

"I am Captain Winston Wright," he replied. "Once personal pilot to Chairman Osmond von Osmond. I travel with my daughter, Roxanna, my son, Orville, my friends Shelby and Lanfranchi, and my nephew, who will speak for himself."

"The boy is your leader?"

"Not perhaps in name," Wright said. "At least not yet. But we go where he goes."

"Then let him speak, if you will not."

Mac was summoned and realised as he approached that the meeting was at a crisis. Captain Wright was carefully expressionless, while Li-Morgana's face was closed and threatening.

He stopped before them and waited.

"Your name," Li-Morgana said abruptly. "What is your name?"

"Hasdrubal Daphne Albright," Mac said without hesitation, and speaking the strict truth.

Right answer, wrong question, Wright thought and waited. Would Mac reveal who he was? And Wright was unsure what he wanted to happen. On the one hand there was danger in being open, on the other, there was probably greater danger in concealment.

Mac spoke again, still in the same clear voice.

"I am the bastard son of the Chairman of Galconia," he said. "You will know that my father has named his personal ship The-All-Sun-and-the-All-Moon. It is in memory of my mother, Grace Albright."

Of course, Wright thought. He had never made the connection and felt suddenly foolish. Mac's statement had all the conviction of simple, incontestable fact.

"Which is why everyone calls me Mac," Mac finished. "So much easier..."

Unconsciously, Li-Morgana's hand went to the katana at her waist.

"You tell me this, knowing I could hold you hostage?" she said.

"I doubt you'll get much of a ransom," Mac replied cheerfully. "My father is extremely cross with me."

"Then if I have you killed he will be grateful?"

"Quite possibly," Mac said. "But do you want the Chairman grateful to you?"

Captain Wright preserved his poker face, but only just. Suck on that, madame, he thought to himself. Li-Morgana's hand left the hilt of her katana.

"Your uncle says you ask for sanctuary?" she said. "Sanctuary from what, precisely?"

"My father, of course," Mac said. "I told you. He's really angry with me, with us."

"Why?"

"Because I refuse to do what I'm told."

"You could have wealth and power beyond imagining," she said with mounting incredulity. "And yet you chose to come to this ruined planet to ask for sanctuary? Because your father is angry with you? Because you won't do what you're told?"

Mac sighed. "It is a little more complicated than that," he admitted. "I was half-brother to Osmond von Osmond the fourteenth. He tried to kill me, several times. His commander-in-chief is probably still hunting us. I was a pawn in a contest between him and my father and I don't choose to be anybody's pawn." Wright admired the disingenuous precision of Mac's explanation, which was strictly true if not truth entire.

"And for how long do you seek sanctuary?" Li-Morgana asked. Unwillingly, she found herself warming to this pleasant young man with his simple honesty, not to mention the fact that he flew like an angel, apparently without the need for enhancers.

"As long as you'll have us," Mac said. "We've been on the run for a year. We'd like to stop for a while."

"A year," Li-Morgana said sharply. "So the eyespies *were* hunting for you."

"But they didn't find us. And with your help, they won't."

"But if they do find you, and we are found to be helping you..."

Captain Wright decided to intervene,

"Which is why," he said. "That we are offering you means to have your own independent supply of thormalium. We would not expect you to take the risk without proper reward."

"You actually expect me to believe that?" Li-Morgana demanded. "That you can make thormalium. What is the word for the ancient magic? Alchemy? You practise alchemy?"

"If you like to call it that," Wright said. "But the fact is, we can and do make thormalium."

"How?" Li-Morgana said with deep suspicion. "Or is that another secret?"

"Orville," Captain Wright said simply. "It was a difficult... struggle to acquire the necessary items, but we managed in the end."

"I think you should tell me."

"It's a very long story."

"Nevertheless," Li-Morgana said. "To grant you sanctuary I must have the full truth. A moment..."

She gestured to Morgana-Li, who hurried across.

"When they have finished eating," Li-Morgana said and expanded the display on her reacom, "I want you to take the patrol on a route flight, touching here, here and here."

Morgana-Li's face fell.

"But that's at least four days," she protested. "We have rations for two."

"You think you don't deserve it? I could make it five days, or six. And you have just eaten a free meal."

"Sir!" Morgana-Li snapped out, barely troubling to conceal her anger. That boy. It was his fault. He must live on enhancers. There was no other explanation for the way he had been able to shatter them. And now this... punishment detail on short rations. But she would get even. Oh yes. Then anxiety for her name-mother kicked in.

"But what about you?" she said. "We can't leave you here alone."

"Leave a gocho and four others."

"But sir..."

"They will be quite adequate. Dismissed, hatamoto."

Morgana-Li opened her mouth but at the look on her name-mother's face, abruptly saluted and turned away.

"Now," Li-Morgana said to Captain Wright and to Mac. "Shall we make ourselves comfortable?"

Part Two

Chapter One

Mac looked around the small mess, at his friends, his family, at Anna.

"I'm not going to Theta Tauri Minor," he said.

"But your father..." Captain Wright began.

"I'm going to Honshos," Mac said.

There was silence.

"Then I guess that's where we're all going," Orville remarked with a grin.

"But why Honshos?" Roxanna said.

Mac looked at her and said very seriously: "Even if I wanted to have anything to do with... with my real father, how long do you think I'll last on Theta Tauri Minor before one of Osmond's assassins gets to me?"

"But Honshos?" Roxanna persisted. "I've never heard of it except when you mentioned it that day back in the tunnels. What, if anything, is on Honshos?"

"Rebels," Mac said. "At least there were once."

"Rebels..." Roxanna began but was interrupted by her father.

"Mac's right," Wright said. "He either kills Osmond or Osmond will kill him. And in the meantime we need a refuge."

"But Osmond is his brother," Roxanna protested. "He can't kill Osmond."

"Watch me," Mac said grimly. "He killed James, in cold blood, never mind what he's done to the rest of us."

"You can't," Roxanna said, appalled. "Think what it will do to you."

"Think what will happen to him if he doesn't," Orville said crisply. "Have you forgotten the screamer?" There was silence.

Nobody could ever forget the screamer or cease wondering at the fact that Mac had not only managed to survive but somehow to emerge from the experience still sane.

"Is Honshos where I think it is?" Shelby asked at last.

"And wasn't it ruined?" John said.

"Yes to both," Wright said. "We could, as the Chairman calculated, get to Theta Tauri Minor without stopping, but Honshos is well beyond the range of this little ship. By the way, what are we going to call her? She only has a number at the moment..."

"I have a name," Mac said.

"What?"

"The James Macgilliguddy."

Everybody nodded. It was only right.

"Agreed," Wright said unnecessarily. "Anyway, the point is, to get to Honshos we'll have to refuel and resupply more times than I care to think about, and that's a problem. We have no money and nothing to trade."

"I thought the idea was to make and sell black market thormalium," Mac said.

"It was," Orville said sarcastically. "But that was predicated on us escaping on a transport with a decent workshop where I could knock up a matter-maker."

"Well I'm so sorry," Mac snapped, flaring up. "I apologise for James that he could only manage to die for a scout ship, and that it fails to meet your exacting requirements."

"I didn't mean that," Orville said. "You know I didn't mean that. And James was family..."

"We loved James," Roxanna said.

Mac shrugged angrily. The death of his step-father was still extremely raw. Roxanna took his hand and refused to let him pull it away.

"So," Captain Wright said, looking anywhere but at his daughter, who suddenly, again, seemed a stranger to him. "We need a plan and what I suggest is this: we take a wide swing back around Redux, then head for Cram to trade some of the ship's thormalium on the black market for what Orville needs in the way of materials and tools. We then use the ship's reactor as power to produce enough thormalium to replace the ship's supply and to pay our way to Honshos."

At the mention of Cram even Mac forgot his bad temper: Cram the legendary, Cram the exotic, Cram the oh so dangerous siren of the Hyades, where anyone could buy anything, sell anything, do anything and lose everything, including their lives, in the blink of an eye. If the Chairman of Galconia was the most powerful person in the cluster and the Palwallum of the Gadai a not so distant second, then the Krus of Cram ran third. With violent caprice he ruled the ungovernable underbelly that not even Galconia had ever been able to suppress and which eventually it had been content to confine to Cram, always allowing that the Krus's tentacles could reach mostwhere at need.

Roxanna shivered. Cram was where the bogeyman of her infancy lived and the name still sparked genuine fear.

"Oh father," she said. "That's mad. We finally get away from Redux and lose Uncle James doing it, and now you want to take us to Cram? It's too dangerous."

"I'm sorry," Wright said. "But actually, if we're not going to Theta Tauri, then it's far too dangerous to go anywhere but Cram. There we have some chance of buying what Orville needs before bringing everybody down on our heads. And unless we get a matter-maker it's only a question of time, a short time, before we're finished."

"But if we know that Cram is the only place we can go," Orville said, "then won't everybody else." There was a long silence. Eventually Wright shrugged.

"Maybe, maybe not," he said. "But it's still our only chance."

Osmond von Osmond, fourteenth of the name, and the one legitimate son of the Chairman, had spent days in a comatose trance trying to absorb the enormity of his failure. No, not his failure. Slade's failure. Dostoi's failure. His stupid deaf-mutes' failure. Everybody's failure. But not his. Never his.

They had been there, so close, within his grasp, breathing his air, stinking up his space, and now they were gone, both of them, free, laughing at him, mocking him, vilifying him, his hated father and his even more hateful, usurping, presumptuous, bastard, born-to-die half-brother. It was intolerable, excruciating, insufferable, unbearable, insupportable. It was, in short, unendurable.

The trance was replaced by a rage that was truly terrifying to those unfortunate enough to be subjected to it. Servants drew lots before being forced to enter his chambers and a stretcher-floater was required on three separate occasions to fetch some poor wretch out again. Dostoi lived for days with a crippling migraine brought on by fear.

Finally, Osmond retreated to his nautch-chaise, where he remained completely undisturbed for a record two days and fourteen hours.

When, at last, Dostoi was eventually summoned to Osmond's ridiculous mountain meadow, he was sure one of two things would happen. Either he would be killed on the spot, or he would be forced to witness the cam Osmond held over him being hypercommended to the authorities on Theta Tauri Minor. Literally trembling, Dostoi insinuated himself into Osmond's quarters hoping that the afterlife, where he would no doubt shortly arrive, would feature a sunny courtyard, a grape arbour, and an excellent lunch laid for two. Osmond, however, was spent at last and Dostoi found him listless, apathetic and distinctly unpleasant to be near. He required Dostoi to produce both a bath and Slade.

General Marcus Alexi Slade was still wearing the hook. As yet he had been unable to spare the month in a pod that would be required to regrow his hand and as time wore on he found that the hook, at first detested, actually had certain advantages. It had already proved its worth as a weapon of last resort and there was no denying that it lent his appearance a certain air that could be varied from dashing to intimidating with the most discreet of gestures. Also, it appealed to a particular sort of woman.

He found Osmond pale but even less interesting than usual and once again winced at the irony with which their fates had become inextricably tangled. It had been a sad miscalculation on his part, he was honest enough to accept, and during the grace period of Osmond's incapacitation he had come to a decision.

"Well?" Osmond demanded with more than his usual boorishness. He too had come to regret ever prospering Slade's career, but the truth of the matter was that he now had no choice but to depend on the man.

"Well what?" Slade replied with open contempt.

"The situation," Osmond snapped. "What is the situation?"

"Your father," he said crisply, "is well on the way back to Theta Tauri Minor. He should be there..."

"Not him," Osmond interrupted crossly. "The other one. My... brother." The word stuck in his throat. "My bastard brother," he added viciously.

"He and the others have managed to disappear," Slade said evenly.

"What?" Osmond yelped. It was almost a shriek.

"They were heading for Theta Tauri as the Chairman ordered, but a bit over two days out the signature of the ship vanished."

"We lost the ship...?" Osmond was incredulous. "How can we lose the ship?"

"You forget," Slade said, wondering if the idiot had ever actually realised. "They have a CAWman on board. A very good one. God knows how long they were living down there in the tunnels without anyone ever realising and they very nearly got clean away, too." He lifted his hook and Osmond shifted uncomfortably. It was true. Slade and his hook had saved that particular day but it didn't change the fact that ultimately, Slade had let his father and the bastard both escape. Osmond nearly burst into tears again as the thought of how close he had come to making himself chairman thrust its way back into his mind

"So," Osmond said, when he had recovered himself. "That's it, is it? They've vanished and there's nothing we can do except sit here and wait for my father to blast us out."

"The Chairman will not attack us here," Slade said. "He won't risk any interruption to mining on Redux or the Gadai will be at his throat..."

"Good," Osmond interrupted.

Slade snapped. It was time. It was past time.

"You are a complete fool," he said coldly. "You are debauched. You are undisciplined. You are dangerous. If you recall, you couldn't even run a betting scam successfully. As it is my misfortune, an error I admit, to have tied my fate to yours and as I have no intention of being further damaged by your incompetence you are henceforward relieved of any involvement in anything to do with anything that matters. Is that clear? You are required only to remain alive and to make sure that you do, as of now you will be placed under 24-hour guard."

Osmond gaped at him uncomprehendingly.

"Are you out of your mind?" he said at last. "Have you forgotten who I am?"

"Must you be fatuous?" Slade said. "You will do exactly as you're told, when you're told, and in due course I will make you chairman of the board of Galiconia, when you will continue to do exactly as you're told."

"Help!" Osmond screamed suddenly. "Help! Guards! Assassins...!"

"They're deaf," Slade said. "And they're mine. Or had you forgotten that too?"

Osmond gulped foolishly.

Abruptly Slade swung on his heel and made to leave.

"Wait," Osmond said, and there was suddenly a note of pleading in his voice. "Please wait."

Slade stopped.

"Is this a coup?" Osmond said. "What are you going to do to me? Are you going to kill me?"

"I told you," Slade said, his mind already elsewhere. "It's a correction, not a coup. I'm going to make you chairman of Galiconia, the most powerful man in the cluster, but answering to me."

The Palwallum had risen to her position of eminence, in many ways almost equal to but ultimately so inferior to that of the Chairman, by dint of rat-faced cunning. It was true that legions of misguided people joined the Gadai with notions of a well-paid life spent serving the public, but the Palwallum herself since her days as a junior clerk on Middlemass, had only ever had one ambition – power, power that one day she would contrive to pass on to her son. If, as the old saw had it, power tended to corrupt, the Palwallum was more than happy to be totally corrupted, and let the cluster at large beware.

On the rare occasions that the Palwallum revealed herself at all, the hoi polloi were presented with a woman of impressive stature and gravitas, a figure both reassuring and yet magisterial, a woman, in short, to rival the Chairman, and one way or another, rival the Chairman she would, starting with the curious anomaly which had Theta Tauri Minor, the Chairman's seat, as the capitol of the Hyades and not Theta Tauri Major which happened to be the Palwallum's seat.

Like all individuals at the head of a huge enterprise, the Palwallum was a prisoner of what those beneath her chose to tell her. It was either that or face drowning in the detail. Accordingly, the Palwallum had devised a system whereby, in addition to routine reviews and reports, she would daily specify the topics which particularly concerned her and it was her particular genius to be able to discern those areas which most required her attention.

Thus, she was aware of some oddities in the recent behaviour of the Chairman: his sudden unscheduled transit from Redux II to Redux, for instance, in a scout ship requiring frequent refuelling by a chain of Galiconia deuterium-tritium tankers diverted

for the purpose, and the fact that the same scout ship had now apparently disappeared on what had seemed a routine flight to Theta Tauri Minor. She was also aware that the Chairman was now actually on his own ship, The-All-Sun-and-the-All-Moon, and returning home. As yet, her instincts were merely tingling at their outer-most edges and she had not bothered, given the press of other events, to probe deeper. Nevertheless, it was all sufficiently curious to justify a listening watch.

For his part the Chairman was both furious and, schooled by Osmond, resigned to the fact that Hasdrubal should turn out to be equally as recalcitrant. On the passage from Redux to Theta Tauri Minor the Chairman, although reunited with his travelling directorate and therefore the myriad pressures of office, still had time and to spare to reflect on the recent events on Redux. There was no doubt that Hasdrubal had behaved splendidly throughout but that in itself was a problem. A ruler – and that's what the Chairman was, whatever the niceties of his position – above all was required to be ruthless, to be able to discern and sacrifice to the greater good. The Chairman suspected that the very fact that Hasdrubal had proved honourable and courageous would prevent him making the hard decisions should he ultimately inherit the chairmanship. The Chairman was under no illusions either about himself or about the qualities required to prevent the Hyades disintegrating into cliques of warring planets.

Osmond, on the other hand, would never hesitate to crush rebellion, but his inherent stupidity might well create more of it than anybody could handle. The Chairman was oppressed by a sense that neither of his sons was suited to rule, particularly with the Palwallum hovering like some great carrion bird, particularly with the "crunch" looming in the rapidly approaching future, a crisis the Chairman devoutly hoped would not have to be addressed at least during his lifetime.

So when the signature of the scout ship vanished from the CAW the Chairman's anger was tempered, slightly, by a vague sense of relief. In the first place, the difficulty of protecting Hasdrubal from his brother's tender attentions was no longer his direct responsibility, at least for the moment, and it meant that Hasdrubal, or someone with him, had a clear understanding of what was at stake. Further, it meant that if not ruthless, the boy at least had sufficient initiative to do the unexpected, in so far as Cram – for that was the only destination the boy could safely approach in the immediate vicinity without a signature – could be called the unexpected. Nevertheless, without Hasdrubal the Chairman was singularly bereft of cards he might play to dislodge Osmond from possession of Redux.

The Chairman allowed himself two minutes of mind-clearing rage and then summoned Tranter. The big man, when he appeared some minutes later, seemed harassed.

"So," the Chairman signed. "The reunion is going well?"

Tranter grimaced. The Chairman allowed the hint of a conspiratorial smile. He had seen enough of Tranter's family from afar to have made a mental note never to allow the sister, particularly, into the same room as himself.

"If I were to send you on a mission then, do I take it you wouldn't object?"

"Delighted," Tranter signed.

"I will order a scout ship to rendezvous... I need you to pay my respects to the Krus."

All of them were gathered on the miniature flight deck of the James Macgilliguddy, staring as Cram rapidly enlarged in front of them. It was like nothing Mac had ever seen or imagined. Roxanna's sense of foreboding deepened the closer they came.

Cram was the inhabitable moon of an uninhabitable gas giant, but there the resemblance to anything else in the universe ended. In appearance it resembled a skin world, except that the skin, unlike the tidy lucent on Redux, looked like nothing so much as an ancient junk yard piled haphazardly as far as the eye could see, where without any planning or regulation, anyone who chose had tacked on whatever they chose to whatever had gone before. The result was a vast maze of dwellings, chambers, booths, hovels, workshops, stalls, paths, alleys, cess pits, markets, brothels, dives, dens, dumps and lairs all built from the weirdest collection of materials ever assembled. And from the middle of the great conurbation there erupted what looked like a huge, rusty boil, a pustule about to burst and spew forth unimaginable evil. This was the headquarters of the Krus and looked as threatening as it did by malignant design. The inhabitants of this seething slum practised all the iniquities, all the vices that mankind had ever dreamed of and some still unique to Cram, and they were kept in the roughest semblance of superficial order only by fear of a brutality worse than their own.

"Cool," Orville said as details began to emerge from the surreal landscape before them.

"Not cool," his father instantly responded. "This place is hell, a hell worse than any god ever thought of and you'd do well to remember that. We'll be lucky to get out of here, and if we don't you'd better pray we're dead. Now, rules of engagement. Nobody leaves the ship without my express permission. Nobody goes out alone. Roxanna, you don't go out at all, ever..."

"Father..." Roxanna began to protest, beginning to turn to Mac for support.

"Ever," Wright said. "Understand me, you do not leave the ship." And he held her gaze until she nodded, reluctantly. "Shelby and John will be the least conspicuous of us moonside..."

"Thanks very much," Lanfranchi said and Mac and Orville grinned at each other. Despite the captain's dire warnings they could not help but be excited at the prospect of landing on a strange world when all they had ever known up to now was grimy old

Redux. Mac spared a thought for Roxanna. He would have to try to find something nice for her.

Wright was watching them.

"Listen to me," he said. "You two will do exactly as you're told exactly when you're told or you'll find yourself in some slaver's brothel before you can blink. You will be raped until you can scream no more and then you'll be 'invited' to play death-roulette for the entertainment of the clients, until, that is, you run out of luck and kill or maim yourselves terminally. Your bodies will then be thrown on a dump for the rats and the slavers are not too particular about how dead you are when they do it. Tell me you understand. Tell me you don't think I'm kidding, because otherwise it would be a kindness if I shot you myself, now."

Both Shelby and John nodded in agreement.

Orville and Mac looked at each other.

"Yes sir," they muttered together.

"This really is a very bad place," Shelby added. "It's the hideout of last resort. Not many survive here for very long."

"If the Galconia cops know you've run here, they close the file," John said. "Cram is the cluster garbage bin."

"Another thing you need to know," Wright said. "Anyone who has the mark of an eye here..." And he touched himself just above the bridge of his nose. "He's a Krusman, a housecarl to the Krus, and they're the worst of all."

"The Krus?" Roxanna asked. "And what mark?"

"The Krus rules here," Wright said. "The current one has done so for at least 30 years which gives you an idea of how ruthless he is. The mark is a sort of joke... eyespies... His men watch. Everything. And the mark is actually a brand, made with a red-hot iron. Ritual initiation. A candidate must stand unsupported to receive it. If he flinches or cries out, they kill him. Not tough enough. Not worthy. And now he knows too much. Do you begin to understand?"

"So how do you know so much about the place, father?" Orville asked.

"I brought the Chairman here, once. He had business with the Krus."

"Business?" Mac said. He couldn't imagine what business his father might have with such a man.

"There's nothing clean about politics, Mac, or your father if it comes to that." Wright turned back to the little ship's pilot panel. "We'll be at the outer transponder in 10 minutes," he said.

Half an hour later the ship was down and parked in a corner of what passed for Cram's spaceport, which was nothing more than a relatively clear area surrounded by seemingly impenetrable slum. Other ships that they could see all had the battered look of space tramps that would turn pirate or smuggler at the hint of an opportunity. Here

and there, people huddled on the beltways, trying to make themselves as inconspicuous as possible. Pallet floaters drifted about without apparent rhyme or reason. Rubbish lay in drifts where it had been blown by passing slipstreams. The effect of the whole was an insidious air of decay, defeat and despair that seeped into the ship and sucked out the excitement of arrival as quickly as emptying an airlock in deep space.

The three young people looked at each other with quickening dismay.

"We tried to tell you," Shelby said. "This is a bad, bad place..."

"And far more dangerous than anywhere else in the cluster," John said.

"Believe it," Shelby added. "Only the worst survive."

"Company," Wright said and pointed.

Still reasonably distant, four black figures were striding along the beltway that led nearest to the ship. They marched in line abreast and others riding the belt had the choice of getting off to let them pass or being knocked off.

"Housecarls," Wright said. "I will do the talking. All the talking." He flicked the switch that dropped the ship's ramp.

As they approached Mac saw they were wearing some sort of rigid, black body armour and that as well as blasters they were each armed with what an ancient serf would have recognised as knouts, short-handled whips where the stiffened raw-hide thongs alternated with hooked wires that would tear out flesh by the chunk. One of the Krusmen, irritated by a passer-by too slow to make way, lashed out lazily and the man shrank back, blood pouring from his face.

"See those thongs?" Lanfranchi said. "They make them out of compressed human skin."

Roxanna grimaced.

"Shut up, John," Shelby said.

The Krusmen left the beltway and headed directly for the ship. There was no swagger or arrogance about them, just total menace. Their skulls were shaven and an ugly, puckered brand stood out in the centre of each forehead. Wright was irresistibly reminded of an ancient myth he had come across in his research: the four horsemen of the apocalypse – Death, War, Famine and Pestilence – except they had no horses. They didn't need them.

"Anna should hide," Mac suddenly said. His voice was urgent.

"No," Wright said. "It would be worse, much worse. Lifesign. They know how many we are. If they don't see her, they'll go looking for her. Just stay back, Roxanna." He toggled a switch to open the airlock. The horsemen marched straight through it as of right. The air they brought in with them was foetid to the point of asphyxiation.

"Are you Galconia?" the leader, Death, demanded. His voice was a whisper. His throat, at some point, appeared to have been ripped out and was now a mass of scar tissue.

"No," Wright said.

"Yet this is a Galiconia ship." It was a statement.

"Yes," Wright said.

"So you flee from Galiconia?"

"Yes," Wright said again.

"Then how do you pay?" The expressionless whisper somehow seemed to become even more threatening.

Wright held out the canister of thormalium Orville had prepared.

"We have this to trade," he said. Famine held out his hand and after a moment's hesitation Wright surrendered it.

"The Krus takes 50 per cent," Death's voice rasped. "The balance will be returned in an hour. Rent is 10,000 centa a day, in advance." Shock showed on Wright's face. "You are confined to the ship. Don't leave until we return. That would be foolish."

War bared his teeth and Pestilence laughed invitingly.

Chapter Two

By a process of elementary deduction, Slade was certain that the boy, as he still thought of Mac, and the others would be heading for Cram. His conclusion was partially confirmed when the CAW revealed a scout ship rendezvous with The-All-Sun-And-The-All-Moon in deep space and then change course for Cram. Further deduction convinced him that the Chairman must have despatched an emissary to Cram, else why the rendezvous in the first place. The one remaining question that no amount of reasoning could resolve was whether the Chairman intended merely to retrieve the younger of his two rebellious sons or to dispose of him in disgust. Sentiment would suggest the first but the Chairman, now no longer hostage, was perfectly capable of the latter. If the latter, Slade need do nothing. If the first, then it was necessary to act. There were other possible permutations, but Slade on consideration dismissed them as fanciful. He returned to the central question and after much thought ordered a hypercom link to Cram.

"How bad is it?" Mac asked. He and the others were watching Wright's face. Wright moved back to the console and closed the airlock in the hope the ship's scrubbers could do something about the flavour of the local air.

"That was half our thormalium," he said at last. "We have enough left for three ascents and descents. I would guess that after they've taken the 50 per cent for the Krus, plus whatever those four think they should cream off the top that we'll have about two days rent and change. The landing rate should be a 100 day, not 10,000."

"This is a Galconia ship," John said. "They're charging us a premium. They think we've stolen it. They think we're dodging heat, which means we have no choice."

"But a hundred times..." Wright said.

"So we won't have enough money?" Mac said.

"No."

"How much do we need?"

"Orville?" Wright said. Orville shrugged unhappily.

"I can't tell," he said. "I must have a plasma lathe and microscopic pattern-cutter. They're expensive. I have to have a neutron-shifter and a molecular welder. They're expensive. I have to have a nano-scanning-electron microscope. That's very expensive. And materials..."

"You should make a list," Roxanna said.

"Of course I've made a list," Orville snapped back.

"So," Mac said impatiently. "If we keep enough thormalium for one up and one down, would the rest raise enough?"

"No," Wright said. "I'm guessing, but no. And that's too dangerous anyway. We have to keep more reserve than that."

"Would it be enough for a deposit, a down payment, enough for someone to get everything together?"

"Probably," Wright said. "But what good's that?"

"So we can steal it," Mac said.

There was a deep, incredulous silence followed by a clamour of expostulation. Mac waited, then cut through.

"What choice do we have?" he demanded.

"We can leave," John said. "Do you have any idea what they'll do to us if we're caught stealing?"

"And we have to keep what thormalium we have left," Wright said. "John's right. We should leave."

"Leave and do what?" Mac said very quietly. "We're here because you said this is the only real chance we have."

There was another deep silence.

"We can still go to Theta Tauri Minor," Wright said at last.

"No," Roxanna protested angrily. "You said yourself it would just be a matter of time before Mac is killed."

Mac was suddenly struck by a thought that he realised with shame should have occurred to him long since.

"As opposed to all of you being killed," he said. "We must separate. I'm sorry. I'm very sorry. I didn't think. We go to Theta Tauri and we separate. No one will touch you if I'm not with you. I should have realised. I'm sorry. Stupid of me." They all turned to him.

"Incredibly stupid of you," Orville said, getting in first. "Incredibly stupid to think that any of us would accept that for one moment. We're only alive now, free now, because of you. And Uncle James."

"I hate you," Roxanna stormed shouting over the top of her brother. "I hate you when you're like this. Stop it! Just stop it!" And she actually hauled off and punched Mac on the arm. It hurt, but he realised the pain was really rather delightful. He felt himself flushing with emotion; part gratitude, part love.

Wright, Shelby and John just looked at him, smiling tolerantly.

"Is that settled then?" Wright said at last, and then: "I guess you're right, Mac. I guess we have to gamble everything on one throw."

Slade summoned Osmond to communications control and was unsurprised when he was thrust through the door angry and dishevelled. He had obviously been struggling with the guards. He'll learn, Slade thought to himself.

"Sit there," he said aloud. "And do not speak unless I tell you to." Slade signed briefly to the two guards and wondered if Osmond would ever realise that he would remain completely helpless until he learned to sign himself.

Using Osmond's name and his silent image on the hypercom, Slade worked his way through a number of housecarls until finally he reached the Krus himself, or someone who at least purported to be the Krus. It was impossible to know who the large, lumpy, four-square figure presenting his back to the hypercom might really be.

Slade considered a moment and then decided there was no reason for the man before him not to be genuine. A larger question, suddenly, was how the Krus should be addressed. Slade needed his co-operation and was concerned not to offend him.

He cleared his throat tentatively.

"Sir," he said.

"Who are you?" The voice was thick, deep and rough as gravel being crushed in a quarry. "I was told Osmond von Osmond wished an audience."

"I speak for His Excellency," Slade said, gesturing to Osmond and noting in passing the royal assumption of the word, audience.

"Why?" the Krus said.

Because he's a total turkey, Slade badly wanted to say but restrained himself.

"He is indisposed."

"Too indisposed to speak?"

"Regrettably, yes," Slade said.

"And what does he want you to say?" the Krus demanded. His voice was openly sceptical.

"It is likely..." Slade said. "It is likely that a group of six people in a stolen Galiconia scout ship are heading for Cram, if they have not already landed. We want one of those people."

"Why?"

"Dead or alive," Slade said. "Preferably dead."

"Why?"

"We will pay in refined thormalium."

"Why?"

"To the value of 10 million centa. You will know best what that is worth on the black market."

"Why?" the Krus said. "Life is cheap. Why is this one so expensive?"

"You may keep the other five and do with them as you will. But 10 million in refined thormalium for the boy known as Hasdrubal D. Macgilliguddy alive or dead, delivered here."

"You are a fool," the Krus said. "I do not run unspecified risk. And for such a price the risk must be great."

Slade cursed himself. He had thought greed for such a fee would be enough. The Krus was right. He had been a fool.

"The boy is a possible threat to His Excellency's position as heir to Galconia."

"And he is also the flighter someone tried to kill in that g-ball game so they could cheat me," the Krus said. There was a long silence. Slade fought hard to resist the temptation to squirm. He dared not look at Osmond. Of course the Krus, through his intermediaries, would have been by far the biggest loser had Osmond been successful with his fix. Fleetinglly, Slade wondered how Osmond had thought to evade the inevitable vengeance and then snorted at himself. Osmond had proved conclusively that he didn't think.

"One hundred million," the Krus said eventually. "I will take 100 million in refined thormalium."

Slade winced, but it was still cheap at the price to get rid of Mac, once and for all. He nodded and broke the connection.

Wright's four horsemen returned, punctual to the hour.

"Boy," Death hissed, pointing at Mac. "Name."

"Uh..." Mac hesitated. "Uh, Mac Albright."

"Proof," Death demanded.

"Uh... I don't have any. But that's my name. Ask anyone."

Death held up a credit chip and clipped it with a register.

"That was one day's rent," he said. "Starting now." He held it out and Wright took it uncertainly. There was C15,000 left.

"And you," Death said to Mac. "You will come with us."

Roxanna gasped and tried to push forward but Shelby held her. Smoothly, with overt menace from their knouts, the four formed around Mac until he was lost behind a bulwark of body armour.

"Why?" Wright demanded.

"Because," Death said, his grin oddly at a variance with his hoarse whisper. "Until he can prove he is who he says is, he is likely worth 100 million centa to a certain buyer."

"Osmond," breathed Orville into the shocked silence and Death looked at him sharply.

"Shut up," Mac said urgently, trying to peer around bodies. "And remember the plan. The plan. Stick to the plan and don't worry about me."

At a nod from Death, the four horsemen turned and made for the ramp, Mac looking very small and lost in the their midst.

"I'll be back," he shouted. It was the last thing they heard.

Roxanna was white and trembling.

"We have to rescue him," she said. "We have to get him back. They'll kill him."

"They'll kill us if we try," Shelby said.

"And even if we do get him, what do we do then?" John added.

"I don't believe you," Anna shouted. "How can you talk like this?"

"You're not thinking," Orville said.

"You too?" Anna stormed.

"He has his glove," Orville said. "Under the gauntlet. He has a better chance of escaping than we have of rescuing him. And he wants us to go on with the plan. He was very clear. There's no point in him making a break for it until we're ready to go, until we have what we need."

"You're afraid..." Anna began to shout, but her father interrupted.

"We're not," he said coolly. "Orville is right. Mac is right. And you're really not thinking. We understand that you're upset and why, but we have to trust that Mac can look after himself."

"But he's just a boy," Anna said, the tears running down her face as she ran to her bunk. All she could see were the housecarls' knouts and Mac's face gouged, shredded and torn to pieces.

Mac, for the moment at least, was more interested than apprehensive. The beltway ended at the edge of the spaceport and Mac's escort, with him still at the centre of the formation, plunged into the labyrinth of alleys leading to the Kruskraal, as it was called. They walked for more than an hour, twisting and turning, and Mac made no attempt to memorise the route. At times the buildings, if such they could be called, met overhead so thickly that the gloom in the resulting tunnels even in the middle of the Cram day was deep and dangerous. Mac was actually glad he had the housecarls for protection. The way was so narrow they were often squeezed tight together and the denizens were forced to seek refuge from their passage in doorways and odd holes or to retreat the way they had come. The faces Mac glimpsed in passing were universally predatory first, then diseased, evil, malevolent, baleful, grasping, repulsive, villainous, loathsome, vicious or simply criminal as an afterthought. And always there was the choking stink of Cram that no amount of forced familiarity could ever diminish. It was not a smell to which anyone could ever grow accustomed. Twice, one of the housecarls lashed out

with his knout and twice there were choked-off screams followed by a swirl in the crowd like a school of sharks or a pack of dogs turning on one of their own. Mac's major concern quickly became fear for his family, who would have to venture out into this seething cesspit to trade their remaining thormalium and then somehow discover someone to supply the necessary equipment.

Abruptly they came to an area of black, charred rubble that had been cauterised to make a clear-fire zone, a killing ground in the unlikely event of attack. In the centre stood the Kruskraal, and if from the air it had looked like a boil ready to erupt, from the ground it somehow resembled nothing so much as a huge and rotting piece of meat. Mac shuddered involuntarily as he was hustled across the cleared ground through the thick ash and cinders and up to a postern. A second group of housecarls was on guard, alert and threatening. One jerked a thumb towards the interior.

"He wants you now," he said.

Mac's heart sank. Too fast. It was all happening too fast. Somehow, he had to play for time. He had no idea how long it would take for the others to arrange matters but he was sure it would take days, not hours, and things here seemed to be moving far too quickly. He found himself being hustled through a maze of corridors that differed only marginally from the alleys outside until finally they stood before a heavy blast door that looked as if it would withstand anything but a thermo. It was guarded by another detail of housecarls. Mac was brought to a halt and they stood waiting, ankle deep in miscellaneous litter. He suddenly realised that he was hot, tired and extremely thirsty. There was also a low threnody of fear playing somewhere deep in his mind which, in a way, was comforting. He supposed it meant that despite everything that had happened to him in a very short space of time, he was still essentially normal. At last, at some signal that eluded Mac completely, one of the guards touched a switch, the blast door hissed opened and Mac was marched inside.

The Krus's personal lair was the complete opposite of everything else Mac had seen on Cram. It was a large hall, austere in aspect, sparsely furnished and scrupulously clean. There were a number of housecarls, all in the regulation black body armour and sitting at consoles, but the eye was inexorably drawn to a very large man standing back towards them on a raised platform. He was dressed in a floor-length black silk over-mantle with a high, crested collar, crusted thick with black on black embroidery and which just revealed the top of his head. The man appeared to be bald or at least to have a shaved skull. Mac was flung to the floor and kept prostrate by a large foot planted between his shoulder blades.

The threnody of fear had changed to a steady, pounding pulse. With his chin jammed into the floor and his eyes rolling upwards, Mac strained to see. He expected the Krus would turn to face him but the figure before him made no move.

At last came the deep, rasping voice: "Is this the boy?"

"Yes," someone replied. "I think so. Let me see." Recognition flooded through Mac like a tide of ice-water. He gasped, his heart frozen. It was Slade. It was Slade's voice. Mac was plucked to his feet and thrust before the hypercom. And there was Slade, staring at him, a slow, pleased smile spreading across his face.

"Yes," Slade said. "That is Hasdrubal D. Macgilliguddy, whatever he might be calling himself now. Hullo, Mac," he added. "How are you? Looking forward to dying?"

There was a pause and then speaking directly to the Krus, Slade said:

"Kill him. Kill him now. So I can see."

Nobody moved. At last the Krus spoke.

"He will be killed when I have payment."

"I can transfer it now, in seconds," Slade said. "One hundred million."

"Thormalium to the value of 100 million," the Krus said.

"I want him dead now," Slade said. "One hundred and fifty million..."

"The price was agreed," the Krus said, allowing his voice to become ominous.

"It will take time," Slade said. "Too much time. Kill him now. I will guarantee the thormalium."

Mac, listening in stunned disbelief, caught a flicker of movement out of the corner of his eye. A man was standing out of range of the hypercom, a man wearing a Galiconia uniform, a man who looked alarmingly familiar. The Krus, still with his back to the room, moved across and glanced briefly at the reacom the other man held out to him. Why a reacom, Mac wondered.

The Krus returned to his podium and spoke for Slade to hear:

"There is a second bidder. Two hundred million in thormalium."

"We had an agreement," Slade said.

"You chose to break it."

"We had an agreement," Slade insisted. "Am I to take it your word is worthless?"

The Krus laughed mirthlessly.

"You say? You dare?"

Despite the light years of space separating them, Slade swallowed.

"If you wish to bid again," the Krus continued, "come." And signing to a housecarl, the Krus had the connection cut.

Mac suddenly remembered to breathe and then let out a long sigh. It seemed he was no longer about to be executed on the spot. And as he relaxed, it came to him. The man in the Galiconia uniform was the same deaf-mute trooper who had protected the Chairman when everything came to a head at the arena. Not only Slade and Osmond, but his father had also found him. Mac felt so foolish and so angry at his foolishness that he was tempted to punch one of the housecarls to finish matters there and then, but

at least on his own terms. Coming to Cram had seemed a sensible move. Sensible all right, so sensible that, as Orville had warned, the whole damn universe had managed to predict it and take measures accordingly.

Once the connection with Slade was broken, Tranter did not linger. He took his leave of the Krus and hurried back to his ship in the kraal's private landing dock and to his own hypercom. The crew, already bored but forbidden to set foot outside the ship, looked at him curiously. Tranter did not trouble to clear them out of the control room. There were some advantages to his affliction he thought in passing as the Chairman made himself instantly available.

"Well done," he signed when Tranter had finished his account. "So Slade has made a mistake and is now forced to leave Redux if he wants Hasdrubal."

"Slade?" Tranter asked. "You're sure now?"

"Oh yes," the Chairman signed. "Or Osmond would still be doing the talking. Slade has taken over completely. There can be no doubt. And there can be no doubt his game must be to kill Hasdrubal, to kill me and then eventually to kill Osmond. The man is launched on a full-scale coup d'etat and in the long run we all die, or he dies. There is no going back for him now."

"So," Tranter signed. "We prepare to retake Redux when he leaves?"

"Unfortunately, no," the Chairman signed. "If Slade is at all suspicious he will stay put and hope to find some other way of eliminating Hasdrubal. Any indication of a troop build-up will scare him off. And there is also the Palwallum to consider. I don't want her developing an interest in matters that don't concern her."

"What then?" Tranter asked. "And what do you wish me to do about the boy?"

"We must save him. If Hasdrubal dies then Slade need do nothing else so long as he holds Osmond. He must win, if only when I die."

"To buy the boy will be expensive," Slade signed. "And there's no guarantee the Krus will play straight."

"So we will give him Osmond." Tranter raised his eyebrows.

"How?" he asked to cover his surprise.

"Slade will have to bring him along to Cram. He can't afford the risk of letting him out of his sight. Once on Cram, I see no difficulty in using Osmond as a bargaining chip."

Tranter nodded.

"Bid to C500 million," the Chairman continued. "That should be convincing... Then we give him Osmond." And, of course, it was the right move, Tranter realised. First and foremost, Osmond deserved to die, and second, his death would render Slade's position more or less untenable. So long as Slade continued to hold Redux he could negotiate for

his life, but without Osmond he would lose all hold on the succession, all hope of coming to rule Galiconia himself.

"And then?" Tranter asked eventually.

"If you can dispose of Slade between Cram and Redux, so much the better. We will no longer have a problem. If he escapes, it will still only be a matter of time."

Tranter had begun to smile as the Chairman signed and by the end was grinning wolfishly. The idea of a ship-to-ship duel to the death between himself and Slade was greatly appealing. Tranter had no view at all about the morality of a father calmly proposing to discard his eldest son in what was likely to be a spectacularly gruesome fashion.

Chapter Three

Shelby, John Lanfranchi and Orville, dressed in the oldest and plainest coveralls their little ship could provide, slipped out the airlock and on to the deserted beltway. Shelby was arm in arm with Orville to disguise as much as possible the fact that Orville was unable to walk, John had the canister of thormalium hidden in his bosom and all three had strapped on conspicuous hand blasters in the hope of discouraging unwelcome attention. Wright as their only pilot had stayed to guard both Roxanna and the ship.

At the edge of the spaceport, the beltway ended abruptly in front of an alley, almost wide enough to be called a street. The three stood uncertainly. A group of figures were lingering in a doorway; one of the shadows moved and a man came towards them. He was smallish and his face was tattooed with a spider web. His eyes glinted avariciously.

"Be guide," he said. "Show strangers what they need. Yes?"

"How much?" John said.

"Ten Cs an hour."

"Five," John said. The man shrugged and turned away. Lanfranchi and Shelby exchanged glances. The figures in the doorway were spreading out, overtly threatening.

"All right," John said. "If that's the rate. Ten." Spiderface turned back and the group behind him relaxed.

"Where go?"

"Changehouse," John said.

"Want guards?" the man asked.

Again, Shelby and John exchanged glances. It was hard to know whether it was protection they would be hiring or their own assassins.

"Two," John said. Spiderface held up two fingers and two of the group split off and came towards them. The others turned away.

"Ten also," the man said and John nodded. At least, he thought, the guards would frighten off casual bandits until they themselves were ready to act. The cavalcade set off and within a minute or two he, Shelby and Orville were comprehensively lost.

It was true, Orville thought. What his father and his men had been saying was all true. Cram city, Cram slum, was something out of a nightmare, worse. A nightmare by definition was at least imaginable but this morass of degradation and decay through which they were forced to wade was just indescribable, and the inhabitants, who had created it, rancid beyond belief.

The changehouse to which Spiderface eventually led them had a barred entrance huddled between what appeared to be a collapsing tenement on one side and some sort of bawdy house on the other. Spiderface rattled the bars with a metal rod left hanging

there for the purpose and kept on rattling impatiently until two burly figures appeared on the other side. There was a grunt of recognition and one of the men punched in the code that lifted the portcullis bars from the deep grooves into which they slotted.

"We wait," Spiderface said and deeply suspicious, John led the way inside. The bars slammed down behind them and they were suddenly faced with two blasters pointing straight at them. They jerked simultaneously. Shelby and Lanfranchi looked at each other and then with a nod to Orville they all unbuckled their own weapons and handed them to one of the guards. Then at another gesture they headed down the dank corridor, hair prickling at the threat behind them and the unknown in front of them.

At the end of the passage they entered a crooked room surrounded by walls of crooked shelves stuffed with miscellaneous objects, the detritus of broken lives traded for one last mindwine, one last nautch. In the middle was a high, crooked desk occupied by a small cowed creature seated on a stool.

It raised its head and they could now see that in reality he was a wizened old man with lank greasy hair and a lank greasy cloak, a pawn broker, one of those fixers who have always inhabited the bogs and swamps of history.

He waited, regarding them expressionlessly.

At last, Shelby was moved to speak.

"We have certain requirements," he said.

"Goods or services?" the old man said. His voice was a dry croak.

"Both," Shelby said. "We need certain items. And we need to convert thormalium to cash to pay for them."

"What items?"

John laid Orville's list on the desk. The old man scanned it for a long minute and then looked up.

"These are not things in demand on Cram," he said.

"But you can supply them?" Shelby said.

"Possibly. It will take time. It will take money. A great deal of money."

"How much time? How much money?"

"Wait."

The man climbed down from his stool and scuttled into a concealed alleyway between the shelving. They heard the whine of a heavy door opening and closing.

Time passed, and more. Shelby, impatient, made to inspect the shelves but a sharp move from one of the blasters made him stop almost instantly. He shrugged and they went back to waiting. At last they heard again the whine of the door and the pawnbroker emerged from the shelves to climb laboriously back on his stool.

"Well," Shelby said.

"It is very difficult," the old man croaked. "Very expensive."

"Naturally," Shelby said. "And your grandchildren are starving and the Krus will break both your legs if you don't pay him the money you owe within the next half hour. How expensive?"

The pawnbroker allowed a look of annoyance to cross his face.

"This is not a simple matter," he snapped. "Most of the items you want can be purchased, with difficulty. Two will have to be... acquired."

"How much?" Shelby said again.

"Eighty thousand centa," the old man said. "For the danger. Take it or leave it."

"And how long?"

"Three to four days."

Orville did a quick mental calculation. Allowing for whatever the housecarls had abstracted, their original parcel of thormalium had probably had a dealer value of 60,000. The two-thirds of the remainder they had with them should thus be worth 40,000. Rent for four days would eat up the whole of that 40,000 leaving them with the original 15,000 in Wright's keeping back on the ship to deal with. It was all very tight.

"Ten per cent deposit," he said. "The balance when the equipment is delivered to our ship." Orville held his breath. Delivery was the key to the whole plan, the plan to hijack the equipment. No delivery, no hijack. It was as simple as that.

"Twenty," the pawnbroker said.

"Fifteen," Orville countered.

The old man drew back his teeth in a preliminary rictus, but Orville forestalled him, playing his last card as nonchalantly as he knew how.

"And we'll deal our thormalium through you. This is the first tranche." And he put the canister on the desk.

The old man flexed a muscle or two and the rictus became a smirk, of sorts.

On the flight deck of Osmond's personal cruiser, Slade stared thoughtfully at the splendid vista of space spread out before him, seeing nothing. On several counts, his position, if not weak, was certainly not strong. There was no sign of any hostile preparations aimed at retaking Redux but given the scout ship that had rendezvoused with the Chairman and then continued on to Cram, and given the changed behaviour of the Krus, it was clear that some sort of ambush was likely waiting for him and Osmond. The safe course then was simply to remain on Redux, but Slade was conscious of the fact that there was no guarantee that sooner or later the Chairman would not lose patience and attempt to retake the planetoid, whatever the cost. He was equally aware that to have any long-term future he, himself, would not only have to dispose of the Chairman and the boy Macgilliguddy, but when sufficiently firmly established in overall control, he would also have to kill Osmond. The dynasty would be dead, but long live the dynasty. His dynasty. The dynasty he would greatly enjoy to establish.

The difficulty of the task was entirely obvious and Slade, after much careful weighing of the options, had decided that he must seize at any chalice that offered and gamble on surviving the poison. Yes, he probably was heading into a trap, but it was yet to be seen who would finally spring it.

He turned to where Osmond and Dostoi awaited his pleasure. It was another weakness. He would have to keep Osmond and his toad beside him for the foreseeable future. He could not afford to have them manoeuvring on their own account, as they inevitably would, given the slightest opportunity. The only real safeguard against such plotting was his own personal vigilance. Slade smiled to himself. Even had he a deputy he could trust, he still would never allow Osmond out of his own immediate control.

Slade thought about easing Osmond's curiosity but decided not to. Instead he stalked off without a word. It was undeniably satisfying. He would, he thought, never tire of the small pleasures that came with power.

The relief of Orville, Shelby and John to be safely back on the ship was palpable. They had spent the whole return journey expecting at any moment to be lead into a dead end and set upon, but Spiderface and his two companions had kept faith, if padding the time considerably with what seemed quite unnecessary detours. Shelby had been so pleased to arrive at the ship's ramp, mission accomplished, party intact and everyone in one piece, that he made no quibble and had actually tipped them.

The delight of Roxanna and her father when they clumped up the ramp and in through the airlock was equally apparent.

"You've been gone for hours," Roxanna said accusingly, after hugging Orville, much to his surprise. "We were so worried."

"Well, what did you expect?" Orville said.

"That you'd stopped off at a tavern, of course," Wright said. "Come and sit down and tell us all about it."

Later when Shelby, Orville and John had finished interrupting each other, there was a pause.

"So it all depends on Mac getting the timing of his escape right," Wright said.

Roxanna looked at him and grimaced. Try as she might to keep Mac from dominating her thoughts, she was constantly being reminded of him. The waves of worry that swept over her whenever she thought of him were so intense that her stomach would cramp and the sweat would start. He had been gone now the better part of a day and she couldn't begin to imagine what horrors might be afflicting him. It was made all the worse by the confident calm of the others. Mac could look after himself. He had his glove, hadn't he? He had survived g-ball. He had survived the screamer. He had even survived the arena, hadn't he? He would survive this.

She felt tears starting and turned away. Wright put his arm round her shoulder.

It was so hard to be strong when she felt so totally helpless. She sniffed and scrubbed angrily at her eyes.

Mac really was totally helpless. It had been easy enough to shout confidently to the others that he would be back but at the moment he could see not the slightest possibility of escape, never mind that he still had his glove.

On being dismissed from the Krus's presence, the housecarls had thrust Mac before them until they came to a long spiralling ramp down the rim of a huge, dimly lit abyss cut from the living rock. At the bottom, the walls were lined with crude cages, less than half the height of a man, stacked three high. In the centre there was nothing, just a yawning, black pit rough-hewn into the floor, an abyss within an abyss. Mac estimated it to be some 40 metres square, depth unguessable. The smell seeping up from it made the general stink of Cram rather pleasant by comparison. From time to time there emerged strange grunts and growls and once, as Mac sought to decipher the noises, there came what he thought must be a human scream, albeit that it sounded quite inhuman. What might be down there in the depths Mac couldn't begin to think, and he was very sure that he didn't want to find out.

Mac's escort was met by another housecarl, this time dressed in leather, not body armour, and who seemed to be in charge. He motioned them to wait, summoned three of his minions and pointed to one of the cages on the bottom tier. A jailer flung open the gate and the two others dragged out the emaciated prisoner, who fought ferociously and screamed for mercy. The other captives rattled and banged at their bars in a frenzied crescendo. At the edge of the pit the victim briefly managed to turn to the chief jailer.

"The money will come," he shrieked. "I promise. I promise..." But the chief stood impervious. One of his underlings picked up a crook and hooked a rope hanging down from the gloom above. As soon as the rope moved a deep, ominous, barely human chant began in the depths.

"Meat. Meat. Meat. Meat. Meat. Meat. Meat."

It throbbed and curdled and beat at the eardrums, and Mac felt himself going to water. It was the most horrible sound he had ever heard, ever dreamed of. It was primal, terrifying and sucked at all the nerve endings in his body.

The rope was put into the victim's hands and as he clutched at it convulsively he was swung out over the blackness. He hung there for what seemed like hours, but then scrabble with his feet as he might, his hands began to tire and he started to slip. With a last despairing effort he managed to stop the slide for some seconds then all at once his strength failed completely and he plummeted into the depths. The chant which had been swelling all the time he had hung there, stopped abruptly. There was a long, bubbling scream and then silence except for a strange undercurrent of continuing noise that sounded to Mac for all the world like the champing of jaws.

The chief beckoned to him but just then he was quite incapable of moving. Two of the jailers seized him, dragged him across the damp, slimy floor and slung him head-first into the just vacated cage, where he cannoned into the back wall. The gate clanged and Mac heard retreating footsteps. He was dazed and in pain and suddenly so emotionally fatigued that he wanted nothing so much as to pass out, but something made him open his eyes. A hand and arm descending from above was just about to claw at his face. A second arm was working its way in from the side, from the left. It was too much, too monstrous. Mac's lizard brain screamed at him, screamed fight, screamed survival. He seized the first arm and wrenched it savagely against the bars above. There was an audible crack as the bone broke, and a shriek. Mac swung it the other way and there was another shriek and then the arm was jerked from his grasp. The other arm, attacking him from the side scuttled hurriedly away like some malevolent crab. Mac threw himself into the opposite corner and huddled there panting, glaring about him through the gloom.

"So," a voice hissed in his ear, only millimetres away on the other side of the bars. "Not just a pretty boy after all." It came from Mac's right-hand side and instinctively he prepared to repel another attack.

"Don't worry," the voice said, hoarse with repressed pain. "They broke my legs. I can't hurt you, even if I wanted to."

There was silence and gradually Mac's breathing returned to something approaching normal. He shifted uncomfortably. He found he was sitting on similar bars to those that formed the sides and the roof of his cage. The stone floor of the cavern was some distance further down and apparently drained into the pit.

"What is this place?" Mac whispered at last.

"Who are you?" the voice replied.

Mac hesitated.

"Just a traveller," he said, finally. "We had to bring our ship in for repairs and the next thing I know, they've kidnapped me."

"You must be worth money, then," the voice said. "Either that or you've upset the Krus. Or both. What's your name?"

"Mac," he said. "Mac Albright. What's yours?"

"Well, Mac Albright," the voice said. "I hope for your sake someone loves you. I hope they're rich."

"What's your name?" Mac repeated.

"It doesn't matter," the voice said. "Not now."

"You're not rich and nobody loves you?"

"No," he said flatly, and then: "Ivan. I used to be called Ivan. Ivan the Edge. I did my work with a laser-razor."

"Used to be called Ivan?"

"I'm next in the pit. The money hasn't come. The money will never come. There is no money. They know that. So they broke my legs, to pay... " Ivan's voice suddenly rang bitter. "They make me wait with my legs like this."

"Wait for what?" Mac whispered.

"You saw..." Ivan groaned again. "I'm next. When they bring someone down..."

"You're next in line?" Ivan said nothing, but it was suddenly clear to Mac that this hellish place worked on a rotation system. You had as long to raise your ransom as it took for your cage to make the cycle.

"What's in the pit?" Mac asked next, but he already knew. In the cringing depths of his soul, he already knew.

There was a long silence and Mac was beginning to think there would be no answer when Ivan finally spoke reflectively:

"Some survive for quite a long time down there."

"You mean...?" Mac started to say.

"I mean the ones who live are cannibals. Insane. They'll tear you to pieces and eat you alive."

Mac found himself retching helplessly.

"It's efficient," Ivan said when Mac had stopped. "For the Krus. Very efficient. Excellent source of revenue. High turn-over. Low running costs. No waste disposal."

There was another long silence broken by whimpering from the cage above.

"What did you do with the razor?" Mac said. He found that he would rather not have time to think, anything to keep Ivan talking.

"I tortured people," Ivan said hoarsely. "Famous for it. I guaranteed never to kill a subject till the client had what he wanted."

"So how did you end up in here?" Mac asked.

There was another silence and Mac began to think that Ivan would refuse to answer, but then he spoke again, the pain plain in his voice.

"I had a friend. A hooker. Pretty once. Not any more. But she was my friend. A housecarl out of his brain on mindwine used his knout. When he finished there was just blood and lumps of flesh. I found her, what was left of her. I found him..."

"How did they catch you?" Mac asked when it was clear Ivan had stopped.

"I am an artist," Ivan said. "There is only one person on Cram who can use a razor like that. And he was my masterwork."

"So why put you in here?" Mac asked. "Why didn't they just kill you?"

Ivan laughed hollowly and then groaned again.

"Due process," he said. "And the Krus doesn't like his men enjoying themselves freelance. Put the two together..."

They fell silent again.

Mac was more or less stunned. The casual barbarity of the Krus's domestic arrangements was beyond belief. The system was ultra efficient, as Ivan had said, but the deliberate and yet unthinking brutality involved was so awful that it was just mind-numbing. Except. Except Galiconia with its screamers and arenas was equally cruel, equally inhuman, and just as deliberately. Was there really any difference between being torn to pieces by mindless cannibals or being sliced up by a plasma whip, self-cauterising to prolong the agony? And which was worse: the subtle slavery Galiconia visited on its inhabitants behind the facade of rule of law, or the anarchy of Cram where so long as you respected the Krus, you were free to do whatever you were strong enough and smart enough to get away with? Mac had come to hate Galiconia and all it represented in terms of human oppression with every fibre of his being, but if the only alternative was Cram, how could anyone of conscience choose to rebel against Galiconia, never mind that the head of the regime happened to be his father? Surely the choice could not be confined to anarchy or slavery. Surely there must be another way? Or he might just as well leap into the pit and be done with it.

At some point, a jailer passed along the cages throwing hunks of rotten bread to the prisoners. If they missed the catch, if it was a bad throw, if the bread fell between the bars, then bad luck. Later, another jailer passed by with a bucket of dirty liquid that looked to have been drained from the floor. Each prisoner was given a second or two to gulp what he could through the bars. Mac knew that at some point, thirsty as he was, he would become desperate enough to drink the slime, but not yet, not nearly yet.

He huddled into the safer corner of his cage and try as he might to prevent it, self-pity came welling up and threatened to overwhelm him. Ever since that second g-ball game, his life had been one disaster after another, each worse than the last. All he had wanted to do was to fly and all he had found was catastrophe, each more horrible than the last, or so it seemed. It just wasn't fair, it wasn't fair. Now he was trapped in a cage with Slade to look forward to, or the pit of unthinkable horrors...

With a sudden spurt of shame, Mac caught hold of himself. Yes, life had been cruel but at the same time it had given him a new family, and it had given him skills that so far had managed to keep them all safe, and it had given him Anna. Most of all, it had given him Anna. And instead of worrying about himself, Mac began to worry about her. It was up to him to save her, to save all of them. He had got them into this mess and he would have to get them out of it. Surreptitiously he flexed his left hand. While he had been searched roughly for weapons, at least no one had thought to make him remove his gauntlet. And evidently Slade hadn't warned them. Well, Mac resolved, that was a mistake that would cost them dear. It suddenly occurred to him that his best chance of escape would come if they did attempt to throw him into the pit. At that moment he would be out of their grasp and out of their reach. Free. It was a powerful thought.

"Ivan," he said. "Ivan. Are you awake?"

"What?" Ivan said.

"How long is the turnover in here? How long before they throw you in the pit?"

"Want to get it over, do you?"

"Just tell me how long?"

"It depends," Ivan said. "I've been lying here four days. Sometimes it can take weeks. And no doubt, they would like it to take weeks for me. But four days has been four days too long." He groaned again as the jagged pain shot through him.

Four days, Mac thought. The timing might work if he were lucky. Very lucky. Incredibly lucky. If it worked then all indictments of the unfairness of life were cancelled. But first, for it to work, Ivan would have to face the pit, as would numbers of others. How many? He didn't know. And did he care? Was he prepared to take his freedom at their expense? But they were doomed anyway and doubtless, if Ivan was representative, they could only deserve such a fate. Mac felt some sympathy for Ivan's revenge on the housecarl but there was no overlooking the brutal and callous facts of the way he had made his living. Another thought occurred to him.

"How do you keep track of time?" he asked. Already Mac had only a hazy idea of how long he might have been there.

"Swigswill once a day," Ivan said.

Mac woke with a start. He had no idea how long he had been out. Minutes, hours? He certainly didn't feel any better. His eyes were tired and gritty and his mouth thick. Something was happening and he strained to see through the gloom. Housecarls were coming down the ramp, dragging someone.

"At last," Ivan said. "The gods relent."

"Good luck..." Mac started to say and then realised how stupid it sounded. What could you say that didn't sound stupid?

The chief indicated Ivan's cage and the detail came towards them. Then Ivan's gate slammed open and two of the jailers reached in.

Ivan screamed and screamed and screamed at the excruciating pain as he was dragged out by his mangled legs. Instantly the rest of the prisoners began to shout and beat on their bars and Mac found that he was as frenzied as the rest of them. It was the only protest they could make and they howled at the fates that had brought them there.

Ivan was dragged through the filth draining down the floor to the pit and again, as a jailer hooked the rope, the prisoners fell silent and that terrible chant throbbed up from the depths:

"Meat. Meat. Meat. Meat. Meat. Meat. Meat."

The rope was put into Ivan's hands and he was pushed out over the abyss. Mac unconsciously held his breath, expecting Ivan would not have the strength to hold himself out of reach for more than a second or two. But instead of sliding, Ivan

laboriously began to haul himself up the rope, hand over agonising hand, his legs swaying and jerking. The pain must have been at the limit of endurance.

"Meat. Meat. Meat. Meat. Meat. Meat. Meat." The chant rose in intensity as the creatures below saw their prey apparently disappearing up into the gloom and escaping them.

Ivan was almost lost to sight now and Mac, still unknowingly holding his breath, was transfixed. What did the man intend? Was he trying to escape? And then it became clear.

At the limit of his strength, Ivan caressingly released the rope and plunged down, down from a height sufficient to ensure instant death.

The chant changed abruptly to growls and screams as the cannibals fought for his body, and Mac sucked in a huge, whooping breath.

Whatever his crimes, whatever his nature, the man had known how to die. It was courage of a high order and Mac found himself hoping that if put to it, he would show the same.

Chapter Four

The first disappointment was the sight of a Galiconia scout ship still sitting arrogantly in the Krus's private landing dock. Even though he had been expecting it, he had half hoped that it might have gone. The second disappointment, more alarming by far, was the realisation that the possibility of instant escape, or any sort of escape for that matter, was precluded. The two plasma cannon, one on either side of the dock, that had tracked his ship's final descent carried all too obvious a message. Still, having made up his mind to come at all, Slade was quite aware that he would need more than his sunny smile to prevail.

Osmond, however, looked about wildly and then screamed at him:

"What have you done, you lunatic? You've killed us."

Slade did not even deign to turn round, merely gestured. Two of his deaf-mutes picked Osmond up by his elbows and marched him off. Osmond this time made no attempt to struggle. He was learning, Slade thought absently, but still not nearly fast enough.

Slade cracked his knuckles and considered the auction before him. While the Chairman through Galiconia obviously had more resources on which to draw, Slade was confident that he would be more ruthless in what he was prepared to agree to. He would bid the whole of Redux if he had to. He noted the party of housecarls approaching the ship and squared his shoulders. He suddenly felt relaxed and comfortable, quite able to deal with whatever events might unfold.

He sought out Osmond and forestalled him before he could start screaming again.

"We are to appear before the Krus," he said crisply. "You will not speak. You will not speak even if you are directly addressed. You will not speak whatever happens. If you do speak from now on, so much as a word, you will lose privileges accordingly." Osmond abruptly shut his mouth. Privileges meant his nautch chaise, the one pleasure left to him in the whole damn universe.

"Is that clear?" Slade insisted. Osmond nodded.

"Very well. Bring Dostoi to attend you. And try to conduct yourself in a manner befitting the next chairman."

One had to be constantly careful of Dostoi, Slade reflected. Better not to leave him alone.

On entering the Krus's chamber, aware as he was that he would face a Galiconia representative, nonetheless Slade was shocked. He had never dreamed that the Chairman might send the deaf-mute Slade had last encountered in Osmond's box at the Redux arena, waving a blaster in his face. Tranter. Tranter, his deaf-mute traitor. Tranter, the man who had wrecked the original plan. Slade stiffened angrily and then

fought to regain his calm. He was a pro, and a pro should avoid emotion. He wrenched his eyes away from Tranter and surveyed the rest of the room. It was exactly the same as he had seen on the hypercom down to the fact that the Krus was still standing on his podium with only his back to the room, though this time there was no glimpse of bare skull above the collar of his mantle. He appeared to be wearing some sort of hat, except that a moment later it became clear that it was a mask, a featureless mask of black boiled leather. There was only one eyehole.

The Krus swept about to face them, his heavy mantle swinging. Underneath he wore more plain black. As a statement, Slade thought, the result was pretentious and then he suddenly remembered that the Krus might well have reason to regard Slade with disfavour. He found himself hoping that business would remain business without unhappy reference to who might have broken whose word.

"Welcome," the Krus said with a lack of cordiality so freezing it would have cracked ice. And then without more ado he started the auction for Mac's life.

"The bidding stands at C200 million in refined thormalium calculated at official market rates. It is against you," the Krus said, turning to Slade. The word "you" was spat out with a vehemence that lashed Slade almost like a blow.

"Three," Slade said, trying not to flinch, trying to think. "Three hundred million."

"Four," Tranter signed, holding up four fingers.

"Four-fifty," Slade said.

Tranter paused.

"Five," he signed.

Slade in turn also paused, but he had no real choice.

"Five-fifty," he said, and unconsciously he sighed.

Tranter took a pace forward, prolonging the suspense. Then he held out his reacom to the Krus with a message already inscribed. It read:

"I am not authorised to proceed beyond C500 million. However, as part of our bid price we offer information. The Chairman will explain and it is for you to evaluate its worth."

The Krus's eye behind the mask considered Tranter for a long moment and then he nodded.

"So," Slade said. "Five-fifty. That's it?"

"No," the Krus rumbled. "First we talk with the Chairman."

Osmond rolled his eyes wildly and made to flee, but Slade grabbed his arm and held it firmly during the time it took to establish the hypercom link. Quickly, so quickly that it was obvious he must have been standing by, the Chairman was before them.

He nodded to the Krus who motioned in return.

"You say?" the Krus said.

"The two g-ball games in which the boy played..." the Chairman began. "You lost heavily on the first and had my son, Osmond, succeeded in the second part of his plan to fix the second game, you might have been ruined."

"You say,? the Krus said. "Your son, Osmond? Who stands before me?"

The Chairman nodded solemn affirmation.

"He's lying," Osmond burst out, suddenly beyond all restraint. "He's lying because he wants me killed." The words were a shriek of outraged betrayal. Never mind that Osmond had been perfectly prepared to kill his father and had indeed attempted to, that his father should now throw him to the Krus struck at the whole foundation of his being. And beneath the outrage, there was terror. Osmond was petrified of what the Krus might do to him.

"You may judge who is lying for yourself," the Chairman responded to the Krus. "You are holding the boy. Ask him. He, at least, has no reason to lie."

Mac was in a sad way. He estimated that he would have to hold out another day before attempting to escape, if he could, but the three days that had already passed had taken a heavy toll. He was famished and badly dehydrated, dehydrated to the point where he had been forced to gulp at the noisome liquid that was offered as water. He feared all manner of horrible disease but the body's priority was to save itself from dying of thirst now and to worry about cankers, blights and infections later. Only once had he managed to grab the bread thrown at him. The first time it had dropped into the filth of the floor. The second time an arm from the side had intercepted it.

The worst torture, however, was the pain of the cage. He couldn't stretch out, he couldn't sit up properly and however he might twist and turn the cruelly spaced maxalloy bars on which he was forced to lie pressed ever more brutally into his body, bruising deep to the bone.

It had got to the point where he wondered if he would still be physically capable of getting away if a chance did offer. The only thing that stopped him sinking into complete despair was the thought of Roxanna's fury if he gave up, surrendered, accepted the fate waiting a metre or two away.

Mac was learning again the most difficult of lessons, that to sustain courage in the face of utter degradation and inhumanity is the worst trial of all. It was so tempting just to sink into the morass of self-pity lapping his ankles. It was so tempting just to let his mind turn in on itself, to drug itself, destroy itself with apathy. But every time he found himself on the edge of capitulation he felt Anna's presence, he remembered she was on this terrible moon because of him and he found just a little more strength. Even so, he had all but forgotten why he was caged, why he had to wait, what he was waiting for. To think at all was nearly beyond him.

Despite his deep horror of the cavern and everything in it, Mac found that he had quickly become attuned to its rhythms. He was aware now of all that was happening about him without having to think. And so when a stir riffled through the cages he knew it was because of a detail about to descend the spiral ramp and that soon the primal pulse from the depths of the pit would beat and throb. Except, somehow this was different. The ripple of response in the cages was more prolonged. There was a flutter of interest, almost excitement.

Mac craned to see. The rumour of the cages was correct. A much larger party than usual was descending the ramp and it was clear that not all of them were housecarls. Mac, despite himself, felt a stirring of anticipation. It was probably too soon and might wreck everything, but he resolved that if there were the slightest opportunity to escape he would seize it. It was unlikely there would ever be another. Even the thought that there might be a chance of escape sent the adrenalin racing through his system. He forgot the ravening hunger. He forgot the raging thirst. The pain of his bruised bones faded, disappeared, and he concentrated avidly on the approaching group. As the only concrete act of preparation he could make, he surreptitiously removed his gauntlets and tucked them into his belt. He stroked the now exposed glove on his left hand and activated the thormalium.

The group of people descending the ramp came round the last curve, unconsciously marching in step, all except one of them whom Mac suddenly recognised with shock. It was Osmond von Osmond, his half-brother. And there was Slade, in person. And also Tranter. All at once Mac knew they could only be coming for him.

Abruptly, the gate to Mac's cage slammed open and he was hauled out by two jailers. Cramp seized his body and half staggering, half dragged, he was brought to stand in front of his worst enemies. His back was to the pit, the edge of which was threateningly close behind him.

A large man so swathed in black that he was almost invisible in the gloom stepped forward. Mac was startled to see that his face was also masked in black leather and realised all at once that he could only be the Krus himself. The jailers were motioned away and Mac was left to stand alone, on the brink, suffering the Krus's extended scrutiny. At last the Krus spoke.

"Boy," he said. "You know this man here?" The Krus indicated Osmond, who was attempting to slide behind Slade and who appeared to have the ague, he was shaking so badly.

Mac nodded.

"Who is he?"

"Osmond von Osmond the fourteenth," Mac said warily.

"And did he ever order you to fix a g-ball game?"

There was a breathless, expectant pause as Mac's thoughts raced. Surely not? Surely it could not be possible? Surely Osmond was not to meet justice at last? In this terrible place where there was none?

Mac drew breath to answer, but before he could speak, Osmond in one final paroxysm of panic and before anyone could react, rushed forward and made to hurl his brother into the pit behind. Automatically, in hard-won reflex Mac spread his left hand as wide as it would go and rocketed upwards. Osmond, with nothing to check his momentum speared head first over the edge and arced into the abyss. There was a despairing shriek and instantly, the chant began to pulse.

"Meat. Meat. Meat. Meat. Meat. Meat. Meat."

From above, Mac had a confused impression of shadowy hulking shapes reaching upwards and grabbing for Osmond's body. There was thump as Osmond hit something and then he began to scream. It went on for a long time.

From his vantage point, Mac could see far too much of Osmond's end. However brutally his brother had treated him, Mac could never condemn anyone to such a fate. Even if Osmond had been attempting to inflict just such a death on him, Mac still recoiled from it. Justice, poetic or otherwise, it might be but it was more justice than Mac would ever seek of his own accord. It was a sight that would stay with him for the rest of his life, that would haunt his nightmares.

As Osmond plunged to his doom, the Krus and the rest of the group automatically shrank back from the edge of the pit. Then at last someone began to shout. It was Slade.

"I don't believe it," he roared over the noise of Osmond being dismembered and consumed alive. "You didn't take his glove. You left him his glove. You call that security!"

The Krus stared at him and then understanding dawned. He began to shout for the jailers and housecarls. Mac waited to hear no more but streaked for the top of the cavern and the entrance to the ramp.

Slade was beside himself, all but incoherent with rage. Not only was Osmond, his ticket, his passport, his ace in the hole, dead, but the boy Macgilliguddy had also escaped and who knew whether he would ever be captured again, captured alive. It was a disaster and as soon as the traitor, Tranter, could get to a hypercom and inform the Chairman, the catastrophe would be complete. Slade would have little chance of getting back to Redux, where his only safety lay, and even then who knew for how long. White-hot with anger Slade planted himself in front of the Krus, so close that the two men were chest to chest.

The hard eye behind the blank, boiled leather face glared down at the foolhardy stranger daring to invade his personal space but before he could sweep this impertinent supplicant aside, the man spat at him in fury.

"Is this how you keep your word? Is this how you treat your guests?"

The Krus stared at him in astonishment. He had no memory of the last time that anyone had dared speak to him in such a manner.

"I want the boy," Slade pressed on recklessly. "We had an agreement. I want the boy and I want him alive. I must have him alive now, not dead. Name your price, but I must have him alive."

Tranter, who had been watching the spittle fly as he read Slade's impassioned lips, stepped forward and gestured significantly.

The Krus pushed Slade back with his vast arm. "I will consider," he said as he strode for the ramp.

Slade hesitated and then followed behind, his anger cooling enough for him to begin to think rationally. He had two options: return to Redux, gambling that he would be able to get there before the Chairman's minions, or wait on Cram in the hope of winning the boy. If he left now, immediately, before Tranter could brief the Chairman, he was fairly certain of reaching Redux before they could either stop him or get there before him. And he was also reasonably certain of then being able to hold the planetoid, at least in the short term, at least until the Chairman came to the conclusion that he would have to destroy it to save it. If, however, Slade waited and if as seemed likely the Krus failed to deliver the boy to him, he would be finished. Regaining control of Macgilliguddy, now sole heir to Galiconia, was his only chance of eventually seizing the chairmanship himself, but first he must look to saving his life in the short term. On the instant of Osmond's death everything had changed. First he must ensure his own safety. Then to remove the Chairman, he would require the only remaining heir not dead, but alive and in his power.

However that last, Slade suddenly resolved, would have to wait. Dead he couldn't do anything and unless he got to Redux first he might well find himself very dead very quickly. To wait in the hope of gaining possession of the boy was too big a gamble altogether.

By the top of the ramp, his mind was made up. He stopped outside the entrance to the Krus's chamber and waited. Eventually the Krus turned to him.

"On reflection," Slade said. "I will leave now. There is nothing to be gained by staying and all debts and agreements are cancelled by the death of Osmond."

Dostoi, seeking to efface himself behind whichever back seemed broadest, let out a sigh. Osmond's death, the reason for it and the manner of it, had terrified him. He, too, had been involved in the match-fixing attempt. There was also another, earlier matter that suddenly weighed heavily on his conscience. He began to sidle around the outside of the group, aiming to bring himself behind Slade ready for the exit he was praying for so devoutly.

"All debts are not cancelled," the Krus said.

"The g-ball?" Slade said. The Krus nodded and Slade's arm suddenly shot out, snaring Dostoi by the collar.

"Then," Slade said. "I give you the other partner." And he thrust Dostoi forward so powerfully that he fell at the Krus's feet. For Dostoi it was the most terrible dilemma. If he tried to implicate Slade to mitigate his own guilt and should they nevertheless miraculously escape, then Slade would certainly kill him, probably in a screamer. If he accepted the blame, rightfully Osmond's, all Osmond's, then the Krus would certainly kill him, probably in the pit. In an agony of indecision, he said nothing and then the Krus spoke.

"I know this man," he said, and Dostoi's heart sank even further if that were possible. "You may go," he said to Slade. "He stays," and he indicated Dostoi.

Tranter in his turn was torn. To have any chance of destroying Slade, ship to ship, he must leave at the same time. But if he did so, he left the future of the Chairman's one surviving heir poised on a knife edge. The Krus, should he recapture the boy, which he almost certainly would, doubtless would then kill him out of hand unless somehow prevented. Tranter, despite his griping desire for revenge on Slade, was forced to concede that his clear duty was to stay and offer Mac whatever protection he could and then return him to the embrace of his father. He cursed mentally as he watched Slade turn on his heel and without further ado march off down the alley towards the landing dock.

Chapter Five

The wait, for all of them, was excruciating. On the one hand there was the anxiety, the uncertainty of whether the equipment would come and how they might steal it if it did, and on the other hand there was their dread of what might be happening to Mac and the consuming worry of whether he would be able to escape at all, and if so whether he could manage to do it approximately at the right time.

For Roxanna, as the hours then days dragged past, it was purest torture and she reproached herself with acid bitterness that she had ever agreed to any of this madness in the first place. Of course they should have gone to Theta Tauri Minor as instructed. Of course they should have trusted the Chairman. How not? Mac was his son, after all. And if the Chairman of Galconia couldn't protect Mac from Osmond, then who could?

It had been insane to think that they could launch out into the cluster on their own with virtually nothing, no money, just the barest minimum of thormalium and Orville's brain. Sheerest insanity. Utter, utter madness. And Roxanna grew angrier and angrier, with herself first for ever having accepted the plan, then with the others who were equally responsible for the mess they were in, but most of all with Mac, most at fault, now suffering who knew what horrors, and serve him right.

Of all of them, Orville was least affected as he at least had concrete tasks with which to occupy himself, the most important of which was to test, realign and recalibrate the ship's eight plasma cannon. Each was housed in a blister on the ship's external skin and could rotate sufficiently so that at the ranges used for normal space encounters the fire from each would intersect with the fire from any two of the others, giving all round protection. However, at close quarters there would necessarily be blind spots and Wright wanted these eliminated by modifying some of the carriages. He was also concerned at the lack of lighting in the spaceport at night.

Orville, working against the clock with John and Shelby's help as required, had no time to worry and to his sister's disgust almost seemed to be enjoying himself. Twice Roxanna flared up at him, subconsciously trying to provoke a row that would consume some of her tension, and twice Orville refused to react, choosing to disappear into one of the blisters. Perforce he knew his sister very well and while the new Roxanna, the Roxanna who had evidently chosen to bond with Mac, was somewhat of a stranger Orville could guess well enough the real source of her bad temper. He had watched, a little wistfully, as the romance had developed and had decided that he was happy for both of them. He, himself, had quickly come to feel close to Mac – there was nothing like acute danger for concentrating the emotions – and he realised that Mac and Roxanna falling in love had been all but inevitable. Like his father, he thought Roxanna far too young for such grand commitment, but like Wright, he also accepted that given

the danger they had faced and would face again, there was a strong argument for making the most of life while they still had it.

When he had finished modifying the cannon carriages, Orville went and found Roxanna, brooding in her bunk.

"Hey Rox," he said. "It will be all right. He'll be all right." She was scrunched up in a foetal heap, facing the wall.

"You don't know that," she flared. "He might be dead already."

"Do you think that?" Orville said. "Do you really think that?"

"No," Roxanna said, turning over. Orville was floating beside the berth anchored to a handgrip.

"Why not?"

"I'd know."

"So stop torturing yourself!" Orville said.

"But..."

"Just stop it," Orville said. "And come and help us with the lights."

But later, when everything was prepared and there was nothing to do but sit in the mess and wait, even Orville found the time dragging worse than his legs. At last Shelby, whose turn it was to be on watch, sounded the alert.

"They're coming," he warned them.

Wright nodded.

"Let's go then," he said. "And remember that we don't want trouble if we can possibly avoid it."

There was a mumble of assent and they separated to their various tasks, John and Roxanna hurrying to get into position outside, Wright heading for the fire-command console and Orville and Shelby moving to the top of the ramp, Shelby lovingly cradling a blaster.

He and Orville could see their consignment approaching in the distance, a number of crates stacked on a floating pallet being shepherded down the walkway. With a farsee, Orville counted a party of eight, the pawnbroker plus an escort of seven.

"Eight," he said to Shelby, who shrugged.

"Makes no difference," he said. "They won't try anything against the cannon, not unless they're out of their minds."

"You think they're really bringing our stuff?" Orville asked. Shelby shrugged again.

"Maybe," he said. "But this is Cram. Be ready..."

Wright watched on the screen as the escort approached and when it had left the walkway and was within 50 metres, he toggled a switch. Immediately, Orville's sunspots flared into life and the ship became the centre of a harsh white circle. There came what sounded like a gasp and then the chittering of thousands of rats and other

nameless night creatures as they fled through the heaps of refuse for the sharp boundary that now separated night from day.

The escort came on and Orville began to pull himself down the ramp to meet them at the bottom. Wright had been unhappy that his son would have to do the negotiating but in the end, as Orville was the only one who could possibly know whether the items were genuine or not, he had had to surrender to simple logic and suppress his fears about what might happen if things turned nasty and Orville, unable to move without handholds, were caught in the open.

The group of thugs stopped and the pawnbroker stood forward, even smaller and more wizened now that he was out of his lair and exposed in the open. He resembled nothing so much as a heap of refuse himself.

"You see," he called. "I keep faith. You have the thormalium?"

"Of course," Orville lied smoothly. He found that he was actually enjoying himself. It was not often he was able to play a principal role on centre stage.

"Show me," the pawnbroker croaked.

"Show me the shipment," Orville said. The pawnbroker motioned and his men brought the pallet across to the bottom of the ramp.

"It's all here," the pawnbroker said. "Acquired with great difficulty."

Orville smiled. "I see some crates," he said. The pawnbroker stared at him and one or two of his thugs moved threateningly, but Orville, somewhat to his own surprise, projected masterful unconcern. At last the pawnbroker made another angry gesture and his men began to stack the crates on the ground. They were just removing the lid from the largest of the maxalloy cases, a case which Orville thought looked about the right size for the molecular welder, when suddenly the ship's cannon on the side opposite the ramp began to fire short, automated bursts. Distantly, they heard screams. Shelby seized his weapon and came racing down the ramp. John and Roxanna emerged from their hiding places, also armed with blasters. The pawnbroker's thugs suddenly found themselves at the centre of a potential three-point crossfire. A dot of violet light moved lazily over the ground, climbed up one of the pawnbroker's legs and settled contentedly between his eyes.

"That was my father," Orville said and paused. Shelby touched his earpiece.

"He says there were six," he said. "He says there are now none."

"So foolish," Orville said. "Did you really think we would let you come up on our blind side? Have you never heard of lifesign?" And it occurred to Orville as he spoke that Galconia's lifesign technology might well not be widely used on Cram.

The pawnbroker said nothing but his stare was eloquent and comprehensive.

Orville touched himself between the eyes.

"Plasma cannon, narrow beam, visual sight," he said. He moved his index finger a fraction. "You are that far away from having no head and a melted neck." Orville

allowed another pause to develop, a telling pause. It had always been their hope that the pawnbroker would try to double-cross them and accordingly leave himself without a leg, moral or physical, to stand on. And he had obliged them to perfection. They had speculated that the seeming opportunity to steal a whole ship would prove irresistible and so it had proved.

Orville finally spoke.

"I suggest you leave," he said. "In a quiet and orderly fashion. I suggest you give us no excuse to kill you. We'd like that. It would be so much tidier. Put your weapons on the ground and go."

One of the thugs made a sudden move and Orville abruptly held up his hand.

"Uh-uh," he said. "Melted neck."

The pawnbroker spat and then hissed at his men, who dropped their blasters and filed off. The violet spot cherished him all the way across the lit ground and deep into the darkness.

Ever afterwards, Mac retained only the most confused impression of his escape from the Kruskraal. Once he had rocketed out of the cavern he found himself in a maze of corridors and passages, dead-ends and cul-de-sacs. Up, he told himself desperately, keep going up, but the longer he was on the loose, the more the uproar grew. As he raced through the labyrinth he would alternately be spotted and abandoned by groups of pursuers, hot on the hunt. Sirens began to howl. At one point, a housecarl swinging his knout managed to catch his boot and half tear off a heel. Another housecarl took a shot at him, but missed. There was a scream from behind the wall where the blast had penetrated. It was flying such as Mac had never done before and never wanted to do again, barrelling through tight, constricted spaces, never knowing what hazards were waiting round the next corner, bewildered and fleeing for his life. But somehow he managed to evade capture and somehow he kept going up until finally he came to a small skylight, apparently giving to the outside. It was locked. And beyond the skylight the passage came to another dead end.

A pack of housecarl hounds roared around the corner behind him and Mac sensed them pause, sensed them realise he was finally trapped, sensed them stop to savour the moment when he would be definitively at the mercy of their knouts.

"No," Mac whispered to himself. "Not now. Not ever."

He backed up as far as he dared and as the grasping hands began to reach for him, he aimed himself feet first at the skylight and set himself to ram it with all the power he could muster. There was a great crash as his boots smashed into it, his heel disintegrated completely and for an agonising fraction of a second the cryllic held firm, then in a shower of jagged splinters he was through and spearing up into the night sky. His exit

was marked by a couple of token blasts flaring up from the shattered skylight behind him. He was out. He was free.

For a moment he revelled in the relatively fresh air and the cool tingle as it flowed past his filthy skin and sucked away the stink of his clothes, then he set about orienting himself. He had had only a brief look at Cram from the air as they landed and now retained only the vaguest notion of how to get back to the ship. Somewhere to the north-east relative to the kraal he guessed, but the more he gained altitude the more confusing became the dark, amorphous mass of the endless city where only the very occasional light showed through the tangle.

He hovered for a long time trying to place himself, the sense of panic building, when suddenly away in the distance there was a blaze of sunspots. It had to be a ship, Mac thought, a ship protecting itself. The James Macgilliguddy protecting itself. And then he told himself that he was being totally ridiculous. Such a mammoth coincidence was plainly impossible but in lieu of anything better, he allowed himself to sideslip into a shallow dive that would very quickly take him there.

The closer the light came, the more excited Mac allowed himself to become. He was almost sure that the pool of white in what appeared to be an uncluttered expanse of black must be coming from a ship on the landing field and then there was a burst of what could only be cannon fire. It must be the James Macgilliguddy. It must be his family, defending themselves. Could it be that they were actually in the process of hijacking Orville's equipment? Surely not. Surely he could never be that lucky. He increased his speed to terminal velocity, shrieking silently through the night sky of Cram without a soul any the wiser, three-quarters blind with the tears of his passage.

When he could begin to make out hazy figures, he slowed abruptly and desperately wiped at his eyes. A group of men were trudging away from the ship's ramp and behind them he could see Orville and Shelby, then John and Roxanna moved to join them.

Roxanna. Mac's heart seemed to explode. She was here. She was safe.

All his instincts were to rush towards her, but something held him back. Then he cautiously began to slip lower until he was hovering silently above the strange gang. None of them spoke until they came to a hut camouflaged to look like more rubbish. They stopped in front of it and a pair of housecarls emerged. Mac recognised Death and Pestilence, as Wright had nicknamed them.

Death stepped forward, lazily lifted his knout and delicately hooked one of the pawnbroker's ear lobes. The old man flinched and Mac guessed that he must have had something to do with organising the abortive attempt on the ship.

"So," Death said, his voice expressionless, but all the more threatening for being so. "Two Krusmen are dead and four probationaries. Yet we have nothing to show for it."

He tugged sharply, the hooks of his knout tore through flesh and the old man yelped. He clapped a hand to the gushing blood.

"All the more for us, for you," he said hastily. "For the Krus," he added obsequiously. "His cut."

"How so?" Death inquired gently.

With his other hand, the pawnbroker hurriedly delved in a pocket and pulled out a remote trigger. He proffered it, but Death let him stand hand outstretched.

"There is a gas in one of the crates," the pawnbroker said.

"Yet you let my men die when you had this?" Death's voice was moving rapidly from expressionless to downright ominous.

"It is less certain," the pawnbroker said, his tone rising. "The crates must be inside and the airlock closed, and then there is no knowing how long before they die. The ship may be airborne, in space where..." The old man suddenly trailed off.

"Where you can't salvage it, but we can," Death said. "Or were you just planning to use the gas against us, after we'd taken the ship for you?" Slowly he raised his great arm and with it the knout. He let it hang suspended for a long second and then brought it lashing down with all his force across the pawnbroker's face. Mac saw an eyeball fly off with the chunks of flesh. The old man screamed like the lost soul he had suddenly become and mercifully passed out.

Death moved a step forward, stamped heavily on the pawnbroker's wrist and bent to retrieve the trigger.

"Bring it on board," Wright said over the intercom and Shelby motioned to the others. With the other two standing guard, he and John began to stack the crates back on the pallet to move them up the ramp. Wright surveyed the area carefully, one last time, noting that the pawnbroker's gang was still hanging around off in the distance but far enough away that there could be no threat. If he had gone to a higher resolution he might have detected the anomaly of Mac hovering above them, but as it was, he was more concerned to help the others get the equipment on board while they had the chance.

Working quickly, the three men took only minutes to restack the pallet and to tow it up the ramp. Wright, behind the other two, reached for the switch to the airlock.

In the glaring light still pouring out from the ship, Mac saw the last figure climb the ramp, turn as though for a final look and then move inside. The hatch began to close and Mac watched in disbelief as Death raised the trigger and planted his heavy thumb on the button. On the instant he was streaking for the ship, careless of who might see and praying that no one had changed the security code on the external access during his absence.

Though only half a click, it was the longest flight of Mac's life. It seemed time enough for the whole universe to contract into one last black hole and disappear entire,

before eons later he was at the head of the ramp and frantically punching in numbers. For a second, nothing happened and it seemed to his despair that the code had been altered. Then the hatch began to slide open.

Mac, holding his breath, dived through as soon as the gap was wide enough and found a scene of developing carnage. They were all down already, Wright and Shelby weakly trying to drag themselves back to the airlock switch, both coughing and gasping. John and Orville, closer to the pallet, when the gas cylinder fired were unmoving and staring fixedly at the ceiling. Roxanna appeared to be dead.

With air from the outside flooding in and diluting the gas, colourless and odourless, whatever it was, Mac went for the worst first. Seizing Orville and Roxanna by the collars of their jerkins, he hauled them to the door and rolled them down the ramp. He dragged in another huge breath and went for John. Shelby, meanwhile, was helping Wright and by the time Mac had also rolled Lanfranchi down the ramp, they were gasping in the doorway.

"Resuscitation," he shouted at them. "Help them. I'll get oxygen..." And one last time, Mac raced back into the hold heading for the emergency breathing apparatus. He nearly didn't make it, his body starving for air with the heavy exertion and minimal breaths, but he was just able to don a mask and turn the valve before he passed out himself.

Outside, Wright was working on Roxanna and Shelby on Orville with the time-honoured method of unassisted CPR developed when man was still a primitive. John appeared to be recovering by himself in the cleaner air. Mac pushed Wright aside and strapped a mask to Roxanna's face and turned the valve on full. She was blue and her fingernails suffused. Wright continued the heart massage. Mac fixed a mask for Orville, and then passed a bottle to John, who was now able to help himself.

Slowly, both Roxanna and Orville began to show signs of recovery. Mac put his head between his knees retching with relief and adrenalin overload.

"Touching," a voice said coldly. It was a voice with which Mac was becoming all too familiar. He looked up and his gorge rose again. Death, Pestilence and the seven thugs of the pawnbroker's gang were ranged around them in a semi-circle. The two housecarls held blasters and at a gesture from Death the others retrieved their own weapons, still lying on the ground.

Mac felt his shoulders slump in defeat. There was now really only one question. Would they be killed here or would they be taken first before the Krus? And Mac found he didn't know which to hope for, nor was he left long in doubt.

Death pointed directly and at him.

"Take his glove," he said to Pestilence and then to Mac: "It would please me if you moved a muscle."

But Mac, uncaring, did. He stripped off the glove himself and handed it to Pestilence as the man stepped forward. Better that and to have some chance of the glove, his last one, still being usable in an unlikely future than to have it mindlessly ripped off and destroyed now.

Death took a step forward, his knout swinging, but in the end let it pass. That made it definite, Mac thought. They were to be taken before the Krus. The housecarls had clearly been warned about the glove and had also been warned not to damage what was now, again, the Krus's property. How long that property would remain undamaged was quite another matter.

"Get rid of that gas bomb and then get this lot on board," Death said to his minions and when one of the thugs gingerly carried out the crate, he himself took Wright by the arm. "We will now fly this ship to the Krus's landing dock," he said and forced Wright up the ramp and on to the flight deck. A light was blinking on the command screen.

"There," Death said. "We go to that beacon. Now." He turned to thug behind him. "Bring the girl," he said. "It would unwise to irritate me," he added to Wright.

Mac, hustled inside with the others, eventually found himself huddled on the floor of the hold next to Orville, who seemed to be breathing almost normally again.

"Are you all right?" Orville whispered.

"Sure," Mac said glumly.

"I'm so sorry," Orville said. "It's all my fault. It's an old, old trick. Highly compressed, highly concentrated carbon monoxide to take out those in the immediate vicinity and give time for a fuel cell and a reverse catalytic converter to generate enough to saturate any closed circuit atmospheric system. It's all my fault. I should have been looking for some sort of booby trap. I should have realised when the stuff turned out to be genuine. They wanted to be certain we'd bring the crates on board..."

"Don't blame yourself," Mac said. "There was just too much against us."

"But I do," Orville said. "And if it hadn't been for you..."

"You probably won't be thanking me in a little while," Mac said, his head down. Orville touched him on the arm and gestured. Roxanna was staring at him as she was dragged forward. Her eyes were huge and the air between them was full of unspoken questions. Mac tried to smile reassuringly but all he managed to produce was a pained grimace. The gods knew what horrors lay before them now.

Wright brought the James Macgilliguddy into the Krus's personal landing dock with his usual immaculate precision and somehow was unsurprised to see a second Galiconia scout ship already in residence. He had been very close instead of landing to sending the ship spearing into the Kruskraal in one glorious, one vast, one final immolation but his daughter's white face and unyielding expression had tipped the balance. Live to fight another day, he told himself. Whatever the cost.

Chapter Six

The Krus's ovoid audience chamber, as opposed to his utilitarian control room, was a strange place, more like the interior of an egg and unlike anything Roxanna had ever imagined. That the roof was concave was one thing but so was the floor, which meant that from where they were standing the Krus's white chair, throne she supposed, was greatly elevated though the dais on which it stood rose only a single step. The ceiling, the floor, and what there was of wall were all backlit so that the opalescent gleam accentuated the egginess. It was altogether quite weird, she thought, particularly as the chair, the one piece of furniture in what was quite a large hall, was hard, straight-backed and severely simple.

Again, when they had all been forced to leave the ship, she had tried to get next to Mac but had been roughly pulled away by one of the housecarls. As far as she could tell, he seemed all right. He was filthy and his clothes stank to high heaven, which would indicate that whatever had been happening to him certainly hadn't been pleasant, but yet again he had managed to save them. Somehow, he had turned up in the nick of time and as a result they were all still alive when really they had no right to be. She felt herself glowing as she reflected on how strong he had proved, yet again. He was... just amazing, and he loved her. But how he or anyone else for that matter might get them out of this present mess she couldn't begin to guess and she found that the glow had vanished on the instant. So many people seemed to want them dead for one reason or another... So many people.

She sensed the guards stiffen, warned somehow, and then a huge man strode forth across the podium from a concealed entrance. He was wrapped in a theatrical black cloak drawn close about him and his face was hidden by a featureless black mask made all the more sinister by the fact that it had only one eyehole. It could only be the Krus and Roxanna involuntarily drew in a shaky breath. He stood regarding them for a long, long minute and Roxanna found the blank stare totally unnerving.

There was a noise behind them at the back of the chamber and a man in Galiconia uniform, a man she recognised, Tranter, made his way gingerly around the dished and sloping floor until he stood to one side of the podium.

The Krus spoke from behind his mask, the voice deep and projecting effortlessly to fill the hall. Roxanna felt the power radiating from him in waves.

"Who speaks for you?" he demanded of them.

"I do," Wright said.

"But I choose you," the Krus said and pointed to Roxanna. "Step forward."

Roxanna was confused and afraid.

"Why me?" she said, mouthing the words more than speaking them.

"Because then I might hear the truth," the Krus said. "Step forward."

"Leave her alone," Wright said. "She's just a child."

"Be silent," the Krus said gently. "Or I shall silence you. And she is clearly not a child. She is grown."

"She is a child," Wright insisted. The Krus made the smallest of gestures and one of the housecarls stepped up behind Wright, whipped the thong of his knout about his head, forced it between his teeth and twisted. It was a well-practised move. Wright gagged helplessly.

Roxanna, suddenly furious, did step forward.

"Don't do that," she snapped. "Or I won't talk. He's my father and you have no right to hurt him."

"If I say you will talk, you will talk," the Krus said.

"No doubt you can make me scream," Roxanna said, the anger plain. "But you will never make me talk if I choose not to. And tell him to let my father go."

There was a long silence, the men in the room all rather stunned by the defiance pouring from such a diminutive figure. Mac felt his heart bursting with pride.

"Oh I think I could make you talk if I wanted to," the Krus said eventually, but nevertheless he waved his hand and Wright was released. He staggered and the marks of the thong were pressed deep into his cheeks. The Krus studied the child-woman before him who was proving unexpectedly spirited. She was undeniably small but her body had the curves of a woman while her elfin face, already fined down from the puppy fat of childhood, was somewhere between pretty and beautiful. She was also undeniably young, sixteen perhaps, but quite old enough. Perhaps.

"Who are you?" the Krus demanded at last.

"Refugees," Roxanna said.

"From what?"

"There is only one thing to flee in this cluster," Roxanna said.

"There you are quite wrong," the Krus said. "There is also me." He turned and sat down in the chair. "So you are on the run from Galiconia? Why?"

Roxanna hesitated. What could she say? What could she possibly say? There was only the truth. She indicated Mac.

"His brother is trying to kill him. His father may be. We don't know."

"And who is his brother?"

Roxanna hesitated again. She could sense her father's eyes fixed on her back. What Mac might want her to say she couldn't guess. "Osmond von Osmond the fourteenth," she said at last.

"Then you will be pleased to know he is dead," the Krus said. "You will be pleased to know that, in fact, he died while trying to kill your young man." Roxanna gasped and she heard the others sigh. This was the first hint of what had befallen Mac.

"So," the Krus continued and again he indicated Mac. "He is not, as you said, a refugee. He is the Chairman's son, his other son."

"All the more reason for being a refugee..." Roxanna found that she was no longer quite so intimidated. "You said yourself that his brother tried to kill him. Again. It is not a close family."

Wright fought to suppress a smile. The mysteries of one's children, he thought. He had had no idea only a few short weeks ago that Roxanna had developed nearly so much substance. Then, abruptly, he sobered. He had a strong premonition that before this interview were concluded he would be wishing very much that Roxanna was indeed still a child.

"Then in your view," the Krus said. "Will the Chairman pay me ransom for this son, or a killing fee?"

Roxanna opened her mouth, then closed it again. There was nothing to say. Tranter, whose eyes had been darting from face to face, stepped forward. Again, he had had cause to thank fate that the Krus's mask did nothing to conceal his lips.

The Krus glanced at him and then turned back to Roxanna.

"I asked you a question," he said.

"I have no idea," Roxanna answered, absolutely truthfully.

"Speculate for me," the Krus commanded.

"I... I think, I believe that Mac must now be the only heir. I think that must mean that the Chairman would no longer want him dead, if he ever did."

"And what does the son, this Mac, want?"

Roxanna considered. "You should ask him," she said at last.

"I am asking you."

"I think..." Roxanna started and then said in a rush. "I hope he wants to be free. I hope he wants nothing to do with Galconia." She almost spat as she said the word.

"You say?"

"Ask him yourself," Roxanna said a touch desperately. "I don't know. I only know what I want."

"So," the Krus said. "Ransom." And then, "What will you pay?"

Roxanna heard the sounds of suppressed struggle behind her. As though from a great distance she heard Mac shouting. She could not make out the words. What would she pay?

"Anything," she said. "Everything."

Slowly, the Krus stood. He paused for an unbearable length of time and then removed his mask. The shock of what they saw hit each of them like a knife to the heart. Apart from his eye and his lips, the Krus had no face, no features, just melted,

congealed flesh; no nose, no ears, no chin, no hair, just ridged, corrugated, blistered scar tissue, grotesque beyond words.

He stood there for an eternity, forcing them to look at him, to search out the full horror of it, to suffer as his mirror. At last he spoke.

"What will you pay now?" he said to Roxanna. His voice was no longer projected but personal and there was almost a note of appeal.

Roxanna drew a sobbing breath. The tears were streaming down her face but she held her gaze firmly on the monstrosity before her.

"Anything," she whispered. "Everything."

"Then come," he said, and turned to the rear of the chamber.

Roxanna somehow unfroze her limbs and stepped forward. She stepped up to the podium and followed in his wake. This time she could hear what Mac was saying. He was screaming over and over again just the one word:

"Nooo! Nooo! Nooo!"

When Roxanna emerged from the entrance to the audience chamber, the Krus had vanished. A person of indeterminate age and all but indeterminate sex was waiting for her. She was a woman.

"Come," she said and conducted Roxanna down a corridor. They entered an apartment, which contained a sitting-room, a bedroom and an abluter. There was a robe on the bed, and sandals on the floor.

"Bathe," the woman said. "And dress." She indicated the robe. "I will return."

Numbly, not daring to think, Roxanna did as she had been told. She was standing, waiting in the middle of the sitting room when the door opened again. There was only a hand mirror in the apartment but Roxanna was uncomfortably aware that the robe revealed far more than it concealed.

"Come," the woman said again.

The private chamber to which she was taken this time was richly furnished to a degree that just missed ostentation. Her eyes were drawn immediately to the Krus. He had discarded his mantle and was dressed in a plain black jerkin and trousers.

"You love the boy so much?" the Krus asked. He was standing with his back half-turned to her. She could see the wrecked cranium and a vestigial stub that must have been an ear before it was melted. She could not begin to imagine the agony he would have suffered. She made no answer.

"Sit," he said and she looked around. There was a divan and she sank to it gratefully. The room to which she had been brought held other comfortable chairs and a table. There was no bed.

"I will resume my mask if you prefer," the Krus said.

Roxanna considered.

"No," she said.

"Do I not revolt you?... Or is it that you find my disfigurement compelling, attractive?"

"Neither," Roxanna said. "It just is. Is there still pain?"

The Krus spun on his heel, his eye fixed on hers.

"That is not a question anyone has dared ask me before."

Roxanna could think of no answer. She looked down briefly and then lifted her face again. The movement seemed entirely natural.

"Do you have no fear of me?" the Krus demanded, but beneath the truculence there was a hint of wonder.

"Should I?" Roxanna said. "Certainly I fear the power you hold over me and my family."

"But you don't fear me?"

"Not really," Roxanna said. "I am sure you could hurt me, kill me. But I don't think you will. Not here. Not now."

"And you don't fear my face?"

"No."

"You should," the Krus said. "Everyone else does."

"They fear what you must have endured," Roxanna said. "The fear the man who could endure that and still be sane."

"But you don't?"

"No. It's tragic. It's terrible. But not something to fear, I think. What happened?"

The Krus regarded her wonderingly and then sat.

"It was an acid bath," he said. "One eye and my mouth were covered and then my head was held in an acid bath. If it happened that I should survive then the man who did it wanted me to be able to see what he'd done, and then to be able to scream."

"What happened to him?" Roxanna asked.

"He still lives. He will live as long as I do and he will... regret what he did for as long as I shall."

"You're torturing him?"

"You're asking me not to?"

"I don't know," Roxanna said, and then: "Yes. I think I am."

"You dare?"

"Who do you really torture: him or yourself?"

"Oh I can assure you, I torture him."

"So you are indeed only evil? You have no morality?"

The Krus paused.

"I have survived," he said. "That is my morality. If survival is evil then I am evil."

"And now," Roxanna said. "You will rape me to prove it." She found it impossible to read him. The mangled remains of his face proscribed all expression and his voice rarely changed timbre.

"You can regard the possibility so calmly?"

"Of course not," Roxanna said, her voice catching despite herself. "It would terrify me. It would destroy me."

"Then will you come willingly?"

"No," Roxanna said. "I love Mac. I love my family. For them I will come of my free will. But not willingly."

"And if you were... less encumbered? If I should order the boy to die?"

"Then I will die. And nothing you could do would prevent it."

"You are so certain?"

"Yes."

There was a long pause.

"You love the boy so much?" the Krus asked eventually, repeating an earlier question.

"He's not a boy and yes I do."

"And if I were to let them go, the boy, your family, would you stay, would you then love me?" There was suddenly what seemed to Anna a strange insistence in the Krus's one staring eye.

"I would love the fact that you had shown them mercy," she said.

"So neatly," the Krus said. "So neatly you provide me with reason, justification and motive to free you. You are remarkable. Truly remarkable. Fit to be somebody's queen, but whose? The boy's? Or mine? Will you have a prince or a king?"

Roxanna said nothing. The tension, the strain was becoming unbearable. Of course she was petrified of the Krus, of what he could do. Of course it took a supreme effort to confront the gargoyle that was his face and still somehow to remain natural. She knew that she had only one slender hope of saving them all and that was to hold her courage come what may, to meet the unimaginable with the invincible, but it was so hard and the effort was beginning to tell. Nothing in her life could ever have prepared her for a duel such as this. She felt the tears beginning to come but lifted her head defiantly and straightened her back.

The Krus had been studying her intently and then to her amazement turned away and resumed his mask.

"I will not burden you further," he said. "Already you have given me what no one else has ever attempted."

"What?" Roxanna said. "I have done nothing."

"You have treated me like the man I once was. I had not thought it possible." He held her gaze for a long, long moment. "The ransom is paid."

Roxanna stood and took the few steps that brought them together. She reached for his hand and held it. Hesitantly and with great delicacy the Krus raised his other hand and traced the line of her jaw. Abruptly, he pulled roughly away.

"No more," he said. "No more. We shall eat and you will tell me of yourself. And you will spend the night where you changed. Alone. And then we will think how best to arrange your release."

He reached into the pocket of his jerkin and removed a small object carefully folded. It was Mac's glove. He held it out to Roxanna.

"The Prince of Galiconia will need this," he said. "His queen should hold it for him."

The others had watched Roxanna climb to the podium and disappear out the concealed entrance with stunned disbelief. Mac had fought so hard that it had taken two of the guard to hold him and they had not been gentle. When at last he stopped struggling, they released their hold and he sank to the floor. There was blood trickling from a bad cut on his lip. From dark, his world had turned instantly to black, the same impenetrable black inside a coffin, entombed, buried.

A housecarl gestured for them to follow and Wright went to Mac, putting a hand under his elbow. Mac rose and walked with them but his brain was functioning only at the most basic level. The pain was too great for anything else. They were taken to a bare, windowless room, relatively clean, with hard benches round the walls. In one corner there was a bucket. The guards thrust them all inside and then the door was slammed and bolted. It was maxalloy and the only possible way out.

Orville was the first to speak.

"What do we do?" he said. His voice was low and frightened.

"What can we do?" his father said. "Wait." He turned to Mac who was standing blankly, stranded in the middle of the room where the incoming tide had left him.

"Mac," he said. "Mac!" There was not the slightest response and it was clear Mac had sunk into some sort of protective, catatonic trance, a trance so deep that it threatened to become permanent. His mind overwhelmed with the horrors of the past few days had sought relief in the only way it could.

Wright hesitated and then slapped him sharply. Still there was no response and Wright hit him again, as hard as he could. The blood from the cut on his lip was now flowing freely again but slowly Mac's eyes began to focus and Wright sighed with relief. A moment later he was forced to wonder if he had done the best thing. The look

of excruciating agony that crossed Mac's face as he regained awareness was terrible to behold. He staggered then found his way to the corner opposite the bucket and sank to the bench. He began to weep, soundlessly, the tears pouring down his face and mingling with the blood. The others looked at each other wretchedly and found they had no comfort to offer. One by one, they too found their way to the benches and sat, each wrapped in their separate misery. The thought of what would be happening to Roxanna, their sweet, innocent Roxanna, was unbearable but, somehow, bear it they must.

An indeterminate time later the door was opened, a table brought in, and trays of food. It was the plainest of fare but apparently clean and reasonably edible. There was also water. Wright eventually roused himself and took a plate and a beaker to Mac.

The tears had stopped but the lines of pain slashed into his face were all the more stark.

"Eat," Wright said. "It will help."

Mac looked at him for a long moment and then burst out:

"How could she do that? How could she do that to me?"

Wright was astonished and abruptly put down his burden on the bench beside Mac.

"To you?" he said outraged. "She did it for you, you stupid boy. She did it for us. For all of us. You stupid boy. You stupid, stupid boy..." He found that in his own pain, pain for the daughter of his heart, that he had raised his hand again and abruptly turned away in disgust. Shelby, John and Orville looked on silently, their faces troubled. Mac turned his head to the wall and some time later was apparently asleep. Slowly the others came to eat and drink, and use the bucket, and then eventually, wrapped in their own thoughts, they too slept as best they could.

Chapter Seven

Roxanna woke and lay reflecting on the strange events of the evening. The Krus and she had sat down to a lavish dinner but neither had actually eaten more than the odd mouthful. With surprising tact, the Krus had questioned her at length about her outlaw life on Redux and the circumstances which had eventually led to freedom, if the present situation could be called such. She had spoken honestly and fully of their plans and why they had been forced to come to Cram.

At the end of the recital the Krus had surprised her and warmed her heart.

He had nodded twice and said:

"So the prince is worthy. That is good. I am glad. Now I really will be able to let you go."

Then they had talked of the immediate future.

"The prince could die," the Krus had said and had quickly raised a placating hand to Roxanna's reaction. "Would that be helpful?"

It had taken a moment for Roxanna to understand and then she had studied the Krus's blank mask unseeingly.

Would it be helpful, she wondered. She hadn't known then and she didn't know now after a night of restless sleep. Osmond was dead if she were to believe the Krus, and she had no reason not to, but there was still that Slade person, she supposed. And what his interests might be now she couldn't guess, nor was there any telling who else might be seeking Mac's death in what she was beginning to realise was the complex arena of Galiconia politics. Then there was the Chairman who, it seemed, as of this moment had only the one heir left. Surely he would want Mac alive and by his side, if only better to protect him, which meant that for Mac it might well be better to be "dead", so long as he truly wished no involvement either with his father or with Galiconia. Was she certain of that? He was young and now that Osmond apparently was no longer a threat he might well change his mind. Surely emerging as the designated successor to the most powerful man in the cluster would be a powerful temptation, irresistible perhaps. Did she have the right to take that away from him?

And suddenly Roxanna realised that she was facing her own powerful temptation. If she had Mac, the identity, killed off then Mac, the person, would become exclusively hers. No one else apart from her own family would have a call on him.

Did she have the right to make such a decision? And the Krus had made it clear that she was his only concern and that thus it was her decision and her decision alone. Particularly, did she have the right to make such a decision when her own interests were suddenly so vested.

Her conscience deeply troubled, she was still no nearer to making up her mind when there was a knock at the door. The woman attendant she had encountered yesterday

entered bearing a tray of food. She set it down and left, to return a moment later with Roxanna's own clothes, cleaned and pressed. There was a small, white, sweet-scented flower on the tray. There was also a note. Roxanna waited until she was again alone before opening it. The Krus asked her to be ready within the hour. An hour, then, to make up her mind.

Food and drink was again brought to them, that was the first surprise. The second was when two housecarls entered, took Orville by his harness and drew him from the room. Wright sprang to his feet protesting but one of the guards threw over his shoulder:

"Shut up. We'll bring him back."

And half an hour later they did.

"What?" Wright said, anxiously. He was stiff and sore from a night on the hard bench and like all of them, not in the best of tempers.

Orville looked at them wonderingly and with suppressed excitement. "They made me check that the pawnbroker had brought all the equipment we need. Then they gave me thormalium, enough to be safe until we can make our own."

The three men clustered around him exclaiming. Suddenly Wright turned to Mac, who was still sitting in his corner, staring at the floor. He looked terrible, his face white and bruised, the lines and hollows carved as in stone.

"Don't you see?" Wright said. "It must mean Roxanna is all right."

Mac gave no sign of hearing and Wright, enraged, went to stand over him. He opened his mouth to yell and then abruptly turned away. There was nothing to say, nothing that could make any difference.

But Shelby, too, was angry. "Don't you care?" he demanded, his voice cracking. "Don't you care?"

This time, Mac did glance up but then went back to staring at the floor. Did he care? Did he care? It was all he could care about. It was all he could see. The Krus's brutalised head and Roxanna voluntarily walking towards him, voluntarily going to the tyrant, voluntarily giving herself. Mac had faced so much and had prevailed but there was a limit, and this was it. He could not cope with the writhing pictures his mind kept throwing at him, pictures of the pit all mixed and intermingled with pictures of his beloved Anna submitting to the beast, allowing every intimacy, accepting the complete degradation of everything he loved, body and soul.

Better the pit. Better the pit for both of them.

Again they were paraded in the audience chamber. Again Tranter was there and another man they vaguely recognised, small, weedy, fearful, obsequious.

The Krus entered from the rear of the dais, followed by Roxanna. She looked calm, self-possessed still, but there was hint of anxiety. She smiled at all of them but had eyes only for Mac. She willed him to smile back for her, give her something, a gesture, anything, but he refused even to look at her.

The room, already silent, began to crackle with tension. The Krus strode to the edge of the podium and surveyed them all, his head turning to include Tranter and Dostoi.

"I have considered," he said. "And my decisions are these. You," and he pointed at Mac. "You are condemned to the pit. You." He indicated Mac's four companions. "You are free and will leave Cram immediately. The woman stays with me."

There was a moment of speechless shock. Tranter was the first to react, stepping forward and working frantically at his reacom. Wright, Shelby, John and Orville all began to shout protests and to struggle desperately. Mac remained motionless, staring at the floor.

The pit then. It was to be the pit. Good, he thought. It was not the end he would have chosen but it would do well enough and the sooner the better.

Roxanna watched him, her heart breaking. Surely he would know, surely he would realise, but all she could see on his shadowed face was acceptance of his sentence and that frightened her more than anything that had gone before. It was terrifying. She had decided that to fake Mac's death would be to his benefit, even setting aside her own wishes, but now, suddenly, she feared it would destroy him indeed.

The Krus motioned to the guards who began to drag the struggling group of her family and friends to the exit. Mac turned of his own accord and still without so much as a glance at Roxanna followed them out. A housecarl marched at each of his elbows but he walked of his own will and unhindered.

Tranter, scowling, strode to the dais and mounted the step. Angrily, he thrust his reacom under the Krus's nose.

"The Chairman," the Krus read, "will take gravest exception to the murder of his son. Strongly advise you reconsider."

The Krus drew back and regarded Tranter for a moment.

"The Chairman," he said at last, "is now in no position to take exception to anything I may do. Ever. Tell him that I am holding his former servant, Dostoi. Tell him that Dostoi will tell of certain events on cam for my records and that he will then live a long and healthy life as a protected witness."

The Krus swept about and ushered Roxanna from the room. Tranter fell back, his face reflecting his confusion. He made to advance on Dostoi but one of the numerous housecarls still in the chamber stepped between them and spoke crisply:

"The Krus requires that you return to your quarters." The guard waited a moment and then added: "Now."

Tranter glared at Dostoi, his mind a whirl of speculation, but had no option except to acquiesce. Dostoi, for his part, knew exactly to what the Krus was referring and raged silently at his fate. It wasn't fair. It wasn't his fault. None of it. It was a mistake anyone could have made and yet the gods were determined that he should never escape the consequences. With Osmond's death in the pit, Dostoi, rejoicing, had hoped that he might finally be free but here he was enmeshed again in the consequences of one ill-considered and careless moment. He had no doubt that he would be prevailed upon to admit to poisoning Osmond's mother, the Chairman's wife, all those years before and he had a pretty shrewd idea where the train of culpability would lead and what the results might be if it ever became public. And Dostoi trembled to think what might become of him now.

Wright and his crew fought all the way back to the ship but the housecarls were too many, too strong and too ruthless for them to achieve anything but their own distress. Eventually they were bundled up the ramp and into the hold where they stood in a forlorn group under the watchful eyes of their guards. A moment later their misery gave way to astonished shock as Mac, equally bewildered, was ushered in. Their amazement was complete when through the open hatch they saw Roxanna, her hand on the Krus's proffered arm, approaching.

At the bottom of the ramp they stopped and turned to each other. After a long moment, Roxanna reached up, pulled the masked head down and kissed the Krus lightly on the lips. The Krus held her a moment wordlessly and then released her. She climbed the ramp and once inside turned to look down at him.

"Go," one of the housecarls said to Wright. "Go now." And he and the other guards filed out.

It took Wright a moment to react but when he did, he was all business. He tripped the airlock and made for the flight deck. Shelby and John waited a moment and then followed. Orville seemed inclined to linger but John grabbed his harness,

"Leave them," he said. "For pity's sake, leave them alone."

Mac sank to the floor and huddled against the wall. Roxanna looked at him expectantly, her face alight, but gradually the glow faded.

"I'm so sorry I had to do that to you," she said. "But to convince Tranter you were going to be executed you had to believe it too."

Mac said nothing, just stared miserably at the floor.

"Talk to me," Roxanna said. "Please talk to me." She took a step towards him but stopped when he flinched like some wounded animal. She too sank to the floor against the far wall, and they sat, two pools of misery, so far apart they might have been in different galaxies.

"Mac," she said. "My beloved..."

But he refused to raise his eyes.

"Don't call me that," he said, his voice so low she could barely hear. "You have no right to call me that."

"What?" Roxanna ejaculated, astounded, angry. She had had no idea of what to expect from him but this was totally beyond anything she could have imagined.

"You went with him," Mac said and then it all came welling up. "How could you go with him?" he howled. "How could you do that? How could you do that to me?"

Roxanna, astonished by the accusation and unable to stay still, jumped to her feet.

"You know why," she said, her voice rising.

"How could you?" Mac said again. He was whispering now and it was somehow much more insulting than his shout.

Roxanna grimly hung on to her temper. After everything, to find this...

"What would you have done?" she demanded. "If he had wanted you instead of me – he might have – what would you have done? Stood and watched while he killed us all one by one? Would you have gone with him, finally, when he got to me or would you have let me die, too?"

Mac looked at her. He understood this. He knew that she had done it for him, for all of them, but mostly for him. He knew this. So why couldn't he accept it for it what it was, a gift, a selfless gift, the greatest he'd ever been given. What would he have done had the positions been reversed? What if it were Roxanna now wrestling in her head with pictures of him and the Krus, the pictures that were assaulting him?

Reason, logic, justice were all with Roxanna but the pictures were with him and he couldn't bear them. The obscene pictures, the filthy, foul pictures, the pictures of her, the Krus and the pit all mixed up, the pictures that sickened him to the point where the thought of death had been welcome.

Roxanna watched him, her face hardening.

"So I disgust you?" she said at last. "Is that it? I disgust you."

"What happened?" Mac said to avoid telling her the truth, that yes, she did disgust him.

"What do you think happened?" Roxanna snapped

"I don't know," Mac said. "Tell me."

"So that you can forgive me?"

Mac shrugged.

"What if I said nothing happened?" Roxanna demanded.

Mac shrugged again.

"I see," Roxanna said. "You wouldn't believe me."

She found she was furious. She couldn't believe Mac's reaction. It was so monstrously unfair. She stared down at him crouched there, huddled on the floor of the hold, filthy, stinking, broken. Was he broken? Had they broken him? What had they done to him? What had they done to him in the time he had been imprisoned? In three strides she had crossed to him and then she was kneeling beside him. His eyes were leaking silent tears, his lip was scabbed and swollen.

"Mac," she said. "Mac. What did they do to you?"

He looked at her at last and then began to sob. Desperately he buried his head in his arms, clutching at himself, trying to hold himself in, but the paroxysms grew and took hold of him so that finally he lost all control. Roxanna thought his heart was breaking and then realised that if his wasn't, hers certainly was. She dropped beside him and a second later was cradling him, wrestling him, rocking him as the spasms shook and tore. Twice before she had held him like this, seemingly aeons ago. But while then it had been a coming together, now she wondered if it were a final parting, a parting she had believed with all her soul could never happen.

It went on for what seemed like hours until finally he was spent. When it was clear it was finished, Roxanna released him and pulled back so that they were no longer close.

"You need to bathe and change," she said. "You need food. And you need to sleep. We'll talk afterwards." She got up and without a backward look walked away. It was the hardest thing she had ever done.

Neither Mac nor Roxanna had noticed the ship's smooth exit from the landing dock and the transition back to deep space. Roxanna was surprised by the vista before her when she emerged on to the flight deck. The others were all there and regarded her anxiously.

"I don't know," she said. "I don't know what they did to him. He needs to sleep."

Wright got up and went to his daughter. She reached for him with barely concealed desperation.

"Are you all right?" he asked, hugging her close.

"I think so," she said. Her voice was rather muffled. "I will be."

"What can we do?"

"Nothing, father... Just love me," she added.

"Oh we do," Wright said. "You'll never know how much. And we think you're a hero. You saved us all and we will never be able to repay you."

"Yes, you can," Roxanna said. "Just love me." Then gently she pulled away. Shelby, John and Orville were all watching, awkward and ill at ease.

Roxanna regarded them a moment.

"Nothing happened," she said. "We had dinner and we talked. Nothing happened. He was... nice. At least, he was nice to me..."

"Does Mac know?" Wright asked.

"No," Roxanna said. She shrugged. "Things are... difficult."

"So," Orville said, unable to contain himself any longer. "What was all that about sentencing Mac to death and keeping you there?"

"We thought," Roxanna said tiredly. "I thought it might be better if Mac's father thinks he's dead, that the Krus killed him because he wanted me. It was the Krus's idea but I said yes. I'm sorry now."

"No," Wright said. "The truth will come out eventually but it will give us some breathing space with any luck. Now, come and tell us all about it..." And Roxanna was glad to let genuine care and admiration soothe away the sting and the bite of Mac's loathing, if only for a little.

Mac, himself, had fallen heedless into his bunk. He woke sometime after ship's midnight to find that the cabin he shared with Orville was empty. And then, finally alone, he faced his dark night of the soul. Unbidden, the pictures poured back into his consciousness, but this time instead of succumbing to them, he took his courage and he fought until one by one he could bring himself to consider each image in all its stark horror, to stare at it until he could regard it dispassionately, then accept it and, at last, to set it aside.

Towards dawn he rose, spent what seemed like an hour being scoured in the abluter, and donned clean clothes. He felt emptied, exorcised, exhausted, but again able to think. Most of all, he felt ashamed. He slipped out the door and padded through the ship. In the soft light of the flight deck he could see Orville, still on watch. Shelby and John were apparently in the cabin they shared together, with the door shut. Wright too was in his cabin. Mac crept past and then eased open Roxanna's door. She was asleep, but troubled and restless. He put a hand on her shoulder and then a finger across her lips. When he was sure that she was awake and not about to cry out he handed her a night robe and then gestured. Silently she followed him to the hold where they could speak without waking the ship.

Roxanna felt withdrawn and lonely, so lonely. She hoped Mac wanted to make things right but she couldn't guess and nor did she have any mind to make it easy for him if that were, in fact, his intention. She was hurt, deeply hurt, and she knew there could be no easy resolution for them. She feared they were finished and couldn't imagine how life might continue if that were, indeed, the case. The difficulties of being confined on this tiny ship for who knew how long if they could no longer bear to be in the same compartment seemed insurmountable.

Mac closed the hatch behind them and they stood regarding each other in the naked white light. At last he made to speak but Roxanna forestalled him.

"What if I told you nothing happened?" she said.

Mac smiled a little, hesitantly.

"It would make no difference," he said. She went cold and her heart stopped.

"It would make no difference," Mac repeated. "I love you now, at this moment, just as you are, whatever has happened, and I'm so sorry I hurt you after what you did for us, after what you did for me. Do you think you could forgive me?" A tear ran down her cheek.

Mac's smile faltered and believing it to be the last throw of the dice, he opened his arms. She rushed to him then and they clung together as though they were one and could never let each other go.

Chapter Eight

Dostoi was aghast. It seemed impossible that things could get worse, but they had. Bad enough that he was imprisoned here on Cram, in the Kruskraal, but following the recording of his evidence, it had been made clear to him, painfully clear, that he was expected to earn his keep by serving in the housecarls' hall. Thoughts of a sunny courtyard with a grape arbour and an excellent lunch laid for two were now cruellest mockery. Instead he was faced with a large, dimly lit chamber packed with roaring, rowdy, brawling thugs, harlots and hangers-on, shouting, bellowing, fighting, singing, snoring, cavorting or copulating as the mood took them in a mess of spilt food, drink and who knew what else. It was a scene straight out of the barbaric history of primitive humanity and Dostoi's task was to add to the chaos by toting around a fat-pack of mindwine, pumping on demand. Demeaning was not the word, he thought, as he unsuccessfully attempted to avoid stepping in yet another pool of vomit. He, who had attended the highest in the Hyades with dignity and understated competence, to be reduced to this... It was intolerable.

A ranking housecarl at the high table bellowed for more mindwine and Dostoi gingerly set out to pick his way down the room. Twice he was deliberately buffeted, and the second time was brought down full length in the unmentionable slop swilling about the floor. There was a great roar of laughter and Dostoi felt tears squeezing from his eyes. Hastily he wiped them, smearing muck about his face. It would be more than his life was worth to show such weakness, even though it had been stated forcefully that he was under the protection of the Krus to the extent that he was to be kept alive.

By the time he had recovered his feet and made his way to the end of the room he was too late. Another menial was already there. Dostoi took the opportunity to slink into a corner. He wished devoutly that he could dematerialise through the floor and was thinking that suicide had become a serious option when the conversation at the table before him began to register.

The dozen or so senior Krusmen were roaring with laughter and jesting crudely about the Chairman. Dostoi froze and at first could scarcely believe what he was hearing. It seemed that the Krus had played a fine joke. It seemed that the Chairman's son had not been thrown down the pit after all. No. He had been spirited away and even now was off somewhere safe in space. That for the Chairman, then, serve him right, and here's to that tricky, fun-loving fellow, our boss, the Krus.

Somebody bellowed for more drink and Dostoi dutifully set off, suddenly unmindful of the debauchery in front of him.

Tranter did not enjoy his interview with the Chairman. The Krus had kept him incommunicado for 48 hours before finally releasing him and he had had plenty of time

to rehearse how he would tell the most powerful man in the cluster that both his sons, legitimate and otherwise, were now dead. But no rehearsal could have prepared him for the Chairman's spontaneous fury, particularly when Tranter had been obliged to inform his master of the reappearance of Dostoi and that as a result undisclosed revelations were now being held over him.

Fury was for fools, the Chairman eventually succeeded in reminding himself. Still, he was entitled, he felt. At one stroke it appeared his dynasty had been ended. It was as yet unconfirmed but he trusted Tranter to report accurately and if all was as it appeared then there was no disguising that this was a disaster. It made the other matter trivial by comparison. Except it wasn't trivial. Justice might be a flexible concept under Galiconian law but if ever it could be proved that the Chairman had connived at procuring the murder of his own wife then he had sufficient enemies, the Palwallum for instance, to make sure the charges would stick. And the Chairman was well aware that Dostoi's evidence combined with that of the Krus would be enough to bring him down and to make the matter of heirs irrelevant.

Every chairman had blood on his hands. It went with the job. But no chairman so careless as to be caught red-handed, so to speak, ever survived. And it was literally a matter of survival as failed chairmen were invariably executed by their successors to limit any subsequent focus for rebellion.

The Chairman turned back to the hypercom where Tranter was still waiting patiently and, speaking with his hands, gave him a set of instructions which boiled down to achieving a simple bottom line: either kill Dostoi or kidnap him, preferably the latter, so that he could then refute his testimony, undoubtedly now recorded, on the grounds that it had been obtained under duress. The Chairman hoped it would not become a suicide mission for Tranter – more and more he was coming to appreciate the man as particularly valuable – and thoughtfully he set about putting this rather hastily extemporised plan into action.

The question of his recent death now troubled Mac not one iota.

"I hate Galiconia," he had told the others twice already, and he said it again. "I hate what they did to my mother and my brother. I hate what they did to James. I hate what they've done to your family, my family. I hate what they've done to Shelby and John. I hate what they're doing to billions and billions of people throughout the Hyades. I want nothing to do with Galiconia."

Wright looked at him curiously.

"But it could all be yours," he said. "Osmond died trying to kill you. You are the only heir left. It should all be yours."

Mac snorted. "You can't threaten me," he said.

The others smiled. It was a happy ship now. They had survived Cram. One way or another, they had managed to procure the equipment they needed. They were free and apparently unpursued. Mac and Roxanna were glowing and the others gathered in the mess for the evening meal were content to bathe in their warmth. Wright had found them an inconspicuous asteroid well off the shipping lanes, set the James Macgilliguddy down on the dark side two days before and Orville, if nobody else, had been hard at work ever since. They were, of course, all happy to help but there was little they could do except get in the way.

"But in all seriousness," Wright said. "You don't feel you have a responsibility?"

"Responsibility to what?" Mac demanded. Wright had broached the subject several times but had never taken this line before."

"To the billions of people you just mentioned."

"What do you mean?" Mac said.

"Well," Wright said and hesitated. "You've just seen what brutal anarchy is like, or more accurately brutal anarchy mixed with brutal dictatorship. People need government, decent government, and you are of the governing class, you know."

"I couldn't care less," Mac said, and then because it wasn't true and because he hadn't meant to be rude, added: "What do I know about governing people?" Anarchy... It was the word that had come to him facing the pit; the anarchy of Cram versus the slavery of Galconia. He had yearned then for a better way, but it was a simple fact. He knew nothing about government.

"Perhaps you should learn," Wright said.

"Are you serious, father?" Roxanna put in.

"Just a thought," Wright said and to Mac: "Somebody's got to do it and I'd prefer you to just about anybody else I can think of. It's in your blood. It's your heritage."

"Just as well I'm dead then," Mac quipped.

"Perhaps," Wright said. "But there's no telling how long that will last, if at all. Are you still determined that we go to Honshos, Mac? Is there any real reason for that now? Now that Osmond is dead, really dead."

"Slade isn't," Mac said. It was something to which he and Roxanna had been giving thought.

"And Slade still holds Redux," Roxanna said.

"So," Mac said. "It seems to us that at some point if he doesn't just give up and surrender Redux then the Chairman must move to destroy him. If Slade's going to fight, and we think he will, he needs to capture me to bargain with to have any real chance. And if he does come after me, then Honshos still looks pretty good."

"Except," Wright said. "If you go to your father, Slade is automatically finished."

"Not so long as he holds Redux," Mac said, and Wright was forced to concede that he was right. Kidnapping on Theta Tauri Minor would be rather more difficult than

assassination, but not impossible given the corruption endemic within Galiconia, and if the kidnapping went wrong then Mac would still be dead whatever happened to Slade as a result.

"Please sir... uncle," Mac said after a moment. "I really don't want anything to do with Galiconia or the Chairman. I'm just a kid, just a kid from nowhere."

Wright looked at him and shook his head.

"No Mac. You're not a kid. Not any more. Far from it. Already you've done more than most people ever do and after all, you're nearly..." he stopped suddenly, working it out. "You turned sixteen on Cram, didn't you?"

Mac nodded.

"It didn't seem something to mention at the time," he said. Roxanna turned to stare at him and a plan began to form in her mind.

"Sir," Mac went on. "They don't teach you much in the schools on Redux. I don't know much about anything. Flying maybe, but that's all. Anna knows heaps more than I do even if she never went to school. She had you. She's educated, I'm not."

"Well," Wright said. "If we're really still going to Honshos there'll be plenty of time to fix that."

"Also," Orville, who had been listening quietly, added. "There will be plenty of time to teach me to be a pilot, a qualified space pilot."

Wright turned to his son and the look of pleasure on his face was all the answer that Orville needed.

The Krus stood before the hypercom, impassively waiting for the link to be established. Internally, however, he was rather enjoying the fact that he had the Chairman at his mercy and while he had no intention of bringing him down – better the devil you knew and had a hold over – there was a definite pleasure in putting the man through a hoop or two.

He glanced at the worm, Dostoi, who was visibly trembling and at Tranter. Both men, of course, had been searched for weapons before being brought into his control room and the Krus wondered idly what the Chairman hoped to achieve with this conference other than his own humiliation.

And then the Chairman was standing before them, for some reason having chosen a full holoc transmission, even for him a hugely expensive method of communication. The Krus felt a tingle of suspicion, but already the Chairman was speaking and he had to set it aside.

"You have killed both my sons," the Chairman said without preliminary. He appeared to be standing at his full, impressive height before them, cold and implacable.

"You say?" the Krus replied, equally forbidding.

"You have killed both my sons."

"In point of fact," the Krus said, "As I am sure your man has told you. The first, a fool, killed himself."

"And you expect to get away with this?"

The Krus paused.

"I expect..." he said. "I expect that you would not wish me to proclaim and to prove that you paid me 20 million centa to arrange the unfortunate death of your wife. I expect that you would not wish me to have this man here..." and he indicated Dostoi... "I expect that you would not wish him to testify as to exactly how he did, in fact, murder your wife at my bidding, that is to say at your bidding.

"I expect," the Krus continued. "That you would find this embarrassing to the point where you would find yourself... unable to continue to live with it. I expect that you will find it expedient to ensure my silence with further and continuing payments of an appropriate nature..."

As the Krus was speaking in his deep rumble, the Chairman seemed to be swelling with rage. At the mention of payments he stepped forward, raising a fist and beginning to shout. All at once he staggered and crumpled to the floor. There was stunned silence and all in the room were frozen. All except Tranter, who with the advantage of foreknowledge and finely trained reflexes kicked the nearest housecarl in the crotch and neatly caught the blaster he dropped in his agony.

By the time the tableau began to thaw, he was in complete control.

The Chairman rose from the floor, spry and suddenly in an excellent humour.

"Tell your men to drop their weapons," he said to the Krus. "Or my man will kill you."

The Krus moved a hand in a cutting gesture and there was a clatter of blasters hitting the floor.

"Tell them all to move into the centre." The Krus made another gesture.

"Now tell them to lie down, hands behind their heads."

The Chairman waited while the half dozen housecarls stretched out on the floor.

"Mr Dostoi," he said when they were still. "You have a choice. You can die, now. Or you can leave with Colonel Tranter. Which?"

Dostoi looked about wildly and all but whimpered. He nodded hastily.

"Good," the Chairman said. "Colonel Tranter will give you skinglue. Immobilise those men. And gag them."

Dostoi, hesitantly, took the squeezer Tranter proffered and set about gluing wrists to necks and shins to calves. He also sealed their lips. It was enjoyable, he realised, thinking of the anguish to come for these thugs as muscles cramped and spasmed. Skinglue locked on the instant, was impossible to break without literally tearing the flesh apart in cold blood, and was notoriously difficult to release even with solvents. There was silence while he worked.

At last he stepped back and the Chairman spoke.

"It only remains," he said, speaking to the Krus. "To say farewell. You should not have killed my sons."

The Krus regarded the holoc dispassionately. Perhaps there was still a chance, perhaps not. But he was a survivor. He would play this last card. He would break faith and play the card.

"I told you," he said. "The first killed himself. The second... the second is still alive, or he was when he left Cram."

"Prove it."

"I can't," the Krus said.

"Why? Why would you do that? Why would you fake his death?"

The Krus paused for a long moment.

"For love," he said. "I did it for love."

The Chairman looked past him and nodded. Tranter thumbed the blaster's beam to minimum focus and sent a small but devastating slug of super-heated magma through the Krus's chest. The monolithic figure swayed for a moment before crashing to the floor. Twice betrayed by the heart, Tranter thought.

The Chairman spoke a final time, this time to Dostoi.

"Understand this," he said. "So long as the recording of your evidence exists, there is some slight advantage in your staying alive, at least until you refute it before a properly constituted notary. But give Tranter the slightest reason or if he finds himself in the slightest danger, he will kill you." And with that, the holoc vanished.

Tranter seized Dostoi by the collar and frog-marched him to the door. As it hissed aside, he slid the blaster under his jerkin. He closed the door and wished he had time to find some way of sealing it behind them, but speed was of the essence. The way to the landing dock was quite familiar by this time and he hurried Dostoi along the twisting passages and corridors, wondering how long before one of the captive housecarls managed to break an alarm beam.

Rounding another corner, they ran slap into a Krusman who stepped back in leisurely fashion and looked Dostoi up and down with great disfavour.

"And where do you think you're going, scullion?" he demanded.

Dostoi felt his sphincters loosening involuntarily. Tranter, he knew, was dumb. He would have to say something, find an excuse, or die.

"I've been told to clean the Galiconia ship," he blurted. "He's taking me there."

The housecarl regarded him with deep suspicion and was about to say something disobliging when claxons began to scream throughout the vast reaches of the Kruskraal.

"Wait here," the housecarl snapped. "Don't move or I'll gut you." And he rounded the corner behind them and disappeared at the run.

Tranter waited a second and then hurried Dostoi on towards the dock, fighting their way through the sudden pandemonium that had erupted in the corridors. Once they found the Krus's body and even if the guards there couldn't speak, surely someone would be smart enough to realise that the only reasonable suspect must be Tranter himself and then the hunt would be on. But in the event he was quite wrong.

The power struggle for the succession began immediately across the Krus's corpse and Tranter's ship had long eased its way past the plasma cannon, out of Cram's atmosphere and had made it's first hyperation by the time anyone thought to look for him.

Chapter Nine

Wright had assigned Mac the necessary but dirty job of descaling the starboard main thruster. When eventually he finished, he threw himself in the abluter and then made his way expectantly to the mess. He was starving and hoped very much that someone had done something decent about dinner. As he opened the hatch, he was faintly puzzled. The ship seemed unusually quiet and why was the mess, he now saw, in darkness? What had gone wrong this time? The instant panic had just about reached shrieking point when the lights suddenly flashed on and the others were crowding around him, yelling "Surprise!" and pounding him on the back.

"You horrible people," Mac said at last, when he could speak. "I thought one of Orville's space banshees had come aboard and eaten you, or something."

"Happy birthday, Mac," Wright said. "It was Roxanna's idea."

"And I have a present for you," she said, hugging him. Mac took the small package and smiled at her fondly.

"A present," he said. "Where could you get a present out here?"

"I have my methods," Roxanna said. "Go on. Open it."

Shelby handed him a pocket laserblade and Mac delicately slit the wrapping. There was a box and inside was his flight glove, the one glove that had survived their escape from Redux, the glove that had been taken from him on Cram. Except there were also two more. Mac looked up his eyes shining.

He seized Roxanna and crushed her to him.

"I thought," he said. "I really thought that I might never fly again. That I might never be able to get another glove. It was starting to drive me crazy. How did you do it?"

"The Krus gave it back to me when we left," Roxanna said.

"And we're not just celebrating your birthday," Wright added. "Orville has finished the matter-maker, and the first thing we did was to copy your glove for you."

"But of course," Orville chimed in. "When I get a chance I'll build you a proper glove-maker to take account of changes in your hand. But these should do for the moment."

"Thank you," Mac said. "Thank you so much. All of you. I couldn't do without you."

"And after dinner," Roxanna said. "I made a plattercake for us."

It was a happy meal and one they all enjoyed to the full. For once, all the cares and difficulties and dangers of life on the run, again, seemed unimportant.

At one point, Roxanna said:

"But you have to promise me one thing, Mac. You have to promise that you'll only use a glove when you really have to. I don't want you dying of thormalium poisoning."

"Of course not," Mac said solemnly, and the others laughed indulgently, but Roxanna was not at all amused.

"I mean it," she warned.

"But Anna," Mac said. "I have to be able to train..."

At another point, John raised the matter of the ship's signature. There were risks either way. If they travelled black they would be liable to instant destruction without warning on detection. Only pirates and smugglers, reivers and rebels flew without a lawful signature and, given that to reach Honshos the James Macgilliguddy would have to touch civilisation and refuel at very regular intervals, the danger was obvious. On the other hand, while they accepted that Orville was absolutely capable of manipulating the CAW to produce appropriate signatures as required, it was not impossible that his tampering might one day be exposed. There were millions of other CAWmen in the cluster after all, even if they devoutly believed that none was as talented as Orville. In the end, however, it was clear that there was no real choice.

This led to a general discussion of the route they should take to Honshos and Wright activated a three-dimensional holoc of the Hyades for them to pore over. Until then none of them had realised the true scope of the odyssey on which they were embarked. They had a long way to go, a very long way, and because the scout ship was only capable of small hyperations it would take them a year at least, probably more.

At last Wright collapsed the holoc and took himself off to bed, closely followed by Shelby and John. The three younger people talked on for a while and then Orville, too, made to leave. Much to Mac's surprise, Roxanna jumped to her feet and solicitously and quite unnecessarily went to help him. Mac, rather more hurt than he cared to admit, bade them good night and sat, staring at his prized gloves.

"Oh well," he thought. "I'll never understand her but it was a nice birthday." He lingered, daydreaming about flying, and then sleepy himself left the mess. The hatch to Roxanna's cabin was slightly ajar and as Mac passed on the way to the berth he shared with Orville, she slipped out and drew him to her. A moment later they were inside with the door closed.

"No one will mind," Roxanna said. "They're all wondering why you didn't move in long ago. And Orville will like having his cabin to himself. Happy birthday," she added and reached up to kiss him.

The Chairman had welcomed Tranter back to Theta Tauri Minor if not with victor's laurels at least with proper appreciation for the difficult task he had brought to some sort of resolution, appreciation for the fact that he still had at least one heir. He had taken the man to his personal quarters and they had gone through the whole business at leisure and in detail, man to man. It had crossed the Chairman's mind that he would be safer to eliminate both Tranter and Dostoi on the spot, but the one had proved his

loyalty and the other still required to retract his confession. Time enough to deliver Dostoi of his cares when he was signed and sealed.

In the end it was clear that the Chairman had two outstanding problems: the question of Slade, still holding Redux; and the question of Hasdrubal and his whereabouts. A subsidiary complication was the possibility of Slade laying hands on Hasdrubal, but on balance neither man thought it the least bit likely. Neither the Chairman, nor Tranter out of deference, chose to raise the question of why Hasdrubal should so adamantly resist returning to his father.

The Chairman eventually came to two decisions. Slade he would leave to stew in his own juice until he had found Hasdrubal, and Tranter would be given the resources, expensive as they were, to run a sophisticated and secret signature surveillance search on the CAW. No matter how skilled the fugitives might be, both men were confident that sooner or later they must reveal themselves. Either that, or if running without a signature they would inevitably die, possibly sooner, possibly later, but inevitably.

The news of the death of the Krus spread through the cluster at a speed light would have envied. The great bogeyman was gone, the devil was dead. The details, unclear to start with, became more and more garbled with each transmission, but the essential fact remained. The Krus was no more, and a great many people whose nearest and dearest would have been shocked had they known, breathed a great deal easier. Over the 30 years of his tenure the Krus's tentacles had bored their way deep into the official fabric of the cluster.

Slade, however, found the word when it came an unwelcome indication that the boy Macgilliguddy, or whatever he was calling himself now, must indeed be dead. Only one man had the power to order the Krus's death and, all things considered, there was only one likely reason for it. Slade, contemplating his future, was depressed to the point of despair.

The Palwallum, on the other hand, found it all a matter of liveliest interest. She set her minions to discover the facts but when days passed and she was not much enlightened, the affair faded into the general background. Her instincts told her the matter was significant, but events pressed on and she let it drop until the afternoon her principal private secretary informed her the Chairman was seeking an interview with her via the hypercom.

However, when the link was patched through, the screen showed not the Chairman but a furtive little man, apparently soaking wet, who kept glancing anxiously over his shoulder. Clearly he had been using an official hypercom and the Chairman's name to bluff his way into her presence. Her immediate reaction was anger and making a mental note to excoriate her staff for admitting an imposter, she reached to cut the connection.

"Wait," the little man blurted. "Please wait."

And for some reason, a premonition, she did.

"What?" she said, her voice at its most awful.

"I have information," Dostoi said, the panic plain in his voice. "About the Chairman. Information of great value to you."

"What?" the Palwallum said again.

"I can't tell you." And again the Palwallum reached for the connection. "He paid the Krus to kill his wife," Dostoi said desperately. "And now his son is dead. Osmond. And his other son is on the run."

"What?" the Palwallum said the for the third time, but now her tone was wondering. "Can you prove this?"

"Yes," Dostoi said. "Enough."

The Palwallum considered, forcing Dostoi to wait. Again he looked anxiously over his shoulder.

"I don't have much time," he said at last. "They'll come back any minute."

The Palwallum made up her mind, fired off a couple of quick questions and issued a number of rapid instructions. She was still talking when the screen went suddenly blank and her subsequent irritation was intense. The possibilities the little man, Dostoi he had called himself... the possibilities were entrancing and to lose them before ever having had the chance to move on them would be too aggravating. She summoned an aide, determined to seed and weed whether or not there was a resulting plant, whether or not it actually bore fruit.

Dostoi knew his days were rapidly diminishing. He had managed to negotiate that in exchange for his new testimony and rather than a jail cell, he would be set to work as a janitor. The retraction was still required as a safeguard against the confession he had been forced to make and which still existed on Cram. The Chairman was adamant that this particular loose end must be snipped lest it again threaten to strangle him, some time in the future.

Dostoi had pointed out, successfully, that were he slapped in a jail cell then the retraction would also be seen to have been obtained under duress. He was thus accorded relative freedom within very strict bounds but the moment his declaration was properly notarised, it was obvious his life would depend on the whim of the Chairman. As time went by, as the official mills ground agonisingly small, he became more and more fearful, and in the end he had resorted to the most desperate of measures. He had held a lighted spill beneath a fire sensor, setting off the drenchers in the service room and also the general evacuation alarms, and as the directorate had emptied, he had crept into the communications room on the floor beneath the Chairman's office. The delays as he alternately cajoled and browbeat his way through to the Palwallum had been excruciating and in the end he had been forced to shut down on her abruptly, all but

caught in the act. Pushing his cleanacart, surreptitiously dripping and ducking some very odd looks, he had slunk out as the disgruntled staff had made their way back in.

Did he have a deal? He could only hope.

He survived the inquisition into the fire alarm by steadfastly disclaiming all knowledge of it. The drenchers had started for no reason. He had no idea why. It was not his fault. He had been soaked. It was not his fault, damn it. Why would he want to get himself soaking wet? He couldn't help their inadequate technology, and so forth. Even so the whiff of suspicion clung to him like his damp clothes and wherever he went from then on, someone seemed to be watching him. He began to fear that they would have done and simply bang him into a cell until they were ready to dispose of him.

The shifts changed and by claiming to be in the middle of a job, Dostoi managed to stay behind, swapping one lot of guards for the next, guards who were less watchful and who were unaware that he had one particular advantage, that from his days there with Osmond he knew the ancient, convoluted building far better than any of them. Dostoi was not so foolish as to think he could escape, but he was reasonably confident that he could find his way to the roof unobserved.

And so it proved. Ten minutes before the hour hastily appointed by the Palwallum, he emerged from a forgotten stairwell and crept along a remote section of the roof in the shadows of the crenellations. On the dot of midnight he flashed an eyebeam twice, and then once more. An agger, fan jet muffled to the merest mutter, rose up beside him and heart in mouth he stepped across. The agger sank back below the level of the roof and crawled away. It was, Dostoi happened to know and to have exploited in the past, the great weakness in the defences of the directorate. All the aerial detection systems focused from the horizontal upwards, leaving a blind spot between the height of the building and the ground. And because there had been no sort of threat for centuries no one had ever bothered to analyse or update this.

Nor was Dostoi missed till the next morning, by which time he was well on the way to Theta Tauri Major. At the time, neither Tranter nor the Chairman saw his disappearance as especially significant. They assumed he had seen a chance of escape and had simply disappeared into the teeming multitudes of the city about them. It was irritating and the commanders of the guard found life greatly unpleasant as a result, but with the Krus dead and with Dostoi's refutation of anything to which he might have confessed now duly notarised, there seemed no particular reason for concern. Indeed, it neatly solved the question of what to do with him.

The Palwallum heard the detail of what Dostoi had to say with heaving excitement, her huge bolster of a bosom roiling like the massing clouds of a coriolis storm. Dostoi found the sight mesmerising and had to keep dragging his eyes away but the Palwallum had no mind for anything but the cornucopia of delights being spread before her:

The Chairman guilty of murdering his wife.

The Chairman's legitimate heir dead.

The Chairman's illegitimate heir vanished and on the run.

The Chairman no longer in control of Redux, source of at least half his power.

In short, the Chairman weak, vulnerable and ready to be destroyed, crushed in favour of her son, her son Rudolphus, her son Rudolphus the First.

Dostoi, his eyes determinedly fixed on his feet, could scarcely believe his ears. This woman had a son? A son of whom she spoke dotingly? The implications, particularly the intimate implications, did not bear thinking about and he wondered despairingly exactly what sort of disaster he had landed himself in this time.

"I can see," the Palwallum said eventually, "that we are destined to work closely together. I might almost say extremely closely."

Dostoi gulped.

"I have need," she went on, "of a man like you on my personal staff. Shall we say 'senior consultant' with appropriate salary and benefits. Starting immediately?"

Dostoi bowed wordlessly and was shown out of the office by a secretary and into his new life.

The Palwallum lingered at her desk reflectively. Fate, it seemed, had dealt her the perfect hand but it would take care and skill to play the cards to maximum advantage.

It took Orville three weeks using the ship's small deuterium-tritium fusion reactor to generate enough thormalium for their immediate needs, and while he was constantly busy, for the others it was a pleasant and necessary interlude during which they settled into the routine which would carry them through their long pilgrimage.

True to his word, Mac set out to acquire the education he lacked and voraciously attacked the texts Wright brought forth from the CAW. Roxanna, too, studied with him and found a sinful pleasure in the joining of minds, in reasoning and debate where before had been only loneliness and self-discipline. She had of necessity been close to Orville and her father, and to Shelby and John, but the shared work, the shared intimacy with Mac was a heady, powerful drug that became increasingly addictive. It was true, she thought. The sum of the parts was greater than the whole, at least the sum of their two parts.

Mac found that he revelled both in the pleasure of learning and discovery, and in the pleasure of strengthening the bond between himself and Roxanna, thread by thread, twist by twist, until it began to seem to him that already it was a cable of thickness and resilience such that it could never be severed. They both found that the more they were in each other's company, the more necessary it was that they should be and quickly they reached a stage where they could communicate without talking.

The others watched as the intimacy between the two rapidly deepened, and were happy for them. It seemed to them all that it was one unequivocally good thing to come out of all the suffering and travail they had been through.

The only frustration for Mac was that he was unable to fly. Try as he might to set it aside, it gnawed at him until one night, unable to sleep for his waking dreams, he slipped into the hold and pulled on a glove. The ship's gravity combined with that of the asteroid where they sheltered was only a fraction of standard and should have made any sort of flying impossible, but by monumental concentration Mac found that he could lift himself up and perform some very basic manoeuvres. It was something. And as night followed night he became more adept and his combinations more complex.

He thought, naturally, that it was all his secret but the very first time he crept out, Roxanna had woken and followed him, and then every other night, too. She had watched his initial struggles and then marvelled at his increasing development in that impossible environment, torn by love for his passion and dedication and by fear of what the thormalium was doing to him.

In the end she had exploded, terrified that having found him he would be snatched away from her, and no amount of reasoning on Mac's part could mollify her. Well might he argue that he had years and years before the addiction, the poisoning would become a problem, but Roxanna having nearly lost him so many times already could not bear the thought of him deliberately risking their happiness, her happiness. It was selfish, she knew, unconscionably selfish, but there was nothing she could do about it. Fear was fear.

For two days they had been silent with each other, Roxanna furious beyond reason and Mac guilty on the one hand but unrepentant on the other, and a pall of gloom had hung over the ship. Eventually Wright had been forced to arbitrate, and they had reached the sort of compromise that pleased neither but was essential to two people learning to share their existence. Mac would limit his practice, Roxanna would tolerate it within that limit, however unwillingly. Inevitably Mac would cheat and inevitably Roxanna would yell at him, but both accepted that if this was the worst they ever inflicted on each other then they would be most fortunate.

Then Mac had a brilliant idea.

"I never did get to see you dance," he said. "And you're getting fat. Why don't you come too." So Roxanna, having exacted due retribution for outrageous aspersions, did and Mac began to try to mimic her movements himself in the air. It was another wonderful avenue of enjoyment for them both though Roxanna did tend to limit her own classwork in an attempt to restrain Mac from overuse of his glove. From time to time the others would join them and Shelby and John having revealed an unsuspected talent would add to the occasion by providing difficult and challenging rhythms.

At last came the moment when the ship was ready to leave the asteroid and they could properly begin the journey to what the future might hold. They were all grave in

the mess the night before, conscious that again they were heading out into both the manifest and the unknown dangers of the Hyades, but as Wright pulled the James Macgilliguddy away from their temporary refuge they cheered with exhilaration and looked out into the vast reaches of space with eager anticipation.

Part Three

Chapter One

The change, essentially undetectable, was immediately apparent to Morgana-Li. Tired, hungry, dirty, wanting only to shed her gear, see her troops attended to and fall into bed, she was instead confronted through her farsee with a small change in the outline of the cliff that enraged her. They were here. It could only mean they were here and that her name-mother had violated the most basic tenets of the security code that was their one safe-guard.

She gave the signal that sent her troop into the well-practised dispersal pattern and, flitting herself through the lengthening shadows of dusk, she eventually slipped under the projecting buttress that protected the lower postern. She counted her troops in, made sure the mess had food for them and dismissed them. They disappeared down the passage, twittering like birds coming home to roost, one or two looking back at her as she stood irresolute, still fuming. And had Morgana-Li possessed a little more honesty and a little more self-knowledge to mitigate an excess of hormones, she might perhaps have realised that it was not so much the threat to Samura security that was exercising her, but simple jealousy. She was all but sick to her stomach with corrosive envy of what that boy had been able to do in the air. And at a deeper level she was even more disturbed by the obviously intimate relationship between him and that girl, the good-looking one... altogether too good-looking, damn her...

Morgana-Li knew, and should have remembered, that a good soldier should just suck it up. As the most junior of officers, it was not her place to criticise the decisions of Li-Morgana. She was the Shoga and Morgana-Li a mere hatamoto, but if the mother-daughter relationship was to mean anything, then surely she had the right to her opinion and to voice it. Loudly.

She stormed to the operations centre and when she found her mother was not there, marched straight on through to Li-Morgana's quarters without troubling to knock. It was a mistake. The first thing she saw was the pilot of the scout ship, comfortably seated in a floater with a cryllic of something crimson in his hand. Her mother was standing at the servery about to pick up a second cryllic of whatever it was they were drinking. She turned at the noise of Morgana-Li's entrance, frowning at her daughter who was standing in the middle of the floor, gaping.

"This," Li-Morgana said to Wright, "is my daughter, Morgana-Li. Outside she is a hatamoto. In here, as you can see, she is merely poorly mannered." Speaking now to

Morgana-Li, she added: "And you will remember Captain Wright, pilot of the scout ship."

"Why are they here? What are they doing here?" Morgana-Li demanded.

"I beg your pardon," Li-Morgana said with bite.

"Mother, why...?"

"Because I judge it to our advantage."

"But..."

Wright found himself watching the scene with detached sympathy. Roxanna could be equally difficult.

"Perhaps you will allow me," Wright said, interrupting, and then: "I realise men are not welcome here and I realise that quite apart from some of us being the wrong gender you don't trust any of us anyway, but your mother is right..."

"My name-mother..."

"Your name-mother, then," Wright said. "Quite apart from the fact that we can give you the means to produce your own thormalium..."

"That is ridiculous. It's not possible..."

"It is," Li-Morgana said. "I have seen them do it."

"Quite apart from this," Wright continued. "My son, Orville..."

"The cripple..."

"That is enough," Li-Morgana said. "Your concern, which was possibly excusable, is now rudeness."

"Yes," Wright said evenly. "He is physically perhaps a cripple..."

"But," Li-Morgana interrupted, "he is a genius. He has the mind of a giant. And apart from thormalium, he gives us the CAW, whatever is on the CAW..."

Morgana-Li made a wordless sound of disgust and Li-Morgana erupted.

"I did not raise you to be stupid as well as rude to a guest," she snapped. "Get out and don't come back until you learn some sense, some manners..."

With all the injured pride of a teenager raw and bleeding, Morgana-Li swung on her heel and flounced from the chamber.

Wright smiled indulgently. Li-Morgana, embarrassed and angry with it, swung on him in turn. Wright raised a placating hand.

"I have a daughter too," he said.

Li-Morgana stared at him a moment and then laughed ruefully.

"So you do."

Wright raised his glass.

"To a fruitful partnership," he said. Li-Morgana clinked cryllics and sat.

"Your questions," she said. "Ask and I will tell you what I can."

"Name-mother?" Wright said.

"Morgana-Li is not my daughter. I love her as though she were my own but I am her foster mother. There are too many daughters on Honshos. In times past they would be left out to die. For a thousand years we have taken them and each baby is given a foster mother."

"We?"

"We, the Samura, an ancient order of warrior women. We ruled Honshos until Galconia came. But in time we learned to fight the Galconia way and we have been fighting ever since."

"Why?" Wright asked diffidently. "I mean, most planets resist colonisation for a time, but then inevitably they succumb to the benefits. Thormalium, for instance..."

"But if we are not Samura, what would we do with your thormalium?" Li-Morgana paused. "We are not ignorant, Captain. We know what's out there. But we chose Basido, the way of the woman. It is a good way. Not for everyone, but for some, for those of us who would have been left out for the carrion birds, it gives us... dignity, honour. Something to live for. Something to die for. Do you have as much?"

It was Wright's turn to pause.

"I have my family," he said at last.

"Precisely," Li-Morgana said. "As do we. A family where there was none."

"No men?" Wright said. "My crew... do we embarrass you?"

"It is... confronting." Li-Morgana sipped at her drink.

"And then," she said. "At last, after many generations, we learned to fight too well. Galconia lost patience and ruined our planet. Things have changed, and we must change with them."

Wright forbore from pointing out the obvious, that it seemed the Samura had been concerned to prevent exactly that, change. Instead, he asked:

"What is it then that you want?"

"You find us inconsistent?" Li-Morgana smiled. "We are. Like all women, like all peoples, of course we are inconsistent. We forced Galconia to leave, to destroy the planet and leave. Victory, to those few of us left in the ruins. So now we have a choice. To accept the devastation permanently, or to repair it knowing that when the planet is fruitful again, Galconia will return. It is degrading to live in a ruin, so we must change. Next time victory must preserve the planet as well."

"There could just be peace," Wright said neutrally.

"Peace is decadence," Li-Morgana said with asperity. "Peace is life spent at the swig trough. Peace is enslavement to both. There is no greatness in peace. There is no struggle. There is no conquest of fear, of weakness. There is no glory. There is nothing worth the dying. When is your life worth most? When you risk losing it. Where is the

greatest risk? In battle. You have been to war?" Wright nodded reluctantly. "Tell me I'm wrong. Tell me you were not most alive when you were closest to death."

"There are," Wright said eventually, "one or two advantages to peace. It's not all life in the swig trough, as you put it. There is art, for instance."

"Art is war," Li-Morgana said impatiently. "The artist is at war with himself and risks his soul."

Wright shrugged.

"How many are you?" he asked. Li-Morgana looked at him narrowly and Wright raised his hands. "Don't tell me anything you don't want to," he said.

"The regiment has some 1000 fliers," she said. "One thousand, one hundred and seven to be exact. And we have auxiliaries, here and on the farms. Several thousand."

"So how do you manage to produce such a high percentage of fliers off such a small base?" Wright said, deeply puzzled. There was a long silence, so long that Wright sensed he had crossed some invisible boundary and was suddenly in deepest waters. Li-Morgana rose and began to pace, circling the chamber. She stopped and picked up her katana from its stand on top of a chest. She turned to face Wright and held the sword thrust out horizontal to the floor, grasping the middle of the saya, her arm stiff. The salute, the threat, was explicit.

"We are not engineers or CAWmen, like your son," she said. "We are chemists. We can enhance the synaptic framework of the body to aid flying. And we have developed... we have developed an antidote to thormalium poisoning. We are immune."

Wright found that he was holding his breath and consciously exhaled. His first thought was for Mac, who could now be spared the long debilitating deterioration that James had been forced to suffer. And Orville. Roxanna would be transported with delight. His second thought was that it all sounded utterly improbable, that an obscure outpost of the Hyades should conceal the solution to one of the cluster's more intractable problems.

Li-Morgana was watching his face.

"It's true," she said. "There are herbs we cultivate that are the basis for both serums..."

"Herbs unique to Honshos?"

"Why not. Thormalium is unique to the two Redux planetoids."

"And you realise what such a monopoly could do for Honshos?"

"We realise what Galiconia would do to obtain such a monopoly."

"If they knew about it?"

"Do they now know about it?" Li-Morgana demanded.

Wright took stock.

"No," he said. "We are not Galiconia. Mac, particularly, is not Galiconia. He hates it. He hates what his father stands for. We all do. That's why we're here. If you doubt us, why have you told me?"

It was Li-Morgana's turn to take stock.

"Already you ask the right questions," she said at last. "You would discover the truth whether I told you or not. I made the decision to trust you when I let you come here. It is why my daughter was so upset. She understands that I have given you power over us."

"So long as we are alive," Wright said.

"Quite."

"How do the enhancers work?" Wright asked after a decent interval.

"If taken from an early age they tend to perfect the human physiology, the neural pathways, and the human physique, the symmetry of the face and the body. It explains, amongst other things, why we look... the way we do."

"I did wonder," Wright said.

"And you're thinking what a waste?" Li-Morgana said, amused. "Most men do."

"That you're celibate?"

"Or dead... That is the choice here."

New Centre Abbey was to Mac, Orville and Roxanna, who had so little experience of anything but the warrens of Redux, a place of astonishment unlike anything they had ever imagined. The Blue Mountain River, at whose estuary they had first landed on Honshos, had its source high in the continental divide and then raced through the wilds of the mountains, gathering strength and power, before plunging over the edge of an ancient escarpment, hundreds of metres high, to the flatlands below. And where the river hurtled over the edge and down, the force of the water had torn a huge, bowl-shaped chasm which over the aeons had retreated far back from the actual precipice. New Centre Abbey now occupied the resulting cliffs and canyons, with its chambers and store rooms, its halls and kitchens, its workshops, laboratories and markets channelling, tunnelling, burrowing deep into the bedrock behind.

The work had taken place over hundreds of years and when Honshos had been ruined much of the infrastructure closer to the cliff faces had been destroyed and subsequently left abandoned, but deeper within the sheltering rock, enough of the Samura had been allowed to survive to seed the future. Thanks to the river, they were now beginning to thrive again.

The river was father and mother to them. It had created the site for the Abbey in the first place, it gave them their power source and down in the valleys it watered the rich farms being reclaimed from destruction. One last thing it gave them. From high in the headwaters, trailing over the damp rocks, came *Gresticus thendalosa*, which now

cultivated hydroponically, distilled, oxidised and then separated gave the two serums, one to perfect the body, the other to protect it from everything except injury and age.

The James Macgilliguddy was resting in a hangar newly carved from a dozen of the original chambers of the Abbey left vacant since the ruination. The expanded entrance had been carefully camouflaged but was as obvious as a new cliff to anyone who lived there. The back of the hangar gave access to living quarters now assigned to the ship's crew but more importantly to one of the main arterial tunnels of the Abbey complex. In turn this led to the workshop which together with its contents had been turned over to Orville.

Their first night there, after speaking with Morgana-Li, Wright had called a private meeting of his crew to relay his discoveries. As he had anticipated, the three youngsters were transported by the knowledge that there was now an antidote to thormalium, but as Wright dispensed a supply of capsules, he was also concerned to issue a stern warning.

"This is a closed, celibate community," he said. Shelby and John looked amused. Mac and Orville looked innocent. "The penalty for fraternisation..." Wright went on. "The penalty is death."

"Well then, father" Roxanna said tartly. "You and Orville need to be very careful." Mac flushed, while Orville grinned.

"We're here on sufferance," Wright said frowning at Orville. It suddenly occurred to him that his son was in serious danger. Immured on Redux, all Orville's natural instincts were perforce repressed but here on Honshos, where there was evidently the means and probably the opportunity, it came to Wright that Orville could undoubtedly supply the motive. With a guilty start, Wright found himself thinking that it was a damn good thing the boy was a cripple and superficially at least, unattractive because of it.

As though reading his mind, Orville shrugged and gestured at his legs.

"I think I'm safe," he said. "But I don't know about you... private drinkies with the boss lady."

"The Shoga," Wright corrected. "Please. Everybody. Be very careful not to offend these people. They might appear relatively normal but they are a warrior caste. They are indoctrinated from earliest childhood with what they call Basido... All the usual nonsense of honour and courage and pride – a pride that makes them touchy, unpredictable and very dangerous."

"So how long do we have to stay here?" Shelby asked.

"How long before we can go and start a place of our own?" John added.

"I don't know," Wright said. "When they trust us, I guess."

"I thought they did," Roxanna said. "I thought that's why they let us come here."

"Of course they don't trust us," Mac said. "They want the secret of making thormalium and they brought us here to keep us in their control."

"And when they have the secret," Roxanna said. "What then?"

"We hope by then they trust us, I suppose," Mac said. "So leave the girls alone, Awful. Don't go getting us into trouble."

"And you worry about yourself," Orville said with a grin. "I don't have Roxy on my case." And he ducked rapidly as Roxanna threw a breadbun at him.

Orville, with Shelby and John, spent a day moving equipment from the ship to his new workshop and then setting it up to his liking. After hours of unbroken hard work, the three of them were standing back and taking a moment to admire the results when Orville sensed they were being watched. He pulled himself about, thinking that no matter what anybody else had to say on the subject his first project would be to build himself a decent, self-propelled floater, and found himself staring at the blonde girl who had been so unfriendly their first day on Honshos at the beach.

"Can I help you?" he said stiffly.

"You can tell my mother that this story about making thormalium is all lies," she snapped. "A con trick. And then you can get out of here and leave us alone."

Shelby and John swung round, looked at one another and then back at the girl.

"And you are?" Shelby said.

Morgana-Li inspected him closely and made it clear that she disliked what she saw.

"I am Morgana-Li, name-daughter to Li-Morgana, the Shoga of Honshos."

"Well, Morgana-Li," Orville said. "It's not a lie. I make thormalium. I can make just about anything you care to name. How about some enhancers? Or some antidote?"

"I don't believe you," Morgana-Li all but shouted.

"You can believe what you like," Orville said, beginning to lose his own temper. "But it doesn't make it not true."

"This is pointless," Shelby said. "You should just..."

"Show her," John finished.

"Why?" Orville said. "I'm not a liar and I don't like being called a liar. I don't have to prove a single thing. Not to her." He stared angrily at Morgana-Li, whose eyes blazed back and who at that moment was at her loveliest.

"Show her," John said again. "Or I will, if you like." He moved across to the matter-maker.

"We don't have much power yet, madame," he said. "Not till we upgrade your hydro system, but if you give me one of your hairs..." Unthinkingly, he reached out and Morgana-Li jerked quickly back. She regarded him unblinkingly for a long moment as he stood, hand outstretched

"Really," he said. "This machine of Orville's will copy anything you want. Put one of your hairs here and we'll show you."

"Don't touch me," Morgana-Li said coldly. "Never touch me." But all the same she did select a long, blonde hair, tweak it free and lay it on the copy tray. Equally coldly, Orville adjusted a dial and pressed a sequence of switches.

"This machine hasn't been automated, yet," John explained. "Orville had to build it on the ship and there was a limit to what he could do there. But it works fine. See?" He pointed to the duplicate tray where there was now a second golden hair, seemingly an exact replica of the first.

"It's a trick," Morgana-Li said, but her voice held a thread of uncertainty.

"Get one of your chemists to do a DNA analysis, then," Orville snapped. He picked up the hair he had just created out of pure energy, laid it with the first in the copy tray and pressed the sequence of switches again. In a moment there were also two hairs lying in the duplicate tray.

Morgana-Li stared and finally lifted her gaze to the cripple. He was thin and wasted but she saw for the first time that his eyes were informed by an intelligence so penetrating that after a moment it was all she did see. She felt herself beginning to flush and turned away to hide it.

"I apologise," she said stiffly and abruptly left.

Shelby and John looked knowingly at each other.

"You watch yourself with that one," Shelby said. "The angry ones are the worst..."

"You remember what your father said," John added.

"Worst what?" Orville demanded. The others just looked at him.

"Don't worry," he said shortly. "I am in no danger whatsoever."

Again, Shelby and John exchanged glances.

Mac woke with the most thrilling idea and was hardly able to contain himself as he, Roxanna and the rest of the crew went through their morning routine. At last he was able to get Orville alone, who listened, more and more enviously, and finally agreed to do as Mac asked. Mac then checked with Wright that nothing in particular was required of him and Roxanna that day and that they might be excused from lectures. Finally he went and found Roxanna, deep in her reacom in their cabin on the ship. She had decided that she preferred it to the chamber they had been allocated. The cabin was home.

"Come on," he said. "I have a surprise for you."

"What?" Roxanna said, without looking up. "I have to finish this or I'll be in trouble."

"Never mind that. Uncle Winston has given us the day off. Come on, come on... It's a gorgeous day and there's no time to waste."

"Oh all right," Roxanna said, nothing loath. "But where?"

"Just come and bring something warmish."

Minutes later they were standing at the edge of the newly carved hangar, looking out at the stunning view. Away to their right, they could see and hear the falls while below them the river wound its way, white and frothing, through the channel it had carved. Opposite was the other half of New Centre Abbey, the apertures still blackened and scarred, the chambers still unoccupied. To their left, by the bank of the river, was the open-air amphitheatre where Samura ceremonial had taken place from time immemorial.

"Close your eyes," Mac said. "No looking and let me put this on you."

Roxanna obediently shut her eyes and kept them closed as Mac fussed about her, evidently strapping her into something. She felt him move behind her and a coolish breeze brushed her face.

"How long is this going to take?" she said impatiently. "When can I look."

"Not yet," Mac said in her ear. "A bit more... A bit more... Be patient... All right... Now you can look."

Roxanna opened her eyes and almost screamed. She was no longer standing on the edge of the cavern, she was high in the sky and totally unsupported, or so it seemed.

"I wanted to show you flying," Mac said. "Don't be afraid. You're quite safe. Orville made me an a-g harness for you, same as his, same as when we were trying to escape from Redux. Nothing can happen to you. You won't fall. But it means you can come with me...if you want to, that is," Mac added suddenly anxious. "I can take you back..."

"But it's magical," Roxanna said, surveying the vista below. "Like being a bird."

Below them, the river emerged from the mountains which themselves swept up beside them and seemed within touching distance in the clear, tingling air. Mac turned Roxanna gently round and the plains rolled away until they vanished in a purple haze.

"It's so beautiful," she said. "I wish I could fly too."

"Well, you can, with me," Mac said. "See. We're tethered together. Or you could hang on to my shoulders. Come on. Let's go explore."

Roxanna moulded herself to Mac's back and he gently pulled them into a swooping dive. Almost instantly she was overwhelmed by a rush of emotion almost frightening in its intensity. She had never felt so alive. It was as though every single nerve she possessed had burst into triumphant anthem. The feel of Mac's hard-muscled body, the wine of the air sweeping past, the glorious motion, the undreamt of freedom all combined to mix an over-powering cocktail that could only be called ecstasy.

The first time Mac had flown the skies of Honshos, sheer delight had catapulted him into the most virtuosic of displays. This time, the second time, with Anna's curves gently caressing him and constrained by the need to guide her as well, he found himself making a profound, resonant music that flowed and ebbed, rose and fell and absorbed them both until all that remained was the absolute honesty of body pressed to body, the absolute unity of soul singing with soul.

There in the sky they were truly one.

Orville had been unable to resist the temptation and had stolen away from the workshop to watch. As they flew thrillingly into the distance, he had never felt so lonely in his life. At last it became unbearable and he turned back to the noise and bustle of the Abbey buried in the rock.

Other people also watched.

Morgana-Li saw them disappearing down the valley and felt the uncontrollable anger which seemed to possess her so frequently of late bubbling to the surface again. She had no idea why.

Li-Morgana had her attention drawn to a surveillance display and noted with irritation that even burdened with a passenger, the boy still managed to fly exquisitely. She sent a peremptory message to the gunso of the guard.

It was dusk before Mac and Roxanna could bring themselves to turn for home and deep night by the time they found the entrance to the hangar. They had not spoken since the beginning and were still so deeply in tune that they felt not the slightest need. It was a doubly rude shock then to find themselves suddenly surrounded by a squad of Samura, all with unsheathed blasters.

The gunso stepped forward and barked at them.

"You are under arrest," she said. "Take them to the cells."

The hatamoto in the background said nothing.

Chapter Two

The Palwallum had spent most of the past year in a fever of frustration. On the one hand, the little worm Dostoi had revealed the key to the ultimate door, but on the other hand she had quite failed to insert the key into the lock.

It should be so simple. Only acquire, for preference, or kill the Chairman's one remaining son and the way would be wide open to removing the Chairman himself. The gift of the chairmanship of Galconia Enterprises Inc. would then return to the board and she had no doubt that by the time she had finished with it, the board would find it impossible to bestow its favours on anyone but her own son, with herself as regent, so to speak. Why else had she invested so much time and trouble in learning how to bribe or blackmail a handsome majority of the 24 members? And how fortunate that Rudi was still only 12. How fortunate that she had had the foresight to conceive in the first place and to suffer the hideous consequences. How fortunate that the resulting child was so well-disciplined and so biddable that he would certainly wish the guidance of his mother for as long as she chose to extend it. So how infuriating was the continuing disappearance of the boy Albright, whom everybody seemed to call Mac, whatever that ridiculous epithet might be taken to signify.

And how infuriating that the Chairman's most intimate adviser should now be a deaf-mute. The Palwallum naturally had a number of well-placed spies equipped with sophisticated surveillance devices, extremely sophisticated, but all too often there was absolutely nothing to hear and furthermore, what there was to see was always incomprehensible. The sign language the Chairman and his minion used was unique and no interpreter she had been able to find had yet managed to penetrate the code.

The Palwallum was aware that the Chairman himself was equally irate at the disappearance of his one remaining heir but other than that she could glean no knowledge of the measures being taken to find him or, indeed, of their success. The one tactic left to her was to closely monitor all missions despatched from Theta Tauri Minor, which was proving a heavy drain even on her clandestine resources, and to ensure that she knew the whereabouts of one Ptolemy Tranter every second of every day.

Other than that, there was absolutely nothing more that she could do, which was aggravating beyond belief when the campaign had started so well, so decisively, and had looked so very promising back at the the beginning...

Dostoi, when newly appointed senior consultant, was desperate to please. She took him through his story over and over again, checking and cross-referencing, until she was sure that not only had he told her the truth, but that he had told her only the truth. Once she was certain of the position it was abundantly clear that if ever the time was

ripe for an end-run it was now, right now. The Palwallum had no idea of the origin of the phrase but if she had been told that it was an ancient sporting term, she would have found it entirely appropriate. The play was there to be made, and make it she would.

She had left within days of Dostoi's so fortuitous appearance with the man himself in tow. As her personal ship, the finest battle-cruiser available, was capable of extremely large hyperations Redux was filling the viewing panels with a minimum of delay. Unsurprisingly, Redux control was less than delighted:

"Gadai ship, Chancellor. Gadai ship, Chancellor. Heave to and state your purpose."

"Redux control," her chief pilot replied. "I have on board the Palwallum. Request immediate clearance."

"Chancellor, Redux is not subject to Gadai control, inspection or interference. Are you in distress?"

"Negative Redux."

"Chancellor, clearance denied."

"Negative Redux. Patch me through to your commanding officer."

"Roco, Chancellor."

There was a long delay and the Palwallum wondered idly how the barbarous word 'roco' for received and copied had originated. Then she noted with interest that Dostoi had started to sweat. Why, she wondered? Surely, he had not led them into a trap, not with his own life at risk? Suddenly she began to panic herself. It was for others to run risk. Not her. Then the hypercom crackled back into life.

"Chancellor, this is Redux Actual." It was unmistakably Slade's voice. Dostoi recognised it instantly and trembled at the harsh and uncompromising tones. "Chancellor, clearance is denied. I repeat denied. Approach any closer and we will disable you."

The Palwallum, rapidly regaining her composure, signed to Dostoi, who stepped forward.

"Sir. General Slade. It's me. Dostoi." There was a pause.

"Dostoi?" Slade said with a distinct tone of disbelief.

"Yes sir. Turn on your vision, sir." There was another pause while Slade inspected his screen. The Palwallum noted that he was sufficiently discourteous as to refrain from reciprocating with his own image.

"What are you doing here, Dostoi?" Slade said at last.

"Sir, I'm with the Palwallum," Dostoi said, desperation creeping into his voice. "She wants to speak to you, sir. Sir, you need to hear what she has to say." Again, there was a long delay.

"Chancellor, this is Redux Actual," eventually came Slade's voice. "Clearance is approved but be aware that on landing all personnel are confined to the ship. Anyone leaving the ship will be shot. Redux out."

Dostoi limp with relief looked to the Palwallum for approval. She rewarded him with the faintest of nods and began for the umpteenth time to review her proposition.

Slade, no doubt to reinforce his independence from all things Gadai – control of the military being solely the preserve of the Chairman – kept them waiting for hours. The Palwallum, however, now so near to her first goal was patient and refused to allow irritation to build. When her chief pilot finally came to fetch her from her personal lounge, she still had all the sharp, predatory glitter of a hunting cat.

Slade was standing outside with a large squad of heavily armed troopers. The Palwallum waited for Dostoi, being hustled to join her, and then sallied forth.

Slade did have the grace to salute her but nevertheless forced her to walk down the ramp to him. He was, she saw, stereotypical GDF except for one thing. In place of his right hand he had some sort of crude hook. She was still wondering about that when he spoke.

"My time is severely limited," he said. "I fear we must be brief."

The Palwallum smiled.

"We can be as brief as you like," she said evenly. "That is as soon as you cede control of Redux to me."

"What?" Slade blurted.

"Your position here, general, as an undeclared rebel is untenable, quite untenable. It is only a matter of time before you are killed or executed. I offer you life, the possibility of a long, prosperous life." There was a stunned silence.

"Perhaps," the Palwallum said at last. "Perhaps we could go somewhere a little more comfortable while we discuss the implications..."

In the end, given what was already obvious and given Dostoi's further revelations, it came down to a matter of calculating the odds. Slade was fully aware that to survive in the long-term, never mind thrive, he needs must find and gain control of the Macgilliguddy boy or the Albright boy, whatever his name was now. Ranged against him were the Chairman with all his resources, and now this large, loud woman with the threatening bosom and all her resources. Furthermore, while the woman would prefer the boy to be taken alive she was, unlike Slade, quite prepared to settle for him just being dead, and death was infinitely easier to achieve than control of an impertinent young man who had many times proved his ability to thwart the designs of his elders and betters.

In the end it was a no-brainer and the only question remaining, the terms of his... surrender.

Slade stretched his legs a touch theatrically and refilled his cryllic. He offered the decanter to the woman and was politely refused.

"Speaking hypothetically," Slade said. "If I were to consider..."

Already tasting the blood the Palwallum went straight for the jugular.

"Commander-in-chief," she said. "Of all Galiconia defence forces and Gadai police, reporting only to me." She had long determined to overwhelm with munificence rather than niggle over details, and if some time in the future it should prove that Slade was not up to the job or that his loyalty was suspect, well sufficient unto the day the evil required.

She knew she had won by the way his expression froze for an instant before he could regain control.

"How...?" Slade began with studied calm.

"I would wish you to stay in command of Redux during the interim and transition," the Palwallum said smoothly, successfully hiding the triumphant turmoil within. "I will reinforce you with as many UWATs and assault ships as you deem necessary to convince the Chairman that any attack on Redux must inevitably lead to its total destruction and therefore cannot be an option. When the second phase is complete, why then I expect you would wish to relocate to Theta Tauri Major, the new capital of the cluster. I believe you will find it most congenial there." And the Palwallum made a mental note to replace all Slade's GDF men with her own UWATs at the first opportunity. How fortunate she had expanded her regiments against just such an eventuality. Foresight. It was all about foresight.

Slade nodded and then smiled expansively. It was on the tip of his tongue to reveal the calamitous fact that had recently forced itself on his notice, but forbore from mentioning it. Time enough for ruin to strike them all when he was safely ensconced in his new pomp.

They talked on amicably for form's sake, but both were lost in their own thoughts and scarcely paid attention to what the other was saying.

They had a second meeting the next day to settle the practical details and the Palwallum departed, well pleased with her visit. As a final refinement, she left behind Dostoi, much to his evident despair. Already he was boring her and it would do Slade good to have a constant reminder of the new chain of command plus the subtle threat of an known informer in his innermost circles. Nor could she see any reason why Dostoi should not continue to live in fear of his life, this time from Slade. It was, after all, the natural state for a worm, to live in the shadow of the shovel that would cut it in half.

As the days, weeks and finally the months wore on, the Chairman was forced to recognise that situation was all but out of control.

At first, the disappearance of Dostoi from the directorate had seemed a minor matter of no particular importance, given that the notarisation of his latest testimony was all but complete and mere formalities remained. However, the day a large force of Gadai UWATs and assault ships descended on Redux and disappeared within, the true significance of Dostoi's departure became all too apparent. To make matters worse, any traces of Hasdrubal and his crew were weeks old by the time they came to light and as yet had revealed no apparent pattern to hint at what their ultimate destination might be. The Chairman could only concede that he had blundered badly on a number of counts.

In conference with Tranter he was unsparing of himself and Tranter found his respect for the man increase. The mistakes that had brought about the present situation had largely been unavoidable in the circumstances of the moment, yet the Chairman accepted blame and responsibility both without any attempt to diminish the consequences. Even Dostoi's escape, damaging as it had proved, was excusable in that he had been spared a jail cell for good enough reason, and Tranter could be thought as culpable as anyone over his subsequent disappearance.

It was apparent to both of them that there was only one way forward.

Then came the sighting, if that's what it was, of the boy and his crew at Honshos. The subsequent eyespy fly-over revealed nothing, but with these people that was to be expected and the Chairman was becoming more and more certain for no good reason, call it instinct, that this was where they had indeed gone to ground. But why Honshos, the Chairman asked himself again? Tranter was right. They did need to know. And then it came to him that the explanation was straightforward.

"Hasdrubal..." he started to sign but Tranter interrupted.

"Why don't we call him Mac?" he signed. "Everybody else does." The Chairman raised his eyebrows for a long moment and then shrugged. He had not been the one to name the boy Hasdrubal, so there really was no good reason to object to the nickname.

"Mac will be betting that there are still rebels on the planet and that because of what happened with his step-father all those years ago they might be disposed to give him refuge."

"What did happen?" Tranter asked and the Chairman told him the story while absently mulling over the situation.

"I see," Tranter signed. "But even so, a gamble to go to Honshos, is it not?"

"They can't keep running forever. Apart from anything else, their ship – my ship – will be long overdue for a major overhaul."

"So, we assume as they have not yet left, as far as we know, that they have been allowed to stay?"

The Chairman paused.

"I think so," he signed eventually. "It feels right."

"Which leaves us where?"

"About to leave for Honshos."

"Both of us?"

"Both of us," the Chairman signed emphatically. "If anything will get that bitch woman and Slade out in the open it will be the chance to kill both me and my son on Honshos. Make sure news of our little trip gets fed to her via the usual sources. And in the event that we succeed in enticing her out of Theta Tauri Major we will make certain dispositions.

'Strange, is it not?" the Chairman added. "She and I play with the fate of numberless humanity but when all's said and done we are concerned only for ourselves, our sons and our enemies."

The Palwallum, thanks to her excellent espionage network, or so she thought, read the order at the same moment as the Chairman's chief pilot and found herself stamping, hollering and generally making the sort of spectacle of herself that would ruin her reputation for gravitas should anyone happen to see. The-All-Sun-And-The-All-Moon was required immediately for a lengthy journey to the outer reaches of the Hyades. The passenger manifest included the Chairman himself, and his deaf-mute dogsbody, Tranter, as well as the usual travelling directorate.

While delightful and ineffably gratifying, it was also unexpected. The Palwallum had been sure that Tranter would have been dispatched alone to retrieve the lost heir. Like a douche of cold water down the back of her neck, it suddenly seemed altogether too good to be true that the Chairman would expose both himself and his son so conveniently. The Palwallum sat down precipitately. This required thought, most careful thought.

Why? Why would the Chairman choose to expose himself?

There was only one possible reason. Bait. He was gambling that she would be unable to resist the chance of eliminating both him and his son at one fell swoop. He was gambling that he, in turn, would be able to eliminate her and restore the status quo.

Simple then. Send Slade. Even if he failed to kill the two of them, she would still hold Redux and while it would be a different game it would still be thoroughly entertaining for her and excruciating for the Chairman.

But. But Slade had his own ambitions and while he might be depended upon to kill the Chairman, if let off the leash he would want to keep the boy alive and to seize ultimate power through him for himself.

Proxy assassins perhaps. Disappointingly unsuccessful in the past, at least where the Chairman was concerned, and with the continuing turmoil on Cram, where no single

overlord had yet managed to assert himself, likely to be even more unreliable for the foreseeable future.

What then? The bait was on the hook, a particularly luscious bait, an irresistible bait, but was it a bait she could swallow without being caught and killed in her turn? That was the question, the consuming question, one might say.

In the end she temporised. She would summon Slade and, together with her own travelling bureaucracy, they would proceed to Honshos ex-signature, the risk of interdiction being minimal in the Chancellor. Once there, she would lurk, observe, and act, as and when opportunity permitted.

And so the forces set out to gather.

Chapter Three

Orville, lingering alone in the workshop, was thinking of dinner. It had been a long day but successful. He had finished modifying a standard floater to his own specifications and had just slid back the door to test it in the corridor. The sound of marching made him pull back. Moments later, an armed squad passed in front of him with Mac and Roxanna in the middle. Automatically he shot himself forward into the corridor and crashed into another Samura following on behind. It was Morgana-Li. The two ended in a fine tangle, Orville half in and half out of his chair, Morgana-Li straddled across him and flinching with distaste as their bodies touched.

"What's happening?" Orville shouted. "Where are they taking them?"

"I told you," Morgana-Li replied with cold anger. "Never touch me."

"It was an accident," Orville said furious. "For goodness sake, it was an accident. Where are you taking my sister? Where are you taking Mac?"

"I'm not taking them anywhere," Morgana-Li retorted. "The guard is taking them to the cells."

"Why?" Orville demanded.

"They were flying without authorisation, without protection. They could have got all of us killed."

"Oh swig's twaddle," Orville protested, raising his voice.

"Don't you dare talk to me like that," Morgana-Li shouted back. She stood there, her rather splendid chest heaving, and glared at him.

Orville regarded her for a long moment.

"I'm sorry," he said at last. "I didn't mean to run into you, or to touch you. And I was upset. I have very little experience at dealing with people. I don't know many. Forgive me if I offended you, but could you please tell me what's happening to my sister and her boyfriend."

"Boyfriend?" Morgana-Li said.

"He is also my cousin, second cousin, or third, or something, but family."

More people were coming down the corridor and Orville retreated back into the workshop to clear the way. To his surprise, Morgana-Li followed him.

"Please," he said again. "What will happen?"

"Nothing," Morgana-Li said at last. "My mother, name-mother that is, or someone else will yell at them, that's all."

"Why?" Orville said.

"We track the eyespies. Flying is forbidden if there are any around. So it has to be authorised. To protect the abbey. To protect us. If the Gadai think we're becoming a

threat before we're ready they'll try to wipe us out again. They'll send in the GDF or the UWATs. The UWATs are the worst. We hate them..."

"I see," Orville said and then: "What's it like to fly? Just by yourself. Free." Unconsciously, he glanced down at his legs. Morgana-Li caught the look and suddenly found herself thinking what it must be like, not able even to walk.

"It's..." she began and changed her mind. "It's a pity you couldn't have enhancers when you were small. They might have..."

Orville smiled crookedly.

"Probably not," he said. "You get used to it," he added after a moment.

Morgana-Li regarded him solemnly. She couldn't imagine having to live her life through her mind alone, her mind and her hands.

"I could take you flying," she said impulsively. "Like they did. Your sister and her boyfriend." She regretted it the moment it was out. Boyfriend was a forbidden word and the idea was ridiculous. She was Samura. It was impossible for her to have anything to do with this boy, well, man, young man. Her mother would kill her. Probably literally. It went against all her training, everything she stood for. Orville's reaction, however, was so totally unexpected, she found herself extremely put out.

"Spare me your pity," he said abruptly and swung the floater round so his back was towards her. "You should go," he added.

Morgana-Li stood there for several seconds, nonplussed, angry at herself, furious at Orville. Who did he think he was, rejecting an offer of simple friendship like that? It wasn't as though she had needed to say anything.

"Go," Orville repeated, and not knowing what else to do, she did, though reluctantly. And that made her even angrier. She stormed off down the corridor like a thunder cloud, shooting sparks and lightning.

Orville had turned back to watch her go, and as he had that morning, he felt himself unbearably lonely. Get used to it, he told himself forlornly.

Mac and Roxanna had also returned by the time Orville felt able to go back. They were sitting in the ship's mess, listening meekly and trying to avoid his father's awful eye. Wright's interview with the Shoga had been perfectly pleasant, but he wasn't about to tell the children that. Li-Morgana had actually apologised for the performance with the guard squad, explaining that she simply wanted to make a powerful impression, and Wright, for his own reasons, was concerned to reinforce it.

Shelby, knowing Orville had finished the floater, had made an appropriate space for him at the table, and Wright waited for him to move in before letting fly again.

Six out of ten, Orville thought glumly, rating his father's performance. Yeah, yeah. Yeah, yeah. And what about them offending me? Yeah, yeah. Well just keep them away

from me, then. Yeah, yeah, yeah... Suddenly he realised there was silence and that the others were all looking at him expectantly.

"What?" he said. "Sorry..."

"Orville?" Wright said. "Did you hear anything I said?"

"What's wrong?" Roxanna said. "Are you not feeling well?"

"I'm fine," Orville muttered unconvincingly.

"Well, pay attention then," Wright snapped. "I was saying... oh, never mind. Just all of you, please, be very careful."

Morgana-Li, like all the Samura, had first come to the abbey when little more than a day old and for two months she had been cared for in the nursery. When the first tests revealed that she was responding well to the enhancers she had been marked as a potential flier and Li-Morgana had become her mother to love and nurture her and to supervise her continuing care in the nursery. Choosing a baby for the Samura was a bit like choosing a puppy, a mixture of instinct and pragmatism. No Samura name-mother could say exactly why her choice had fallen as it had but it was rare to the point of all but unheard of for such a conjoining to turn out badly.

Li-Morgana had loved her name-daughter with a fierce passion ever since her first glimpse of the infant and the love, as Morgana-Li grew, not unnaturally was returned in full measure. It was a good life for a child: food, warmth, care, love, friends, lessons, arms drill and flying, and if men were missed it was never mentioned.

Morgana-Li was precocious. From her earliest years no one seriously doubted that she was destined to inherit the Shogunate from her name-mother, as Li-Morgana had inherited it from her name-mother before her, Morgana, famed leader of the revolution. In those first glorious weeks Morgana had commanded a successful guerilla campaign but, eventually trapped by overwhelming numbers, the Samura had been cut to ribbons and destroyed as an effective fighting force. Some few of the Samura had survived, sufficient eventually to rebuild. Morgana herself had been captured. After being forced to witness the ruination of Honshos, she had been removed to the arena on Redux from where, after a series of unprecedented events, she had disappeared, never to be seen again. Her legend lived on, however, brightly burnished. It was Li-Morgana's true legacy and in time would be Morgana-Li's.

But while there had never been doubt about Morgana-Li's future that was not to say there was not jealousy from others in her cohort and from their name-mothers. She was always the first to be advanced and there were those who felt that oftentimes it had less to do with her merits than her position. Morgana-Li was twice pressured. To justify her name-mother's faith she felt bound to excel and worked hard for success, but the more she achieved, the more she was disliked for it and the lonelier she became. With

adolescence, her loneliness became aggression and anger, ensuring that her isolation was self-perpetuating.

Li-Morgana had watched the process of embitterment with a sick heart but found herself powerless to intervene. Scrupulous as she felt she had been, anything else she might do could only make the situation worse and she was left to hope that the loneliness of a solitary girl might harden into the independence necessary for leadership.

Li-Morgana had even gone so far as to disqualify herself from adjudication of her daughter's final tests and trials but that had done nothing to diminish the whispering when Morgana-Li inevitably graduated top of her year and, as tradition demanded, became the only member of her group to be immediately promoted to hatamoto, first dan. It was unfair. There could be no doubt that on any dispassionate assessment Morgana-Li had more than earned the honour, but now as an officer, however junior, she was doubly separated from her fellows. Even flying, which had always been passion and solace in one, was now compromised in that she was denied the pleasure of being just an individual in the sky, free, but must be responsible for her troop and their opinion of her.

In her less bitter moments she hoped that the miseries of her life would prove the right tempering for the Shogunate, which everyone, non-friend or foe, seemed to think would come to her one day. But that did nothing to ease the ache that bedevilled all her waking moments, the ache of her pent-up emotions and thoughts and longings.

After her encounter with Orville, Morgana-Li spent an evening more restless than usual, and then a sleepless night. In the morning after roll call she found herself wandering in the direction of the aliens, as she had come to think of them. When she realised where she was unconsciously headed she stopped, but after a moment shrugged and kept on, this time with purpose. Mac was outside, using the hangar for his morning practice routine. Morgana-Li stayed in the shadows of the tunnel and watched. He was so good, she thought, but this time his artistry made her not angry but envious. And it was all done without enhancers as she now knew. It was astonishing.

At last, she stepped forward. Mac spotted her with surprise and dropped back down to the floor. He recognised her as the angry one from the river, the Shoga's name-daughter.

"Hi," he said. "Great day. Don't suppose there's any chance of letting me fly outside?"

"You have to check with flight control," she said.

"We could go together, maybe?" Mac said cheerfully.

"Uh..." and Morgana-Li found she didn't know what to say.

"Is there something I can do for you?" Mac said after a moment. Morgana-Li took her courage in both hands.

"Your... girl-friend," she said.

"Roxanna?"

"Yes. Could I speak with her? Please?"

"I should think so," Mac said. "Unless she's in the abluter. Come inside. She still prefers to stay on the ship. It's home..." Morgana-Li bridled. Going aboard the ship was definitely a step too far.

"Could I speak to her outside, out here?" she asked in a low voice.

Mac looked at her curiously.

"Sure," he said. "I'll go fetch her. You're Morgana-Li?" She nodded and watched jealously as Mac did a back-flip launch and speared up the ramp. Show-off, she thought, and then: But if I could do it, I'd flaunt it too.

Roxanna smiled at the tall, blonde girl waiting for her. Mac had been able to give no hint as to what she might want but Roxanna could see she was nervous. She held out her hand.

"I do like a proper introduction," she said. "Don't you? I know who you are of course, but all the same. I'm Roxanna."

Morgana-Li took the proffered hand.

"Thank you for coming," she said. "I wanted to talk to you about something, someone..."

"Of course," Roxanna said.

"Your brother."

"Orville?" Roxanna said, surprised. Oh dear, she thought. Oh dear. Oh dear. And suddenly the smell of trouble was curling about them in thick wreathes and plumes.

"Is that wise, do you think?" Roxanna said.

Morgana-Li looked at her hard and then swung on her heel. Roxanna knew she should let the girl go but much against her better judgment put out a hand.

"Wait," she said.

Morgana-Li turned back, a strange look on her face.

"I insulted your brother without meaning to," she said. "And I hoped you could tell me how to apologise without making it worse, without offending him again."

"What did you do?" Roxanna asked.

"He said he didn't want my pity," Morgana-Li in a low voice. "And it wasn't pity. I just wanted to be... nice."

"I know," Roxanna said gently. "It can be very difficult with Orville. You have to understand. You have to understand us and how we had to live."

"Could you tell me?"

"Morgana-Li... This is not good."

"I know." And Morgana-Li impatiently brushed at the tears that were suddenly embarrassing her.

"I don't want you to get hurt, either of you," Roxanna said, knowing full well that it was already too late, that the sudden fires of youth had already blazed into life and would not be easily extinguished.

"You should go," she said.

"If I promise not to go near him again, would you tell me about him?" Morgana-Li said. "On my honour as a Samura."

"Won't that just make it worse?"

"Give me something. Please."

Roxanna regarded her, deeply worried. Her first concern, of course, was for Orville, but how best to protect him, to protect him from this lovely young woman, to protect him from himself?

"On your honour?" Roxanna asked at last.

"I promise," Morgana-Li said.

Roxanna shrugged, hoping that she was doing the right thing.

"Come and sit," she said.

It was a long conversation and for Morgana-Li a pleasure that was frightening in its intensity. This small, dark girl with the beautiful face and the dancer's body showed nothing but care for her family, loving care, and an open honesty that was totally foreign to Morgana-Li. There was no suppressed jealousy, no hidden enmity, no sub-conscious desire to hurt. As the story unfolded, Morgana-Li lost all track of time and her ache, without her realising, completely vanished.

Mac came out of the ship having cleaned up and looked at them. He went away and came back some time later with a tray.

"Breakfast," he said, and disappeared again.

"I'm sorry," Morgana-Li said, embarrassed. "I'm keeping you."

"That's all right," Roxanne said. "I'm free if you are. Orville's the one who has to go to work."

Mac came back hours later with another tray.

"Lunch," he said, and this time he stayed, sitting by the edge of the chasm and sharing the food. Morgana-Li watched him as he ate and for the first time saw clearly. He was not now a threatening stranger, not after the long account Roxanna had given her of their life and all that had happened, but a good-looking young man with a tall, strong body just coming into its full heft. His face was pleasant and broke into cheerful

creases and dimples when he smiled, which was often. And the hair, the red-gold hair, was a killer. But, it had to be said that next to Orville he did look rather... dumb, nice but dumb. Really nice though. Like a brother should look. Or a brother-in-law. The forbidden idea shocked her and without thinking, she said:

"You are lovers?"

Mac and Roxanna looked at each other and smiled. Mac reached for her hand and kissed it.

"And we love each other," he said. "Which is the best bit."

"Aw... do you think?" Roxanna said.

Morgana-Li flushed.

"I'm sorry," Roxanna said. "I know it's taboo around here."

"I should go," Morgana-Li said. "I'm on duty soon. Thank you. Thank you, Roxanna."

"Please remember your promise," Roxanna said, suddenly serious.

"I will," Morgana-Li said as she left.

"And will she keep it?" Mac said when she was out of earshot.

"I hope so," Roxanna said.

"What promise?"

"She and Orville are an accident waiting to happen."

"Oh," Mac said.

Morgana-Li, though deeply ambivalent, came back quite regularly and was always welcome, particularly as Mac and Roxanna noted that she was true to her word and careful to make sure Orville was busy elsewhere before she appeared. Though superficially as different as it was possible to be, the three found that at a deeper level they had much in common and could enjoy each other's company. They often went flying, Mac and Roxanna together with Morgana-Li handling their interaction with flight control.

Morgana-Li was noted as the flier of her generation and secretly felt that she was about as good as it was possible to be, until, that is, she had encountered Mac. Now in competition with him and under his tutelage she found her abilities rapidly expanding. Faster, higher, stronger were Mac's watchwords and Morgana-Li responded with fierce determination that was no longer tinged with desperation and which was far more powerful for the change. In turn, Mac found that he was being stretched at times himself, which was something that had never happened to him before and which was enjoyable in a masochistic sort of way. There was nothing like a competitive edge to bring out the best in them both.

Roxanna watched the contests with tolerant amusement. To fly with Mac was a delight and privilege of which she never tired but she had no desire to fly herself and she was happy to wait with a reacom on some choice bit of river bank while the other two fought duel after duel. As time went by Mac no longer won automatically and had to work harder and harder. Increasingly, however, Roxanna was given to wondering how long this idyll could last and what Mac intended to do when it ended.

Of them all, Orville, Shelby and John were the only ones to work hard. Orville had discovered the abbey had a number of hydro generators that had been shut down after the ruination, there being no need for them with the much diminished population. He, Shelby and John were in the process of servicing and restoring them and Orville calculated that with these back on line there would be ample extra power for the matter-maker he was also in the process of constructing. The three of them were deeply involved in the project and often didn't appear in the mess from one day to the next.

Captain Wright, for his part, after all those years of conditioning on Redux, was quite happy to continue to engross himself in historical research, with regular visits to the floor of the valley for the spectacular walks. The unaccustomed fresh air, the exercise and the study were balm to his soul after the harried, year-long pilgrimage across the cluster. He also enjoyed his regular encounters with the Shoga whom he had come to respect for her intellect and her common sense.

But he, too, gave thought to the future and what it might hold. They could not stay hidden here forever, nor, if he were any judge, would his family wish to.

Chapter Four

With the All-Sun-And-The-All-Moon still one short hyperation from Honshos, the Chairman called a halt and he and Tranter sat down to review the situation. So far, the spheres were spinning in their appointed orbits. Slade had left Redux, travelling black. The Palwallum in the Chancellor had left Theta Tauri Minor, also travelling black. It was a foregone conclusion that they would rendezvous and then follow hotfoot to Honshos. Also, the secondary arrangements were satisfactorily in hand. All that remained then was to get eyeballs on the ground to discover exactly what the situation might be.

"You're still happy to go down alone?" the Chairman asked Tranter, who nodded.

"You are still happy to make the last hyperation black?" he signed back.

"Oh yes," the Chairman signed. "When our signature disappears this close to Honshos, they will be more sure than ever where we are going."

"And you will still unblock the hypercom?"

"I want them to know what's happening."

"Won't they suspect ulterior motives?" Tranter signed, looking doubtful.

"Of course," the Chairman signed. "But it's the only way to bring them out in the open."

"But they can't read our sign language. We know that. We've tested it."

The Chairman smiled contentedly, pleased to know that sometimes, at least, he could still stay ahead of Tranter.

"You forget," he signed. "Slade can read us. He invented the language, after all."

Tranter bowed his head submissively. He hadn't forgotten, in fact, but he had learned that the Chairman took such pleasure in these harmless little victories that it was a kindness to allow him one from time to time.

"So," the Chairman continued after a moment. "You will stay clear of that idiot Alkatani and his company of cretins and go straight to the abbey?"

Tranter nodded. "And you will stay out of range of their detectors but within reacom range?"

In his turn, the Chairman nodded. Then the two men rose and shook hands.

"Good fortune," the Chairman signed as Tranter turned to go.

If the tiny ship's lifeboat dropping into the night-time sky of Honshos registered on the variously arrayed detectors, it would have shown only as a meteor. By the time Tranter had levelled off and was slipping along at a contour-following altitude of 50 metres, it would have been recorded, if at all, as an impact. The fuel range on the lifeboat was severely limited but he should have more than enough for his purposes. He

crossed the Blue Mountain River within seconds of his ETA and turned right to follow it inland, skimming the surface of the water and invisible to all but the night creatures.

Seven clicks short of the abbey, where, reports from the garrison had confirmed, such rebels as there were still had their base, Tranter turned up a small tributary. Round the next bend were the lights of a farmhouse surrounded by shadowy outbuildings. Tranter brought the lifeboat to a silent hover and surveyed the scene through his darksee visor. Beyond the farm there was a grove of some sort of heavy trees and Tranter wound his way slowly through the trunks until he was in the deepest shadow. He set the lifeboat down and cracked the pod. The air was pleasantly cool with a scent of earth and leaves and with the humus deep enough that there was no difficulty in camouflaging his little ship to look like just another hump in the floor of the wood. After checking the contents of his fatpac and spending some time preparing a series of messages on his reacom, he set off back to the farmhouse.

The lights went off, just as he cleared the trees. Good, he thought, bedtime. Cautiously, wary of dogs or whatever sort of guard animal it was that they had here, he circled the building until he found a window, its crude shutters open, and slipped inside. With the help of the visor it might have been daylight and Tranter had no difficulty methodically working his way through the house. The few rooms were empty except for what must be the main bedroom. The door was closed and Tranter gently placed a vibration meter against the surface. It oscillated strongly, which meant that people must still be moving around or talking or doing whatever it was that you did when you could still hear. Not often did Tranter resent his fate but at times like this, total deafness was a severe handicap.

The needle at last went back to zero, but still he waited. Some time later it began to pulse again, very gently – snoring perhaps, or at the very least heavy breathing. He eased the door aside and surveyed the room, two separate snugglecots with a man and a woman, both in night-clothes, both well on the down-side of life. The woman looked like a cruet of vinegar. The man was pink and rubicund but to Tranter the air of good cheer seemed false, a veneer. Underneath he would be as grasping and mean as his partner. Ideal, Tranter thought. He fetched a floater from the wall, lifted his visor and turned on the light. Then, unhurriedly, he seated himself.

The woman woke first. Tranter pointed the blaster at her with one hand and with the other put a finger to his lips. Her eyes went wide and she gasped, but that was all. The man slept determinedly on and in the end, Tranter had to motion to the woman. She quickly reached to shake her partner's shoulder and then huddled back under the covers.

The man dropped his jaw to yell when he finally realised the situation but a jerk from Tranter's blaster brought him up short. He stared fearfully at the weapon and then remembered to shut his mouth. Tranter took his reacom from the breast of his jerkin, expanded the display and held it so they both could read.

"Who else is here?"

Neither spoke. He moved the blaster so that it was aimed directly at the woman again, instead of pointing between them. Still neither spoke. He shifted the muzzle until it pointed directly at the man.

"Uh..." the man said. Tranter fractionally adjusted his aim and let his finger be seen to be tightening on the trigger-pad.

"Uh. No one," the man said. Very good, Tranter thought as he lip-read. The woman looked viciously at her partner.

Tranter reached again into his breast pocket, brought out a C-chip and sent it spinning to the man. He caught it automatically and automatically checked the value. It carried 100 centa.

Tranter switched displays on his reacom and the new message read:

"I need a guide. I need information."

The man looked across at the woman and showed her the chip. Her gaze was still baleful, but after a long pause, she nodded. Tranter smiled and lowered the blaster. He turned the reacom about and in a moment the Chairman was staring at him from the display.

"In place and proceeding," Tranter signed.

After their rendezvous, Slade was finding close confinement with the Palwallum increasingly irksome. He had at least managed to leave that worm, Dostoi, behind on Redux but the company, he thought, had scarcely improved. The voyage and the waiting made the Palwallum's heavy-handed attempts at sociability doubly deadly. Slade could cheerfully have throttled her with his hook by the time they reached the environs of Honshos, where they would have to stay lurking in a dust cloud for the gods knew how long. For a day he prowled the ship until finally in an excess of boredom he was driven back to the lounge where at least there was the chance of a g-ball game on the hypercom, albeit he would have to bear the Palwallum's idiot commentary.

The hypercom was indeed switched on when he entered but was tuned to a screen full of static, the main communication channel, Slade guessed. The Palwallum was buried in her reacom and Slade sidled to a floater and sat down as inconspicuously as possible. He, too, opened his reacom, aligned it with one of the ship's auxiliary nodules to access an info channel and began to flick idly through the day's cluster news, which effectively meant only what might be happening on the two Theta Tauris unless someone somewhere else had started a full-on revolution. It was all the usual political squabbling, words, words, words, and Slade, yawning, happened to look up in time to see the hypercom come to life.

To his amazement the screen showed Tranter, the Chairman's creature, signing briefly and then the Chairman himself replying, even more briefly.

The Palwallum, whose attention had also been captured, groaned, apparently with frustration.

"So much for that," Slade said. "Why bother to report at all? And why have they unblocked the link?"

"To taunt me," the Palwallum said spitefully.

"To taunt you?" Slade repeated with wonderment.

"They know I can't break their code."

"What code?" Slade said. "All Tranter said was that he was in place and proceeding, and the Chairman acknowledged. There wasn't any code."

The Palwallum gaped, then leaped to her feet, marched across the room, and seizing the arms of Slade's floater, bent down so her face was only inches from his. Her breath was unpleasantly heavy with artificial mintyfresh.

"Are you telling me that you understood that?" she demanded.

"Of course, I did," Slade said, trying not to breathe through his nose. "I invented it."

"You invented it?"

"I needed a private language for my deaf-mute troopers."

The Palwallum straightened and turned away. She stood for a moment and then gave a little involuntary skip before resuming her chair. It was probably the single, most alarming thing that anyone had ever seen her do.

"Do you realise what this means?" she said when she had regained sufficient composure to be able to speak. "It means that now we know everything they're up to..."

"But," Slade interrupted. "Only so long as they use an open link. And why are they...? Using an open link?"

The Palwallum's mouth gaped so that Slade was again assaulted by distant waves of mintyfresh. She really was an odious woman but it was well, Slade had to keep telling himself, to remember that she was sufficiently astute to have achieved the position of palwallum in the first place, and that in the second place she had had no trouble in reducing him to one of her minions. It was a chastening thought. She closed her mouth and spoke.

"The Chairman would know that you understand that particular sign language?" she demanded, suddenly all business. Slade nodded.

"Then it is still just bait," she said and went back to her reacom.

Interrogation was a tedious business for Tranter, but by the time dawn was just beginning to show faintly luminous in the reflections from the river, he had what he needed. The woman, Nala, was a former Samura acolyte, a sometime lay member and was now wife to the farmer Pellman. He was just greedy and Tranter surmised that he had accepted the woman only for the small pension she brought with her and that it was

only fear of the Samura that made him keep her. They had no children and their life as share-croppers for the Samura was hard but not unreasonably so, or at least no harder than any other native's life on Honshos since the ruination.

So much was straightforward, but what they had to say about the Samura themselves was less candid as the woman kept trying to restrain her husband whenever he seemed on the point of being indiscreet. However, in the end, Tranter was reasonably sure that he had sifted out a fair amount of truth. First and foremost, it seemed indisputable that the boy and his crew were holed up in the abbey. Pellman had seen the boy flying with a girl and another uniformed Samura many times. Why the abbey should have admitted them at all was another matter. Pellman, resisting his wife's unspoken but vehement disapproval, stated as fact that the strangers could make thormalium and were teaching the abbey how to do it in exchange for sanctuary, that once the abbey had both the means to manufacture the mineral, the enhancers and the antidote, why then the Samura would be nigh on invincible. He had had it from the next landholder along, who had it from a lay sister, who had had it from a gunso who knew a hatamoto who had seen it for herself.

Tranter thought the story wildly improbable, one of those misunderstandings that became an exaggeration that became a rumour that became a fact and so gained an incontestable life of its own. Two wild exaggerations. Who could believe that anyone could make thormalium, and as for enhancers and an antidote, the idea was simply preposterous. Nevertheless, Tranter dutifully reported his findings, all his findings, to the Chairman.

And to Tranter's surprise, the Chairman did not dismiss either notion out of hand, particularly manufacturing thormalium, but on the contrary seem intrigued, more than intrigued. He instructed Tranter to discover whatever else he could about both but only as a secondary objective. His primary task was to confirm with his own eyes that Mac was indeed resident at the abbey.

Slade was off watch and asleep when the transmission came through and only arrived as Tranter was signing off. The Palwallum looked at him with sharp disapproval and ordered the recording to be played and replayed, making Slade translate the conversation verbatim three times before she was sure he had captured every nuance.

She too was thoroughly intrigued at the thought of an antidote but even more so with the idea that thormalium was being manufactured. She was aware of the theoretical possibility but was also aware that research into anything to do with replication technology was discouraged with summary disappearance. A monopoly required to be protected at all costs. So why then was the Chairman suddenly so interested?

"I suppose he intends to destroy the process," she said aloud. "He must be planning to get the boy and then blow up the abbey."

Slade said nothing and concealed his superior little smile behind his one good hand. It was perfectly clear to him that the Chairman wanted to be able to make the stuff because the supply of natural thormalium had reached a critical level. It had not taken much investigation on his part once in sole charge of Redux to realise that yields were declining by three per cent a year and that Redux II was in an even worse state. It explained why the Chairman had been spending so much time on the two planetoids of recent years, much to the distress of his travelling directorate. Without thormalium, the Hyades faced economic doom, a depression that would set humanity back thousands of years. Of course a manufacturing process for artificial thormalium, up and running, was of extraordinary note

Tranter, feeling the effects of the long night, swallowed two eye-openers, waited for the drugs to kick in and then set about the laborious process of explaining what he wanted. Pellman would take him to a place where he might see for himself that the boy was indeed in the vicinity. The woman would have to be imprisoned for the duration. Or killed. On balance, however, as he preferred to have the man's willing co-operation, imprisonment seemed the better option.

The protests were vociferous. The boy did not come every day or even every second day. There was work to be done, animals to be fed, milked, let out, got in, the farm didn't run itself, you know. It was outrageous that his wife should be locked up for however long it took. Quite impossible. If he wanted to see the boy, he could just go himself...

Yes, Tranter, said. But only if he had killed them both first.

Pellman took the point.

To seal the bargain, Tranter took back the C-chip and put another hundred on it. Pellman allowed as that was more than decent pay for a day off work and told his wife to shut up. She would be perfectly comfortable in the cellar for a few hours. Tranter, himself, locked her in, having made sure there was no possible exit. That is, he found the trap-door to the secret under-cellar but missed the escape tunnel behind the tiered wine barrels against the far wall, wine barrels far too large for one man, let alone one woman, to move.

It crossed Pellman's mind for a split second to take the axe from the woodpile to the back of Tranter's head as they passed, but he might miss and that didn't bear thinking about. The stranger was far too large and far too ugly a customer to provoke unwisely. Docilely, he lead Tranter to the path that cut the angle between his stream and the river proper, and then several clicks along the bank to the thick, low-hanging tree he knew of, where a man could lie concealed from the air as well as the ground. He had lied. So far, the boy had never missed a day, though the time varied. And he had always had at least one girl with him. The little dark one was always with him and often the nubile blonde. The brunette was the one he truly lusted after, but a man would be a fool to say no to

either. He licked his lips. And today he was being paid more than handsomely to watch; the only pity was that his wife would miss her day's work. Oh well, she would just have to catch up tomorrow.

They waited all morning and into the afternoon, when Tranter stiffened and raised his farsee. Pellman was snoring quietly, having missed his night's sleep, and Tranter didn't trouble to wake him. There, coming down the river from the north-east, it was the boy. No doubt. Someone seemed to be riding his back and there was a blonde flying beside him. They dropped down to a grassy dell on the far bank where the boy's passenger dismounted. She was the spunky little girl, Tranter saw, who had stood up to Osmond way back at the arena on Redux. She settled herself with a reacom and the other two left her and began to play some sort of aerial game. Tranter put away the farsee and allowed himself to doze off. The gods knew how long they would disport themselves and he was tired now, very tired.

The lights of the farmhouse began to show through the trees and Pellman quickened his pace. He was cold, hungry and stiff from being too long asleep on the bare ground. Tranter, too, was thinking only of reporting the success of his mission to the Chairman and something to eat. His 200 centa ought to be good for at least one meal, he supposed. Nor did he care what vinegar-face might have to say on the subject. He was deaf and in this instance glad to be so. They came to the open area between the house and the stream and angled across to the lights.

The first Tranter knew of anything amiss was something sharp stinging his neck and the prickle of blood running down the skin. He put up his hand to brush away whatever insect was making a meal of him and found himself touching something cold and hard, maxalloy, a blade. He stopped and stood poised, his hand drifting towards his blaster. The pressure on his neck increased and the blood ran more freely. Forget the blaster then. He raised his hands and waited.

Shapes descended on him noiselessly out of the sky and in seconds Tranter was surrounded by Samura. Whoever it was with the blade to his neck moved round to his front, still airborne. Even had he been able to hear, there could have been no warning. He felt someone else taking the blaster from his belt and hands patting him down. He was too much the professional to curse, even had he been able. A false wine-barrel, he supposed, leading to a tunnel. He should have tapped them all. One tended to overlook primitive, time-out-of-mind devices. It was understandable though nonetheless unforgivable.

Pellman came back towards them. The woman with the sword said something. Pellman protested vehemently, but eventually, with extreme reluctance brought out the C-chip that Tranter had given him. The Samura glided across to the the farmer's wife and there was still light enough in the sky for Tranter to see her hand over the money.

This time he did curse, even if he couldn't hear it. Perhaps if he had thought to pay her in the first place...

Li-Morgana found herself in a quandary as unpleasant as any she had ever had to deal with. Captain Wright was here at the abbey under the code of the guest, and she was obliged to warn him that Galiconia had tracked down his family. Yet as Shoga, she was obliged to keep it secret so long as there was any chance that the young engineer, Orville, might complete the thormalium plant. Nothing was more important than that. If Wright were warned, he would have little choice but to take his people and flee. If they went too soon, she as Shoga would again face the crisis of their fast diminishing reserve. Soon enough, there would be no alternative but to attack the garrison and to take the thormalium they needed. In turn, that would bring Galiconia's punitive forces down upon them, long before they were properly ready.

The man standing before her wore no sort of uniform but he could have been stark naked and his identity would still have been unmistakable. He was a Galiconia storm trooper. And the small G-symbol stamped on the butt of his blaster was conclusive. He had apparently refused to talk but when the pressure became severe he had made writing motions. She was prepared to accept his message that he was unable to speak, and that led her to recollect the detail of the adventures Wright had recounted. The Chairman's chief aide had been a deaf-mute, she remembered him saying. It made the choice before her even more unpalatable.

Honour required one course of action, duty another. In the end, duty won as she had always known it would. But the taste in her mouth was none the better for that as she broke faith and ordered the man to the cells.

"And hatamoto," she said to Morgana-Li. "See to it that no one, particularly our guests, knows that he's there, at least until we see how the situation develops."

Morgana-Li saluted and about turned. Her mind was racing and she was deeply troubled but she could not presume to question her mother with her squad looking on. She marched them out together with the prisoner and carried out her orders to the letter, all the while feeling that she was betraying the only people she had ever really liked.

Li-Morgana watched her go, her heart heavy at the burden she was placing on her daughter, so young. But she had to learn, and learn quickly. There was no telling how much time there might be. When the door slid closed, Li-Morgana turned to the screen and ordered the cap and perimeter patrols doubled.

Chapter Five

Morgana-Li spent a difficult night. Roxanna had told her enough of her family's travels for her to realise the significance of Tranter's capture, and she knew enough of the general situation at the abbey for her to understand her mother's dilemma and the decision forced upon her. But it wasn't right that the aliens, likable aliens, should be sacrificed without their knowledge. It was wrong, wrong, dishonourable, a thousand times wrong, a thousand times dishonourable. With all the passion of outraged youth, Morgana-Li railed at the unfairness of life, at a life where duty could demand such deceit and betrayal. Oh yes, she understood why her mother had to do what she did, and she even understood why as Li-Morgana's daughter and destined Shoga she, herself, had been directly involved. But it was wrong, all so wrong.

She had a date to go flying with Mac and Roxanna again that morning, but how could she keep it? How could she look them both in the eye and sustain the lie she would be telling? But how could she not? To suddenly withdraw would be suspicious. Given that Samura because of the antidote were never sick, to plead illness would be ridiculous and even more dishonourable. Morgana-Li began to understand the full dimension of the burden her mother had laid upon her, the dimensions of the lesson she was being taught. If you would lead your people, then you must lie and betray at need. She had to go. Like her mother, she had no choice. And it had been so foolish to think these strangers might ever become her friends. Aliens they were and aliens they must remain.

Thus far, Morgana-Li had been scrupulous in keeping her promise to Roxanna that she would avoid Orville, however the young man with the wasted legs but with the finely carved face and the glowing intelligence in his eyes was much in her thoughts. Often she had been tempted to seek him out, to prove, she told herself, that the attraction between them was all in her imagination. But always she had managed to resist. Nevertheless, it was inevitable that at some point they would accidentally encounter each other. It was particularly unkind fate that it should be now.

Orville glided around the corner in front of her and there was no escape, no time to react. She made to step aside, intending to walk past without speaking, but he stopped in front of her.

"Hi," he said. "I was hoping I might see you some time. I wanted to apologise. I made this for you. Just a memento..." He reached into the breast of his jerkin and pulled out a small package.

He held it out to her. There was no way she could refuse to take it without being gauche beyond words. Besides, deep down she very much wanted to have it, whatever it might be. She took the little packet, half-smiled and stepped around him, still without speaking a word. Orville shrugged and watched her go. She didn't look back.

Once out of his sight, Morgana-Li broke into a run despite the curious looks from passers-by and then slipped into a disused chamber. She stood concealed from the doorway, looking down at Orville's silken package. She knew she should throw it away unopened but it was quite beyond her. With clumsy fingers she fumbled it open and tipped the contents on to the palm of her hand. Lying there was a slender golden band, a bracelet. It had been delicately woven from hair, the ends seated in a tiny golden clasp. It must be her hair, she realised, or rather, more copies of it that Orville had made from the original strand she had given him. And it was exquisite. Tears began to stream down Morgana-Li's face. The gift only made her treachery seem all the more terrible.

Samura were strictly forbidden all personal adornment, the only vanities allowed were marks of rank and the knowledge of one's own achievements. Morgana-Li stood for a long time staring sightlessly at her hand. Something in her yearned to slip the band on to her wrist despite all the proscriptions and her own long-inculcated inhibitions, but in the end she restored the bracelet to the envelope and stuffed it into a pocket. What she mostly felt, she realised, was guilt, and with the guilt, anger, a hard-edged, unforgiving anger. None of this was her doing. None of this was her fault. If these people hadn't come here, she wouldn't have to feel like this.

Roxanna was unwell. She was rarely troubled by anything but today all she wanted was horizontal peace and quiet.

"You go," she said to Mac, who was manfully hiding his disappointment. "I trust you. Besides, if you lay a finger on her she'll probably kill you." They both smiled. Both knew their union was absolute.

"I just want to rest," Roxanna added. "And I don't want to have to feel guilty about depriving you."

Mac stopped arguing and was waiting for Morgana-Li when she arrived.

"Lovely day," Mac said, and explained that Roxanna was staying behind. Morgana-Li muttered something monosyllabic, punched at her reacom, waited for clearance and then launched herself out of the cavern. Mac watched her curiously. Something was obviously eating at her but in the end he was left no choice but to shrug and to follow.

Morgana-Li flew fast down the river to their usual sparring ground and without any preliminaries launched into a savage attack. Mac reacted automatically and neatly evaded her first determined pass, but was rushed and less composed the second time. What could be wrong with the woman, he wondered? It looked like she was out to kill them both. He rolled into a tight, defensive circle and made expressive faces at Morgana-Li glaring across at him from the other side. There was no acknowledgment and Mac suddenly felt the waves of genuine threat pulsing at him.

What in the Hyades was going on? Something was badly amiss.

He made a decision and pulled out of the circle, intending to land and have it out with her but as he swooped down on the river she curved away, dropped into a power dive and in an instant was coming straight at him, head-on, in the age-old game of let's-see-who-breaks-first. Their combined closing speed was suddenly several hundred clicks an hour and Mac had only an instant to realise that whatever the result, there was no way Morgana-Li would change her line. He would somehow have to miss her or they would both die.

At the last possible moment, to avoid any mad counter that Morgana-Li might try, Mac made a minute adjustment and instead of hurtling to mutually assured destruction the two bodies flashed past each other, so close that they were rocked and buffeted by each other's slipstreams. It took Mac some seconds to pull out of the uncontrolled tumble that resulted but he was still in time to see Morgana-Li crash helpless into the deep pool below them.

Unhesitatingly, Mac speared down and into the water. He found her quickly, dead or unconscious from the impact, drifting towards the bottom. Gripping her with his right hand he was able to generate enough lift with his left so that this and their natural buoyancy brought them eventually back to the surface. From there it was only a few metres to the bank, and even though unable to swim, Mac managed to struggle ashore with the limp body of the suddenly suicidal Samura.

Her mantle had somehow tangled round her head and Mac ripped it away. She was not breathing and, not knowing whether the impact had killed her or whether she was just unconscious and seven-eighths drowned, he tore at her breast plate to clear the way for heart massage, and then the stiff jerkin, heedless of the under-garment. Straddling her he began to rock to the rhythm Shelby had taught him after Cram, stopping every fifteen pumps to push two quick breaths into her mouth.

It went on for a long time and Mac was beginning to wonder how much more he could sustain. Then one moment, Morgana-Li was lifeless, her eyes closed, and the next she was gazing up into his face. She felt his hands on her naked chest and swung her arm with all the force she could muster. It crashed into the side of Mac's head, knocking him sideways and to the ground.

Gunso Teresa-Li, unamused by the unexplained extra duty, brought her squad of seven down the patrol line through the forest to the river and then turned thankfully for home. Rounding the next bend, she raised her hand and brought the patrol to a hover. There were figures there on the bank. Through her farsee she could make out a man doing what appeared to be something perverted to a woman. She ordered charge, and the patrol raced to the rescue. As they drew near, they saw the woman courageously crash her arm into the man's head and he was sent sprawling. He ceased trying to get up when he found two katanas at his throat.

The woman struggled to rise and Teresa-Li's heart went into her mouth. It was Morgana-Li, the Shoga's beloved daughter, her clothes torn, her breasts exposed, her face bloodied. Clearly, the man, one of the strangers from the ship, had been trying to rape her.

Afterwards, Morgana-Li could never separate out the truth. Had Mac, in fact, been trying to rape her, or had he, in fact, been saving her life? She had been deeply confused when she came to. She had lashed out automatically. Then the squad had arrived and the circumstantial evidence instantly became set in fused rock so that even had she challenged it, she would have been dismissed as too distraught to know what had been happening. For a celibate community of women, rape is the worst possible abomination. At the hint of it, starved imaginations become fevered and it looms out of all proportion, impossible to treat rationally.

After the first minutes any doubts Morgana-Li might have had were swept away by the enraged certainty surrounding her, cocooning her in a warm bath of concern. She had been angry, she remembered that, so angry, and hurt, more than she could bear, or so it had seemed. She had wanted to hurt back, impose herself, convince herself that she was not just a helpless pawn to fate. And she wasn't, for here was the boy, the man, the flier she could never match, with his arms wrenched behind him and a blade at his throat. Who was helpless now? Who had fate really betrayed?

And yet, when she had set her clothing somewhat to rights and the patrol was busy considering how best to deliver the captive to the abbey – far too risky to let the man fly himself, they were saying – she couldn't help checking her innermost pocket.

It was still there, the band that Orville had made for her.

Mac was totally bewildered. One minute he had been desperately struggling to save Morgana-Li's life, the next he was desperately struggling for his own freedom. The sword blade at his throat made him desist. He opened his mouth to speak but thought better of that too when both arms were suddenly wrenched even higher behind his back.

He looked towards Morgana-Li, his face a study of outraged innocence, but she refused to meet his eyes and then he could no longer see her for solicitous women. The situation was extraordinary and quite beyond anything Mac had ever experienced. He had no idea how to deal with it except to tell the truth, but no one would let him speak and already he had a shrewd suspicion that Morgana-Li, if she didn't deny everything he said, would certainly not confirm it. He was ensnared in a web of circumstance and inference and felt singularly helpless. On top of everything, it looked like being a long walk home as the gunso had just come and ripped off his glove.

Roxanna was asleep when her father found her.

"You'd better come," he said. "There's trouble."

"What sort of trouble?" she asked after a moment.

"I don't know," he said, and then: "Something to do with Mac. Did you know that he and Morgana-Li went off alone this morning...?"

"As it happens, I did," Roxanna said with something of an edge. "And he doesn't need a chaperone, Father."

"You think?"

"Father, just what has happened?"

"I honestly don't know," Wright said. "But we've been summoned by the Shoga and it's something to do with Morgana-Li. I'm getting a very bad feeling."

And indeed, as they made the way through the corridors to Li-Morgana's situation room, people drew back from them and there was whispering behind their backs.

"Where are the others?" Roxanna asked at one point.

"Down at the hydro plant," Wright said.

"I could understand Orville being in trouble with Morgana-Li," Roxanna said. "But Mac... It doesn't make sense."

"What do you mean?" Wright said.

"Never mind," Roxanna said.

"I do mind," he father replied tartly but had to let it go as they had reached the guard on Li-Morgana's door.

They were ushered inside and then stood, shocked. The first thing they saw was Mac. He was in fetters, even to the extent of a metal collar around his neck connected to brutal handling poles. He was standing between two large Samura, who apart from gripping the control rods also had drawn swords. Li-Morgana was standing in the centre of the chamber flanked by a dozen of her highest ranking officers. Morgana-Li stood opposite Mac. It looked for all the world like a court room complete with judge, jury and executioners.

Roxanna gasped and then stormed forward towards Mac.

"You let go of him," she shouted at the two guards. "How dare you?" One of the swords swung round and Roxanna was brought up short, with the point pricking her breast.

"Be quiet," Li-Morgana said behind her. Roxanna swung round and glared.

"Just what do you think you're doing?" Wright demanded hotly.

"Holding a hearing," Li-Morgana said coldly. "This..." She pointed at Mac and groped for the appropriate word. "This... man was caught in the act of attempting to rape my daughter, Morgana-Li, before eight witnesses."

"Oh rubbish," Roxanna said impatiently.

"He was seen," Li-Morgana said, her voice glacial.

"Well, they saw wrong," Roxanna said. "It's quite ridiculous. Tell them Morgana-Li."

The Shoga's daughter looked at Roxanna unhappily. She had come to think of this small, fiery person and her man as people she would like for friends, real friends. But now, it seemed, they could only be enemies. She had no real idea of what had happened. She had been unconscious, she knew that, and had woken to find Mac touching her naked breasts. The others had seen and they said it was rape, attempted rape... It was all so difficult.

"He was on top of me," she said. "He was touching me."

"I was only..." Mac started to say, but broke off retching as one of the guards gave a vicious tug on his collar.

"You call this a hearing," Wright suddenly exploded. "This is no hearing. This is a lynching. You won't even let him speak..."

"The evidence speaks for itself," Li-Morgana snapped back. "Morgana-Li was unconscious but eight witnesses saw the crime. There is no doubt. None."

"What witnesses?" Wright demanded. "Who?"

"A Samura patrol lead by one of my most experienced gunsos," Li-Morgana stated. "I say again, there is no doubt. None."

"You have to let him speak," Wright said. "Simple justice demands it." He and Li-Morgana stared at each other for a long minute, then the Shoga nodded.

"Speak then," she said to Mac.

Mac looked to Roxanna and to Wright and then he opened his mouth. All that came out was a croak. He cleared his throat and tried again.

"We were training..." he said.

"Training," Li-Morgana said. "Alone." It was a statement not a question and carried a weight of condemnation.

"We were training," Mac insisted. He was long past angry. He was now weary and sick of the whole stupid business. "We came too close and nearly collided. The turbulence pitched Morgana-Li into the river and knocked her out. She sank. I pulled her out and because she wasn't breathing, because I thought she might be dead, I had to rip her things off so I could work on her heart..."

"You ripped her clothes so you could rape her," Li-Morgana said coldly. "You were seen. She fought you until my troops got there. She fought you off and saved her honour. She is a hero, and you, you are... disgusting. You are a guest..."

"A paying guest," Wright interrupted.

"And yet you took advantage the moment you thought you could get away with it," Li-Morgana said. "You are vile."

"Oh swig's twaddle," Mac shouted, suddenly quite beside himself.

"Hold your foul tongue," Li-Morgana roared. "Or I'll have it cut out."

There was a long silence, a corrosive, dangerous silence.

Wright spoke, carefully, with as much control as he could muster.

"I understand..." he said. "I understand the situation as it appears must be deeply upsetting for you all. But please consider what the young man has to say. For my part I could never doubt his word. We have been together through many trials. He has saved my life repeatedly and the lives of my crew. I trust him implicitly. If he says that is what happened, then that is what happened. There can be no doubt."

"Indeed there can be no doubt," Morgana-Li said. "There were witnesses. Eight of them."

"Who saw only the aftermath," Wright said. "And who misinterpreted what they saw."

Li-Morgana drew breath. That was possible, she supposed, however unlikely. But against that there was the ferment roiling the abbey. Word of the rape had swept through the halls like a fire-storm. The word rape was flame, incandescent flame, and she knew that with the slightest mishandling the inferno would turn in her direction and consume her leadership. It was not just irrational man-fear that somehow she had to control, but prurient man-longing repressed to the point where a trigger such as this could create a holocaust that would consume them all.

And then there was the matter of the thormalium. To kill the boy out of hand as he deserved would complicate the project immeasurably. She would have to hold Wright and his people hostage to force the cripple to complete the process and who knew what booby traps he might build into his machines. But first things first. First the fire.

"I hear what you say," she said, speaking directly to Wright. "Perhaps there is some slight question. I withhold sentence of death. He will be put to the trial."

"Trial?" Wright said.

"Trial by mortal combat. Against my chosen champion. Two days hence." There was a sigh of satisfaction from the ranks of her officers. She turned to Mac.

"Will you accept the judgment of the sword?" she demanded.

"What if I won't fight?" Mac responded, quizzically.

"Then you will be cut down like the dog you are," the Shoga snapped. "You will be executed out of hand... Take him away."

Roxanna gasped and then before anyone could stop her, marched across to Morgana-Li.

"If Mac dies," she said in a clear, precise voice. "I will kill you." And she spat full in Morgana-Li's face. The Shoga's daughter stood woodenly, the spittle running down her cheek. She wanted to weep but somehow kept it contained. Warriors don't cry.

Chapter Six

Both the Chairman and the Palwallum on their separate ships waited most anxiously for Tranter to report in and as time went by, both became increasingly concerned. There was nothing that the Chairman could do but possess his soul in patience and occupy his mind with the routine work of the cluster, but for the Palwallum it was another matter. She had Slade to torment.

They discussed his lack of communication endlessly, until eventually the probable explanation occurred to Slade.

"Those first transmissions were a mistake," he said.

"What do you mean a mistake?" the Palwallum demanded.

"We only picked them up because some fool left the link unblocked," Slade said. "We weren't meant to hear at all. It was a mistake. Just a mistake."

The Palwallum stared at him. The truth of his words was self-evident. Or course, they were just mistakes, stupid mistakes, for the Chairman dangerous mistakes, but mistakes nonetheless. She sat there thinking and Slade gratefully closed his eyes. At last she spoke and Slade sighed, though noiselessly and to himself.

"It is time," the Palwallum said.

"Time for what?" Slade said, despite himself.

"Time to go down to Honshos."

"What?"

"Time to go down to Honshos," the Palwallum repeated.

"But Madame..." Slade said.

"To the garrison. A GDF inspection tour, I think. You will wear your uniform and they won't know the difference."

"But this is not a GDF ship," Slade said. It was true that he still wore the uniform in default of anything else but he had no mind for the sort of masquerade this dreadful woman seemed to be proposing.

"As if those fools would dare to question," the Palwallum said. "And they will provide you with local transport. You'll be able to go to the abbey and see for yourself."

"What?" Slade ejaculated again.

"We need first-hand information," the Palwallum said, pressing the button to summon her pilot.

"But madame..." Slade began. The idea of being despatched to blunder about the countryside of Honshos exposed to a bunch of homicidal women was quite appalling.

"No buts," the Palwallum said. "The time has come to be decisive."

"And where will you be?" Slade inquired icily.

"On the ship," the Palwallum said comfortably. "Ready to respond instantly to whatever you discover."

Roxanna couldn't stop shivering. It was part fever, but mostly concern for Mac. The whole business was just too bizarre but it might well end up costing him his life.

They were all gathered in the mess, silent and miserable.

"Well, they needn't think I'm doing any more work for them," Orville said at last.

"Or us," Shelby said.

"Right," John echoed.

"If you don't," Wright said. "They will hold Roxanna and me hostage. Better to keep what freedom we can while we can."

"What does trial by combat mean anyway?" Roxanna said, her teeth chattering. "What sort of combat?" Wright got up to fetch her a wrap.

"Swords," Wright said. "Katana." The Shoga had drawn him aside for a minute before they had left the situation room.

"An aerial sword fight?" Orville asked.

"It would be normally," Wright said. "But because Mac flies so much better than any of them, they won't let him have a glove."

"But that's unfair," Roxanna protested. "He doesn't know anything about sword fighting. That's just slaughter."

"I think that's what they want," her father said gently.

"And it's not even true," Roxanna said angrily. "Morgana-Li flies much better now. Mac taught her."

"And she has been trained..." Shelby began.

"To the sword," John finished.

They all looked at each other.

"That would be fairer," Roxanna said. "At least Mac would have a chance."

"Accuser versus accused," Wright said consideringly.

"Please try, Father," Roxanna said and she took his hand.

Wright nodded slowly

"Nothing to lose," he said.

Nobody noticed that Orville was suddenly very silent.

The Shoga received Wright, dressed formally in full regalia, but was alone as Wright had requested. She bowed, as was Samura custom, but Wright refrained from returning it.

She regarded him with suppressed tension.

"We may still respect each other," she said.

"You have condemned my nephew to death for a crime he not only did not commit, but never could have imagined," Wright said. "My nephew is as a son to me."

They held each other's eyes for a long moment and then Li-Morgana motioned him to a floater.

"You asked to see me," she prompted.

Wright hesitated a moment and then spoke, his words harsh. He had calculated that an appeal in effect for mercy would summarily fail, and that the only possibility of success was a challenge. Nevertheless, what he was about to say was a gamble and the risks increased the strain in his voice.

"Every great cause begins as a crusade," he said. "But inevitably the ideals harden into a code, the code ossifies into mindless rigidity, and the rigidity degenerates into a mere carapace for corruption. And that is the point that you and your Samura have reached. You are mindless and your *honour* is bankrupt, depending now, as it does, on destroying the innocent." At Wright's palpable sneer as he said the word honour, the Shoga had sprung to her feet and loomed forbiddingly, the fall of her richly embroidered mantle swaying with her breathing. Wright held up his hand.

"I haven't finished," he said. "You and I understand each other quite well, I think. I understand that there is doubt in your mind about this so-called rape. I certainly understand that you are afraid to impose impartial justice for fear of what your lynch mob followers will do. It's not your honour you are protecting, but your hide. You will slaughter an innocent young man to protect your position. You will allow him to be sacrificed by your people to their steamy prejudices, their illicit cravings, with no thought to truth or honesty. You will bow to mass hysteria, the hysteria of your daughter, the hysteria of your so-called witnesses, the hysteria of all your posturing women, and you call that honour. You have prostituted your honour to expedience. If you were truly honourable you would fall on that sword you value so much and you would fall on it now."

At the word sword, Li-Morgana swept the katana from her waist-band in one motion and held it poised, quivering, over Wright's head. To her utter astonishment, he laughed.

"Case proved," he said quietly. "So much easier to kill me than to face the truth. Corrupt to the core..."

Wright stared into the Shoga's narrowed pupils, calmly and completely without fear. The sword dropped and she turned away. When at last she turned back it was again sheathed at her waist and the killing look had gone from her eyes. She sat.

"You enjoy to dance with death?" she asked. Wright said nothing. There was much truth in what he had said, Li-Morgana was forced to recognise, uncomfortable truth, dangerous truth. It had shamed her, as he had known it would. The question was what

did he wish her to be shamed into. He would know that the original ruling of trial by combat must stand, so what did he want?

"You said the boy, the man, Albright is as a son to you?"

Wright nodded.

"A name-son?"

Wright nodded again.

"I cannot save him."

Wright nodded a third time.

"But you can give him a chance," he said. "You can make it a fair fight."

There was a long, silent struggle, every bit as intense as what had gone before.

"Let your daughter defend her own honour," Wright said at last, as though concluding the wordless debate. "They are differently matched but the contest would be equal."

The Shoga bowed her head.

Unspoken was Wright's unanswerable argument. He had only to whisper to one or two passing Samura that Li-Morgana was afraid to let her daughter defend her honour herself for the whole edifice to come crashing down about her. Instead, Wright had chosen the most dangerous of paths in challenging her directly. The Shoga could do no less than accept.

Mac was returned to the ship very soon after Wright had arrived back. Roxanna rushed down the ramp and seized him. His guard having released him took up positions across the mouth of the cavern. The message was clear. Roxanna hurried him inside, shaking and barely suppressing her tears. She could see an unsightly bruise around his neck but otherwise he seemed undamaged for once.

"I didn't touch her," Mac said as soon as he was allowed to get a word out.

"We know that, you great idiot," Roxanna said. "Of course, we know that."

"I was just trying..."

"To save her life. Shut up." Roxanna pushed him into a floater and busied herself in the galley.

"And now I'm supposed to kill her...?"

"There are those of us," Wright interposed, "who find that thought infinitely preferable to her killing you. Or to you being executed."

"She went crazy," Mac said. "When we were flying. We nearly crashed and she hit the water so hard. I don't understand. I don't understand any of it."

Orville, sitting quietly in a corner of the mess, said nothing.

"Here," Roxanna said. "You need food. When did you eat last?"

"It doesn't matter," Mac said, but he took the plate she held out. "And there's another thing." The others all looked at him. "In the cells," he said. "I saw Tranter. My father's found us again."

At last someone spoke. It was Shelby.

"Well, that didn't..."

"...take long," John finished.

"In the cells," Wright said. "Why would they have put him there and not told us? Have we seen any ships, Orville?"

"I haven't been watching," Orville said. His voice was colourless, strained. Roxanna looked at him sharply. He shrugged. "I was busy and I thought we were safe for a while. My fault..."

"No," his father said. "We should have been helping. Can we check now?"

Orville went forward and when nobody was watching, Roxanna followed him. She bent over the back of his floater and hugged him.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I'm so sorry."

"There was nothing," Orville said. "I'd only ever talked to her three times."

"But..." Roxanna said.

"But..." Orville replied.

"I'm so sorry," Roxanna said again, very gently, and left him.

Orville was frowning when he returned to the mess.

"There is no sign of any Galiconia ship," he said. "So I've no idea where Tranter came from. But there is a Gadai ship just coming into the garrison."

"A Gadai ship?" Wright said.

"Probably routine," Orville said.

"And Tranter wouldn't have come from there, anyway, would he?" Mac asked

"Unlikely, I would have thought," Wright said. "So how did he get here? And what does he know? And who else knows what he knows? And why are the Samura keeping him secret from us?"

"Could you ask the Shoga?" Roxanna said. Wright smiled.

"Given that she nearly killed me not so long ago," he said, "probably best not. At least not just now."

"Killed you?" Mac said. He had emptied the plate and Roxanna quietly moved to get him some more.

"It was an... interesting interview," Wright said. "But she let you out in the end."

"For the moment," Shelby said.

"So what do we do now?" John asked.

"Think," Wright replied.

It was Lieutenant-Colonel Alkatani's worst nightmare come true. The signature of a Gadai ship had suddenly appeared out of nowhere, far too close for any proper camouflage to be activated, and here he was facing a full-scale inspection totally unprepared. He barely had time to change into his best uniform and race to the landing dock, making a mental note to disembowel that fool Norton who had let them be totally surprised without any sort of warning. How could a man concentrate on tri-continental flora and certain particularly interesting aquatic creepers if he couldn't rely on his subordinates.

He was standing to rigid attention with a hastily assembled honour guard, just, as the ramp descended. The hatch opened, he snapped to the salute and his heart sank. Emerging from the innards of the extremely large, not to so say magnificent, ship was a full-blown, four-sun, Galconia general. Why such an august GDF personage should be travelling with the Gadai was not a question that even crossed Alkatani's limited mind. His only reaction was to quail inwardly even more.

Slade brushed away the attempted attentions of the welcoming party as he would annoying insects and strode into the operations room. Alkatani had been first mesmerised and then apparently terrified by his hook, he noted with amusement.

An hour later, by dint of using his most forceful manner, Slade, despite the manifest incompetence of the whole garrison, had what he wanted and was on his way. The agger was antiquated but presumably serviceable, the escort squad cowed into cringing silence, and the pilot briefed and flying as carefully as he knew how. Slade calculated it would be at least a 36-hour trip to the other side of the planet, but as far as he knew, there was no particular reason for hurry.

Orville huddled miserably in his berth. "But..." Roxanna had said and that was all he had, "but". However, it was a big but. He couldn't get Morgana-Li out of his head. Even her imperious disdain was infinitely attractive, particularly when he had contrived to break through it. Except, he had then managed to muck it up completely. Orville had had absolutely no experience with women – for a long time his sister had been the only female in his ken – and he had assumed that he never would. However, simply by fact of being Morgana-Li had shown him in an instant that he was wrong to think himself immune. He was just as vulnerable as anybody else and had fallen. Hard. To his thinking mind it seemed ridiculous that he should be so affected by a couple of chance meetings, but his heart knew better and for once in his life, his heart ruled. And now, his best friend, his cousin, his sister's lover, had been condemned to fight a duel to the death with the one person who had ever struck sparks from him. It was enough to make one believe in the gods, peculiarly malicious gods with a vicious sense of humour.

There had to be a way to stop it. There had to be. And he would find it. Orville grimaced wryly. Things could be worse, he thought. He could be crippled, and stupid.

"Mac," Roxanna said. "Why did we come to Honshos, to the abbey? What are we doing here?"

Mac twisted round to look at her.

"What's that all about?" he asked. "Why do you suddenly ask that?"

"I just don't know what we're doing here. You don't want to be a farmer, do you? And that's about all there is."

"I don't know what I want to be," Mac said slowly. "I want a chance to find out, for myself. I don't want to be told. I know I don't want to be chairman of Galiconia. What do you want to be?"

"With you."

"That's no answer."

"I dance," Roxanna said.

"But that's just..."

"It's not *just* anything."

Mac smiled. "Warning, minefield," he said, and then: "You know why we came here. To hide."

"And then what?" Roxanna said. "That's what I'm asking."

"And then, my father finds us again, or his man does, which is the same thing. And then I have a date with some mortal combat." He paused. "The future seems a long way away, Anna."

She reached for him and buried her head in his chest. She was weeping.

"I'm sorry," he said, his fingers deep in her hair. "I didn't mean to... bring it all up."

"Your father could stop this," Anna whispered. "The duel."

"My father is a tyrant," Mac said. "Galiconia is a tyranny..."

"You could be different," she said and he could feel her sudden tensing. Mac sighed and she sat up, urgent, seizing his hands.

"No," he said.

"You'd rather die..."

"I'm not going to die..."

"Then you're going to have to kill Morgana-Li," Roxanna said coldly. Her tears had gone. "If you don't kill her, they'll execute you. And I couldn't bear that. It's her or me, Mac. Her or me. That's your choice." She pulled away and in that instant they found themselves on the opposite sides of that unbridgeable chasm every couple sooner or later comes to and somehow must learn to cross again if they would stay together.

Mac was stunned by the suddenness of it all. For so long they had been so close, indivisible, staunch in the face of everything that the cluster had been able to throw at

them. Now here they were, seemingly marooned at opposite ends of the universe. Roxanna watched him, her heart breaking but determined not to weaken.

Slowly, Mac's face hardened.

"I know how I would feel if our positions were reversed," he said. "I know how I felt when you went with the Krus. And how I felt afterwards. But you can't ask me this."

"I can't ask you to save your own life... my life?"

"You can't ask me to accept my father and everything he stands for. And that's what it would be if I ask him for help."

"You're exaggerating," Roxanna said. "If you ask him for help it doesn't mean you have to do what he wants."

"Of course, it does," Mac said. "I don't know him. He doesn't know me. If I use him, then he uses me. That would be the contract."

"You don't have to keep it," Roxanna said. It was a mistake and she knew the moment she said the words that they were fatal.

"Then what would be the point in bothering to save my life," Mac said very quietly. He got up and walked to the door.

"I'll go sleep in that other room," he said. "I'm sorry. Good night."

Roxanna sat, frozen, but her mind was racing.

Morgana-Li paused outside the door. She was never sure of late which woman she would encounter, her name-mother or the Shoga. The peremptory nature of the summons was a fair indication and she braced herself. Li-Morgana was waiting for her, standing by the katana-kake, the stand mounting the daisho – the katana and the wakazashi – ceremonially passed from Shoga to Shoga. The weapons were now so ancient that they were never used for fear the metal of the blades had become crystalline and would shatter. The sayas, lovingly polished for thousands of years, glowed with a radiance that was almost luminous. Morgana-Li felt her muscles tighten. Shoga it would be.

Li-Morgana put aside her concern over the Gadai ship that had just landed at the garrison and surveyed her daughter for a long moment. Morgana-Li was everything a name-mother could ask. Tall, strong, lithely made, the flier of her generation and the sword mistress, too. Li-Morgana understood her daughter's anger at life and was thankful that she had such fire in her belly, fire that would temper and harden the woman she would needs become. If she survived. And that was the price of being a warrior. Death must be chanced freely and without fear. If it came, it must be accepted with stoic gratitude that one was being spared the shames and humiliations of ageing.

Wright's accusations had struck deep at Li-Morgana. Since the ruination there had been little enough fighting, the odd challenge, the odd raid on one of the out-lying farms to be punished, the odd war between outlander clans to be settled. In general, however,

Honshos, with its cities destroyed and its towns reduced to hamlets, was so sparsely populated that there was small reason for conflict. The Samura, reduced as they were to a sometime police force, had grown soft. Under the guise of rebuilding their holdings, their strength, they had fallen into the way of comfort, security, longevity. They were, indeed, corrupt. They had forgotten how to die. And their officers had forgotten how to order others to die.

"Hatamoto," Li-Morgana said. "You are to receive a mark of distinction. You are to be permitted to defend your honour yourself. You will fight the rapist in trial by mortal combat."

Morgana-Li's eyes widened. She was already standing rigidly to attention but somehow managed to give the impression of stiffening further.

"Yes sir," she said, and then again, more strongly. "Yes sir."

"Questions?"

"Will he have a glove, sir?"

"He will. But he knows nothing of the sword, so the balance is even."

Morgana-Li trembled and fought to stop it showing. The balance was nothing like even. Despite all his coaching, she could not begin to compete with Mac in the air, not in anger, and you didn't have to be much of a swordsman to stick a blade in some one's unprotected back, unprotected because your opponent could more or less expose it at will.

Her mother, her name-mother – and suddenly the distinction seemed truly significant – was sentencing her to die. Morgana-Li bit her lip as hard as she could. The pain helped.

With an unreadable look in her eyes, the Shoga half-raised an arm, then dropped it.

"Dismissed," she said and turned away.

Morgana-Li managed some sort of salute to her name-mother's back and got herself out the door without falling, but she had to lean against the wall of the corridor outside for a long time before she was able to move.

Chapter Seven

The agger, a regulation overt troop-carrier with minimal stealth cloaking, trundled along through the night, staying low to the darkened landscape in an effort to slide below the horizons of whatever detection fields might be out there. Slade commandeered the co-pilot's seat and dozed uncomfortably. He sub-consciously noted the change of watch as the pilot was relieved but came fully awake an hour or so later when the whine of the fan jet developed an ominous knocking. The co-pilot's inquiring face turned towards him was intensely irritating. It was an engine, damnit. How would he know what was wrong with it? The pilot came forward and stood uncomfortably stooped in the cramped cockpit

"Well," Slade demanded.

"I don't know, sir," the pilot said unhappily. "It might be nothing."

He was proved instantly and hopelessly wrong. There was a rumble, a bang and a graunching noise. The engine stopped and the agger trickled to a halt, dead in the air.

Slade wanted to scream with frustration at these bumbling, idiot, fools who couldn't even keep their equipment properly serviced. Instead, he spoke with an icy precision which, on balance, they found even more scarifying.

"Find a place to land," he said. The co-pilot thankfully released the position of greatest danger and, changing places with the pilot, put himself through a series of damaging contortions in an effort not so much as to breath on this terrifying general who probably enjoyed to rip people's guts out with that hook of his.

The pilot surveyed his screen with increasing desperation.

"The only possible place is over there, sir," he said, indicating a clearing in the forest on the display. His unhappiness had progressed rapidly to wretchedness. "But it's at least half a click, sir. And we can't move."

"Do you have a flighter on board?" Slade demanded, each word an iceberg fit to sink one of those ancient, maritime ships.

"Yes sir," the pilot said.

"Then tell him to get out and push," Slade roared, finally cracking.

An hour later they were down, the damage assessed as terminal, at least for this trip, and the garrison's two remaining aggers had been summoned, one to tow the derelict home, the second to continue on with Slade. Slade himself, in lieu of going mad, had been forced to see the funny side, the putative head of the GDF being physically pushed to a landing by a flighter of so little ability that twice he went spearing off into the darkness necessitating the flood lights being turned on for him to find his way back. But funny or not, Slade had no intention of reporting in to the Palwallum. Let her sweat, he thought savagely.

Morgana-Li found next morning that as the designated combatant she had been excused all duty. It was scarcely a kindness. The night had been long and desperate and what she really wanted to do was to find Roxanna, or Orville, and somehow to be comforted. It seemed to her that her own people, her own name-mother, had turned on her, that through no fault of her own she was to become twice a victim. But, of course, she could not go to the aliens any more than she could go to her mother. She was absolutely alone. And frightened.

In desperation she made her way to the training hall, people averting their eyes as she passed. She found a corner to herself, stripped down to a fighting tunic and began to warm up with a shinai, watching herself in the wall mirror. She felt clumsy and unfocused, and the harder she tried, the worse it seemed she became. Others stopped to watch her. At first there was silence but then the inevitable whispered comments grew into a buzz of conversation. Words, phrases, flew at her, spearing through her brain.

"...slow..."

"...not trying..."

"...look at that..."

"...doesn't want..."

"...liked it..."

"...she won't..."

"...he won't either..."

"...excuse..."

A single voice demanded her attention.

"Don't wield the weapon, you are the weapon."

Morgana-Li dropped back to the floor and bowed.

"Sensei," she said.

It was the essence of fighting with glove and blade. An aerial sword fight introduced so many more possible moves that blade, arm and body had to become one both in attack and defence.

The sword-mistress-at-arms bowed to Morgana-Li and allowed a hint of warmth to show on her face. The girl was one of the best students she had ever had, but it was always difficult to face your first duel to the death and no one could tell how the tyro would behave until she was there, standing in the puddled blood of her opponent, holding the head aloft. And these others, they knew nothing with their gossip and their insinuations. They had no idea.

"You fear your foe?" Li-Alana inquired.

Morgana-Li said nothing.

"You should," Li-Alana said. "Only a fool does not fear the katana. Whoever holds it, holds the power to take your head. Strength is to overcome the fear."

"Yes, sensei."

"You have heard this many times before, and yet you still doubt. I have heard the boy is a master in the air."

"Yes, sensei."

"But knows nothing of the sword?"

"No, sensei."

"So. Fight him on the ground."

Li-Alana turned to go and Morgana-Li bowed deeply, deeply enough to hide her gratitude.

She turned back to the mirror and found that she was again someone she knew. The spectators noted her new poise. The speculation ceased and with it her own doubts. She was who she was. What had happened had happened. The price must be paid.

She stayed there for the rest of the day alternately working and resting, blessedly freed from the treadmill of her mind. She hoped to make herself sufficiently fatigued that if the night to come was to be her last, then she would spend it asleep.

The decision was inevitable but extraordinarily difficult to accept, to come to terms with.

Alone in the cabin she had shared so joyously with Mac, Roxanna wrestled with the tangle of writhing emotions that had so cruelly come to haunt her. The worst was the loneliness, the instant crushing loneliness that had fallen down upon her like a mountain as Mac walked out. She never could have believed how desolate it would make her feel. It was a foretaste, a most powerful foretaste, of what was to come if he died, and indeed it could not be borne. But to save him she would have to lose him, and that could not be borne any more than the other. In the end it came down to choice of which hell she must face for the rest of her life. In the end there was no choice at all.

Mac, tired and dispirited, slept deeply and woke to find Roxanna sitting across from him. The sight of her hit him like a blast from a plasma cannon.

They stayed looking at each other for the longest time, each desperate to seize the other but neither able to move.

Roxanna spoke finally, her voice held flat, unemotional.

"I wanted to make sure," she said.

"Sure of what?" Mac said. His voice, too, was expressionless.

"That you hadn't changed your mind."

"About my father? No," Mac said.

Roxanna rose and left, her face graven.

She found Orville in the generator room, deep beneath the falls, where the noise pounded as hard as the water. He looked at her wordlessly and then pointed to a small control room. When he shut the door they could at least hear each other.

Orville looked terrible but then undoubtedly so did she, she realised.

"What?" Orville shouted. It was still an effort to make oneself heard.

Roxanna put her mouth close to his ear.

"We have to tell the Chairman," she said. "He's the only one who can stop this, if he's close enough to get here in time. And I think he is."

"Why?" Orville said. "Why do you think that?"

"Tranter had to come from somewhere."

"But it doesn't mean the Chairman's there."

"Call it a hunch," Roxanna said, and then: "It's a chance. Otherwise Mac dies. Or Morgana-Li dies."

Orville stared at her.

"If he fights," he said. "Are you sure he will?"

"Don't be stupid," Roxanna snarled. "He either fights or they execute him out of hand. Of course he must fight. And he knows it, otherwise we wouldn't be having this stupid row about calling his father."

"So Mac doesn't know? He doesn't know you're doing this?"

"No," Roxanna said. "And he mustn't know or he'll try to stop us."

"You know he'll hate you? He'll hate you forever. You can't do it, Rox."

"I have to."

"You can't go behind his back like this."

"I can and I will," Roxanna said. "I won't watch him kill Morgana-Li. I won't watch him die."

Orville looked deeply troubled. He too had thought of this solution, but had rejected it and had determined to find another. So far, if such existed it had eluded him and time was running out, time was all but gone. Suddenly he felt not only crippled but stupid as well.

"And you want me to help?"

"You have to. I can't do it myself."

"I don't think I can."

"You want Mac to die? Or Morgana-Li?"

"I can't go behind Mac's back like that."

"Orville," Roxanna said. "If you don't, I will hate you. I will never forgive you. If I can do it, you can do it."

She stepped back and held his gaze.

"I mean it," she said, again bending close to his ear. "I will hate you till the day I die."

"When?" he said, capitulating.

"Now."

As they expected, the flight deck of the James Macgilliguddy was deserted. Orville closed the hatch and then flicked a switch, locking it.

"We should tell Father," he said.

"No," Roxanna said. "He might try to stop us. He might tell Mac. And if he decided to do neither then it doesn't matter whether he knows or not."

"But he knows the Chairman."

"The Chairman will remember us."

"He won't. You flatter yourself."

"Then we'll introduce ourselves," Roxanna snapped. "What's the problem?"

"You know what the problem is. Mac's my friend."

"Mac is my heart," Roxanna said. "And I will not let him die without trying to save him."

"It might be Morgana-Li..."

"And that's better? For you? Just make the call," Roxanna said. "Before someone comes."

"That's another problem," Orville said.

"What?"

"It will have to be open until he lets us block it and who knows who will be listening."

"Orville, I don't care. Make the call."

He shrugged angrily and then busied himself at the communications module. Not knowing where or in what the Chairman might be, he had two choices. He could route through RCentral using Mac's name in the hope that they wouldn't be thwarted by some officious underling or he could gamble and try a direct approach to the The-All-Sun-And-The-All-Moon.

"What do you think?" he asked Roxanna.

"The ship," Roxanna said. "I'm sure he's on the ship."

"How do you know?"

"I don't. Come on Orville." Again Orville shrugged angrily, wondering when it was exactly that his sister had turned into a termagant, a termagant who would take upon herself decisions that frightened him, who would follow her own dangerous course without consulting their father, lest he interfere. Poor Mac, he thought, having to cope

with that for the rest of his life, and then he remembered that whatever happened Roxanna would lose him. He suddenly realised the depth of the sacrifice his sister was prepared to make and argued no more. He wondered for a moment what it might be like to have someone to love him so much.

The pilot of The-All-Sun-And-The-All-Moon took their call without hesitation and a moment later the Chairman was on their screen as though he had been waiting, which indeed he had, but not for them. He was becoming increasingly concerned at Tranter's disappearance and to give him his due, not least for the man himself.

Roxanna moved forward into the Chairman's view. He looked much thinner and rather older than she remembered.

"Do you remember me, sir?" she asked.

"I do," he said.

"Then would you mind if we put in the blocks?"

The Chairman nodded and Orville made the adjustments.

"Now," the Chairman said. "What is this about?"

"Mac, your son, is still with us," Roxanna said. "Tomorrow morning he must fight in a trial by mortal combat. He must fight with swords, sir. He is not a swordsman and the woman he faces is an expert."

"I see," the Chairman said slowly. "And what do you expect me to do?"

"To care would be a start," Roxanna barked. The Chairman visibly recoiled.

"Young lady, nobody..."

"...Speaks to you like that?" Roxanna paused. She seemed to have burned her bridges one way or another with most of the people she knew. There was no reason not to set fire to this one, too.

"As a father you are a disgrace," she said hotly. "Your son, your last and only heir, would rather die than ask for your help. He would rather die. Do you understand? You should die of shame. I would if a child of mine thought that of me." Orville winced and hoped that he was not visible on the Chairman's screen. There was a long silence.

"I take the point," the Chairman said at last.

"Do you?" Roxanna demanded.

"Yes," he said. "Let's not labour it. You said tomorrow morning? And you are where?"

"Honshos. Ten o'clock eastern hemisphere time. New Centre Abbey."

"Excuse me," the Chairman said and disappeared. He reappeared after a lengthy delay.

"It is possible, just possible, that we might get there. We will try."

"Thank you, sir," Roxanna said.

"Where is Tranter? Do you know?"

"He's here. In the cells."

"I see," the Chairman said. "And that is how you knew I would be in reach?"

"I guessed," Roxanna said.

"Well you should know this," he said. "It is highly likely, almost certain, that General Slade is also on his way to the abbey." Roxanna paled but said nothing.

"Tell me," the Chairman went on after a moment. "Why didn't Mac come to me himself?"

Roxanna hesitated.

"He hates Galiconia," Roxanna said. "He hates what it does to people. He doesn't want anything to do with Galiconia or with you. He thinks that if he asked you for help you would hold him to his... heritage."

There was another long pause.

"In that last he is probably correct," the Chairman said. "But not the rest. Tell him this for me. The success of government is measured by the sum total of suffering avoided, not by the suffering that must be inflicted."

"Tell him yourself, sir."

"I would relish the opportunity. And you speak the truth when you tell me I should be ashamed." The Chairman paused and then rather more wistfully than he intended, he said: "Does he know how fortunate he is to have found you?" Abruptly, the connection was broken.

Orville felt limp. He turned to Roxanna, wiping mock sweat from his brow, stared and then opened his arms. Tears were pouring down her face.

"It will be all right," he said as he hugged her. "He'll be safe now." But he knew how hollow his words must sound.

The Chairman waited only to make one more hypercom call before ordering instant departure for Honshos. The call was to the special unit he had had the forethought to put in place on leaving Theta Tauri Minor, the unit he was quite sure the Palwallum knew nothing about.

The Palwallum, herself, was furious. First, Slade had failed to sched in and she had had to find out from the garrison about the stupidity with the aggers, and now this tantalising fragment on the open hypercom. Some girl had brazenly accosted the Chairman and he had agreed to take the call. Bizarre. It must mean something, but what?

At last Slade consented to come to the hypercom, unshaven and uncooperative. The Palwallum made a mental note to address the matter of his discipline, which of late had been quite unsatisfactory. Slade listened.

"It could have been the boy's cousin," he said.

"Why would she be talking to the Chairman?"

"I have no idea."

"You are not paid not to have ideas," the Palwallum snapped.

"Madame, at the moment at your behest I am stuck in this filthy jungle with a bunch of incompetent idiots, being eaten alive by the gods know what poisonous insects. When I say I have no idea, I have no idea."

"Well, if you don't like the insects, you'd better get to the abbey," the Palwallum snapped and broke the connection. But she was not as displeased as she sounded. The situation was coming to a head, she could feel it.

Wright found Mac in one of the abandoned chambers, sitting with his legs dangling over space. There was a guard outside the entrance, but otherwise the Samura were content to leave the boy to his solitude. Without his glove he had no possible means of escape, except by the door. Wright nodded to the sentry and went in. The chamber was big enough that they could talk without being overheard, but Wright drew the line at sitting on the edge of the precipice. He chose a less uncomfortable-looking bit of floor and sat nearby, leaning his back against the charred wall.

"Good morning," he said. "No. It's afternoon already." At first he thought Mac would refuse to respond, but finally he spoke.

"Hi," he said glumly.

"It's time we talked about your father," Wright said. "What he is. What he does. And why."

"I'm not asking him for help," Mac said. "Did Roxanna send you?"

"Oh. So that's what all the upset's about."

Mac said nothing.

"It's time you understood the Chairman," Wright said.

"I do," Mac said grudgingly. "I've learned a lot this past year."

"Yes, you have. An astonishing amount. But you still don't understand."

"What?"

"Politics is people, Mac," Wright said, after a moment. "And there is never a tidy resolution when people are involved, particularly when they're thinking for themselves. Freedom is a luxury humanity cannot afford."

"So we're just ants?"

"No. What we have is a balance of competing forces. The Chairman and his monopoly on the one hand, and on the other the Gadai. What do you replace this with if you tear it down?"

"Anything. Anarchy would be better," Mac said.

"I beg to differ. I thought you saw that on Cram. No. The cluster had anarchy and eventually we evolved this form of governance and it has survived the long haul."

"That doesn't make it good. It doesn't make it right."

"Mac," Wright said. "Listen to me. The great majority of people throughout the cluster want only simple things: to live in peace and reasonable prosperity, to raise their children and enjoy their grand-children, to be able to die with dignity. They don't care who rules them as long as it's done reasonably well. You would condemn them to return to anarchy?"

"There could be democracy. There was democracy. You taught me that."

"And I thought I taught you that democracy was an historical aberration, dictatorship by the greater number of fools. It has been tried a number of times and each time it failed disastrously. Think about it, Mac. How can democracy work except in the very short term? The majority dictates to the minority which sooner or later rebels. And again, you have anarchy."

"But the oligarchies always led to anarchy, too. You've shown me that. Revolution after revolution."

"Until Galiconia," Wright said. "Because of the power of the thormalium monopoly, it has survived for two and a half thousand years and with the Gadai as the necessary counter-weight there is no reason it shouldn't go on indefinitely. Economic dictatorship wielded with a modicum of wisdom requires minimum use of force and oppression. It is the most efficient and, believe it or not, the fairest system of government we have ever managed to develop. And that's what you come from, Mac. And that's where you should go."

"No," Mac said.

"People are not perfectible. It was too hard for the Thrones. They gave up and went away and fortunately for the majority of people in the cluster, Galiconia came along. Even the Thrones had to acknowledge in the end that the idea people can govern themselves is just laughable."

"But they should be allowed to try," Mac said, stubbornly.

"At what cost?" Wright asked quietly.

Mac stopped. He had been about to say: at any cost. But was that true? Was that really what he thought. Was freedom really so desirable? And freedom from what? Oppression? Life was oppressive.

But deep down in his gut there was still an unshakeable conviction.

"Everything you say may be true," he said quietly, holding Wright's eyes. "Probably is true, I don't know. Maybe economic dictatorship is best, I don't know. But I do know this. I can't do it. I could not be the dictator. I will not be the dictator. And accordingly, I will not ask my father for help."

And still Wright would not surrender.

"Do you know the one thing that makes you truly fit for the job?" he asked. "The fact that you are so adamantly opposed to seeking it. Along with everything else, everything you are, everything you've learned, everything you will be, it makes you uniquely qualified."

"No," Mac said.

Wright rose and stood looking down at the young man who had become as dear to him as his own son. He felt pierced by a sense of unbearable loss.

"What else will you do, what else could you do that would mean anything besides this?"

"No," Mac said. And that moment he came to his decision.

The long day dragged on into the evening, with people keeping to themselves. There seemed nothing to say that had not already been said. It was a time of waiting, one of those moments of truth when people are forced to accept that there is no disguising the fact that we are all alone and that there can only ever be temporary escape from this, the most essential human condition. Only Shelby and John were still able to find solace in each other's company.

Orville tried to work but kept lapsing into brooding gloom. Although they had summoned the Chairman in the belief that only he could help, still Orville could not accept that Morgana-Li was wilfully lying. And if she wasn't lying then perhaps there might be some way of helping her to see the truth and to stop this whole, dreadful business now. Roxanna had said it would be a waste of time and not to bother, but how could he not at least try?

The training hall had emptied long since but still Morgana-Li stayed. She was worn out from whipping herself to a frenzy but the smell of old sweat and old fear was somehow comforting and she lingered on, seated cross-legged on a mat and meditating. She was shocked to her core when something made her turn her head to see a floater gliding towards her.

"A guard told me where you might be," Orville said.

"What are you doing here?" Morgana-Li demanded. "You have no right to be here. Go away. I'm leaving."

"I want to talk to you," Orville said.

"I don't care what you want," Morgana-Li snapped, her temper rising.

"Yes you do," Orville said. "I think you do." Morgana-Li had jumped to her feet and stood facing him, breathing heavily. She had the sheathed katana in her hand and there was no doubt who held the physical cards.

"Mac didn't do it," he said. "And I think you know he didn't do it."

"I know nothing of the sort," she said. "He tried to rape me."

"You were all wet, weren't you? Soaked? All your clothes?"

"I... how did you know that?"

"Mac told us."

"It means nothing," she said.

"But how did you get so wet? What we're you doing?"

"We... we were flying," Morgana-Li said. She stepped back and half turned away. "I'm going," she said.

"Why?" Orville said.

"I don't want to talk any more."

"Because you're frightened of what you might remember?"

"I don't remember anything," Morgana-Li said. "Except waking up with him on top of me, touching me."

"But why were you so wet?" Orville persisted.

"I don't know," Morgana-Li said defiantly.

"What happened when you were flying? Were you angry? You seemed very angry when I gave you the bracelet? Did that make you angry?"

"No," Morgana-Li said. "I..."

"What?"

"How dare you interrogate me?" she flared.

"Did the bracelet make you angry?"

"No. I said, no." And then, as though suddenly forced out of her, she added in a low voice: "I love the bracelet." Orville felt a thrill of satisfaction but determinedly set it aside.

"So why were you angry?"

"I just was," Morgana-Li said. "Something had happened."

"And you were taking it out on Mac, in the air?"

"I... I suppose so."

"You and he nearly crashed, didn't you?" Morgana-Li nodded reluctantly. "And you hit the water and blacked out?"

Morgana-Li nodded again. Orville paused and studied her face. She really was amazingly beautiful, even with the scowl.

"Who do you think pulled you out of the water?" Orville asked. Morgana-Li said nothing. "Who do you think got you breathing again?" Again, Morgana-Li said nothing. Orville waited. At last she spoke, a strain of desperation threaded through her voice.

"He was on top of me," she insisted. "He had torn my clothes off. He was touching me."

"He was saving your life," Orville said.

She looked at him for a moment, her face ashen, and then ran for the door. Orville was too quick for her and blocked her passage.

"Leave me alone," she shouted. "I promised your sister not to speak to you or see you. Leave me alone." Shocked in his turn, Orville didn't react when she darted for the door again and disappeared.

He was still sitting there when she returned some minutes later.

"I suppose Roxanna hates me?" she said tentatively.

"I don't know about hate," Orville said. "She'd be a lot happier with you if you told the truth."

"I am telling the truth," Morgana-Li said quietly. "And however clever you are, you can't change that." Orville looked at her hard but she held his gaze steadily. In the end he was forced to accept that indeed she believed what she said. She turned to leave again.

"Wait," he said. "Why did Roxanna make you promise to stay away from me?"

"Because she knows I like you too much," Morgana-Li said softly. "And it's not allowed. Not here. It's dangerous. Tell her I'm sorry for what happened, but the truth is the truth."

It was just on dark when the agger set down and Slade climbed out, followed by the sergeant in charge of the squad. As ordered, the agger immediately lifted up and departed the way it had come, back down the river to stand by, hidden at a safe distance.

During the wait for the replacement transport to arrive, Slade had found that the sergeant, Eldo, unlike evidently everyone else at the garrison, had been sentenced to Honshos not for stupidity but for incorrigible criminality of a minor nature. He actually had some useful information to offer during the long wait. The Samura, according to him, were a bunch of raving female fanatics with all sorts of weird notions about honour. They called themselves warriors, were all accomplished fliers and hated men. Preferred weapon, those ancient sword things that would cut straight through body armour like butter. He had heard that the swords were forged from thousands of laminations of maxalloy and that it could take up to 15 years to make one weapon by the time they had finished all the chemical treatments they put the raw blade through to make the edge indestructible.

Slade had asked him about life-sign monitoring but Eldo seemed to think that while the Samura had most of the standard detection fields, life-sign technology was still beyond them. Slade hoped so, or that if the two of them did register that the Samura would think they were deer or whatever passed for such here. The thought of deer led naturally to the question of predators. Slade was about to put that to Eldo, but thought better of it. Whatever he might say, silence was undoubtedly their best protection.

The two men slogged on through the night, following the right-hand river bank. Slade was no field man and was quickly unnerved by the natural noises of the forest. He wondered, too, about Samura patrols. Fortunately, none of the three local moons were in phase. Unfortunately, this meant they must stumble along by starlight. At one point, Eldo silently drew him into the deep shadow beneath a tree and pointed at the sky. Slade saw a number of large shapes passing silently overhead and felt his heart race. At another point they found their way blocked by a noisy tributary and had to divert far inland before they could find a place to ford. They then saw the dim masses of some sort of buildings and had to divert even further.

Later, Slade called a rest break. He was thoroughly sick of the whole miserable business, Eldo, however, seemed quite at ease. He might be worth rescuing, Slade thought to himself. Criminality had its uses along with general military expertise and a good man in a pinch was a good man.

The escarpment began to loom before them in the starlight. Not before time, Slade thought. He was very tired and Eldo no longer seemed quite so insouciant as he had been. But though they could see the escarpment looming in the distance, they still had far to go. Another patrol passed overhead, higher, further off and less of a threat. Slade called another rest break. It was mistake. He found it almost impossible to get moving again. His feet were blistered and his level of general pain medium intense. His calf muscles, in particular, were screaming like cattle in a slaughterhouse.

At last the escarpment was blotting out most of the eastern sky and Slade felt they must be getting close. A strange sensation began to force itself on his awareness and it took a long time for the realisation to penetrate his fatigue that it was noise, increasing noise, the noise of the falls. Thank the gods. The need now was to find somewhere safe to lie up, to watch, to see what might be seen. Still they stumbled on. The noise from the falls was louder now. Eldo, in the lead, suddenly reared back and fell to the ground. He crawled forward and Slade followed suit. They had come to what seemed a ravine, some sort of vertical drop anyway. They had been forced by the forest some little way in from the bank and they followed the rim of whatever it was back towards the river. The ground flattened out gradually and they came round what seemed to be a corner. In the faint starlight they could make out what appeared to be some sort of amphitheatre, floored and terraced in fused stone.

They crept around the inside, keeping to the shadow of the terraces. About the mid-point, they came to what appeared to be a number of cells, their doors open. Then they came to the entrance to a tunnel, and then more empty cells.

Slade grabbed Eldo by the arm and hissed in his ear, though by this time the noise of the falls was such that he could have spoken normally with little danger.

"We can stop here," he said. "In one of these cells. They haven't been used for years."

"How do you know?" Eldo said, and then offered a belated: "Sir." A moment later, he said: "It's too dangerous. Sir."

"More dangerous out in the open," Slade said.

"With respect, sir, the general is wrong. Sir."

"That's an order, sergeant." And the fact of the matter was, Slade was forced to admit to himself that he couldn't have gone on even had he wanted to. He chose the cell furthest away from the tunnel mouth and motioned the sergeant inside. They pulled the door almost closed. It was solid with only a small barred aperture.

"Take the first watch," Slade ordered and collapsed on the floor. Eldo regarded him with contempt and then took up a position by the door, seated with his back to the wall and his blaster across his knees. Why would you ever bother to feed an officer, he thought to himself, let alone a gods-poxed general.

Chapter Eight

Slade woke in a mind-numbing panic. The light in the cell was dim but from the crack in the door he could tell that it must be full daylight outside, that the morning was already well advanced. Eldo was fast asleep. He must have dropped off not long after being detailed to watch, never to stir. The noise from the falls seemed less in the daylight and to have changed significantly. There was a rumour running over the top of it that sounded almost like...

Slade crept to door and cautiously peered through the crack. He nearly died on the spot. All he could see were people. Hundreds of them, thousands of them, all women, all dressed alike in archaic robe things, pouring past the door, many with swords. They must be coming from the tunnel mouth and climbing up into the stands above him. He eased back from the door and put his hand over Eldo's mouth. It crossed his mind that it would be better just to cut his damn throat but he didn't. He might need him. Eldo's eyes came open and Slade kept his hand over the dratted man's mouth until he saw that Eldo understood. If they ever got out of this alive, he promised himself that Eldo would have a lot more to worry about than a lazy exile on Honshos. Slade cringed back against the wall and tried not to think. All they could do was to wait it out.

Li-Morgana gave the crowd time to settle before leading the official procession from the abbey down into the tunnel. They finally emerged into bright sunshine after what seemed like hours to Roxanna. It took time for her eyes to adjust but gradually she found she was looking across a paved courtyard to the river. Behind them what had once been a natural hollow was now a formal amphitheatre, rising in tiered terraces, its wings gradually curving down until they met the river bank. The seats, she could see, were filled with thousands of Samura, acolytes and attendants. It seemed every soul in the abbey had come out to witness the event.

Roxana and the others were ushered to one side and a guard posted ostentatiously around them. She had not seen Mac since the day before and could see no sign of him now. It felt like she had a hole in her heart but she had held firm to her determination to stay right away from him. She knew she would have been unable to conceal the fact that she had summoned his father. She had also thought to go to Morgana-Li but doubted she would be able to keep her temper in check, or that it would make any difference if she did. Orville had tried anyway, as she had known he would, and had duly reported failure. Roxanna had never believed there was any possibility that Morgana-Li could be induced to retract. It had all gone too far, much too far. But one way or another, everything that could be done had been done and it remained now only to watch.

Choosing her moment, Li-Morgana paced forward from the group of senior Samura and stood isolated in the middle of the killing ground, for killing ground it was. It had

been used from time immemorial for Samura challenges and ritual executions. She raised her arms and serried ranks behind her fell silent, leaving only the distant rumble of the falls. She turned to face her people. A moment later, Mac and Morgana-Li strode from the tunnel. They were each followed by a sword bearer and then a tight squad of Samura guards. Mac was dressed in his normal jerkin. Morgana-Li was cloaked in an elaborate robe.

Roxanna saw Mac searching for her and when he finally found her, their eyes locked. It was a look that said everything, and nothing. She trembled a little and her father put a firm hand under her elbow. She was grateful. Morgana-Li looked steadily ahead the whole time. They came to a halt before the Shoga.

Li-Morgana had a squalker-talker attached to her throat and her words carried effortlessly throughout the whole of the amphitheatre.

"You are summoned," she said with the cadence of a preacher, "to witness trial by mortal combat between Hasdrubal Albright, accused rapist, and Morgana-Li, name-daughter, soldier and defender of the Samura. The truth of the charge will be put to the blade. The verdict will rest in the blade. The sentence will flow from the blade. On pain of death let no person intervene. Let the judgment of this court proceed."

The two sword bearers paced forward turned in unison and knelt before the two combatants, their arms extended and raised, each sword-bearer with a katana in its saya resting across her palms.

"Morgana-Li," the Shoga commanded. Morgana-Li stepped forward and rested her hand palm down on the middle of the proffered sword. Her face was solemn. It was what she had been preparing for all her life. So often she had been told of the clear, calm tranquillity between the moment of life and the instant of death, and here it was. Gone were all the doubts, the questions, the anxieties. All that remained was serenity, born of the certainty that in the sword lay the truth of one's soul. She smiled at her mother, a lovely smile.

"Swear after me," the Shoga said. "I attest the truth of my case and will defend it to the death. I will accept without fear or dispute the judgment of the sword."

Morgana-Li repeated the words. Both she and Mac had also been fitted with squalker-talkers, and the oath rang clear to the thousands of spectators.

"Albright," Li-Morgana said. "Place your hand on the sword," and she waited for Mac, too, to step forward.

Instead he crossed his arms and stood firm where he was.

"Swig's twaddle," he said. "Spare me the the mumbo-jumbo." A shocked gasp raced around the amphitheatre. His words, bored rather than defiant, rang equally clearly.

Wright, Orville, Shelby and John instinctively looked to each other and on all their faces was the same expression: that's our boy. Roxanna hugged herself and stared at the ground. Oh Mac, she thought. Oh my darling.

It took time for Li-Morgana to recover. Several of her senior officers started forward but after a moment, she motioned them back.

"You will take the oath," she said.

"Why?" Mac demanded. His voice was less than polite. "I will not fight. I have done nothing of which I am ashamed. I have committed no crime, here or anywhere. I have nothing I need to defend, or choose to defend." He turned to Morgana-Li who was staring at him fixedly.

"I did what I did to save your life," he told her and the thousands watching. "In retrospect, from my point of view, that was clearly a mistake, but it was not a crime. I did not rape you or attempt to rape you. I pulled you from the river and gave you resuscitation. How you and your people choose to interpret that is a matter for your consciences not mine. Back in the day, my name-father, James Macgilliguddy..." There was an unconscious exclamation from many in the assembly as Mac invoked the revered name. Then came an outbreak of whispering as the significance of his words began to penetrate. His name-father..? The boy's name-father was Macgilliguddy...?

Mac was forced to pause for some little time before he could resume.

"...My name-father, James Macgilliguddy," he was able to continue eventually, his voice ringing like a clarion now. "...My name-father accepted summary death in the arena by refusing to fight Morgana of Honshos, a woman. I will not dishonour his memory by fighting you, Morgana-Li of Honshos, a woman." Mac smiled with twisted amusement.

"Besides," he added conversationally. "How wasteful it would be should I happen to kill you, having worked so hard to save you."

Now there was stunned silence. Through the whole of the great amphitheatre, the only sound was the distant pulse from the falls.

At last there was a collective sigh as everyone, simultaneously, remembered the need to breathe.

For the Shoga, the Samura and for Morgana-Li the moral dilemma which had suddenly been presented to them was of epic proportions. They worshipped the man who had defied the Chairman and all Galiconia and who in the arena on Redux and in the face of certain death had refused to fight Morgana, name-mother of Li-Morgana, their present Shoga. How then could they now kill his name-son for refusing to fight Morgana-Li, name-daughter of Li-Morgana, in the amphitheatre of Honshos, whatever the accusation? Especially when in addressing the charge, the young man's words carried the conviction of truth.

Wright as an historian and something of a philosopher thought himself an intelligent man. He had even been present when James had refused to fight Morgana. Yet the possibility that Mac, so young, would rhyme past and present with such mature finesse had never occurred to him. More, the elegance of the position Mac had so ably

constructed simply confirmed Wright's view that the boy had a duty to the cluster. A year ago he would have been amazed at the subtlety of Mac's thinking. Even now after the months of patient tuition and discussion had shown him that Mac had a fine mind well suited to politics and administration, it still came as a surprise. If talent will out, Wright thought ruefully with a nod to Mac's unique abilities as a flier, then so will the genes, the genes of government.

For Roxanna and Orville the same thought struck with horrifying force. They could not have dreamed that Mac would prove more than capable of defending himself, without fighting, without his father's intervention, without help from anyone. They had betrayed him then for nothing.

Slade had watched the drama play out with increasing excitement. At first he had merely been pleased that the problem of the boy as heir was likely to be solved without him lifting a finger. It was plain that one way or another these dreadful women were fixing to kill him. But then the boy had spoken and the mood of the assembly had suddenly become uncertain, and now, it seemed, was leaning to leniency, mercy, forgiveness. Which meant the boy would live. Which meant that perhaps, even now so late in the game, Slade could kidnap him for himself and regain control of the situation, control of the Palwallum, control of the Chairman. Slade unconsciously licked his lips and began to calculate. To get out alive, he would need not only the boy but also the head woman, whatever she might call herself.

The prospects were suddenly altogether too delicious. Speed and decision would be of the essence, and he was just the man for that.

Ever afterwards, Li-Morgana would sometimes wonder what she might have done had fate left her to her own devices, had called on her to find the solution to this preposterous situation. Fate, however, had other ideas. The shock of Mac's speech, a shock as great as any she'd ever known, was followed by the most astonishing event in the annals of the Samura, an event that would mark the beginnings of the Reduction, an event that for all time would be known as The Coming.

Facing the assembled Samura in the stands as she was, the Shoga was the last to understand the dimensions of what was happening behind her.

After Mac's speech there had been a frozen silence that gradually splintered into massed comment and speculation. Li-Morgana, as uncertain as anyone as to what to do, considered taking counsel but just as quickly dismissed the idea as a fatal weakness in such a situation. Whatever was to be done was up to her alone and needed to be done quickly, within the next few seconds. But as she frantically groped for a response that would be both fair and acceptable to her rank and file, never mind her daughter, the roar of conversation surrounding her began rapidly to diminish, until again there was utter silence except for the distant falls. People were pointing and staring back over her head.

Morgana-Li's gaze was fixed on something past her shoulder. The young man abruptly uncrossed his arms and stood with his hands on his hips. Curiously, incredibly, he looked furious.

Li-Morgana swung sharply on her heel and all but screamed. She seemed to be nose to nose with a huge space ship that had silently descended behind her. It was so big it stretched from wing to wing of the amphitheatre and far back across the river to the distant bank. It stopped within metres of the ground and a delicate line of fire speared out from an aperture way above her head and lanced into the empty space between her and the first terrace. There was a small explosion and a crater erupted in the middle of the killing ground. The message was abundantly clear. To reinforce it, a voice boomed from above:

"Nobody move. Hold your positions on pain of death."

Li-Morgana turned back to face the monstrous intruder. Beneath the blank viewing panels of the flight deck, the ship's name suddenly flashed and burned. The-All-Sun-And-The-All-Moon, she read.

A ramp opened in the ship's belly and with the vast craft still floating peacefully just above the ground, touched down. A man's legs appeared, and then the man himself. From a thousand transmissions on the cam, unmistakably it was the Chairman. The crowd broke into another buzz of speculation.

Slade watched the arrival of the Chairman's ship with complete bewilderment that changed rapidly to bowel-squeezing fear. Instantly he abandoned any notion of attempting to kidnap the son on his own account and became concerned only with his own escape. Then as the Chairman himself appeared and began to stroll towards the Shoga, he reconsidered. It suddenly occurred to him that this was likely to be the best gods-sent opportunity he and the Palwallum would ever have to put an end to the von Osmond dynasty once and for all. He fumbled in his breast for his reacom and flipped it open. Eldo watched him with stark horror for a moment and when it became clear that Slade was indeed proposing to speak, he made a lunge for it. Slade rammed the butt of his blaster into the pit of Eldo's stomach with savage satisfaction and watched the man go down, but even with a rictus of pain scarring his face he still had the presence of mind to stay silent. If one were to overlook the initial indiscipline that had made the man try to seize the reacom in the first place, he might still be worth saving.

Slade expanded the screen, punched in the Chancellor's code and waited impatiently. A moment later he was whispering to the officer of the watch, and a moment later to the Palwallum herself.

"Shut up," he whispered with hoarse urgency as she began to berate him for not scheduling in at the appointed times.

"What?" the Palwallum roared. Slade hastily turned down the volume though he calculated that at this precise moment the risks of being heard were as low as they would ever be.

"Shut up and listen," he said. "If you come now, right now, you should catch the Chairman, his son and The-All-Sun-And-The-All-Moon on the ground at the abbey. You can get rid of the whole damn shooting match in one go."

There was silence as the Palwallum absorbed the burthen of his message and then she began to demand detail. Slade answered in angry whispers and then cut her off.

"Someone will hear me," he said. "Just come."

"Don't let them get back on the ship," the Palwallum ordered. "Do you hear me? Don't let them get back on the ship alive. Do you..." Slade cursed under his breath as he broke the connection. How dare she order him on a suicide mission?

The Palwallum also cursed and then ordered immediate lift-off. Anybody not on board was to be left behind and shot later. Her pilot told her that it would take a minimum of 35 to 40 minutes to get to the other side of the planet by the time they climbed through the atmo into orbit and descended again.

"It will take 30 minutes," she told him. "If you still want a job. Twenty minutes will make you a rich man."

"Madame," the Chairman said genially. "I see you have found my errant son for me. I trust he has not been troubling you."

Li-Morgana's mouth opened and closed foolishly, but then she rallied. She was not Shoga for nothing.

"Somewhat," she said. "Regrettably."

"Regrettable indeed," the Chairman said. "You will no doubt be relieved then when I tell you that he will be troubling you no longer."

Li-Morgana bowed.

"And I believe," the Chairman continued in the same genial tone that brooked no argument, particularly with his monstrous ship hanging over his shoulder, "I believe another of my men has been bothering you. Tranter by name. You have him in your cells, Perhaps you'd be good enough to send for him now. I have no wish to detain you all here longer than I must." The Shoga motioned and one of her aides-de-camp broke away at the run and headed up the tunnel.

"So Hasdrubal," the Chairman said, turning to his son. "Or should I say, Mac... That is what everybody calls you?" Mac remained stony-faced and unmoving. "How pleasant to find you here. It's time we met again..." Still Mac made no response. "No? Well, I feel the need for a reunion."

"And if I don't?" Mac said, speaking at last. His voice was openly hostile.

"Well," the Chairman said. "You may stay here by all means, but I'm afraid I'll have to insist that your family come with me. Your family is my family after all, and I hardly know them." The Chairman switched his gaze to Wright.

"Perhaps you'd like to take your people aboard now," he said. "While we're waiting for Tranter. We can send for your things here later. And the ship that you borrowed."

Wright nodded reluctantly and, followed by the others, began to move to the ramp. Roxanna didn't look at Mac as she passed. Her face was white and strained. Mac watched her coldly. And Orville. Their fixed expressions were all the revelation Mac needed.

Another line of fire abruptly sizzled from the nose of the ship and smashed into the far perimeter of the amphitheatre. There was a scream and then cries for assistance.

The Chairman turned to the Shoga.

"I really must insist that your people do not move or try to escape," he said evenly. "Perhaps they would be more inclined to accept the order from you?"

Li-Morgana glared at him for a long moment and then spoke to the crowd, her voice sharp and peremptory. The rustle of movement that had been building subsided again.

They waited, the Chairman patient, Mac angry, Li-Morgana feeling foolish, usurped, the crowd increasingly restive.

Again the Chairman looked at Li-Morgana. Again Li-Morgana was forced to call for calm.

Tranter appeared in the tunnel mouth at last, flanked by two guards, his hands manacled behind him. They saw him glance to his left as though something had caught his attention. Something had, the glint of sunlight on the barrel of a blaster as it poked through a crack in one of the cell doors.

A uniformed officer came running down the ramp from the ship, urgent, strident.

"Sir," he shouted to the Chairman. "A ship on approach, weapons armed and locked."

"How long?" the Chairman said. He had Mac by the elbow and was already moving fast for the ship.

"Minutes, sir," the officer said.

Tranter, craning over his shoulder, saw the barrel lifting. Fatally betrayed by his muteness, unable to shout a warning, he convulsively broke free from his guards and threw himself towards the Chairman.

The officer's reply was lost in the roar of a blaster. The slug of magma passed straight through Tranter, killing him instantly, and taking the Chairman in the chest. He staggered and went down, Mac struggling to break his fall. Then the officer was there.

"Get him on board," the man said. "Hurry." A third person was suddenly with them, helping, and they staggered up the ramp with the injured man, to be surrounded by an anxious crowd.

The Chairman was trying to speak and Mac shouted for everyone to shut up.

"Give Wright the deck," the Chairman gasped. "He's our best chance."

The officer hesitated a second. The ramp was closed and already they could feel the ship rising, but if that's what the Chairman wanted, so be it.

"Come with me," he said. Wright plucked Orville bodily from his floater and with the strength of crisis followed at the run.

Slade cursed silently. He had, despite his better judgment, taken the chance of a shot only to see it spoiled by that traitor, Tranter. The Chairman had gone down but he had no means of knowing how badly hurt he might be. Neither had been wearing armour, so possibly it was mortal. There had been no chance of a second shot either at the Chairman or at the boy, even had he been prepared to take the risk. He had no idea whether he had already been marked.

Eldo was looking at him, appalled. Slade motioned to him to come across with him behind the door and then began to ease it wide open. In a minute or two, if anybody thought to look it would just be another empty cell with the door gaping. Even if someone poked a head in, they might get away with it till dark and then there was the agger waiting for them down river.

There was still hope, Slade thought. Not much, but better than none at all.

It seemed that no one had seen where the shot had come from. An amphitheatre of its essence concentrates the gaze in one direction and everyone it seemed had been watching the officer race from the ship and then the flurry of movement back.

Li-Morgana sent a squad on a perfunctory search of the cells under the first terrace but from the line the shot must have travelled it seemed to her far more likely that the sniper had been up on the rim and even now would be seeking to make his escape through the woods. She had two troops up there already, scouring the forest.

Of far greater concern to her personally was the fact that for some unaccountable reason, Morgana-Li when the shot came had dashed forward and had then helped to carry the Chairman up into his ship. She was up there even now and Li-Morgana was beside herself with worry for her daughter. She could see the contrails high in the upper atmosphere where the unknown invader was diving to the attack.

Wright ensconced on the oh so familiar flight deck, Orville beside him, flung the huge ship into a violent climbing turn, desperate for altitude.

"Incoming," the CAWman shouted, and Wright caught the double blip on his screen closing at about mach five. He timed the impossible rollout, impossible with a ship of this size, to the fraction of a second and the missiles went hurtling past to crash into the ground before their sensors could kick them out of the dive. But the cost of the rollout

which had saved them from the initial salvo was temporary vulnerability. Wright fought to roll back but was just too late. They felt the jar as the blast from the Chancellor's plasma cannon clipped their tail.

"The drive's gone," Wright said with professional calm. "I can't steer. Can't do anything."

"Give her to me," Orville said, equally calmly and Wright, with the look that all fathers at some point are finally forced to accord their sons, nodded. They could see the Chancellor clawing round on their screens and setting up for the death pass.

Orville waited a second longer and then moved his hands rapidly over the controls. The world outside went momentarily black and then there was the Chancellor no longer behind them, but right in front. Orville caressed the cannon trigger and the Chancellor disappeared behind a sheet of flame. An instant later they could see the ship rapidly disappearing, trailing smoke from a blast hole. Without steering, the shot had been slightly off-line, enough so that the Chancellor survived.

There was a long silence and then the flight deck erupted into frenzied cheering and hollering. Crew were hugging each other and pounding each other's backs. From certain death they had been restored to life in the blink of an eye. It was a miracle and the adrenalin had to find an escape valve somehow.

Huckley, the displaced captain of The-All-Sun-And-The-All-Moon forgot his stiff resentment and seized Wright by the hand, wringing it over and over.

"We know of you by reputation, of course," he gushed. "But I never thought to see flying like that rollout. And as for what happened next... what did happen exactly?"

"Orville happened," Wright said. "My son."

They looked to the co-pilot's couch where Orville had sunk back, his eyes closed, an expression of exhaustion on his face.

"Orville," Wright said. "How did you do that?"

Orville's mouth twitched.

"Will they come back?" he asked

"It doesn't look like it," Wright said. "They've had enough. They're ex-atmo already. How did you do that?"

"It's something I've been thinking about," Orville said.

"It's impossible," Wright said. "You know it's impossible. You could have killed us."

"They would have killed us," Orville replied and then: "I know I took a chance, but it worked." He shrugged.

"What worked, exactly?" Huckley asked.

"This maniac..." Wright said and his hand kneading Orville's shoulder robbed the words of all offence. "This maniac hyperated out and then a split second later hyperated

back to exactly the same co-ordinates. The slightest error, and I mean the slightest, and the Chancellor would have smashed straight into us or we would have been trying to materialise inside the planet. It takes the CAW three minutes to make one hyperation calculation. Orville did two in the time it takes you to blink."

The crew were all hanging on his words

"How was that possible?" Wright asked his son. "It's not possible. I know it's not possible."

"I... simplified the equation," Orville said modestly

"You simplified the equation," Wright marvelled. "I don't even begin to understand it, let alone know how to change it."

"And I've been practising," Orville finished. He looked at the screen in front of him. "Now," he said. "Given that we're just floating in mid-air, we probably should do something..."

Huckley took over but not before he had made a deep bow to Orville.

"An honour to serve with you, sir," he said and saluted. He and his crew then joined in a heartfelt round of applause. Wright found he had tears in his eyes. The finest thing a man could experience, he suddenly realised, was to feel his son stand on his shoulders and claim the stars.

The Palwallum couldn't believe it. One second The-All-Sun-And-The-All-Moon was hanging there helpless before them, and the next she had vanished. An instant later, the Chancellor was rocked as a plasma blast hit them somewhere amidships. The fear and the hysteria flooded through her nervous system.

"Get us out," she screamed at her pilot. "Get us out of here. They're shooting at us. They're shooting at us. Get out. Get us out."

The pilot, himself wrestling with mystification at the turn of events, allowed a look of disgust to flit across his face and obeyed. He shoved the controls forward for maximum thrust and maximum lift and two minutes later they were safe in space, the damaged compartment automatically sealed off and the fire extinguished by the lack of the oxygen. Three minutes later they had made their first hyperation and were free of all possible pursuit.

Chapter Nine

In the ship's narthex, they had no sort of warning. They had laid the Chairman on the floor. Someone had shouted for medicals. Wright and Orville had disappeared. The floor tilted as the ship climbed steeply with full lift and full thrust and then they had begun to slide helplessly with the wild gyrations Wright put them through as he dodged the missiles. There was a huge crash from somewhere aft and then everything went still. Instinctively they held their breath as they waited for the killer blow, but it never came. There was the sound of distant cheering and then nothing.

A medical appeared at the run and dropped to his knees beside the Chairman. Mac, who had thrown himself across his father in an attempt to protect him from the worst of the manoeuvres, sat back on his heels. He found himself staring at Morgana-Li. She was still wearing her elaborate mantle, which was now drenched in blood. Mac saw that he too was soaked. Morgana-Li stood and slowly removed the robe, letting it fall. Underneath she wore only the brief fighting tunic she had donned for the duel.

The Chairman's eyes were closed and he appeared to be unconscious. Two orderlies came with a pallet and Mac helped to lift his father on board and watched as it was hurried away. He saw Roxanna looking at him, Roxanna who had betrayed him. Her face was curiously blank, as though disengagement were the only way she could maintain control.

Morgana-Li half made to touch him and then didn't.

"I'm sorry," she said. "He's your father, isn't he?"

"Yes," Mac said. His voice was remote. "Thank you. Thank you for your help." And then as though realising for the first time to whom he was talking, his eyes widened.

"What are you doing here?" he said, focusing. "You shouldn't be here."

"I... I wanted to be," she said.

Mac looked at her narrowly, and then nodded. He understood. Whatever had been between them was now past. He nodded again. If only it could be so easy with Roxanna. Why couldn't it be? She had betrayed him. Because she loved him. But she had betrayed him. Betrayed him to the one thing that he had feared with all his heart ever since he had learned his true parentage.

Roxanna was still looking at him, steadily, blankly, without hope.

How could he live without her? But after this, how could he live with her? Now that the weight of the cluster would descend inexorably upon him and force him into the mould of ruler, until all that remained would be the unremitting wielding of power, minute by minute, hour by hour, day by day, year by year, and the consequent, inevitable erosion of his soul. What had begun as instinctive rejection of the idea of telling anybody what to do had hardened with education into total conviction that there

lay madness. A madness to which he had now been condemned by the heart of his heart. A madness which would destroy her, too, if he allowed her to stay with him.

He had to live without her. She had sacrificed, as she thought, to save his life. He could do no less. He must now sacrifice to save hers.

Somewhere a small voice in his head whispered: Mac, you're full of it. Such tragedy, from so little. But he knew it was a deceitful voice, the voice you hear when the choice you must make is too hard, and he dismissed it. So noble, the voice said, determined to be heard. So honourable. But again, he dismissed it. So wrong, the voice said. So hurt, because she went behind your back. So wounded... And then there was an orderly plucking at his sleeve.

"Sir," he said. "He's asking for you. The Chairman, sir... And you, please madame, and you," he said to Roxanna and Morgana-Li.

They followed him along a featureless corridor for what seemed an impossible distance. The ship was huge, equivalent internally to large building, which it had to be to house the Chairman's travelling directorate. At one point Mac and Roxanna felt their hands accidentally brush against each other. The touch burned like fire for both of them. They both started away.

The Chairman was lying in a pod with only the head cowl open. They could not see his chest with the gaping wound. The treatment ward was large, brightly lit and severely functional, designed for battle casualties by the score. The Chairman was the only patient, with a medical monitoring the control panel and another standing on call. Mac and the others stood in an uneasy group, waiting for they knew not quite what. People continued to file in: Wright and Orville, again in his floater, with Huckley and other senior ship's officers, important looking men from the directorate and as many women. There was a mutter of conversation as people arranged themselves amid a shuffling of feet. Finally, Nella Nilson, after Tranter the Chairman's principal aide, walked in and took her position by the Chairman on the other side of the pod, facing the assembled group. She was middle-aged and grey, and of an austerity matching the Chairman's own.

The Chairman opened his eyes and addressed her.

"Are we all here?" he asked and she nodded

"Thank you," he said, his voice was not strong, but perfectly firm. "I have asked you here because I'm dying," he went on. "The damage is beyond repair, the burning of my internal organs too severe. I am feeling no pain and those of you who are not of my family are here to testify that I am perfectly compos mentis and fully aware of everything I say. They tell me I have a little time but not much.

"Step forward, Mac. And Roxanna, please. You should know, Mac, that I did not find you because of anything Roxanna did. Tranter had already found you. He had seen you flying along the river. Given the opportunity, I might have approached you

differently but Roxanna asked me to come as she feared for your life. You may argue that although I already knew your whereabouts that does not change the fact that in intent Roxanna betrayed you to me, betrayed your stated wishes, but as your father I must say this:

"Could you stand by and do nothing if by violating Roxanna's wishes you thought you might save her?"

"Cleave to this woman, Mac, as I cleaved to your mother even when of necessity we were forced to separate." He paused to gather his strength. When he continued his voice had noticeably weakened.

"As your father," he said. "I declare you to be my heir, my sole heir, to inherit all rights, privileges and property that I own. My last will and testament has been notarised and duly filed to this effect. There are certain bequests that I would ask you to honour. There are certain obligations I would ask you to undertake. But as of my death, you will become the majority shareholder in Galiconia Enterprises Inc, whether, Mac, you like it or not. What you do then is up to you, but do something you must. There is no escape. You must either assume the burden or you must consciously discard it with all that will mean for your people, the people of the cluster."

The medical at the control panel bent to whisper in the Chairman's ear, but he shook his head impatiently.

"Young lady," he said to Morgana-Li. "I have to thank you for aiding me when I needed it, at risk to yourself. Captain Wright..."

Wright stepped to the side of the pod and stood looking down, his face sombre.

"Thank you," the Chairman said. "Thank you for saving my ship and my son."

"Ah," Wright said. "But it was my son who did that, my son Orville."

"Really?" the Chairman said. "How fitting. My son and your son..." His voice was fading and the chief medical took charge, hustling people from the ward.

"Mac," the Chairman whispered. "I have more to say."

Mac looked down at the father he had never known except in the most cursory fashion, and despite everything he loathed about Galiconia felt a deep sadness. The ward emptied completely and fell silent. Someone brought him a chair. He sat, leaning forward, his face close to his father's.

"There are two more things I must tell you," the Chairman whispered hoarsely, his breath beginning to rasp. "The Palwallum is your enemy. She will try to destroy you. She has tried already..."

"Shsh," Mac said. "Don't talk."

"I have taken steps, but she will try again."

"Shsh," Mac said again. "It doesn't matter, not now."

But his father was determined.

"And thormalium is running out," he managed to gasp. "Soon there will be none..."

He fell silent and Mac began to think he had slipped into unconsciousness. He shifted position and his father opened his eyes. He could no longer speak but they held a mute appeal.

"It's all right," Mac said. "I'll stay. Of course, I'll stay."

The Chairman moved his head slightly from side to side.

"Promise," he whispered in a voice so low that Mac had to put his ear to his father's mouth to catch it.

"Promise what?" Mac said, but he knew.

"Promise," his father repeated.

Mac hesitated. His father's eyes were boring insistently into his, demanding, commanding with all the urgency of a man who knew he was already in debt to death. Still Mac hesitated and still his father refused to let go. Mac could bear it no longer.

"I promise," he said, and the eyes glazed. Mac closed them with a gentle hand and bowed his head.

A promise extorted, or a promise freely given? Mac didn't know. But either way, it was a promise he would have to keep.

Roxanna was waiting for him outside in the corridor. She was alone, sitting with her back to the wall, hugging her knees. She looked at Mac as he came out and then back to the floor. Mac sat down beside her and rested his head against hers. A long time later he put an arm round her and pulled her close.

"The old man was right," he said quietly. "Had the positions been reversed, of course I would have done what you did. Thank you. And I cleave to you."

Roxanna strained her cheek against his, over and over. The relief was so intense she thought she was going to faint.

"But," Mac said and the desolation was plain in his voice. "What by all the gods am I supposed to do now?"

Wright came looking for them and found them still sitting entwined in the corridor. Well, that's one good thing, he thought. At least that's sorted out. Mac saw him coming and got to his feet, Roxanna beside him.

"So," Mac said. "You've got what you wanted." There was a bitter twist to his words. Wright grimaced.

"Not like that," he said. "I didn't want it to happen like that. You know that, don't you? You know your father and I were friends?" Mac nodded.

"But it did happen," Mac said. "Can you tell me what I'm supposed to do now? I'm chairman of Galconia Enterprises Inc and I haven't a clue. I'm seventeen. My father

said the Palwallum is trying to destroy us. He said the thormalium is running out. And I'm seventeen." It was a cry of pain, of desperation.

Wright ignored Mac's distress.

"He said what? He said what about the thormalium?"

"He said it's running out."

"Well, the first thing you do," Wright said, looking up and down the corridor, "is never to mention that again. Not till we know what the situation really is. I'm serious, Mac. Not a word."

Mac stared at him.

"You too, Roxanna," Wright said. "It must stay absolutely secret. No one can know."

"But..."

"No buts, Mac. This is absolutely crucial."

"But if he knew," Mac insisted, meaning his father. "Some one must have told him."

"Not necessarily. Your father kept things, important things, very compartmentalised. Nobody but him knew the whole picture. That's your first lesson, Mac. Knowledge is power."

"I thought it was thormalium."

"Knowledge and thormalium together." Wright paused. "People will be coming for you any minute now, Mac. I asked them to give you a little time. The first thing you should do is call your staff together, establish the new chain of command."

"The first thing I need to do is change."

"No, Mac." Wright was quietly insistent. "That is your father's blood and at the moment it's your badge of office. It's what will make them obey the orders of someone they don't know and who is still very young by their standards."

"By any standards," Mac said bitterly.

"You can do this, Mac," Wright said. "I have no doubts. None."

"Nor do I," Roxanna added. "You were born for this. You know that. Deep down, you know that."

Mac was about to launch into a tirade of denial, but as Wright had forecast, people were converging on them.

They were taken to the Chairman's personal suite, now his, Mac forced himself to accept, and were greeted by Nella Nilson.

"My condolences, sir," she said to Mac.

"Thank you," Mac said, openly inspecting the trim, severe woman before him. "And you are?"

"I was your father's principal private secretary, sir, Nella Nilson, second to Colonel Tranter his chief of staff. I understand Colonel Tranter died on Honshos, sir."

"Yes, unfortunately," Mac said. "I never knew him."

"He was a hard man. He loved your father, sir." There was a respectful pause.

"What should I call you?" Mac asked after a decent interval.

"Your father called me Nel, sir."

"And would you find it impertinent if I did the same?"

"Oh no, sir," and she blushed. Born to it, Roxanna thought with private amusement.

"And I don't like 'sir'," Mac said. "Mr Albright if you must. I prefer Mac..."

"Albright, sir?"

"It was my mother's name. My father never formally recognised me." Nel frowned.
"Is that a problem?"

"No, Mr Albright. Not for me. But it might be with the board."

"I doubt it," Mac said. "Whether they like it or not, I am the majority shareholder. But first things first. I would like to speak to as many of the ship's company and staff who can be assembled, and to the rest over the com system."

They had arranged a podium on the ship's hangar deck, and Mac stood before a curious crowd who stretched back into the distance. There were hundreds of them and it looked like everyone on board had managed to squeeze in. Mac had been given a report of the fight with the strange ship and had a few minutes while the meeting was being organised to think what he might say. He was aware it could well set the tone for the rest of his life. The sea of faces before him was terribly disconcerting. He had never even thought of making a speech before and the expectant mass waiting on his words was as terrifying in its way as the bloodlust of the g-ball stadium before his first game. The memory gave him strength. He had beaten that one. He stepped forward.

"I am puzzled as to how to address you," he began. His voice was firm and carried clearly, whatever nervousness he was feeling undetectable. "Ladies and gentlemen? Citizens? My people? And the answer is, I don't know. There is much I don't know. I have been thrown into this position before my time by the death of my father, the Chairman, before his time. This is his blood on my clothes. My father, the Chairman, was shot down by an unseen assassin and by this blood, his blood, I swear that my father's murderer will be found. This ship was then attacked by an unknown assailant and I swear again by my father's blood that the assailants will be found." There was a stir and some angry interjections. Mac held up his hand.

"They will be found," he repeated with calm confidence. "They will be found..."

"For the rest, I invoke the ancient custom of the one hundred days. For one hundred days I will watch and learn. I will make no changes until that probation period is complete.

"There is one more thing. As most of us now know, our ship was saved today from annihilation by the genius of one man, my cousin, Orville Wright, who successfully

completed a manoeuvre never before thought possible or attempted. In my father's name and in recognition of his exceptional courage and skill I appoint him Pilot, Grand Cluster, first class."

He turned, accepted the ceremonial torq from an aide and stepped down to where he had arranged Orville should be placed in the front row. As he smoothed the chain about Orville's neck, his cousin whispered in his ear:

"Bastard." But Mac knew it was the only way Orville could control his pleasure. Morgana-Li beside him was bright with delight.

"You earned it," Mac whispered back. "But it might have been better for everyone if they'd blown us out of the sky." He stepped back and his sober gaze met Orville's, now equally sober.

Mac led the applause and as Orville waved back at the crowd, quietly slipped out.

"How did you know do that?" Wright asked.

"Do what?" Mac said. He was feeling tired now, very tired.

"To speak like that. To tell them you weren't going to march in axe swinging, changing everything." Mac shrugged. "And to give Orville a medal."

"He deserved it."

"I know. But to do it like that. On the spot. To give them all something good to take away, to be happy about." Mac shrugged again.

"You'd better watch out," Wright went on. "You might actually be good at this. You might get to enjoy it."

"And then you'll really be in trouble," Mac said. He surveyed his father's austere lounge, more workroom than recreation area.

"Uncle Winston," he said, after a long pause. "I need you. I need you both. I can't do this by myself. It's so big, so huge... I don't know if I can do it at all."

"Yes, you can," Wright said.

"Yes, you can," Roxanna said. "We believe in you."

BOOK THREE

Chapter One

The Palwallum had successfully negotiated anger, then depression and had now reached determination. One could regard recent events as a disastrous fiasco, or alternatively as a not entirely successful waypoint on the road to triumphant victory. It was, for instance, undeniable that if the boy had escaped, nevertheless that twisted old tyrant, his father, was dead. Half the goal had therefore been achieved and if the son, a mere stripling and surely no match for a leader of her stature, were subsequently to expire without an heir and possibly intestate, well then... In other words, the game was still very much afoot and all that was required was a little fortitude, a little resolution, a little cunning.

She was eager now to get back to base and resume the campaign. Apart from anything else, she had been too long away and while there was nothing she could quite put her finger on, she had the sense that all at head office was not quite as it should be. Something about the communications from her underlings during her absence had been disconcerting, a sort of wooden restraint...

The express elevator hissed to a stop at the summit of the Chancellery spire. The Palwallum automatically checked her maquillage in the 3-D mirror, smoothed her robe to show her bosom to best advantage and prepared to stride forth into the foyer of her private penthouse, ready to greet her loyal and no doubt affectionate staff assembled to greet her return. She squared her shoulders to lift her best weapon to the present, cocked her head to hide the faint pendulousness developing about her chin, and stepped through the doors with all the rightful confidence of a mistress of the universe. But one step was as far as she got. She stopped short in amazement. Her jaw dropped, revealing the incipient jowls that as a mistress of the universe, there had been simply no time to have smoothed, and a small exclamation of shock escaped her suddenly constricted throat.

Her way was barred by laser barriers all luridly flashing "crime scene" and by a large storm trooper in full black body armour complete with helmet, visor down, and a blaster at high port, the charge light glowing.

The Palwallum stood stock still, shocked into speechlessness, and then the outrage kicked in.

"What is the meaning of this?" she shrieked, her secretaries and travelling servants behind her craning to see. "Get out of my way, while you still can."

For answer the storm trooper, a three dagger veteran, dropped his right foot back and brought the blaster swinging down to his hip. The muzzle was now pointed directly at the Palwallum's bosom and, formidable as the latter might be, there was no doubt as to which weapon would ultimately win. The sergeant keyed the com link on his chest and a moment later an officer appeared behind him. He too was a storm trooper, a veteran and of entirely different calibre to say, General Slade, who was essentially a politician. The lieutenant's default setting was to kill first, question later.

"Madame," he said. "I have orders to escort you to your office." He switched off the barrier, stepped through and then reactivated it.

The Palwallum, for once in her life, was lost for words and remained silent during the short ride to the floor below and the processional to her office, which together with allocations for her personal staff consumed all the space available on that level. Most of the work-stations as they passed through were occupied by people she had never seen before. A further shock awaited in her inner sanctum. A man was sitting in her floater, her sacrosanct floater, at her desk, her sacrosanct desk, scanning her screen and no doubt her private files. He looked up and raised a hand to forestall the inevitable tirade.

"I am Whittlespoon," he said. "Court appointed chief auditor with authority to investigate all relevant matters pertaining to your administration and your personal conduct."

"You're what...?" the Palwallum began.

"Really, Madame," Whittlespoon interrupted. "Shouting is uncalled for." He was a small man with greying strands of hair pasted across his pate, but he was firm and quite unruffled.

"Get out of my chair!" the Palwallum roared, and began to stalk round the perimeter of her vast desk, overtly threatening.

"Lieutenant," Witlespoon said, and the storm trooper abruptly blocked her progress. The Palwallum recoiled so sharply that she all but fell.

"A guest suite has been prepared for you, Madame," Witlespoon said. "My investigation will determine what further action, if any, will be necessary."

"How dare you?" the Palwallum demanded, her voice still painfully loud. "How dare you arrest me?"

"Not arrest," Witlespoon said. "Not yet. But I might advise you to appoint good legal representation. There are certain matters already that require detailed explanation." He smirked. "It's beginning to look like you've been a very naughty lady," he added. "But not naughty enough to fool old Witlespoon."

Despite herself, the Palwallum shivered and made a sudden decision.

"I shall go to my quarters now," she said and turned sharply on her heel. Even had her conscience been as clear a cryllic, she was far too well versed in the art of suggestio falsi to think Witlespoon would find nothing if whoever it was who had perpetrated this

charade wanted him to find something. The Chairman. It could only be the Chairman reaching out from the grave. Back in the elevator she made three calls on her reacom: one recalling the crew of the Chancellor immediately, the second to Theta Tauri Major's second moon, where her son Rudi was in boarding school, and the third ordering the destruction of certain records carefully quarantined from any possible connection with her office. In the circumstances, better to avoid any possibility at all that they might be discovered. She was not to know that with careful forethought the elevator had been armed with a tiny eyespy, and under outrageous attack on her own ground, she was far too agitated to be wary of such a possibility.

Wittlespoon and the lieutenant looked at each other knowingly as the Palwallum stalked out. They had followed the script given to them exactly and so far it was having the effect predicted. When the Palwallum failed to appear in the guest wing and the Chancellor sometime later lifted off without warning or clearance, they were able to report mission accomplished.

"So," Wright said. "She's gone, and she's heading for Redux. You're sure this was wise?"

"I think so," Mac said, consideringly. "Whatever my father hoped to find with the audit will take time to uncover. Meanwhile, she's been separated from most of her resources. We don't hold Redux anyway, so we might as well use it to isolate her."

Wright nodded. It made sense. So far, everything Mac had ordered made sense. Proud as he was of the boy, however, Wright couldn't help feeling himself continually astonished. Mac's grasp of political manoeuvring was so intuitive it was spooky, no doubt the result of generation after generation of Machiavellian breeding. Wright smiled to himself at the thought. It was an allusion only an historian would know.

Mac sat at the end of the long conference table, brooding. He supposed that if there were one thing worse than him assuming the chairmanship it would be allowing it to go to the Palwallum. Worse for the cluster. Worse for himself. She would have to kill him or he would inevitably become a perpetual focus for discontent and revolution, and if Mac was sure of only one thing in his life, it was that he was not yet ready to die. Two things. There was also Roxanna. He was sure of Roxanna. And that was another worry among the myriad that had cascaded down upon him the minute he had quietly left the hanger deck to Orville and his deserved applause. Already he was so inundated with demands on his time that there seemed nothing of him left for her, scrag end and a grunt or two. Already, again, Nel was hovering, waiting to catch his eye and Wright was busy scanning a new topic on his reacom. Abruptly, he made up his mind.

Ten minutes later the group he thought of as his family had gathered and was seated around the table on either side of him. Nel having ushered them in made to leave, but Mac stopped her.

"Nel," he said. "How long did you work for my father?"

"Twenty-two years, sir."

"Well, I think that makes you family, too," Mac said. "What do you think? I would like you to stay. With us. On the inside."

Nel flushed a little with pleasure and sat herself down near the foot of the table.

"No," Mac said. "If you're in, you have to be in all the way. Come and sit here." He got up, pulled out a floater between Shelby and John and waited until she had joined them. Nel and Morgana-Li as the two new members of the clan sought each other's eyes and then smiled self-consciously.

"Thing is," Mac said. "We're due to hit Theta Tauri Minor in a few hours and I need to have a process in place before then or I'll drown in the detail."

"You said you weren't going to change anything for a hundred days," Orville objected.

"In the first place, I'm not really changing anything," Mac said. "I'm adding. In the second place what I have to say for public consumption, to reassure people, is not necessarily what I think or what I will do." Wright nodded and Mac suddenly stood up.

"Look," he went on after a moment. "This is a huge thing I've been catapulted into, something you know I never wanted, something I tried very hard to avoid. You know I loathe the way Galconia operates. I hate it, everything about it. I do. But I'm trapped. My father by dying has trapped me. I now own a majority of the shares and unless and until I can find a way to get rid of them safely, I have to do the job. I'm riding the dragon, very much against my will but at the moment, there's no way to get off without it turning and burning me, us, to cinders. As it is, I'll be very lucky to survive. I have no heir so if I die, if someone manages to kill me, then the game is wide open for the first time in fourteen generations. And whoever manages to kill me will then kill anyone who is with me as a matter of course.

"So I have to ask, are you with me? I have to ask that. I can't assume it. To be with me is dangerous and it would be unfair not to give you the chance to leave."

Mac paused and looked slowly round the table, holding the eyes of each person there before moving on.

"Thank you," he said. "I am humbled.

"I will have to tell lies," he continued with a nod to Orville. "There's nothing I can do about that. It goes with the territory. It's one of the reasons I've asked you here now. I want to establish us as the inner council, where we will always tell the truth. I may not be able to tell each of you everything, but I promise I will never lie to you. In return, I want your promise that you will never lie to me, that you will never shield me, that I will know everything you know, good and particularly bad. I am very serious. I need each of you to make that promise to me now, formally, in front of everyone." Mac gestured to Roxanna who stood up beside him.

"I promise," she said, touching his arm briefly.

"I promise," Orville said, who was next to her.

"I promise," Morgana-Li said, standing. There was a wondering look on her face which firmed into decision as she spoke.

"I promise," Shelby said.

Nel stood as he sat down. "Thank you, sir," she said. "Thank you. And I promise."

"I promise," John said, standing very straight.

"I promise," Wright said, and shook Mac by the hand.

"Excellent," Mac said. "The council of eight." He waited for Wright to resume his seat before sitting down himself.

"Now," Mac said. "I have no chief of staff and I never could have trusted Tranter anyway. So that's you, Uncle Winston, whether you like it or not, and if you won't do it, I'll have you locked up...."

"Oh well," Wright said. "In that case..."

"Nel, I would like you to be his deputy with Shelby and John as your assistants and to handle your present functions. You are the gate-keepers to Uncle Winston. He is the gate-keeper to me." The three of them nodded simultaneously, Nel hiding a secret smile of pleasure at the promotion.

"Orville," Mac went on. "Obviously, you're my everything technical man but I also want you to be my personal pilot. What should we call you? Chief pilot? Chief engineer...?"

"Perhaps senior technical counsel," Orville said. "That would give me authority to stick my nose in anywhere without displacing existing incumbents."

"Excellent," Mac said again and Wright also nodded. Mac turned to Morgana-Li but Roxanna got in first.

"Are we free to say anything?"

"With care," Mac said, knowing what was surely coming.

"Why is she here?" Roxanna demanded, an edge to her voice. "We have only known her a few weeks and just a few days ago she was all set to kill you because of false charges, a false charge that she made."

"But in good faith," Mac said quietly, and then: "Morgana-Li, you gave up everything you know to come with us. You haven't asked to leave or to go back to Honshos. Do you want to go back to Honshos?"

"No," she said, surprised at the question, surprised at her answer. "No, I don't."

"And why did you come with us?"

"It... it was the right thing to do."

"Not Orville?"

"And Orville," Morgana-Li said firmly.

"I trust her," Mac said to Roxanna. "She's a trained soldier and she's the best flier I've ever seen apart from myself. We need her."

"To do what?" Roxanna muttered. Whatever Mac might say, whatever Orville might think, she was quite sure that she would never be able to bring herself to trust Morgana-Li, not after what had happened. If nothing else the Samura was far too temperamental. "To do what?" she repeated more loudly.

"To be your chief bodyguard," Mac said.

"What?" Roxanna exclaimed.

"Think about it," Mac said. Roxanna did. They all did. The point, the danger was obvious.

"And apart from being guarded," Roxanna said at last, with a degree of bite. "What else do you have planned for me?"

"To be with me," Mac said. "I want you, at least, to know everything I know, and to keep me honest. You are to whisper in my ear that I am mortal." Everyone else, everyone but Mac, saw the trap that suddenly gaped.

"Then why do I need a bodyguard?" Roxanna demanded, pouncing. "If I'm to be with you all the time?"

Mac laughed and it was the first time any of them had seen his happy creases and dimples for days.

"So... so you can make a fool of me, of course," he said. Roxanna felt her heart melt.

"All right," he continued. "I am not too concerned about the day to day running of the cluster. Nel has the experience to know what needs to be referred for decision and what doesn't and I would think I'm right in saying that mostly it doesn't." He looked at her inquiringly and she nodded.

"But Nel," he said. "I need you and your two right hands to take on a special project for me. I need to know precisely the situation with thormalium supply and demand. Also, the long-term trend. I gather my father liked to keep things scrambled so that only he knew the truth." Nel nodded again. "We need to unscramble it and quickly. This has priority and it must remain absolutely secret, so I'm afraid that you three will have to do the research yourselves. Please don't involve anybody else." The three of them all looked at him and nodded.

"Now Orville," Mac went on. "My father started a game with the Palwallum which we decided to carry on." He filled them in on the details of the audit, which caused Nel for one a great deal of nostalgic amusement.

"So in the elevator," Mac said, "she made a call that we monitored ordering the destruction of records controlled by a separate office, reporting only to her, her dirty tricks unit we think. We got there too late. The CAW files had been dumped and the operator was dead. A heart attack, clearly murder, clearly ordered by the Palwallum. I want those files. I really want those files. Is there any way to retrieve them?"

"What's in them?" Orville said.

"We don't know," Mac said. "But something sufficiently compromising that it was worth killing a man to protect."

"Well," Orville said. "Theoretically it's possible. When the CAW program was written back in the dark ages, they kept the even more ancient thing of wiping the address tag for a file when it's dumped, not the file itself. The file is over-written when the storage space is needed, but it never is. CAW memory is effectively infinite. The files will be there, but without some sort of clue, impossible to find. That's why she had the operator killed."

"How impossible?" Mac asked. Orville looked at him sharply.

"Ninety-nine point nine nine per cent," he said.

"We need to shoot for that hundredth point," Mac said. "We really do. What does CAW mean anyway? I never liked to show my ignorance by asking."

"Causal algorithmic weighting," Orville said. "It's one step down from ESP, exponential self-programming. That's what gives you AI. That's why we're stuck with clunky old CAW. It's as good as you can get without getting too smart. I'll see what I can do. There might be a way in through the actual terminal address."

"We really do need it," Mac said again. "All right. I think we're done. Would you stay, please," he said to Morgana-Li, and then to Wright. "And you."

Roxanna rose with the others.

"Where do you think you're going?" Mac said.

"You weren't serious?"

"Absolutely serious," Mac said. "You're with me."

"We have to talk to your mother," Mac said to Morgana-Li when the others had gone. The girl allowed a look of unhappiness to cross her face.

"It will be all right," Mac said. They swung round to face the com screen on the wall behind them and Mac asked for the call to be placed. There was a considerable delay and eventually the Shoga appeared, wearing night clothes.

"Madame," Mac said. "I'm sorry to disturb you, but time is short. Your daughter is here." Morgana-Li with a slight push from Roxanna stepped into range.

"I have no daughter," the Shoga said. Mac sighed.

"Don't be ridiculous," he said. "And please listen to me. Here is what I propose. First I will withdraw the garrison from Honshos. Second, as your matter-maker is still unfinished I will guarantee to meet any reasonable need for thormalium until it is. Is that agreeable?"

The Shoga stood before them on the screen, suddenly rigid.

"In return for what?" she said at last, cautiously.

"Your troops are probably the finest in the cluster, certainly the most versatile," Mac said. "But now, they have nothing to fight. Honshos is yours, no war of liberation required, a war we both know that you could never win in the long run anyway. And one way or another you will have sufficient thormalium for your future needs. What will you do to avoid growing slipshod. And fat?"

Morgana-Li, her face expressionless, grinned hugely to herself. Unerringly, Mac had put his finger on her mother's great weakness. She had a horror of putting on weight and went to great lengths to control her incipient paunch.

"What will we do?" the Shoga said noncommittally.

"I would like you to take the place of honour in the cluster and to provide my house regiment," Mac said. "A regiment of flighters, officers and troopers. I pay you to train, organise and rotate them as you see fit."

"You would wish me to command?"

"I rather thought that you would prefer to rule your planet," Mac said.

"If I were to agree," the Shoga said, "the... values of the order would quickly be diluted."

"Do you think?" Mac said. "Surely that depends on the strength of your convictions. I do know that with no enemy and no purpose your values will not only be diluted, they will die. You have been fighting Galconia for a long time. Well, I'm afraid that I, as chairman, no longer choose to provide you with that purpose in life. So I offer you a replacement."

"And my daughter?" And as soon as Li-Morgana used the word daughter, it was apparent to everyone that Mac had won.

"I would like her to speak for herself," Mac said.

"In private."

"If you wish." Mac made a sign and Roxanna and Wright followed him from the room, leaving Morgana-Li standing nervously defiant.

"Are you well?" Li-Morgana asked. Her face had momentarily softened.

"Mother..."

"What?"

"I'm not like you."

"Clearly," Li-Morgana said. "I've never betrayed my vows."

"Neither have I," Morgana-Li said hotly.

"But you will."

"No... yes. If he'll have me."

"Is that why you went with them?"

"Partly." Morgana-Li shrugged helplessly. How could she say that there was so much more, that the narrow, closed life of the abbey had been strangling her, that if she ever

allowed the dutiful façade to slip, the thought of eventually ascending to the shogunate had appalled her, that once the chance of freedom had offered she had seized on it without thought, a starving child suddenly spying food.

"And what does this boy, this chairman, want of you?"

"I am to be chief bodyguard to Roxanna. She will be in danger."

"Which means you will be in worse danger... So what is your counsel?" her mother said, once more Shoga. "You know these people. Do I accept his offer? Will he keep to his word?"

Morgana-Li thought.

"Like you, mother, he will keep to his word as much as duty will allow," she said, watching the Shoga frown with chagrin. "Yes. I believe you should accept the offer. He's right. The abbey will die otherwise. If we're honest, the abbey is dying now. To survive it must change and this is probably the one chance it will get."

"You dare say the abbey is dying?" Li-Morgana had a sudden, vivid recollection of the conversation with Wright when he had accused her of corruption. Her daughter looked at her sadly.

"You know it is," she said. "You know we never would have slipped into all that farce about rape if we had been strong. We would have been able to see the truth for what it was."

There was a long silence.

"Will you ever come home?" Li-Morgana said at last.

"I don't know," Morgana-Li said honestly. "Would you want me to?"

"I don't know," Li-Morgana said, with equal honesty.

"I will accept," Li-Morgana said to Mac.

"Excellent," Mac said for a third time. "Captain Wright will organise the details with you. There is another thing. Did you find whoever it was that shot my father?"

"No," Li-Morgana was forced to say. "I had every flighter in the abbey out for days, but they slipped through somehow." She neglected to admit that it had been her mistake in the first instance that had let them elude pursuit. A second, thorough search of the amphitheatre cells the next day had told the story.

"I have one more request," Mac said. "That my battalion include your ninja squad who will answer directly to Morgana-Li."

"Ninja squad?" Li-Morgana said too quickly. "There is no such thing."

"Commandos, if you prefer," Mac said.

"How...?"

"I have eyes. I have ears. And your ninjas are human. They like to display themselves. They like to be admired. One can't stay long in the abbey without realising the powerful women all in black are a special unit..."

"I get the bit about enlisting the Samura," Roxanna said when she and Mac were finally alone. "But I don't understand why Morgana-Li has to be my bodyguard."

"She can fly," Mac said. "She can fly very well. She's not a man so she can go with you where a man can't. And most important, if necessary, she'll die for you."

"You think?"

"I know. You are Orville's brother and my beloved. She loves Orville and she owes me her life, her life and a lot more. She will die to protect you. She would not be able to face either of us if she let anything happen to you."

Roxanna digested his words and then smacked his hand away.

"What makes you so smart?" she said with some irritation.

"Love," Mac said. Roxanna smiled and allowed as how the wandering hand might perhaps return.

Slade somehow managed to control his temper. That monstrous woman had completely abandoned him to his fate on Honshos, to the nightmare journey down the river swarming with Samura patrols, a journey he was forced to admit he had only survived through the skills of Eldo. For more than a week they had crawled through the undergrowth, scarcely daring to breath, hiding in swamps and thorn brakes as the Samura criss-crossed overhead. For more than a week he had been filthy, starving, eaten alive by the swarms of insects which, given a choice of Eldo or himself, always preferred him as a matter of course. And for more than a week he had been in stark fear for his life, all of which for the putative head of all Galconia's defence forces was quite intolerable.

When they had eventually been able to summon the agger to collect them, it was to discover that the garrison itself was being summarily recalled, lock, stock, barrel and baggage, never mind important work involving comparative inter-planetary botany. They had barely made it back to the base in time to be loaded on the transport with the rest of the detachment. It had then taken all Slade's force of personality to contrive sufficient diversion from the direct route to Falebeen to allow a rendezvous with his own ship, which he had taken the sensible precaution of keeping more or less within reach.

So now, to find his personal bay at the Redux spaceport occupied by the Chancellor was vexing in the extreme. Even more vexing was to note that all the guard points on the way to RCentral were manned by Gadai UWATs, not his own troops, who had been despatched who knew where. And worst of all was to discover that the Palwallum had

appropriated his own private quarters for herself and her entourage. For two pins Slade would have marched in and shot the woman out of hand, except that he was brought up short by two burly UWAT sentries, blasters at high port. Eldo, he noted, was careful to keep well behind him.

"Announce me," Slade snapped, barely coherent. The corporal UWAT moved his lips and the throat mike picked up the vibrations to relay them to a superior. A moment later, he held out a hand.

"Leave your weapon," he said. The lack of the word "sir" was particularly pointed.

Scarcely believing what was happening, Slade fumbled one-handed with his belt. He dropped the blaster to the floor and stepped forward. The two UWATs let him through but stepped in front of Eldo, who backed off with visible relief, retrieving the discarded blaster as he went.

Slade, fuming, marched through his own ante-rooms – now filled with strangers – to be brought up short outside his own door. The worm Dostoi was waiting for him, a layer of servility plastered over something else that Slade failed to recognise immediately. It came to him. It was contempt. The unspeakable little toad dared to be contemptuous. It gave Slade considerable pause and his outrage cooled rapidly to caution. Dostoi bowed wordlessly and activated the door. Slade stood, his mind working furiously. The crucial point, he suddenly realised, the point that should have been concerning him long since, was not that the Palwallum had taken over his personal fiefdom, but why. Temper was far more often a trap than a weapon, he reminded himself, too late.

He moved forward at last, the hair on the back of his neck prickling with danger. The Palwallum was standing at the far end of the elegant room, a room as fine as any in the Hyades. Not for Slade the eccentricities of his predecessors with their aquariums and mountain meadows. His personal quarters were furnished with the best of the culture and art the Hyades had to offer. He prided himself that he had the eye of a connoisseur and since gaining control of Redux and its vast revenues he had felt duty-bound to exercise it.

The Palwallum, seemingly absorbed, was gazing out across the plain of the city, at its slummy, utilitarian buildings and beltways, devoid of feature or relief. It was a bleak view and a forcible reminder that things had taken a distinct turn for the worse, that her future and that of her son now balanced on a laserblade's point. Slade was determined not to cough or otherwise indicate his presence. He knew the game. She wanted him there as a supplicant from the first instant. At last, when the pressure had become unbearable, she turned.

"Ah, General," she said. "I didn't hear you come in."

Swig's twaddle, Slade thought. Still he did not speak.

"I have to thank you for your hospitality," she went on. "And to congratulate you on your safe return. A belated return, but safe, thankfully."

"Thankfully?" Slade remarked. "It is no thanks to you. You abandoned me."

"It was unavoidable," the Palwallum said. "Unavoidable and most unfortunate. My ship was badly damaged and the lives of my whole crew were at stake."

"I saw no sign of damage when we landed," Slade said coldly. And it was true. The one glancing hit from The-All-Sun-And-The-All-Moon had been quickly repaired. "And why, may I ask, have you found it necessary to commandeer Redux, never mind my own quarters?"

The Palwallum smiled, the smile of a space banshee presented with a blood meal.

"Because, my dear, incompetent general, you quite failed to carry out your orders," she said with relish. Slade's head snapped back.

"Did I not command you to kill the Chairman and his son?" the Palwallum demanded remorselessly. "Did I not expressly order you to make sure that come what may they both died? Both of them. And did you achieve that? Did you do that? No, you did not. You failed abjectly." She kept advancing on Slade until he was finally forced to fall back or do intimate battle with her bosom. "And because you failed," she continued, spitting out the words, "I now find myself in a somewhat vulnerable position which necessitates me assuming direct control of Redux."

Slade knew he had lost the moment he gave ground to the Palwallum's physical assault, but nevertheless, he tried.

"I did kill the Chairman," he said, and was mortified to find that he could not keep the tone of sulky guilt from his voice. "And you should have shot down his ship. You had every opportunity."

"Don't," the Palwallum said, more in sorrow than in anger. "Don't attempt to mitigate your own hapless efforts by attacking me. You had a simple task and you failed..."

"Failed!" Slade almost howled. "I was in the middle of thousands of rabid women, all armed..."

"One more, simple shot," the Palwallum snapped. "That's all it required. And then my ship never would have been exposed to that infernal secret weapon. And nor would I have been forced to come here. You dislike my presence, General? Reflect on the fact that it's all your fault."

Slade found his mouth opening and shutting, but no words came. Abruptly he turned on his heel and stalked from the room, leaving the field to the victor. And as he left, his mind fixated on one thing. Secret weapon? What secret weapon?

Chapter Two

Theta Tauri Minor came as a shock to everyone but Wright and Nel. Everything was so huge. Everywhere they looked all they could see were buildings, each one taller and more splendid than the last, soaring, swooping, hanging from the sky in rippling curtains with the beltways curving their way, hither and yon, high and low, seething and squirming, like streamers of colour swirling from a mad artist's brain.

"It makes my head hurt," Mac said as The-All-Sun-And-The-All-Moon eased its way down from orbit.

"And it's all yours," Roxanna said.

"You can't threaten me," Mac retorted tartly. "And it's not anyway. Only the directorate. Which one's the directorate?"

"There," Wright said, pointing.

"Whoa," Mac said. "Can't we have one of the shiny ones?"

In complete contrast to the huge city, which from altitude seemed to cover most of the continent, the directorate appeared ancient, low-slung and squat. It was only at ground level that one realised the building was in fact 50 storeys high and only appeared squat because it was so horizontally massive.

"However many people does it hold?" Orville asked in wonderment.

"About a million," Nel said. "At least, that was at the last census. Probably more by now. They keep going down. What you see is only the tip of the iceberg."

"Whatever an iceberg might be," Shelby said.

"Just an expression," Nel said. "I don't know what it means either."

"They don't all live there, do they?" Roxanna asked.

"No. Just us, personal staff, the domestics and the guard. They have their own barracks."

The-All-Sun-And-The-All-Moon eased into a cavernous, kilometre-long entry port in the side of the building and slid to a halt. The colour party came to the present, laser banners were dipped in salute and somewhere a band with electronic brass instruments burst into the Galconia company anthem. Mac rolled his eyes and sighed deeply.

The chairman's quarters occupied a portion of the top three storeys on the inside of the monolithic structure, overlooking a sunken roof-top park that stretched for at least two kilometres of manicured lawns and handsome trees in either direction. There were lakes, fountains, a stream, small deer wandering about and everywhere the music of song-birds. From the windows, curved and colonnaded, they could not see the other side, nor the ends. It was altogether an astonishing trompe l'oeil. It was as though they

had come to a palace set in rolling countryside, not an apartment in a gargantuan building crouching in the midst of the most immense city imaginable.

Roxanna surveyed the scene from the comfortably furnished parlour to which they had been brought. She turned to Mac and they both had the same thought simultaneously. There might be the odd compensation to this new way of life into which they had been thrust so precipitately.

At the first opportunity, Roxanna summoned Morgana-Li and sat her down. She made to speak but Morgana-Li forestalled her.

"If I were you I would never be able to forgive me for what I did to Mac," she said in a low voice. "To falsely accuse someone's man of rape is the unforgivable thing between women. I don't expect forgiveness but I would welcome the opportunity to try to atone. If you'll let me." She waited, her eyes cast down.

"It doesn't seem to be up to me," Roxanna said at last. "My masterful man has spoken. I don't question his judgment. Undoubtedly, he is right. There will be danger. If he says you are best able to protect me, I believe him. So we'd better be friends again, don't you think?" She took Morgana-Li's hands in hers. "Life's too short," she said.

If Mac and the others had thought their existence overly busy during the journey to Theta Tauri Minor, it was nothing compared to the inundation of vital matters and urgent affairs waiting for them on arrival. To those unused to the press of government, the endless torrent was terrifying.

From his years with the Chairman, Wright had had some notion of what to expect but even he found himself intimidated by the volume of work. Nel Nilson was the one bulwark standing between them and chaos and Wright constantly blessed the insight that had brought Mac to embrace her within the family circle. How the boy had come by his ability to read a situation and find the key, Wright couldn't guess. Instinct, he supposed. And experience. When you thought about it, Mac had already seen more of the extremes of human nature than most people did in a lifetime. He had, Wright knew, from a year of guiding the boy's advanced education, an astonishing ability to assimilate knowledge and then to apply it, but the level of maturity and confidence he was now bringing to the council table was something else. And eventually Wright realised that the explanation was simple enough. You didn't survive events like the screamer or the pit on Cram or any of the other near fatal incidents that Mac had endured without learning a great deal about yourself, however young you might be at the time.

If only, Wright prayed, the boy could also survive intact all the corrupting influences of power.

So that the business of the cluster might proceed, the Chairman's will was quickly granted conditional probate and his shares passed straight to Mac without caveat of any sort. Wright had thought that possibly they might be required to be held in trust until Mac came fully of age, or, as Nel had intimated, there might be a problem with his illegitimacy, but no. Mac now owned, free and clear, 59 per cent of Galconia Enterprises Inc and apart from anything else was by far the wealthiest person in the cluster. He celebrated by spending a largish fortune on two plain bands of priceless antique gold which he and Roxanna, in a small, private ceremony, family only, placed on each other's fingers. They were still too young by capitol law to be formally wed, but nobody paid any attention to that. Nel cried and so did Morgana-Li.

On probate being granted, the secretary of the Galconia board on behalf of the members demanded Mac's confirmation hearing be held within the month. Until then he was to consider himself acting chairman only and not empowered to make substantive decisions. Normally, as ratification was considered a mere formality, the confirmation hearing might be postponed for years. In discussion, Mac, Wright and Roxanna detected the fine hand of the Palwallum pulling strings behind the scenes.

"Two reasons, I think," Mac said. "She may attack my succession on the basis of my illegitimacy, or the board may try to rule me out because I'm still a minor. I don't turn 18 for nearly eight months and they might try to stop me on that basis, or at least stall."

"Can they do that?" Roxanna asked. "Because you're illegitimate?"

"There is precedent," Wright said. "Illegitimacy was once used as the excuse in a feud about 1200 years ago. And theoretically the board has the power to demand a candidate they deem unsatisfactory forfeit the shares to another member of the immediate family."

"Of which I have none," Mac said.

"Then what?" Roxanna asked.

"Guess," Mac said.

"Finder's keepers?"

"Bull's-eye," Mac said.

"So what do we do? Father?"

"Mac makes a will," Wright said. "And I think he has a plan."

"Not really," Mac said. "Bluff and bluster is about it at the moment. Unless Orville comes up with something."

"What?" Roxanna said.

"I don't know," Mac said. "I can think of things I'd like, but I don't know."

"Then we should stall," Roxanna said. "Put off the confirmation hearing until we're ready."

"Can't," Wright said. "Unfortunately. The board has the power to make the chairman report at its discretion."

"So what?" Roxanna said. "We think the Palwallum has enough board members in her pocket to rig the vote?" Mac and her father both nodded.

"Doesn't that strike you as odd?" she said. "That the Chairman... I mean your father... that he would allow that to happen, that it wasn't him who had them all in his pocket?"

Mac and Wright looked at each other.

"Very odd," Mac said. "He was nothing if not a tactician."

"The thormalium," Wright said at last. "He was spending most of his time off planet these last years, too much time, it seems. And the Palwallum saw the opportunity to get in under his guard."

"What can we do?" Roxanna said.

"Not much," Wright said. "Not in the time available. But we can try. We might be able to swing one or two back."

"Let's at least put them on notice," Mac said.

"Notice of what?" Roxanna asked.

"Consequences."

"And we can stall the meeting, at least a bit," Roxanna said. "We shouldn't just let them do what they want. We should make it as difficult as possible. Tell that secretary it's not convenient, or something."

The other two nodded.

The Samura regiment arrived. The Shoga had given full measure and had sent Li-Wilhemena, her own deputy, to command. She had also sent Li-Alana, the sword mistress, as regimental sergeant-major.

Morgana-Li found that she was to be ostracised now even more than back at the abbey. She had turned traitor and was not to be trusted on any account. The members of the ninja squad that was to fall to her command were openly insolent.

She stood it for two days then with Roxanna safely ensconced with Mac she ordered them to a secluded section of the park. The dozen members of the squad formed up in front of her, contemptuously casual, with the gunso, Madelena-Li, standing a pace forward. Morgana-Li pointed to a pile of shinai there ready.

"Distribute these," she ordered curtly, taking one of the wooden practice swords herself. She lifted herself into the air.

"Up," she ordered, and then when they were floating before her at a handy distance, she shouted: "Defend yourselves!"

One against twelve should have been a massacre, particularly as the ninjas prided themselves on being the elite of the Samura, but Morgana-Li's own ability, honed by the extended training with Mac, had brought her to a pitch of excellence that was frightening to anyone but Mac. Even so, it was a hard-fought, bruising battle and Morgana-Li was badly battered by the time the last of her opponents went down, battered but clearly unbowed and the rest of them were in a much worse state. One was still out cold with a suspiciously twisted arm.

Morgana-Li, still aloft, looked down, savouring the moment.

"Fall in," she commanded, dropping down.

"Gunso, forward," she ordered. Madelena-Li stepped up, trying not to limp. She also had a black eye and a broken nose, Morgana-Li noted with satisfaction.

"So, gunso," Morgana-Li said evenly. "Do we have an understanding?"

Madelena-Li regarded her warily.

"Yes, hatamoto," she said. "I believe we do."

Nel Nilson, Shelby and John quickly came to a solid working relationship and a fair way to becoming friends. Nel, who knew the workings of the directorate intimately, concentrated on the day-to-day routine while Shelby and John delved into the intricate and deliberately confusing detail of thormalium mining and refinement. Neither man had ever had much in the way of formal education but the years spent assisting Captain Wright in his historical research was excellent training for this sort of job. Also, from their years knocking about the cluster they had a fine practical appreciation of the realities involved.

However, pinning down the exact situation was a monumental task. It seemed apparent that mining yields were indeed declining, but to what extent against what reserves of ore might be left was another matter. Then there was the question of the reserves and stockpiles of refined thormalium scattered throughout the Hyades, not to mention the probability or otherwise of any of the many prospecting expeditions striking a third mother lode. As yet they had no clear picture of what Mac faced. A great deal of the necessary information had died with his father and reconstituting it was proving a herculean labour.

"Best if you speak to him," Mac said, as he had each time before. Wright grimaced. He understood the reason. Their instinctive reaction was to dismiss Mac as a boy and therefore anything he might say as beneath consideration. Also, Mac wanted to keep his personal powder dry. Nevertheless, Wright was finding the lobbying of the board members an unpleasant task. The fifteen men and nine women, eight if you didn't count the Palwallum, ran to type – supercilious, overbred, over-entitled and fundamentally

useless. Their only interest and purpose in life appeared to be the preservation of their prerogatives. Effete was the word that came to mind, effete and utterly unprincipled.

The next on the list, Copal Devli, appeared before them on the screen. He was a small, neat man dressed in shiny emerald green with an elaborate coiffure. His family held the rights to half a dozen planets under Gadai supervision and their hereditary seat on the board had come to them at least 900 years before.

"Thank you for taking our call," Wright began. "We thought it appropriate that the new chairman should introduce himself to board members before his first meeting."

"Acting chairman," Devli said. His voice was thin and precisely accented.

"A formality," Wright said.

"Perhaps. And you are?"

"Captain Wright. His excellency has been pleased to appoint me his chief of staff."

"So," Devli said looking pointedly at Mac's calmly silent image on his own screen. "In point of fact, you act as regent?"

Wright made a vague gesture. In one form or another each of the board members they had so far addressed had made the same assumption, and Mac was not yet concerned to disabuse them of the notion.

"And as well as introducing ourselves," Wright continued. "We would seek to confirm your support for his Excellency's confirmation."

"Oh quite," Devli said.

"May I take it then that we have it? Your support?"

"No doubt. No doubt. Now, if that is all...?" And abruptly, the screen went blank.

"Another one," Roxanna said after a moment, emerging into view. "They're such bad actors."

"Except they're not acting," Mac said. "They can't be bothered even to go through the motions. An unknown candidate with an unknown chief of staff and they have no questions?"

"Breath-taking," Wright said. "They couldn't be any more blatant if they tried."

"He was number 17," Roxanna said. "Number 17 against, that is."

"The fix is in," Wright said. "I don't know how many the Palwallum has actually bought, one way or another, but they're all jumping on the bandwagon. No one will vote for Mac and risk being left totally exposed."

"Is there any point going on?" Roxanna asked.

Mac shrugged.

"May as well," he said. "May as well see what they all look like."

Orville barely slept or ate, he was so deep in the CAW. The task Mac had set him was deeply frustrating, like looking for a small lump of rock in a spiral galaxy, except

he didn't even know if it was indeed a rock he was searching for. He just had to hope that in amongst the billions of dumped files pouring through the CAW he would recognise whatever it was they wanted when he saw it, if he saw it. He had constructed numbers of programs predicated on the one fact he had, the address of the guilty terminal, but as he had told Mac, his chances of success were infinitesimal. He took his hands from the palm-board and rubbed tiredly at his eyes. He would have to sleep soon, the fatigue was killing him, but time was running out so fast, how could he?

When he opened his eyes to find Morgana-Li there, he actually thought he was hallucinating. She smiled.

"I can't come to you," she said. "You'll think it's out of pity, if I do. So I've been waiting for you to come to me. But you never will. You're afraid I'll reject you because you're a cripple. So what do we do?"

Orville rubbed his eyes again, but she was still there when he opened them.

"Why is your face all bruised?" he asked. An hallucination wouldn't have bruises, surely?

"Never mind about that," Morgana-Li said. She bent down, lingered a moment and then kissed him full on the mouth.

"Mac taught me," she said. "He taught me I have to be honest, to try to be honest anyway. And I want you. I honestly want you. I want you so much I can't stand it any longer."

"I want you," Orville said slowly. "More than anything."

"Well then?" Morgana-Li said.

Orville had a sudden idea. Perhaps if he inserted a sub-routine cross-referencing the Palwallum's personal code into each of his search algorithms...

"I have to do this," he said. He half expected, no, he fully expected Morgana-Li to fly into a rage and storm out. Extreme provocation and insulting at that. How not? She didn't.

"I'll wait," she said, drawing up another floater. "But tell me again, just so we're sure."

"I want you," Orville said.

"That's what I thought you said," Morgana-Li replied a touch breathlessly.

Li-Wilhemina noted the bruises that had suddenly sprouted on Morgana-Li and the rest of the Ninja squad. She also noted that the squad had suddenly become remarkably respectful towards their young officer. She further noted that other Samura were suddenly being a great deal more careful about whom they trashed to whom. She drew her own conclusions, smiled and said nothing

Her survey of the directorate, however, was quite another matter and she positively demanded an immediate interview with Mac and Wright. They fitted her in between the

last of the board members. She took Li-Alana with her for added weight, though Li-Wilhemina refrained from phrasing it quite like that. The sword-mistress could be a chancy proposition to offend.

She went straight on the attack.

"The defences of this building are shocking," she stated bluntly. "Simply disgraceful. It looks like nothing has been done to upgrade them for at least 500 years."

"What do you mean?" Mac said.

"Look all right to me," Wright said. Li-Alana sniffed meaningly.

"With respect, sir," Li-Wilhemina snapped. "You are merely a pilot. To anyone properly trained it is quite obvious that things have been allowed to deteriorate to a shameful condition. Why, the aerial detection system only functions from five degrees above horizontal. And there is no life-sign monitoring at all. None. Zero."

Roxanna took charge. Mac and her father were far too busy trying not to look at each other.

"Perhaps," she said. "With over a million people using this building, life-sign surveillance would be more confusing than anything? Perhaps that's why we don't have it?"

"That's no excuse for not using it after hours," Li-Wilhemina retorted.

"Fair point," Roxanna said.

"Hatamoto," Mac said, suddenly serious. "Thank you for your diligence. I want you to take whatever steps you deem necessary as quickly as possible. The deputy chief-of-staff will give you financial authorisation. Well done. We're grateful."

The two Samura saluted and left. Wright bided his time. When next Mac asked for an opinion, he pounced.

"Speaking as a mere pilot," he began... and broke off, shielding his head as the other two threw whatever came to hand in his direction.

Roxanna realised that Mac's notion of an inner council was already falling by the wayside. Everyone was simply too busy to spare the time for formal meetings. But they all had to eat, she thought, and what was the point of being betrothed to a billion-trillionaire if she couldn't order up some nice food.

That evening she demanded everyone's presence, even Orville's, no excuses accepted, and sat them informally about a round table she had caused to be set up in a pleasant chamber overlooking the park. It was like the old days voyaging on the James Macgilliguddy, with the addition of Nel and Morgana-Li. "The old days," she thought, amused at herself – a matter of months but already so very distant.

It was a pleasant meal, fun, relaxing, necessary.

"I give you fair warning," Roxanna said. "I'll be doing this most nights. No good having a family if you never see them."

And she made Mac take an hour each morning early for some strenuous flying with Morgana-Li and her ninjas. The question of who would act as her bodyguard in the interim was solved by Roxanna promising not to leave their apartment and posting four large Samura on the entrance. The apartment where she and Mac had been installed had been the chairman's ever since the elaborate quarters had been fashioned. Apart from the view and the general splendour, its chief feature was a bed-chamber where the walls, like the chairman's official sanctum, were panelled in pealed-pearl. In the filtered light from the trees outside, the effect was quite lovely. Neither she nor Mac were to know that this same apartment had once been occupied by Mac's half-brother, Osmond von Osmond the fourteenth. Nor did they know why, on the death of his mother, Osmond had demanded that he be allowed to live there if his father was going to insist on staying in his monkish cell.

On his daily furlough, Mac divided the ninjas into two teams, the other under Morgana-Li, and invented a pick-up form of g-ball. To keep the resulting hand-to-hand combat non-lethal he introduced a rule that to break any bone of any opponent meant automatic forfeiture of the game. It worked, mostly. The competition was intense and under his tutelage all the ninja became markedly more accomplished at flying. He progressively reduced his self-imposed handicap from fifteen goals to seven. Morgana-Li was quickly forced to accept that no longer would it be wise for her to think that she could tackle all 12 of her squad at once. The Samura detailed to mark and guard the perimeter of the playing cube were deeply envious of those privileged to compete and a little harmless gambling on the outcome quickly spread through the regiment. Even Li-Alana was known to have a flutter and Li-Wilhemena made it her business to know the daily result. She was considering introducing a tournament for the whole regiment once things were properly squared away.

And then it became impossible to stall the confirmation hearing any longer. Polite insistence degenerated into strident demand. Every possible delay had been invoked and finally overborne, and the date was set for three days hence.

Chapter Three

The Palwallum was not unhappy at the delay, reasonable delay. It gave her a chance to cement her absolute control of Redux with a judicious mixture of bribery and brutality, and to shore up her position with some of the less committed board members. She found that, perversely, the more the boy Albright and his creature Wright attempted to ingratiate themselves with her colleagues, the better her situation. Even those members she did not yet own, once they saw the way things were shaping, fell into line. No one it seemed was prepared to risk being isolated on this particular issue. A quick meeting, a surgical excision and a return to normal business under the experienced hand of the Palwallum, deservedly elevated to chairman, became the universal prognosis.

Even so, the Palwallum resisted the temptation to become complacent. It was well to remember that if recent events had gone according to plan this meeting would never have been necessary in the first place. Once bitten, she thought, twice wise. Indeed, a true professional would have a fall-back.

Again she consulted the collated reports of her various spies in the directorate – so much easier to maintain proper surveillance now that impossible sign language had been eliminated from the equation. She was aware, for instance, that those dykey Samura were insisting the building's security be overhauled but were having small success in the face of bureaucratic indifference and inertia. She was aware that Albright indulged himself every morning with a session of irresponsible aerial exercise, which truth to tell she found quite fascinating to watch courtesy of the bootleg cam she had insisted be obtained, and never mind the danger. The boy had a body, there was no doubt about that, and was really quite good-looking. She was aware that the girl, most improperly unchaperoned when she was with the boy, had the elite squad of fliers as personal bodyguards. So what, she wondered, was the arrangement when that same squad was playing that stupid game with the boy every morning? She made a note. And what was it that they did at those dinners, which she had not yet managed to penetrate? She made another note.

The Palwallum thought more about preparing a fall-back. She couldn't see how she could possibly fail with the board and it was undoubtedly so much wasted effort, but call it an exercise, an exercise preparing her for her new role.

Assassination? To place a sniper in the park with a clear shot at the boy during one of his morning rituals would be no trick at all. The sniper would undoubtedly die too, but a volunteer could be arranged by applying appropriate levers. However, in the improbable event that she should need to resort to simple murder, then by the same token, security would undoubtedly become stringent to the point where such opportunity would vanish. Should she just have done with it and dispose of the boy now, while she could? Perhaps. But to have the boy deposed and herself elected in his

place, all during the one elegant half hour, would be so much tidier, no possibility of loose ends or mistakes, and so much more satisfying. Her position, unanimously anointed as company saviour, would then be unassailable whereas if she should come to the board with blood on her hands and legally vulnerable, she might well encounter opposition, if not now then later. She could name at least three members who were themselves covetous of the chairmanship.

What then?

The girl stayed in her rooms while the boy was flying. The report said that she had had a barre and mirrors installed and that she had her own rigorous exercise routine. Four Samura guarded the entrance. The windows and balcony were on the second floor above the park. The windows were vast and apparently vulnerable, but being hugely expensive maxcrylic they were actually impenetrable to anything but a thermo.

The dinners were still a mystery. Once the food was delivered, the participants served themselves. All food and drink was automatically presented in toxin-tasting vessels, as was only sensible. The Palwallum herself had a vivid memory of a cryllic suddenly flaming crimson in warning as a servant had topped it up. Despite most earnest inquiry, she never had discovered who had been behind it, cut-outs within cut-outs. However, she had been morally certain that her husband, whom she had chosen simply for his genetic history, had been the ultimate instigator. It had been a relief to be able to dispose of him, more or less in good conscience, though the fool had denied involvement right to the end. The Palwallum had never bothered to wonder how the man could come to forget that she used TT utensils as a matter of course. Some inconvenient questions were better not asked.

She summoned Dostoi for his knowledge of the palace, definitely it was a palace and she would rename it in due course.

"This apartment," she said, indicating the screen showing images of the Mac and Roxanna's rooms. "Do you know it?"

As it happened, Dostoi knew it extremely well.

"Yes?" he said warily.

"Tell me about it."

"It is the master suite," Dostoi said. "The old Chairman preferred something much less ostentatious, a simple small cell, so..."

"Go on."

"After his wife... died, it was used by his son, Osmond. I used to serve him there."

"And...?"

"It's very comfortable. Luxurious."

"And...?"

"That's all."

"I'm not paying you a fortune for something the cook could tell me. What else?" The Palwallum's voice suddenly assumed that clarion note that Dostoi had learned to fear.

"There is a secret passage," he said. "An escape route."

"A passage?"

"It had been forgotten until Osmond found it. We used it for..."

"For what? I won't tell you again."

"For contraband. His nautch chaise, and mindwine, and stuff."

"Where does it lead?"

"To the landing dock."

"The landing dock?" All at once the Palwallum's mind lit up with the rosy-gold hue of inspiration. Dostoi nodded.

"And nobody knows about it?"

"No," Dostoi said.

"Leave me," the Palwallum commanded absently, already lost in contemplation.

Half an hour later she made her dispositions, undoubtedly unnecessary, but it never hurt to have insurance and this would cost nothing to abort.

The night before the critical meeting the mood around the dinner table was gloomy. Orville had been the last to enter and it had hurt to look at the expectant faces and to have to shake his head. He still had nothing and doubted he ever would. Roxanna had looked particularly downcast and Orville realised she was consumed with worry for Mac.

"I'm sorry," he said, to her particularly. "I've tried everything I know, everything I can think of..."

"Never mind," Mac said. "It was always a long shot and if you can't do it then it can't be done."

"If only there were more time," Orville said.

"Never mind," Mac repeated. "And thank you. Really thank you."

"But what will you do?"

"Play it by ear, I suppose."

"We've got to do better than that," Wright said.

"What would you suggest...? Anyone?"

No one had anything to say. It was a topic they had exhausted long since. Everything had depended on Orville. He was their best chance, their only chance.

"Don't worry," Mac said. "If nothing else, we hold the directorate and possession is still nine-tenths of the law."

Later, in bed, Roxanna reached for him and held him desperately.

"You can't really fight the whole of Galconia with 500 Samura," she said.

"I won't have to," Mac said. "There used to be a game called poker. I read about it somewhere. I'm going to play poker."

"What are you talking about?"

"I don't want to talk at all," Mac said with exaggerated patience.

None of the 24 members of the board, least of all the Palwallum, cared to be present in person for the critical meeting. There were sufficient recorded instances of displeased chairmen taking hostages or even summary executive action, executive in the sense of a firing squad, for it to have been written into the company by-laws that holoc presence was all that was required, at the member's expense, of course. And while the cost of holoc transmission was outrageous, it was still cheaper than the cost of the voyage in one's personal space ship and the peace of mind provided in what might prove contentious circumstances was well worth the price.

Mac stopped outside the boardroom door. He was dressed in simple jerkin and tights and looked far too young to be anything but a schoolboy. He was holding a tell.

"What's that?" Roxanna said, spotting it for the first time

"Nothing," Mac said. "It's empty. Blank."

"Then why do you have it?"

"It might come in useful," he said. "I might want to make a recording."

"You do talk nonsense. It's all recorded anyway. You made sure of that. You ordered the cams yourself..."

Mac looked inquiringly at Wright.

"I checked them myself," he said.

"And we're streaming real-time."

Wright nodded.

"Not that anybody will watch."

"I still don't understand," Roxanna said. "Why do we want to?"

"I thought it might help," Mac said. Roxanna looked at him searchingly.

"Mac," she said. "What are you going to do? What can you do?"

"I told you, Anna. I'm going to play poker."

"Do you know what he's up to?" she asked her father.

Wright frowned with worry and shook his head.

"Trust me," Mac said.

"We don't have any choice," Roxanna said tartly.

"I've got to go," Mac said. "Wish me luck."

Wright shook his hand.

"We'll be in the control room with the others," he said.

Roxanna kissed him.

"I love you," she said.

Mac entered the board room and paused. He, Wright and Roxanna had inspected it a number of times over past days and he was familiar if not comfortable with its extravagant décor. The board table was a massive slab of scarlet marble set on a black marble floor. The walls and ceiling were lined with gold synthetic silk figured with the company crest in a scarlet that matched the table exactly. The effect was of overpowering wealth and bad taste.

The 24 board members and the company secretary were all already seated, most lolling about with exaggerated disdain, their proxy images indistinguishable from real life. Mac strode forward to the head of the table where the one real chair in the room had been positioned. Nobody rose. Mac threw the tell down with a crash that drew every eye.

"Gentlemen," Mac said. "Ladies. I note that you fail to rise." He stood there expectantly. Various of the board members before him shifted uneasily, glancing about at their neighbours. Slowly, one half rose, then another until at last they were all standing in various degrees of discomfiture, all except the Palwallum. Eventually, even she was no longer able to resist the moral pressure Mac had brought to bear and found herself being forced to her feet.

In the control room, Mac's family, gathered about the four screens that showed the view from each of the fixed cams, was jubilant.

"Ain't he something," Shelby said over and over. "Ain't he just something..."

"Shush," Orville said impatiently. Roxanna and Morgana-Li were standing on either side of him and suddenly each of the girls took one of his hands. Roxanna's grip was painful.

"Thank you," Mac said and waited until everyone was seated again.

"An announcement," he said. "As chairman of this meeting I have made it available for streaming on real-time public camcast." There was a long, long silence as each of the members absorbed the fact that the humiliation they had just suffered had taken place before an audience potentially huge. There was an angry stirring.

"You have no right..." the Palwallum began.

"I have every right," Mac said calmly.

"Your appointment has not been ratified..."

"...And you're just a snot-nosed boy," Copal Devli interjected. There was a rising rumble of agreement and comment.

"Be quiet," Mac said. "Or I'll cut the sound. You are here to listen to me, not me to you."

"How dare you?" Devli shouted, leaping to his feet.

"The quiddity of this company is dictatorship and I am the dictator," Mac said. "Therefore I dare."

"The what?" Devli demanded. "What did you say?"

"The haecceity, if you prefer," Mac said.

"Do not make sport with me, boy," Devli shouted.

"Do you not speak the language, sir?" Mac said with perfect composure. "Am I, a snot-nosed boy I think you said... am I to teach you your letters?" Devli, unnerved, looked about for support and was saved by the Palwallum. As she began to speak he gratefully sat down and strove to efface himself.

"In point of fact," the Palwallum said in a carrying voice, "you are not dictator. You are not even chairman until your appointment has been ratified. That, I remind you, is why we are here, not so you may offend us with your impudence."

"Ah," Mac said equably. "The nub of the matter, but it is mere formality."

"You think so?" the Palwallum said, her voice suddenly silky.

"Indeed," Mac said. "But before I call for discussion, let me just make a general observation or two." Again there was a stir. The meeting was not going at all to plan and there was a sudden sense of danger in the air. The boy clearly had something up his sleeve and a number of covert glances were being shot at the Palwallum. She was aware of them, and was disconcerted in her turn. Mac, still standing, bent forward and picked up the tell, holding it negligently. Again it drew every eye. The sense of danger increased. What was the tell? What was on it?

Wright began to get an inkling.

"I don't believe it..." he started to say but was instantly shushed.

"My father," Mac said, "the late chairman, before he died obtained a formal court order and instituted an independent audit of the Palwallum's affairs, including her personal affairs. The Palwallum was made aware of the audit on her recent return to Theta Tauri Major from attending to business elsewhere in the cluster. Astonishingly, instead of electing to stay and account for herself, the Palwallum chose to flee. However, before leaving Theta Tauri Major she gave orders that files held through a secret facility be dumped and that the operator concerned be killed to ensure his silence." Mac paused and surveyed his audience. They were hanging on his every word, he saw, and comprehension was beginning to dawn, comprehension closely followed by apprehension.

"Now," Mac continued. "As perhaps you are unaware, files dumped on the CAW are, in fact, retrievable given the appropriate level of skill. That is a fact, an unfortunate fact, a most unfortunate fact in this instance for the Palwallum and certain others who mistakenly gave her their... trust."

Mac lingered a moment and then with perfect timing again hurled the tell to the table. It smashed down with what seemed the crack of doom. Mac, vengeful, righteous, began to seek out the eyes of individual directors, staring coldly until each was forced to drop their gaze in defeat. Devli, of course, and Chin, and the Amati woman, Mazdov and Lester, Pahlavi, Reston, Polkinghorne-Wilkes and on, one by one. They forgot his youth. They forgot their own bespoke intentions. They forgot the Palwallum, her threats, her bribes. They were left only with the desire for self-preservation, the desire at all costs to avoid the imminent exposure that would spell ruin for them all. And there was another factor, intriguing, so tempting.

"I remind you," Mac said finally. "That the proceedings of this meeting are public. I now move that I be appointed Chairman of Galconia Enterprises Inc. Is there a seconder?"

Hands shot up all round the table, much to the amusement and scorn of those watching.

"I think the motion is seconded," Mac said gravely. "Would the meeting wish me to speak to the motion?"

There was an indrawn hiss of alarm, quite audible to the cams, and a shaking of heads. Devli leaped to his feet.

"Surely unnecessary," he said hastily, and then regaining some poise, added unctuously: "I believe we may take it that the sense of the meeting is unanimous and that we may declare you elected by acclaim."

Abruptly, the Palwallum's holoc winked out.

"One dissenter," Devli said with chagrin.

"Perhaps..." Reston said, standing. "If the chair will recognise me...?"

Mac nodded graciously.

"Perhaps, in the circumstances, " Reston said. "Perhaps, we might vote first on the Palwallum's continued membership of this board... Then the Chairman could subsequently be elected unanimously..."

"I second that," Amati said.

"Then I believe that's all carried," Devli said with the most unseemly haste. "Congratulations, sir. And may you have a long and happy incumbency."

And as if disconnected by a single switch, all the holocs simultaneously disappeared, leaving Mac alone.

The victory was so sudden and so miraculously complete that everyone involved, everyone watching, was frozen with shock. At last, Mac sat and began to tremble with reaction. Bluff and bluster he had said, but he had never really believed he would be able to carry it off. He picked up the tell and contemplated the fact that he had bet not only the cluster but their lives on a hand of such rubbish that the cards didn't even exist.

He had bet, he had bluffed and he had won. The door hissed open, the others piled in and Mac was instantly the centre of a disbelieving celebration.

They took him to the private dining room, now also furnished with couches and comfortable floaters, that by common consent had become the family meeting place. In all of them, as well as relief and joy at the turn of events, there was the same awe. Mac, their Mac, happy, knockabout Mac, Mac still a boy really, had turned out to be not a magician so much as a man of compelling substance, a man to value for his acumen and leadership, a man to depend on, a man to whom you could trust your life, truly a man to follow.

Each of the group had nursed the same deep-seated fear. The chairmanship would be withheld from Mac, and then, at best, would begin a long, destructive civil war. At worst, if the Samura thought it politic to change allegiance, Mac and all his people, themselves in other words, would summarily be disposed of in nameless graves. They had not talked about it except within the group as an abstract, and each of them had wrestled alone with very real fear of the immediate future, unwilling to burden others with more of the same.

The release they all felt was extraordinary.

Nel, reserved, severe Nel, hugged him for a long time. "Your father would be so proud," she whispered.

Orville was in tears. "I tried everything I knew," he said. "And I failed and I thought we'd all end up dead. But you didn't need it anyway..."

Shelby and John would not stop slapping his back and pummeling his arms. "You bastard," they said over and over. "You bastard."

Morgana-Li without apology to anyone, even Roxanna, kissed him once, twice, three times and a fourth for luck. "I knew you'd win," she said, which was a totally shameless lie.

Roxanna and her father just watched, except the radiance of Roxanna's face would have ignited a bonfire and Wright could not stop grinning like an idiot.

Eventually Mac came to them.

"So," Wright said. "You really can do this..."

Roxanna was mock angry.

"I thought I was supposed to know everything that you know," she said.

"You do," Mac said innocently. "Everything I think is another matter and it's not my fault if you can't play poker."

Chapter Four

For the first time in more years than she cared to admit, the Palwallum could no longer think of herself as the most powerful woman in the cluster. She was again little Lotte Schmidt-Schmidt, unattractive, friendless and so very, very frightened. She wanted to crawl into her snugglecot, pull the covers up over her head, and to stay there until the nightmares all went away. Her mother would come in, no, better not her mother, her nurse would come in, smooth the covers and hold her till the morning came. And everything would be all right. Everything would be all right.

The magnitude of her defeat was impossible to grasp. On vanishing from the board meeting she had instantly tuned to the public camcast, in time to watch aghast as not only was the imposter boy formally installed as Chairman, but she, herself, was first expelled from the board. In one fell swoop she had been cut off at the knees, emasculated, so to speak, disembowelled, gutted. She had been publicly branded corrupt, a fugitive from lawful investigation and a murderer. Instead of owning the board, she had been ejected from it with haste so indecent it was akin to being stripped naked in public, and that devil boy and her enemies within the Gadai would now move instantly to despoil her of the Palwallumship as well. And then, then they would come for Redux, if Redux didn't rise against her first. It was over, all over. She was finished.

And indeed, the Palwallum was so shattered that it was not until the next day that she remembered her fall-back.

"All right," Mac said. Out of increased concern for his security, he had been made to miss flying that morning and was grumpy with it. "Council in session. Come on, shut up..."

"Whoa," Orville said. "Listen to his nibs, the Chairman."

"Shut up," Mac said again. "Or I'll send you back to searching the CAW. Come on, there's stuff we have to think about."

"Like what?" Orville said.

"Security for starters," Morgana-Li said. "You don't think the Palwallum will just give up, do you? Curl up her toesies and call it quits?"

"She might," Orville said.

"And there is the matter of Mac's investiture," Wright said. "Plus what we do about appointing a new Palwallum."

"And the thormalium," Mac said. "Don't forget thormalium is running out, never mind that we're still shut out of Redux."

"Nel," Wright said. "Why don't you tell us about investitures for starters?"

"Grand occasions," Nel said. "The grandest in the Hyades, like an ancient coronation."

"Does it have to be?" Mac said.

"Absolutely," Nel said. "You might be the most powerful man the universe, but even so it's much easier to govern if people are disposed to be co-operative. So, you can't afford to offend anyone, not right at the beginning, which means you have to invite absolutely everyone who's anyone, which means it has to be huge and that you'd better put on a show. Or they'll all be very cranky at coming in from the ends of the cluster for nothing."

Mac sighed. "How huge?"

"I suppose about a hundred and fifty thousand."

"What?"

"Official guests," Nel said complacently.

"Ye gods," Mac said. "How do we begin to organise that?"

"You have a department of protocol to do it for you. Just tell them when you want it."

"When do we want it?" Wright put in.

"On my eighteenth birthday, I suppose," Mac said. They all nodded. It was the obvious date and would allow enough time, perhaps, for all that had to be done.

"The Palwallum?" Mac said, moving on. "And Redux."

"I've already set the wheels in motion to formally strip her of the title," Wright said. "That won't be a problem. Any number of senior Gadai will be glad to get rid of her."

"And her replacement?" Mac said.

"More difficult. Theoretically, it's an internal appointment by vote of senior management. In practice, it's whoever survives the in-fighting. You can obviously exert influence but backing the wrong candidate and losing means that you automatically end up with a very powerful enemy, the new palwallum."

"What do you suggest?"

"Research in the first instance," Wright said. "We need to talk to our Gadai specialists. We need to get this right."

"Are all of them, the Gadai, like the Palwallum?" Mac asked. Wright shrugged.

"Some," he said. "Most. You have to understand, Mac. The qualities that make for a successful politician make for a perfectly appalling human being."

"So why is it that you all insist I be a politician?" Mac demanded, with real anger.

"Stop it," Roxanna said.

"Stop what?" Mac snapped.

"Feeling sorry for yourself and behaving like a... palwallum."

Mac smiled, grudgingly.

"I really do hate all this," he said, and no one could mistake the genuineness of the plea in his voice.

"Someone has to do it," Roxanna said. She lowered her head, her heart aching.

Mac sighed, but Wright rounded on him.

"Look here," he said passionately. "Power is never given, it's always taken. You did that. You took it. You fought for it. And you took it. Now you live with it. Before that meeting we didn't really know who you are. Now we do. Make up your mind to the fact that you are the Chairman. You. No one else."

"That's not fair," Mac said hotly. "I didn't want it. I never wanted it. I only went to that meeting because I had no choice. I had to go to protect all of you."

"And do you think that I could have done what you did?" Wright demanded. "Or anyone else here? Anywhere? You were the only one who knew what to do, the only one who knew how to do it. You were the only one who could possibly have pulled it off. The people round that table, they were all there because they have power, because they know power, they understand power. They use power every day of their lives, great power. Yet you played them like fish in a net. You have a gift, Mac. And this is what you were born to do. This. Not to amuse yourself flying. This!"

There was an embarrassed silence.

"Fish on a line," Mac said at last.

"What?" Wright said.

"You play fish on a line, not in a net."

"Which is precisely my point," Wright said fiercely. "You put them in a net. You had nothing but an empty tell and yet you rounded them all up in a net made of their own guilt. And they had no chance to avoid it. You gave them no chance. Accept it, Mac. You're the chairman, you're the man, and it's right that you should be."

"But I don't have to like it," Mac shot back.

"Then pretend," Wright said. "Or you'll drive us all mad. And most of all yourself. This is your life, Mac. You established that yesterday. Make up your mind to it."

Mac regarded him with a look as mutinous as a sulky child and there was another long silence. No one knew what to say, how to sweeten the bitter pill Mac was being forced, finally, to swallow. Up to now the situation had had many of the aspects of a game, a high-stakes game but entertaining, heavy with possibilities. Now all that stretched before him was a lifetime of routine responsibility, responsibility so heavy that it was like to crush from him all the joy that made him who he was.

For all his severity, Wright perfectly understood what he was asking of the boy and it grieved him deeply, but there was simply no help for it. Destiny had made its decree and there was no escape.

Mac stood and his face bore an expression of such pain that Roxanna felt her heart stop. Without a word he walked to the open window and the balcony beyond. He

paused for a moment and then lifted off, angling rapidly up into the sky until he disappeared beyond the trees.

Morgana-Li belatedly leaped to her feet.

"I should follow," she said. "He's unprotected."

"No." Roxanna said. "Let him go." She was weeping.

Wright put out a hand and took hers.

"He'll come back," he said.

She shook her head.

"But that's just it," she said. "I don't know that I want him to."

Slade had watched the camcast with mounting disbelief, then anger, and finally fury. First the boy had outfaced that miserable bunch of sycophantic incompetents and then he had played them, played them for fools, played them for the fools they were. Of course it was bluff, it had to be bluff, and yet not one of them including the precious Palwallum had had the balls to call him on it. Anyone could see that it was bluff. Retrieve dumped files? Total and utter nonsense, at least he was pretty sure it was. And none of those idiots would challenge him. Not one of them. They had treated that tell the boy had thrown at them like some sort of thermo about to explode in their faces. It had to be blank and yet they had folded, every single one of them had folded.

Then, a small, traitorous part of Slade's mind wondered, with everything to lose and only the Palwallum as overlord to gain, whether he, too, might not have made the same craven choice. And he knew, of course, that that was exactly what he would have done. Possible exposure versus getting rid of that dreadful woman and her threats and her blackmail once and for all. It wasn't even a choice. Gods, the boy was good, like his father before him, men you could work for. And yet again, Slade bemoaned the decision long gone that had first put him on the wrong side of fate and now into this stinking, clapped-out, thormalium transport.

And he also knew that inevitably the Palwallum would order his mission to proceed, what else could she do? And that just as inevitably he would obey. What else could he do? And what the Hyades did quiddity mean anyway, never mind haeceity?"

Mac had been longing to fly the skies of Theta Tauri Minor, to wander among the incredible spires and towers, to swoop along the tangled beltways, dodge the aggers and haulers and private fly-bys, explore the endless city canyons. And always it had been denied to him. Too risky, his ninjas said. Too easy to sidle up in a fly-by and pop him with a magma slug. Bad enough that he insisted on exercising in his own park. Flying free was out of the question.

Except he wasn't flying free even now. There was no escape.

Wright was right.

Mac stormed down a long curving beltway, the people moving inside the clear cryllic tube pointing at him and exclaiming. They would know who he was, he realised. The camcast of the meeting had taken on a viral life of its own. A little boy waved at him, excited, pulling at his mother's restraining hand. Mac waved back. It seemed important that he should. He boomed and zoomed and finally topped out at a level with the tallest spires. The air was thin and anaemic up here, cold. It was difficult to breathe. He could keep on going up till he blacked out and fell. It would be quick. Dramatic. Final.

Wright was right.

He hovered, trying to see a limit to his immediate domain. There was none. In every direction the man-made pinnacles and summits, peopled by billion upon billion, marched on, endless, until they lost themselves in the distant haze. His people. In their measureless myriads and multitudes. All with their hopes, their fears, their anxieties, all with the potential to smash, to burn, to rape, to kill.

Wright was right.

Mac rolled into a vertical dive, screaming down at terminal velocity, eyes slitted, blind with tears. What difference would it make? What difference would any of it make? None. The only possible answer was none. He was part of the continuum, that was all. You live, you die and what happens in between matters nothing except as continuum. He heard Anna's voice. How could he? "I have a message from your father. I memorised it for you. It seemed important. 'Government is measured by the sum total of suffering avoided, not by the suffering inflicted.'" When had she said that? Had she ever said that? Did he believe it? Had his father believed it? Was that how he had endured? All those years?

Now. Or never.

Mac pulled out, his body racked by the g-forces, and hurtled along, almost at ground level. He was in some sort of plaza and rapidly running out of room. People were ducking, dodging, alarmed, fearful, defensive. Conflict. It was the natural state, xenophobia, hard-wired into the human frame and never eliminated, an evolutionary blind alley born on the savannahs of ancient earth where any other group of hunter-gatherers was a threat to the food supply and instant enemy. No wonder the Thrones had departed in disgust. Again he had the choice.

He banked and climbed.

Humans had killed the mother planet, besotted by democracy, unable to control themselves, scorching it in the fires of their conflicting self-interest, myopic, pathetic, unrepentant, irredeemable, surging out into this cluster to do it again, and again. A plague. Unless.

Unless what? Unless he managed them?

Hubris. Arrant hubris.

And that was the crux. What right did he have to rule? Right of birth? What right did he have to think he could? Right of conquest? Right of fantasy? Right of good intentions?

The right of resolve?

Mac came to rest on a jutting corbel, high above the plaza he had just terrorised, and sat there, just sat there.

Theta Tauri pushing the dawn over the horizon finally roused him. He was cold and stiff from the long, lone vigil high in the solitude of the sky. When had he come to rest there? The morning before. He had not eaten or drunk or slept for nearly 30 standard hours but he was neither tired, nor hungry, nor thirsty. The air tingled. The star's rays were warming. And what he felt was clarity.

He had hoped just to be able to slip through the window into the apartment he shared with Roxanna, to find her before seeing anyone else, but as instructed the windows were all locked. He dropped down to the portico below and took the surprised salutes of the Samura on duty. Again, the sentries guarding his own door saluted as he went past, stepping quickly. His rooms, however, had that instantly recognisable dead feel. He stopped and quested, the hairs on his neck rising. Every room was empty. He checked twice. The covers were disturbed on the floater and Roxanna's robe lay discarded on the floor of the dressing room, but there was no other sign of her.

He went back to the entrance.

"When did the Lady leave?" he asked the gocho.

"But sir, she hasn't left..." the gocho said. Instantly her face creased into a frown of alarm.

"How long have you been on duty?"

"Nearly four hours, sir."

"Get Captain Wright, young Captain Wright and Hatamoto Morgana-Li," Mac said. His voice was very crisp, very clear. "And check with the other guard details that she didn't leave while they were on duty."

"Yes sir," the gocho said, though both of them knew that had this been the case, the information would have been passed on.

Mac went back inside and checked each window individually. They were all securely locked from the inside. If not through the windows and not through the door, then how? There had to be a passage. Of course, there was a passage. No chairman, certainly not in the earlier days, would have stayed here without an escape route. But where? Not the pearl panelling, too fragile. Not the bed-chamber then. Not the day-room. Not the drawing room. Not the breakfast room. The servery? Too small. The abluter? Seamless. The dressing rooms, then. One of the dressing rooms. No. The mirror. Of course, the mirror.

Each of the two dressing rooms opened off a wide alcove, the end of which was taken up by the largest 3-D mirror any of them had ever seen. It went from floor to ceiling and was some two metres wide.

Wright came bursting in followed by Orville and Morgana-Li.

"There must be a passage," Mac said. "They must have got in through a passage. It must be here, I think. Behind the mirror."

He was down on his knees, feeling along the floor.

"No," Orville said after watching him for a moment. "Stand up. Your left hand, palm out, shoulder height. Stretch out your arm."

Nothing happened.

"And your right arm," Orville said. "Stretch it out as far as you can. Touch the crystallic."

For half a second, nothing happened. Then the mirror noiselessly slid up into the ceiling and they were staring into a wide passage of fused rock, lit by thread lights that had automatically turned on with the lifting of the door.

"Heat sensor locks," Orville said.

"How did you know?" Morgana-Li asked. Orville shrugged as his father hurried to get the guards.

"It's what I would have done," he said.

Mac was already thrusting into the passage.

"Wait," Morgana-Li said. "You're not armed."

"They're long gone," Mac said over his shoulder and pressed on. A moment later he was followed by Wright and the Samura. Orville thought for a moment and then turned about the other way.

He had checked exhaustively with the landing dock controller by the time the others finally emerged in an obscure corner and hurried across the cavernous space. It had taken them time to negotiate the passage, more time to find the sensors in the sliding panel that protected the entrance, top and bottom in this case, and it was a long walk across the dock.

He turned as they came up.

"She's on her way to Redux," he said. "A thormalium shipment came in, sometime after midnight. The ship stayed an hour, unloading, and left straight away. Back to Redux. The signature is showing on the CAW. It was a regular run, more or less. The ship parked quite close to where you came out. It's near the the thormalium vault. Nobody saw anything. Nobody suspected anything. The guards were only interested in checking the thormalium through.

"I'm sorry," he added to Mac. "We've been stupid. So stupid."

Chapter Five

Slade had grilled Dostoi until the man was nearly in tears and he was reasonably satisfied that he had an accurate picture of the Directorate's landing dock and the normal procedure. And the worm Dostoi had assured him over and over again that there would be no difficulty at all, that all the guards were interested in was the thormalium, that they would be able to slip out the blind side and round the corner, no problem, he had done it many times.

"And you're sure about the apartment," Slade demanded for the umpteenth time. "The layout?"

"Unless they've changed it," Dostoi said. "But there's no reason they would and they haven't had time anyway."

"Well, let's hope for your sake that you're right," Slade said. Dostoi's lip curled and he nearly said what he was thinking: Not that hoary old threat, please. But he caught himself in time. That thug Eldo was watching him suspiciously and Dostoi hastily dropped his eyes. He didn't like Eldo and tried hard never to be left alone with him.

The transport entered atmo and slid quickly down through the night sky of Theta Tauri Minor towards the Directorate. The ship's code was accepted by the controller of the landing dock without question and the laser barrier winked out to allow them entry. A marshal led them past the huge mass of The-All-Sun-And-The-All-Moon to the usual loading bay by the vault, as Dostoi had predicted, and within minutes the practised routine was in full swing, thormalium canisters sliding down the conveyor and on to the a-g pallets to be towed into storage.

Slade, dressed in greasy coveralls, a blaster thrust in his bosom, waited until he judged everyone had lost what little interest they might have had in the ship and motioned Dostoi to lead the way. With Eldo bringing up the rear, also with a concealed blaster, a laser-blade and a maxalloy garrotte, they slipped out the escape hatch and across the floor of the dock. A moment later they were safe behind the bulwark that concealed the entrance to the tunnel.

It was quite like old times, Dostoi thought, except that back in the day the guards would have been well bribed and there wouldn't have been the slightest risk at all.

"Put your hand here," he said to Slade, indicating a spot about shoulder-high on the wall panel. He bent down and placed his hand against the bottom, feeling the slight, well-remembered indentation that had been worn by all the others before him. He sighed with relief as the wall swung inwards. He hustled them inside and swung the panel shut. As he did so, the thread lights came on. Again, Slade motioned for him to lead the way.

It was a fair journey, almost 20 minutes. The Chairman's palace was well separated from the hustle and noise of the landing dock and their route was somewhat circuitous,

following as it did the cavities of the huge load-bearing walls, internally trussed and braced with massive beams of maxalloy. There were no branches or diversions. The passage had one destination and one only. At last after yet more flights of open-work steps and another long traverse they could see the place where the thread lights abruptly ended.

Dostoi walked to the end, turned to the others and held a finger to his lips.

"Remember," Slade whispered. "No noise. We kill the boy and anyone else who might be there, bring the bodies in here and get out." He nodded to Dostoi, who spread-eagled his arms and then stood back as the mirror slid upwards. He had no intention of going inside. What did Slade think he was? Crazy.

Slade pulled down his dark-see visor, took the blaster from his belt, motioned to Eldo to do the same and slipped through, Dostoi's sketch of the layout clear in his mind. He quickly checked both dressing rooms, impressed despite himself by their size, then the abluter, the day room, the formal drawing room, the breakfast room and the servery off to the side. That left only the bed-chamber. The door hissed slightly as it slid open and Slade cursed under his breath. He and Eldo went through fast, one after the other and fanned out. There was only one small figure curled on the vast floater. Slade cursed again. The boy wasn't here. Only the girl. Oh gods! Just once, couldn't things go according to plan? He thought frantically. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Eldo stuff his blaster away and step towards the bed, garrotte swinging. He swung out his arm and his hook lodged in the crook of his elbow. Eldo jerked angrily, but Slade hung on.

"No," he hissed.

"No what?" a voice suddenly said. It was the girl. "No, he isn't here." She sounded calm, which was something. She was sitting up, sheet pulled to her chin. Slade saw a robe on the end of the floater. He let go of Eldo and threw it to her.

"Put that on," he said. "And then get dressed. You're coming with us. But if I think you've touched a panic button or hit an alarm field, I kill you. Move."

Eldo leered and then whistled as she slipped on the robe.

Slade held up his hook. "You touch her and I'll cut off both your hands and feed them to you," he said. "I need her undamaged. Get back in the passage."

He hustled Roxanna to her dressing room.

"Can I turn on the light?" she said, still calm. All she could feel was the wash of relief. They had come to kill Mac, and her no doubt, but Mac hadn't been there. He was still safe and that was all that mattered.

"I'll do it," Slade said. He passed his hand over the sensor pad, praying it wasn't an alarm, and hastily lifted his visor as the room sprang to brightness.

"I'm not dressing in front of you," Roxanna said. "You can either trust me or kill me."

"Get on with it," Slade said, and turned his head in something of a compromise. It was enough for her to obey, though it would have been less than human of him not to note out of the corner of his eye that she was lithe, muscled and had all the right curves. She was ready quickly, the sort of no-fuss woman that Slade admired most.

"Can I bring a bag?" she said.

"One minute," Slade said. "You have one minute."

Roxanna threw some things into a fatpac and turned.

"I still have a scar on my throat from last time," she said. "You do remember what happened last time?" Slade winced. He took the bag and rifled through it, before giving it back to her.

"You'd do better just to go," Roxanna said. "To leave. Without me."

And for a fleeting instant, Slade even considered it. But what was there left for him if he did? Life on the run? Life on Cram?

He motioned to the door and Roxanna walked through, head high, and into the tunnel. Dostoi closed the mirror while Slade gagged her and slip-tied her hands behind her back. All she could do then was to make sure that she kept either Dostoi or Slade between her and Eldo, if only to stop him accidentally finding the small laserblade she had palmed into her cleavage while Slade's gaze had mostly been averted.

They emerged into the landing dock without incident but just as they were about to follow Eldo round the bulwark he suddenly turned to the wall and fumbled at his crotch. Slade hooked Roxanna by an elbow and pressed his good hand to her mouth to make doubly sure.

"Hey," a guard shouted at Eldo with disgust. "You can't do that here."

"Go to Hyades," Eldo snarled and calmly hosed the wall. The guard noted his thick neck and broad back and quickly decided honour was satisfied.

"Swig," he shouted and stalked off.

Eldo, to reinforce the victory, took his leisurely time and didn't finish till the way was quite clear. Two minutes later they were back aboard the ship, Slade, on the one hand impressed by Eldo's quick thinking and on the other repelled yet again by his irredeemable crudity. He took Roxanna to the one spare cabin and locked her in, making a particular point of changing the code on the lock.

"Don't let anyone but me come in," he said. "For your own sake. Eldo is by no means the roughest on board."

"And just exactly how would you suggest I stop them?" Roxanna demanded.

Slade shrugged.

"You're not on top of this at all, are you?" Roxanna said with scorn.

"On top of it enough to know the boy will do anything to get you back," Slade snapped, stung. "You'll bring him to us, and we'll kill him then. We can wait."

"He wouldn't dream of coming," Roxanna said. "He's far too smart." But they both knew her words were hollow. Slade smirked.

"Would you care to make a small wager?" he said and left while he had a scoring point to cover his exit. She was right, of course. Snatching her to hold against the boy's life had been purest extemporisation. Even so, Slade was beginning to feel quite pleased with himself. He had taken a difficult situation on the volley and who knew, he might well have come up with the winning shot.

Roxanna waited until the door was locked behind him and then made a careful inspection for eyespies or other surveillance devices. As far as she could tell, the cabin was clean. There was an air vent high up near the ceiling in one of the corners. It seemed harmless. Even so, she used as much concealment as possible to retrieve the laser-blade and slip it to a safer hiding place in her boot. It was quite capable of killing a man, used properly, and Morgana-Li had made her practise hitting the fatal spots until she was sure that Roxanna would do it automatically.

She felt the ship come to life and after some stop-start manoeuvring, the motion smoothed out and she knew that it would not be long before they were ex-atmo and clear of possible pursuit. Then all she could do was worry and to pray that Mac had decided to leave for good, which was stupid. If there was one certainty in the universe it was that whatever his state of mind, Mac would come for her as soon as he heard what had happened. He would come and there was only one thing she could do that would stop that, and there was no guarantee even then.

Slade kept com silence all the way back to Redux. However secure the link, this was not something he felt capable of explaining to the Palwallum and her unpredictable temper before the interested gaze of the ship's crew. And he was also preoccupied with the problem of the little minx locked in the spare cabin. Because of that same ship's crew he had determined that he would have to tend to her himself, never mind the ribald comments that he was carefully intended to overhear. But if only they knew. The girl gave him hell. Each time he took her to the abluter or brought her a meal, she launched into him like a hellion, physically assaulting him so that he would have to slap her half-unconscious and then she would resort to the sort of verbal abuse that several times brought him so close to a murderous rage that he would have to flee the cabin. And it was only after the most violent of these episodes, when he found himself trembling outside in the corridor visualising the act of ripping out her throat with his hook, that he finally realised that this was exactly what she was aiming for.

She was deliberately trying to provoke him into killing her. Why? To save the boy. It must be. To save the boy! Gods of the cluster! What a girl! What a damn fine woman!

So why didn't she just have done and kill herself? There were ways, even locked in that cabin. Because, Slade realised as he asked the question, suicide would burden the

boy forever with a guilt he would never be able to bear, because in killing herself she would also surely kill the boy and then her sacrifice would be pointless.

Slade sighed with admiration, and then again but this time with irritation. It made it so much easier if one could despise one's enemies but life had conspired to ensure that he could only despise his so-called friends.

He went back into the cabin. Roxanna was still lying crumpled on the floor where he had smashed her during the last bout. She lifted her head slightly.

"I'm not going to kill you," he said. "Whatever you do, I won't kill you. That would let the boy off the hook." He held up his own crude prosthetic to emphasise the point. "And I know you won't kill me, because then I couldn't kill you. And I know you won't kill yourself. So you might as well stop all this."

"If I kill you, the others will kill me," Roxanna said tiredly. Her lips were bruised and her voice blurred.

"No," Slade said. "You know what they'll do and it won't be to kill you. And even if they did, by accident, that's taking self-sacrifice too far. Anyway, you know what that would do to Mac. It would send him crazy, the same as if you did kill yourself. No. You're done. I salute your courage. Really I do. But you're done."

Roxanna buried her head in the crook of her arm.

"Why?" she said, after a moment. "Why do you keep hounding us? What have we ever done to you?"

"I made a bad decision," Slade said. "One bad decision, and fate locked us together."

"That's not an answer," Roxanna said.

Slade shrugged.

"But it's the truth," he said. "From that one bad decision, the path could lead only to where we are now."

"You could have stopped. At any time you could have stopped."

"No," Slade said slowly, understanding himself fully for the first time in his life. "I couldn't have stopped, any more than you could. Vanity wouldn't let me."

"You could stop now," Roxanna said. She had moved her arm and was staring straight at him.

Slade held her gaze, absently, without emotion.

"No," he said. "I can't. I have nowhere to go. We have to play this out to the end."

"We have money," Roxanna said. "We could give you more money than you've ever dreamed. Enough to buy a planet of your own. A dozen planets."

Slade's gaze sharpened.

"You know that's true," Roxanna said.

"But always you would have the power to crush me at will. And you would. Mac would have to. He couldn't let me live after this. He would be perceived as weak, fatally weak."

"You could just retire," Roxanna persisted. "Anonymously. Disappear somewhere quiet. Honshos..."

Slade smiled.

"The gods save me from that monstrous regiment of women," he said.

"Not Honshos then, but somewhere else nice." There was a sudden trace of hope in Roxanna's voice.

Slade thought. It was tempting, so tempting.

"Ask me again some time," he said at last. "But in the meantime, no more nonsense."

"Now," Roxanna said. "It has to be now. Or it will be too late."

"It's already too late," Slade said as he left. "We're nearly there."

Dostoi hurriedly stepped down from the bunk, where he had had his ear pressed to the joint vent. The bouts between Slade and the girl had been the only entertainment to be had on this tedious voyage, and stimulating at that, but this last was something else. It was knowledge that might well play to his advantage. One way or another. He was very sure of one thing. If Slade managed to find a way of extricating himself from the Palwallum's grip and the rest of this mess then Dostoi was going with him.

The trip through the passage to the landing dock had given Mac time to control his shock and then to think. Orville's news as they emerged came as no surprise. It was simply confirmation of what had seemed obvious from the first minutes.

The others, he saw with irritation, were all looking at him, waiting for his lead.

"It was an assassination attempt," Mac said. "Because I wasn't there they took Roxanna hostage instead of just killing us both. They'll want me in exchange for her. And a formal share transfer."

Both Wright and Orville looked stricken.

"You can't do it. You can't go," Wright said.

"Of course, I'll go," Mac said touching Wright on the arm. "How could I not?"

"We can't... spare you," Wright said, making no attempt to hide the effort it took to say the words.

"It's not a matter for debate," Mac said. "And we go now, fast, before they have time to organise. They didn't plan this. It just happened. It gives us a chance, if we're quick."

"We?" Wright said.

"Not you. I need you to stay here and run things," Mac said. "Orville," and he pointed at The-All-Sun-And-The-All-Moon where she sat taking up a good half of the

available space, "get her cranked up. No signature. No admin staff. And all the cockroaches we have. Morgana-Li, I want all the Samura on board in an hour. Full kit including fighting suits and heavy weapons. Have the GDF take over from them here. Come on, move."

Wright looked at him as they raced off.

"Do you know what you're doing?" he asked. Mac shrugged.

"We'll see," he said. "I do know that the faster we go, the more chance we have. Even The-All-Sun-And-The-All-Moon won't catch that transport before Redux, but we should be able to get there very soon after. We might find them unprepared."

"Do you have a plan?"

"Not yet. I have an idea..."

"About your will," Wright said. "Have you made one?"

"Of course," Mac said. "I very rarely don't follow your advice. Whatever happens, there will be no share transfer. If they kill me, all the shares go first to Roxanna and if she dies too, then they come to you. To you, then Orville."

"That wasn't my advice," Wright said, taken aback. "I just said, 'make a will'."

Mac smiled, despite his tension.

"And who else do you think I could possible leave them to?" he asked. "You'll do the job better than me anyway." As he spoke, the landing dock began to spring to life. Techs were hurrying towards the ship and the first Samura were appearing with weapons pallets.

"There's one other thing I might need," Mac said. "Some sort of dummy document, you know what I mean. Could you see what the secretariat can whip up for me?"

Chapter Six

Slade's transport joined the queue waiting at the atmo-lock and in due course passed through the lucent and down to the space-port. A burly UWAT major thrust arrogantly on board as soon as the ramp was down and gave Slade the barest sketch of a salute.

"You are to report immediately," he barked.

"Sir," Slade said. The major eyed him insolently.

"You have no authority over UWAT forces," he said.

"On the contrary," Slade said. "If you check, you'll find that I am your commanding officer, Lieutenant."

"On the contrary," the major said with relish. "If you check, you'll find that you're not. Not any more."

It was a severe shock. Slade caught the open smirks on the faces of the crew and fought to hold his dignity. The bitch, he thought. The poisonous bitch. He turned and went to Roxanna's cabin. She was waiting for him. In his agitation, he failed to notice Dostoi slipping along behind him and ducking into his own cabin.

"Ask me again," Slade said. Her eyes opened very wide.

"I will do what I can," he said in answer to her look. "It may be that I can do nothing. If I'm able to help, I trust you to value my services appropriately." Roxanna nodded slowly.

"I promise," she said, hope suddenly flaring.

"I don't," Slade said. "But I will try. Come on. We have to go."

The last time Roxanna had made the journey between the spaceport and RCentral it had been with a feeling of disbelieving triumph. Now, returning, it was with dread. The large armed escort hustled them along, forcing all and sundry out of their way without ceremony, and it began to seem to Roxanna that Slade was almost as much a prisoner as she was. If so, it went along way to explaining his change of heart though it seemed correspondingly unlikely that he might actually be in a position to help.

Slade expected to be paraded before the Palwallum and was mortified when he found instead that they were standing before the UWAT general the Palwallum had brought in allegedly as his own deputy. Vanderdot was a large, crude man, a typical copper made good, and there had been no love lost between him and Slade right from the start. Now he was positively beaming, as well he might, sitting as he was at Slade's desk, flanked by two of his UWAT aides.

"General Slade," he said, neither troubling to rise nor salute.

"Take me to the Palwallum," Slade said coldly.

"All in good time," Vanderdot said. "Perhaps. You had a mission, general. Clearly, as you failed to communicate, you have failed to complete it."

"I did not fail..." Slade began.

"Did you kill the boy?" Vanderdot demanded.

"The Chairman? No I did not..."

"As I said then," Vanderdot smirked.

Slade indicated Roxanna.

"But I do have his betrothed," Slade said.

There was an astonished silence in which Slade took particular pleasure. Abruptly the inner door, which Slade knew very well led to the Palwallum's sanctum, which had once been his own, hissed open. A functionary appeared and a moment later, without a word, Vanderdot followed the man within. He reappeared some little time later and both Slade and Roxanna were interested to note that his face had grown distinctly red.

"In here," Vanderdot snapped at Slade. "And you," he added, pointing at Roxanna. "Check her first," he said to burly the lieutenant-colonel standing by the desk.

The man leered and began to paw at Roxanna. She stood it for long enough for it to be accepted that she was concealing nothing then hauled off and cracked him across the face with all the force she could muster. Slade laughed.

"I think we should go before she does him a permanent injury," he said. The colonel glowered and dropped the hand he had automatically raised to strike back.

They walked through an ante-room and then into a large, windowless chamber that in the short space of the Palwallum's occupation had become more boudoir than anything. Slade's carefully chosen art had all disappeared. Instead there were fussy drapes and pretty tapestries concealing most of the wall panelling and an abundance of satinate-covered furniture. The flooring was of thick, white shurpile and the overall effect was of over-powering femininity as if in an attempt to make up for the lack of it in the room's prime occupant. The only discordant note was a screen on the central table. It still showed an image of the office they had just left and the escort still patiently waiting there. The Palwallum, formidable bosom quivering, stood to greet them.

"Ah. General," she said, faintly mincing her words. "Welcome home."

"It is not my idea of a welcome..." Slade began, obviously about to launch himself into a tirade only to be adroitly cut short.

"General, General," the Palwallum cooed. "Some creative tension, that's all. Perhaps a little more creative than intended." Vanderdot shifted angrily but the Palwallum quelled him with a terrible eye.

"And so," she continued. "As regards your mission, it seems you have achieved a brilliant improvisation. The boy was..."

"Not there," Slade said, not the least bit mollified. "His betrothed was. Rather than kill her to no good purpose, it seemed better to bring her. To bargain with."

"Indeed," the Palwallum said, actually licking her lips. "Roxanna Wright, in the flesh. How do you do, my dear?"

"Quite well," Roxanna said. "But I can see you would be better yourself had you remembered to shave this morning."

Vanderdot choked. The two guards went purple trying not to choke. Memories flashed through Slade's mind of the other occasions he had heard this young woman, seemingly defenceless, strip an enemy naked.

The Palwallum stood rooted to the spot as though incapable of believing that anyone, never mind a slip of a girl, would dare to so insult her. She wanted to feel her lip. She wanted to rush to a mirror. It was not true. She did not, she simply did not have a moustache. Nothing like a moustache, not nearly. It was the cruellest thing anybody had ever said to her. Her bosom swelled even more alarmingly and she swayed on the brink between bursting into tears and bursting into a tantrum. In the end, she did neither.

"Most amusing," she said when she could trust herself to speak. "So droll. I can see we shall be the best of friends, bosom friends."

"You can't threaten me," Roxanna said pointedly.

"Oh, but I can," the Palwallum said. "And I can do more than threaten, my dear." She turned to Vanderdot.

"Take her away," she said. "She is to be treated with all care, all care for the moment. Time enough to enjoy ourselves later. And of course, now that General Slade has returned to us so victoriously you will relinquish your acting position and resume your former duties."

Vanderdot saluted stiffly and tried to take Roxanna by the arm. She resisted stoutly.

"All care," the Palwallum intervened. "I said all care, General. That does not mean man-handling. I shall want her looking her best when we talk to the... Chairman. So young for such an exalted title. So inexperienced."

"Why wait?" Slade said.

"There's no hurry," the Palwallum said. "I wish to consider the position."

"What's to consider. He brings himself and a notarised share transfer or..."

"There is no hurry," the Palwallum repeated firmly. "Delay will only increase his anxiety, his natural anxiety for his beloved, and it will make him more... receptive."

"It will give him time..."

"To what?"

Slade shrugged and let it go, suddenly remembering that he had, in fact, changed sides. Did this stupid woman really think Mac would just be twiddling his thumbs on Theta Tauri Minor waiting for her to call? Idiot, and Slade found he was very glad, and relieved, that he had finally switched his allegiance.

"I am going to my quarters," he said. "To clean up." And it was true. He did feel dirty. It was not the environment so much as the company...

He was surprised to find Dostoi lingering in the corridor outside.

"What do you want," he demanded.

"To go with you," Dostoi said meaningly.

"What in Hyades are you talking about?"

"I know," Dostoi said. "I know what you're planning."

"Have you been drinking?" Slade demanded. "Have you got hold of mindwine or something?"

"I'm coming with you," Dostoi said doggedly. "Or I'll..."

"What?"

"If you go, I go," Dostoi insisted. "Or neither of us will." He turned and hurried off down the passage leaving Slade looking after him very thoughtfully.

"I want a transport," Mac said. "Find me a transport."

"What are you thinking?" Orville said.

"That I need leverage. And that this is the way to get it." Orville looked at him narrowly.

"When you say 'I'..."

"I need you to stay with the ship. I need you to stay on the CAW. I need you to be S-WAC," Mac said. Orville looked unhappy. "Please." Orville nodded unwillingly, even though it was patently obvious he could be only a liability if things got rough.

"Also," Mac said. "I wouldn't trust any other pilot."

"Flattery," Orville said dismissively, but was pleased despite himself.

"No," Mac said. "I don't know what's going to happen. You remember that plan we had to escape Redux back when? It might come to that, for instance... How many cockroaches do we have?"

"Enough," Orville said. "It was the first thing I set the lab on when you recruited the Samura."

"Another thing," Mac said. "Can you pull plans for the spaceport and RCentral off the CAW. I need to brief the troops. A 3-D of Redux would be good too."

"Sure," Orville said. "Done."

"And do you remember that clip of me fighting the agger? Would it be possible to find that? Or is it too long ago?"

"I can find it," Orville said, curious. "Why do you want it? Nostalgia? Conceit?"

"I want to show them how to do it," Mac said with irritation.

"Ah," Orville said, abashed.

"And any call for me will route straight through from the Directorate? I want them to think I'm still on Theta Tauri."

"Of course," Orville said. "Though once you're on the transport it will be harder to disguise. I'll fix a background patch or something. But why would they think you'd still be there anyway? They're not complete fools. They'll know that you'll know it could only have been them. They must be expecting you to do something."

"Maybe," Mac said. "Or maybe they'll think I won't dare risk any harm to Anna. Either way, let's keep them guessing."

"And will you?"

"What?"

"Risk Rox?"

Mac held Orville's gaze.

"What do you think?" he said.

And then for Mac it was a time of waiting. Everything that could be done had been done and all that was left for the moment was to go through the motions of living, of eating, drinking, pretending to sleep, maintaining the illusion of calm and confidence for the benefit of his troops. Apart from the officers, Li-Morgana had sent him for the most part the younger, more restless Samura hungry for experience and a taste of life off planet. She had included a seasoning of veterans but many of the young ones had never experienced a firefight and their nerves were beginning to show.

Mac gave the clip of his duel with the agger, now so long ago, to Li-Wilhemena, genuinely intending that it be information only. However, without his knowledge she had shown it to the assembled Samura on the hangar deck and it had proved a huge morale boost. For the young Samura to see someone even younger, not much more than a child, emerge from the devastating cannon fire and then single-handedly destroy the perpetrator was riveting. By the end of the brief sequence all 500 of them were cheering like maniacs and afterwards regarded Mac with outright hero-worship, even the officers. It made him deeply uncomfortable but understanding that leadership is a matter of legend as much as anything, he bore with it.

Morgana-Li came up to him later in the day-cabin where he was resting on a couch, projecting if not feeling repose.

"I had no idea," she said, respectfully.

"No idea about what?"

"That you are a warrior. I've seen you fly, of course, but I've never seen you fight. And you were so young..."

Mac shrugged. With Morgana-Li he could be honest.

"I was terrified," he said. "I am terrified."

Morgana-Li sat down and put out a hand, drawing back, however, before quite touching him.

"We'll get her back," she said.

Mac said nothing.

"Do you ever wonder what would have happened if we had fought that day on Honshos?" Morgana-Li asked after a pause.

"No," Mac said. "I was never going to fight you. But you would have won. I know nothing about swords."

"No," Morgana-Li said in her turn. "You would have won. I see that now. You would have found a way. Like now."

"Like now?"

"The plan."

Damn the plan, Mac thought. Why don't they call? Why don't they call? He knew why. Slade, he was certain it was Slade, it had his opportunistic fingerprints all over it... Slade had not had time to reach Redux yet, and he would wait until he was sure he was safe. But the worry was eating at Mac like corrosive acid. And most of all, he couldn't bear the thought that the last time he would ever see Roxanna might be in the act of walking out on her. The shame of all that no-account angst and posturing, all that adolescent sturm and drang when he should have been there to defend her was the worst humiliation he had ever known. He vowed for the twentieth time that it would never happen again, all the while knowing the vow was quite unnecessary.

This time Morgana-Li did touch him. He refocused on her with a visible start.

"How long since you slept?" she asked.

"I'm all right," Mac said.

"You should sleep."

"When it's done."

"You can't keep going on eye-openers. They'll affect your judgment."

"Are you complaining, Hatamoto?"

"Mac, it's me," she said sharply, and then. "It wasn't your fault."

"But it was," Mac said, so softly she could barely hear.

"If you'd been there, they would have killed both of you. You would both be dead. You know that. They came to kill you."

"Which is not to say they would have succeeded."

"Yes they would have. You're human. Even you, Mac. You would have lost. You would both be dead. This way..."

"What?" Mac said.

"This way we can get you both back. I believe that, Mac."

Orville called him to the flight deck and pointed to a blip on the CAW screen.

"Transport," he said. "Just hyperated in. One more jump to Redux."

"Can we get to him before he goes again?"

"If I hyperate in on top of him. There's a risk..."

"Stop being modest," Mac said. "Will Redux notice?"

"Unlikely," Orville said. "His signature will cover both of us if we're close enough."

"Do it." Mac picked up the internal com mike.

"Stand-by, boarding party," he said. "Sixty seconds."

"Give my love to Rox," Orville said. "Bring her back or..."

"What?"

"I'll murder you."

"You won't have to," Mac said. He spun sharply about, picked up the fatpac with the spare suit and harness and left, pulling on his helmet. Orville was suddenly very sober indeed.

"Good luck," he called at Mac's retreating back.

Amin Khaled, skipper of the down-at-heel thormalium transport Salad Days, going about his lawful occasions on a perfectly routine milk run to Redux, nearly died of fright. One second he was there in free space, not another ship within parsecs, waiting for the elderly CAW node to calculate the last hyperation, and the next second he was nose to nose with the most gigantic battle cruiser he had ever seen. Fortunately, his beloved Salad Days was already stationary or there would have been a disastrous collision. There was no way he ever would have been able to react quickly enough to avoid it. His cursing was just gaining flank fluency when the airlocks on the cruiser opened and streams of suited figures issued forth towed by space sleds and heading straight for him. A cowl on the nose of the cruiser slid open and Khaled, astonished into silence, found himself gazing down the evil muzzle of a plasma cannon. The message was clear and with what resignation he could summon, he ordered the Salad Days' airlock be opened to receive visitors.

In minutes they were everywhere like a plague of sack-rats copulating at warp speed. Hundreds of them. More than the ship could possibly hold. And still they came. And more. And weirdest of all, apart from the one standing behind him holding his helmet and a blaster, they all appeared to be women. Pretty women. He realised suddenly that his crew had all been rounded up and marched off, leaving him alone.

An older woman pushed forward and saluted. Khaled nearly saluted back but realised just in time the woman was saluting the man behind him.

"All aboard, sir," the woman said. "Just..."

"It won't be long," the man said and then poked Khaled in the back. "Take us to Redux," he ordered. "Or, if you prefer, you can wait here. There's much more room." And he waved a hand at the blackness outside. Khaled began to curse again, but under his breath.

He went vocal though when time came to kick in the exorbitantly expensive thormalium he was being forced to waste and which, of course, was nearing the bottom of the half-cycle. Nor was there any telling how the dickey magnetic conduits would handle the huge extra load on the field generator. His swearing reached a new peak of intensity when they encountered a longer than usual queue at the atmolock and his heart sank. The Salad Days' scrubbers were struggling badly and the air was already foul to the point of gasping. By the time they got through, they might all be dead. At least they were on the night side of Redux and the temperature might stay bearable.

The woman, the one in charge, caught the man's eye.

"We could use the suits to breathe," she said. The man, damn him, shook his head.

"Save it as long as we can," he said. He poked Khaled with that damn blaster again.

"Ask for priority," he said. "Tell them you have an emergency. Failing air supply." And that was true enough, Khaled thought. He got on the comm and after fighting through the bored disbelief of the duty controller they were grudgingly bumped up the line to next ship in.

"And if you're lying," the controller said at the last, abandoning any pretence at proper comm procedure, "you'll never land here again."

Khaled was all set to really fire up when the man put a finger to his lips.

"There are ladies present," he said and Khaled accidentally bit his tongue in frustration. He caught a grim smile from the woman out of the corner of his eye and if that one's a lady, he thought, I'm not Amin Khaled. Soon as gut you as look at you, that one.

The atmolock slid open and Khaled delicately lowered Salad Days into the bay. There was the distant roar of inrushing air and the bottom of the lock opened in turn. At the same time the indicator lights on his control panel showed that his own airlock had been cracked and the ship began to rock as though it had hit severe turbulence. It was weight shifting, he finally realised. People were leaving. He looked around wildly, but there was that man with his damn blaster again. At least he could breathe now.

"Calm," the man said. "Just concentrate on flying. Shouldn't you be getting your landing instructions?"

Khaled opened his mouth but again the man held a finger to his lips. Khaled nodded and turned his attention back to the comm and the flight path.

The duty controller, having reluctantly given Salad Days priority, was concerned only that his judgment be proved correct. He was far too occupied arranging a boarding party ever to glance at the life-sign monitor, where the fact that this ship appeared to be carrying a plague of cockroaches might have given him pause. When, with the ship within the entrance of the actual port, the cockroaches began to disperse in various purposeful directions, he might even have managed some alarm.

As the Salad Days eased to a halt in the designated dock a civilian inspector with back-up appeared and headed towards them. The detachment was not in the familiar GDF uniforms.

"Pass the word, UWATs," Mac said to Li-Wilhemena.

"Don't you worry about that," she replied. "We'll give them unrestricted weapons and tactics. We've been waiting a long time." And she was as good as her word. The detachment came on board to find themselves ringed by blasters and then dropped by a butt to the back of the neck before they could begin to react. Three of the five died instantly and the other two shortly thereafter. The civilian stood frozen in shock. Khaled stood frozen in shock.

"Lock them in the brig with the others," Mac said. "Let's go. Keep it as quiet as you can as long as you can." And he slipped out the hatch, followed by Morgana-Li and her ninjas.

Chapter Seven

The spaceport, catering as it did for thormalium deliveries to half the cluster, was a vast, sprawling enterprise, encapsulated by a huge dome and capable of handling anything up to 200 ships simultaneously on short turnaround. There were three ground-level entrances, spaced equi-distantly around the perimeter, one of which catered to the thormalium haulers. All were tightly guarded and the perimeter patrolled inside and out to discourage attempted escapes by workers, or slaves as Mac now thought of them. Ships entered and left by a great circle, known as the smoke-hole, cut in the apex of the roof. Once, indeed, the whole complex had been open – why go to the expense of roofing it, when there was already the lucent above it? – but eventually, the smuggling and the number of successful escapes had forced Galiconia to completely enclose it.

When the dome was constructed the admin offices and the central control room were relocated to a ring hanging halfway up the roof and connected to the ground by three slanting tubes opposite the entrances and which served the dual purpose of reinforcing the whole structure and housing the elevators. While the dome gave the exterior the appearance of clean simplicity, apart from the elevated doughnut the interior of the huge cavern was a haphazard jumble of miscellaneous buildings, a warren of trading offices, workshops, supply depots, barracks and fuel dumps. Over the centuries what had once been a planned and orderly spoked design had been so adapted and modified to accommodate passing needs that now the vast, open spaces of the loading docks were all hedged about and bordered with a crust of temporary structures that had inevitably become permanent. As a battleground it was a perfect urban jungle, ideally suited to the fly-by-night guerrilla tactics of the Samura. Against that was the fact there were only 500 of them to take on a defence force within the dome of three UWAT battalions, each 1000 strong, never mind the reserves outside. The Palwallum had brought in a veritable army to replace Slade's suspect GDF troops.

For the first minutes, with surprise and the added advantage of being an aerial force, the Samura sweeping down from above and pouring out of the captured transport carried all before them, killing UWAT patrols quietly with the sword, spreading fear and confusion as panicked civilians fled for the exits. Then, when fighting became general, they opened up with blasters and shoulder cannon.

The UWATs, however, were tough, hardened troops and those who survived the first rush began to coalesce into pockets of fierce resistance. Mac had calculated that they would attempt to retreat to and concentrate about the regimental headquarters, a central, four-storey blockhouse. What he didn't know was that the blockhouse under Slade had been upgraded with protective armour of almost impenetrable, acid-tempered maxalloy. On leaving the ship, with his ninjas about him in formation, he headed straight for the focal point, climbing for altitude to survey the situation. Outside the dome, it was dark. Inside, there was enough random light that darksee visors were only of marginal help.

With the rapidly increasing frequency of muzzle flash they were a positive hindrance and he left his up.

The Samura were now close enough on two sides to attack with plasma cannon, but to no discernible effect. They were also taking casualties. The top of a nearby water tower over-looking the blockhouse had been fortified as a tactical command post and fire from there was taking a heavy toll. The tower had been shown on the plans but not Slade's fortifications, an obvious enough improvement, Mac thought in passing.

It was clear that the longer the blockhouse held out the more trouble the Samura would face, dreadfully exposed as they were to counter-attack forcing its way in from outside. The tower... it had to be the tower first. Then the blockhouse.

Mac dropped down and ignoring the fire that came their way led his force at exhilarating speed through the twisting lanes and alleys towards the base of the structure, fabricated from open-work, max alloy girders. There were three twitchy sentries guarding the bottom of the spiral stairway. Mac held up three fingers and made a sweeping motion. Three of his ninjas flitted off, as invisible as moths in their night camo, slipped into the tower, and dropped down. The guards never knew what it was that had sliced so effortlessly through their armour and then their throats. Mac too was astonished. He had never realised that Samura katana were quite so lethal, that armour was no defence against them.

The rest of the team raced across and Mac led them up through the centre of the tower, literally at breakneck speed. The cross girders were numerous and almost impossible to see.

At the bottom of the water tank, shielded from those on top, Max pulled the Ninjas in tight.

"Deploy," he whispered into his throat pad. "Keep visual contact. Slide up the outside and on my signal, over the top. Let's have fun ladies," he added lightly. "Samura!" He moved quickly with Madelena-Li on one side and Morgana-Li on the other. As they eased up the side of the tank he had time to register that they both looked actively happy. So was he, he realised. It came as a surprise.

Just below the rampart and still out of view of the defenders, Mac paused and looked left and right. A chain of nods came back.

"Go," he said crisply into his throat pad and sprang over the top, firing as he went and yelling his head off, the others all with him and screaming like banshees. It should have been instant slaughter, but the 15 UWATs there were the best of their battalion and did not break easily. There was a bloody muddle of hand-to-hand combat which only ended when the captain and the sergeant, back to back in the middle and fighting like demons, finally went down, one to a flying kick from Mac which broke his neck and the other to a slash from Morgana-Li's katana which took him through his open visor.

Li-Wilhemena, leading the front rank of Samura and pinned down by fire from the tower, estimated they had perhaps ten minutes before reinforcements arrived from outside and they would find themselves caught between the hammer and the anvil. The situation was deteriorating from desperate to disastrous very rapidly. Nor did she like to think of the casualties they had already taken. Suddenly the fire from the TCP ceased, a miracle, an unexpected miracle. It must be Albright. It could only be Albright. From her position she could not see what was happening, only the muzzle blasts from the wall turrets and ramparts of the blockhouse. She launched herself upwards, jinking and swerving to tumble over the edge of the tower into cover. As she had surmised, she found Mac and the ninjas there before her.

"Bombing run," Mac said briefly, looking up from the package of helgel he was rapidly fitting with a contact fuse. "We're hoping they didn't bother to armour the roof. One of us might get through. Be careful," he said to the others. "Don't want this stuff going off here."

"No pain if it does," Morgana-Li remarked. She and her squad members looked composed and confident, Li-Wilhemena noted with part of her mind.

"You'll never do it," she said. "It's suicide."

"It's suicide if we don't," Mac said. "Be ready to get to the entrances. Their reinforcements will be here any minute. Don't forget the smoke-hole if I don't make it. They'll be sending aggers for sure. Come on," he said to the others, lightly. "Let's have fun, ladies. Samura!"

They looked at Mac and smiled, their eyes shining. It was all Li-Wilhemena could do to restrain herself from going with them as they burst from the roof, rocketing upwards at maximum climb. The defenders were late picking them up as no one had yet had the wit to realise that what they took for insect specks on their life-sign monitors were in fact humans. But inevitably, fire began to concentrate on the attackers and Li-Wilhemena saw one figure tumbling lifeless and then another. At the roof, Mac and the remainder of his team rolled into a vertical power dive.

There was a huge explosion as the bomb from one of the dead ninjas hit the ground, followed a fraction later by the other and the unplanned diversion was enough. The defending fire faltered for an instant, sufficient for Mac's team to scream down to a point where they could drop the bombs accurately, then starburst outwards for their lives. It seemed to take forever. Li-Wilhemena was holding her breath and counting, and then at last it came. The remaining 12 helgel bombs went off almost simultaneously. The four-storey blockhouse trembled, hung a moment and finally collapsed inwards on the occupants.

Li-Wilhemena sprang into action. Shocked by the loss of their fortress, the outlying pockets of UWATs were quickly mopped up – surrender was not an option they were offered – and Li-Wilhemena raced about her troops, chivvying, exhorting, organising.

Now was no time to relax. She shouted herself hoarse trying to generate urgency. Her wrist reacom flared. It was Mac.

"We'll get to the smoke-hole," he said. "I've got wounded. Send reliefs when you can." There must have been something in his voice.

"Yes sir," she said and then: "Are you all right, sir?"

"Good enough," Mac said.

Morgana-Li gave a last squirt of sealskin and stepped back.

"You need a medical," she said.

"Not yet," Mac said. "Come on!"

The magma slug had caught him just as he had let go his bomb, penetrating the articulated shoulder joint of his fighting suit and burning its way through his left shoulder. The pain almost made him faint as he stood up. His knees threatened to collapse and Morgana-Li supported his good elbow.

"You can't fly with that," she said.

"I can."

"Take a pain-plug."

"I can't," Mac said. "That you really can't fly with. Kills the synapses. Come on," he said again and lifted off. Of the squad, two were dead and a further three, including the gunso, Madelena-Li, were wounded to the point where they could no longer fly. Others were hurt but given Mac's example, still functioning. That left him nine counting himself. As they flew he divided them into two teams, one under the gocho, Gainor-Li, the other under Morgana-Li, trying to balance injured with able-bodied.

"There could be a lot of them," he said. "Stop them first. Then kill them. Make sure they're all stopped before the smoke-hole or they'll still be able to drop down inside."

They came to the rim of the huge circle big enough for even The-All-Sun-And-The-All-Moon to descend through, and hovering, Mac cautiously peered over the edge. An entire wing of aggers, four squadrons of eight were coming at them fast. It meant more than 700 fresh men, quite enough to finish matters, whether or not the ground reinforcements managed to break through. The wing was in close squadron formation, four wedges of eight, one on top, one below and two to the sides. Their over-lapping fields of fire would make frontal assault suicidal but there was no time for anything else.

"Sir, they'll cut us to pieces," Morgana-Li said.

"Give me a katana," Mac said. With marked reluctance, Gainor-Li handed hers across. Mac flicked off the saya. It fell spinning and her face fell with it.

"Wait your moment," Mac said to Morgana-Li. "You'll know when. Come at them from underneath. One shot into the fanjet and on to the next one. Don't worry about their flighters, they'll be hopeless." He paused a second.

"Let's have fun, ladies," he said. "Samura!" And he swept to the attack, knowing that when the time came they would follow without question, knowing they would die for him, knowing they knew he would die for them. Nine against 700, nine of high heart and invincible courage, nine warriors about to make a legend. The feeling was magnificent. He knew too that if he were to perish now, Anna would know he had been coming for her.

Mac dived over the rim and followed the contour of the dome down, gaining as much speed as he could. If the sensors on the aggers picked up anything it was only an insect speck and ignored. His night camo against the roof made him invisible even to darksee visors. He bottomed out and shot upwards, aiming to catch the tail of the wingman on the left outer squadron. The calculation of their closing, angular velocities was crucial. Too soon was to be spotted. Too late was forever.

At the last, Mac was climbing vertically and managed to level out in the same direction just enough so that when he grasped the leading edge of the tail-fin, the jerk didn't tear his arm from his shoulder. He had to use his left hand, now not needed to fly, as with the right he gripped the katana. The pain of the wound tearing open made his head swim, but somehow he held on to the fin, held on to consciousness. He thrust the fine blade of the sword into the gap between rudder and fin, and levered hard.

The result was spectacular. The agger swerved straight towards the others of its squadron and suddenly there were machines wheeling all over the sky as the pilots took wild, evasive action, causing a chain reaction through the whole wing. Two machines went down. Then another three. And the battle order of the rest was completely shattered.

Morgana-Li reacted instantly.

"Charge," she roared. The ninjas shot from their hiding place and as the aggers were very close now were in the thick of it within seconds.

Frantically trying to avoid collision, with discipline disintegrating, confused by cacophony of shouting over the local circuit, the pilots had no idea of what they faced. Some of the gunners caught disbelieving glimpses of the ninjas but were either too slow to fire or too frightened of hitting their own people. And the targets were so few and so small, jinking, weaving, hard to hit. Surely they couldn't be serious? What could they possibly do against aggers, anyway, against cannon?

It soon became clear.

The fighters hooked on to tail fins and the UWATs not under immediate attack watched in amazement as the enemy fired blasters into the fan jet intakes of their compatriots. Instantly the aggers wallowed and stopped, dead in the air, helpless, unable to manoeuvre, unable to fire for fear of destroying their own. The ninjas didn't wait but chased after another batch and then on again.

The wing commander reacted first.

"Take them out," he shouted at his pilot. "Take them out."

"But sir," the pilot said, banking as sharply as he could. "We'll hit our own men."

"Do it," the wing commander roared.

The pilot of Mac's machine had panicked and instead of simply stopping was trying still to fly and Mac was content to help add to the chaos. However, he saw the command agger nearby begin to turn with purpose. He shot out the fan jet, abandoned his own steed with a pang of guilt for Gainor-Li's katana and lunged across. He got there just as it was lining up to fire at one of its own with a ninja riding the tail. It was Morgana-Li. Mac shouted a warning over his command circuit, thrust the muzzle of his blaster down the cannon barrel and fired. He had no idea what would happen. It was the only thing he could do that might save her.

The magma going down hit the plasma coming up, the proverbial irresistible force hitting an immovable object, and the agger simply exploded. Secondary flame shot out the barrel as it did so, turning Mac's blaster instantly white hot and incinerating his fighting glove. Shock masked the pain but his suddenly bared hand felt shrivelled, blackened, charred. A fraction of a second later, the blast waves laced with shrapnel threw Mac tumbling through the sky. This time he did black out.

He came to with someone shouting desperately:

"Mac! Mac! Fly! I can't hold you."

He was falling but not as fast as he should have been. He understood. Morgana-Li had caught him and was slowing him down as much as she could. He flexed his left hand. It still worked.

"Go," he said. "Finish it." She lingered a moment and then flew to re-join the battle. All but two of the aggers were stalled now and the last two were disabled as he watched. The ninjas in teams were working to turn them turtle. UWAT flighters were trying to emerge but those that actually made it out were no match for the Samura. They were dealt with almost casually. Mac saw one ninja, who evidently had lost her blaster, sweep out her katana and behead one of the enemy in a single movement. The separated corpse fell slowly at first, the head regarding the body with an expression of ludicrous surprise.

And then, of an instant, it was all over. The sky was clear except for Mac's ninjas.

Morgana-Li appeared in front of him, concern creasing her face. There seemed to be at least two of her.

"Come," she said. "We have to get you down, get you to a pod. You look dead. You should be dead." She took a moment to survey the detritus of wrecked aggers pocking the ground below.

"No one will ever believe this," she said with profound satisfaction and then began to shepherd Mac back to the smoke-hole, supporting him as much as she could. They were met by the reinforcements Li-Wilhemena had finally managed to send.

The first Slade knew of the attack on the spaceport was the huge explosion that destroyed the blockhouse. The blast was powerful enough to penetrate even to the depths of RCentral. He was asleep and woke with a start, and then a slow smile began to spread across his face. He didn't know what was happening precisely, but he was certain he knew who was behind it. And so much for the Palwallum's plan to increase Mac's anxiety, he thought. He sounded worried to death. Slade hurried to cram himself into his uniform but couldn't help smiling the while.

The control room when he got there was in a ferment. Various officers were shouting into com mikes, others were worriedly kneading palm-boards, and Vanderdot was standing in the middle of it all, fuming and interjecting.

"I see we have a situation, general," Slade said. "Kindly report."

"What?" Vanderdot exclaimed.

"What, sir," Slade said. "Report." As he listened to Vanderdot's prolix summation, Slade felt his insides squeezing with pleasure. Totally unexpected, totally unorthodox and totally brilliant. The boy really could do it all. And Vanderdot's response must prove disastrous. He stumbled to a halt.

"And would you please explain, general," Slade said with relish. "How was it that I was not informed immediately?"

Vanderdot stumbled badly. In the end he managed to mumble some phrases about there not being time... fast-moving... emergency... crisis...

"Do we have an estimate of enemy number?" Slade interrupted, cutting him short.

"At least 5000," Vanderdot said. "I've sent six battalions to reinforce and the agger wing."

"Rubbish," Slade said. "There are nothing like 5000, not unless there was an invasion fleet. Was there a fleet? And if so, how did they get through the atmlock without us noticing?"

Vanderdot could find no answer and was even more disconcerted by the Palwallum sweeping into the room.

"Turn back the aggers," Slade ordered.

"What?" Vanderdot ejaculated adding a belated, "Sir."

"Turn back the aggers or you'll lose them all."

"You're mad... sir," Vanderdot said.

"Turn them back now."

An aide waved a hand at them, pressing at an ear piece with the other.

"Excuse me, sir. The aggers are under attack."

"Get them out of there. Give me the wing commander. Put it on broadcast..."

Instantly there was a babble of pilot cross-talk: "Break left, break left.... Climb... Break left, no, right, right..."

Slade held out his hand for mike, give me the command frequency.

"Redwing, Redwing, this is Redux actual," he said with professional calm. "Commander, get your aggers out of there now. Repeat now. Acknowledge."

"Sir..." the wing commander started to say. There was what could have been the start of an explosion and then nothing. The control room fell deathly quiet.

"Get on to them individually," Slade said. "Any still left, get them out..." Another aide interrupted.

"Sir," he said. "A ground report says they're falling out of the sky."

"What?" the Palwallum demanded, speaking for the first time. Slade looked at her pityingly.

"Albright, the young Chairman, once destroyed an agger single-handed," he said, trying to disguise his satisfaction. "He has obviously passed on the technique. Had your man here seen fit to obey the chain of command, to consult, then I would have been able to warn him. As it is he has just killed 768 men plus pilots and destroyed 32 aggers, our entire fleet."

"Sir," an aide came at them again. "Ground forces are taking heavy casualties. They're using our own cannon against us."

Slade looked invitingly at Vanderdot, who stared at the floor and remained mute.

"Tell them to break off, withdraw to safety and contain," Slade said. "Well," he continued after a telling pause. "That went well. By delaying..." he nodded to the Palwallum, "and by insubordination and incompetence..." he nodded to Vanderdot, "we have allowed young Albright to destroy all our aggers, a significant proportion of our ground forces and to capture the spaceport and all your assault ships. You didn't think to station any outside the perimeter? No. Of course not. The spaceport, it seems necessary to point out, controls the atmolock and without aggers or ships, there's not much we can do about defending it. You, general, and you, madame, between you have just lost Redux."

"We have not lost Redux," Vanderdot started to bluster.

"Try to leave," Slade said. "Or try to get reinforcements in... Whereas young Albright can now bring in the whole damn GDF if he chooses."

"Then it's a good thing we have the girl," the Palwallum said, with heavy displeasure directed at Slade.

"Except, you'd better pray," Slade said, "that this new chairman is not half so ruthless as his father was."

The Palwallum absorbed the import of his words and looked suddenly stricken.

Working parties were bringing the Samura dead and wounded to one of the central landing docks where they were laid out in rows on captured pallets. Medicals moved among the living, dispensing triage and treatment. There were no UWAT wounded, or prisoners. The Samura hatred for their prime enemy ran deep.

Mac was sitting with his back propped against an old crate, somebody's cloak around his shoulders. The shock had kicked in and he was shivering violently. Morgana-Li was fussing, trying to divert one of the overworked medicals.

"I'll take my turn," Mac said irritably. "Stop it." His shoulder wound, reopened during the battle with the aggers was bad, but nothing compared with his right hand. It was more or less completely flayed and where the flesh was not charred and blackened, it showed red with the glisten of white bone and sinew. Now the battle mist had gone the pain was excruciating. He felt fatigued to the point of death and he wanted nothing so much as to burst into tears, except that he was too emotionally drained even for that.

"I need to know what's happening," he said to Morgana-Li. "I need a sit-rep. Find Li-Wilhemena." Morgana-Li looked unhappy at being ordered to leave him. "I'll be all right," he said. "And find out about my ninjas. I need to know."

"Yes, sir," Morgana-Li managed to say. She turned away unable to stop the tears.

A medical finally got to Mac and shook her head over his hand.

"That's a pod job," she said brusquely.

"No," Mac said. "Do what you can."

The medical shook her head again but cut away his sleeve and drew up a vac-bag dressing until it reached unburned skin on his arm. She sealed the aperture and then sucked the air out. To protect the damaged nerves as much as possible from jarring she placed his hand in a suspension cast. Then she repaired his shoulder again, which for Mac was almost equally unpleasant and went over the rest of him, extracting a least a dozen bits of shrapnel and patching up the wounds with sealskin. In one sense Mac had been fortunate. He had been blown backwards almost as fast as the metal, which had penetrated less as a result, most stopped by his armour.

"You need a pod," she repeated severely. "Or I won't answer for the consequences. She took a shot-injector from the holster on her hip.

"No," Mac said. "No drugs."

"Anti-infectoid," she said, shooting him in his good shoulder. She put it away and reached for the injector on her other hip.

"Not that one," Mac said.

"Don't be foolish... sir," the medical snapped in such way that the "sir" was extremely pejorative.

"It's just pain," Mac said. "I need to be able to think."

The medical stalked off and Mac found himself alone for the minute. It was a blessed interlude. He worked to damp down the surging throb in his shoulder, the shrieking in his hand, and then to wall it off. Finally he let his mind go blank...

Li-Wilhemena was standing before him, Morgana-Li behind her. Both their faces were deeply concerned.

"I'm all right," Mac said. "I can still think. I'm still functioning." Li-Wilhemena visibly relaxed. "Report," he said.

"We hold the dome completely," Li-Wilhemena said. "There are no UWATs left inside. They counter-attacked from outside but we held them off without much trouble using their own emplacements. They have now withdrawn out of range. We have external pickets patrolling the perimeter in case they try to blast through. Morgana-Li tells me that you and the ninjas destroyed their air wing and we seem to have captured all their assault ships, unless they have others outside. My assessment is that we are secure for the moment."

"Casualties?" Mac said.

"There are 47 dead and another 51 wounded, including yourself, sir."

"Orders," Mac said. "Alert both the Wright captains to the situation. Tell Wright senior to despatch the agreed reinforcements from their holding points. Tell Wright junior to come to geo-stationary orbit on this mark and to prepare to receive wounded. Use whatever ships here you like as shuttles. Which reminds me, release those others from the brig of that transport. Give the skipper a load of thormalium with my compliments and get him out of here. You'll look after our people, of course, food, rest, but order them to stay suited with helmets to hand. And we need replacement suits for those that were ruptured." He looked at the rips and perforations in his own. "Check the warehouses and the depots. If all else fails get Captain Wright to resupply from The-All-Sun-And-The-All-Moon, ordinary space suits if he doesn't have enough fighting suits. Our need is likely to be greater than his. This is not finished and it gets unpredictable from here on. Is there anything else?"

"Sir," Li-Wilhemena said. "What's next?"

"The Palwallum," Mac said. "But not yet. I want the wounded safe first and back-up on the way."

Li-Wilhemena lingered a moment, obviously wanting to say something but unable to find the words. She saluted and left.

Morgana-Li exercised family privilege and sat down beside him.

"She wanted to tell you how proud she is," Morgana-Li said. "It's the greatest victory the Samura have ever won."

"It doesn't seem like much of a victory," Mac said. "So many of our people dead. How many ninjas?"

"Three. Madelena-Li didn't make it."

"Take me. The wounded first."

Morgana-Li helped him to his feet and led him to the treatment area. Both the injured ninja were lying among a row of patients all in preventative, induced coma, tended by medicals. He was informed that given prompt treatment his two could both expect to make a complete recovery. Then Morgana-Li led him to a quiet corner. All the rest of the surviving ninja were there, keeping vigil over the bodies of their comrades. Mac knelt stiffly and slowly passed his hand over each face. Here was Li-Candice, young to be a name-mother. She had been so torn between leaving her daughter and the adventure of joining Mac. Here was Helen-Li who had laid that monster hit on him playing g-ball. He had limped for a week, he remembered. Here was Madelena-Li, the scrappiest of them all, scrappy to hide the heart of gold.

They had fought well. None better. They had died well. None better. Suddenly he was no longer sad. He rose and collected the eyes of his people.

"Let us hope," he said quietly. "That we all may go so well when our time comes." There was silence, but better silence, good silence, no longer charged with grief. Mac went to the eight women standing there and embraced each of them.

"We are brothers," he said. "Brothers in arms." He turned to go.

"Sir," Gainor-Li his surviving noncom, said. "Before she died Madelena-Li asked me to give you her daisho." She offered the katana and the wakazashi to him across her outstretched palms. "She knew you had no swords of your own and she wished you to have these. She asked me to tell you that they are of great age and honour and that it is just they should come to you."

Mac received the swords reverently and was indeed genuinely touched. They were beautiful weapons from the golden age of Samura sword-making and had been passed faithfully down the Madelena name line, a line now ended.

"I am sorry. I lost your katana," he said to Gainor-Li.

"Sir, I'm not. It won a battle. That was what it was for. And the wakazashi will be famous for all time."

Mac nodded. It was true. He admired Madelena-Li's swords resting across his arms, and then realised he didn't know what he could do with them, his right hand being quite useless. Morgana-Li stepped forward and gently took them from him. He looked again at his personal fighters.

"Let's have fun, ladies," he said lightly. "Samura!"

"Samura!" they roared back at him. "Samura! Samura!"

Heads turned and then the war cry was being taken up all around them. People were shouting, yelling, screaming with left-over adrenalin, with relief, with bursting pride.

Chapter Eight

Down in the depths of RCentral Roxanna felt rather than heard the explosion that destroyed the blockhouse. She had been dozing but came instantly awake. It could only mean one thing. Mac was coming. She felt the glow start deep inside and spread. Then she began to worry. The explosion must mean they were fighting, and if they were fighting she knew with absolute certainty that Mac would be in the forefront of battle, at greatest risk. Worry for him segued into panic. She reached out with her mind, trying to find him, feel him alive. She seemed to sense something, enough to soothe her.

Time passed, she knew not how long, and nothing else happened. She could hear nothing through the thick walls of her prison, feel nothing, nothing more. It was a bare cell but clean and with the basic amenities. She was hungry, however. She hadn't eaten since well before landing on Redux.

She was so sick of it all, sick of waiting, of being treated as a chattel, sick of vicious, grasping people hauling her about the universe, threatening her, trying to kill Mac. She let herself grow angry. Anger was good. Anger was strength. Anger kept despair at bay. Anger and the faint hope that maybe Slade would remember his promise and find a way to intervene.

Towards dawn, Mac slept for an hour or so on one of the pallets they had found for the wounded. It was probably a mistake. He woke feeling worse. His body was a mess. Both his injured hand and his shoulder were screaming at him in different keys with an underlying threnody from his other various wounds.

Morgana-Li came and woke him as he had ordered and brought food. He was unable to eat.

"You must," she said. "You can't keep going on your nerves." And he forced down a mouthful or two to make her stop nagging him.

Li-Wilhemena appeared. She had with her two brand new fighting suits of the standard Galconia pattern, complete with the newest lightweight, low-bulk body armour.

"This should fit you," she said. "And the other's for the Lady. But I don't know what we do about your hand with that cast."

"I'll manage," Mac said, and he pointed to the fatpac. "I still have Roxanna's suit. Give the spare to someone else."

Li-Wilhemena and Morgana-Li cut the old suit away from him and the blood-soaked skivvies. Under the sealskin his shoulder was an ugly mess and the two women looked at each other behind his back with dismay.

"Can you still use your left hand?" Morgana-Li asked, meaning can you still fly? Mac flexed it. The hand felt stiff and awkward.

"Enough," he said, which was a pious hope if not an outright lie.

Li-Wilhemena eased the cast off his right hand, they dressed him in fresh clothing and then began the dreadful business of getting him into the suit. Working his barbecued hand through the sleeve was the worst thing either woman had ever done in her life. Mac nearly fainted, twice, and at one point could not prevent a cry being jerked from him. At last it was done and Morgana-Li, expanding the suspension cast to its limits, managed to fix it around the outside of the glove. The thormalium in the inner, flying glove on his other hand was still activated.

"So," Li-Wilhemena said. "What now?"

"Now we beard the dragon lady," Mac said, unknowingly echoing Roxanna's insult. "Tell Orville, Captain Wright, to set up a link to RCentral and find somewhere with a com we can use."

Li-Wilhemena saluted and left.

"Do you have a plan, Mac?" Morgana-Li asked.

"More poker," Mac said.

"You will be careful? Please be careful. I couldn't bear it if..."

"Neither could I," Mac said.

The Palwallum was conferring privately with General Vanderdot when the word came through. The Chairman wished a negotiation in 15 minutes. The Palwallum nodded acceptance to the aide who had brought the message and then turned back to Vanderdot.

"So we are agreed, General?" she said. "You will summon the reserve battalions to Redux and the reserve assault ships with all speed. We need aggers too. But in the meantime you will put the missile batteries in place directly and you will accept only my orders with regard to them?"

Vanderdot nodded vigorously. "Yes, madame," he said. He was pleased to be trusted again and decided to chance his arm a little.

"We could," he ventured. "Relieve Slade of command now. Stress, perhaps?" The Palwallum regarded him coldly.

"I do not find, general, that the quality of your advice renders his redundant. Not yet," she added as an afterthought. Best to keep Vanderdot dangling in hope. "And you will give the orders for the reserves now?" It was an order itself.

"Certainly, madame."

"How long will it take?"

"Some days but in my judgment we can hold out indefinitely. The batteries are on stand-by and can be deployed within minutes."

"Proceed then, general. And it would be best if General Slade were not troubled with this information."

"Of course," Vanderdot said, pleased again. He turned smartly on his heel and left. The Palwallum took a deep breath and set her mind to the confrontation with this infernal boy who now had the nerve to call himself Chairman. Intolerable. Quite intolerable.

Roxanna had no warning. One minute she was sitting alone, in silence, nursing her anger, the next, the door had slid open and she was staring at a quartet of guards. One of them beckoned. She thought about putting up a fight, of being dragged through the corridors, kicking and screaming. He beckoned again, urgently, and she got up. Save it, she thought, for when it might matter.

She was marched off down the corridor and left to wonder where she was being taken; no doubt to that odious woman's nauseating boudoir. She was pleased to feel her temperature rising. She was wrong, however. She was taken to a dedicated communications room, one wall of which was a large com screen. It gave her an inkling of what to expect. The Palwallum strode in a moment later, accompanied by Slade. Roxanna looked hard at him but he kept his face expressionless. Without a word, the Palwallum planted herself in front of the screen and motioned with her hand. It flickered to life and all at once Mac was standing before them as they would be standing before him.

He looked dreadful and Roxanna gasped. His face was white and strained and he had obviously been wounded. He was standing with his right hand behind his back and looked ready to collapse at any moment. The Palwallum inspected him greedily.

"I see you have suffered," the Palwallum smirked, without preamble. "So sorry."

Mac said nothing, did nothing, but by some alchemy it was clear that a switch had been thrown and he was again whole, at least for the moment. The silence became a test. The Palwallum sustained it as long as she could but was finally forced to drop her eyes. She tried to cover her defeat by gesturing to Roxanna.

"We have something that belongs to you," she said.

"You are mistaken," Mac said disinterestedly. Slade had positioned himself where he could watch Roxanna. She did not even blink at Mac's disavowal which meant that she was quite certain it was untrue, bluff.

"And you," the Palwallum continued, "Have something that belongs to me."

"Again, you are mistaken," Mac said.

"The chairmanship," the Palwallum said. "It is mine by right. I offer you her life for the chairmanship of Galconia Enterprises Inc. The shares to be transferred immediately."

"For the third time you are mistaken," Mac said. "You are mistaken to think that anything you might do could induce me to give up the chairmanship." Again, Slade noted that Roxanna gave no sign.

"You're just a boy..." the Palwallum spat, unable to contain herself longer. "You're just a boy and you have no right..."

"Be quiet," Mac said. He spoke in the same even, disinterested tone but it cut through the Palwallum's temper like a rock through ocean froth.

"Your misjudgement," he continued, "miscalculation and fatal mismanagement have put you in an impossible position. Your defeat is certain. However, to spare my troops and the reinforcements who will arrive shortly, I am prepared to accept your surrender now."

"You're what?" the Palwallum shrieked.

"I will accept your surrender. On terms."

"What terms?" The Palwallum was suddenly disposed to be cautious.

"Exile. You and your son."

For a long minute, it looked to those watching at both ends that Mac might actually have won, that the Palwallum would accept safety in some barbarous outpost to all but certain death on Redux. Her eyes lost focus and it seemed certain she would capitulate. Then, abruptly, she stiffened.

"I don't believe you," she said. "Once you got away with it, but not twice. You might have fooled those idiots on the board, but not me." She stepped across to one of Roxanna's guards, took his blaster and held it to Roxanna's temple.

"I don't believe you," she repeated. "Mistaken, am I? I think you have a lot more to lose than I do." Her finger visibly began to caress the trigger pad.

Suddenly Mac was in no doubt that she would do it. Whatever the consequences for herself or her son, she would do it out of pique. She simply could not tolerate being scorned again, and would unleash her fury at the prospect.

"Put the blaster down," he said sharply. The Palwallum looked at him lovingly.

"No, Mac," Roxanna said, her emotions in turmoil.

"Put the blaster down," Mac said again. This time there was a note of fatigue in his voice.

"Good," the Palwallum said. "Some sense at last. Now as to details of the surrender..."

"No," Mac said. "You can have me, but that's all. There will be no surrender. You can make your own arrangements when you're chairman, but there will be no surrender."

Negligently, the Palwallum began to lift the blaster again.

"I think, boy, that you misunderstand the situation..." she began.

"Listen to me," Mac said. "Listen carefully. You have just saved your life and that of your son and you have won the chairmanship. Beyond that I will not go. If you push me, I will destroy you, you and your son. I will burn you to ashes, I will pound the ashes to dust and then I will fire the dust into a sun. You will be obliterated. You will never have been."

There was another long silence and finally the Palwallum lowered the gun.

"This time I do believe you," she said. "And no matter. As you say, I can resolve the details in due course. Shall we say in 30 minutes then? At my place." And the image vanished.

Li-Wilhemena and her staff were regarding Mac with horror. Morgana-Li was standing protectively close.

"I'm sorry, sir," Li-Wilhemena said into the silence. "But you can't allow that woman to become chairman."

"She won't," Mac said. "Don't worry. She can't. That's why I wouldn't accept that we should surrender. I will go to Anna. I will do what I can to get us both out. If I fail, we will both die, but together. If we both die my shares pass to Captain Wright senior, who will deal with matters here. In that event, you will, of course, take your orders from him. In the meantime, you are to hold the spaceport."

"But..."

"She is my heart," Mac said.

"I'm coming with you," Morgana-Li said. Mac smiled at her, one of his lovely smiles.

"Thank you," he said. "But no." The other ninjas, all but the two who had been evacuated with the rest of the wounded, were gathered close. Mac knew he had to give them something.

"But you can fly cap for me," he said. "As long as you're up high, close to the lucent, they can't shoot at you. Too dangerous. They might bring the whole thing down. And then they're all dead. If I can get her out of the building, you might just make the difference for us." Morgana-Li still looked unhappy, but somewhat mollified.

Mac fumbled with his fatpac one-handed.

"What do you need?" Morgana-Li said.

"Anna's harness," he said. "Put it on me. Maybe they'll overlook it. And the spare gloves. Put one in the cast for them to find. Roll the other one long and tuck it round my neck."

"What makes you think she just won't have you shot out of hand at the front door?"

"She needs the scrip. She needs to make sure that I've signed the shares over to her."

"And when she finds that you haven't?"

"Won't that be interesting?" Mac said.

He had been planning just to slip away but Li-Wilhemena was too quick for him. She had every Samura who could be spared, and some who couldn't, drawn up on formal parade. As he appeared out of the building that had been commandeered as the HQ, Li-Alana bellowed in her best sergeant-major's voice.

"Parade... shun. Present... arms." Three hundred katana sang the song of the sword as they flashed out and Mac then had no option but to inspect the ranks, accompanied by Li-Wilhemena, in that most ancient of ceremonies.

At the end, Li-Wilhemena saluted and said in a carrying voice:

"Sir, it is our custom sometimes... in unusual circumstances... that is to say, we've done it once before, just once... to appoint an honorary daimyo of the regiment. There has never been a man... We all vote on it... It must be unanimous. Sir, it is our honour and our privilege to appoint you Daimyo. Congratulations... and thank you sir. Thank you." She saluted again, and held it.

"Three cheers for the Daimyo," Li-Alana ordered and it came pouring down on him, all the emotion, all the pride, all the love the women could express no other way:

"Samura! Samura! Samura!"

Mac slowly looked about him, trying to catch every eye in thanks. Then he lifted a hand in farewell and rose towards the smoke-hole, followed by his ninjas.

RCentral seethed with rumour and incipient panic. Within minutes, the defeat at the spaceport and the loss of the air wing was fairly general knowledge throughout the vast building. But in the succeeding hours what was not known and subject to increasingly fantastic speculation was how it would all play out. And then came a whisper, unbelievable as it was, that somehow the Palwallum had prevailed and that the young Chairman was even now on his way to surrender.

Dostoi picked it up from one of his more reliable sources in the kitchens and found it entirely convincing, knowing as he did that the Palwallum had infamously kidnapped the Chairman's betrothed. Already in his own mind Dostoi was distancing himself as far as he could from any responsibility or involvement.

If the young Chairman was indeed on his way then Dostoi knew in his bones that it could not be long before Slade made his play and Dostoi intended to be part of it. Quiet retirement, the girl had said. Ask me again, Slade had said. And she had. And Dostoi yearned for quiet retirement with every fibre of his being.

Dostoi didn't know where the boy would arrive but he knew where he must be taken and headed himself for the well-known apartments, once Osmond's, once Slade's and

now the Palwallum's. It was his misfortune, so he thought, to encounter Eldo. In fact, Eldo had been searching for him.

To be the only GDF noncom in a building full of UWAT thugs was a most unpleasant experience and Eldo had been keeping a profile so low that he was almost invisible, but with the tuned antennae of the veteran campaigner he was aware that things were coming to a head. He was also aware that vulnerable as he was, his best chance of survival was to stick close to a man better connected and more afraid than himself, the toad Dostoi. And now that he'd found him, Eldo was determined not to let him out of his sight for the duration.

Dostoi glanced at him distractedly and hurried on. Eldo turned smoothly and followed.

From high up near the lucent, Mac looked down at the well-remembered entrance to Galconia Central. The day, years ago now, when this had all started was sharp in his mind: walking through the entrance with James, the flight test, the astonishing outcome, his first encounter with Slade who had bedevilled him ever since, the cauldron, the arena, Boss and Branco – were they still here on Redux? – and now Anna. Who was waiting for him.

He spoke to Morgana-Li and the rest of the ninjas over their local circuit.

"Orders," he said. "Whatever happens will happen quickly. We'll either get out or we won't. I'll try for the roof. You are to stay here no longer than nightfall, at which time you will return, all of you, and report to Hatamoto Li-Wilhemena. That is an absolute order. You have no discretion to vary it." There was silence.

"Acknowledge," Mac said. "All of you."

Eventually Morgana-Li spoke.

"Yes Daimyo," she said with extreme reluctance. There was a chorus of assent from the others.

"Take up surveillance over the roof," Mac said. "See you soon." And without more ado, he dropped away in a long glide.

"Good luck, good luck, Daimyo," they called after him in a flagrant breach of discipline.

Back at the spaceport, Li-Wilhemena who had been eavesdropping blew her nose loudly. Thousands of kilometres overhead Orville, too, felt a pricking behind his eyes and nervously scrubbed at his chin. The gods protect them, he thought, assuming whatever gods there might be were any damn use at all. And what was the daimyo thing?

There was an armed escort waiting for Mac. A UWAT captain saluted sketchily and invited Mac to accompany him through the echoing concourse. The troopers closed in about them and automatically fell into a regulation quick march. As much out of

mischievous as weakness, Mac deliberately slowed down and forced them to walk at his pace. There was great annoyance and awkwardness. Anna would have enjoyed it, Mac thought to himself. She hated mindless conformity.

It was a lengthy journey but at last they emerged from the elevator on to the command floor and stopped outside an imposing entrance that could only lead to the Palwallum's lair. Mac took a deep mental breath. Samura!, he said to himself.

Chapter Nine

At any other time Mac would have burst into laughter at the sight of the enormous chamber, once a mountain meadow, then an imposing grand salon, now a parody of femininity, but he had eyes only for Roxanna. She was standing by herself, isolated, towards the centre of the room. She looked unharmed and composed, as self-contained as ever. He wanted to rush to her, to crush her to him, to sweep her off and away from these vicious, unconscionable people. Instead he gave her nothing, at least nothing that anyone but she could detect. He appeared cold and utterly indifferent as did she, but a current sparked between them that left them both momentarily weak at the knees.

Roxanna could see now, as Mac was no longer hiding his right hand behind his back, just how badly hurt he was. Somehow she kept the concern from her face. He looked quite ghastly. His eyes passed over her without the slightest pause and went on to the reception committee.

The Palwallum was flanked by Slade, Vanderdot and a number of other UWAT officers there for show. She stepped forward, looking to Roxanna for all the world like a swig about to plunge her snout into a bucket of swill up to the eyeballs. She was so excited that she was unable to stand still and kept taking tiny, mincing little steps.

"Your excellency," she said mockingly. "How good of you to come."

"My pleasure," Mac said matching her tone exactly. "Entirely my pleasure."

"But first things first," the Palwallum said. "First we must relieve you of your flying glove. You must find it so uncomfortable."

Mac held up his left hand and an aide came forward, removed his suit gauntlet and then the black, gossamer-thin flying glove. Mac kept his hand up but the aide refused to replace the gauntlet. Without it, the suit could not be pressurised. Mac shrugged mentally. It was unlikely now that it would need to be.

"And," the Palwallum said portentously. "I'm afraid we must also relieve you of the spare glove you have undoubtedly brought."

Mac hesitated, gave the appearance of being about to deny any such suggestion, hesitated again and finally, with evident reluctance, pulled the spare from the cast on his right hand. It was a perfect little cameo performance; only Slade and Roxanna were not fooled. They glanced at each other and Roxanna saw Slade's eye droop ever so slightly. She hoped it meant what she hoped it meant.

"And finally," the Palwallum said, quite unable to contain her anticipation. "You will hand over the deed of transfer. For the shares. Your shares. In Galconia Enterprises Inc."

Again Mac played the moment, drawing out the suspense until it seemed the Palwallum might crack with tension and fracture into tiny pieces all over the floor. At

absolutely the last possible fraction of a second he pulled a cryllic tube from his thigh pocket. The same aide took it from him and passed it reverently to the Palwallum.

She slipped the end off, ejected the permo-parchment and greedily unrolled it. Given the time available, Mac thought, whoever in the secretariat was responsible had done rather well. The spurious share transfer was really quite convincing until, that was, one noticed that instead of the official seal of the notary public it bore instead the stamp, meaningless in the circumstances, of Galiconia Enterprises Inc.

In the event, the Palwallum was deceived for all of 30 triumphant seconds. Then she lifted her eyes to stare at Mac with cold disbelief before attempting to rip the document through and through. When the permo-parchment made a mockery of the gesture she threw it to the floor and stamped on it.

"You play a dangerous game," she shrilled at Mac.

"Oh no, Madame," Mac said. "It is you playing the game, a game you can never win. And I gave you that transfer to illustrate the point. If I die, if you kill me, by the terms of my will, which has been notarised, my shares will go elsewhere. They are locked up. Nothing I can do here can change that. Nothing you can do can change that. I came here only to tell you that you've lost, absolutely, and to accept your surrender."

"I have not lost," the Palwallum choked, barely coherent. "I can still kill you. I can still kill her." She pointed to Roxanna who was standing white-faced, wondering how much longer Mac could possibly overcome the weakness that was visibly threatening to drown him. He was starting to sway.

"If you kill me," Mac said, "my successors will hunt you down. If you kill Roxanna, I will hunt you down. Understand me, madame. Whatever you do, you will never be chairman. If you harm us, you will die. Your one chance is to surrender now."

It very nearly worked.

The Palwallum drew a long, shaky breath, then another. It seemd she was indeed about to capitulate. But finally a look of cold calculation began to wash over her face.

"You have ships," she said. "You will send for a notary public. And when he gets here I am quite sure you will sign a share transfer." She paused and turned to Vanderdot.

"Make her scream," she said pointing to Roxanna. "Make her beg for mercy."

Vanderdot smiled and signalled to a thin, unremarkable officer standing at the rear. He also took out his blaster and pointed it unwaveringly at Mac.

"Meet my interrogator," he said conversationally. "Captain Lourde. Very talented. And don't think of moving. It will be your knee if you do."

For Roxanna it was the moment that would define her life. Yet again she could fall victim to the forces of evil, or she could fight, she could take matters into her own hands, she could kill. There was never a second of hesitation, never a second's doubt. Her mind was crystal clear and resolute.

Lourde, all the more menacing for his unassuming air, moved out into the centre of the room towards her. However futile, 99 women out of a hundred would have attempted to flee. Roxanna stood calmly as the man sidled towards her and at the last possible moment spun away from him in a classical pirouette, and another. It was astonishing, mesmerising. Her leg went high over her head and something small slid from her boot into her hand. She turned again, so fast, so beautiful to watch, and again, taking her away from Lourde and towards the Palwallum who stood frozen, rooted to the spot along with everyone else. Roxanna's hand flashed, the laser-blade flared and on the instant the Palwallum's carotid artery was fountaining blood. She stood in stunned amazement, her lifeblood pulsing, pooling about her, then she staggered and crashed to the floor.

Vanderdot roared in outrage and swung his blaster towards Roxanna, who was now spinning away from the body. As he fired, Mac launched himself with all the strength he had left and caught the slug full in the body. His armour stopped the magma but the concussion at such close range did terrible damage.

"Drop it," Slade yelled, cutting through the mounting hubbub. Vanderdot turned, blood in his nostrils, his blaster seeking the next target. Slade fired and Vanderdot clutched at his arm.

"Nobody move," Slade shouted. "Stand still." He fired again and there was a exclamation of pain. The gathering motion abruptly ceased.

"Help him," Slade said to Roxanna. "We have to go." Mac had struggled to his hands and knees but could get no further.

"To the roof," Mac said weakly. They needed the ninjas. His com was still switched off. He couldn't reach it. He was fading, then Anna was there, hauling at him.

"My darling," she said. "We must go." Somehow she got him to his feet. Slade was standing by the wall his hook tapping out a security code on a concealed pad. His other hand still held the blaster covering the group of UWATs. Vanderdot was staring at him viciously, blood dripping from the hand clutched to his arm. Part of the wall slid open.

"Here," Slade said. It was the concealed private elevator he had strangely neglected to draw to the Palwallum's attention when she commandeered his apartment. Roxanna and Mac staggered inside. Slade followed, punched in a second code and then fired randomly at the UWAT officers. There was another cry as a man went down.

Dostoi had his ear unashamedly pressed to the door. He faintly heard the sound of the first three shots, another and then the murmur of shouting. He pulled back hastily as a group of UWATs struggled with each other to get through the doorway. The dam burst and they erupted into the corridor and pounded off without noticing him. There was no Slade, no Albright, no Roxanna. He peered in the door and saw the bodies on the floor, one a UWAT officer, the other the Palwallum, lying in a soggy puddle of

blood-soaked shurpile. She was clearly dead and Dostoi spared a moment to rejoice. The cluster was much the better for it. But there was still no sign of Slade and the others. The only way they could have left was by way of the hidden elevator, well-known to him from his days with Osmond. He went to the wall, slid back the panel that concealed the security pad and punched in the old code. It still worked. The elevator was returning.

Morgana-Li and the ninjas were flying lazy circles high over the roof of RCentral. She had her farsee visor down and stiffened as three figures emerged: the Daimyo being helped by the Lady. The third she didn't know. They were obviously fleeing. Roof guards were beginning to run towards them.

"With me," she snapped into her throat pad. The ninjas dropped into a steep dive, Morgana-Li deploying them as they went. There was no word from the Daimyo. He either couldn't speak or his comm was switched off. She prayed it was the latter. Seconds later, the cap peeled away and opened fire. The guards, caught by surprise, had no chance. Five went down. Three others turned and fled.

Morgana-Li, Gainor-Li and two more waited a second to make sure no other guards would pop out and then dropped down on the roof with the fugitives. The Lady stopped trying to support the Daimyo and let him sink down. He was barely conscious. Morgana-Li saw his left hand was bare. She felt around his neck. The spare glove was still there and she eased it over his fingers, careful not to damage it.

"He brought the harness for you," she said to the Lady, pointing.

"He can't fly," she said. "He's too badly hurt. You have to take him."

"We can't leave..."

"Take him," Roxanna shouted at her. "Take him now. I order you."

"More hostiles," came the warning in Morgana-Li's earpiece. Far down the roof a group of figures had emerged and were racing towards them. More and more were pouring out the access door.

"Cap, intercept," she ordered, and the four ninjas still aloft again dived to the attack. A moment later they opened fire and the UWATs scattered, vainly seeking cover on the exposed roof top. The ninjas weaving in their fast, well-rehearsed firing patterns, took a deadly toll.

Dostoi was outraged when Eldo forced his way into the elevator behind him.

"Where's Slade?" Eldo demanded.

"Get out," Dostoi said. Eldo seized him by the nose and jerked his head savagely backwards and forwards. Dostoi tried to scream with the pain.

"I said, where's Slade?" Eldo repeated.

"Od de roof, I tink," Dostoi managed as Eldo made another threatening gesture.

"Take us there," Eldo said

It was a brief ride. They peered cautiously out the opening door and what they saw infuriated Eldo. Slade and the others were obviously about to be rescued by the flighters. Slade was obviously planning to abandon him. Well, if he, Eldo, wasn't getting out of this hellhole, then no one else was either. He snarled with inarticulate rage, turned and shot Dostoi in the chest. The man died, desperately trying to summon the vision of a sunny courtyard with a grape arbour. He failed. Eldo spat contemptuously and then began to run.

"You must take him," Roxanna said. "Please." Morgana-Li hesitated, then nodded unhappily. She activated the thormalium on the harness Mac was still wearing and motioned to Gainor-Li.

"You and Kirby-Li look after him. Get him back safely, understand?"

"Yes hatamoto," she said. "You can trust us."

Still nobody had noticed the lone gunman charging at them from behind. Slade was the one Eldo really wanted, the gods-poxed general who had used him and discarded him, left him to the UWAT vultures. At last they heard him coming and looked up. Too late. He fired from the hip and Slade died instantly. Eldo tried desperately to adjust his rush, to shift his aim... He failed. A katana flashed out and disembowelled him. He shrieked and went on shrieking until Morgana-Li calmly took his head.

"Take the Daimyo now," she said, glancing down the roof. The UWATs were beginning to make ground and they would be under fire shortly. Gainor-Li raised Mac effortlessly and began to climb fast, Kirby-Li running interference between them and the UWATs. They curved away and were quickly out of range.

"Strip," Morgana-Li said to Roxanna, who was looking after Mac as she thought for the last time.

"What?" Roxanna said incredulously.

"There's a chance I can get us out, if we both strip," Morgana-Li said tearing at her fighting suit. "One of Orville's theories. If we can link our body impedance, skin to skin, the thormalium might cover both of us. I might be able to lift you. Come on." But Roxanna was already shedding her clothes.

Gainor-Li rushed the Daimyo straight to the makeshift hospital and the senior medical came running. Mac lay there, floating in mid-air as though on a pallet, seemingly unconscious. The medical put her fingers to the pulse in his throat. It was weak, thready.

"Typical concussion hit," she said pointing to the burn mark on his torso where the armour had absorbed the heat of the white hot magma slug. "There will be internal

ruptures. We have to get him to The-All-Sun-And-The-All-Moon. There's nothing I can do here."

Li-Wilhemena came hurrying up, worry and responsibility carving deep lines in her face. The medical, still gauging the Daimyo's pulse glanced upwards.

"What in Hyades...?" she exclaimed. They followed her gaze. Nobody noticed that the Daimyo's eyes were also open.

The remains of the ninja squad was dropping down from the smoke-hole. What was extraordinary were the two naked figures clasped together in the middle of the group. Eyes widened and people began to run.

Morgana-Li brought them down by the hospital and Roxanna leaped to Mac's side. His eyes were open and focused, she noted thankfully.

She bent down to whisper in his ear.

"I love you," she said.

"Purrr," Mac said. "Do it again. You look great."

"Don't be stupid," Roxanna replied, but her voice could not have been less indignant.

Someone handed her a cloak.

"We need to get you out of that suit," she said.

"No," Mac said. "You need to get into one. And I need a glove." He raised his left hand slightly. His voice faded and then he was gone again.

Roxanna looked at the medical and Li-Wilhemena.

"He's better in the suit," the medical said. "Until we can evacuate him. Support... Protection..."

"And he's right," Li-Wilhemena said. "This isn't over till the UWATs are neutralised. He brought your suit here with him. I have it. Please put it on now. And we'll find the Daimyo a spare pressure glove."

"Daimyo?"

"It's what we call him now."

"Why? What it does it mean?"

"It means lord," Li-Wilhemena said.

Chapter Ten

Vanderdot dispassionately kicked at the foot of Slade's corpse. GDF amateur, he thought, making him pull back from the spaceport. GDF traitor. Serve him right. He winced as pain shot through his wounded arm. Absolutely serve him right. To be truthful, he was not displeased at the turn of events. He had chafed at the slight to his authority ever since Slade's return. He supposed he ought to feel something that the woman was dead but to be truthful again, she had been a total bitch. All things considered he was not at all unhappy that she had overplayed her hand and was gone. That girl had been something though and flying off like that at the end, nude. He glanced at the crumple of clothes lying by the bodies. His men hadn't been able to believe it. What was that all about? But yes, all things considered he was not at all unhappy to find himself in sole charge, though that did leave the rather large question of what to do next.

Surrender? On the face of it, the only sensible option. It would spare his men more damage, get them home to Theta Tauri Major, tidy up this whole, stupid situation. But Vanderdot was not in the least doubt as to what would happen to him personally. Galconia would never be able to forbear from making an example of him. Mutiny... Rebellion... He would end in the arena, probably here on Redux, a spectacle of judicial revenge beamed throughout the whole damn cluster.

Supposing he didn't surrender? Supposing he retook the spaceport and control of the atmolock from those hell-spawn women? Slade had been right about one thing. There couldn't have been many more than 500 of them to start with. How many left, 400, 350? Not nearly enough to withstand determined assault. He had 10 battalions, not counting the three which had been so badly mauled. He had missiles. They could never stand as long as he went at them before their re-ups arrived. Speed then. Move fast, kick ass, kick them out of their beach-head and that young Chairman could go whistle, though he hadn't looked in fit state to do anything, the way that fighter had dragged him away. How had she done that?

So, retake the spaceport. Then what? Well, he had re-ups coming himself, didn't he? Enough to cover his withdrawal, get clean away. Or... Or enough to hold Redux himself, indefinitely...? Enough to play the game on his own account...? The future was suddenly intoxicating.

Vanderdot began to bellow and officers began to run. Vanderdot bellowing was bad for all concerned. Vanderdot allowed to bellow for more than 30 seconds was a disaster. Better to shoot yourself. Within the minute the UWAT machine on Redux was cranking at full speed.

Mac was lucid again. The medical saw his eyes open and came at him with a shot-injector. She was actually pressing it to his neck before he managed to make her desist. He felt like he had just come out of a head-on collision with The-All-Sun-And-The-All-Moon at warp speed but his mind was his own again, for the moment. Best not think about what was going on inside him. Ruptured liver? Ruptured spleen? His breathing wasn't good. A lung gone?

Roxanna came hurrying over, pulling at the suit he had insisted she don. She held a spare glove.

"You have to let them sedate you," she said. "Put you out."

"No," he said.

"Mac!"

"Don't fight me. Very soon there'll be more than enough of that. Don't waste my energy. I don't have much. I need Li-Wilhemena..."

"I'm here, Daimyo," she said. She had followed Roxanna.

"They will attack," Mac said. "Very soon. They have to retake the spaceport. It's their only way out and they must have reinforcements coming. The officers know what I'll do to them if they don't escape. That general – find out who he is; we need a briefing – he might even decide to try for Redux himself. They're coming and they'll use missiles. They know they have to get us out before our reinforcements arrive. They know they have to move very fast. How long before our re-ups get here?"

"Sir, the last report I had was two hours," Li-Wilhemena said. She wondered how Mac could possibly think let alone talk in his condition.

"Orders," Mac said. "We try to hold. If we lose the port, a surprise attack won't work a second time and it will be next to impossible to get into Redux again without destroying the whole place. But tell Captain Wright to bring The-All-Sun-And-The-All-Moon in close in case we do have to pull out. Tell the re-ups to get here absolutely as fast as they can. Hatamoto, the UWATs will be bringing up missile batteries if they're not already deployed. Do what you can about taking them out, but I don't want suicide missions. Do what you can about disrupting their troop deployments. Delay. Delay. Delay. Till we get our re-ups."

He suddenly stopped talking and seemed to have fainted again. He opened his eyes.

"And get this harness off me," he said. "Roxanna is to put it on in case we have to evacuate."

"Mac," Roxanna started to say.

"Do it," he said petulantly, and this time he did faint.

Li-Wilhemena gently lowered him to a pallet and removed the harness. She handed it to Roxanna, who looked at her mutinously.

"The Daimyo's orders," Li-Wilhemena said.

"He doesn't order me," Roxanna snapped, but took the harness anyway. The holy reverence suddenly surrounding Mac was very quickly becoming intensely irritating.

He was awake again and looking at her with wry amusement as Li-Wilhemena hurried off.

"Don't worry," he said. "It scares the Hyades out of me too." She smiled.

"I need to get to the CP," he said.

"Don't talk that military rubbish to me."

"The command point," Mac said. "I need to see what's happening."

"You're staying right here."

"Anna, please stop fighting me. I have to play this through. There's no other way."

"You're three-quarters dead."

"We'll all be all dead if this goes badly..." His voice was fading again. Anna angrily stamped off to find help.

Li-Wilhemena was hugely relieved to see the Daimyo being brought in to the warehouse she had appropriated as headquarters. It was solid and centrally located. Her staff had set up various portable com units. There was also an array of life-sign detection screens covering the perimeter of the spaceport.

"Report," Mac said. Li-Wilhemena turned to a display that showed a plan of the spaceport and surrounds.

"Recon patrols put missile batteries here, here and here." She indicated three points opposite each of the three entrances. The batteries were well back in the hinterland tangle of the city and no doubt well-defended.

"We have troop concentrations massing here, here and here... close," Li-Wilhemena continued. "They appear to be planning frontal assaults rather than to try breaching the dome. It makes sense. They will expect the missiles to take out the emplacements so we can't use them and it should minimise damage to the actual facilities and let them get their re-ups in fast." She consulted a readout on her wrist panel. "I have units detailed to attack all six points simultaneously in two minutes."

"Weapons?" Mac said.

"What helgel we have left," Li-Wilhemena shrugged. "There isn't much... their cannon, which they will destroy, the ground weapons we brought, and blasters." It was the weakness of their brand of aerial warfare. As commandos and guerrillas, the Samura had no equal but it was impossible for them to use heavier weapons than hand-blasters and bombs of one sort or another once they left the ground. In the first place, if flying they could only fight one-handed; in the second, recoil any greater than from a small blaster sent them tumbling uncontrollably.

"We'll do some damage," Li-Wilhemena said. "But we won't stop them. Slow them down maybe. Enough, maybe."

The numbers on her wrist panel ticked over and suddenly they were surrounded by chatter from the fighting circuits as the Samura swept down from the lucent. They were met by an intense curtain of fire that only increased as the angles became more oblique and the defenders could shoot without fear of hitting the sky. They heard an explosion and then another as helgel detonated but from the shouts and screams coming from the comm units, it was clear to Mac that his troops were taking more casualties than they could afford.

"Call them off," he said to Li-Wilhemena. She failed to hear his weakened voice in all the noise of combat. "Call them off," he tried to shout. Roxanna saw his lips moving, bent to hear and relayed the message. Li-Wilhemena stared at him. Did he know what he was doing? Should she over-rule him? But she saw that his eyes were perfectly focused.

"Break off," she ordered over the command circuit. "Repeat, break off and return." She again looked at Mac, openly questioning.

"We're losing people for nothing," Mac said as she bent to hear. "They're too strong. We'll just have to try to hold them here. And pull back from the entrances. No point losing people to the missiles. Just be ready to go back out when the bombardment's over."

"But the lifesign," Li-Wilhemena said. "They'll know if we pull back."

"Only if they've worked out the cockroaches. Tell them to leave the blockers behind," Mac said. "Lifesign doesn't matter now. If they think that suddenly there are more of us, then well and good." Li-Wilhemena grimaced. The Daimyo was still cunning, even if he couldn't move.

"I have to talk to Captain Wright," Mac said

A com operator brought over a unit at Li-Wilhemena's wave. Mac could not quite stifle a groan as they propped up his head. A moment later Orville was before him, filling the screen.

"You look like death," Orville said.

"Feel it," Mac said. "Where are you?"

"Right overhead, about 20 clicks up."

"You know Roxanna's safe?"

"She got word to me. Morgana-Li?"

"She was all right two minutes ago. Listen. It's going to be tough to hold on here till the re-ups arrive..."

"I could bring the ship in..."

"She'd be a sitting duck under the lucent. No room to move. But what fighters have you got on board?"

"Just the ship's tender," Orville said. "We left in too much of a hurry..."

"Send it. We can use it as a fire platform, at least. They have no air cover at all. And send all the helgel you've got."

"Yes sir, boss," Orville said. "Fast as we can. Don't get dead... "

A brief hiatus hit the command post, then Samura retreating from the front began to drop down from the smoke-hole. Li-Wilhemena went outside to re-assign them and Mac allowed himself to fade again. He had no idea how long he could keep going. At least the pain seemed to be reduced somewhat. Wrong, he thought ruefully as he relaxed. It was all still there. It had just been masked a little by activity. Roxanna was regarding him with angry concern. He closed his eyes to shut her out. For once in his life he wished they were a little less connected. Just now he had no desire to know what she was thinking. He had to go on until it was finished one way or another, and that was all there was to it.

Vanderdot was on a high. Things were going exactly according to plan. The civilian population, those that hadn't had the sense to leave of their own accord, had been ejected from the fire zones to join the refugees from the spaceport – no point killing good slaves – and his troops were now fully deployed. Those damn women had tried to interfere, as they were bound to do, and though brave – no denying they were brave – had been driven back without difficulty. All that remained was to launch the final attack. His own reserves were still at least three days away but let Galconia try to land once he had retaken the spaceport... let them just try.

He turned and surveyed the missiles, the deceptively small missiles, sitting in their neat rows on the thrower. Not thermo but almost as devastating. And he was going to use every last one of them. Plenty more where they came from. Silly damn women, sitting there in those emplacements, his emplacements, waiting to be hammered, thinking no one would ever work out the truth about all those cockroaches that had suddenly appeared. Fools. But then they were only women. And luck's a fortune, he thought. Luck. His luck.

He flicked a switch on his wrist panel, selecting the batteries' circuit, and tapped his throat pad.

"Prepare to take," he said. "On my mark. Two, one, mark." There was the faintest of delays, then the missiles behind him streaked into the air, described a shallow parabola and a second later crashed into the emplacements around the spaceport entrance. The simultaneous explosion of the 20 Pyric-A warheads might just as well have been a small thermo. The blast wave made Vanderdot stagger even a good three clicks out as he was, the flare seared the eyeballs and the column of smoke shot upwards to mushroom convincingly against the lucent. There were two more identical columns from the rear of the dome.

Vanderdot chuckled to himself. He had always wanted to do that. He strode into the CP and scanned the screens. Just as he'd predicted, not a cockroach to be seen. But there did seem to be a lot of lifesign inside the dome all of a sudden. Well, no matter.

Reports were coming in from the advance posts. All three entrances had been obliterated and his observers could now see right into the interior of the spaceport through the gaping breaches in the dome. In fact, it was a wonder the thing was still standing.

Vanderdot flicked another switch on his wrist panel.

"All units advance," he said with eager anticipation.

The unbearable blasts of the missile strikes brought Mac back to life. He jerked and actually sat up. The pain tearing at his insides all but made him faint again. For long, long seconds nobody could think, nobody could hear. They might just as well have been in the centre of a star going nova. The dislocation was appalling, total.

Dimly, from a great distance, Mac began to register a voice calling him, over and over. It was Orville, on the com. Shouting. As loud as he could.

"Get them out," he was yelling. "Mac! Mac! Get them out!"

Li-Wilhemena shook her head.

"What's he saying?" she said.

"Shut up," Mac said. "Orville. What is it? What's wrong."

"We're picking up heat, Mac. Building. Exponentially. Remember back. Remember what I told you I thought would happen if thormalium ever started a chain reaction. It's happening Mac. The missiles set it off. There's no stopping it. You have get out, as far away from Redux as you can. I'll come for you, but you have to get out. Now. Everyone. As far out into space as you can."

"He's crazy," Li-Wilhemena said. She was suddenly extremely agitated. "What's he talking about?"

"We do it," Mac said. "Abandon ship, planet, whatever. Now. Right now."

"Daimyo, we can't."

"We must. Or we die."

"Daimyo, I'm sorry. You're not yourself. We can't fly out into space. It's mad. Crazy."

"It's our one chance," Mac said. A faint tremor shook them. "Feel that. We have to go."

"Sir," Li-Wilhemena said gravely. "I can't let you do this. Your wounds... I have to relieve you of command."

Mac looked at her, searched her face. He saw not fear, not panic only honest concern, determination. The noise of battle was growing. Reports were coming in over

the coms of troops advancing, firing. There was another tremor, stronger. What could he do? What could he say?

"Hatamoto," he said, his voice almost lost in the increasing crescendo. "On my honour as a warrior, on my honour as Samura, you must trust me. I swear we must leave. To stay is to die."

Li-Wilhemena stood for another long moment. What did she really know about this boy? Nothing. Nothing except that if he were false, if the Daimyo were false, then life truly was not worth living."

She nodded.

"Give the orders," Mac said.

"The wounded?"

"Put them on pallets. They have neutral gravity."

"The atmolock? It has to be opened from here."

"I stay," Mac said. "I'm probably dead anyway." It was as though the bang and crash of the battle outside had suddenly ceased. There was deathly silence.

"Then I stay, too," Roxanna said. Mac looked at her. He could order her to be dragged away by her harness. She would fight. He could have her restrained. He opened his mouth and then found there was nothing he wanted to say.

"And us," Morgana-Li said. She was standing at the door of the CP with the surviving ninjas.

The battle noise outside took over again, louder, more desperate.

"But how will you get out?" Li-Wilhemena shouted.

"There are manual airlocks," Mac shouted. "For work on the lucent. We'll find one. Move!" he added urgently. Li-Wilhemena took a second to salute, sure she would never see him again, then turned and started barking orders.

"We have to get to the control room," Mac said, "Before they see us. We won't be able to hold them off long if they do. The less we have to fight the better."

"Can you fly?" Morgana-Li asked. For answer, Mac spread his left hand and rose from the pallet, trying to hold himself as rigid as possible.

"Turn on your harness," he said to Roxanna. "You fly with Morgana-Li. Lead out."

"No," Roxanna said. "I fly with you. You can't use your right hand. You're defenceless. I'm back-up."

"Give her a weapon," Mac said. "Come on."

The tremors were coming faster now and much stronger. Mac wondered how long the dome would stand. There was also noise, grinding, crashing, that was not of battle but a world starting to tear itself to pieces as the gravitational shear fed off the thormalium's chain reaction and began to run wild. One of the warehouses collapsed with a rolling thunder barely audible over the increasing cacophony. Samura, some

guiding a-g pallets with the remaining wounded, were streaming up through the smokehole, covered by small rear-guard detachments, all volunteers.

Mac and the ninjas flew up to the doughnut. The central control room straddled the elevator tube from the main entrance. Mac chose a likely-looking window.

"Shoot it out," he said to Roxanna. A moment later it disappeared in a burst of crystallised cryllic.

"Find the atmolock driver," he ordered and they poured in through the window.

"Daimyo, we can't hold any longer," a voice came through his helmet. It was the junior hatamoto in charge of one of the rear guards.

"Get out," Mac ordered. "Get out and get up. Fast. All rear guards. Break off now." Buildings were swaying and collapsing all over the spaceport. The noise was drowning out the battle completely. Mac saw figures from the three separate detachments accelerating urgently upwards. As they left, UWATs charged through the breaches blasted in the dome. Debris was raining down from the wrecked areas and they could feel the huge monocoque structure beginning to heave.

"Daimyo," Gainor-Li said. "Over here." She had found a large, cryllic cover labelled 'Atmolock'. Underneath there were two red buttons marked 'In' and 'Out'.

"It's CAWmatic," Mac said. "Get on to Hatamoto Li-Wilhemena. Hit the out button when she signals they're all there."

"Daimyo," Morgana-Li called. "She was standing to one side of the central window. They've spotted the window we shot out. They're going for the elevator."

Automatically they both looked to the lobby where the elevator would debouch.

"Take them out," Mac said. "We have to hold till they're all in the atmolock."

The floor surged beneath them. It was beginning to feel like a space ship weaving its way through an asteroid shower. At this rate they wouldn't need the airlock, Mac thought. The lucent would be falling about them any minute, never mind the dome. Open the atmolock now? What difference would it make? Redux was doomed. As if to underline the point, a jagged crack appeared in the far side of the dome and raced upwards as he watched, but Mac knew even if he could find a way to over-ride the CAW and open both sides of the lock simultaneously that he would never be able deliberately to blow off the atmosphere that 10 million people depended on even if they were already effectively dead.

Morgana-Li opened fire as the elevator doors parted. There was a yell and then screaming adding to the racket all around them. A pop-bomb arced out of the elevator. Morgana-Li caught it and hurled it straight back. The noise from the elevator ceased. Morgana-Li cautiously eased forward and then with the help of two of the squad jammed the doors open with bodies.

"They'll come up the other shafts and round the doughnut," she yelled to Mac.

"I doubt it," Mac shouted back. The dome was now shaking and swaying so violently it felt like it could go at any moment.

"How long?" he shouted to Gainor-Li.

"She says one minute."

"We won't last that long,"

A jet of plasma shot through a window a little way along with a crash loud enough to drown everything else.

"Ground fire," Morgana-Li yelled. "Shoulder cannon." Another window and part of the wall vaporised. Kirby-Li was down, her body half severed, dead before she hit the floor. Morgana-Li and the ninjas began to return fire though their hand blasters were totally outgunned. Roxanna was firing too. Mac wondered which would bring down the whole damn doughnut first: the cannon or the huge vibrations that were jerking the structure about them like a dog with a rat.

Gainor-Li was shouting something. Mac couldn't hear but if she wasn't asking permission to fire the lock, it would all be too late anyway. He signalled affirmative and saw her push the button. Cannon fire was eating away at the floor about them.

"Evacuate," he yelled over his command circuit. "Evacuate now. Go, go, go."

Vanderdot was mystified. Streams of women were flying upward from the smoke hole towards the atmlock. It didn't make sense. What could they possibly hope for up there? And all this upheaval beneath him. The ground shuddered again and he almost fell. Unnatural. It was all totally unnatural. The Samura rear guards were fighting hard, which was only to be expected, but now according to the reports he was getting, they were pulling out too. The ground heaved again. Great fissures were opening up. It was hot suddenly. Where was the heat coming from? One of the missile throwers was actually swallowed whole. Vanderdot felt the fear rising. His men were looking wildly about and starting to run, but where to? There was nowhere to go. Buildings were coming down around them and civilians were appearing from nowhere, screaming, panicked, wild with terror. It was terrible, terrible. The heat, it was burning. And the noise. A man couldn't think for the noise. He could hear nothing now but the grinding of the ground and the thunder of collapse. The voices of his troops on the circuits was just babble, faint and meaningless. The ground was splitting open. Everywhere he looked great rifts were tearing the earth apart, faster than a man could run. And the heat was pouring out. You couldn't breathe. People were being swallowed en masse, disappearing into huge clefts and crevasses, the cracks of doom. A rupture streaked towards Vanderdot and raced between his legs. He felt himself begin to split as his feet were ripped apart. Then there was nothing and he fell, screaming himself, though quite unaware of it in the bedlam, never knowing that it was his order to fire all the missiles simultaneously that had brought about armageddon on Redux.

Mac, Roxanna and the surviving ninjas fled upwards towards the smoke-hole, racing the cracks tearing at the fabric of the dome. Mac, trying to think amid the horrendous tumult, couldn't believe it was still standing and then, suddenly, it wasn't. The whole monstrous structure collapsed about them. The skin compressing the air beneath left it only one place to go, the smoke-hole. Mac and the others were picked up by the instant hurricane and spat out, twisting, turning, tumbling, completely out of control in the turbulence, blinded by the storm of dust and debris that came with them. Roxanna was torn from him. He felt a faint tug as she lost her grip, a glimpse of white face gone instantly in the swirling clouds about them. The roar of the wind drowned all possibility of thought. He tucked himself tight to minimise the terrible new battering his body was taking as they were hurled through the wreckage and abandoned himself to fate.

Time lagged.

He was with Hannibal. His brother was laughing. And his mother. James was there. He missed them. He missed them all so much. He tried to speak to them, to call them. They didn't hear. Osmond arced below him into the unspeakable pit. His other brother. Mac twisted his head trying to block out the horror that followed. His father collapsed to the ground. He was talking. The edges of the gaping wound had become lips pouring out words with the blood. Mac wouldn't listen, refused. His father insisted, the blood and the words coming faster and faster. Mac knew what it all meant. It was his turn. Ten million people, ten million people were dying because of him and now it was his turn. It was just.

A girder was swimming towards him, lethargic, languid, lethal. Mac twisted but nothing happened. He couldn't move. He was caught, trapped. The girder swam on, massive, malevolent.

Time surged.

The girder smashed into him.

Time stopped.

Chapter Eleven

Orville, racing to the rescue, watched his monitors with horrified fascination. The heat signatures from the three missile strikes had registered in the range of small thermos. He couldn't believe it. Some maniac had unleashed concerted salvos and instead of dissipating, the separate heat signatures had instantly coalesced into one which was now flaring ever more intensely, spreading, waxing, feeding on itself exponentially. It was immediately clear to Orville that whatever the estimates of the ore remaining, there was more than enough thormalium left to fuel a furnace that would incinerate all Redux and tear it asunder.

Lifesign was emerging from the atmolock. Already The-All-Sun-And-The-All-Moon was feeling the gravitational surges. Orville wondered how long the lucent could hold before it started to disintegrate. What would happen when it did? How long did he have before the shear became too great even for this ship to survive? That was another question. If he had to make an emergency hyperation to escape, what effect would the wild gravity have? It was possible they could become irretrievably lost in a distant galaxy.

Orville delicately edged the ship closer to the survivors streaming towards him and gave the necessary orders for picking them up. For a moment he dared to hope that Morgana-Li might be with them and then his attention was fully engaged in trying to gently The-All-Sun-And-The-All-Moon through the increasing gravity storm. Despite its mammoth size, the ship was starting to buck like an ancient maritime vessel caught in a hurricane.

Long minutes later, with the ship now all but uncontrollable, Orville got the word that all the survivors were on board, including the wounded, and he blasted out into space not willing to risk a hyperation. Behind them, he could see on the screen, the Redux lucent was starting to fracture.

With the ship's motion finally easing, Li-Wilhemena struggled on to the flight deck. Orville handed over the controls and turned to face her. He was warned by her expression.

"How bad?" he asked.

"They're still down there," she said. She was distraught and not terribly coherent. The speed and the horror of Redux's demolition had been deeply shocking.

"Who is down there?" Orville asked quietly, trying to calm her with his own manner.

"The Daimyo," she said. "And the Lady. And Morgana-Li. The ninjas, those who are left. They stayed to hold the control room and to open the atmolock for us." Orville looked back to the monitor showing Redux. There were great tears in the lucent now and clearly visible there were plumes reaching far out into space. Debris and dust was

being sucked out with the atmosphere as the pressure within and without fought to equalise. One of the mountains began to crumble.

"Were they alive?" Orville demanded. Li-Wilhemena hesitated.

"Were they still alive?" Orville insisted.

"Somebody opened the atmolock," she said. She shrugged despairingly. "The Daimyo was badly wounded before it began..."

"The others?"

"I don't know. I just don't know."

Orville thought for a moment and then issued a stream of orders to do with the safety of The-All-Sun-And-The-All-Moon. He turned about, seized his helmet and rushed for the hangar deck. He couldn't risk the ship in close again but there was one faint chance. He still had the shuttle. There had been no time to despatch it. He could risk that. He could risk himself.

The shuttle was too small for his floater. He flicked on the a-g harness he was wearing as a matter of course and pulled himself aboard by main force. A minute later he had the little vessel in its launch chute and was on the way. He expected nothing. To find anyone in the maelstrom that was erupting as Redux disintegrated would be impossible, miraculous beyond belief. He expected to die. But he knew that Mac, that Roxanna, that Morgana-Li would all have come for him without a moment's thought. It was not love. It went beyond love. It was family.

Roxanna felt her grip failing and then all at once she was snatched away. Mac reached out a futile hand and was gone. She was alone, tumbling through the whirling clouds. She caught a glimpse of someone else, one of the ninjas. Morgana-Li? Gone again. What to do? There was nothing she could do, just tuck herself in as small as possible and hope to miss the worst of the battering debris. The rushing column of air about her began to lose energy, finally. It hit the lucent and mushroomed. The current broke up into complex eddies and whirlpools. She became completely disoriented. She had no sense of up or down, whether she was spinning or somersaulting. Visibility was clearing. There was a body, limp. Unconscious, or lifeless? It was Mac. She could see the insignia on his helmet. He was out of reach and she was helpless, unable to control her motion. She tried the circuit in her helmet but all she could get was static. He looked dead. Oh gods, he looked dead. She stretched towards him, yearning with every fibre. A flaw in the currents brought them closer together. Tantalising. So near. The pressure of the wind was dropping and so was Mac. He couldn't fly. He would fall, straight into the inferno below. Then she would go with him. He was nearly underneath now. She switched off her harness and dropped towards him, but he was falling now too. She couldn't reach him. Oh gods, let her reach him. A last flurry threw them violently towards each other. They cannoned together and she wrapped herself around him,

clinging with all her strength. She had to hold on. She couldn't lose him again. Somehow, as their speed accelerated she managed to switch the harness back on, praying it would support them both, that Orville's automatic regulator would have sufficient tolerance. She was only small, light. Surely...? Their fall slowed. Stopped.

Through the static in her earpiece Roxanna could hear a voice, faint but definite. Then others. It was the ninjas. It had to be the ninjas.

"Here!" she shouted. "Here. Help!"

The dust was clearing fast now. She saw shapes and then they were coming towards her.

"Roxanna," Morgana-Li called. "Are you all right? Have you got the Daimyo?"

"Mac's here," she said. "He's hurt."

And then the ninjas were with her. Five of them. Only five. Two more gone. Lost? Dead? Who knew?

"We have to get to the atmolock," Roxanna shouted.

"No good," Morgana-Li said. "We can't open it."

"There'll be a manual airlock," Roxanna said. "For inspections. Repairs."

"Are you sure?"

Roxanna was by no means sure, but what else could they do?

"I used to live here," she said. "You'll have to tow me and Mac. He can't fly."

The ninjas rallied about them and they began to rise in convoy.

"Is he dead?" Morgana-Li asked tentatively.

"No," Roxanna said. "I won't let him be dead."

"If he's dead we should leave him. We'll have more chance."

"Leave us if you want," Roxanna snapped.

"I only meant..." Morgana-Li started to say and then stopped. The hurt was plain in her voice.

"The lucent!" Gainor-Li shouted. "Look out...!"

Above them, the pale skin was splitting, tearing apart as though someone were slitting it with a laserblade. A line of black showed through, stars. Inexorably they began to hurtle towards the fracture as the pressure of Redux's atmosphere vented into the vacuum beyond. There was nothing they could do. The only question was whether they could fit through the fissure or whether they would just be smashed to pulp.

Morgana-Li reacted instinctively, but with full knowledge and understanding of what she was doing. She had a moment in which to be glad that she had the ability, the skill to rise to a challenge beyond everyone except the Daimyo. She had a moment in which to feel her life these past months had brought her all the fulfilment she had ever craved. She had a moment to feel peace. She had a moment to shout: "Samura!" Then she rocketed into the lucent well in advance of the others and, with enough extra

acceleration added to her existing velocity, smashed through a way for them. The convoy shot safely through the breach Morgana-Li had died to create and out into space. Morgana-Li's lifeless body twisted away in the jet-stream and was lost.

The closer Orville came to the death throes of Redux the worse the gravitational upheavals. The little shuttle bucked and twisted like a mindwine hallucination, completely at the mercy of the wild, invisible forces rending space about them. Orville could not begin to imagine how the tiny ship managed to hold together in the midst of all that impossible violence. With a small part of his mind he made a mental note to seek out the engineers who had constructed the shuttle to reward them with untold wealth. If he survived. Which was growing more unlikely by the second.

If he were Mac or Roxanna or Morgana-Li what would he do, assuming they could still do anything? They would have to head for the lucent and beyond, get as far away from Redux as they could, keep going till the gravity ran out. Assuming they could survive the huge shearing forces at all. Assuming they'd run for it soon enough. To have any chance now, they had to be out here in the void already, away from the apocalypse engulfing Redux, but how to find them? In this mess, he would never pick up the cockroach specks unless he ran into them. Which was when he saw regular lifesign registering faintly on the monitor. It had to be them. Nobody else could be out here. They must have got rid of the blockers.

Orville fought the controls with new urgency, trying to slip the little ship through the flaws and eddies of gravity gone insane, to find the fault lines, to minimise the stress tearing at the fragile hull. He flicked through the frequencies, and again, and finally picked up a signal.

"Mayday, mayday," came a voice with the age-old universal distress call. It almost sounded like Roxanna.

"Mayday, mayday." It was a different voice this time. They must be rotating to minimise drain on the suit systems and to maximise signal strength. Again the call came, and again a different voice.

"Mayday received," Orville sent. "Mayday received. Keep talking for the DF to home on."

"Orville, is that you?" It was definitely Roxanna. A powerful gravity vortex tore at the ship and Orville was too busy concentrating to reply for some minutes. But the maydays kept coming, and Orville fought his way in towards the source of the signal.

"Orville," Roxanna called. "We see you. We see you."

"Keep talking," Orville managed to say and then between gyrations: "This will have to be fast. Can't hold her. Don't try to use the airlock. I'll vent the whole ship. Just pile in."

"Roco," Gainor-Li said.

And then he saw them. Five of them. Only five of them, clustered around a body. A premonition gripped him. He hadn't heard her voice. Surely she would have spoken had she been able. Mac would have spoken. One body. Two missing voices. The premonition grew stronger. He made a supreme effort to control the fear suddenly pulsing through him. He had to get this right. The way the ship was being thrown around they might well be killed trying to get aboard. His hands moved over the control panel and there was a sudden roar as the ship's air vented, tugging at him, sweeping away anything loose. He opened the main hatch to give them as much room to board as possible and began to edge in to them, desperately trying to minimise the demented motion. Brute force and ignorance, it was all he had left. It was all anybody had left.

Now he could no longer see them. All he could do was to try to hold position. Twice, one of the group got a hand on the ship only to have it wrench itself away. The third time, Gainor-Li managed to hold on and the others used her as a bridge, thrusting Mac on board, then themselves. A hand reached out to hit the switch and the hatch slid closed.

"Go, Orville," Roxanna said. "Please, go."

This time, Orville did hyperate. He had no choice. The shuttle surely could hold together only seconds longer in a gravity storm which was now of such dimensions that Orville could see Redux itself beginning to shatter. The whole planetoid was splitting into fragments. There was no time for equations or calculations. Orville punched numbers and trusted to dumb luck.

Instantly, the motion ceased. A moment later he was looking out at a strange sky, a sky he had never seen before, a sky that for all he knew might be in some parallel universe. The gravitational distortions had been so severe that anything might have resulted. At least things were still again, calm, comprehensible.

Automatically he reached for the switch to restore the ship's atmosphere and then hesitated. There was no telling how long they might be out here. The shuttle, being designed for short-haul only, had minimal scrubbing capability and relied mainly on stored oxygen. Their suits were the same, some scrubbing, some oxygen cells. They would last longer, breathe longer, if they used the ship's oxygen only to top up their suits. How much longer? It was not a calculation Orville wanted to make. A day or two? Three? How long altogether? A week maybe. A week to find the way home, or a planet with breathable atmosphere.

What was he thinking? Better to think about that than the other.

She was dead. He knew she was dead. It had to be faced.

He got out of the couch and pulled himself round.

Roxanna was slumped against a bulkhead, a helmeted head in her lap, the body stretched out prostrate, floating just above the floor. The four other ninjas were similarly slumped, locked within themselves.

"Is he alive?" Orville asked.

"Just," Roxanna said. Mac's wrist panel now tuned to his lifesign showed a faint heartbeat.

"I'm sorry, Orville," Roxanna continued. "I'm so sorry. She died to save us. When the lucent split and we were being sucked out through the slit, she made herself crash into it first. To make a hole for us to get through. She saved us. She died doing it. Mac said she would die for us. He knew. She did. She just did it. There was no time to stop her. She just did it. She was so brave."

Orville could see the tears pouring down Roxanna's face inside the helmet. How uncomfortable, he thought distractedly, no way to blow your nose, dry your eyes. He would know exactly the feeling, he realised, as his own eyes overflowed. So beautiful. She had been so beautiful. And strong. In the end. So strong. A sob escaped him.

Gainor-Li struggled to rise.

"Sir," she said. "I'm sorry, sir. We loved her too. But we have to get the Daimyo to the medicals. Or we'll lose him too."

Orville bowed his head and then reluctantly straightened.

"I don't know where we are," he said, his voice still tear-stained. "The gravity storm was so severe that we might be anywhere, a different universe even. I don't know. We have to maximise the oxygen. Stay in your suits. I'll try to do something." He looked at Mac.

"There's a first aid kit," he said. "In the locker. We can keep him hydrated at least. What happened?"

"In the end... I don't know," Roxanna said. "Something hit him. There are gouges here, on his helmet. But he was badly hurt before that. I don't know how he kept going." She began to cry again. "He was shot saving me. His hand was almost burnt off saving Morgana-Li. He was hit before that in the fighting. He should be dead."

"But he isn't," Orville said. "Don't worry, try not to worry. We'll save him." But his words sounded particularly hollow even to himself.

It seemed to Orville that the problem was damn near insoluble. Hypercom links with the CAW depended on constant modulated orientation of the receptors and vectoring precise to within fractions of a nanometer. The gravity storm had destroyed their orientation which meant they had no link and without a link, blown to who knew where as they had been, it would be impossible to identify their location, restore the orientation of the receptors and so re-establish the link. It was a circle of self-defeat and it very nearly brought Orville to a state of catatonic despair. Morgana-Li was dead so what was the point anyway? Better just to accept what fate was proposing. Came a time when it was smart to give up, to know when you were beaten even if death by

asphyxiation was a bad way to go. He closed his eyes there on the pilot's couch and let himself sink into listless apathy.

It was later. He didn't know how long, minutes, hours? Roxanna was floating above him, her expression furious.

"If I could slap your face, I'd give you such a crack," she said, her voice as sharp as a laserblade. "You've given up. And you so proud of your smarts... Orville the genius... Except when things get really tough you fold."

Orville said nothing. It was true. He had given up. He closed his eyes again. Why couldn't Roxanna just accept there was nothing to be done. This was it. They were finished, whether she liked it or not. Yes, he was proud of his abilities, but not any more. They couldn't help anyone now. Idly he turned his head.

In the zero g of the shuttle, the ninjas had Mac floating free and lightly guyed to restrain him from any further damage. An IV squeezebag with a pressure regulator was connected to the cannula in his suit. The heart monitor on his wrist panel still showed a faint pulse. He couldn't have long, Orville thought. He was the lucky one. He would just slip away without the agony of prolonged suffocation. Good old Mac. Even he would be forced to quit as things were now. It was irritating though. Finally a problem he couldn't solve. Always a first time. Not even the first time. He hadn't been able to retrieve the Palwallum's dumped files either. But that wasn't a problem exactly so much as a case of too little time and too little direction. Whereas now there was nowhere even to start, no direction at all.

Roxanna had her head close to Mac's. He could see her lips moving while he could hear nothing. She must have switched both their suits to a private circuit. What could she possibly be saying. Giving him directions, no doubt, orders. Hang in. Don't give up. Don't die. Don't you dare die. That was Rox. She'd get through to him somehow, even if he was deep in coma. She'd keep him alive by main force. She wouldn't let him die. She'd just refuse to release him. For Rox there was only ever one direction. Straight ahead, ramming speed.

Why was this word, direction, constantly surfacing? What was all this direction, direction, direction? He knew other words. He could take other... directions.

The DF. The direction finder. Supposing it was possible to modify it? Supposing it could be made to scan for hypercom beams instead of radio waves? Supposing he could find a way to adapt it? Then why hadn't it already been done, centuries ago, aeons? Nobody had ever needed it? Maybe. Could it be done? Maybe. If anybody could do it, he should be able to. It would pass the time at least.

Orville reached for his pockets where he always carried a basic micro-electronic tool kit.

Roxanna looked up as he began to move, exchanged glances with Gainor-Li and smiled to herself. Orville's vanity had always been a reliable lever.

Two days had passed. They were beginning to think about their breathing. Mac was still alive, still the same, deep in the coma that for the moment was probably the best thing for him. For how long was another question. He desperately needed to be medicalised, to be treated properly with the body rebuilders only a pod could provide.

Orville's hypercom finder was on line, had been for hours, but, as he had explained, whether it found anything would largely be a matter of luck. The beams were so narrow that it might take ten years to search a square centimetre of sky thoroughly, and if the beam was intermittent, one might never find it at all. As he had no idea where a beam might come from, Orville had set his device to make broad sweeps, which meant their lives absolutely depended on luck. Hit or miss. Inevitably miss. But it was the best he could do. It was a chance, however infinitesimal.

Another day passed. They still had oxygen cells in reserve but Orville was insisting that to maximise their duration they must maximise the discomfort now. He wished he had started the regime sooner. But every breath was torture as a result, except for Mac whom they kept on full supply. Nobody moved unless it was absolutely necessary. Nobody talked. They were each buried in their own mental coffin, beyond thought, locked into the unremitting grind of the struggle for the next breath, and the next, and then the one after that.

Orville caught himself about to black out. He roused and distributed more cells. One of the ninjas had slumped into unconsciousness. He couldn't remember her name. He replaced her cell and turned it on full until he saw her eyelids flicker. Roxanna looked at him questioningly. With an effort, Orville held up two fingers. Two days tops. Even if they did hit a beam it was growing more and more unlikely that anything could be done in time to save them.

An alarm went off in his ear. After the last episode when he had nearly lost consciousness, Orville had set it as a precaution. Automatically he switched it off and reached for the remaining spare cells. But the alarm kept on, insistently, stridently. Orville struggled to understand what it meant. Eventually it came to him. It wasn't the oxygen alarm it was the DF. Galvanised, he reached for the controls.

Chapter Twelve

When The-All-Sun-And-The-All-Moon arrived at the rendezvous the shuttle looked derelict, dead. Huckley made repeated attempts to raise Orville but could get no response. Urgently, he brought the huge ship sweeping round and with finesse that he hoped Orville might still be alive to appreciate, scooped the shuttle into its chute. He raced aft and was in time to see the little ship slide out on to the hangar deck.

"Get it open," he ordered. "Fast."

He was the first on board as the hatch slid up and air flooded in. Bodies were lying haphazardly, all of them suited and helmeted. He began to unlock visors, shouting for oxygen masks and medicals. He came to the Chairman, identifiable by the insignia on his helmet. His wrist panel showed a faint heartbeat.

"Get them to pods," he ordered, standing back as the medicals took over with ventilators of pure oxygen and cardiac stimulators plugged into the suit electrodes.

Mac was hurried off on a floater while the others, for the moment, were worked on where they lay.

Ten minutes later, the chief medical came to report.

"One of them was too far gone," he said. "One of the women. The others are alive."

"Brain damage?" Huckley asked.

"Too early to tell."

"Which woman?"

"A soldier, sir."

"Not the Lady?"

"No."

Huckley allowed himself a sigh of relief. Partly, he had dreaded having to be the bearer of such news had they all died, though from the brief glimpse Huckley had managed the Chairman's survival seemed extremely problematic. Mostly, however, he had come to develop a genuine regard for these people, particularly Orville. Crippled and all, the man was amazing. It was the reason Huckley had been content to stay with The-All-Sun-And-The-All-Moon and play second fiddle. The young Chairman, very decently, had offered him command of one of the new fortships presently building, but Huckley found he preferred to stay where he was, for the moment, anyway.

"When can I talk to Captain Wright?" he asked.

"He's still unconscious," the medical said. "He needs a pod, at least for a while."

"See to it," Huckley said. He made his way back to the flight deck to report to Captain Wright senior and realised that he was extremely grateful not to have responsibility for the handling of such a crisis: the Chairman at death's door and Redux

reduced to shards and fragments, not to mention the fact that the rest of his family might still emerge only as vegetables.

"Well done, captain," Wright said. "I'm very grateful."

Huckley shifted self-consciously.

"It wasn't me, sir," he said. "It was all Orville, I mean, captain..."

"Orville is fine. He's not one for ceremony."

"I've never seen anything like it," Huckley said. "That whole planetoid was just tearing itself to pieces and he got in there somehow. The gravity shear was off the dial. I don't know how he managed. I couldn't have done it, I don't mind saying... Even to find them... And he had to hyperate out..." Huckley shook his head. "The distortions were impossible..."

"So how did you track him?"

"We didn't. Orville jury-rigged the DF on the shuttle and somehow picked up a beam, enough to re-orient. Then he called us and calculated a rendezvous, the shuttle coming full speed till it ran out of fuel, us going full speed. I don't know how many hyperations... It was spot on. It had to be. They had seconds left when we got air to them. One of the soldiers, one of the women, she didn't make it. Too far gone..."

"Keep me informed," Wright said. "Any change, to any of them."

"Of course," Huckley said. "And sir... Orville, your son.. Exceptional... Truly exceptional."

"I know," Wright said. "But thank you for saying."

It came to Orville. Her name was Nikkos-Li, one of Mac's ninjas. Why was he thinking of her? She had nearly died on the shuttle but he had given her more oxygen just in time. Was she still alive now? He hoped so. The others? Mac? But Morgana-Li was dead. There was no doubt about that. Roxanna had told him so and she never would have said anything if she hadn't been sure. Was he dead, too? Was this some sort of afterlife? Whatever it was he didn't want it.

Orville sought again the moment of finality that had engulfed him on the shuttle, the excruciating pain in his throat, his lungs and then the blessed peace. It wouldn't come.

Where was he? He felt the viscous embrace of some sort of gaseous gel, thick but yielding. He must be in a pod. He was in a pod. He was alive. Alive, and desolate to the point of despair. It was a worse pain than anything physical, anything he'd ever known. He wished he were dead, as before, but truly dead. He'd died once. Let him die again. It wasn't fair to make him live, not now, not anymore. He'd done everything that had been asked of him, everything. And still he was made to live.

The strange bath in which he was submerged flowed in and out of his lungs as he breathed and he could, very much against his will, literally feel his body healing.

Suddenly, he wanted out. Claustrophobia seized him and he began to panic. Unknown to him, an alarm sounded and then the pod was being cracked. Two brawny medicals, females, fuzzy through the gel still coating his face, were gazing down at him.

"Welcome back, sir," one said. "We thought for a while we were losing you."

"I wish you had," Orville couldn't help replying, thereby answering the unspoken question. His intellect was unimpaired, if not his emotions.

They lifted him out and gently sponged him clean. They dressed him and then sat him in his floater.

"What happens now?" Orville asked with scant interest when they had finished.

"You tell us, captain," one of them said. "We're discharging you."

"Where is my sister?" Orville said.

"She's out of the pod, too. She's with the young Chairman. We have them in a private ward."

"Show me," Orville said and then, lying with all the grace he could muster: "Thank you for your care. I appreciate it. I will remember."

The two medicals were pleased and cheerfully took him next door.

There was another pod, which Orville assumed held Mac. Anna was there beside it, curled in a floater, her knees drawn up and hugging herself tight. She had been weeping. She looked up as Orville was shown in and the door closed behind him.

Brother and sister regarded each other with the deep understanding they had learned during a lifetime in the tunnels on Redux, tunnels which had channelled the thormalium reaction and helped to blow the place asunder.

"How is he?" Orville asked.

"Alive," Roxanna said.

"How bad is it?"

"He should be dead. Even in the pod, he should be dead. The scans show massive internal damage. Just the haemorrhaging should have killed him. Days ago."

"Will he live?"

Roxanna shrugged.

"What happened on Redux?" Orville asked.

"I killed the Palwallum. Somebody tried to shoot me, and Mac..."

"What?"

"Got in between us. He was hit. At point-blank range." Orville winced. "And then there was another battle. We had to hold long enough to open the atmolock for the others."

"What happened to Morgana-Li?"

"I told you. That much I told you before you were so busy, before we had to stop talking."

"Tell me again." Orville tried, but there was no hiding the anguish in his voice.

"Darling..." Roxanna said. There was a long pause. "She died full of joy. She was in her element. Battle. War. Everything was simple for her on Redux. Black and white. Good and bad. Clear. She shouted something before she crashed."

"What?" Orville asked.

"Samura! She shouted, Samura! It was what she wanted. Death or glory. Or both. To die a hero. It was what she wanted."

"I thought she wanted me," Orville said, very softly with extreme bitterness.

"Death or glory!" he burst out a moment later. "That's the stupidest, most moronic, most juvenile load of claptrap..."

"But it speaks to them," Roxanna said. There was another long silence.

"Orville," she said at last. "You'll hate me for saying this. If I, or Mac, or both of us had died and if Morgana-Li had survived, you two would have nothing. Morgana-Li would never have been able to live with herself. Mac was right. And even more, she never would have been able to live with you. Every time she looked at you, it would have been our faces she would see."

Orville opened his mouth to shout her down, to scream at her. She might be his beloved sister but how dare she? How dare she? Then abruptly, he took hold.

It was true. Roxanna spoke only the truth.

"I make you this promise," Roxanna said. "I, and Mac if he survives, will live lives that honour her death, that will make it mean something."

Gainor-Li and the two other surviving ninjas, Zara-Li and Jane-Li, appointed themselves keepers to the Daimyo and the Lady. One of them was on guard outside the door at all times and another inside to relieve Roxanna when she snatched an hour or two of rest. It was necessary. There was a constant stream of concerned visitors. Everyone who had ever exchanged so much as a word with the young Chairman felt obliged to inquire personally after his well-being, his progress.

Among the Samura, Mac had been raised to the status of a minor god, quite worthy of prayer and supplication, and the ship's crew who had been less directly involved were rapidly absorbing the full dimension of the legend. Any Samura who had been on Redux with the Daimyo, as even the crew were starting to call him, and who chose to linger in the main mess, was never short of an audience or was left with an empty crylic.

With Orville's permission, Li-Wilhemena had a long, private com session with Li-Morgana back on Honshos. Morgana-Li's death, of course, had come as a huge shock but the grief was assuaged by a swelling, bursting pride. Her daughter had been a hero several times over and the battle for Redux, or the Reduction as everyone was now referring to it, somehow justified the thousands of years of Samura discipline and

denial. Five hundred Samura, just five hundred, had invaded and taken a planet, well planetoid, held by unnumbered UWATs and their heavy weapons. It was a feat of arms such as the cluster had never seen and let who liked mock the Samura at their peril now. And things were starting to go well on Honshos, too. Li-Morgana could see a future where the Samura would be the unquestioned elite troops of the cluster with Honshos their head-quarters. Thanks to the Daimyo. It suddenly seemed particularly important that he should survive.

The-All-Sun-And-The-All-Moon slid into the landing dock at the Directorate to a muted welcome despite the victory.

To less militaristic minds, the destruction of half the cluster's available thormalium, not to mention 10 million people, give or take, scarcely seemed a matter for celebration, setting aside the fact that the callow young chairman who had perpetrated this disaster now lay at death's door. One might call it the judgment of the gods. And what was that strange title he seemed to have acquired? Daimyo? What did it mean? Never mind. It was unlikely to be a matter of any importance for any length of time. His uncle, however – uncle or whatever he was – seemed to have a grip on things. Couldn't complain there, but a wise man would move stars and planets to lay in an illicit supply of thormalium the way the black market price was already going through the roof.

Wright was well aware of the swirling currents of public sentiment; could scarcely not be even had he been unable to overhear the whispering officials and dignitaries gathered behind him. He had considered closing the return of The-All-Sun-And-The-All-Moon to all but himself and necessary staff, but had decided that to do so would signal guilt over the destruction of Redux and everyone on it. The rumour mill would spin quite out of control. Better to put a positive angle on the Reduction with some controlled openness. It had seemed wise even to allow a select group of cluster correspondents to attend.

The-All-Sun-And-The-All-Moon lowered the great ramp from the narthex, the Galiconia anthem rang out and Wright stepped forward to greet Orville, Huckley and Li-Wilhemena, the senior officers, as they emerged. They saluted each other, shook hands and then stepped back to allow the serried ranks of Samura to march forth. It was a stirring sight and the presenting of the massed swords when it came made a deep impression on the civilians. The ancient phrase, cold steel, still carried a visceral thrill even if the blades were acid-tempered maxalloy.

Wright endowed the colour party with a somewhat hastily contrived battle honour and waited impatiently for the ceremony to come to its appointed end. As the troops finally marched off, he disappeared up the ramp and was taken to Mac's ward. Roxanna was waiting for him, grave, contained.

"How is he?" Wright asked gently, as she buried her head in his chest.

"Bad," she said. "But better, a bit." Her voice was clear but Wright could feel his daughter trembling. She stood back. Her face was a mask of pain. No longer, he noted, was there any remaining hint of the girl she had been a such a short time ago.

"Let's get you both home," he said, unable to hide his distress.

Days went by and then weeks and slowly the Daimyo's body, the good, strong body, absorbed the rebuilders in the celgel and began to repair itself. Roxanna spent most of her time beside the pod, barely eating or sleeping. She grew waif thin and her family became as concerned for her as they were for Mac. Cajole as they might, however, nothing would shift her adamant determination to stay with him every minute she possibly could.

Orville was with her most, at first working to secure the secret passage with DNA breath analyser locks only she or Mac would be able to open, and then talking or just sitting.

"You were right," he said at one point. "We couldn't have been together if you or Mac had died."

"Did you really love her?" Roxanna said. "Or was it just sex?" Orville looked at her sharply.

"I don't know," he said at last. "I loved the idea of being in love. I never thought it could happen to me."

Roxanna took his hand.

"You are silly," she said. "Don't you know how sexy you are?" Orville looked down at his legs.

"How can you say that?"

"Because if you weren't my brother I'd be after you myself."

"Except for Mac."

"Except for Mac."

"It can't help him if you get sick too."

"I'm all right."

"You know what you're doing, don't you?" Orville said.

"What?"

"Guilt. You're making yourself suffer out of guilt." It was Roxanna's turn to react.

"That's not true," she said sharply.

"Prove it. Eat."

"It's not true," she repeated, but Orville was relieved to see that she did start to take more food.

At long last came the day when the chief medical decreed they could begin to reduce the level of induced coma. Mac's body had recovered to the point where it would do as well outside the pod.

Roxanna was there, of course, and Wright and Orville.

"How does this work?" Orville said.

"We progressively lower the IV stream," the chief medical said. "It's a simple process. Instead of a chemical coma he'll revert to a state of natural unconsciousness. When he's ready he wakes up and we take him out." The other medicals nodded.

"How long will that take, for him to wake?" Roxanna asked.

"Minutes. Hours. It's always different."

The medical moved to the control panel and for want of anything better, the others stared intently at the heart monitor. Slowly, the medical eased back on the IV. Nothing happened.

"Perfectly routine..." the medical started to say, but suddenly a strident alarm ripped at them and Mac's heart rate began to drop sharply. The medical jammed the IV back to maximum and after a moment the monitor picked up and Mac's heartbeat slowly returned to normal.

"What happened?" Roxanna demanded. "What happened? Why did it do that?"

The medical looked at them, not trying to disguise his confusion.

"I've no idea," he said. He looked to his colleagues, all equally mystified.

"So what do we do now?" Roxanna said. There was a frantic edge creeping into her voice.

"I don't know," the medical said. "I really don't know. I've never seen... I've never heard of anything like this."

"Should we try again?" Orville said.

"No," Roxanna said. "No."

"Rox, he can't spend the rest of his life like this."

"Sir?" the medical said, appealing to Wright.

Wright put his arm around Roxanna. "Try again," he said.

The medical again eased back the IV, and again after a short period, Mac's heartbeat began to crash. Roxanna started to sob.

They were sitting together in the drawing room, Mac's pod in the bed-chamber behind them being watched over by one of the team of medicals. The view out over the park was pastoral, peaceful, a stark contrast to their thoughts.

"Why?" Roxanna said again. "Why? Why? Why?"

"Do you think...?"

"What, Orville?"

"He knew what was happening to Redux, didn't he?"

"Yes," Roxanna said. "Why?"

"How would you feel if 10 million people had died and you thought it was your fault?"

There was stunned silence. Roxanna stared at him, her eyes huge.

"What are you saying?" she said at last.

"He might not want to come back... subconscious protecting the conscious. Could you face it, if it were you?"

"But it wasn't his fault," Wright said. "That's ridiculous."

Orville shrugged.

"Mac is ridiculous," Orville said. "You know how he is about honour and stuff."

"But how could he think himself responsible?" Roxanna demanded.

"He came after you didn't he? With the Samura. He invaded Redux, didn't he? He started the war."

"He didn't kidnap me," Roxanna stormed. "He didn't fire the missiles."

"I'm not saying it's his fault," Orville said. "But he would be saying it, if he were conscious. You know how he thinks. Of course you know how he thinks."

It had the horrible clang of unwelcome truth.

"It's ironic," Orville continued thoughtfully. "We were the ones who should have ended up vegetables, on the shuttle, running out of oxygen. Instead, it's Mac... "

"That's a horrible thing to say," Roxanna protested.

"Well, if you keep him alive, that's all he'll be."

"Shut up, Orville," Wright said. "That's enough."

"Time," Roxanna said. "He just needs more time." But a terrible fear was squeezing the breath out of her, the fear that Orville was right, the fear that sooner or later she would have to choose.

A week went by, at the end of which Roxanna resisted pressure to try again. She couldn't bear the thought that Mac might still be the same.

Another week went by. Nobody said anything yet Roxanna felt the weight of their disapproval like a living thing writhing about her. And she knew that if she surrendered and that if Mac again failed to respond, started to crash, a whole new dimension would be added to the decision confronting her. And how could she live without Mac? How could she let them turn off the juice and just watch him fade until there was nothing of him left at all?

She went to find Orville, who was pottering in his new workshop. Since returning from Redux he had indulged himself and his private domain was now an Aladdin's cave

of delicate tools and complicated machinery. Buried in a project here, he could sometimes forget Morgana-Li, sometimes set aside the situation with Mac.

He inspected Roxanna with deep concern. Every day that went by, the hollows and bruising around her eyes got worse. Every day she seemed thinner, more transparent. As far as he could determine she had more or less stopped eating altogether.

"This can't go on," he said.

"If it were Morgana-Li, what would you do?" Roxanna asked.

Orville knew, was honest enough to admit, that his feelings for Morgana-Li had not been remotely comparable. It had been a fine, careless rapture. He had enjoyed it immensely. He missed her dreadfully. But it was not remotely comparable. He took Roxanna's hand and sat her down.

"I guess I would try to do what she would have wanted," he said. He paused and brought her fingers to his lips before continuing. "But I know that would have been much easier for me than it can ever be for you."

"What do you think Mac wants?" Roxanna asked. Her voice was so muted he could barely hear. Orville was about to speak. He stopped.

"I don't know," he said at last. "His subconscious apparently wants oblivion, but I don't know what he wants."

"So it wouldn't be wrong to try to reach his conscious mind? To ask?" Orville had to lean forward to hear.

"But Rox, how could you do that?"

"I might be able to. Would it be wrong?"

"And if he still wanted oblivion?"

"Then I would want it too."

"Oh, Rox."

"Is it wrong to try?"

"You can't just give him peace?"

"No." Roxanna said. "I can't. He has to tell me. He has to tell me that it was all for nothing."

"Crack the pod," Roxanna said. "Take the cover off." Her voice was firm, determined. The chief medical and the rest of his team gaped at her.

"But madame..." the medical began to protest.

"Take the cover off and clean his face," Roxanna said. Behind her, Wright nodded. Outside, the day was bright and warm. The birds were singing. A good day for a death, Wright thought. He had no hope that his daughter might succeed with whatever it was she was determined to try. He expected to witness the end of the young man he was not ashamed to acknowledge, was pleased to proclaim, his leader.

The medicals busied themselves for some minutes and finally stepped back.

Roxanna walked to the pod and gazed down at Mac's face, at the red-gold hair, long now, at the creases and dimples, the snub nose, the dusting of freckles stark against the pallor of his skin, the sprinkle of golden stubble. There was no sign of life, no flickering movement of the eyeballs, no sound. Even the motion of his breathing was invisible. He could have been a corpse. In a minute, it might well be true.

"Turn off the IV," she said.

The medical stopped the flow. As before, things proceeded normally for a minute and then the alarm began to scream. Roxanna bent and kissed Mac full on the mouth, passionately, unreservedly, with everything she knew of love, with all her heart and all her soul. The alarm screamed on.

"It's flat-lining," the medical said, his voice rising. "It's flat-lining. He's dying." The alarm screamed on. Roxanna resigned herself to failure but still continued, refusing to give up, the tears pouring down her face.

Of an instant with shocking suddenness the alarm stopped. She felt warmth flooding the lips pressed to hers.

Mac's eyes opened. They held an expression of purest horror that made Roxanna's heart break. She put a hand either side of his face and forced him to look at her, nowhere else.

"I brought you back not for myself, but because you owe a debt of honour," she said, her voice ringing. "Morgana-Li killed herself, deliberately killed herself, to save you. Whatever the cost, you must live and you must work until your body can no longer function. Or her sacrifice means nothing. Ten million and one are dead, and it's the one that counts. You owe."

Roxanna held his face firm until she saw acceptance. There was something else. Dark. Brooding. It filled her with fear. She was sure then that she had saved him to lose him. The kiss of life. The kiss of death.

For the first 24 hours Mac was mostly asleep, or appeared to be. Roxanna retreated to the dayroom, trying not to think. She spent the night there, eating nothing, dozing a little. With the dawn, she took herself downstairs and out into the park. The Samura on guard were most reluctant to let her go alone but in the end gave in. She looked so distraught, they didn't have the heart to insist. However, two of them followed on behind trying to be as discreet as possible. And it was one of them, hours later, who got the call. She hurried to catch up to where Roxanna was aimlessly wandering.

"Lady," she said. "Pardon. The Daimyo is asking for you."

Roxanna was hit by an explosive mixture of flaring emotions: hope, fear, finally gratitude that at least he wanted to see her one more time.

He was seated in a floater, clean, brushed, shaved. He looked thin, his muscles obviously wasted, but otherwise he appeared the same. No, Roxanna realised. Not true. There was a clarity, a hardness about the eyes now that had never been there before, even in the worst times, as though all that remained of youth had melted away in the crucible of Redux, leaving only the man – refined, pared down, stripped bare, the essence. It was the same process of annealing that others had seen take place in her.

She stood before him, wordless, waiting for sentence to be pronounced, her fate for all eternity. He allowed his eyes to rest on her face. They were expressionless, remote.

"Why did you bring me back?" he asked at last.

"I told you," she said. "You owe." Despite her best efforts, there was a tone of defiance in her voice which she knew would be instantly apparent to him.

He said nothing, just waited.

"I brought you back because I can't live without you and I don't want to die," Roxanna said. She was weeping helplessly, angrily. "Is that what you want to hear?"

"Yes," Mac said. "Or I couldn't stay. Not just for duty. Not without you. I wasn't sure..."

The realisation engulfed her like the slow rise of an ocean tide. They were all right. They were all right.

Chapter Thirteen

Wright left them alone for as long as he could, knowing that at best it could only be a day or two. Mac had been out of action for far too long already. The shockwaves of the Reduction spreading through the cluster generated its own useful hiatus as millions of functionaries absorbed the implications, but the hiatus was now quickly becoming a vacuum that various predatory carnivores of the human variety were eyeing with interest. Vacuums were dangerous. Vacuums required to be filled. Vacuums meant opportunity. As soon as the news of Mac's emergence from the pod spread beyond his immediate circle, as it would very quickly, he would have to assume control or lose it forever.

He worried obsessively over Orville's contention that Mac was indeed oppressed by the belief it was he who had killed the millions on Redux. If that were the case, would Mac, could Mac ever forgive Roxanna for bringing him back to face it? Would he ever be able to think effectively again, to govern? Would it have been better, kinder, just to let him slip away? He didn't know, but in the midst of the incessant struggle to keep the cluster from collapsing into chaos, he did come to a complete realisation of how much he needed Mac to return and take over.

Two days had passed, and he could wait no longer. Mac would either have to resume the burden or renounce it for all time.

They were easy to locate, the cap and perimeter guards making it obvious where they were. He found them sitting in a pleasant dell by the stream, their heads close together and deep in conversation. He felt a pang of grief, of envy. It had been long since he had been able to enjoy that sort of intimacy with another. It seemed to answer one question at least.

They watched him gravely as he made his way over the close-cropped grass towards them. They had a rug and a picnic hamper, as yet unopened.

Mac rose and Wright noted that he still looked extremely fragile.

"So," Mac said. "The holiday is over?"

"I'm afraid so," Wright said.

"It's not a holiday, it's convalescence," Roxanna protested.

"Even so," Wright said.

"Please sit," Mac said. There was something restrained, delicate, about the atmosphere, as though the two of them were still feeling their way back to each other, to some sort of future. Wright desperately wanted to know how things stood. It must have been too obvious.

Mac smiled gently.

"I'm all right," he said. "I don't believe I'm some sort of monstrous, mass murderer. Not any more. I've thought a lot about it and I understand what happened and how it happened. When you all thought I was asleep after leaving the pod, I didn't need sleep. I'd been asleep for weeks. I needed to think. And in the end there was only one question that had to be answered." He looked to Roxanna

Wright also looked to his daughter. She seemed to accept what Mac said at face value, yet there was a hint of something else, a secret. Wright suddenly thought to wonder what other conclusions Mac might have come to. Roxanna took his hand.

"It really is all right," she said to him. "Mac's still Mac and we're still us, and I never stopped being me. It's just..."

"What?" Wright said.

"Different"

It was true and it came to Wright what had changed. They were both older, so much older. They had fought, they had killed, they had suffered, they had survived. He had wondered often in past weeks at the hidden strengths in his daughter, strengths he had never dreamed she might possess. The thought of her being able to laserblade the Palwallum more or less in cold blood was still deeply shocking and a thing unsaid between them. Looking at her now Wright doubted it ever would be said. He understood, suddenly, that he no longer had the right to question her, to advise, to impose himself as a parent. She was gone from him. All that was left was the love.

The main business Wright brought was a demand for an emergency board meeting, complete with the requisite nine signatures.

"Copal Devli?" Mac asked.

"Not directly. But yes, of course."

"Then we mustn't disappoint him. Anything in particular or everything in general?"

"The loss of Redux through your incompetence. And naturally, they want to see if you still, in fact, exist or whether I'm playing them for fools; whether the rumours of your recovery are false. Which is what they'll be hoping, that you've died."

"But my will..."

"Under company by-laws is somewhat irrelevant. If you pass your shares to anyone but immediate family, the will only stands so long as no one chooses to challenge it. Roxanna is not yet your legal wife and you have no children. If you don't appear they will take it that you are dead and that your will is fair game. If you do appear then there will be a concerted attempt to unseat you on grounds of incompetence. They will hold you responsible for the loss of half Galconia's thormalium."

"And what is the true situation? Have Shelby and John finished the stocktake?"

"Yes."

"And?" Wright paused.

"With Redux, there was thormalium for 40 years," he said. "Now, maybe 15, give or take, depending on how much is being held in secret stockpiles."

Mac and Roxanna looked at each other.

"A bit better than we thought it might be," Mac said. Wright looked at them curiously. Why had they been talking about that? At this particular time?

"And what is your view?" Mac went on. "Am I competent? House rules. Truth only."

"Honestly?" Wright said. Mac and Roxanna just looked at him.

"Honestly... The jury is still out. You were evidently capable of decisive action. You were evidently capable of outsmarting your colleagues on the board, once at least. Whether, after all that's happened... just your health... you are now capable of successful management for the long term, whether you can handle the thormalium crisis is yet to be determined. What are we going to do about that? You do realise that in 15 years or so the whole economic structure of the cluster will disintegrate."

"We've been thinking about it," Mac said. "Amongst other things."

"And what have you decided... if I can ask?" Wright was nettled.

"We're still working on it," Mac said.

"We?" Wright found he was now distinctly put out.

"Anna and I."

Wright let his silence speak for him. It was Roxanna who eventually broke it.

"Don't be cross, father."

"I'm not," Wright said, giving himself the lie. "But to be effective I need to know..."

"You will," Mac said. "When the time is right."

"Clearly, I am no longer in your confidence..." Wright began, openly angry.

"Uncle Winston," Mac interrupted. "If I told you what I'm thinking, you'd probably shoot me. I need a little time to work it through. Please don't be upset. I need you. Just not for this. Not yet."

Wright found his anger had suddenly given way to worry. What in Hyades could the boy be up to this time?

"And the board meeting?" he said at last.

"Whenever it's convenient for everyone else," Mac said serenely.

"And how will you handle it?"

"How would you advise?" Mac asked innocently. Wright laughed, mostly at himself.

"I'm hungry," Roxanna said and started investigating the hamper to disguise her relief.

As once before, the members of Mac's extended family were gathered in the com room, though this time there was no thought of publicly streaming the meeting. As before, the members of the board, minus the Palwallum, had convened by holoc. The

internal blood-letting within the Gadai was coming to a climax but as yet a new palwallum had still to emerge. And as before, Mac strode into the boardroom but this time accompanied by a formidable phalanx of Samura with Li-Wilhemena, Li-Alana and Gainor-Li to the fore. They were all fully armed.

The assembled holocs rose as one and Mac allowed himself an inward smile. He sat, the Samura arrayed behind him.

"Greetings," he said. The holocs finally deemed it safe to sit themselves. When the shuffling stopped, Mac spoke again.

"You have summoned me," he said. "I am here. Who will speak?" There was a hesitant pause. Eventually, Copal Devli rose. He had been seated and was now standing at the far end of the ridiculously long table.

"You dare to bring armed... personnel to the boardroom?" he began with confected outrage. There was a false tone to his voice, as though he were trying to hide uncertainty with aggression.

"They are here to bear witness," Mac said.

"It is a breach of protocol. It is a breach of precedent."

"Indeed?" Mac inquired politely.

"A monstrous breach."

Mac said nothing and when it dawned on Devli that he would continue to say nothing, he found himself floundering.

Watching on the monitor, Wright and Roxanna glanced at each other. Both found themselves wondering the same thing. How had Mac, still so young, come by such poise and composure? The hard way. The answer was obvious with a moment's thought.

Devli looked to his colleagues for support but found a disheartening indifference. Even Pahlavi, who had been adamant the Chairman should be dismissed forthwith, was studying his fingernails with more attention than they could possibly merit.

The silence dragged on. Devli felt himself beginning to sweat and with a mighty effort, forced himself to speak.

"You have been summoned under indictment," he said, regaining confidence with the sound of his own voice.

"Really?" Mac said.

"You are charged with incompetence in that you attempted to invade Redux, subsequently causing the whole planetoid to be destroyed and with it, at least half of the company's available thormalium reserves, half this company's available wealth. Do you deny it?"

"Do I deny that my 500 Samura successfully landed on a planetoid held by 13 battalions of UWATs and change – approximately 13,000 men. Certainly, we did. How many men in your private army? Are they as well trained as UWATs?" Devli blinked but continued.

"Do you deny that you destroyed Redux?"

"Certainly, Redux has been destroyed. Are you confident of your own defences?" Devli frowned. Most of the other board members were now, again, staring fixedly at the table, seeking invisibility.

"Do you deny that this company has been seriously compromised by your actions. That profits must inevitably suffer severely?"

"In which case I shall be obliged to find alternative sources of revenue or to curtail certain dividends, or both."

Devli stopped. The import of Mac's words could no longer be ignored.

"Are you threatening me?" he demanded suddenly. Mac smiled and rose.

"Absolutely," he said coldly. The 12 katana swept out and the boardroom chimed and rang with the song of the sword. Devli flinched. Mac sprang on to the scarlet marble of the table and strode the length, board members falling back in alarm on either side. He halted before Devli and in the one fluid motion drew his own katana, the death gift of Madelena-Li, and sliced through the holoc's neck. Devli, even though light years away, screamed and fell to the floor.

Mac strode back along the table, stepped down via his ceremonial chair, almost a throne, and resumed his seat.

"I move," he said, "That the indictment be dismissed."

"You can't treat the board like this," Pahlavi hissed.

"And who will stop me?" Mac said. "You?" Again the threat was explicit. "Is there a seconder?"

It was very clear to the majority of members that the attempted coup had failed dismally. The GDF, informed by tradition, precedent and self-preservation, invariably held itself aloof from such boardroom squabbles. The force had learned from bitter experience that attempts to exercise political influence inevitably came back to haunt it. The UWATs, at the behest of the palwallum of the day, might attempt to interfere surreptitiously but at any overt level were cancelled out by the GDF. And as yet, there was no palwallum anyway. All of which meant that Mac's Samura, proven and deadly, were for the moment, at least, the determining factor. The use of private armies was not a tactic unknown in the annals of Galconia Enterprises Inc., it was just that Devli and his co-conspirators had never expected that one so young would have the charisma to acquire one so loyal so quickly, nor the ruthlessness to use it.

The meeting was quickly concluded. As the members were about to disperse, Mac held them back.

"I have one last announcement," he said. "My inauguration as chairman will take place on my 18th birthday. That is in three month's time to the day. Under company by-laws you are, of course, required to attend in person or forfeit membership of the

board." Mac was looking straight at Devli as he said it, and noted with some satisfaction that the man's holoc turned pale before it winked out.

"This inauguration," Wright said. "Nel made the point that you have to give them a show."

"I intend to," Mac said.

"But you've cancelled everything the Protocol department was preparing?"

"I will make a speech," Mac said.

"Saying what?" Mac made no reply.

"You promised to tell me what you're planning," Wright said, doing his best to keep his voice neutral. "You've said nothing about the thormalium. You keep avoiding it... You promised to tell me..."

"When the time is right," Mac said softly, to rob the words of offence. "It's not."

"Does Roxanna know?"

"Yes," Mac said.

"And does she approve?"

"She supports it."

"And she supports not telling me?"

"Sir," Mac said. "We don't know how you'll react. We don't know how anyone will react. It seems best that all the reaction should happen at the same time. Please, don't be offended."

"You mean I will disapprove, fight whatever it is you're going to do?"

"I don't know," Mac said. "I honestly don't know."

"Mac, whatever you're planning is obviously significant. You can't make such decisions without taking advice." Wright spoke with all the earnestness he could command. "You are extremely capable, but you must take advice."

"No," Mac said. "Not this time." Wright was at a total loss. A sudden thought occurred to him.

"Does Orville know?" he asked.

Mac hesitated.

"Some of it," he said at last. "He has to know some of it."

"What are you doing?" Wright demanded. "What? Are you planning to resign?"

"No," Mac said.

"Then what?" Wright spoke sharply, almost shouting. The gods knew what these crazy children were up to.

"I won't tell you," Mac said. Not 'I can't', but 'I won't'. To Wright it somehow seemed the most hurtful thing anyone had ever said to him.

"Then I must resign," Wright said. "I am clearly not to be trusted. Find yourself a new chief of staff."

"You don't mean that, Uncle Winston."

"I do."

"Roxanna said you would feel like this. I'm sorry. Would you consider suspending judgment until the day? Would you consider just trusting me?"

"Why won't you tell me?"

Mac hesitated.

"If you disagree with me," he said. "Then you will feel bound in conscience to fight me. You may even feel that you should go public. You could wreck it."

"I might agree with you."

"I want no one to carry any responsibility for what will happen other than myself."

"Roxanna? Orville?"

"Orville has been asked to do a specific thing. He knows no more than that. Roxanna? She is me, myself and I." Mac got up and went to the window overlooking the park. He stood gazing down at the amazing vista. Wright waited, and realised as the minutes passed that he was content to wait, that it was right that he should be content, that Mac had known he would eventually think thus.

At last, Mac turned to face him.

"I withdraw my resignation," Wright said, surrendering as he did so any last lingering notion that as the elder he knew better.

The inauguration was to be mounted in the Hyperbowl and as Nel had predicted, the Department of Protocol had found it necessary to invite at least 150,000 official guests. That left room for another 150,000 in the upper tiers. The ceremony itself was to take place on a stage in the centre of the g-ball cauldron, the cauldron itself providing almost unbreachable security for Mac, his official party and the most favoured of the cluster, who would also be seated within. In times past, the floor of the cauldron had been used for the celebrations, entertainments and finally the revels appropriate to such an occasion. The fact that the floor was this time being used for seating had already aroused a fever of speculation. The most popular theory was that given the young Chairman's astonishing aerial prowess – Mac's g-ball exploits had been resurrected from the archives and were being thrashed to death on public cam – then the whole business would take place in the air. Cluster correspondents were vying with each other to invent ever more improbable programs, presenting them to the public with an air of incontrovertible authority.

The night before, Roxanna organised dinner for the inner council. It was not a success. Everyone tried but people would fall silent, sometimes in mid-sentence, as the weight of the occasion to come bore down upon them. Roxanna, herself, was wound

tight and was uncharacteristically irritable. Wright felt a pang as he realised it was because she alone of them all knew what was to come, she and Mac. He found he was staring into space with Nel looking at him expectantly. He caught a grin flitting across Mac's face. Of all of them, he was the most relaxed and had absolutely no right to be, Wright thought.

Orville came late and after apologising said almost nothing the whole evening. His face wore the intense look it assumed when he was grappling with a problem, a problem not necessarily of interest to anyone but himself. Roxanna snapped at him twice and then angrily left him to brood.

All things considered it was a relief when the party felt it could decently expire of its own deadweight.

Orville, lurking in the corridor, caught Mac as he left.

"I need to show you something," he said in a low voice.

"I'll be a minute or two," Mac said to Roxanna and followed Orville to his workshop.

She was in bed and restlessly asleep by the time Mac finally returned. Instead of joining her, he sat for a long time, thinking, remembering, wondering. They had come so far, overcome so many impossible problems and difficulties. They had fought and struggled and loved. They had nearly died, so many times. And tomorrow, he would astound the whole cluster. Now, on Orville's screen there was the hint of something that might render the journey to date totally insignificant, perfectly meaningless.

Chapter Fourteen

It was one of those days for which Theta Tauri Minor was justly famous, but which in practice were so few and far between. It was warm, yet crisp. It was clear. The air tingled as though effervescent with extra oxygen. It was all around good to be alive. Roxanna woke refreshed, her irritability forgotten. Mac was still asleep and she lay there watching him. Words were so inadequate. She loved him so much. All the poetry of all the ages could not begin to convey the feelings she had for him, and which she knew he had for her. That was the best part. The sharing. The certainty. The sense that the two of them together were far more than the sum of their parts. And then there was the flaring, inexorable, unbearable explosion, a star going nova which welded them indissolubly into one. She watched him sleep on, still too thin but wiry again, and then gave herself the pleasure of waking him.

Mac had laughingly then adamantly declined to wear the ceremonial robes Nel had wanted to inflict upon him. He dressed in his habitual white shirt, simple jerkin and tights, quite aware that it was in these that he looked his best. Roxanna chose a long gown cut with the simplicity only a master couturier could achieve. She wore no jewellery, just the gold band she never took off. However, she had put her hair up for the occasion. She looked stunning. Mac grinned at her.

"It's so nice to happen to love someone who happens to be as beautiful as you," he said. She kissed him with intent.

"Stop it," he said. "Unless you want to do your dressing all over again."

They went downstairs and joined the others. The distractedness of the night before had disappeared and the mood was eager, anticipatory. They all wore the finest clothes they could command. Mac went and embraced each of them.

To Nel, he said: "Sorry about the robes."

"I'm not," she said. "You look so handsome I'd marry you myself if I thought I could get you away from Roxanna."

To Shelby and John, whom he clasped about the shoulders, he said: "A long way from the tunnels on Redux. Thank you for coming with me. Thank you."

They said nothing, just gripped him back. But their eyes were very bright.

To Orville he said: "Anna and I are only here because of you and Morgana-Li. We will never forget that."

"She would have loved this," Orville said. "She would have been so bossy."

"I know," Mac said.

To Wright, whom he pulled very close, he said: "This is all your fault. You made me think I should do it, could do it. I'm sorry I shut you out back there, but you'll see why."

"You're sure?" Wright said. "You're sure about whatever it is you're going to do?"

"Absolutely," Mac said. "I have no doubts." Wright nodded.

"Then do it," he said.

Roxanna he kissed lightly on the lips and she clung to him for a moment. They said nothing.

"Onward," Wright said and led them to the formal entrance of the Directorate and the fleet of waiting fly-bys.

They entered the Hyperbowl through an underground portal and were led into the cauldron not by the doorway in the cryllic but by the medicals' room and the tunnel used for removing bodies. They emerged into the area cleared about the circular stage. The noise was deafening, far worse than at the g-ball games Mac had played. This stadium held three times the number of people and their clamour was a physical assault writhing about the official party like a starving animal. Ushers with formal tabards led them up the stairs to the dais where there was a grouping of floaters and a smaller, central podium. The company secretary was waiting for them, dressed in the gaudiest over-robe any of them had ever seen, so gaudy it seemed to have a life of its own like some exotic bird. He was flanked by two assistants in rather less gorgeous attire.

Mac was escorted to the podium and the others shown to seats. The secretary raised a hand and stood patiently. Gradually the noise reduced until quite suddenly there was silence, or as much silence as there could ever be with an audience of 300,000.

One of the assistants handed the secretary a scroll which he proceeded to unroll with deliberation. He began to read, his voice rolling effortlessly throughout the vast congregation.

"Distinguished leaders, distinguished guests, distinguished citizens. We attend the inauguration of the 321st chairman of Galiconia Enterprises Inc., the son of the late lamented Osmond von Osmond the 13th, his excellency, Hasdrubal D. Albright, who succeeds to the chairmanship as duly appointed and notarised heir of the aforesaid, Osmond von Osmond, cognisant of the responsibilities and duties now incumbent upon him and in the full knowledge of the rights and rewards due to shareholders who through the duly appointed board have elected him to this august office." The secretary paused for a desperately needed breath. He allowed the scroll to spring closed and handed it to his assistant. The second assistant brought forward a book elaborately bound in antique gold and passed it to his master.

Even though he knew very well what the book was, in fact, the company statutes, Wright had to fight a surreal sense of disbelief. They just couldn't be serious. The secretary was speaking again. He offered the book to Mac.

"Place your left hand on the book and raise your right... Do you, your excellency, before this awful assembly solemnly swear that you will uphold the registered by-laws, orders and constitution of Galiconia Enterprises Inc., so help your soul?"

Mac stumbled over the words. Oh no, Wright thought. The occasion has got to him. In fact, Mac was having great difficulty suppressing an outbreak of hysterics. Of all the pious, pompous hypocrisy...

"I do," he managed to say in the end, with the suspicion of a hiccup. He dared not catch anyone's eye, especially Roxanna's.

"Then, sir," the secretary proceeded with extreme unctuousness. "By the power vested in me as secretary to the board, I pronounce you Chairman of Galiconia Enterprises Inc."

The huge arena broke into polite applause which meant the noise beat down on them like a meteor shower. It was devastating.

Mac with a disdainful wave motioned the functionaries away from the podium. He stood there, his hands clasped behind his back, and swivelling on his heels he turned about twice to give the whole stadium a good look at him. He began to speak, conversationally, without emphasis, without notes. He might have been in his own drawing room addressing friends. Once again, Wright marvelled at the boy's command of himself.

"It is customary, I know," Mac said, "To provide a spectacle at an occasion like this. I hope you will forgive me for neglecting such amusements. I hope you will find what I have to say sufficiently interesting to justify the long journey that so many of you have made.

"What I offer you instead, is change. New lives. Different lives. All of you. All of you throughout the cluster..."

The rumour of the stadium stilled and against all nature absolute silence did descend. Wright along with everyone else found himself hanging on Mac's words.

"In 15 years time," Mac continued, "Reserves of thormalium in the cluster will be exhausted. There will be no more. In 15 years time, Galiconia Enterprises Inc will have no thormalium to sell. There will be no more. The cluster as we know it will be finished, unless... unless you take responsibility for yourselves.

"I have placed on the CAW detailed plans for the construction of matter-makers with which you will be able to manufacture your own thormalium. The economic base of the cluster will be secure, providing you make it so. How you do it, how you govern yourselves to do it, is entirely up to you. You have 15 years to work it out.

"Thank you. That is all I have to say."

The silence, disbelieving, incredulous, electric, continued until it began to seem impossible it could ever break. Then came first a whisper, then a buzz, then a roar.

Mac went to Roxanna and led his party from the dais. As they made their way to the tunnel, Copal Devli broke from the front row of VIP seating and seized Mac by the arm with the grip of a drowning man.

"You maniac!" he screamed. "You can't do this."

Mac refrained from stating the obvious.

"You fool. You gods benighted fool," Devli shrieked. "If you can make thormalium, then we can keep the monopoly..."

"I choose not to," Mac said, his words inaudible but his message clear. He calmly broke Devli's grip and led the way below.

When the crowd noise was no more than a murmur, Mac stopped and turned to Wright.

"I'm sorry," he said. "You see why I couldn't tell you."

Wright, his emotions in turmoil, could find nothing to say. He lifted his hands helplessly, the question implicit.

Mac regarded him for a long moment with great affection.

"Uncle Winston," he said. "We each must take responsibility for our own lives, don't you think? Or what's the point?"

When at last they were alone, Roxanna said:

"I forgot to ask with everything else. What did Orville want to show you, last night?"

Mac grimaced.

"And they think they have problems now," he said. "Out on the fringes of the cluster... It looks like a ship coming in."

"Coming in?"

"Coming in."

The End

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