

# THE MACHIAVELLI INTERFACE

BY STEVE PERRY

## Part One

When you have mastered the Way of strategy, you can suddenly make your body like a rock, and ten thousand things cannot touch you.

—MIYAMOTO MUSASHI

Therefore the best fortress is to be found in the love of the people, for although you have fortresses, they will not save you if you are hated by the people.

—MACHIAVELLI

## ONE

DEATH CAME FOR him wearing a smile.

It came in the form of a trusted friend, a counselor with the Wall since the dangerous years, so long past. Here was one of Marcus Jefferson Wall's best, a man who was, in a galaxy where lying had become an art, a true artist of spoken prevarication; a man who had fooled the best machinery the Confed could devise; a master of verbal fugue. Always before, the lies had been under Wall's direction, for his own purposes; now, however, the liar had shifted his aim. Such a pity, Wall thought. Truly it was.

"Ah," Wall said, "my old friend Cteel! Come, let me get you something. Some dust? A flare of wine?"

The other man smiled, and nodded politely. "Perhaps a spiral or two of kik-dust."

Wall rose from his orthopedia. The machinery whirred silently as he shifted his weight, trying to accommodate his leaving. The man padded toward his drug dispenser. It was a nice room, he knew. Big, lush, all the comforts of true civilization. The floor was covered with handwoven carpet from the Green Moon, fibers of bioengineered *tutch* wool dyed indigo and scarlet. It was the most pleasing substance man had yet devised to walk upon barefoot. The walls were hand-waxed persimmon wood three centimeters thick—overlying, of course, a ferro-foam armor and zap fields. The ceiling was hung with spider silk from the New Zealand Arachnida, formed into a gossamer sheet that shined with a natural silver color. And the electronics, well, certainly there were none finer. Wall could have had a servomech deliver Cteel's amphetaminic, but he preferred to do it himself.

At the dispenser, Wall said, "Kik-dust. Variant P."

A small mirror extruded itself from the slot of the unit and a fine nozzle laid a left-hand spiral of the pink powder onto the shiny surface. Wall picked up the mirror and returned to where Cteel stood.

"Variant P?"

Wall smiled, showing a fine and artistic etching of smile lines radiating from the corners of both eyes. "Yes. A new one from my custom lab. As exquisite as any you've ever had."

"Thank you, Marcus." Cteel produced a noselining tube, and with the grace of a tea ceremony master, inhaled the pink dust. When he raised his head, his eyes were already gleaming. "Excellent! I must recommend this to my friends."

"Do sit down," Wall said. He waved lazily at the second orthopedia as he climbed back into his own form-chair. Gel-like, the chair accepted him and fitted itself perfectly to his contours.

After Cteel sat, Wall said, "Now, what brings you here in person?"

Cteel's smile was perfect, without a trace of guile. "The matter of Khadaji."

"Ah. The Man Who Never Missed. What about him?"

"He is, as I am sure you already know, in the hands of Confederation troopers on the backwash world of Renault. Very much alive, despite reports to the contrary."

Wall smiled. "I have just been reviewing that file. Has anyone determined how he managed to convince a very savvy Over-Befalhavare Venture that he was dead?"

"Not as yet. No doubt someone will soon."

"No doubt."

"In any event," Cteel continued, "I am sure you will wish to have him tried and executed here on Earth, rather than in some provincial camp away from the publicity we must milk from him."

"Such goes without saying," Wall said. "Unfortunately, Over-Befalhavare Venture is now in charge of the Shin System, which includes Renault, and he would very much like to flay Khadaji personally. He lost a great deal of face originally, none of which has been restored since it was discovered that Khadaji had been running the bodyguard school practically under the Over-Befalhavare's nose."

"I can understand his desire."

"If we are to have Khadaji, there will have to be some... concessions made to Venture."

Wall nodded. Of course. The Confederation was built on concessions. "What do you think would be appropriate?"

"Perhaps command of Ground Forces. That way he'd be here on Earth, where we could keep an eye on him. He's what—pushing a hundred? It's about time for him to bow out, anyway."

Wall stared at his ceiling silk. Lovely, truly it was. "I could have President Kokl'u arrange that, I am sure."

Cteel nodded. "Good. I'll deliver the message personally."

"I think not, old friend."

"Pardon?"

"Delivering the message. I'll have my man Massey do it. After all, he was a student at Khadaji's training school, he'll be able to recognize him better."

Cteel looked perturbed, but only for an instant. "I was given to understand that Khadaji wore a disguise, that none of the students ever saw his face."

Wall leaned back in his form-chair and sighed as he watched the pale silk sheet over his head. "True. But I'm afraid I can't let you go, Cteel. You see, I know about your plan to ally yourself with Venture." He looked at the other man. "The Confed hasn't collapsed yet, and when it does, I still plan to be the supreme power in whatever is left, old friend. You should have known that, after all this time. Oh, I understand your thoughts—the Military will be a

factor, to be sure—but I'm afraid I can't allow such an alliance to take place. It would upset the balance I'm striving to achieve."

Realization dawned on Cteel. Wall admired how well he took it.

"The kik-dust."

"I'm afraid so," Wall said. "I am not a cruel man, Cteel. It will be painless; quite enjoyable actually, so I'm told. And you'll have several hours for last minute good-byes, that sort of thing."

Cteel managed to smile. "Well. Thank you for that, Marcus. You do understand it was not personal?"

"Of course." That might well be a lie, but Wall preferred to pretend to believe it.

"I won't take any more of your time." Cteel rose and moved to kiss Wall's hand.

Wall decided, for the sake of old memories, to allow Cteel a final victory. He stretched out his hand and allowed the man to take it. He hardly felt the jab of Cteel's sharpened fingernail against his palm, and he pretended to take no notice of the new light in Cteel's smile. "Farewell, old friend," Wall said.

"And you, old friend."

After Cteel was gone, Wall called his vouch from its tether, to check on the scratch. The servomechanism inspected the cut with its sensors, bonded the skin, and pronounced Wall unharmed. Poor Cteel thought his nail carried slow-acting neurotoxin; in fact, his biomed tech had worked for Wall for years, and the nail was laced with nothing more than a mild antiseptic. It wasn't so much for Wall to do, to let his old friend think he'd been revenged. He was, after all, The Wall: he could afford to be generous to a dead man.

## TWO

EMILE ANTOON KHADAJI sat on a slab of silicon, staring at the inside of a room that seemed carved from that same material. An interesting cell, he decided. The rubbery substance was hard enough so that it could not be torn and, say, stuffed into one's mouth, if suicide by choking might be desired. At the same time, the silicon was soft enough so that it would take a very determined effort for a prisoner to effect self-damage. He could, he supposed, stand on the chunk that served as bed and chair and dive headfirst at the floor. With his head tilted just so, it might be possible for him to break his neck. Such would do him little good, Khadaji knew. A military-issue vouch

no doubt prowled outside the door—itsself hidden under layers of silicon—and it would be inside at the slightest hint of physical danger to the cell's occupant. Probably ultrasound telemetry fed the vouch Khadaji's vital signs, but they might be using Doppler.

Khadaji grinned at unseen watchers. Suicide wasn't on his mind. Oh, there were risks to being here, but calculated ones. He had, after all, given himself to the Confed willingly. Not that he'd had any choice—the decision had been made years ago, even before he'd left Greaves and his one-man stand against the Confed machine. *The Man Who Never Missed*. That's what they called him, though it was no more than a fairly clever trick. He'd blown a few shots at the troopers with his spetsdöds. The trick lay in hiding that, so the Confed only thought he'd never missed. He darted plenty of them into a six-month long muscle clench with neuro-muscular poison flechettes. Thousands.

The silicon-covered door slid back suddenly, breaking Khadaji's memory run. He looked up to see three men and a woman enter the large cell. The woman and two of the men—Sub-Lojts—spread out fast and pointed hand wands at Khadaji. The fourth man, a Lojtnant, stood in front of Khadaji, but three meters away.

Khadaji smiled at the Lojt; it was the man who had killed him on Greaves. Or so everyone had thought at the time.

"You're a lucky man," the Lojt began. "We were ready to begin neurochem and brain scanning, the simadams couldn't wait to get at you, but you got a reprieve—from the Confederation President Himself. He's sending a special envoy to talk to Over-Befalhavare Venture, to discuss your... ah... disposition."

"Why tell me?"

The Lojt grinned. "Because the Over-Befalhavare wishes you to know that no matter what, happens, you belong to *him*."

Khadaji, who had been sitting very relaxed, tightened his muscles and shifted quickly forward, as if he intended to jump from the silicon block. He moved no more than a centimeter with the fake attack.

The Lojtnant leaped back a meter, digging for his hand wand, and the flanking troopers snapped their arms out stiffly and tightened their aims.

Khadaji relaxed again, leaning back and pulling his feet up. He chuckled.

The Lojtnant's face reddened. Khadaji saw him think about saying something nasty, then decide against it. Everything that went on inside this room would be monitored, the Lojt would know, and a hasty word would

surely find its way back uplevels, to brass. This particular Lojt already had one black mark on his record, that of "killing" Khadaji in the first place; he wouldn't want another. The brass might think it strange enough that the Lojt was even here, light-years and time-years away from Greaves, to be seeing Khadaji again. He didn't want that; neither of them did.

Abruptly, the Lojt spun and stalked from the cell. The guards followed, one by one, at least two wands pointed at Khadaji until they were all out of the cell. The door slid shut silently.

Well. An interesting development. Not altogether unexpected. In fact, Khadaji had been waiting for it. The Confed wanted to pillory him in full view of its citizenry, of course. Under the glare of its baleful eye, and the photomutable gel eyes of galactic net coverage, too. And where better than Earth? Of course, leaving Venture's control on Renault for the heart of the Confederation was very much like leaping from a small vat of acid into a larger one, but Khadaji had no intention of being cooked by either chemical fire. Intentions might not be fact, but that was something he had learned to live with over the years.

He stood and stretched. The dead-gray paper coveralls he wore didn't tear as he bent to touch his toes, but he knew the fabric's strength would not stand much more than that. Assuming he could figure out what to attach them to, they didn't want him hanging himself. He wished they'd left him his robe and cowl. He'd gotten quite used to wearing the uniform of the Siblings of the Shroud in his disguise as Pen over the last few years.

He shrugged. Ah, well. One did what one had to with what was available.

The silicon felt warm and spongy under his bare feet as he began to practice the martial dance known as the Ninety-seven Steps of Sumito. His essence settled to his *hara*, and his concentration became total.

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Dirisha Zuri stared at the holograph on the table. When she looked up, she saw the others watching her expectantly. It was only at that moment that she realized how much she had missed them all: Red, Mayli Wu—also called Sister Clamp—Bork, and of course, Geneva. When she'd left Matador Villa, the training school for the galaxy's most elite bodyguards, it had been with regret, but also with some excitement. Of all the students and instructors, Dirisha had been chosen to protect Rajeem Carlos, a man that Khadaji-masked-as-Pen thought to be one of the most important in the galaxy. The Confed was falling, and Carlos might be the one to help the new order stand.

But after six years at the school, it had become home, and these people had become her family: Red, the spetsdöd instructor; Mayli, the teacher of love's philosophy and technique; Bork, the big man whose muscles seemed carved from harder flesh than other men wore; and Geneva, the blonde who was the best of them with the tools of a matador or matadora, and who loved Dirisha as she had finally learned to love in return: these were her friends and chosen family. Only two of them were missing: Sleel and Khadaji.

Dirisha cleared the emotional thoughts and brought her attention back to bear on the problem at hand. "How did Sleel get these?"

Bork said, "They were in a computer, and Sleel says anything that is in can be gotten out, if it's important enough. He says you ought to know."

Dirisha grinned. Yes. She had a quick surge of memory, of the night she had broken into Pen's personal files, using a complicated subterfuge. The story had gotten around.

"Okay," Dirisha said, "let's do a link-scan on this, just like in training. I want us all to be able to draw this layout from memory by tomorrow. Three dimensions and color-codes. I'll put it into the cube's comp so you can do rotation and angles on it."

Everybody nodded.

"When's Sleel coming back?"

Seated across from Dirisha, Red said, "Eighteen-thirty. He's thickening our cover."

Dirisha nodded at that. Good. The cube Geneva had leased was sometimes used for religious retreats, which was the ostensible purpose this time, but somebody somewhere would run a scan on that eventually. Until they were ready to move, they didn't want any cools knocking on the portal, locals or Confederation.

"All right. I'll dump this into the system and let's get to it."

The chairs slid back and the group rose, to go to their terminals. It was just like a training session at the Villa, only now, Dirisha thought, she was running it instead of Pen. Khadaji. Damn, she still had trouble condensing the two men into one. Khadaji had only worn the disguise of Pen, the cowl and robe of the Siblings of the Shroud, changing his voice and manner so none would know. Khadaji the Legend was different from Khadaji the Man she had worked for as a bouncer in a pub almost a decade past. Both were different from the shrouded figure who called himself Pen, a mysterious and inscrutable teacher who had taught the defensive martial way. And yet, all

three were the same. Dirisha thought she understood why Khadaji had taken the disguise and what his intent was, but there were times when it was hard to remember that Pen was only a role –

"You want me to feed that to the comp?"

Dirisha looked up at Geneva, who lightly massaged the tight neck muscles Dirisha only just now realized she had. Dirisha smiled at the younger woman and patted her hand. "No, hon, I'll do it. Thanks."

Geneva looked worried. "Can we do it, Dirisha? Get him out?"

Dirisha wasn't at all sure, but she said, "Yeah. We can. Using what he taught us, we're the best there is at what we do. If we move fast enough, we can do it."

Geneva seemed reassured, for she smiled. She used the barrel of her left spetsdöd to scratch a spot behind Dirisha's left ear, a small gesture she had begun after the two women had become lovers at the school. "Okay. I'll get to my terminal and start working it. You're as bad as Pen, giving us one day to do a full-memorization."

As Geneva turned away, Dirisha's smile faded. There hadn't been any question in her mind that she would contact the others and arrange for the rescue of Khadaji; more, none of them had questioned her leadership, either. Even Sleel, who never accepted anything at face value, had smiled and nodded when Dirisha began to outline what she wanted. It was a little frightening, somehow, that they would defer so readily.

Dirisha took the holograph to the computer terminal in her room and began to prepare the unit to scan the image. Normally, Geneva would be here with her, just as Bork and Mayli usually shared room and bed. But for this, individual attention was needed. The plans for the prison in which Khadaji was being held needed to be as familiar to the matadors and matadoras as their own bodies. There could be no mistakes allowed, were they to survive.

As the computer's molecular/viral brain digested the image placed before its scanner, Dirisha allowed the thought she'd suppressed earlier to surface. Yes, they could do it, if Khadaji stayed where he was. If they moved quickly enough, they might free him. But it would have to be very fast indeed; otherwise, what would be left might not be much. The brain that lit Khadaji and Pen might be broken on the wheel of the Confed's mental machineries, leaving only a husk without the ability to generate any thoughts. They would need a puppet for their show trial, and if that was to be avoided, there was no time to lose.



### THREE

THE WALL regarded himself with a critical eye. He smiled, and his wraith returned the expression exactly. The dop-pelganger produced by the holographic mirror was a perfect twin; from a third viewpoint, it would be nearly impossible to tell which was the man and which was the image of the man. Had he been inclined to existentialism, Wall could have made some interesting observations.

*Ho, brother. We have changed, over the years, haven't we?*

The image nodded almost sadly. Facing Wall stood a tall and physically perfect man who looked forty, though he was half again that age; the shade was dark-skinned, blue-eyed, and black-haired; it wore a face Wall's mother would not have recognized. Like the caster, the reflection was a careful sham, a construct built to hide the true form. Even the name was a disguise, full of historical psychology and no more real than the holoprojic image that regarded Marcus Jefferson Wall thoughtfully.

"Off," Wall said. His twin disappeared like a light switched off. Wall grinned. He had come a long way from the Darkworld. He had been born an albino, one of the experimental sports that still bred true on the far world of Rim, a hundred years after such genetic tamperings had been forbidden. Chemicals and dyes and lenses had hidden the external signs; surgery and implants had changed his face. He no longer looked the part of an exotic, though he still had one advantage common to his pale brothers and sisters: he was pheromonically potent. Like all the albinos from the Darkworld, Wall held an almost magical attraction for normal humans. Such a thing wasn't totally responsible for what he had become, of course, but it had helped. Ah, yes, it had helped....

Enough of this stroll through the memory vaults, he decided. Nichole would be arriving shortly; he must be ready. At the thought of the girl, Wall felt himself flush. Nichole Miyamoto was a trembling twelve, a rare and precious flower just beginning to bud. He was looking forward to opening her petals. That her father was one of Kokl'u's ministers made it easier, of course. The man was ambitious, and who better than Wall the Kingmaker as a friend? Wall trusted no man or woman past a near point, but he was generous with those he considered his friends. Minister Miyamoto could become a friend, through his daughter....

"A visitor," the security comp said. The voice of the machine was soft, feminine, even childlike.

Ah, Nichole!

"Show me."

The holoproj lit to his left, filling the space left vacant for it. The image coalesced from formless color, to show the elfin form of Nichole standing at the entrance to his sanctum. As he watched, the security computer scanned the image, giving for a brief moment a flash of bare skin under the thin silk robe. The skin faded to muscle and the shadows of internal organs, then the underlying bone.

"Clean," the computer said.

Oh, yes, she was clean. Fresh, alive, not yet nubile, and clean, in all the senses of that word he loved.

Abruptly, Wall found that his armpits were damp, that his hands felt sweaty. His heart raced, his mouth went dry. How silly. To feel like a young boy meeting his very first girl, it truly was silly.

Some cynical part of Wall's mind sneered and shook a metaphorical head. *Silly? it seemed to say. No, it's merely perversion, and you do treasure the illusion that makes you tremble, don't you?*

Wall's grin never faltered. He had learned to tune that part of himself out when he wished. What use were the best meditative techniques and drugs if one couldn't avoid a part of one's self when one so desired?

"Admit her."

The door slid open noiselessly. The girl, who barely reached Wall's chest in height, started at the movement.

Oh, how delightful! She was nervous, like a fawn from a nature holoproj!

"Nichole, how delightful to see you. Please come in."

"H-hello, My – my Lord Factor."

Wall took the sweetness of her fear and respect and allowed it to fill him for a moment before he shook his head. "Ah, my lovely child, you must call me Marcus. We are going to be great friends, and I want you to think of me not as a Factor, but as a... man."

He could not read the look, for the girl quickly lowered her gaze and bowed her head. "Yes, My Lor – I mean, yes, Marcus."

Oh, the thrill was so sublime! He put his hand on her shoulder – such a wonderful shoulder! – and massaged the muscle gently through the thin blue silk. She was a vision for all his senses, the sight and smell and feel of her! He

felt himself begin to tremble, and he took a deep breath, but slowly, so she would not hear it.

"Come, have some refreshment," he said, urging her toward the table in the center of the room. Slowly, he told himself, there is no hurry. No hurry whatsoever.

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There were times when Khadaji had doubts about it all. The crystal realization he'd had more than twenty T.S. years past became clouded at times, hiding the surety of purpose. During the battle that came to be called The Slaughter at Maro, it had shattered him: *Relampago*, the Cosmic Lightning, the Finger of God, the Universal Touch. As he had fired his weapon into the mindless mass of humanity, it had come to him, how wrong it was. They had been harvested like human wheat, falling into a sea of their own blood, and all for the continuation of the Confed and its policies. Then, he had known it must be stopped, that the Confed was dying and must be replaced with something finer—with a system that held human life as worth more than continued power. He had thrown down his weapon and deserted, and the following fourteen years had been filled with study, of how to effect the change.

At times, he had lost his certainty. At times, he had feared he was wrong. At times, he had been confused.

Khadaji laughed. Then he laughed again, amused at what the hidden monitors must be thinking of him lying on his rubbery block and laughing at nothing. The purpose was firm here, firmer than the room surrounding him. Locked in a cell, slated for public trial and execution, he should feel more fear, more worry, and yet, he felt only triumph. Even if all his plans for his personal salvation failed, there were still the matadors. And they were next to the people who wielded real power in today's galaxy, those with money or influence who had been made criminals by a frightened Confed. His disciples were out there, and no matter what happened to him, they were spreading ripples on the cosmic pond....

The air pressure in the room changed slightly. Khadaji looked at the door, to see it moving. A visitor. Khadaji sat up.

There was a moment when the doorway stood empty, then a single man stepped into the frame and stood there, holding a solid pose for a few seconds of melodrama. Massey.

Khadaji grinned.

Massey strode into the chamber, alone. The door shut behind him. The man moved to stand two meters away from Khadaji.

"Ah, the spy returns in triumph," Khadaji said.

Massey nodded, matter-of-factly. He said, "I'm wearing a flatpack confounder. Our conversation will be private."

"I have nothing to hide," Khadaji said, "so I must assume you have. But a question before we get to why you're here. What is your agency?"

Massey shrugged. "I was *Soldatutmarkt* when I infiltrated the school. Now, I am in the personal service of The Wall."

Khadaji nodded. "I thought as much."

"And you *knew* before the raid. I have wondered why you allowed me to remain, knowing I was a spy. But I suppose we will find that out, in due time."

"One would suppose that, yes."

Massey turned away and looked around the cell.

"You are braver than the local troopers," Khadaji said, "to risk turning your back on me."

Massey turned back toward Khadaji. "Really? I think we both know better than that. I have come all the way from Earth for you. Left here, Venture will break your mind and destroy your body by millimeters, laughing all the while. I am your pass out of here."

"For a show trial and execution on Earth."

"Of course. You have to die, that's a given. It is the manner that is important. At least our way will be humane."

"The end result will be the same, why should I care?"

Massey laughed. "Because I was your student, I know you, Penn. Or Khadaji. You taught me that a matador should never give up. Alive, there is a chance to fight or flee. Dead, there is nothing. Alive and on the way to Earth, you can scheme. Left here under the gentle ministrations of Over-Befalhavare Venture, who rightly hates you, you have little chance. He would flay you personally, you know, were it allowed."

"I suspected as much."

"It doesn't matter what he wants. Factor Wall wishes you on Earth, and I have been sent to arrange it. Venture will fume, but in the end, a bargain will be struck."

"Why tell me all this?" Khadaji shifted upon the cube suddenly, but Massey did not flinch as the troopers always did. Good that he had learned that much: don't defend unless there is a real attack.

"To obtain your cooperation. You can always be killed while trying to escape, and proper media attention will paint a picture nearly as pleasing as your trial and execution, if it comes to that. But Factor Wall would rather you do it his way. After all, you might be found... innocent."

Both men grinned at this. Massey was a pragmatic professional, and he obviously gave Khadaji enough credit for being the same.

"Your proposal makes sense."

"I thought you might see it that way. Pen was always a realist. It will take a few days. Venture and I must do our ritual dance first. Incidentally, his men will be storming in here momentarily, when it finally dawns on them that I'm confounding their bioelectronic eyes and ears."

"I'm curious," Khadaji said. "What am I worth to the Over-Befalhavare?"

"Well, I don't want to inflate your ego, but you are worth command of all Confederation Ground Forces."

"Ah, I see. Wall is nervous about Venture, so he wants him on Earth, where he can watch him."

Massey looked around sharply at the door, which was once again beginning to open.

Khadaji said, "I take it you'd rather not have me repeat that?"

"It might be better if you didn't."

The door opened and four troopers, led by a Lojt, burst into the cell, hand wands held ready to fire. Both Massey and Khadaji regarded the men impassively.

The Lojt looked flustered. "Uh... is everything all right?"

"Why wouldn't it be?" Massey looked faintly amused.

"We... uh... that is, our... uh... monitoring gear must be... uh... faulty. We detected... uh... signs of a struggle."

"Really? I would have thought that my confounder would have prevented that." Massey produced a thin rectangle of plastic the length of his middle finger from his tunic. He waved the device at the Lojt.

"Confounders aren't allowed in holding cells, Envoy –"

"And if snakes had legs, they'd be lizards," Massey said. "Let's not discuss things that don't apply to our situation, Lojtnant. In any event, my talk with

your prisoner is finished, for now." Massey turned to look at Khadaji, and gave him a military bow.

Khadaji returned the gesture with a short inclination of his head. Massey had chosen to shut out the troopers, and Khadaji acknowledged his gambit.

"I'll see you later," Massey said. He turned and moved from the cell, still ignoring the troopers. The Lojt looked irritated, but followed the Envoy without another word.

Khadaji smiled at the retreating troopers, and leaned back on his block. Things were getting interesting.

Indeed.

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Sleel leaned against the wall next to the door, managing to look insolent, confident, and snide, all at the same time. Dirisha shook her head. Good old Sleel: no matter what, it wouldn't take him long to get back to his pose of the galaxy's greatest everything.

"Well?" Dirisha raised an eyebrow, giving Sleel the opportunity to brag.

He took it. "I've lubed the proper parts," he said. "Spread a few stads among the needy and tapped into the right computers. We are covered thicker than a singularity explorer's hull."

"Good," Dirisha said. "Everybody is nearly finished with the assault memorization, except you."

Sleel grinned, cat-full-of-canary. "I already did it. Ask me anything."

Dirisha grinned back, and shook her head again. She did that a lot around Sleel. "No need. You say you know it, I believe you."

Sleel's grin grew larger.

"I've rented the simulacrum generator," Dirisha said. "Geneva is programming it now, at the warehouse we leased. We'll do a walk-through this evening, a full-dress tomorrow, and a final run before we bend to Renault."

"Cutting it a bit close," Sleel said.

"No help for it. Red says he figures they won't keep Khadaji bottled for much longer. Our line into the place is getting edgy; she says something is definitely going to happen, but she doesn't know exactly what. He's still in one piece, so far, but we've got maybe three standard days to snap him out. After that..." Dirisha shrugged.

"We'll do it," Sleel said.

Dirisha said nothing. She wished she had Sleel's confidence.

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The warehouse was identical to a dozen others in the row in which it stood—a rectangular block of stressed plastic without any windows. The winter air was chilly, but the building gleamed a dull green under a sunny sky.

Dirisha was the last to arrive. Like the others, she had done a perimeter scan and security sweep. As far as she could tell, nobody had any interest in this particular industrial section at all, much less this warehouse.

The air was warm inside. Sleel and Bork stood talking to Red and Mayli, not far from where Geneva fiddled with the controls on the generator. The matadors wore spetsdöds on both hands, gray orthoskins, and spookeyes pushed back on their foreheads. Dirisha quickly shed her outer garments to reveal the same dress and gear. She walked to stand next to Geneva.

"Almost got it," Geneva said, touching a series of control tabs. She turned and kissed Dirisha. "It's a little tricky, getting the balance for a spookeye run. Thing likes it fully lit or completely dark, but has trouble in between. It should work now."

"Okay. Where is the front?"

"There, I've marked the floor with a spot of pulse-paint."

Dirisha turned to look along the line of Geneva's pointing finger. She saw the faint glow of a thumbprint-sized splotch of white, throbbing like a small heart. She took a deep breath. "Let's do it."

The two women walked toward the marked spot, gesturing to the others to join them. Once all six were there, Dirisha said, "Okay, this is a walk-through. You have a question while we're in it, stop and let's figure it out. Anything at all—I don't want any doubts later. Everybody ready? Good. Geneva?"

The younger woman gave Dirisha a brief smile, then turned around to face the emptiness of the warehouse. "Go," she said loudly.

The warehouse began to alter, filling with walls and ceilings and doors and even human figures as the simulacrum generator did its work. After a few seconds, the five stood at the entrance to the military prison on Renault. Dirisha reached out and touched a wall as solid as the hard-foam it appeared to be. Hang on, Emile, she thought. Hang on.

FOUR

PRESIDENT KOKL'U wore a smile so bright it had to be sincere. Wall returned the expression with his own smile, and it, too, was sincere, but hardly for the same reasons. Kokl'u's problem had never been intent, only the ability to do anything with it. The man was dazzling to look at, he had all the right moves for presidential timbre, but he was a shell, all style and no substance. A perfect puppet.

"Ah, Marcus, so good of you to come." Kokl'u extended a strong, brown hand. His grip was just firm enough to show strength, without initiating challenge.

"Limba. Nice to see you again."

"Come, have some tea." Kokl'u raised one hand and his personal servant—a human instead of a servomech—scurried to arrange the tea setting. So gaudy, Wall thought, as ostentatious as was the room. Synsilk sheets in shades of hot pink draped all the walls; the floor was living carpet, one of the low-chlorophyll grasses imported from Baszel, in the Ceti System. It smelled much too... earthy for Wall's taste, but then, Kokl'u *had* no taste. The furniture was period, something from the early post-Bender era, and was no doubt considered "futuristic" when it was produced. Now the cast plastic looked something less than quaint, with its sweeping lines, odd angles, and rainbow colors. Well. He would finish his business and leave as soon as he could.

"Some color in your tea, Marcus?"

"Yes, a bit of blue, please."

Kokl'u nodded at the servant, who hastened to add the chemical to Wall's tea. The man counted slowly to four—Wall watched his lips move—then extended the thincris cup to Wall, who took it. Trust Kokl'u to waste his time training a menial in the precision of tea-and-color.

The two men sipped at their tea. Wall made appreciative noises at Kokl'u, who seemed pleased by such praise. Wall did not press the President; he was a puppet, but it sometimes took care to keep from tangling his strings. Instead, Wall merely waited. He hoped the man would hurry; Nichole would be coming to his chambers later in the afternoon. That thought was enough to cause a rush inside Wall. Ah, he had reveled in her, taking her to the edge of her first passion, then tumbling them both into the depths of his own. She had cried out from the bliss of it—

"—think that I might justifiably do it, Marcus?"



Wall pulled himself away from his precious memory and back to what this spineless actor-president was saying. He backtracked over Kokl'u's words. Something about a new pavilion, some sort of kiosk or other.

Smoothly Wall said, "Why, of course, Limba, I see no reason why you shouldn't have this thing. After all, a man of your great responsibilities should have some small comforts. Surely no one can begrudge you this." Inwardly Wall felt derision. Another toy for Kokl'u's vanity, he thought. Probably stocked with women or men who had caught his fancy, to be dressed in some outlandish costumes, ready to hop when the President yelled "wallaby."

"You don't think the media would castigate me for it?"

"Of course not, old friend. They can be very understanding, given the right persuasion." So that's what he wanted. As always, Kokl'u would eat his cake and have it too. Well, it was a small enough price. Let him build his new playground; Wall would see to it that reports of it, if any, would be favorable. Media management was one of his specialties. Protecting the decadent desires of the President could be done with minimum effort. Were the man to behead his chief ministers and drink their blood in plain sight of half a million people, Wall could arrange to have that seem to be no more than an illusion. Let him have his toys and his self-esteem—as long as he did what he was supposed to do. If he failed in that, he would be replaced faster than a Bender trip to Titan.

"Worry yourself no more, Limba. Consider it taken care of."

Kokl'u's patent-toothed smile gleamed again.

Such a fool. Wall sipped at his tea. Another five minutes of small talk and he could get away. Nichole would be coming soon. Yes...

\* \* \*

Over-Befalhavare Venture sat behind a vast expanse of electronic desk, glaring. He appeared laser-straight, despite the eighty-odd years he carried. Khadaji had never met the man. Venture had been the Systems Marshal for Orm, the single habitable planet of which was Greaves, upon which Khadaji had staged his one-man war against the Confed. They called it the Shamba Police Action before they had discovered that only a single soldier existed on the opposite side. Now, the Confed never spoke of it publicly at all. The Over-Befalhavare had been transferred to control of the Shin System, a five-planet post, shortly after the Greaves incident. Ostensibly, he had been promoted; in fact, he had been kicked uplevels. Over-Befalhavare Venture

had loudly and rightfully blamed his troubles on Emile Antoon Khadaji; now, the cause of his shame stood across the desk from him. Khadaji was unfettered, and if he had been bent on enduring a great deal of pain, he could have launched himself at the Systems Marshal, to try for a bare-handed lulling. The problem was that Khadaji would have to pass through a zap field to reach the Confed military man, and the name told exactly what happened to anybody who might be stupid enough to try.

The two men were alone in the room. Khadaji would have bet thirty years' labor against a half-stad that their conversation was *not* being recorded by Venture.

"So, the infamous Khadaji. The Man Who Never Missed. You don't know how much I've wanted to meet you."

"I can imagine." Khadaji's voice was dry.

"I used to put myself to sleep nights, coming up with ways I might have personally destroyed you, you know. Some of them were quite ingenious. And now I actually have you."

Khadaji said nothing, waiting. He could hardly deny the man his small taste of triumph.

"But it seems that you are worth more to me alive and on Earth than dead on Renault. That really is a pity." Venture shifted in his chair, and nodded to himself. "As much as I want the price they are willing to pay—you do know what it is, don't you?"

Khadaji nodded.

"As much as I want it, I have some questions for you. If you fail to answer them, you are a dead man, no matter how much Factor Wall wants you. Do you understand?"

"I understand."

"And you might as well tell the truth, because I will know if you don't. I've got stress analyzers and full-scan electrophony gear working you."

Khadaji didn't doubt him at all. "I understand."

"Good. First, why did you do it? The real reason."

Khadaji hesitated for a moment, gathering his thoughts. He had a rapid flash of all that had happened to him in the years since he'd deserted on Maro; of his insight, his training, first with Pen, then Red; of his decision as to what must be done; of his agony of having to use those means he was trying to supplant. He took a deep breath and said, "Because I knew the Confed was falling, and I wanted to help it fall faster. Because I knew if I set

myself up as a mythical figure, I could inspire resistance – if one man could do this, what might a hundred or a thousand dedicated men do? Because the Confed is evil, is *wrong* in a way I couldn't begin to explain, and it needs to die."

What he said was true. There was more he didn't say, but even the most sophisticated truth-readers couldn't judge what was left unstated.

The Over-Befalhavare nodded. "A fanatic's answer," he said. "I expected as much." He caught Khadaji's gaze with his own. "How did you escape?"

"I had a tunnel under the drug room your men imploded. I had an organic chem package with the correct mix in storage there, to simulate a human body under chemscan. By the time the room was destroyed, I was half a klick away."

The old man nodded. Khadaji's mind raced, seeking to answer the obvious second part of that question, searching for a way to speak the literal truth without giving away something he did not want revealed.

"How did you know the room would be imploded?" Damn. There it was. He had to speak very carefully. "I wasn't positive it would be." That was true enough. "But the drug room was equipped with reaper locks, armored door and walls, and a densecris window. Nobody was going to get to me just using a .177 Parker." That was also the truth. "The Lojt in charge would know better than to use explosives in a confined space like the Jade Flower. Implosive charges are the logical method of attack on an inside stronghold." All true, but skirting the real question being asked. Was it enough?

Venture looked down at his desk, at the read giving him the results of the electronic telemetry focused upon Khadaji. For what seemed a long time, he stared at the small holoproj. "All right."

Khadaji wanted to relax, but he held himself carefully, trying not to show any signs of relief.

"Your mythmaking worked," Venture said. "Despite all our attempts to suppress it, what you did got out. You took out over two thousand Confederation troopers in the six months you operated, all by spasm paralysis."

"Two thousand three hundred and eighty-eight," Khadaji said. His face was serious.

Venture nodded. "You would have kept count."

"Yes."

"That in itself is a remarkable achievement. No single guerrilla ever did that well before. But without missing a shot, according to our tally of your ammunition, that is more than remarkable, it's incredible. Are you really that good?"

Khadaji shook his head. "No. I missed shots. I had a secret cache of darts. I went to it eight times."

Venture shook his head. "Only eight times. It's still amazing." Khadaji heard grudging admiration in his voice. Then Venture said, "But The Man Who Only Missed Eight Times doesn't have quite the same ring, does it?"

"No. Myths need to be larger than life, to work. A man who makes mistakes, if only a few, is not so impressive as one who never fails."

"So you set yourself up as something to strive for."

"Yes."

Venture didn't bother to look at his monitoring screen. "If I had a hundred like you, I could rule the galaxy," he said.

Time to plant a seed. Khadaji said, "There *are* a hundred like me, Marshal Venture. At least three of them can out-shoot me without effort, and the same three could defeat me in fair bare-handed combat. A dozen more will be able to do both within a short time, if they continue to practice. They are the matadors I have been training during the seven years since I left Greaves. The Confed, in its infinite wisdom, recently declared them all criminals."

For a long time, Over-Befalhavare Venture said nothing. When he finally spoke, his voice was charged with fear and respect: "Christus! What did we do to deserve you?"

\* \* \*

Dirisha shifted to her left, firing her spetsdöd as she moved. The weapon coughed, and the dart caught the trooper under the chin. His body spasmed, and he curled into an instant fetus, muscles locked by electrochemical poison. He wouldn't die, but he'd spend six months in the lock, despite the best medical aid available.

The scene was unreal, lit in multiple shades of ghostly green. To an unaided eye the corridor was pitch dark; to one wearing spookeyes, the available light was amplified millions of times. The troopers were blind, easy targets for the matadors—until somebody could repair the emergency lighting system. They had, Dirisha estimated, seventeen minutes.

Red gestured from the corner, and Geneva and Sleel darted around the bend after him. Dirisha followed at a run. So far, her transceiver was silent—

Bork and Mayli were outside, guarding the exit and maintaining the perimeter against any reinforcements. So far, so good.

"Hey!" A pair of guards, one using a spookscope, ran into the corridor. Dirisha dropped to a prone position, both hands extended. The roar of a .177 filled the air as the guard with the carbine sprayed the place where Dirisha had just stood. She returned his fire with a half-dozen darts, three for each man. The two men jerked and hit the floor, hard.

"Dirisha...?"

That was Geneva, coming back to check on her.

"I'm okay, keep going!" Dirisha scrambled to her feet and ran toward the other woman. Geneva turned and sprinted back for the corner.

Ahead, in the eerie green, came the staccato spat of a spetsdöd. Dirisha heard the thrum of a hand wand, then more rounds from a spetsdöd. She and Geneva rounded the next corner.

And went blind. Somebody was waving a big HT lantern, and with the amplification of the spookeyes, it was like looking at a nova. Dirisha shoved her spookeyes up to kill the fire, but Geneva was faster. Geneva's right spetsdöd kicked into full auto, and a shower of darts encircled the light. The lantern fell and shattered on the floor, turning the corridor jet once again. Dirisha pulled her 'eyes back down. The afterimage on her retinas blotted out anything directly in front of her, and she had to use peripheral vision to see.

"He must have come out after Red and Sleel passed. The shooting was farther on."

Dirisha nodded. "Come on, the clock is running."

They ran. The plans said the center block control was just ahead. Another thirty meters—

Dirisha leaped the downed forms of a pair of troopers as she reached the control room. Red stood guard, arms extended to cover two corridors, while Sleel bent over a panel. He attached a portable power pack to it. Without speaking, Geneva slid to a stop behind Red, covering the remaining two corridors with her weapons. Father and daughter stood back to back, watching.

"Come on, Sleel, give me a heading!" Dirisha felt her tension, but there was no help for it. Her adrenaline ran high, lapping at her logic, insisting that she *move*! Each of the matadors circulated bacteria-aug, and was therefore considerably faster than an unaugmented trooper, but one of the side-effects

of the neurological bacteria was the urge to use that speed once it was initiated.

"Steel – "

"Three, he's on three, the isolation cell! Four, no, five doors down!"

Dirisha ran. With the power down, Khadaji had to know something was going on. He'd be ready to move.

Three, four, there it was, the fifth door. Dirisha skidded to a stop. The manual door pry was supposed to be marked with an emergency symbol—there it was. Dirisha grabbed the lever and pulled it from left to right. The door slid toward her on its tracks, like a block coming from a wall of blocks. She moved to the side, waited until the opening was just wide enough to squeeze through, and leaped into the cell.

Khadaji stood in the center of the room, unable to see her in the dark, but smiling. He *knew*.

'Time to leave, Emile.'

She moved to him and extended the spare pair of spookeyes she had stuck in her belt. Amazingly, he reached for the gear and took it without fumbling. How could he do that? He couldn't see anything!

Khadaji slipped the spookeyes on, clicked them into life, and nodded. "Your show, Deuce," he said, grinning.

"That's my line," Dirisha said. "People keep stealing it." She turned and moved.

Eight minutes later, seven more troopers cast into the lock ward, and they were out. A military hopper waited at the entrance, with Bork at the controls and Mayli mounting the spingun. It was five minutes past midnight.

The matadors hurried into the hopper. Bork triggered the confounder, rendering the vehicle invisible to Doppler and radar. He turned to grin at Dirisha.

"What say we lift?"

Dirisha shook her head. "No, I think we've danced this dance enough. Geneva?"

The blonde said, "Okay. Stop."

The hopper began to lose its opacity, quickly going from a solid to a phantom around them. The wall of the prison faded, and Renault's night sky lost its moons and stars, turning into a symmetrical net of cast plastic girders. It seemed as if Khadaji lasted a little longer before he, too, faded away into nothingness, but that was only wishful thinking, Dirisha knew. The

simulacrum generator played no favorites with its creations. After a moment, the six matadors found themselves standing in the bare warehouse once again. This was the last rehearsal, and they had done it, they had gotten the ersatz Khadaji out without losing anyone.

Dirisha looked at the others. It might not go that way during the real thing, and she didn't want to think about any of these people not making it. But the reality was upon them. Tomorrow night they would be on Renault and the troopers would be using real ammo, not the tinglers the simulacrum had used. Then again, they would be going for the real Khadaji, and not a machine-made ghost. She had a moment of doubt. "Listen, if anybody wants to walk away –"

"Shut up, Dirisha," Sleel said. Everybody else grinned.

Dirisha felt the tears gather, but she smiled back at them. "Okay, fools. Opening night tomorrow. I love you all."

## FIVE

POWER WAS a wonderful thing: it could be wielded with the delicate touch of a psychoneurosurgeon's laser or with the brutal overhead smash of a poisonball player. Marcus Jefferson Wall lived for the exercise of power in all its myriad forms. As a Factor, he had limited abilities; despite this, he was the most powerful man in the galaxy. He was an uncrowned king, an unelected president. He was, ultimately, the man in charge of anything he wished to control. It had not been an easy climb, but it had been worth it.

Wall's attention was held by a holoproj that danced in the space provided for it in his sanctum. A political debate in the Confederation Parliament was heating up. The whip of the majority party—the Soclibs—was ranting about the failure of the minority party—the Conserves—to unanimously support quick military action during the recent uprising on Ago's Moon. The whip, a muscular man of fifty with stranded-and-dyed hair, punctuated his argument with choppy waves of his arms.

"...very close to treason, in my view! Confederation fortunes are bound up in a strong and instant retaliation toward terrorist action! We cannot allow the slightest resistance!"

The minority whip, a big woman who wore half a kilo of body jewelery—earrings, noserings, and pectoral clips—jumped to her feet and pointed her

inducer at the speaker as if the electronic device were a weapon. The amplified voice of the chamber's computer rumbled into life.

"Point of order, minority whip's privilege," the computer said. "Will the speaker yield?"

The majority whip looked as if he would explode, but he nodded tersely. Failure to yield to privilege was legal, but practically unheard of. It was impolite, and considered a major faux pas for any politician. The majority whip sat in his form-chair.

The minority whip paused only long enough to take a deep breath. "So, rational hesitation is now treason, is it? I think the majority whip overreaches himself! It is bad enough that he endorses moronic displays of expensive military power every time somebody sneezes on some tree-shrouded agroworld; now anyone who disagrees with his one-orbit view of criminal intent is accused of treason! So what if some shrink-dink moon fields a riot? Are we supposed to tell the taxpayers to dig deeper into their pockets to fund more million-a-minute sorties by troopers looking for live targets for their exercises? The majority whip is using piss for reaction fuel if he thinks we can afford to police every commune in the galaxy! Let the Ago's Mooners insurrect, let them have their rock! A simple—and cheap—embargo would bring them around quick enough, without a shot!"

The majority whip jumped up and angrily clicked his own transponder, to respond, but Wall had seen enough. The woman—what was her name? Tinglo? Bringlo? Something like that—was dangerous. Wall waved his hand over the sensor, wiggling his fingers, and the holoproj vanished. He thought about it for a moment, then called to his computer. He had recently renamed the device, in honor of an old friend.

"Cteel."

"My Lord Factor?"

"Contact the minority whip of Parliament, I forget her name."

"Madame Hinglow."

"Yes. I would like to see her, at her convenience."

"My Lord," the computer said. It even sounded like Cteel, no large feat, since it had his voice tapes for programming.

Wall considered his intended action. The scalpel or the smash? Both were effective, but which would be the better for this situation? The carrot or the stick? Or both?



"Cteel, while you're at it, get me the psychfile on Madame Hinglow. Vocal and visual."

The computer's answer was to light the holoproj again. A soft female voice began to speak. Wall turned to look at the image, smiling as he did so.

\* \* \*

"Factor Wall, how nice to see you again."

Wall gestured toward the orthopedia facing his own. "Please, do relax."

Madame Hinglow allowed the device to accommodate her large form. She was an attractive woman, wide-hipped and large-breasted, and she had changed her clothing from the conservative suit she wore in Parliament to a clearsilk wrap. The nearly-invisible cloth revealed erotic tattoos on her abdomen, as well as her tri-colored pubic thatch, worn in the currently popular lap-braid style. Wall suspected that she had been dusted with a pheromone pump, but it didn't matter. As an exotic albino, he was immune to such devices.

As she leaned back into the orthopedia, she allowed her legs to part slightly, showing him lips rouged in two shades of red. She was very good, he thought. But it was wasted on him.

"You are looking well," she said.

Wall smiled and nodded. Now the fugue would begin in earnest. She was, he recalled, an excellent player.

"You were very effective in your debate with the majority whip this morning," Wall said. It was a mostly neutral statement, but the fugue sense was plain enough: *I saw you, I heard you, I know what you said.*

"I am honored you took time from your busy schedule to notice our small proceeding." And in fugue, Wall heard, *Why were you watching me?* A bit abrupt, but he could understand that: she was worried.

"The argument has supporters on both sides," he said, "but don't you think you run some small risk in taking what might be – ah – the less popular side?" *I don't like what you said. We cannot allow even one moon to have its way. That path leads to disaster.*

Unconsciously, the minority whip brought her knees together. That body language needed no expert in fugue to read. "I... that is, such things must be taken into account, of course." *What do you want me to do?*

Wall smiled. She capitulated quickly. No fool, this woman. A shame, since he would have liked to spin the game out a bit longer; still, the result was important, too.

"I understand that the upcoming election is likely to result in a victory for the minority party," he said. "As many as, say, fifty seats might be changed. Which would make you majority whip, would it not?" *If you change your attitude, you may have the carrot. I can arrange this easily enough.*

Madame Hinglow's knees relaxed again. She smiled. "Naturally I would like to see my party ascend. But political life has been somewhat wearisome of late. I have even entertained the idea of retiring." *What if I don't go along?*

Wall's smile grew. Ah, some spirit, after all. Good.

"Do you know the game of poisonball?" *You have heard the carrot, now hear the stick.*

"I don't follow sports, I'm afraid." *I'm listening.*

"It's a fascinating game. Two players stand a few meters apart, separated by an airwall. The airwall will allow a solid object to pass through, if it moves sufficiently fast. The players are naked, save for a power racquet each. The object is to use the racquet to propel a ball through the wall to strike the other player." There was no fudge woven into his statement.

"Interesting." *And...?*

"Ah, but there is more, you see. The ball is of a most special construction. It has two main functions. The first involves a contact poison contained within. Upon touching human tissue, the poison is released. It is not fatal, or rarely so, but it causes great pain for several days, pain which even the most potent medications cannot blunt. Some kind of replicating virus, I understand. To be struck by the ball is to lose the game in a particularly nasty manner." *Playing this game is dangerous, if you fail to move properly.*

"Ah. But what if one of the players simply lets the ball lie on his side of the airwall? Or are there rules against such?" *What if I won't play?*

"That's where the second function of the wonderful ball comes in. There is also within the device a timer. The game lasts no more than fifteen minutes, and the timer is set to trigger randomly during that period. Whichever side of the airwall the ball happens to be on when this occurs is showered with the aforementioned contact poison. You can see then that it would pay to try and return the ball to one's opponent as soon as possible, so that the chances of the ball triggering on one's own side would be minimized, don't you agree?" *To fight is to lose; to do nothing is to lose, as well.*

"Ah. It does sound an interesting game; my Lord Factor. Not my kind of thing, but... interesting." *I understand. I will not oppose you.*

"Well. Enough talk of sports. Come, we will have some tea, and perhaps a radiant, to put sparkle into our smiles."

"You are too kind, my Lord Factor."

"You must call me Marcus, Madame. We are going to be great friends, and will have no need of ceremony, I am sure."

They smiled at each other.

\* \* \*

Massey leaned against one end of Khadaji's silicon block, regarding the seated man. Khadaji waited for the ex-spy to speak. Finally, he did.

"Venture hates you even more than we knew. I didn't realize just how precarious your position was, our negotiations with him notwithstanding."

Khadaji allowed his eyebrows to raise slightly. "I would have bet no small amount that Venture wasn't recording our interview."

"He wasn't."

Khadaji gave Massey a short nod of acknowledgment. "Congratulations. The Wall should be proud of you." Venture hadn't been recording the conversation, but Massey had managed it, somehow. No one was safe from Confed spying.

"There was some difficulty," Massey said. "But your own teaching allowed that knowledge is power. Factor Wall is a... strong believer in knowledge."

"So it would seem."

Massey pushed away from the block, strolled a couple of steps away, then turned back to face Khadaji. "Well. It isn't important. Our negotiations are nearly complete. We shall be leaving the company of Venture's troopers shortly. In another two days, I would expect. And within a few hours, we'll be back on Earth."

"You'll excuse me if I don't applaud?"

Massey ignored the comment. "We could have you totally immobilized, but I think simple induced ataraxia should be enough to keep you from trying to escape. Not that there is anywhere to go on a Bender ship in transit. Besides, it might be our last chance to talk, and I don't want to miss it."

Khadaji said nothing. Massey was right: once the ship was bent, there was no way to escape. On Earth the security would be so tight it would be impossible to move. And, once the ataractic drug was in his system, Khadaji wouldn't want to escape, even if an opportunity somehow magically presented itself. It certainly narrowed his options.

\* \* \*

There was a knock on the door.

The six matadors dropped or raised into combat positions fast, aided by their bacterial augmentation. Almost as quickly, Dirisha relaxed her aim at the door and straightened. Confederation troopers would have come through the door blasting, if they'd known who was inside. Even local cools would have been more direct than to announce their presence with a knock. It must be somebody else.

"Who's there?" Dirisha said.

"A friend of the matadors," came a male voice.

Everyone glanced quickly at Sleel. Red said, "I thought you said we were covered better than a singularity explorer."

Sleel shrugged.

Dirisha moved toward the door; the others spread out, taking positions so their field of fire wouldn't cross on each other. Bork and Mayli took the left, Sleel and Geneva the right, while Red watched the windows.

Dirisha, her right spetsdöd held ready, thumbed the door control with her left hand. The door slid back to reveal –

Pen!

For a moment nobody spoke or moved. Then the shrouded figure nodded once and stepped into the room.

Dirisha regarded the man in the costume of the Siblings of the Shroud. It wasn't Khadaji of course. This man was shorter, older, to judge from his hands, and his eyes were green, not blue. He didn't seem the least worried that twelve spetsdöds were pointed at him.

"Who are you, Deuce?"

Beneath the cover of the robe, Dirisha thought she detected the motions of a smile. "I am called... Pen," he said matter-of-factly.

Dirisha felt the tension in the room relax, as the others came out of their combat poses. A Pavlovian response to the name? No, it was something else; there was a kind of peace about this man. He was, Dirisha felt, not a threat; more, he was what he had said through the door – a friend.

"Pen," Dirisha said. "Any relation to the Pen we all knew?"

"I was Pen before; for a time, I was known by another name. When Emile no longer needed the identity, I resumed it."

"Jesus," Sleel said, "you're that Pen? His teacher?"

The robed man bowed. "The same."

Dirisha felt a sense of awe, and with it, a spate of questions. Was this really Pen? What was he doing here? How had he found them? Chang, *Pen*, the real Pen! How? Why?

Pen saved them the trouble of asking. "I'm here because of what you plan to do," he said. "Emile is due to be transferred from Renault to Earth in two days."

"We figured it'd be quick," Dirisha said. "But Renault is only a few hours away by direct Bender. We have time—"

"You mistake me," Pen said. "I am here to tell you that you should not attempt to free him on Renault."

"What!" Geneva stepped forward. "We won't have a chance once he gets here! Even a hundred matadors couldn't get through the net they'll have over him!"

"I understand that."

"Then you're telling us we shouldn't try to break him out at all?" That from Bork.

"Yes."

"Why?" That from Dirisha, Red, and Sleel together.

Pen stood silently for a moment. "I cannot tell you. Not yet. Emile knows you will try, and it is his wish that you do not."

"You've communicated with him?"

"Not for some years."

"Then how can you know what he wants?" Dirisha said. "You were his teacher a long time ago, but he was our teacher only a few months past. We owe him."

Pen shrugged. "I can only convey what I know to be true. You should not risk yourselves. Yet."

Dirisha turned to look at the others. She saw skepticism on their faces, and it mirrored her own. Even if this was Pen, they didn't buy his message. She certainly didn't.

"Listen, Pen, or whoever you are, I'm sorry. We're set to leave. If you are on our side, you can come along. Or stay here—as long as we can be sure you won't screw up our plans."

Pen laughed.

"Something funny here I'm missing?" Sleel said. His voice was soft, what Dirisha knew as his dangerous tone.

"Only my amazement at how farsighted Emile has always been. I searched for years for the Cosmic Flash, and because I wanted it so much, I never found it. I learned a lot, but never that great truth. He knew what you would say." Pen paused, and looked around the room. "I won't betray you. Do what you must, but remember what I have said. We'll meet again, perhaps."

Bork edged forward a hair, just enough so Dirisha caught the movement. His movement was an unspoken question: Do we wrap this guy up, Dirisha?

Before she could react. Pen danced toward Bork, three or four moves melded smoothly into a flow, like liquid. Dirisha recognized a section of the Ninety-seven Steps of Sumito. She had never seen it performed that smoothly before, and not in all her years of practice had she ever done it that well. Even Khadaji wasn't that good.

Pen's move was not an attack, everybody saw that. Nobody fired, or even reacted visibly. It was merely a demonstration. He was one of them; more, he was the best of them. He finished the sequence, and stopped.

"Okay," Dirisha said. "If you wanted to cause trouble, we'd already be having it. We appreciate your interest, but we've got to do what we think is right."

"Of course." Pen bowed, turned, and left.

After he'd gone, nobody spoke for a long time. Then Sleel said, "Why do I get the impression everybody knows what's going on but us?"

## SIX

THERE WERE TIMES when Marcus Wall allowed himself to reflect upon his past, to glory in the distance he had come. He had been born on Rim, the fifth planet of the Beta System, a planet also called Darkworld; he had been poor; he had been handicapped. Now, he was... much more.... Wall seldom went out. Today was one of the rare days. He was to attend the ground breaking for Kokl'u's new toy. Though it had only been a few days, with the President the thought was as the deed, and he wasted no time in those things he personally desired. While he was about, Wall would also find time to tend to other small chores that required his presence. A media shower here, a favor granted there; such was his power that to appear in public with someone automatically granted that person great face and clout. Today, he would dine with Minister Miyamoto, father to the exquisite Nichole. The restaurant was secured, there was no danger, and the event would be dutifully recorded:

Factor Wall dined this day with Minister Miyamoto. The pair were observed smiling and laughing as they consumed *élat du sung* in the Valsevian Quarter, and a highly placed source tells us that Minister Miyamoto currently enjoys Factor Wall's largesse and favor....

Wall grinned at the thought of the faxcast. He leaned back against the silk cushions and stared at the fittings of his aircoach. The motif was frogs-and-cranes, cast in platinum and brightly polished. The reflections in the polarized densecris windows gleamed more dully, but even so, the richness would not be denied. Yes, he had come a long way from the Darkworld.

So that he might find greater joy in his fortune, Wall allowed himself to slip into a memory trance. The soft purr of the aircoach lulled him, as he returned in time to Rim, to the boy he had been at thirteen....

\* \* \*

...mother looked very grave as she sat in front of the boy. She reached out to cup his face with both hands, her colorless skin matching his own. Tears gleamed and ran from her pink eyes.

"What is it, mem?"

The woman shook her head slowly, the white hair floating cloudlike around her temples. "Artemis wants to... talk to you, Tavee."

The boy's jaw muscles danced as he bit down on his anger. Artemis was Luete's agent—it was he who sent her to service those with money, he who kept Tavee alone so much.

"I don't want to talk to him," the boy said.

Luete stroked Tavee's hair, hair as soft and white as her own. "I—I wish you didn't have to, my son. But he is our... protector. We must not make him angry."

"I don't care if he puffs up and blows an artery," Tavee said. "Piss on him—!"

Her fingers dug into his shoulders, hurting him.

"Ow, mem, stop!"

The pressure eased, but her face was angry. "You are not to say things like that! Without Artemis we would be in great danger. You remember what happened to Glenna. And Surrat."

Dumbly, he nodded. He remembered. The same thing that had happened to Bleez and Tarn and Amarah. Dead. All killed by colorskins. Knifed or shot or beaten. Surrat had been doused with chem and set aflame. His killer had laughed while Surrat died. Many of his friends and relatives had been

murdered. Tavee had never known of an albino who had died of natural causes. It was because of the Curse. They all had it, just as he did. Where he went, he saw the colorskins looking at him, wanting him, wanting to own him, wanting to touch him. Part of it was pheromones, he had been taught. Part of it was his beauty, itself a genetic design. There were no ugly, no ungraceful, no undesired albinos. They had been bred that way, and even after the laws forbid such manipulations, the breeding ran true. He had seen them lusting for him, the women, the men, even the bothlings.

So, now it was his turn, just as it had been his mother's turn. He had been expecting it. Tavee was no virgin—no albino past the age of ten was, many did not manage it that long—but he was not yet a member of a working stable. Until now.

"I am sorry."

The boy shrugged. It was not her fault. She couldn't stand up to Artemis; none of them could. He was big and mean and he knew fighting.

"It's all right, mem. Really."

She smiled, and wiped her tears away. "I'll tell him you're ready."

"Fine."

She left the room, and Tavee looked around. It was a good room, as rooms went. Much better than the coloredskin rooms he'd seen. Artemis gave them lots of stuff, good stuff. But he was one of *them*, his skin had that fleshy brown tint, and he wanted to do the same things the others did. He protected them, but he used them, he made money from them, just like the other *agents* did. Right now, he'd be smiling his straight-toothed grin, rubbing at his hard-on, wanting to stick it into Tavee, just like the others.

The boy's jaw muscles danced again, and he took a deep breath. He was scared, but he knew what he was going to do.

\* \* \*

In his aircoach, light and realtime years away, the man traveled through memory. This was the part he liked best.

\* \* \*

Artemis came in, and when he saw Tavee, he grinned. The boy was naked, sitting on the bed.

Artemis sat on the bed next to the boy and put one dark and muscular arm around him. "Ah, Tavee, you're somethin' real special. I won't hurt you, you'll like it."

"Stand up," Tavee said.



"What?"

Tavee stuck his finger into his mouth and sucked on it.

Artemis's grin grew, and he quickly stood. "You're gonna do real good at this, Tavee, real good." Artemis untabbed his pants and let them drop.

A minute later, when Artemis closed his eyes and leaned back, Tavee pulled the slender knife from under the mattress. He had a good grip on Artemis with his left hand, and the knife was very, very sharp.

When Artemis looked down in stunned surprise, still seconds away from real pain, Tavee stood and drove the blade into the man's belly, slicing upward until the edge was stopped by the breastbone. Artemis fountained blood and organs, but Tavee was already halfway to the door. He didn't look back, then. Only much later...

\* \* \*

The aircoach settled the half meter to the road with a slight bump that roused Wall from his memory. He looked through the densecris as if unable to make any sense of what he saw. He smiled. Ah, yes, the ground breaking. They would be waiting for him, since he was the last to arrive. Waiting with reverence for his power. He had come a long way since gutting the cuntmaster on Rim. A long way, indeed....

\* \* \*

Three armed troopers held hand wands aimed at Khadaji as Massey and the Lojtnant approached him. The Lojt held a biomed popper in one hand. Massey waved one hand; in a gesture meant to convey reassurance, Khadaji figured.

Massey said, "A medium-level ataractic, that's all."

"Appath?"

"You would know the names, wouldn't you? No, it's Antipuje. You'll be able to talk and move, just a bit slower than usual. And no epinephrinic surges, of course."

"I'm familiar with the drug," Khadaji said.

"It would be foolish to resist," Massey said. He gestured at the troopers. "Wand stun is much more unpleasant."

"So it is." Khadaji extended his left arm, turning it so that he presented his supinated wrist to the Lojt.

The officer caught Khadaji's hand, jammed the unit against his wrist, and triggered the device. There was a small *pop*, and Khadaji felt a cold sting, nothing more.

He looked at Massey, who seemed somewhat edgy. "Disappointed, Massey? You look as if you expected me to perform some magic just then, to knock the Lojt down and dance past the guards unharmed."

Massey smiled, but said nothing.

Khadaji's own smile faded, and his face took on a flat aspect, as if the world of men held no interest for him. He stood as if carved from plastic flesh, a man with nothing on his mind.

Massey shook his head. "So, this is how it ends. Not in a martial dance, but like a mindless animal led to slaughter. I am disappointed, old teacher-mine. I had hoped you would acquit yourself better. So much for mythology." He turned to the Lojt. "Okay. Let's get out of here. We leave at six hundred. The drug should last until we arrive back on Earth."

Massey turned back to Khadaji. "Go lie down."

Obediently, Khadaji went to his block and lay upon it. His expression did not change.

Massey sighed. "Just like any other man. A shame, really. You'd think a legend would have something to fall back on, wouldn't you? Where are your miracles now, Khadaji?"

There was no answer, and Massey turned to leave the cell, followed by the Lojt and the now-relaxed troopers.

\* \* \*

Though it suited her purposes, Dirisha thought it odd that any ship would go directly from Earth to Renault. Then again, the Confed was not known for the brilliance of its transportation schedules. One could bend space and arrive on Renault in a few hours; yet a trip to any planet in the Delta System took at least six days. Delta was much more important in the grand scheme of interstellar commerce than was the Shin System, in which Renault occupied its tiny niche, of that there was no doubt. Trust the Confed to dork it up.

Dirisha sat in a lounge seat, toying with a curved knife. The weapon was the length and arc of a banana, a thing of mirror steel, brass, and exotic hardwood. The design was based upon that of a sabercat's tusk. Khadaji, as Pen, had given her the knife just before she had graduated from the matador school, along with some cryptic advice. Apparently Pen—the real Pen—had given the same knife to Khadaji years earlier, along with the same kind of input. It had to do with simplification, and if Dirisha had been one to anthropomorphize, she might have named the knife Occam's Razor.

She twirled the fat-handled knife idly, watching the gleam of light from its blade. She didn't really think of it as a weapon; it was more a talisman. Close enough to use a knife would also be close enough to use her hands and feet, and they were as deadly as sharp metal and less likely to be lost when needed. But you never knew....

Dirisha sheathed the knife when she realized what she was doing. She didn't want to think about what was coming, that was the thing. In a few hours they'd be on Renault, and they'd move to free Khadaji. The others were on the ship, they were ready, but Dirisha had doubts. Some of them might not make it through. *All* of them might not. For herself, she felt no fear – she had to do what she had to do – but for the others...

She didn't want to lose any of them. Especially she didn't want to lose Geneva. The blonde had been her lover at the school, but it was only later, when Dirisha learned to love Rajeem, that she knew she also loved Geneva.

Rajeem. She smiled. She wondered how he was doing, back on her home world, itself named Dirisha. Port and Starboard could certainly handle the local raf, and the Confed wouldn't think to look for Rajeem Carlos there. No, he and his wife Beel were safe enough. Even if she didn't get through this, Rajeem would be all right. Eventually, he would resume his contacts with the Antag Union; eventually, he would go back to resisting the Confed, maybe in a more active way this time.

"Still got that sticker, huh?"

Dirisha looked up. Sleel dropped into the chair across from her. They had not been so foolish as to seem to be traveling together, still, neither did the matadors see spies behind every disposal. They assumed there might be some kind of security check on Renault, but that was being taken care of – if Sleel's contact on the planet could be trusted.

"I still have it, yeah."

"Not to worry, Dirisha. We'll pull it off."

"Who's worried?"

Sleel leaned forward. "Yeah, well, look. Just in case I might not make it, what say we spend some time in the privacy cube before we land? Take our minds off things."

For a second, Dirisha was tempted. Then she laughed. Sleel had been trying to bed her ever since she had known him. It had been the first thing he'd said after his name, years ago in Khadaji's pub on Greaves. *Hi, I'm Sleel. Want to screw?*

"Nice try, Sleel. The old, 'I-might-not-live-long' gambit must work pretty well for you."

He grinned. "Almost as good as 'Help-me-I-don't-know-much-about-this-kind-of-thing.'"

Dirisha felt better. Good old Sleel. As singleminded as a hungry dog. "Ah, Sleel. What would I do if I didn't have you around to keep me on my toes?"

"Hey, Dirisha, you don't know what you're missing."

"I'll ask Mayli if it ever really bothers me."

Sleel shook his head, and stood. "You going to be nasty, I'm leaving. Later."

Dirisha grinned at his back. When Mayli had been a practicing trull, Sleel had challenged her. He'd wound up with phlebitis of the penis for his trouble.

She felt better. No matter what happened, she'd learned a lot from these people in the last few years. They had become family, and she loved them. Even Sleel.

\* \* \*

Steel's contact passed the matadors through without incident; the fake Military aircar was where it was supposed to be; as the skies turned to night, the plan was working perfectly. Money could buy miracles, at times.

They got all the way to the Military prison before it fell apart. The place was lit like a landing field, sirens blasted the night, and troopers shuffled back and forth like mad decks of cards, waving weapons at anything that moved.

"Looks like something is wrong here," Bork said.

"You are a fucking master of understatement," Sleel said.

Geneva squeezed Dirisha's arm. "Dirisha?"

"I don't know, hon. Maybe we better grab somebody and find out."

"You and Bork ought to go into entertainment," Sleel said. "Shit. Shit."

## CHAPTER SEVEN

NICHOLE SAT CROSS-LEGGED upon his bed, intent upon the colorful holoproj show Wall had made for her. The girl laughed at the clowns in their costumes, as they tried a complicated acrobatic construction and fell, instead. The recording was of the Galactic Circus, currently playing the Faust System. Normally, the circus would be on Earth in a few months; unfortunately, it had chosen to play Ago's Moon and was now embroiled in that world's

rebellion against the Confederation. The circus might never see terran skies again, which would be a pity; certainly, it would be delayed somewhat. By the time it arrived Nichole might well have... passed her peak. Some new love would see it with him. But of that, he didn't want to think just now. Nichole was here, dressed in her thinsilks, rapt over his present. No doubt she would wish to repay his kindness shortly.

The thought made Wall feel weak. She was so much more than he had hoped for, perfect in every way. Despite her youth, she was very... adept, once he had shown her how.

He'd have to see what kind of favor he could bestow on her father, the minister. Something appropriate for a man who could produce such a lovely daughter. Her father already had a certain amount of power, of course, but there could never be enough of that, Wall knew. Another notch in Miyamoto's political weaponry would please him.

For a moment, as he watched the bright-faced child intent on the recording of the circus, Wall felt a fleeting thought bouncing across his mind: he had become what he had once detested—a user of children. With the control he had mastered he hurried the thought along and refused to readmit it to his sanctum when it howled outside his mental door. This was different. Truly it was.

\* \* \*

The six men leaving Khadaji's cell had turned their attention away, no longer considering him a threat. They had poisoned his circulating bacteria—aug when he'd been captured, but they'd missed the culture he'd hidden—embedded in viral wart tissue on his left thumb. He had triggered the bacteria yesterday; they were now fully active. That wouldn't have mattered, if the chemical they had just given him had been working properly. It wasn't.

Khadaji moved. He shoved himself away from the silicon block and immediately jumped into the beginning of the third section of the sumito dance. He had practiced the moves a dozen times, moving from the block to the cell door; that there were six men in the way complicated his motions some, but not as much as an untrained observer might expect. One against six, but he had fought more, in practice. Four was the hardest number; more than that in close quarters and they only got in each others' way; fewer could be avoided.

One of the soldiers began to turn, alerted by some small sense. Khadaji spun, curved his fingers just so, and swept the man from his feet—

– two other men scratched for bolstered weapons. The troopers became part of Khadaji's dance, took wing and flew like parakeets suddenly escaped from a lifetime in cages, smashing artlessly into the nearest walls –

– Massey, better trained than the others, moved away from immediate danger, backing into the Lojt –

– the fourth trooper attacked, a hard snap kick for Khadaji's groin accompanied by a loud "kiaii!" Khadaji twirled away, caught the soldier's foot, and upended him. The man hit the rubbery floor on his back and shoulders and grunted as his wind was knocked away –

– Massey pulled a tube from his sleeve, put the end in his mouth, and aimed the other end at Khadaji. A dart straw, poisoned –

– the Lojt smashed the edge of his hand against the back of Massey's neck, knocking the dart straw loose and felling the surprised man. The Lojt grinned at Khadaji.

Khadaji didn't pause to return the Lojt's smile. He reached into the downed Massey's trousers, removed the confounder the man carried, and triggered it.

"Let's move," Khadaji said.

The Lojtnant nodded.

The two men ran. The fight would have been on the cell's monitors; even with the confounder, the place was going to be filled with troopers in a moment, despite whatever bribes the Lojtnant had placed. Escape from the cell did not mean escape from the prison. The Lojt was his man, had been so since Greaves, where he had helped Khadaji escape by imploding the drug storeroom at the Jade Flower. Before there was sympathy for Khadaji's cause, he had had money to spend. The Lojt was half-rich; if they survived this, he'd be twice as wealthy. A wise man knew when to spend his standards –

"This way!" the Lojt ordered. He led Khadaji down a corridor, to a maintenance lock. The soldier thumbed the hatch open and ducked to enter. Inside, the lock ballooned into a small room filled with robotic dins attached to power grids. The room was dark, save for the glow of the charge diodes on the dins, amber lamps that cast golden light. The air was filled with the rich smell of machine lube.

The Lojt ran through the room. Khadaji followed, the neurological bacteria playing amphetaminic songs upon his nerves as he moved. *Go, they sang, go, go, go!*

\* \* \*

"I'll go," Geneva said.

Dirisha nodded. Any of them could do the job, but Geneva was still the best, as far as Dirisha was concerned. Despite what Khadaji had said about her own skill, Dirisha had yet to truly believe it. She could lead, and she was good, but Geneva was better on her feet.

Red looked as if he was going to say something, but he shook his head briefly and sat back in his seat. Fatherly concern, maybe, but he had trained her; he knew how good she was, too.

"Back in a minute," Geneva said. The door to the military hopper opened and she was gone, a gray shadow that quickly blended into the night.

Dirisha looked into the darkness. So far, nobody had challenged them, being in a military vehicle as they were, but whatever was going on out there, she didn't like it. All the plans they had made were a waste. What in Deep was going on—?

"Here she comes," Bork said.

Dirisha scanned the darkness. "Where—?"

"To the left," Mayli said. "With her arm around the shoulders of a trooper."

Dirisha saw Geneva approaching. She felt a tenseness leave her, accompanied by a small sigh. Sure, Geneva was the best, and Dirisha wouldn't have been worried if she had gone instead of the blonde, but there was no way around it, it had made Dirisha nervous. Mother hen effect? No, more like a rooster....

Sleel opened the rear bay, and Geneva hustled the trooper into the hopper. The man was a good twenty kilos heavier than Geneva, but his face was pinched and he moved like a man in great pain. Dirisha touched Geneva lightly on the upper arm, and the younger woman smiled briefly. A small touch, but there was meaning attached to it.

"Wh-who are you?" the trooper managed.

"Not your business, Deuce," Dirisha said. "You only have to concentrate on one thing to make it out of here—what is going on at the prison?"

"Stuff it, cunt—ah!" The man tightened as Sleel dug his fingertips into the trap muscle alongside the man's neck.

"Sleel," Dirisha said. Sleel eased his grip.

"Look, Deuce, we can do this any way you want. I can uncork some chem and pop you. I can let Sleel here do his half of the good-cool-bad-cool routine. Or you can tell us what we want to know and take a little nap. Your choice."

The trooper was obviously no virgin. He looked around at the six gray-suited figures and their spetsdöds, thought about it for five seconds, and decided where his best interests were. "It's a break," he said. "Somebody got out."

"Who?" Even as she asked, Dirisha was certain she already knew the answer.

"The guy in the robe. The one who never misses."

"Are you sure?" Red asked.

"It's what my quad leader told me. The guy took out a dozen armed troopers *after* he'd been popped with down-chem. He ain't normal."

"Looks as if our partner stood us up for the dance," Sleel said. "Now what?"

Dirisha nodded at the trooper. There was a whump! as somebody – Mayli, maybe – shot him with a shock dart.

"Put him out and let's go find someplace quiet," Dirisha said.

"Got a problem there," Red said. "Company."

The matadors looked away from the drugged trooper, in time to see four quads heading in their direction.

"What say we –" Bork began.

"Lift," Dirisha finished.

Bork punched a control and the hopper bounded into the air. The com circuit lit with a direct call: "You in the T-1, land and park it! Stat!"

Bork swung the hopper into a tight turn. The com continued to blare commands. "Last warning! Land or we bring you down!"

"Not with Parker carbines you won't," Sleel said.

"One of the quads is probably a heavy," Bork said. "They'd be carrying ground-to-air."

"Enough to bring us down?" That from Geneva. "I thought this cart had belly armor."

"If they get lucky, they could hit a repellor. Wouldn't do us a lot of good."

Dirisha had a sudden vivid picture of the hopper slamming into the ground at a couple hundred kilometers per hour, splashing dirt and metal and blood like a rock dropped into a pond. Her own death didn't frighten her, and even the plan to break Khadaji out of the prison hadn't worried her – maybe it was because she had felt in control. But in the air, locked into the hopper, she was only a passenger; she couldn't protect her friends.

"Strap in," Bork ordered.



A moment later, the big man threw the hopper into a power dive. "Here it comes," he said.

There was a bright flash and an explosion that shook the aircar, rocking it hard. Other than the noise, there seemed no apparent effect.

"Took it on the armor," Bork said. "We'll be out of range in a few seconds. They won't spot us with Doppler or radar, but they might put up some pursuit on visual or infrared. Where to, Dirisha?"

Where to, indeed? Khadaji was gone, and the whole plan suddenly seemed very foolish. In truth, Dirisha hadn't thought past the point of saving Khadaji. Once they got him out, then *he* could take over. As Pen, he had always known all the answers; as Khadaji, he had been a legend. It was all his show, it had been all along. Now what were they going to do?

"Find us a hole, Bork. We've got some thinking to do."

## CHAPTER EIGHT

MASSEY HAD BEEN CONTRITE, but the escape of Khadaji did not weigh upon Wall as heavily as it might have another time. It would have to be dealt with, of course, but there was another snake in his garden, one closer and nastier, and at first, Wall didn't even want to contemplate it. At first. A destroyed fantasy was the worst of all things, worse than some distant reality concerning a man he didn't even know. Far worse.

In his chamber. Wall brooded, while Massey stood at attention, no doubt fearing he was the cause of his master's grief and anger.

"My Lord Factor, I know there is no excuse—"

"Never mind, Massey." Wall waved one hand, as if to dismiss the entire affair of Khadaji and his escape. "We will attend to the matter in due course. I have another service I would have you perform."

Massey's relief was palpable. Wall needed none of his truth-displaying machineries to know that. Good. A grateful servant was a better one.

"Anything, my lord."

"Cteel, give Massey the files we have just been discussing."

To Massey, Wall said, "Read these, memorize them, and find out everything you can about the people named in them. Everything, do you understand? Speak of this to no one, it is for my ears only. I want it yesterday."

"Sir."

"Go. I wish to be alone."

After Massey left, Wall stood staring into the depths of a painting for a time before he spoke. "Cteel, cancel my appointments today. All of them."

"Excluding Nichole?" Cteel said.

"No, *including* Nichole." He sighed. "Especially Nichole."

Wall returned his gaze to the painting. The Fremaux usually cheered him. It was something vaguely Oriental in design, brightly colored in primary reds and blues, full of happy people wandering in a happy land. Today, it gave him no solace. None at all. Fantasy could not be trusted. Not today. Maybe not for a long time. Ah, damn! It was a cruel life, none the less so for all his power.

Damn!

\* \* \*

The Man Who Never Missed sat quietly in a zendo more than a dozen light-years away from where he'd been imprisoned on Renault. Koji was the only habitable world in the Heiwa System, sparsely populated, but the planet was a good place to hide: Koji was the galactic center for religious freedom. A pilgrim to the Holy World might be many things elsewhere, but on Koji, his or her privacy was respected. On a busy street, one might see Buddhists walking with Trimenagists, Siblings debating Jesuits, Tillbedjare arm-in-arm with Libhobers; all manner of Brothers, Sisters, Fathers, Mothers traveled to Koji to learn, to teach, to preach. Much was allowed between consenting adults, but if one did not wish to be bothered, one was not.

More than a few criminals had found their way to the Holy World; some hid, some listened to the various Ways and changed. There was an uneasy and unwritten treaty between the Confed and Koji. Confederation spies searched for particularly wanted fugitives, but no action was taken against such criminals without long and careful consideration. The galactic followers of the various religions on Koji numbered in the tens of billions; for the Confed to tread too heavily upon Koji's toes might spark a religious rebellion, a thing the Confed surely did not need.

Khadaji remembered only too vividly his experience on Maro, when the fanatical followers of one particular holy man had died by the hundreds of thousands to please their leader. They had marched smiling and unarmed into the guns of the Military, cut down like human grain.

No. The Confed didn't want a holy war.

Khadaji sat *zazen*, eyes closed, chin locked, hands folded. A zen master, should one happen to pass, would use the bamboo, for Khadaji was not

meditating. He might have the external appearance, but his mind was not peaceful. His thoughts were of war.

Once again, he had managed to stay alive. The plan was still working. He had escaped from the military prison, adding to the legend he had set out to create so many years ago. He was a pivotal figure, just as he had intended.

The Man Who Never Missed. The man who took on the Confed, alone, and died only after crippling an entire planet's military machine. Only he *hadn't* died! He had allowed himself to be captured, and then he had escaped. Anybody who opposed the Confed, whether in spirit or action, could take heart—a single dedicated man could do miracles: What could a hundred such men and women do? A thousand? Ten thousand?

Even with galactic damping of the news, word-of-mouth would spread the rumor. The basic truth would be inflated, as it had been all along. Khadaji had once talked to a trooper who had told him that the Shamba scum had taken out soldiers in class-three body armor with a spetsdöd, a thing Khadaji knew to be impossible. The man had believed it.

The rumors could not be stopped, Khadaji knew. More, with millions of standards behind a covert publicity push—Did you hear about Khadaji? The rebel? He escaped from a maximum security cell on Renault—vanished into thin air!—the myth would continue to grow, a snowball rolling down a high-gee mountain.

And the rebels all through the galaxy would hear the stories and nod. Look what he did—can we do any less?

Khadaji had taken his lesson from history. Remember the Alamo. Remember Pearl Harbor. Remember Ho Chi Minh. Remember Jatra. Rallying cries echoing along the martial corridors of mankind. He was now one of them: Remember the Man Who Never Missed.

In his *zazen*, Khadaji sighed. He hadn't wanted to use their methods against them. Fire against fire. Deadly violence was wrong, it was what made the Confed so evil, their quick willingness to use the gun or bomb. But there was no other way, in the end. He had taken as his weapon the spetsdöd, so he wouldn't be lethal, but it was only a small concession.

Well. The time for regrets over methods was long past. He had chosen his path, had walked it, and now was nearing the end. The matadors were trained, the legend was in place, and there were only a few more things he had to do. It could all be undone; he could have spent his life only to fail in the end. There was no way he could know. He might die and never know.

Khadaji arose from the formal pose, stretched, and left the zendo. The tatami under his bare feet was polished smooth by the many thousands of other feet that had walked upon it. The incense burning in the brass brazier filled the air with fragrant sandalwood smoke. The silence within the temple was almost tangible. He turned and bowed as he left the zendo, a gesture of respect for the place and the philosophy behind it. Then he slipped on his dotic boots and walked into the cool fall afternoon. There was a time for contemplation and meditation, and a time for action.

It was time to move.

\* \* \*

The six matadors grounded the aircar with the unconscious trooper in it and stood talking in the dwindling night. They had no reason to return to Earth. Dirisha had told them they could go their own ways, if they wished. She was going back to the world of her birth. Rajeem Carlos was there, and Khadaji knew how to contact her there, as well. Dirisha was sure he would, eventually.

"Don't be stupid," Sleel said. "We're all going."

"When did you take up mind reading, Sleel?"

"He speaks for me," Red said.

Bork and Mayli looked at each other. "Us, too," Mayli said.

Geneva put one hand on Dirisha's shoulder. "Wither thou goest, love..."

Dirisha grinned. "Okay, fools. You had your chance."

\* \* \*

The boxcar swung from orbit into the bottom of the gravity well that was Dirisha's homeworld. Sawa Mji: Flat Town, a pustulent boil on the backside of a do-nothing planet. The major ambition for anybody born here was to leave, as soon as possible. Flat Town was a spacer port, catering to the men and women who traveled the star lanes to and from better places. Pubs were big in Sawa Mji; whores had a guild larger than most other guilds; violence and death were a part of everyday life. Dirisha had hated the town when she lived in it; she saw no reason to like it now.

Except that Prebendary Rajeem Carlos was there, along with his wife and two children. Rajeem had opened Dirisha to love, after all the martial years without it. Beel, his wife, had added to that love. What Geneva had felt for her at Matador Villa, Dirisha could now return. Love wasn't exclusive. Khadaji, as Pen, had given her that most powerful and wonderful gift—the

ability to see love and act upon it—and she owed him for that more than anything.

The boxcar performed its usual bouncy landing. Dirisha exited the vehicle and was struck by the stench of Flat Town. It was an odor of oil and sweat and heat and rottenness, and once again, Dirisha marveled that the residents had grown so used to it that they no longer smelled it.

No one was there to meet her, which was good. She wanted the two bodyguards. Port and Starboard, watching Rajeem and his family, and she surely didn't want the Antag leader out in public any more than he had to be. But they knew she was coming.

The summer sun beat at her as she found a transport into the city proper. What a nice place to be from, she thought. Far from. Starting one's life as a trull, daughter of a trull and sister to another, was not the best way to grow up enjoying that life. The fighting arts had been her way out, at the cost of caring for anybody else. A high price, but she'd never known enough to regret it, until Matador Villa. Now, she had a new family, and she loved them more than she ever had her biological relatives.

When Starboard opened the door, Dirisha felt a surge of joy. Rajeem stood there, and Beel, and with them was Geneva! Beel held Geneva's hand, and all three were smiling.

"Dirisha!" Rajeem said.

There followed a communal hug—Beel, Rajeem, Dirisha, and Geneva. Rajeem's arm half circled her waist; Beel's lips touched Dirisha's cheek, Geneva's fingers stroked her neck. Gods, it was good to be back with these people!

\* \* \*

Rajeem was all business once the greetings were done. Dirisha explained about Khadaji, how they had just missed him. He had apparently cinched his escape: no trace of him had been located by the Confederation.

Rajeem asked the question Dirisha had been asking herself since Bork had flown them away from the prison: "Now what?"

She had an idea, but she wasn't sure of it. She took a deep breath to speak.

There was a knock at the door.

Port and Starboard were good—they drew slim hand wands and aimed for the door—but compared to Dirisha and Geneva, the two men were slow. Dirisha urged Rajeem and his wife into the sleeping room while Geneva flattened herself against the wall, her right spetsdöd raised. When she was

sure her clients were safe, Dirisha turned to face the door. She nodded at Geneva, who tapped the door's control. The panel slid aside.

A boy of maybe ten T.S. stood there.

Starboard pointed an H.O. scanner at the boy. The device was silent, and Starboard shook his head. "Clean," he said.

"Yes?" Dirisha said to the boy. He was an alley rodent, one of the permanent homeless who got by any way they could. Bright teeth flashed against the dark and dirty skin.

"Luggin' comfax straightshit tellit fern Zuri," the boy said. It had been years since Dirisha had spoken rat slang, and it had changed some—it changed constantly—but she got the gist. She said, "Lookin' Zuri."

"Callit cheap, showit hard."

Geneva was still against the wall, unseen by the boy, who had made no move to enter the room. He was too streetwise to go into a place he hadn't checked out before.

Geneva looked at Dirisha and raised one eyebrow.

"He wants proof of who I am," Dirisha said. "He's carrying a message for me." To the boy, she said, "What do you need, boy? What hard showit?"

"Catfang, callit."

Catfang? What the hell was that?

The boy gathered himself to run; Dirisha could see him tensing. If she didn't have the answer, he was supposed to take off. Catfang... catfang, cat—wait, she had it.

"Callit slicer," she said.

The boy's grin returned. "Gray shroudwrap say tellit turdtalk—'It's time.' "

Dirisha shook her head in disbelief. "Anybody got any loose stads?"

Port fished a plastic coin from his pocket. "I got a fiver."

"Give it to the boy."

Port scaled the five standard coin to the boy, who snatched it from the air easily. He rubbed his thumb over the disk rapidly, to test for the heat-threads that showed it was genuine, then nodded. "Nedit moutheyes askit Resh."

The boy took off.

Dirisha nodded at Geneva, who shut the door.

The blonde relaxed and shook her head. "What was that all about?"

"It's a message, from Khadaji. 'It's time,' he says."

"What?" That was from Rajeem, who had come back into the room.

"I think it means it's time we helped the Confed along on its fall," Dirisha answered. "I think we've just been asked to start a war."

"What?" Geneva added her voice to those of Rajeem and Beel.

"Khadaji sent the message, he had to. The boy wanted to know what *catfang* was. It's the knife Khadaji gave me. *Slicer*, in the local patois. Nobody else knows about that except Khadaji. And *shroudwrap* ought to be clear enough."

Rajeem said, "Khadaji? Here?"

"I doubt it," Dirisha said. "But Pen—the real Pen—could be. Or it could be any member of the Siblings. They have to be tied into this, somehow. It doesn't matter. Nobody but Khadaji knew to look for me here, and even if anybody else *did*, they wouldn't know about the knife."

"But—war? With what army?"

Dirisha's mind was already working. She smiled at Rajeem. "The matadors."

"They're spread all over the galaxy by now," Geneva said. "Just *contacting* them would be a major undertaking."

"That's the thing, hon. First thing we have to do is figure out how to call 'em."

Rajeem shook his head. "You're *serious* about this!"

"Hey, don't worry about us, Rajeem. You're Khadaji's handpicked leader. After we win, you've got to run the show."

"You're crazy."

Dirisha smiled. "Well. It's something to do."

## NINE

AFTER MASSEY HAD FINISHED his report, Wall stood mute for a time, staring at nothing. He had known; maybe he hadn't wanted to acknowledge it to himself, but he had known.

To Massey, Wall said, "You have documentation?"

Massey glanced down at the flatscreen in his hand. "Yes, sir."

"Logged into a computer?"

"Only my portable, my Lord Factor." He extended the device toward Wall. It was a standard reader, as long as a man's hand from fingertips to wrist, slightly wider than a palm. That such a small thing could hold such infamy was unbelievable. The plastic should burst asunder, spewing the tainted viral/molecular brains like a rotten fruit full of gut flies.

Wall took the flatscreen and hefted it. "You have done well, Massey. I consider the matter of Khadaji balanced."

"You are too kind, my lord."

"Doubtless, to my friends. Not to my enemies." Wall stared at the small computer as he continued to speak. "No one is to know of this matter. All your electronic sources are to be wiped; all your... organic sources are to be put to brainscan and this portion of their memories... deleted. Call on Legal, ask for Referee Dim Sû Leh—she will arrange the necessary documents for the scans. Have the subjects taken to my personal simadam for the procedure."

"Yes, my lord."

"You are a most loyal fellow, Massey. What is your current rank?"

"SG-1, my lord."

"You are promoted. What is the grade for Sub-chief of Imperial Security?"

"M-my lord?"

"Never mind. I will have it arranged. You are now Sub-chief of Imperial Security, detached to my personal service."

Massey stood silent, too stunned to reply. Wall gave him a practiced, false smile. "I reward loyalty, Massey. You would do well to remember that."

Massey found his voice. "I-I never doubted it, my lord."

"Good. Run along now and attend to that matter I requested, if you would be so kind."

"At once, my lord."

"And stop calling me my lord. You must call me Marcus. My friends are allowed that."

"Yes, my—yes, Marcus."

When Massey had gone, Wall sat into his orthopedia and thumbed the portable computer into active mode. The flat-screen cast a small holographic display above its surface, a list of files. Wall adjusted the control that enlarged the print, picked a file, and called it up. He began to read.

Three hours later, when he blinked away the vestiges of the reading trance, the tears streamed freely down Wall's face. Oh, to be tricked so! To be made the fool, to be laughed at! His grief nearly consumed him, but it was tempered, abated by another emotion nearly as powerful: rage. Payment would be made for this; it would be made in dear coin, an expense the tricksters could not begin to imagine. They were going to be sorry. Beyond measure.

\* \* \*



Seated in a small office in the Holy City Business Complex, Emile Khadaji began his campaign.

Before he had been Pen the teacher, he had been Khadaji the resistance—and Khadaji the pub owner. Fourteen years before that he had deserted from the Ground Forces, leaving his job as a combat trooper. Between the days of being a soldier and starting his one-man war, he had been a student, a smuggler, a dealer in illegal goods, and finally, a rich and mostly-honest businessman. He had developed a medium-sized fortune during those years after Maro and before Greaves. He had used a small part of his money for the school; he still had better than ten million standards free money left, with perhaps twice that much in business assets scattered through twenty planets and five wheel worlds. Now it was time to use the power that money represented.

On a coded White Radio line, set up with the best industrial scrambler available, Khadaji began to make his calls.

\* \* \*

"Yes, Hemet, it's Roj Antoch. I have a galaxy-wide campaign for our agency. Yes, I have the Confed authorization, I'll have a copy of it stat-flexed to you. We're pushing a biography, pop-read, with holoproj vid tie-in. Due out in six months, but they want a big push. The title? *Emile Antoon Khadaji: The Man Who Never Missed*. That's right, him. Yes, I know it's not particularly bright of the Confed, but I have the authorization. Right. Get our best people on it, right away. I'll have the start-up copy sent with the stat-flex of the Confed okay. Yes. We're talking three million initially, supersaturation, stat. Our clients want everybody in the galaxy to know about this book within a few days. Good, Hemet. I knew I could depend on you."

\* \* \*

There was no legitimate Confederation authorization, of course, only a very good forgery, courtesy of another Khadaji contact. Nor was there to be a book or vid. That didn't matter. By the time the Confed pinned the agency, it would be too late. The myth would be too tall to shoot down. Hemet would be covered, Khadaji would see to that as best he could.

\* \* \*

"Mease? Yar, it's Cyclone Milla. No, not dead yet. Busy the last seven or eight years. You still in the biz? Good. I've got an order for you. For Ago's Moon. What? Yar, I know there's a war going on there, what do you think, I want a load of foodstuffs? Listen up, I need five thousand spetsdöds and a

thousand rounds of Spasm each. Yar, that's what I said. And I need five thousand canisters of emetic gas. Standard Oxyemetine should be good enough. Yar, B.I. if you can't get Standard. And two thousand expulsive carthar-tensmus bombs. Yar, I know it'll stink. No, I wouldn't want the cleaning bill, either. No. No Parkers. Spetsdöds, puke-gas, and diarrhea bombs, that's all. And don't tell me what retail is, I know you ain't paying for any of it. I'll go six hundredths on a stad. Fifteen? Forget it. I'll get in touch with Spartang. I might go eight, just for old times' sake. No. Twelve is too much. Ten? Okay. You got it."

\* \* \*

The leaders of the resistance on Ago's Moon were about to get a ship full of help against the Confed. They'd also get a communication about the time the non-lethal weapons arrived: *Compliments of Emile Antoon Khadaji – I'm with you.*

\* \* \*

Over the next three days, Khadaji made a dozen similar calls. He also started rumors, to be fueled by paid sub-rosa advertising:

The Confed was going to break up any religion with over five million adherents.

The Confed was going to double the galactic income tax.

The Confed was brain wiping all major felons and using them for illegal genetic research.

Before he was done, Khadaji hoped to have half the galaxy believing that the Confed was going to rape everybody's mother and sister and then devour the resulting babies....

\* \* \*

"Yes, this is Father Dank Nootna calling. Thank you, my family endures, Praise the Eternal. I have word of a Confederation plot, Holy Mistress. The Inspectors of Doctrine are planning to poison the Holy Mistresses, while pretending to observe during the upcoming Eternal Light Festival. Yes, Mistress, it is just as you have always suspected. No, I spoke to no one else of this. I am well aware that many of the Divine do not have your powers of observation, Holy Mistress. Certainly. I will speak of it to no one. Praise the Eternal that one so vigilant as you exists to protect those less on their guards than you, dear Holy Mother...."

\* \* \*

Some of what he did and said grated on Khadaji, but those angers and rages he awoke had a deserving target. The Confed had ruled with fist and gun. It was about to be repaid in kind.

The dinosaur's time was past; it needed to know.

\* \* \*

Once again the six matadors sat around a table, planning treason.

Insanity, Rajeem called it, but it was not quite that. Risky, yes, dangerous, but very logical, given the goal.

"Think about it, Rajeem," Dirisha said. "How else could we contact them all? We don't know where all the matadors are. Eventually, I figure most of them will try and contact each other, using the drops we learned about in school. But even then, they'll be careful—if somebody is captured by the Confed, those drops will be known pretty soon. So the only way is to go directly to them."

"You could all get killed trying it."

Dirisha held Rajeem's hand and smiled at him. "Hon, the Confed *wants* us, remember? We are all guilty of de facto treason, just by being who we are. We could get killed by walking into the local pub. Besides, we're good at what we do. When you get to be a member of the best bodyguard corps ever, you learn how to attack as well as defend. The place will be guarded, sure, but not nearly as well as the prison Khadaji was in."

"As I recall, you didn't free him."

"We would have, he'd have stuck around. We were prepared."

"I still think it's too great a risk."

Dirisha nodded. He loved her, he was afraid for her, she could understand that. She felt that way about him, and about Geneva. Maybe even a little that way about Khadaji. But Rajeem was an intellectual before he'd become an activist; he didn't know what she knew. Dirisha had tested herself against death at least a hundred times. If she had allowed fear to paralyze her, she would have died during those early years of playing the Musashi Flex. She hadn't been afraid then; she wasn't afraid now. It was a risk, but not one resting on pure chance. She had certain skills which put the odds in her favor.

Sleel slapped Rajeem lightly on the back. "If we're still around after the Confed turns belly up, probably we'll be taking orders from you," Sleel said. "But until then, we go with what Dirisha says. She knows what she's doing. We trust her."

Around the table, the other matadors nodded or smiled in agreement.

Rajeem sighed, and turned to his wife. "What are we going to do? They're all crazy."

\* \* \*

The spiral Sb called the Milky Way was by no means completely explored, but even the human and mue inhabited portion of it was too large for slower-than-light communications. White Radio—a misnomer, for it was neither invented by Desmond White nor was it radio—was the most efficient means yet devised by men. White got the credit because he supplied the research lab and funding; the device itself was the creation of several teams of physicists, electronicists, and biologists, as well as assorted engineers, military types, and even psychics. To understand exactly what White Radio did required several advanced degrees, an IQ nearing high genius, and intuitive abilities rivaling those of mystical seers. Mathematics aside, the relatively simple explanation was that the machineries somehow detected hitherto undetected subatomic particles called impious chronons—of which there were three types: eclectic, reverse entropic, and pan-neurotic—focused, transmitted, received and managed to somehow attach meaning to these invisible particles. The scientists had called the prototype the A-17 Chronometric/E-RE-PN Impiopic Particle Acceleration/Reception Augmenter, which was why it quickly came to be known as White Radio.

That Dirisha knew all this was due to research she and the other five matadors had done, in preparation for their planned undertaking to contact the other matadors. She also knew that while White Radio had a theoretically unlimited range, in practical terms anything over a hundred light-years was yet to be accomplished. For reasons no one had yet determined, communication at longer distances took less time than shorter spaces. At five LY, there was a nine second lag; at thirty LY, the lag was only two seconds. Mostly, the system worked, but there were problems. Visual transmissions were possible, but only in shades of gray. Color augmentation was added at the receiving end, but it left something to be desired—people sometimes looked like ancient, tinted, flat-photographs. In its own way, White Radio was much like the early days of terran radio and television: useful and interesting, but less than perfect.

White Radio was expensive, but widespread. There were system nets, for commercial and industrial communications, and there was even a galactic net. It didn't cover the galaxy, of course, but it did reach most of the human

worlds and wheelworlds. It was Confed controlled, used for entertainment, propaganda, commercial advertising, and education.

If she couldn't locate each of the hiding matadors individually, Dirisha reasoned, she would just have to send them all a message at the same time. The plan, like all good plans, was simple: she and the other five matadors would take over the galactic net broadcast station.

## TEN

REVENGE, IT WAS SAID, was a supper best served and eaten cold, in order to savor it fully. Wall knew this, for he had taken such dishes many times during his career. But there were times when a meal still warm had more appeal; this was one of those times, while Wall's ire raged impotently within the hot cage of his anger. Drawing it out over months or years would leave it with him too long. He would lance it like a festering sore, and be done with it. His solutions, in any event, were not final. With his initial irritation spent, he could reflect more upon further additions in time to come.

"Minister Miyamoto and Nichole have arrived," Cteel's disembodied voice said quietly, almost as if the computer could somehow sense Wall's simmering purpose and feared to arouse it.

"Scan them for weapons and admit them."

A moment later, the minister and Nichole entered Wall's sanctum. Wall smiled benignly at the pair and gestured for them to be seated.

"Hi, Marcus," Nichole said, smiling happily.

"So very nice to see you again, Marcus," Miyamoto the elder said.

Wall had turned over a thousand variations of how to begin and finally had settled on one of the simpler ones. He didn't feel like playing fugue.

"I know," Wall said. "I know all about your game."

Nichole looked puzzled. "Game, Marcus?"

Wall pulled his gaze away from the girl to look at her "father." Miyamoto had the grace to sigh and acknowledge the comment with a resigned nod.

"What game, Marcus?" Nichole persisted. She looked a little nervous, now.

Wall's simmering rage boiled up. "What game, you little bitch? Why, the game of Fool the Factor! The game of illusion, slut!"

"Marcus," Miyamoto began, "I—I—"

"Shut up," Wall said, regaining control of himself. "You will address me as 'my lord' and you will not speak unless I direct it, do you understand?"

"Y-y-yes, my lord."

"The same goes for you, Nichole."

"But Marcus –"

"Another word and you will die. Painfully."

Nichole shut up.

"Why, Miyamoto? That's what I want to know. Why?"

The minister had begun to sweat. He wiped at his face with an unsteady hand. "P-power, my lord. You have more than any man; to be your friend is to bask in your reflected glow, moon to your sun. A public lunch with you is worth the influence to change the lives of millions."

"And so you would be my friend at the price of tricking me." It was not a question. Miyamoto had the sense to not answer.

Wall turned back toward Nichole. "And you?"

The girl shrugged, and that single gesture seemed to age her by a decade. Or was that only because Wall knew her true age? She was long past twelve. Fifteen years past. The "girl" he had taught so lovingly, lifting her from her innocence, was a woman nearer thirty than even twenty, much less twelve.

"Money," she said. "Enough to spend for the rest of my life, to live in luxury."

"Nichole Elesas Duvul," Wall said, reciting the name he had learned from Massey. "A common whore, treated with physiologic retardants to delay puberty, given biosurg hymens, what—weekly? daily? for each new customer?"

"Not a common whore," Nichole said. "I was saved for the perverts who love children."

"Shut up!" Wall took a moment to calm himself. He would not allow her to anger him visibly. He would *not*!

"So you and the President's minister developed this scheme to gain my friendship."

"It was his idea," Nichole said. "He made it attractive to me."

"How foolish you must have thought me," Wall said. "How you must have laughed at my ignorance."

The woman-not-woman shrugged again. "You think you're special, but you aren't. There are hundreds, thousands, maybe millions like you. Sick. I pandered to it, but I didn't create it."

"But you stayed twelve, a dewy virgin, gulling people who loved what they thought you were."

"I fill a need. I'm very good at it. Better somebody my age than a real child –"

"Your opinion is noted," Wall said, his voice cold. "It is wrong. When the fortunate children who have been my friends grow older and leave, they are better off. Richer, wiser... awakened. Awakened in a manner much better than most of them would be otherwise."

"You would see it that way," Nichole said.

"That's because it *is* that way. We serve each other's needs, my flowers and I."

Nichole shook her head slowly. That infuriated Wall. How dare she patronize him! But he had his anger in check now, and his was the final word.

To Miyamoto, Wall said, "You will resign as minister immediately. I have secured a position for you as a beast-keeper in my stables in the SA grasslands, near the Equator. It will be your job to clean the stalls of the elephants and cloned mastodons. Any objections to this?"

Miyamoto, who had never done any labor more strenuous than walking a few hundred meters, paled. "N-no, my lord."

"I thought not."

Wall turned back to stare at Nichole. "As for you, I care not for your opinion of my character, only that you engaged in trickery and deceived me. You pretended to be that which you are not; you took advantage of my affection, of my... love. I could say I knew it all along, but that would be a lie. I was hurt when I discovered it. So your punishment must be greater than his, even though it was his idea. He did not lay with me, you did.

"Because you have spent so much time as a child, you have missed your adulthood; therefore, it is only fitting that you catch up on lost time quickly. You will be given drugs to counteract your false youth. My biologists in Brisbane have discovered some fascinating things about aging. As certain medicines will delay, so will certain medicines accelerate the process. You will be taken there for... treatment. For every month that passes, you will age three dozen years. In a few days, you will look your true age. It is somewhat hard on bone structure, I am told. In two months, you will be middle-aged. In three months, you will be old. In four or maybe five months..." Wall trailed off, not speaking of death. With care, a person might live to a century and a half, perhaps three-quarters. Nichole would hardly have access to that kind of care, unless he allowed it. He was considering his choice as to that.

Induced progeria would hardly be a worthwhile punishment if Nichole decided to suicide, or had a fatal accident too soon....

Cteel said, "The guards are here."

"Good," Wall said. Massey's men. "Scan and admit them."

To Miyamoto and Nichole, he said, "Your documentation was good, but not good enough. It was, I must admit, a clever idea. But I check things. Everything. As closely as needed."

The two guards entered the room. Wall looked at the false beauty of the girl-woman before him for a final time before he spoke. "Good-bye, Nichole. The next time I see you, why, I expect I'll hardly recognize, you will have grown so."

\* \* \*

Khadaji walked the streets of Shtotsanto, the Holy City. This part of the world of Koji lay sheathed in winter, with a dozen centimeters of new snow down over the two meters of old. His breath made fog in the crisp air. He recalled walks in the snow of a far world, where Pen had taught him the intricacy of pubtending. Those days seemed a thousand years past—slogging across the countryside on webbed footgear, listening to Pen. He had come a long way; physically, mentally, emotionally.

Now, Khadaji walked alone, wondering how active his role should be, now that his plan had gotten as far as it had. His disciples, the matadors, no longer needed him to direct them. Oh, they might think it so, but he knew better. He had manipulated them, changed them, and ultimately, forced them into a position of opposition against the Galactic Confederation. The only way the matadors could ever hope to be free again was to rebel and overthrow the Confed. To be passive meant eventual capture and death for most of them.

There were times when he lay awake in the darkness and thought about what he had done, about the lives he had touched and shaped. Dirisha had called him on it. What was it she had said? That the only thing he cared about was the game? The twisted manipulations he performed? She was wrong, of course. He had the longer vision, he could see the larger picture, and while what he did had regrettable aspects, it was necessary. But sometimes, late at night, when he was tired and his vision was not so clear, he wondered. Could she be just the smallest bit right? Was that aspect of it sometimes more important than the end? In any venture, the means versus the end had to be considered. His means had been drastic, harsh at times, and had caused pain



to many. He had stolen six months each from over two thousand Confed troopers—a thousand man-years—by darting them into spasmodic comas. He had made a hundred matadors into traitors. He had lied, smuggled, and stolen—all in the name of a mystical vision he'd had on a battlefield. In the end, if it went the way he had worked so long and hard for it to go, it *would* be worth it. The end, in this case, would justify the means. It did that, sometimes. But somewhere along the way he had lost his godlike surety; he had had to think instead of feel, and the monkey brain was never as quiet as the zen mind.

He was only vaguely aware of the direction in which he had been walking. The streets, despite their load of snow and sharp tang of winter air, also had more than a few pedestrians. Perhaps others wrestled with ethical or moral problems, as did he. He smiled mechanically at passersby.

Rounding a corner, Khadaji found himself staring at the small military outpost the Confed had in the Holy City. No place was totally immune from such outposts. Unconsciously, he must have directed his walk to this place, he felt. He looked at the structure.

The military compound was similar to dozens of others he had seen. A high, thick wall surrounded several large structures. The construction was of local stone, rather than prefab foam; armed guards stood behind a metal mesh gate and suicide-attack barriers designed to stop a large vehicle. A place designed to keep the barbarians out, Khadaji thought. A fortress. He remembered a line from one of his early texts about such places, and how useless they were against the will of the populace. Convincing people that these places should not be was all that was needed. There weren't enough soldiers to resist any kind of popular uprising, there never had been. And walls, historically, had never kept oppressors safe from those they considered barbarians.

Khadaji nodded to himself as he stared at the Confed outpost, His resolve was strengthened. He might be working off his karmic portion of all this for a dozen lifetimes to come, if the rebirthers were right. Well, so be it.

He turned away from the symbol of that which he fought. He had set it up, had worked a great portion of his life for it; now, he could sit back and watch it all, if he wanted. He had done his part, he had fought the good fight, he was entitled to rest.

No. There was too much to be done to slack off now. The active part wasn't over yet, not by a long shot.

\* \* \*

Getting into the Galactic Broadcast System studio would hardly be a major tactical problem, according to the research the matadors had done. Visitors were allowed – large, guided tours, even – and each of the six bodyguards had made at least one circuit. The problem lay in finding a way to smuggle their weapons in, and then moving quickly enough without raising the alarms. It wouldn't be necessary to take and hold the entire station; that was good, because it was unlikely without dozens of trained people. No, they only needed a single studio out of the hundreds, and a few minutes to do what Dirisha had in mind.

The plan was made, and it seemed sound. Rajeem wasn't happy, but even he could see the logic of it.

The main studio was on Mason, the first extra-system world settled by men. It had been called Alpha Point when the initial settlers had arrived, an almost Earth-type world orbited by three moons, one of which was dome-habitable. Mason was an old planet, in terms of inhabitants, and boasted a population of over four billion, spread over three large continents and a series of tropical islands. While large civilization had its discontents, blending into the diverse population was not one of them. The matadors had been on the world for two weeks and had encountered no trouble whatsoever. On a bright, summery morning, they moved.

\* \* \*

Bork went in first, with Mayli. They passed through the weapons detector easily, since both were unarmed. Mayli carried a tiny confounder which had been custom-designed to disable the detector. She had no trouble placing the confounder within range, because nobody noticed her. She wore trendy, but dull clothes, currently the prevailing middle-class fashion in the capital city of Gaines. Bork, on the other hand, wore thinskins which looked as if they had been anodized onto his body. As big and as muscular as he was, Bork was noticed even if he wore clothes designed to hide his size; when he chose to emphasize it, everybody noticed Bork's massive frame. People would stop what they were doing and stare. Mayli would have had to work to draw attention.

Red followed, with six spetsdöds hidden under his dress jacket. The detector ignored him.

Sleel went after Red, his pair of hand weapons hidden in a tape canister.

Geneva carried six sets of gray orthoskins with red holographic patches on the shoulders in plain sight past the security guards, smiling happily at them. Her spetsdöds were under the clothing. No one asked her what the costumes were for; such things were common.

Dirisha went last, her swirling skirt hiding her smuggled weapons. She stopped to ask the guard for directions to the fresher, and while occupying the man's attention, allowed Sleel to retrieve the hidden confounder. It wouldn't do to have anybody else smuggling arms into the studio.

There was a program for teaching esoteric languages being transmitted to a holding line on the net, from a small studio on the third level of the giant GBS building. They had chosen the studio because it only used three technicians for the cast: an announcer, a camerawoman, and a technical director. The last man sat in a control booth, mostly to monitor automatic equipment, occasionally reaching to touch a control, tuning this or that. Bork had learned the job from an expensive, but fast, teaching-virus. Geneva learned the operation of a photomutable gel camera the same way. Dirisha would take the announcer's place, while Red kept watch at the studio door.

Dirisha glanced at her chronometer. All six of the matadors had set their timetellers to the same second. That was very important during an operation like this. Sleel and Mayli would be changing the main transmission program complex in nine minutes, thirty-three. Everybody had to be ready by then.

The third floor, assigned to the dullest of programs, was quiet. Dirisha met Bork at the corner, and Red and Geneva at the door to the studio. The normal transmission from the studio was to begin in six minutes. Dirisha nodded.

Bork opened the outer door; the others scooted inside. Bork then shoved at the latched inner door to the control room. The thin plastic lock had never been designed to withstand the strength of a man who could bench press three hundred kilos.

The director didn't even have time to look startled before Bork shot him. The spetsdöd's cough was loud in the small room.

The announcer and camerawoman joined the director in sleep seconds later. Quickly, the four matadors dressed in their orthoskins. Dirisha looked at her chronometer.

"Five minutes, three," she said.

\* \* \*

"Five minutes, three," Mayli said.

Sleel nodded. They stood outside the emergency exit to the station's transmission program room. Sleel bent to place the popper against the door's lock. He thumbed the timer for a five-second delay. Mayli backstepped quickly, and Sleel followed her. After the popper blew, they would have maybe three or four seconds before the techs recovered from their shock and started to move. When the matadors stepped into the room, they would both draw an imaginary line down the middle; Mayli would take the right, Sleel the left side of that line.

The popper went off. The sound of the blast rolled past Sleel and Mayli, who were already moving by the time the door swung open.

Mayli went first, Sleel right after her.

There were nine techs—five in Mayli's sector, four in Sleel's. Mayli darted three of hers before they had moved from their form-chairs. One was already standing, and Mayli's fourth shot caught the woman in midstep. The last one was reaching for an alarm on his board when the spetsdöd's dart bit his wrist and stole his consciousness.

All of Sleel's targets were also down. Sleel grinned at Mayli.

"Let's get set up," Mayli said.

They moved.

## ELEVEN

THE BALL HAD EXPLODED on his side of the airwall, so it seemed. Wall stared at the holographic image of his spy, a picture carried across the light-years by a special channel of the galactic net. For once, the color was almost right; his agent looked nearly the same as Wall remembered her.

"And your conclusion?"

The woman shrugged. "The revolution on Ago's Moon was history until the rebels suddenly came up with new armaments and a rallying cry: 'Khadaji is with us!' Now things are in full flame again. The Confederation forces will win, of course, but currently there are five thousand or so troopers either locked in spasm, engaging in projectile vomiting, or crapping all over themselves. We aren't talking about a few malcons any more, my Lord Factor, we are talking about a full-scale war. Every time a Confed unit shoots it out with a rebel group, the rebels gain a hundred new converts for each man they lose."

Wall stared at the holoproj, unspeaking. He was a student of history, he knew how empires fell. The Confed had grown fat upon the sumptuous banquet of a tightly-controlled populace. Now, the lean and hungry had invited themselves to dinner.

The spy, after waiting politely for lag and hearing nothing from Wall, said, "So, my conclusions are simple. We either tie up half the Confederation Ground Forces in this system for a long and nasty guerrilla campaign, or we sit down and negotiate with the leaders of the rebel alliance. I'd recommend the latter."

"Your recommendation is noted," Wall said. "Someone will contact you through official channels soon. It's a dis-com."

Wall turned away from the fading image. This was how it began. Today, it was Ago's Moon, tomorrow, some other back-spiral world would chaff at the Confed's yoke; a rock would be pitched at a nervous trooper, he would let loose with his carbine, and another underground would be born with the death of its first martyr. Some other world would follow, then more would see that as their cue. Ago's Moon might be contained with fire and steel, but there weren't enough soldiers to contain them all. Negotiations would slow the revolts, for a time, but eventually, those standing in harm's way would realize that the Confed was a toothed, but aging tiger. It couldn't eat all of them. Enough people could kill even a tiger.

That was how it went. Leaves falling from a tree in autumn, first one planet, then another, until all were eventually gone....

Damn! It was not unexpected, but it was too soon. He had figured another fifteen, maybe twenty years before it began in earnest. But something had happened to speed it up. Or, rather, *someone*.

Khadaji.

Wall considered his options. There might still be enough time. Khadaji was dangerous, but if he could be caught before he did too much more damage, if he could be made to recant publicly and in great detail, maybe it could still be delayed. Ago's Moon would have to feel the Confed's wrath, maybe even to the point of major destruction, an expensive undertaking; still, the cost would have to be balanced against the future. Yes. That was the way to go –

"Marcus?" Cteel's electronic voice cut into Wall's thoughts.

"Yes?"

"Your show is about to be broadcast."

"Ah. Thank you, Cteel. Put it on."

His show. How amusing that was. A short program on the training of Confederation Factors, a teaching piece, actually, but one he took great delight in producing. He was never on camera, of course, but Wall was instrumental in all phases of the operation, from choosing the handsome actor who represented him, to deciding which products were allowed to associate themselves with the program. There was, by its nature, a limited audience for "Facts for Factors," but it was sent galaxywide because it amused Wall to have it done.

Stopping the imminent destruction of the Galactic Confederation could wait for an hour. Wall moved to his orthopedia and made himself comfortable as the opening for his program swirled into holoprojic life. He smiled.

His smile faded as the beginning of the program was abruptly interrupted. A strong-faced black woman wearing gray orthoskins stood where Wall's actor should stand. She sported a pair of spetsdöds. What was this? Some technical glitch? An entertainment vid?

The woman started to speak, and Wall shortly realized it was neither glitch nor fictional play.

\* \* \*

A shipment of weaponry was on its way to Nazo, in the Nazo System; a second ship would follow shortly, to land on Maro, Nazo's sister world. And instructions for making bombs from common chemicals were on their way to Kon-trau'lega, the prison planet in the same system.

The inhabitants of all three worlds had more than their share of grievances to resolve with the Confederation; they were being aided by the Man Who Never Missed.

Khadaji spent a final hour in the zendo, taking in the sights and smells of the temple, enjoying himself. He had put into action most of the plans he had for stirring the volatile soup he had spent years creating. There were several places he needed to visit personally; he had done what he could long distance.

As he started to leave, Khadaji saw a pair of monks standing in front of a holoproj near the entrance to the temple. Funny, even here one could not escape such things —

He stopped, to stare at the projection. The unit was small and the figure was only a quarter life-size, but he had no trouble recognizing Dirisha. He listened to her words, and smiled. His best student had not failed him.

There was one less place he would have to visit.

\* \* \*

Bork nodded, and said, "Go."

Working the camera, Geneva switched on the light that showed Dirisha the unit was now working.

Dirisha took a deep breath.

"Fellow matadors, I've got a couple things to tell you.

"First, Pen – Khadaji – has escaped from Confed custody. Actually, there are two of them, Pen and Khadaji, and as far as we know, they are both free and working. What they're working *at* is taking the Confed dinosaur out for a one-way walk. The Confed wants them dead, just like it does us. 'It's time,' Emile says, and I figure he's right, just like he always was. Unless we help make the beast extinct, it's only a matter of time until it catches us."

Dirisha paused, and smiled, then continued.

"I have to keep this short, so I'll get right to the point. It's them or us, gang. Pen set us up, and some of you might not like how he did it, but it's done. You can try and hide and pretend it didn't happen, or you can do what needs to be done. Remember what Emile did on Greaves. He was alone then, we aren't now. There are billions of people who are looking for leaders. So go and lead.

" 'It's time,' Emile says. He gave us the means, he taught us the why and how of it. The rest is up to us. Red and Bork and Sleel and Mayli and Geneva are with me, and we're not planning on hiding for the rest of our lives. The Man Who Never Missed is alive and with us. The Confed doesn't have a chance."

Dirisha grinned again. "Either way, take care of yourselves, gang. See you someday."

The light went out and Dirisha allowed herself to relax a little. "Okay?"

Bork said, "A little fast, but okay. Sleel and Mayli say it went out. Better we should take off." He looked at his chronometer.

"Tell them two minutes from now," Dirisha said.

Geneva moved from behind the camera and hugged the bigger woman. "You did good," Geneva said.

"Yeah, it *felt* pretty good. Let's get out of here."

\* \* \*

Sleel, laughing, came running down the hall, followed by Mayli. "Fantastic," he called. "You should have gone into entertainment, like I said."

Dirisha looked at her chronometer. "We can discuss careers later," she said. "Guards will be coming."

"Mayli and I took out three at the control room," Sleel said.

"No problems with the charges?"

"Planted and set for" – he glanced at his chrono – "just about –"

There came a muffled *boom* from behind them.

"... now," Sleel finished.

"Red?"

"I must be a couple of seconds slow –" he began. Then the lights in the hall blinked off. "Ah, there we go."

The emergency lights flicked on, allowing enough visibility to see, but not well. Just what the matadors wanted.

"Let's hit the door," Dirisha said.

They ran.

\* \* \*

There were two hundred people milling around in the lobby – those who had sense enough to use the stairs when the power failed. Panic hovered over the crowd; fear was thick in the air, though most of the people could not know what it was they were afraid of.

The six matadors charged into the crowd suddenly and gave the frightened mob a focus. There was no need to clear a path – lanes appeared as if by design. Nobody wanted to stand in front of the mysterious gray figures.

The glass wall at the building's front allowed sunlight inside. The guards were easy to see. The air filled with the sounds of *spetsdöds*, no louder than handclaps among the yells of the mob.

The hovering panic descended like a net cast over a school of fish. People began screaming and shoving.

Guards dropped. There were six – no, eight – down. Two or three dodged into the crowd. Bork got one. Geneva shot another. Then the six matadors were at the door, hustling through.

*Blam!* An explosion behind them, swallowed by screams. A hole the size of Dirisha's fist appeared in the thick glass door, half a meter from her head. Dirisha spun, searching for the source of the explosive rocket. She couldn't see the shooter –

Wait! A flare and second blast, there –! Not a uniformed guard, it was a business-type!



Mayli and Geneva and Red were outside; only Bork and Sleel were still behind Dirisha. As she swung her right spetsdöd around and shot the civilian, Sleel leaped into the air, twisting in a half circle.

"Sleel!"

Where Sleel's left arm had joined his shoulder there was now only bloody flesh and raw bone: his arm had been blown off by the rocket.

"Bork!"

"I got him, I got him!" Bork bent and scooped Sleel from the floor as might a man lifting a small child. He held Sleel's wound pressed against his own massive chest, to check the bleeding. Sleel's face was dead-white. Shock.

Dirisha opened up on the crowd, both spetsdöds on full auto. People fell like puppets with severed strings.

Bork ran past and outside, clutching Sleel.

Methodically, Dirisha reloaded her weapons. She opened up again, fanning twenty people into unconsciousness.

"Dirisha!" Red was pulling on her arm. "Come on!"

"Sleel's arm –"

"We haven't got time to look for it! Come on!"

Dirisha stared at the remains of the cowering crowd. She wished in that moment that she had loaded something other than shock-tox darts. She wished her darts were poison. Fatal poison.

"We've got to get Sleel to the medicator!"

That got through. Dirisha turned away from the lobby. Bork was already at the hopper with the others and Sleel. Dirisha ran. Don't you die, Sleel.

*Don't you fucking die!*

## PART TWO

Become the general and the enemy becomes your troops.

–MIYAMOTO MUSASHI

The injury that we do to a man must be such that we need not fear his vengeance.

–MACHIAVELLI

TWELVE

MASSEY STOOD STILL, outwardly impassive, but Wall could feel the man's nervousness. Just as well; he should be nervous. Everybody connected to Confederation power should feel skittish. Everybody with half a functional brain! Damn Khadaji and his home-grown rebels! That broadcast had gone out to tens of thousands of local stations all over the human and mue inhabited galaxy. Billions would have seen it live, more billions would have seen recordings of it. It was more than just a call to arms to the handful of bodyguards Khadaji had trained, it was an incitement to general war. Any half-baked dissident anywhere would take that short-but-deadly message to heart: Khadaji lives! There are more like him ready to lead you!

Most people wouldn't know, of course, just how much of a thorn Khadaji had been. A hundred such thorns might well poison the Confed beyond repair. Empires had fallen under less prodding; even if the Confed won, the cost would be tremendous. A pyrrhic victory, at best.

What could be done? At this stage, Wall wasn't sure. The only thing he could hope to do was cut off the head, and hope the body would wither. Catch Khadaji. Capture or kill these others, the one called Zuri, who had made the broadcast. He had her file; Massey knew her. He had said, "She's one of the best, Marcus. Maybe her girlfriend Geneva could outshoot her, but I wouldn't want to bet my life on the outcome, if it came to that. She was a Flex player, one of the best, even before Khadaji taught her."

"Could you defeat her?" Wall had asked.

Massey, like many men in his service, had great confidence in his ability to rise to any challenge. Wall had seen the doubt in his face, the knowledge before he had spoken. "I don't know. Maybe."

Wall turned away from his memory and faced Massey. "Go and find them for me, Massey. Take as many men as you need, spend as much as it takes, but find them. Destroy them."

Massey looked uncomfortable.

"Something?"

"My lord—Marcus, even if we do find Zuri and Echt and the others with them, that won't stop the rest of the matadors. I know them, I trained with them. Once they decide on a course of action, they'll go with it. There were almost a hundred graduates, and maybe thirty students not too far from leaving. We don't have any of them in custody."

"Do you have a better suggestion?"

Massey shook his head. "No. I just wonder how much good catching a few of them will do."

"Suppose you let me worry about the overall picture, Massey. You just do as you are told."

"Yes, Marcus."

Massey departed, and Wall walked back and forth, feeling the exquisite carpet under his bare feet. He could still win; still keep the perfect womb he had built for himself; still maintain the prestige he had earned. He controlled thousands of agents on the planets and wheel worlds, he could set them all to searching for these matadors. A rebel leader had to have followers; sooner or later they would expose themselves. Yes. It wouldn't be easy, naturally, but this was a high-stakes game, the highest. He could lose everything.

Wall smiled and rubbed his feet on the indigo and scarlet *tutch* wool. Well he would not lose everything. A man in his position had to be prepared for many possible futures. If it all fell apart tomorrow—it wouldn't, but if it somehow *did*—he would not wait around to be impaled on some barbarian's spear. He had his lines of retreat carefully laid. Money, places to hide, medics to change everything from his face to his brainwave patterns—he had all those things and more. The Confed could fall, but he did not have to fall with it. When the cosmic debris found gravity wells and settled, he would still command power. His hidden millions might be worthless or not, in the wake of galactic disaster, but there would always be value in certain items: weapons, precious stones, rare earths, and most of all, knowledge. Certain technologies would be worth kings' ransoms. He had all those things, waiting for him to command. When the new order rose, he would figure prominently in it. He was a survivor, he always had been. He always *would* be. It would only be a matter of time before he was back at apogee, where he belonged. Only a matter of time....

Ah, but that was only a worst-case scenario. Certainly it was nothing to overly concern himself with at this point. The game was young, there were still major moves to be made. One did not resign when one's opponent pushed his first pawn. Not when one was the best. Never.

\* \* \*

Khadaji wore a skinmask and an implanted confounder that altered his brainwave patterns. He carried identification that showed him to be a minor official from Jicha Mungo, the giant wheelworld orbiting Mtu, in the Bibi Arusi System. Such a man existed; his face was much like the face Khadaji

now wore; he, too, had left for a vacation a T.S. week past. Anyone attempting to check on Khadaji's background would find it very much in order. Boring, but in order. It was unlikely anyone would bother to check. The last place anyone would look for the Man Who Never Missed was on a Bender ship docking in high orbit over Earth.

Khadaji did not have the resources that Marcus Jefferson Wall had available; still, he was not without useful contacts. Wall was careful of those people who surrounded him, very careful, but Khadaji had started thinking about his moves years ago. He had two dependable spies only three or four people removed from the Factor who controlled the Confederation President. These moles had gone about their business without arousing suspicion for years, doing nothing to reveal their second employer. In fact, they did not know for whom they worked. A paramedical assistant in Wall's personal medic's office thought she fed her small tidbits to an ambitious New Zealand minister; a sanitation worker in Wall's building believed his information went to a major newsfax service. There was nothing obviously damaging or dangerous to Wall in the reports Khadaji had read, especially when taken singly. Taken together, however, a different picture emerged. Synergistic flows sometimes happened, and those were what brought Khadaji to Earth.

Khadaji arrived at the room he had booked, a small covered lanai buried among thousands just like it on the Big Island of Hawaii. He arrived in time for the morning eruption of the local volcano, Mauna Loa. From his lanai on the Kona Coast, he took a tourist hopper across the island. As they flew over the volcano, Khadaji watched the lava shoot high into the air. With his cheap holocamera, he took pictures. He was tourist among tourists, dressed in colorful local clothing, as invisible as it was possible to be. He looked like a man with absolutely nothing on his mind, save to enjoy his short but expensive vacation. The hopper turned back for Kona City, and the overcast on the east side of the island gave way to the tropical sun once again. Perpetual summer in paradise, they said. Khadaji allowed himself a small smile. The expensive skinmask did not hinder the movement, but if anyone noticed, they did not speak of it.

\* \* \*

"Steel?"

Dirisha spoke to the injured matador. He lay naked within the hyperbolic chamber of a Healy medicator, his eyes closed, his left side hidden under the shell of a Zigg-Roth generator. The wound was staunch, and the viral-

molecular electronics of the Zigg-Roth monitored and bathed the injury in complex proteins and enzymes under pressure. The arm was gone, but he was still alive.

Under the thick plastic dome, Steel's eyelids fluttered, and he opened them to look at Dirisha.

"Sleel?"

"Look, as long as I am dying, why don't you get in here with me? Might be your last chance. You wouldn't want to miss it."

Dirisha smiled and shook her head. "If I could open this thing without causing a problem, I would Sleel. Truly."

He grinned. "Shit. I ought to get my arm blown off more often."

Dirisha's face went grim. "It's not funny, Steel."

"It'll grow back, Dirisha." His tone matched hers. "And it's not your fault."

Geneva and Mayli came to stand next to Dirisha. Both the women touched her gently.

Sleel said, "Besides, while it's growing back, think of the reaction I'll get from women. I can be a war hero, for six months, at least."

Geneva grinned, but Dirisha's face remained solemn.

Bork strolled over and leaned against the machine. "You ruined a perfectly good uniform, you know," Bork said. "That much blood'll never come out."

"I'll buy you a new one. Uh, thanks, Bork."

"No problem. You're not supposed to litter in public places. I couldn't just leave you lying there."

The two men smiled at each other.

Dirisha turned away. "How can you two make jokes? A few centimeters to the right and Sleel's heart would have been punched out! It could have been any of you."

"Or you," Geneva said softly.

Dirisha turned back to look at her friends.

From the doorway, Red said, "You don't have a lock on living, Dirisha. That rocket could have found you just as well. That never dawned on you?"

Dirisha shook her head. "Sure, I know that –"

"Do you?" Mayli put in. "I don't think so. Or maybe it's just that you don't worry about yourself as much as you worry about us?"

"You aren't responsible for us," Geneva said. "We chose to be here."

"I know –"

Sleel rapped on the inside of the medicator. Dirisha moved closer.

"They're right, Dirisha." Sleel's amplified voice sounded sleepy. "We wanted to be someplace else, we'd be there. You lead, 'cause that's what you're good at. But you can't take any blame for what happens to us. We chose it."

Dirisha regarded Sleel. Yeah, he was right, they all were. Logically, rationally, she knew that. But emotionally it was different. She could admit that to herself, finally. They were her *family*. More than her own biological family had ever been. They were trusting her to do the right thing, to take care of them. At least that's the way she felt. Felt, rather than thought. Gut, not brain. What she wanted to do was take them to some far place, out of the Confed's deadly reach; there, they would all live happily ever after, like in the mytho stories she'd read as a child. That was impossible, of course. There wasn't any place the Confed couldn't reach, no truly safe haven. Sure, there were hidey-hotes, temporary sanctuaries. They could become monks and live in a religious complex. Change their names and faces and hope to stay out of trouble. But as they stood, they were doomed. Unless...

Unless the Confed was too busy worrying about its own safety to bother with them. Unless the Confed toppled like a clipped tree, shorn off and dead.

It might not be possible. And even if it were, there would be risks. Next time, it might not be something as simple to fix as an arm. One of them might *die*.

That was a thought Dirisha didn't want to have. There was no way around it, though. And the worst part of it was, she had to put them in jeopardy, she had to take that risk, if they were going to survive as what they had become.

She hated Khadaji for that, just as she loved him for bringing her to the point where she could care so much. The man was ruthless, and yet, she was much better for having known him. And his goals were good. Ah, damn! Why had it come to this? Love wasn't all joy, she was discovering. There was pain attached to it, and risk. On balance she wouldn't have it any other way, but gods, sometimes it was so fucking *hard*! She took a deep breath and looked at the matadors.

"Okay. Okay. I get your point."

They nodded and grinned, her friends, all save Sleel, who had fallen asleep inside his plastic and steel medical robot.

THIRTEEN

THE WAR ON AGO'S MOON was going badly for the Confederation Ground Forces. They weren't losing, but neither could it be said that they were winning. The fanatics had a demigod on their side, in spirit, at least, and the name of Khadaji was like a mantra to them.

Wall sat in his orthopedia and brooded. The resistance to Confed policy was not confined to Ago's Moon.

The engineers on 313-C, unofficially known as Ohshit, in the Nu System, had shut down production of the extension biologicals.

Baszel, in the Ceti System, had gotten its first taste of war—hundreds of indents had stormed the five-quad outpost and sent the naked troopers into the broiling summer sun.

On Mwanamamke, in Bibi Arusi, the historically restless student population had shut down all university operations by the expedient of firebombing the main records and operations computer in the capital, Chokaa.

In the wheel world of Chiisai Tomadachi, dissidents had drugged the water supply with long-acting psychoerotics, which had thousands madly copulating for a week, effectively stopping nearly all scheduled work on-world.

Wall sighed. It was time to take a personal hand. President Kokl'u was running hither and yon, trying to look calm, urging for a return to order, but that was a wasted effort. Those who knew paid little attention to the man. Everyone was waiting for some kind of sign from Marcus Jefferson Wall, the *real* power. He must, he knew, make a personal appearance in a place of prominence, and drop hints as to what he planned to *do* about all this turmoil. The people, bless their little micron brains, needed to be reassured.

There was a local festival, the Brisbane Revival, to be held soon. Very well, he would attend the thing, allow himself to be seen in the proper places, speaking to the proper people, and those who knew could feel less threatened. For a time, at least. Order needed to be maintained, for as long as possible.

Wall sighed again. Yes. That he would appear publicly would indicate the seriousness of the problem, and at the same time, ameliorate it. He would arrange it now.

\* \* \*

A man wearing the face of a minor official from Jicho Mungo caught a shuttle from Hawaii to Brisbane. The man was outdoor-tanned, wore a

brightly colored jumpsuit, and carried a camera, all of which marked him as a tourist. That he traveled on the night shuttle also marked him as someone without wealth or privilege, and therefore no one to spend any concern upon. He was a lowrank among many lowranks, and no one gave him a second look.

In Brisbane, the Confederation capital and largest city upon the Australian continent, Khadaji continued to behave as a tourist. He visited the local places of historical import: he took holographs of Queens Park; rode the antique hovercraft to the North Stradbroke Island Ape Preserve, and returned to the mainline by way of the Moreton Island Powered Bridge; he spent an afternoon touring the University of Australia, at Toowoomba.

When he was certain he was not followed or monitored, Khadaji removed his skinmask and colorful clothing, and wearing the white orthoskins of a medical orderly, approached the complex that catered to Factor Marcus Jefferson Wall. He bore identification provided him by a woman who worked at the complex as a paramedical assistant, altered to show his face and EEG patterns. He had no trouble gaining admittance. Unless someone of importance was being medically treated or observed, the security of the complex was only good, not superb. The fake identity existed in the proper computer, and the ID tag passed the scanner. Khadaji was not armed.

The woman who thought she provided information for a New Zealand minister was within, but she was not the reason Khadaji had come. No, there were more important matters on his mind. In this kind of conflict, a man was only as good as his information. There was something very important to be learned here. Learned, and perhaps, used.

\* \* \*

"Somebody has stepped on one of our secondary caltrops," Geneva said.

Dirisha stood on the room's narrow balcony, staring out through the dirt-streaked plastic bubble at the disarray of Flat Town. She turned to look at Geneva. "What?"

The blonde nodded. "Red is backwalking it."

Red sat at the computer terminal, talking in a low voice to the instrument.

"Red?"

"Hold on a second," he replied. "No, not you, computer. Let's have it. Out loud."

The wash of color over the terminal was joined by a soft electronic voice. "Reporting," the computer said. "Inquiry was made at drop-block prime by



identity/verified Confederation agents seeking the bearer of Galactic Traveltik 69-644-5009-Beta."

"Hold," Red said. He looked at Dirisha.

"That's mine," she said. "Under an old pseudonym. They shouldn't know it."

Red nodded. "Looks like they do. Continue, computer."

"Upon denial of knowledge of said bearer's whereabouts, the block computer was physically assailed and rendered inert."

"No surprise," Dirisha said. "Was a visual record of the assailants transmitted, computer?"

"Negative."

"Continue your narrative."

"Nine-point-six-three-nine hours after the assault on drop-block prime, drop-block secondary was approached by identity-verified Confederation agents seeking the bearer of Galactic Traveltik 69-644-5009-Beta."

Sleel picked that moment to wander into the room. He was pale, and the left sleeve of his orthoskin was empty; he wasn't wearing his temporary prosthetic arm, but he looked healthy enough for a man who had lost a limb to an explosive rocket only a few weeks before. "What's up?" Sleel asked.

Dirisha waved him to silence.

"How'd they find the secondary?" That came from Mayli, who was listening from the bed nearby. Bork lay asleep next to her.

"From the tight-beam transmission of the primary to the secondary," Dirisha said. "They must have had somebody good with tracers with them."

"Tells us something, doesn't it?" Geneva put in.

Dirisha nodded. "Continue, computer."

"Upon denial of knowledge of said bearer's whereabouts, the secondary computer was physically assailed, triggering the self-destruction circuit and rendering the unit inert."

"Yeah, inert all over the walls," Sleel said. "And with a grenade of Spasm darts for anybody stupid enough to be within range."

"Computer, were visuals obtained and transmitted before destruction of the secondary block?"

"Affirmative."

"Show them to us."

The air swirled above the terminal. Representations of six people coalesced from the floating colors. The images were half a meter tall, in shades of gray, until the computer enhanced them with coded colors. Three men, two of them

possibly mutes, two women. The sixth figure was in class-three body armor, his or her sex not apparent. The one in armor had the visor raised, but the face was in shadow. One of the women bristled with electronic gear; all the figures were armed with hand wands or shot pistols.

"Five of them won't be following us," Sleel said. "The sixth, I'm not sure. Maybe a dart got under the visor."

Red said, "Why was only one of them wearing armor?"

"The Confed's too cheap to suit them all," Sleel said.

"Don't bet on it," Dirisha said. "Something's wrong with this scene."

"What do you think?" Red said.

Dirisha shook her head. "Computer, give us a close-up on the face of the person wearing armor."

The image shifted, then the vp trucked in on the face.

"Stop. Eliminate as much of the shadow as you can. Use the lighted part of the cheek for a match."

The face began to lighten, like an onion being peeled.

Dirisha moved to one side, to view the holoprojic image from a different angle. Something about the face—a man, definitely—was familiar....

Boik sat up on the bed then, the slimsteel frame protesting the motion. "Massey," Bork said.

"What?"

"Guy in the armor. That's Massey."

Red nodded, and Dirisha saw it at the same instant. Yes. The image was poor, but it was Massey. The spy who'd infiltrated the school. Khadaji had known, he'd told Dirisha; she'd wondered then why he'd allowed it. His motives were always twisted past her understanding.

"Shit," Sleel said. "He was good. I wouldn't bet a stad to a toenail clipping that the Spasm got him."

Geneva nodded. "Looks as if the Confed must want us pretty bad."

"Wall," Dirisha said. "Khadaji told me that Wall had sent Massey to the school. No reason to think he's working for anybody else."

"Looks as if we got their attention," Bork said quietly.

"Yeah," Sleel said. "Whoopee."

"What now?" Mayli said. "Can they trace us from the secondary drop-block?"

"Assuming the darts didn't ruin the electronics, eventually. We had the signal bounced from five different re-casters to get here, he'll have to run them all down. It'll take a month."

"What I want to know," Sleel said, "is how come he didn't have his people in armor? Even class-two would have kept most of them safe."

"He'd know we were monitoring the drop," Red said. He looked at Dirisha.

"Yeah," Dirisha said, "he'd know. And he wanted to show us something."

Sleel played student for her. "Show us what?"

"How much he wants us. Enough to sacrifice five people without blinking. They weren't important; we're supposed to see that."

"Shit, you mean he let us kick them into a six-month lock ward stay just to make a point?"

"Yeah."

Sleel shook his head.

"What now, Dirisha?" From Geneva.

Dirisha stared at the image of Massey, then looked away, at the city of Sawa Mji, laboring under its own stink. A Confederation-created scum pit, where life was cheap and dignity cheaper. One of thousands of places like it. "Way I see it, we can split up, run, and start little fires along the way, like the other matadors are doing, or..."

"Or what?" at least three voices said together.

"We can go to the rat's nest and burn that sucker into ash."

Sleel laughed.

"Something funny?" Dirisha said.

"Well, I'd applaud, but it's kinda hard at the moment."

"Go get your arm," Bork said. "We'll wait."

## FOURTEEN

WALL DECIDED to make a major production of his public appearance: he had a new Factor's robe spun, of the best silks; he had new castings of his personal motif—frogs and cranes—done in platinum and diamonds for the cloak's closure and dangles. There were more opulent and expensive alloys and jewels, but the pure metal and clear stones had always been his favorites: no one but he knew the significance of the color: white, for a former albino.

The cape, with its stiff, high collar and perfect flowing lines, was the hand-created product of a demented genius of a tailor who suffered from total

androphobia. The man never saw his clients personally; he never saw *anybody* personally, but stayed totally isolated from men and mues, on some small island off the coast of Greenland. That was strange enough in itself; that the man was the best tailor on Earth, working completely from generated simulacra, was nothing short of amazing. Wall had Cteel send the tailor a substantial bonus. The maroon silk garment was unique, and its creator deserved recognition.

The fittings were no less perfect, and when he was dressed, Factor Marcus Jefferson Wall was a sight to draw admiring stares. His custom-spun dotic boots matched the hue of his cloak; his underbreeks and tunic were a paler shade of the warm spectrum, matching the darker gear perfectly. The platinum cranes and frogs glowed richly, with eyes, beaks, and nails of perfect diamond. The wearer of these clothes was not merely rich, he was a man of *taste*.

Wall smiled at his holoproj self. *Dashing, aren't we, brother?*

The image nodded slowly. Indeed. Indeed.

The aircoach stood on its cushion of generated repulsion at the end of the guarded corridor. Outside of the matadors, for which he had learned a grudging admiration, Wall's own bodyguards stood second to none. A hundred of them protected him each time he appeared in public, not that there was really any need for them. Factor Wall was generally loved, particularly by those who did not know him. His enemies, especially those who might be dangerous, were accounted for at all times. Those with too much power to be completely neutralized were not allowed to approach him closely. Those without power were usually not allowed to survive at all. A dead enemy was no threat.

The last item in his dress for this occasion was the traditional Factor's hat, a boxy thing with a high peak, flat in the back to keep from being dislodged by the cape's collar. When he had donned the hat, Wall turned for a final view of himself in the holomirror. Regal, he truly was.

He took a deep breath. Time to go calm the waters.

\* \* \*

Wall's aircoach floated gently to the roof of the Presidential Theater, in Queen's Park. The building was old, built just after the beginning of the Galactic Confederation. It had been updated, of course, so that now a bank of particle-beam tacticals next to the landing pad guarded against air attacks, and mild repel fields kept out precipitation and insects. Wall's honor guard

stood at statuelike attention as the vehicle alighted. The day was cloudy, and a light rain was scheduled later in the afternoon. A thick patch of news-fax techs stood in their assigned areas, with cameras already locked into focus on the aircoach.

He would give them something to see when he swept out onto the roof. He grinned.

The coach stopped, the hum of the engines muting to silence. Wall stood and walked across the interior of the main salon of the vehicle to the exit. He smiled again. Oh, mem, could you but see me now. Carried to and fro, alone in a flying machine bigger than the rooms we used to occupy; dozens of technicians, that many guards, hundreds inside and billions more waiting for an electronic look at me. No man in the galaxy has ever come so far, mem. Ah, could you but have lived to see it!

"Open," Wall commanded.

The spun-fiber door pretending to be fine wood obediently raised, and Factor Wall stood outlined in the doorway for a moment, to give the photomutable gel eyes of the net cameras a moment to focus on him. Then he strode out onto the roof. They were going to love this.

\* \* \*

Getting to Marcus Wall was considered impossible by most. The security around him was as tight as any Khadaji had ever seen. Even in the scenarios he had used at Matador Villa, not a few of which had been designed as unbeatable, Wall's would have been one of the hardest. His personal guard was formidable, well-armed, and trained; his quarters, vehicles, destinations, and transits were all protected by state-of-the-art bioelectronics. Any plan to get close enough to Wall to do him damage would have to be incredibly complex to stand the slightest chance of working. Anyone who was apt to be within a hundred meters of Wall was triple-checked. Guards all knew each other intimately; newsfax techs were almost as well known, and new ones spent a good portion of their time being examined, physically and electronically; no strangers were allowed within combat range of the kingmaker, much less to touch the hem of the man. Khadaji could, he supposed, work his way into a position of some sort of familiarity or semi-trust after months or years, but he had neither the time nor the desire.

He might possibly devise something so off-the-bulkhead and twisty that he could circumvent even Wall's precautions. He had, after all, spent years building assassination and protection games for his students.

Or, Khadaji thought, he could come up with a plan so simple nobody had ever considered it. A reversal of ordinary thinking could sometimes result in a successful ploy. He had tried to teach that to his students, to not always work in a linear, beginning-to-end fashion. With some, such as Dirisha and Geneva, he had succeeded.

Now, it was time to see if he could follow his own advice. If Muhammad could not go to the mountain, perhaps the mountain would come to Muhammad....

Simple did not mean easy, Khadaji knew. He had several days, once Wall's speech was announced, to set his plan in motion, and even with heavy outlays of stads, it was still an iffy proposition. Khadaji had updated old criminal connections, paved roads with promises and money, and managed to get the hardware he needed. The software was up to him, and it depended on the Wall's psychology and that of his protectors. If they were sharp enough, it was possible. His attack would have to be oblique, but it might work....

\* \* \*

Factor Wall stood on an indoor balcony overlooking his privileged audience. The balcony was shielded by clear sheets of densecris and wrapped in a zap field, but Wall was visible to the seven or eight hundred people fortunate enough to be allowed to see the Factor in the flesh.

Standing below, next to a fat man in an intricately folded origami robe, Khadaji looked the part of a well-paid medic. He wore an expensive sharkskin suit, boots made from real animal hide, and his professional medic pin prominently displayed on his left breast. While Wall worked the crowd up with his patriotic and well-written speech, Khadaji managed to look sophisticated enough to be slightly bored. The face Khadaji wore was altered only slightly, mostly coloring and cheek pads; he could not risk a skinmask, even the best, for the kind of scrutiny he would have to undergo, if his plan got that far. In his belt pouch, Khadaji bore a tag that identified him as Marsh Himit, Medic First, recently added to the staff of Wall's own medical complex. The name was real, as was the medic, but the computer at the complex had been rascled to show Khadaji's slightly altered face instead of Himit's, when asked for identity scan. The medic himself had been ... detained for the day.

"...cannot despair, my fellow men, because the galaxy is not a place of chaos, but of order. We must maintain that order. We *will* maintain that order."

More applause. Khadaji glanced at his chronometer. Almost time.

To Wall's left on the balcony, a highrank man coughed, a little louder than was polite. A moment later, a tall and pale woman also coughed.

One of Wall's sub rasa guards working the crowd passed in front of Khadaji. Khadaji brushed at invisible lint over his medic's pin, just enough for the guard to see the emblem and take notice of it. The guard was the floor commander; Khadaji had paid ten thousand standards for that small information.

"—situation might seem worse than it is—" Wall coughed, then continued. "—but I can personally assure you, it is merely a storm in a bottle." He coughed again, and his Chief of Security looked alarmed.

Others began to cough, louder and harder now, and Khadaji could see the security man begin to understand. The man's throat began working, as he subvocalized into his com implant. Khadaji could imagine what he was saying.

Three large men hustled the Factor away from the densecris and out of sight. Others on the balcony began to panic, trying to run, but the guards, coughing and retching themselves by now, held them back.

"What the hell... ?" the fat man next to Khadaji said.

The crowd under the balcony caught the fear, and somebody said the words aloud: poison gas!

By now, Wall would be seeking his personal medic, who would be nearby. Only his medic would be in worse shape than Factor Wall. The time-released drug administered in his breakfast would be coursing throughout the medic's system, and he would pass out when his blood pressure raised under the stress of treating his patient.

Wall no doubt had a vouch in his aircoach, but the coach was on the roof, moments away, and the vouch might not be sufficient to treat some esoteric poison. At least that's what Khadaji hoped Wall and his advisors might think. It was a risk, but—

"You!" The floor commander grabbed Khadaji's arm. "Your identification, quickly!"

"What—?"

"Now!"

A second security man approached, and the commander shoved Khadaji's tag at him. "Verify it, stat!"

The second man produced a small reader and inserted Khadaji's bogus tag. Meanwhile, the commander was already half-dragging Khadaji through the panicky crowd.

"Verified, Commander. He's on-staff at the Med-plex – "

"Scan him!"

As they moved, the security man pointed an HO scanner at Khadaji. "Clean."

"All right! Clear us a path to the emergex route."

The second man did so, by pulling a hand wand and flashing the people in their path. The three stepped over unconscious forms on their way to the powerlift.

The Factor leaned against a plush wall in the hallway, looking sick. Khadaji was ordered to attend to Wall. Somebody shoved a medical bag at him, and Khadaji opened it and slapped a blood diagnoster onto Wall's brachial plexus as if he had been doing it for years. He found a light and flashed it into Wall's eyes, tapped on Wall's chest, and asked Wall to tell him if he hurt anywhere. Wall tried but was unable to string words without wracking coughs.

"Easy," Khadaji said. "You'll be fine."

Guards pointed guns in all directions, including one at Khadaji.

It was time for the medic to take control, Khadaji decided.

"We need to get to the Medplex. Is there a vouch or Healy in the Factor's aircar?"

Before anybody could reply, Khadaji snapped, "Come on, I want some answers!"

"Yessir," the Chief of Security said. "There's a vouch – "

"Let's move," Khadaji said, "I want that car in the air in two minutes!"

Six guards snatched Wall up. They ran down the hall, Khadaji right behind them.

In the aircoach, Khadaji said, "You, untether the vouch and get it in here. You" – he pointed to the Chief of Security – "get everybody else out of here. Tell the driver to lift. Call the Plex and tell them to scramble the trauma team. Come on, now!"

"I need my men," the security chief began.

"And I don't! You can stay, and the one collecting the vouch. Everybody else will just get in my way."

"Listen – "



"No," Khadaji said, "you listen. You and your man can protect the Factor from the doctor trying to save his life if you want, the rest can follow or lead."

The security man gave it two seconds. "Outside. Box formation, four threes. Go."

The salon emptied, save for Khadaji, Wall, and the two security men. The aircoach lurched into the air quickly.

The man with the vouch returned, dragging the instrument faster than its wheels wanted to go. The bioelectric medical cart whined in protest.

Wall's eyes had closed; he was unconscious.

"I'll need you both to give me a hand here," Khadaji said.

The two guards moved closer.

Within range.

\* \* \*

Rajeem Carlos was not happy. Dirisha felt his pain, and yet couldn't help him, for she was the cause. The two of them were alone in the smallest of the sleeping rooms. Beel had quietly taken the two children and closed the door behind them, so that Dirisha and Rajeem could say their good-byes. Beel loved her, too, but Rajeem had been first; he had awakened that part of Dirisha.

"Look, hon," Dirisha said, "you know this has gotten a lot bigger than just us."

Rajeem nodded. "I know."

"And you also know I'm good at what I do."

"Yes, but —"

"But nothing, hon. I love you. Going to do what I have to do doesn't change that. Khadaji kicked a snowball down a high-gee hill a long time ago, and now the thing is too big and too heavy to stop. You ought to know that better than I."

Rajeem sighed. "I do know it. I am aware of my duty, you've pointed it out to me often enough. I don't know if I can be what Khadaji thinks I can —"

"You can. You're good at what you do, too."

"Don't interrupt, woman." He smiled. "I don't know if I can, but I'll give it my best. The Confed is falling faster now, and I want to give it, or some part of it, a new direction. I have my connections, waiting. All that is a matter of course. Maybe we win, maybe we go down in smoking glory." He shrugged. "It's not that. What bothers me, I think, is knowing how much it's all going to

change. Your leaving is a big part of that. Even if we pull this off, we—you and I—aren't likely to be able to go back to the simple days. No more walks in the country, no more easy manages in some rustic hideaway."

Dirisha nodded. "Yeah. I'll miss that."

"I'm a realist, Dirisha. I'll want it, but if I survive and we triumph, there won't be time. It'll take everything I have to keep things together."

"I expect we can keep in touch, Rajeem."

"Of course we will, idiot woman! But you know what I'm trying to say."

Dirisha slid across the half a meter separating them and hugged him. "Yeah."

"And I know you're good, but I will worry."

"That's okay, hon. I'll worry about you, too."

They sat hugging silently for a time. The price of this game was high, Dirisha realized with a new clarity. It was going to cost a big piece of her, win or lose.

Rajeem's shoulders shook a little, and she realized he was crying. It didn't take long for her tears to add to his. Rajeem Carlos was the head of the Antag Union, a dedicated, educated, and loving man, and he was crying for her. She had only known three people in her life who loved her enough to do that, and she was about to walk away from one of them, maybe forever. Unfair didn't begin to touch it. There was no other choice, though.

No other choice at all.

## FIFTEEN

MARCUS WALL regained consciousness all in a rush: his eyes snapped open and he was alert, as if he had inhaled a particularly fine and potent kik-dust. He was momentarily disoriented, but then he recognized the interior of his personal aircoach. He recalled coughing, having trouble breathing at the speech, and being hustled out by his men. An assassination attempt, it must have been, only it had failed.

Wall sat up, and saw several things at once: his vouch was in attendance; a man sat on a cushioned stool across from him, holding a medic's bag; his Chief of Security—in Massey's absence—and another guard lay sprawled on the salon floor. Had his men been overcome during the attack?

The medic smiled, and Wall felt a chill. Where was his regular doctor? This man looked familiar, but Wall didn't know him. All right, it was time for some answers –

"Feeling better, Marcus?"

The man dared call him by his first name? He might have saved his life, but he had no right to presume –

"Forgive me if I don't observe proper protocol, Marcus.

We only have a few minutes for our conversation."

"Who do you think you are?" Wall demanded. "What in the Nine Hells is going on?"

"My name is Emile Antoon Khadaji," he said. "And I've gone to a lot of trouble to get here."

Khadaji! It couldn't be! Even as he thought it, Wall recognized the man from his file holos. *How* had he gotten here? More importantly, what was he going to do? Wall glanced around in fresh-blossomed fear.

"Your spring gun and aerosol aren't there, so don't bother looking for them," Khadaji said. "I'm sure you know better than to try anything physical."

Wall nodded dumbly. He was doomed. Maybe he could stall. "Are they... dead?" He indicated the downed men.

"No. If I were Confed, I don't doubt they would be, but that's not my way."

Wall felt a surge of relief. Maybe Khadaji wasn't going to kill him.

Khadaji continued, "I could have used poison, instead of gas tussive and soporifics, if I'd wanted you dead today. It would have been less risky, and the galaxy might well be better off without you."

"Wh-what do you want?"

"To talk. To offer you a proposition."

"A proposition?"

"Yes. You didn't get to be where you are by being stupid. You should be able to see what is happening to the Confederation. Your best efforts will only serve to delay it, and in the process, cause a lot of misery for a lot of people. I want to avoid needless grief."

Wall's mind began working, despite the underlying fear. What was he getting at? Some sort of truce? "I am listening."

"You know the rebellion will spread. My matadors and others will fan the flames until the Confed is roasted. If you use your influence for an orderly dismantling instead of violent demolition, you can save a lot of lives."

"That's your proposition? What could I possibly gain by agreeing to such?"

"Your life, for one. Even if I don't kill you now, your chances of surviving a revolution are slim, no matter how carefully you've planned otherwise. Anyone can be gotten to, as you can see. And the people have long memories."

Khadaji wasn't going to kill him, Wall now knew that. So he could ask. "Why *don't* you kill me? Even if that is against your... moral principles, if I refuse to go along with you, I will be no small impediment."

Khadaji nodded. "I know. I'm not appealing to your humanity, but to your self-interest. Do it my way, and live. With you working for change instead of against it, you can make things much easier."

"I see. I'm more valuable alive and helping than dead, aren't I?"

"Yes."

Wall allowed himself a grin. This Khadaji was a poor fugue player, to give so much away.

"But," Khadaji said, "if you continue current Confed policies, you're expendable."

"You are a fool," Wall said. He was in control again, he felt it. Khadaji might be adept at martial games, but he was out of his league here. "You risked your life to offer an enemy a chance to mend his ways. Did you think I would simply see the light and agree?"

"I thought you might consider the proposition seriously."

Oh, Wall thought, I shall consider it with all the seriousness which it is due. As long as it takes to laugh. But he kept his face grave, as he nodded. "How can I know you have enough influence to keep me alive after the new order rises? I assume you have a candidate for President, or *somesuch*?"

"Yes. If you help us, you will be allowed your life and freedom."

Wall pretended to consider this. "This is not a decision to be taken lightly," he said. "Helping you would require very tricky and subtle manipulations. Even my expertise would be strained."

"It'd be difficult, yes."

"All right," Wall said. "I will consider your proposition. Where can I reach you with an answer?"

A faint smile seemed to play over Khadaji's face, but it was only there for an instant, and Wall was not sure he had actually seen it. "I'll contact you. Soon."

Wall felt tired suddenly, as if draped with a heavy cover. Sleepy. He raised one eyebrow at Khadaji.

"A slow hynotic," Khadaji said. "We'll be landing in a few minutes, and there's a little bit more to this scenario to be played."

The room grew wavy around Wall; the last thing he saw before his eyes closed was the face of the Man Who Never Missed. It looked sad.

\* \* \*

The trauma team boiled into the aircoach and took charge of Wall with practiced skill. A guard glanced at the Chief of Security and the second man lying on the floor.

"Gas got them," Khadaji said. He didn't wait for the man's reaction, but followed Wall's floating gurney out of the coach and into the wide hall of the emergency wing.

The medic in charge of the trauma team listened as Khadaji rattled off a list of fake signs and symptoms, consistent with thanglor gas poisoning. The Factor would need a blood wash, liver and kidney pump and systemic steroids to survive thanglor inhalation, as well as a new set of lungs. Khadaji could almost see the woman's mind lining up the procedures. It wouldn't get that far, of course, once a Healy screened Wall for chem, but it would keep everybody busy for a few minutes.

Wall was propelled into a full-spectrum analysis room. Khadaji waited outside the doors, since he wasn't part of the team. To a guard waving a military carbine, Khadaji said, "I've got to go to the fresher."

The guard nodded brusquely, intent on keeping assassins from entering the trauma room.

Emile Antoon Khadaji turned and walked calmly down the hall and out of the Medplex. In all the confusion, nobody even noticed he was gone.

\* \* \*

On three planets in the Confed there existed limited, but spreading revolutions. Half a dozen worlds rode the edge. So far, the Confederation Ground Forces had kept the conflicts contained; the rumblings were there, but the Confed was hardly running scared. Against the well-armed and trained Confederation military machine, a few hundred thousand dissidents spread over hundreds of light-years stood little chance of actually winning. But it made the beast sit up and take notice.

Dirisha rode a Bender ship toward Earth, though not directly. The trip would take several weeks by her circuitous route; once there, she would meet the other matadors, who also traveled round-aboutly. The Confed must be taking some precautions, and Massey had been a matador student.

The ship, the *CSS Raymond Bartlett*, was one of the old *rijk*-class pleasure vessels, still in service seventy-five years after its construction. During its heyday, the starliner must have been something remarkable: the *Bartlett* was as large as an ancient ocean liner, opulently outfitted, boasting hundreds of private suites. The rich and famous had traveled in total luxury in those days, feasting on rare foods, drinking expensive liquors, and strolling among indoor parks large enough to give the illusion of being on-planet and out-of-doors.

Things had changed somewhat in the last three quarters of a century, Dirisha noted. The green parks had shrunk to scraggly stands of dying trees and stunted bushes; the crystal stemware and fresh vegetables had been replaced by plastic and soypro. Like an old woman who had spent too many years working in high-rad sunlight, the *Raymond Bartlett* had been cruelly aged, requiring imagination to see what it had once been. A lot like the early promise of the Confederation itself, Dirisha thought.

The ship suited her purposes well enough. Amid the thousands of bureaucrats, tourists, and business people, she would be hidden. As she strolled along a skybridge between a small shopping center and a restaurant, she felt safe enough, even without her spetsdöds. Those were carefully packed in her personal luggage. And she was skinmasked, as well. Too many people had seen her on the galactic net broadcast for her to risk showing her own unaltered face in so public a place. She was just another dark-skinned human female, one among dozens or maybe even hundreds on the giant starliner.

Dirisha paused on the bridge, under the artificial sunlight, to look at a group of children playing by a small fountain. The stale smell of the ship's air was stirred by a tiny breeze generated by the fountain's spray, and she smiled at the ability of the children to enjoy the water, with its corroded metal figures.

A sense of being watched made her flick a sharp glance to her right, just in time to see a man stop to stare into a shop window. Dirisha looked away quickly, cataloging the man's features. She didn't recognize his face—hadn't seen it before—and he seemed ordinary enough in his typical tourist's coveralls. But there was something familiar about him.

Dirisha moved on, strolling as if she hadn't a care in the galaxy. At this stage in her life, paranoia was a survival characteristic; still, she didn't want to waste her energy being nervous about everybody who breathed. On the

other hand, she was too well-trained to ignore her feelings. A lot of truth could be found from subliminal impressions.

Across the skybridge, Dirisha entered the restaurant. She found a double-seat booth and sat so she could see the entrance and hallway past the clear plastic front of the restaurant. If she had a tail, it would drag past shortly.

It did. He did. The same man. He didn't enter the restaurant, nor did he loiter near the entrance. The man walked briskly on, not looking toward Dirisha. There was no obvious reason to believe he was following her, but suddenly Dirisha was certain of it. Something was wrong with the way he walked, something she couldn't quite nail down.

What did he want? Could he maybe just be interested in her on a physical level? Sex? Or maybe he was a player, walking the Musashi Flex, looking to test himself in combat against somebody who had the look of another player. Dirisha had walked that path for a time, and she could usually recognize another player when she saw one. But she was moving carefully, hiding her ability to move well deliberately –

That was it. She was hiding her smoothness and balance, to avoid being noticed, and so was her tail. He was tight, but it was a pose.

A memory awoke then, of a day at Matador Villa, when she and Khadaji-as-Pen had stood watching some of the new students try and walk the martial pattern of the Ninety-seven Steps of Sumito. Of one student in particular...

Massey!

Dirisha felt a touch of fear frost her. Yes. She recognized him from his body. Like her, he must have been wearing a skinmask. The impact of it hit her, and the frost turned to a bucket of liquid nitrogen. *How had he found her?*

That Massey was here for her Dirisha didn't doubt for a moment. Somehow, he had located her. He was biding his time, waiting for the right opportunity, then he would move. He wouldn't be alone.

Damn!

Trying to appear perfectly calm, Dirisha punched in an order for fish strips and a cup of splash. The table acknowledged the order, and in a moment, the food and drink were delivered by a servomech which listed slightly and jolted each time one of its wheels rolled over something stuck to it. The last thing she wanted to do was eat, but Dirisha also knew this might be her best opportunity for a while. Maybe ever. One had to eat when one could in situations like this; besides, it would give her a minute to think. Why hadn't

Massey tried to take her yet? How long had he been on her? Was her room covered? Were there others watching her now?

Too many questions, Dirisha knew, and no way to answer any of them. She had to deal with what she knew, and that was simple enough: the Confed, in the person of Massey, had her under surveillance, trapped on a Bender ship.

She was in deep trouble.

The fish tasted like greasy string and the splash was flat, but Dirisha ate mechanically. She had to get out of here, lose Massey and whoever else he might have helping him, and find a place to hide. One step at a time. Getting off the ship was something to worry about later.

If there was a later.

## SIXTEEN

TO THE WEST AND SOUTH of the nose of South America, in what was once called Brazil, just to the north of die great swamp of Pantanalde Sao Lourenco, sits the Planalto de Mato Grosso. On a particularly flat section of the plateau, east of Cuiaba, overlooking the Rio das Mortes, is the galaxy's largest collection of formerly-extinct animals. The zoo centers in a patch of pure savanna called campo limpo; there are dozens of exotic grasses, the tallest of which is called *jatte riz*. Imported from Thompson's Gazelle in the Delta System, *jatte riz*, with its unique layered-stalk structure, grows to a height of ten meters on Earth. It is the preferred food of the mastodons and Spandle curlnose, although the native terran elephants don't like it much.

Wall smiled as he looked down on the fifty-kilometer oval of grassland. The zoo was one of his favorite toys; he knew as much about it as any of the workers or keepers. It was a place he came when he wanted to relax and forget the weight of his unofficial office. Being kingmaker grew tiring at times.

This particular visit had another purpose, besides simple relaxation. Ex-Minister Miyamoto had been sent here several weeks ago, to learn the exacting task of shoveling excreta. Wall wanted to see how well he was adapting to his new work.

The aircoach banked and began the short glide into the landing area. The large, boxy buildings of the zoo complex lay just ahead. The rainy season had begun again, and the grasses already looked lush and thick. Purple-gray clouds were piling up on the horizon, and Wall knew it would rain before the



day grew much older. What were the numbers again? A hundred and eighty centimeters of rain each year? Had it come all at once, an average man would have to stand on his toes to keep from drowning. And a man might welcome the water, for the heat of the day was already body temperature, with the hottest part of the afternoon hours away. A nice place to visit, but only secure within an umbrella-field and dogged by servomech coolers.

No doubt ex-Minister Miyamoto was less than pleased with his tenure here so far. Wall smiled at the thought.

The aircoach settled amid a spray of humid air. Wall waited while the cooled tube of the gamp was brought out and linked to his coach, providing a walkway to the terminal. His guards opened the door and he strolled the twenty meters to the building, pausing to glance through the gamp's densecris window at the vast expanse of grass. Ah, truly it was a place of splendor! Even without knowing that hundreds of monstrous beasts patrolled their controlled territories within the foliage, the *jatte riz* was enough to conjure up what Wall felt were surely racial memories. He could imagine some small proto-humans darting about in the grasses, waving pointed sticks, stalking beasts for dinner.

The zoo director met Wall inside the terminal. She was a thin, almost emaciated woman who burned with a religious fervor for her charges. Wall considered himself lucky to have found her, for she would have *paid* him to work with his beasts, she so loved it. She had half a dozen degrees in various biological sciences and was considered the galaxy's foremost expert on Proboscidea and their alien and extinct relatives.

After general greetings, Wall asked his director how his new clean-up technician was working out.

"He was a bit of a problem at first," she said, "but he is coming along."

"Ah. Good, I should like to see him."

"I have him working in the sickroom, as you requested."

It was necessary to leave the protection of the terminal to reach the holding pen in which the ill animals were treated. A servomech cooler followed Wall and his director, its fans straining to maintain the envelope of comfortable temperature as they walked across the complex. Even so, the direct rays of the tropical sun found Wall, and he felt the beginnings of perspiration under his thin tunic. Without speaking, Wall gestured, and one of his bodyguards snapped an umbrella-field on and dialed for dark polarization, so that Wall suddenly walked in a hard-edged shadow. Better.

The interior of the sickroom was cooler, but still not comfortable for humans. Several African elephants stood swaying to the sound of pulse generators along one wall of the building, while a curlnose was sling-cradled under a gantry, to keep weight off what was an obviously injured foreleg. The normally black skin around the foot had turned ashen, indicating a serious infection.

"Busta will be all right in a week," the director said. "He picked up a mutant staph, but he is responding to treatment."

Wall nodded. He wasn't looking at the curlnose. Instead, he was watching a thin man shovel large clods of wet fecal material from the ground behind the elephants, then heave the substance onto a conveyor. There was a methane generator tank, quite primitive, really, being fed by the conveyor. The man wore nothing more than a groin strap and hardskin gloves.

Ah, yes. Ex-Minister Miyamoto: the ambitious liar. Wall wondered how far the man's ambitions extended these days.

Wall walked toward Miyamoto. The former minister had lost at least twenty kilos of body fat, and his once-pale skin was darkened by both sun and dirt, as well as bits of dried scatum. His face was set in neutral lines, neither pleased nor disgusted. He continued to wield his shovel as Wall approached.

"Ah, my old friend, how are you?"

Miyamoto stopped suddenly, and looked at Wall. For a moment, it seemed as if he did not recognize the Factor. He did not speak.

Wall grinned. "I see you have taken your new work to heart. I am so glad."

Miyamoto's hands tightened on the shovel's smooth plastic handle. For one glorious moment, Wall thought the man might actually try to attack, and he felt his pulse quicken at the thought. But Miyamoto relaxed his grip and nodded. "A man can learn to accept anything," he said.

Wall felt a pang of irritation. He'd expected more. Begging, perhaps. Regret. Something. He said, "Oh? I am so glad to hear that. Since you seem to enjoy your labors so, I am certain we can find more for you to do. Perhaps you can aid other workers less capable than yourself. I will see to it."

Miyamoto did not reply, and Wall turned away in anger. We shall see how much you can learn to accept!

The zoo director said, "There is a mating scheduled today, my Lord Factor."

Wall perked up. "Really?"

"Mastodon Hizta is to mount one of the young females, Grintel." The director paused delicately. "Her first time."

Wall felt a surge of something akin to lust. A young female. Her first time. And he remembered Hizta, he of the two-meter-long penis. "Yes," Wall said. "I would like to see that." Indeed. A man needed a place to relax, and what was more relaxing than watching the copulation of beasts long since extinct, save for the hand of man?

\* \* \*

From his rented computer terminal in the small programmer's complex in Baton Rouge, Khadaji created a man who didn't exist. Or, rather, who existed, but not where Khadaji showed him. He was a herring, meant to draw those seeking his creator.

The program was imbedded on a steel ball the size of a child's marble. The small sphere of metal had been worth two years' standards to the man who built it, and it was cheap at the price. Using the program, Khadaji was able to rascal the maincomp used for detailing offworld passenger lists. The addition of one name to a manifest was carefully balanced. According to the now-altered list, one Marsh Himit, Medic First, had taken a shuttle to the Confederation starliner traveling to the Delta System. The herring had, according to official records, transferred to a system liner for the world of Lee. There, he had booked passage to the City of a Million Caves, and his stated purpose was to spend several months in religious contemplation among the ten thousand kilometers of interlinked tunnels that formed the city.

It amused Khadaji to think of the Confederation resources that might be expended in trying to find the "doctor" who had gassed Wall and his men at the recent festival in Australia.

When the alteration was complete, Khadaji set up a worm so that no one could trace the source, then destroyed the link. He took the program ball to the top of the fused glass levee that bound the Mississippi River, and tossed the little marble as far as he could out into the brown water. Even if anybody ever thought to look for such a thing, the chances of finding it were minimal.

With luck, some bright cool would eventually stumble upon the passage entry and take the bait. The Man Who Never Missed had run to hide in a cave, and they could go look for him there. Meanwhile, he had things to do.

Sooner or later, some of his matadors would be coming to Earth. He was sure of this, for he had trained them to think of final solutions to dangerous problems. Khadaji didn't know who, for certain, or when, but it was going to happen. When they arrived, they would need his help.

He took a hovercraft downriver, to the rebuilt city of New Orleans. The Dixie Underworld was still potent there, and Khadaji had bought several connections to vouch for him. Amid the oak trees and Spanish moss, the crime center of the North American continent did its business. If you wanted a thing done and you had sufficient money, it might be arranged.

Except for a small pub on Muta Kato, in the Bruna System, Khadaji had converted all his holdings to cash. He had sufficient money, and he had things to do.

\* \* \*

Dirisha finished her meal and stood, trying to look as if she was in no hurry to do anything in particular. She couldn't go back to her room, though she would have dearly loved to collect her spetsdöds. She had to assume Massey and his men had her cabin secured. Anything less would be wishful thinking. If they knew enough to follow her while skin-masked, they must know which quarters were hers.

The immediate problem was to lose her tail. They couldn't take what they couldn't find, and the starliner was plenty big enough to have places to hide. As long as they were in bent space, nobody was leaving the ship, but there was a stop in the Svare System due in two days. For two days, she could stay hidden, if she could get away long enough. She had several stad cubes under different names, so money should be no problem—they couldn't know all the aliases she had, even if they did know the current one.

It wouldn't do her any good to hide, though, if they had some way of tracing her. She didn't know how long they'd been watching her, but if they'd had a chance to get to her rooms, she might be carrying a sub rosa caster. She'd have to find out before she ran.

There was a store selling electronics on the main level, she recalled. She would go there.

On her way, Dirisha stopped in a clothing shop. She bought another set of thinskins, like the body suit she wore, only darker, a tunic and lightweight jacket, and a pair of silicon boots. Just in case. She had the new clothes packaged to carry easily. If Massey continued to tail her, she did not see him, but she had to assume somebody followed her. After a few moments, she saw a woman whose face looked familiar from the restaurant. Good. Better the devil she knew.

Inside the electronics kiosk, Dirisha toyed with a holoproj recorder and a stimwand before getting to her real reason for being there. A wide-band

receiver was built into a digital-ball music inducer. She asked the clerk for use of a speaker room, and smiled at him through the thincris window as she went through the motions of playing the inducer. What she did instead was wind the receiver, with its sound turned down, across its spectrum. Halfway across the upper end, she found the caster.

It was in her left boot. Probably a viral electronic, but she didn't really care. A further run of the receiver showed the rest of her clothes to be clean, but she wasn't going to chance missing anything. She waved at the clerk, who went back to his counter.

Quickly, Dirisha stripped, and dressed in her new clothes. There was a back exit, and if she moved fast, she could get to it before they noticed she was gone. It might be covered, but that was the chance she had to take. The sooner she got free, the better.

Dirisha moved from the speaker room in a hurry, slinging the inducer at the startled clerk. The man yelled as the small machine smashed into a display of entertainment vids, knocking them down in a shower of plastic strips. Dirisha ran for the exit, jerked it open, and leaped through.

A single man stood near the end of the corridor behind the row of shops. He looked up, obviously not expecting to see Dirisha charging toward him at a dead run. He fumbled for something in his tunic, a mistake.

Sumito was effective at any speed. Dirisha danced by the man, slammed her knee into his groin, and smashed his face with her elbow. His head bounced off the wall he had been leaning against, and he fell. Did he have time to transmit a warning? She hoped not, but it didn't matter. She was committed at this point. She rounded the corner, saw she was on the edge of a pedway, and stepped onto the moving strip. At a fast walk, augmented by the speed of the pedway, she moved away. With luck, they'd think she was still inside the electronics kiosk for a few more minutes. Her tagged boot would say so, and if they were only watching the front entrance for her to emerge, they'd be in for a long wait.

For the first time since she'd seen Massey, Dirisha felt some relief. She was still in trouble, but at least the shit wasn't so deep anymore.

## SEVENTEEN

THERE WOULD BE no mistakes this time, Wall was certain. He had not been gulled into choosing a warped flower by wily antagonists, not *this* time.

Once, they could set him up; twice, never. No, he had picked a city at random, one called Manchester, had gone there and made his choice from thousands of girls who had not even known for what they were applying. His subterfuge involved advertising for pre-teen girls of exemplary character – virginal status – of good background and pleasing appearance, to compete for ten scholarships to the prestigious Prep School at the University of Australia. Ten girls would be chosen from the thousands who applied; nine of them would be given hefty trust funds and entrance to the school almost immediately. The lucky tenth girl would be given private instruction by tutors selected by Factor Marcus Jefferson Wall Himself. Few parents could turn down such an offer. None ever had.

"Cteel."

"Yes?"

"Project the pictures of the finalists for me. I want to see my flowers."

"At once."

The holoprojic images of the ten girls swirled into solidity in front of Wall. He smiled, and walked completely around them, to view them from the rear as well as the front. All of them were lovely; any of them would be an excellent choice. Certainly they would, for he had personally selected them all. There was the heart-breaking blonde, the sultry-looking brunette, the one with the single dimple... ah, how could he go wrong? No more mistakes for him; each of these ten had been researched to their great-grandparents. Which to choose? Was there ever such a joyful decision to be made?

"Sir?"

Wall was snagged from his contemplative trance by Cteel's voice. "What?"

"You requested immediate notification on any matter directly relating to the apprehension of Khadaji."

"Do we have him?"

"No. We have determined where he has fled."

"Where?"

Cteel told him.

Wall shook his head. "I very much doubt it, old friend. Our man Khadaji is unlikely to be so stupid as to use the name he gave us during his little game. Send troopers, of course, but don't expect the City of a Million Caves to yield our quarry."

"We have also backwashed the medical computer to discover an earlier false identity."

"Doubtless he no longer uses that one, either."

Cteel continued doggedly. "We have located the tourist quarters in which he stayed. We have recordings, if you wish to view them."

Wall started to cut Cteel off. What did it matter what hole the rodent had spent time in? But knowledge was indeed power, Wall knew. Perhaps some clue lingered in the air of the den. "Show me," Wall commanded.

The Hawaiian lanai appeared in front of Wall. The point-of-view shifted to the ground below the second level unit, to people lying in the bright sunshine, damaging their skins with the naked radiation. Fools. A waste of his time. Wall started to have Cteel kill the picture. Then he stopped, his heart suddenly loud in his ears.

"C-Cteel. Hold that picture!"

The computer obediently went into freeze-frame mode.

"That man, the one sitting at the table, drinking from a plastic pineapple. Enhance the picture. Double the size."

The figure grew and sharpened. The resolution was very sharp. Wall could tell what color eyes the man had, could see the small moons at the base of the fingernails. The details were good. Quite. Good.

Wall found he was leaning against his orthopedia. The device whined as it tried to adjust to a position for which it had never been designed. Wall also found he was holding his breath. The man in front of him, captured in holoprojic reality, was a man he knew: Artemis, the cuntmaster Wall had killed on the Dark world. The last time he had seen Artemis, his guts were spilling all over the boy Tavee's bedroom. The boy Marcus Jefferson Wall had been, more than fifty T.S. years ago.

Impossible! The technology for repairing the kind of damage the cuntmaster had sustained had been available only on a few worlds back then. And, even if it had been in that stinking small town on Rim, nobody would have wasted it on Artemis. He was scum, and even a half-hearted attempt to patch him would have been amazing.

Shaken, Wall circled his orthopedia and settled into it. It wasn't Artemis. It was only somebody who looked like him. In a galaxy with billions of people, there must be doubles of almost everybody, maybe dozens of people who looked exactly like each other. It was reasonable to expect such things; Wall was a reasonable man. It was somebody else. A coincidence.

Finally, the most obvious difference registered. Artemis would be a middle-aged man of eighty by now. This frozen figure was no more than thirty. Wall

smiled. It meant nothing. No one knew his background; it was merely a loop of his own memory that had snared him, no more.

"Cancel the projection, Cteel. Give me back my flowers." As the picture faded, Wall nodded to himself. So much for old ghosts. Banished by his command of another electronic ghost. He found that amusing.

\* \* \*

Khadaji was being a Black Butterfly.

When men had first landed on Rangi ya majani Mwezi, the so-called Green Moon of the Bibi Arusi System, they had discovered *Svart sommerfugl*, the Black Butterfly. In fact, the creature was not black, nor was it a butterfly. It was closer to reptile than insect, and ranged from pale to dark gray in color. It was named for what it did as much as for what it looked like. The kiss of the Black Butterfly was worth death. The thing spat a complex protein that behaved like a neurotoxin; contact with improperly protected skin resulted in complete muscular shutdown, within ten seconds. Where the creatures nested, almost no other native animal would venture; where the butterflies flew, no man or beast was safe. The most obvious solution was for the new settlers to wipe out the killer creatures as soon as possible. There was, however, a problem. The Black Butterfly had a mimic, the Pseudo Black, a harmless creature which looked identical to the deadlier flitter. And the Pseudo Black was catalytically responsible for the pollination of the *Bindodo* vine, which produced a key chemical component in the adaptogenic used on all civilized worlds to extend human and mue life spans. The chemical had thus far eluded scientists trying to duplicate it artificially. It was the *Bindodo* vine or nothing.

Blacks and Pseudo Blacks often flocked together, nested in the same areas, and fed on the same plants, which made for an interesting dilemma. Blacks weren't wanted, but Pseudo Blacks were invaluable. And Pseudo Blacks were such perfect mimics, only a trained zoologist could tell them apart, and then only in the lab.

As Khadaji sat in a small pub in a small town on the Olympic Peninsula staring at the Straits of Juan de Fuca, he smiled at the analogy. Butterflies all around, but which was the dangerous one? They all looked alike.

To a muscular man seated two stools down from him, Khadaji said, "I hear they're about to lay off all timber operators."

The man nearly choked on his drink. "Where'd you hear that, floman?"



Khadaji shrugged. "I got a brother works for the Confed Admin in Seattle. He says they think machines can do it better and cheaper, so they're gonna zap everybody and replace 'em."

The man's nostrils flared. "Yeah, well any jobs get zapped and them fucking machines ain't gonna have anything *to* cut, they get here, your com receiving that? You might pass the word, floman, to your brother in Seattle."

"I'll do that," Khadaji said. He had no brother there, of course but he did have a paid informant who knew that some workers were about to be laid off. Not to be replaced by machines, but merely because of a timber surplus. Nobody in this town would believe that, not after the rumor got around.

\* \* \*

In San Diego, a militant splinter group of religious fanatics suddenly found themselves with a benefactor who was willing to supply them with weapons. Non-lethal ones, but hey, it was better than nothing.

\* \* \*

In Port Moresby, a dissident writer suddenly had access to holoproj replication equipment, so a hundred thousand copies of his latest work detailing Confederation atrocities could be duplicated. And distributed.

\* \* \*

In New Orleans, where graft and bribery were part of everyday life, several high-ranking Confed officials were pressured to supply very secret Confederation information. Where money didn't work, blackmail sometimes did.

\* \* \*

Flying the short-range hopper from Rome to New Baghdad, Khadaji felt very much like a Black Butterfly. He had never had much hope that Wall would capitulate, but he had learned something very valuable from their meeting. And he had had to try, of course. How odd that his own experience would come in so handy now. Juete, the woman he had loved so long ago, had given him a weapon to use against Wall. It was a small thing, his knowledge, but sometimes big victories were won with enough small things.

Sometimes.

\* \* \*

The obvious places to hide were out, Dirisha knew. It was tempting to run to a cargo bay, to find a nest among the freight canisters, but that would be a stupid move. A couple of men with Doppler and bioseekers would quickly find a human where there wasn't supposed to be one.

And trying to blend into a collection of other people was out, too. She didn't know her enemies by sight, save Massey, and exposing herself to people exposed her to the unknown hounds.

So, she had to be someplace they weren't apt to look, or couldn't get to for a couple of days. The best place was also the simplest: she needed another room, one occupied by somebody else.

Dirisha headed for computer operations. She needed access to the ship's register of rooms. Given more time, she could have found a sympathetic lover, concocted a story, and had help. Sure. And given more time, she could have made her own Bender ship from wire and dead bushes, and flown off into the dark. Might as well wish for wings. No, she'd do it the fast way.

There were small consoles for passengers' use here and there on the ship, but Dirisha needed specific information. And for that, she needed a programmer, or at least somebody with the codes for the passenger list.

Outside the computer operations room, Dirisha found her helper. He was a tall young man, ship-pale and dressed in operator's coveralls. Dirisha fell into step beside him, and smiled.

"'lo," he said. "You looking for a little action?"

"Yeah, you could say that."

He grinned, sliding his gaze over Dirisha's tight body. "My room is this way –"

"Why wait? There's a privacy booth just ahead." Dirisha took his arm, and kneaded the muscle suggestively.

"Anything you say, chocolate." He draped one hand over Dirisha's shoulder and squeezed her breast lightly.

Inside the privacy booth, Dirisha hooked her right ankle behind the man's knees and shoved. He lost his balance and sprawled on the padded floor. He grinned. "Get right to it, hey? Let me get my clothes off –"

"Don't," Dirisha said. She turned her right palm so that it faced him. A flat metal disk with a short rod protruding from it lay on her hand. "You know what this is?"

The man's eyes widened. "It – it I-looks like a slapcap."

"That's what it is, Deuce. If you know what it is, then you know what it does. Let's you and me have a little talk."

He nodded. "S-s-sure."

Three minutes later, Dirisha stood in front of a terminal that would connect her to the ship's computer. Her programmer was asleep, and would remain so

for several hours. When he awoke, he would scream, and Massey would know what she had done, sort of. She had gotten a dozen codes from the programmer, only one of which she wanted. Massey wouldn't know what she had in mind, since several of the items were a lot more interesting. She had the codes for the weapons' room, the drive hatch, the escape ships, and the crew list, as well as the passenger manifest.

The laser printer fed her the sheets of hardcopy rapidly, and in another five minutes, Dirisha had what she needed now, and more she might need later.

The right way for Massey to do it would be to examine each room on the ship physically; Dirisha didn't think he had enough people to do that before they reached the next port. That he wanted her alive was obvious; otherwise, she'd already be dead. She needed two days. And in two days, she had to figure a way off the ship.

She found a public fresher, entered a stall, and lit the privacy diode. She sat on the bidet and began to read the passenger manifest.

## EIGHTEEN

WALL WAS IN HIS AIRCOACH traveling to Manchester. He had made his choice, and he wanted to speak to the parents personally, to assure them of how well their daughter would be treated. There would be no objections from them, he was certain. It was not every girl who had personal instruction from the most powerful man in the galaxy. Upper-middle-class parents would kill for the right to say as much to their friends: "Shelly? Why, she is in Australia at the Prep, didn't I mention that? Yes, Marcus Wall deemed her worthy of a full scholarship. Well, of course I call him Marcus. We're friends, after all. Yes, I spoke to him just the other day, and he is so pleased with Shelly's progress. So pleased."

How easy it was to despise them, Wall thought.

There was an admiring throng at the pad, and Wall smiled and waved to them from behind his densecris shield and moving wedge of bodyguards. Holocameras caught the carefully staged show of respect, to repeat it on newsfax casts. With the troubles on the out worlds, it paid to keep reminding everybody how normal things were where it really counted. Wall smiled and waved.

Amidst the admiratory walls, there came a word that killed Wall's smile and caused him to stop as though he had hit a thick post.

"Tavee! Hey, Tavee!"

Wall spun, his robe flaring, and frantically searched for the source of the voice.

Thirty meters away, standing near the entrance to the underground tube, stood Artemis. The same youthful man Wall had seen in the holoproj of Hawaii.

Before Wall could speak, the man turned and walked calmly into the tube's entrance, out of sight.

"That man!" Wall yelled. "Get him!"

"Where, my lord?" the nearest bodyguard said, drawing his weapon.

"There, at the tube! He just went in!"

Half a dozen guards sprinted for the tube's entrance. Wall stood as if transfixed, waiting.

Five minutes later, the guards were back. Without the man Wall had seen.

Wall turned and went back to his aircoach. "My visit here is cancelled," he said.

Inside the coach, Wall kept shaking his head. It was no coincidence. There were only two explanations he could think of, and neither brought him any joy. Either he was mad, and being haunted by the shade of a man dead fifty years, or somebody was privy to knowledge to which they could not possibly have access. Not possibly. He could discount the first explanation, he was sure. And who could know about Artemis?

That the first time he had seen the facsimile had been while viewing a recording of Khadaji's hideout on Hawaii was not lost on Wall. There was no way, and yet the man *knew*!

Even protected by the thick walls of his coach, Wall suddenly felt exposed and vulnerable, as much so as when he had faced Khadaji personally in this same enclosure only a few weeks before.

Marcus Jefferson Wall, the most powerful man in the galaxy, rode in the lap of luxury, dry-mouthed and afraid.

\* \* \*

Khadaji moved through the dark, a part of the shadows. Aside from his spetsdöds, he was armed with his martial skills, not the least of which was a practiced ninj-ability to blend into almost any background. That alone would have shielded him from most human eyes; the class-one shiftsuit he wore, a miracle of viral electronics capable of focus matching the nearest background within a quarter second, hid him from any other organic notice. A confounder

nestled against his belt shrouded him from electronic eyes and ears. It would take a very good guard indeed to spot Khadaji, and where he was going, the guards were apt to be no more than competent.

Where he was going was the hangar in which Wall's personal aircoach was housed.

The hangar would be guarded, of course, but not heavily. Wall was not in the vehicle, and it was routinely inspected before each use for possible sabotage, inspected very carefully, especially since the "assassination" attempt in Brisbane. No matter. Khadaji was not after Wall; he merely wanted to make a point.

What had worked for entering a not-too-secure warehouse on Greaves should also work on Earth. The essential ingredient was rain, which was due to start falling in a few minutes. Soldiers hated rain and usually avoided standing in it, if they could. That would buy him access to the building's roof. On Greaves, he had deliberately tripped inside alarms of a warehouse several times until the system had been shut down by angry troopers. Once that was done, the inside of the building was easy. Through the roof, in and out, and he was gone.

Earth soldiers were no less cooperative than those on Greaves. It took an hour, but after six false alarms, the inside system bioelectrics were turned off. Khadaji used a wire ladder to reach the floor. He attached the shaped-charge to the aircoach, used a buzzpoint to etch a message onto the hatch of Wall's salon, and left.

A kilometer away, Khadaji stopped, part of the night. He thumbed the transmitter into life. The roof of the hangar blew out in a bright flash, followed a couple of seconds later by the sound of the explosion. The charge would have blown the coach in two, leaving the message on the hatch intact for Wall's inspection.

Khadaji laughed softly, flattened himself against a corrugated green plastic wall as four quads of troopers went running past, toward the noise. When the soldiers were gone, he had a brief moment of nostalgia for the days of guerrilla activity on Greaves, when it had been one against all.

The Shamba Scum had struck again....

\* \* \*

Dirisha had found the room she needed. It was occupied by two women and a man, listed as a group marriage from the wheelworld of Malgranda Luno, circling Farbis, in the Bruna System. One of the women was dark-skinned and

fairly large, so that if she were seen entering the room, Dirisha might not be wondered about by a casual viewer. It was the best choice, under the circumstances. If Massey did start a room search, he was likely to concentrate on those rooms with single occupants first. Controlling three people for any amount of time would be difficult at best. At least she hoped Massey would see it that way.

She stopped briefly at a pub and obtained two weeks' supply of a high-range soporific; her last public appearance for a while, she hoped. Then she went to cabin 2322.

A thin, spindly man answered the door. He was a Farbisian, to judge from his upswept hair style and Dirisha's first thought was to wonder how he managed to handle two women. Old pattern of thinking, she corrected herself mentally. Maybe they handled each other and he watched. Or maybe he had a wart....

"Yes?"

"Maintenance sent me," Dirisha said. "To fix the drink dispense."

"I wasn't aware it was malfunctioning."

"That's why I'm the tech and you're not," Dirisha said.

"How droll. Paliva, Orsal, there's a technical person here. Try and conduct yourselves accordingly."

The two women were playing some kind of card game on the room's single, large bed. The larger woman—Paliva, Dirisha knew—wore a thin silk wrap; Orsal was nude. Both glanced up at Dirisha, then went back to their game. In a moment, the man, Ledo, joined them.

Dirisha went to the dispense and began fiddling with it. She removed the cover, then hid the unit from the three with her body. She took five of the high-range sops, each a single crystal the size of a pinhead, and dropped them into one of the plastic glasses next to the dispense. She coded the unit to produce a thin stream of vintage red wine and watched the crystals fizz and dissolve as the wine washed over them. She then divided the wine into three portions, each in a separate glass.

"Excuse me," Dirisha said to the trio on the bed. "I need your assistance. If you would please taste this wine, to see if the problem with the dispense has been corrected?" She extended the glasses.

"Tastes fine to me," Ledo said. "A bit on the tart side, but ship wine is always lacking something."

Paliva shrugged as she downed the wine. "I'm a beer fan myself. It all tastes sour to me."

Orsal said, "It needs more aging, but I don't suppose the dispense can help that."

Dirisha smiled, and thanked them. She covered the perfectly fine dispense unit and left.

Fifteen minutes later, she was back. She had the entry code to the door, so getting in was no problem. The triad lay peacefully sleeping on the bed, the cards scattered where they had fallen.

Well. She had a place to hide. The four of them could live on liquids easily enough for two days; some of the ship's selections were quite nourishing. The group marriagees would sleep most of the time, or be so out of it they wouldn't know what was going on.

Dirisha sat on the stuffed chair close to the bed and thought about her next move. This was all going to be wasted effort if she couldn't come up with a way to leave the ship when it stopped.

The obvious ways were the most dangerous, for they would be just as obvious to Massey and his troops. Walking to the shuttle would be foolhardy; trying to steal an escape pod or lighter was out, since she was certain they'd be guarded, and probably rigged to new start codes. Hiding in cargo or luggage was possible, but likely there was some procedure for inspection, and probably not all that much leaving the ship at the next juncture. Disguise was a possibility. Hiding in the solid waste might be another. Nothing seemed particularly appealing.

What would Khadaji do in this situation? In his teachings while disguised as Pen, he had always stressed looking at all parts of a problem, of sometimes picking the obvious, but sometimes finding a section of the circle no one would suspect. Come on, Dirisha, *think*. You've got to get off the ship –

Wait. There was something there.... Dirisha grinned. Maybe she *didn't* have to get off the ship, not if she could somehow convince Massey and his thugs that she had gotten off! If they thought she was gone, they'd go after her. Maybe not all of them, but if she could throw enough of them off her track, she could leave at the next stop, another two days beyond. It would certainly be a lot easier then. Yeah. That'd do it. She might be able to pull it off. There was a computer console in the room, and she had the codes for ship-to-port communication. A local Confed agent could spot her scuttling for safety at the port and give Massey a call. He'd have to go after her, especially if there

was a positive identification. Yeah. The timing would have to be close, just as the ship was ready to leave, but she had the schedules for that, too.

Thanks, Emile, wherever you are.

## NINETEEN

AT DUSK on a balmy September evening the Kookaburra Beacon finally died.

Wall regarded the news with a feeling just to the left of panic. He sat in his organomechanical chair and listened to the vapid newscaster's voiceover as the unblinking eye of the camera focused on the dead beacon. Darkness had fallen, and for the first time in seventy-seven years, the night was unhindered by the Miracle of Birdsville.

Wall knew the story well enough. It had been the subject of reports for at least sixty years, long since leaving the party chatter of Earth to make the rounds of bored gatherings around the civilized galaxy.

The Kookaburra Beacon was nothing more than a small sign lamp that had been wired into place over a poster board on the back wall of a pub in central Australia, the old state of Queensland. It was a small bulb, twenty-five watts, tungsten-alloy element in vacuum, surrounded by clear glass. The owner of the Kookaburra Public House had set the bulb in a cheap socket and tied it directly to a DC line running to the pub's main battery. It was easier just to let the porky thing run, don'tcha know, than to wire in a bleedin' switch. He could, he thought at the time, just unscrew the bulb when it burned out and toss it a damnsight easier than fiddlin' alia time with a control.

He, lived long enough to see his grandsons still waiting for the bulb to go nova.

There might have been some doubt that the bulb was the same, but during the same afternoon he'd installed the bulletin board, the owner and operator of Birdsville's largest rec-chem facility had been doing some touch-up painting on the wall above it. He'd spilled a long dribble of Sherman's Everlast Exterior—guaranteed for a hundred years exposure to desert sunlight—and the pale blue paint had landed on the bulb and its socket. Three quarters of a century later, the paint had faded some, but it was still there in an unbroken line across the socket and bulb.

After ten years, the beacon was local curiosity.

After twenty years, tourists would drop by to see the technological wonder.



After fifty years, legends had been thickly formed about the beacon. Some were quite fanciful and had religious overtones. A densecris cover had been put up, to keep some fanatic from tossing a rock at the beacon. Armed guards stood watch round the clock. Over a hundred thousand tourists a year came to gawk at the little lamp. Expert scientists had examined the bulb, wire, battery, and paint, and pronounced them authentic. For a device rated at perhaps a thousand hours, the Kookaburra Beacon had long outlived the company that had produced it. It had become a symbol of many different things: some said it represented man's struggle against the forces of darkness; some said it showed that technology was salvation; some said the beacon represented the Confederation, and that as long as it burned, the Confed would rule.

As the early evening shadows stretched into night that balmy and fateful day, however, the little bulb winked out. The dozen or so who happened to be watching drew in simultaneous breaths and held them, as the last orange glow faded from the heroic wire.

The Kookaburra Beacon had finally been overcome by the forces of entropy.

Wall was not one to believe in portents or prophecies, but as he watched the final seconds of the newsfax cast, he felt the now-familiar cold hand of fear massage the back of his neck a bit harder than usual. That little light was a symbol, burning since before he had been born.

For a wild moment, he *knew* that Khadaji was somehow responsible for this, too. Stop it, Wall – that way lay madness!

Wall shut the holoproj down with a terse command. Things were not going well. Khadaji was still at large, as were all his matadors. Revolution held sway over the populations of nine of the Fifty-Six Worlds and seven of the Eighty-Seven Wheel worlds. Unrest stirred on a dozen other planets and twice that number of artificial satellites. Damn, it was all happening so fast –

Wall's com circuit chirped. Only a dozen people had clearance to use his code, all of them important.

"Yes?"

"My Lord Factor." It was the acting Chief of the Guard.

"Yes? What is it?"

"There has been an... incident, my lord."

"Incident? What kind of incident?"

"Your personal aircoach has been bombed."

"Bombed? How?"

"We have yet to determine that, my lord. It happened a few hours ago. We have been investigating – "

"Is the area secured?" Wall cut in.

"Yes, my lord – "

"I'll be there shortly. I want to see for myself."

"I don't think that would be a good – "

"If you *thought*. Chief, my aircoach would be intact."

\* \* \*

The destruction of his prized coach was total. Wall picked up a twisted and blast-darkened section of his motif, then let it drop. A moment later, the message graven into the hatch was found. Some quirk allowed a thin beam of sunlight through a crack in the destroyed roof, so that the hatch was illuminated as if by a focused light:

*The People Have Long Memories*, was all it said.

\* \* \*

Emile Antoon Khadaji felt his palms grow damp and his heart begin to speed up, despite his attempts to maintain his calm. He sat in the anteroom of a religious commune on Manus Island, in the Bismarck Sea, three hundred kilometers northeast of Wewak, New Guinea. For the last hundred years, the island had belonged to the religious order, which had made the place virtually self-sufficient. As a basically pacifistic organization, the order had been tolerated by the Confed. They paid their taxes, stayed out of politics, and obeyed – ostensibly, at least – the law.

The order was known as the Siblings of the Shroud.

Khadaji knew this, for he had become much of what he was due to the teachings of the Shroud, in the person of Pen. Pen, who found him in a daze after the Slaughter at Maro, and who had taught him the Ninety-seven Steps of Sumito; Pen, who had taught him how to tend pub; Pen, who had given real direction to the boy who had touched the face of the Cosmic. Khadaji hadn't seen the old man in years and had seen his face only once, was now about to meet his teacher again.

The figure standing near the entrance was wrapped in the voluminous folds of his robe, which covered all of him, save his hands and eyes. The two additional figures who came walking down the hall in that smooth, flowing gait were similarly dressed. To a casual eye, there was no way to determine the identity of the Siblings, but Khadaji's gaze was more than casual. He recognized Pen instantly from his walk. Khadaji stood, and smiled.

"Ah, Emile," Pen said. "It has been too long."

Khadaji caught the old man's hand—it was wrinkled a bit more, but still firm and powerful—and brought it to his lips. They stood that way for a moment, then Pen gently pulled his hand back. "So, you don't look like a legend."

"I can't say as I feel much like one, either," Khadaji said.

"We will talk."

At this, the other two Siblings glided quietly away, leaving Khadaji with his mentor. "Allow me to show you the grounds of the courtyard."

Khadaji nodded, and followed Pen.

"I saw your best students," Pen said, as they exited the building into the courtyard. The place was thick with flowering bushes, bright color splashed against the green. A path of what looked like marble wound through the carefully tended plantings. "You are to be complimented. They were going to bend to Renault to free you. Your escape must have been frustrating."

"Let me guess. You tried to talk them out of it?"

"Am I that transparent?"

Khadaji laughed. He stopped to smell the fragrance of a pale green rose. "You are as transparent as a tub of mud, Pen. I appreciate all the help the Siblings have given me, carrying messages and so forth. What I am still unclear about is why."

The pair cleared the forest of bushes, to behold a clearing of thick, short grass. To one side was a wide strip of flat rock with six sets of sumito foot patterns imprinted upon the exercise material.

Pen cleared his throat. "The Siblings have been peaceful for a hundred and fifty years. Philosophically, we prefer peace, but we like to think of ourselves as prepared for anything. While there have always been good reasons to fight, the opportunity for doing so effectively has only opened its window recently."

Pen strolled across the cushiony grass. Khadaji followed. They stopped near the middle of the clearing, in the sunshine. Khadaji said, "I've been accused of being manipulative, with good cause. I set my students on this path to bring down the Confed. I've got good people waiting to step in when the beast lets out its final death-bellow. More than two decades of work, some of it not pretty. But I get the impression that what I have done to others was done to me first. Any truth to that, Pen?"

The older man turned, his dark gray robes hanging heavy in the humid air. "Few men have felt the *Relampago*, Emile, the touch of the Alless as you felt it. It gave you vision, the true-sight. We in the Shroud were privileged to help you achieve your vision."

Khadaji laughed softly. "That's what I thought, old friend. Not that it matters. I can hardly blame anybody else for doing the same things I have done. I just wanted to be sure."

"You were already sure, Emile."

"Yeah. I guess I was."

"And what will you do now?"

Khadaji turned to stare at the surrounding tropical vegetation. "The end is near, I think. The fight will be coming to Earth. I expect some of my matadors soon."

"Some are already here," Pen said.

"You know that, you must know who."

"The one called Red, and his daughter, Geneva. The large one, Saval, and the holy woman, Mayli. There is one who has sustained the loss of an arm, Sleel."

Khadaji nodded. "Dirisha should be with them."

"We have not seen her."

Khadaji focused on a particularly bright batch of flowers, an electric blue color, speckled with yellow. Dirisha. He hoped she was all right.

\* \* \*

Dirisha struggled with the sleepy form of Orsal, half-carrying the woman back from the fresher to the bed. Keeping the three passengers on downchem for four days had been no problem. It was keeping them hydrated and then emptied that was a hassle. Orsal had slipped back into sleep and off the bidet when Dirisha turned away for a few seconds; fortunately, she had finished urinating.

Orsal flopped back onto the bed and began to snore. The three of them would awaken soon, hungover, but none the worse for wear. By then, Dirisha hoped to be gone from their lives and the ship. The port of Volny, the small wheel-world in direct orbit around Svare, was only a few hours away. If things went like she hoped, Dirisha could leave *the Raymond Bartlett*, real space to Kalk, and catch another Bender from there to Earth.

It was no certain task. She had sent the bogus message to draw Massey and his people off at the last stop. With luck, they'd still be searching for her

there. They might suspect a trick when they didn't find her on Vul, but maybe not. The major difference, Dirisha figured, was that now the inside of the ship would not be covered as well. She'd had four days to work on the access codes for the escape pods and the lighter, and she had the sequences in hand. The pods would get her free, but not far; the lighter, on the other hand, would get her all the way to Kalk. It was her best bet, and she decided to chance it.

"Thanks for the company, gang," she said to the sleeping trio as she left the room.

She felt tenseness creeping into her shoulders as she walked the corridor toward the lighter's dock. She wished she had her spetsdöds, but risking her own room didn't appeal. She had her slapcap, a highvolt buckle buzzer, and a small bonus from the passengers in cabin 2322: a close-range stink bomb. The bomb contained a gageant potent enough to make anyone without nares filters want to run. Not the most dependable of self-defense weapons, but better than nothing. It gave her more range than the cap or buzzer. She also had the set of filters she'd found with the bomb, and they were in place. They made her want to sneeze.

Since she had the codes, gaining access to the lighter's dock was no problem. The *Raymond Bartlett* had already shifted from bent space back into real, and Dirisha wanted to steal the lighter and be gone before the liner reached the control net around the wheelworld. She could jive the Kalkian orbit setters long enough to put the ship down, she was sure.

The hatch slid open and Dirisha stepped through, into a domed hangar. The lighter sat in the middle of the launch and landing pad, facing the exit hatches. She wouldn't want to spend six months in the tiny ship, but it would get her where she wanted to go. The hangar seemed to be empty. Good. Dirisha started toward the lighter, holding the stink bomb loosely in her right hand.

"End of the line, Dirisha," came a voice. Massey!

Dirisha turned slowly, to see the Confed agent move from behind a compressor housing. He held a hand wand, aimed at her. He was maybe seven meters away.

"Let's see the hands, clear and empty."

Dirisha started to move her clenched hands away from her body, slowly.

"I knew you'd still be on board. Pen taught us –"

Dirisha whipped her right hand toward Massey, triggering the stink bomb as she flung it at his face. She followed her hand in a long dive, intending to tuck and roll out. Massey's wand thrummed, and Dirisha's left side took fire, going numb almost instantly. She hit the deck too hard, the tuck only half done. Her left arm was limp and her left hip tingled, but she still had control of her leg.

The bomb exploded with a *whomp!* and a yellow haze burst out. "Fuck!" Massey yelled. The wand thrummed again, but Dirisha didn't feel the pulse. She scrambled up from the deck and began weaving the sumito pattern toward Massey.

Massey threw up. He saw Dirisha, spun to face her, but slipped in his own vomit. He threw his arms out for balance, and let go of the hand wand. The weapon sailed through the air behind him.

The Confed agent had caught a hard blast of the stink bomb, but the room was too big for the gas to stay concentrated. Dirisha covered the distance between them quickly, but Massey dropped into his own sumito stance.

Dirisha stopped three meters away. Her left arm was going to be dead for an hour, and her chest, lats, and abs on that side were also impaired. Massey was still retching, but on his feet. She had the buckle buzzer and the slapcap. If she could get close, she could smoke him.

A glittering blade caught the dome lights as Massey pulled a curved knife from his tunic. Dirisha almost laughed. It was Khadaji's knife; she'd had it in her room.

They stood that way for a moment, neither willing to attack. Dirisha realized that Massey might have help on the way and that if she delayed too long, she'd miss her chance. She edged toward him.

Inside his range and at the edge of hers, Massey lunged. She didn't have time to palm the slapcap or pull the buzzer. The knife flashed by her ear. Dirisha danced away awkwardly, out-of-balance, and parried the slash. Massey tried to circle the cut, but was too far to reach her. Dirisha snapped a kick up at Massey's groin, but he blocked it with a punch. They both danced away.

On the next pass, Massey hooked the point of the knife just under Dirisha's left breast. The sharp tip gouged a rib, but Dirisha didn't feel any pain. She slammed an elbow against Massey's forehead, knocking him backward, but not down.

Massey leaped back at Dirisha, screaming a continuous *kiai!* He swung the knife in an uppercut, aiming for her groin. It was a classic strike, and deadly. For all her years of training, the defense that came back was one she'd learned in her first dojo. She bone-blocked Massey's wrist with her good forearm, twisted her hand as she jerked back, and snatched the knife from Massey's grasp. A showy move, and a dangerous one. Instru'isto would have never approved its use in actual combat; he would have yelled at her, were he here.

Massey backed away. Now she could finish him—

A green beam splashed from the wall between Dirisha and Massey, bringing with it the smell of burned metal. Ceepee!

Dirisha spun, to see a man waving a power pistol at her. It was time to leave this game. She ran for the lighter.

Massey screamed something, and another lance of focused charged-particles winked by, missing by centimeters. Then Dirisha was around the tail of the lighter and at the entry hatch. She punched in the entry code, missed a button, and had to redo it. Footsteps pounded on the deck. Get it right, Dirisha!

The hatch slid up. Dirisha leaped into the little ship and hit the close control. The hatch slid down. Somebody pounded on the outside. Dirisha locked the override control.

She ran to the pilot's seat and fell into it. She taxied toward the exit lock on wheelmotor power. Come on, open, you son-of-a-turd, open!

When the nose of the lighter was nearly touching the lock, the doors split and slid back, revealing the outer hatch. She didn't have time for the automatics to pump the air into a holding tank. She hit her override switch and kept the wheelmotors going. She lit the engines and ran them up to full idle.

The outer hatch slid open and a rush of air going into vac followed. The air turned white and froze as it hit the cold vacuum. There was something else, too—

Massey. His wide-mouthed form flew past the forward viewport of the lighter and into empty space. He must have followed her into the lock, still trying to get the lighter's hatch open. The explosive decompression of the lock had blown him right out....

The body floated away from the ship, now surrounded by a red and yellow crystalline haze of frozen body fluids. Not a good way to die. But dead was dead, and if she didn't get moving, she might well join him.

Dirisha engaged the thrusters and shot out of the *Raymond Bartlett*, a fiery-tailed dart leaving the belly of a whale.

## TWENTY

THE MARK OF A CIVILIZED MAN was to know when to leave the party. Marcus Wall certainly considered himself a civilized man. He had been called a spider in a web by some, but this spider knew that when the web snared something too big to eat, it was time to leave. Another web could be spun, another time, another place.

It was not quite time, but it was close. From his precious room with all its comforts, Wall knew it was no longer *if*, but *when*. Khadaji and his cohort hadn't won yet, it was still possible that they might all be destroyed, but Wall would not bet his life on it. Of course, what might happen after they tore it all down was arguable, but that it was being disassembled was no longer open to reasonable doubt. Not to Wall.

He sighed. Who would have thought it? That a small band of fanatics could have done so much so quickly? Of course, history showed that fanatics were always people to be wary of; still, no empire in history had ever approached the size and scope of the Confederation.

Wall rubbed his bare feet upon the delicious carpet. When the proper time came, soon, five men as nearly identical to Wall as surgically possible would depart for five separate destinations. Each would be guarded, each would carry a small fortune in gems and rare oddities, each would be on his own, once he reached his assigned destination. Expensive stalking horses, but worth every stad. If the rabble wanted somebody to chase, he would give them somebody. Five somebodies. Wall himself at that point would no longer look like he did now. Originally, he had planned to leach the skin and hair dyes, remove the droptacs, and with a little specialized surgery, return to what he had once been. Now that Khadaji knew he was an albino, that option was out. It had been so perfect, too. Darkworld albinos stood out wherever they traveled. Who would suspect somebody so in the public eye to be the kingmaker Marcus Wall?



Ah, well. The best-laid plans and all that. His surgical staff would make him into something else, less obvious, perhaps, but just as effective. The staff would then, be disposed of, and the new man would never meet anyone who knew his face. In a few years, a rich miner, say, could work his way back into favor, with no one the wiser. Aided by his cunning, experience and invisible pheromones, the former Tavee, the former Wall, the new Somebody would once again spin his web to gather in the power. Carefully, but surely. The rabble would always need men like him; the sheep never looked up for more than a brief moment.

"Marcus?"

"What is it, Cteel?"

"I have a report from the Bender liner *Raymond Bartlett*, off the Svare wheelworld."

"Concerning...?"

"Your agent, Massey."

"Good news?"

"Not for Massey. He is dead. The outlaw matador he was following has escaped."

Wall digested that rank morsel. Massey was one of them, the best Wall had. If he couldn't catch them, nobody else was likely to, either. The time was drawing closer.

"My lord?"

"Yes?"

"You have a request for an audience."

"Deny it. I am granting no audiences this week." Or any week, so it seems, Wall thought.

"Yes, my lord."

"Just for curiosity's sake, who was it wishing the audience?" Which of the frightened rats wished succor now?

"Elesas Duvul, my lord."

The name meant nothing to Wall... for a moment. Then he remembered. Nichole. Her real name.

The pain he felt was almost immediately replaced by a surge of pleasure. Ah, the fair child would be considerably older now. Perhaps even... haggard. The thought was too much.

"Rescind that order, Cteel. I find that I can allow myself one visitor to my sanctum this week after all. Schedule her for tomorrow. Do we have a holograph of her as she appears now?"

"In the medical files there is a record entered yesterday," Cteel said. "Should I project it for you?"

"Yes—no, wait. Don't. I should like to be surprised, I think." How much better that would be!

Wall's com circuit sang its birdlike song. A caller? What now?

"Hello, Marcus."

It was *him!* Khadaji!

"*How did you get this number?*" Wall was both angry and afraid.

"Does it really matter? I know all kinds of things about you, Marcus. Or should I say Tavee?"

To Cteel, Wall said, "Visual!"

The space for Khadaji's holo remained blank, however. Wall faced the nearest of the computer's visual monitors and silently mouthed the words "Trace this call!"

As if he were also reading Wall's lips, Khadaji said, "It won't do you any good to have your dead friend try to find me. I am three circuits away. It'll take much longer than you've got."

"What do you want?"

"Just to remind you that you reneged on our agreement. There's a price to be paid, Marcus, and you must be prepared to pay it. Soon."

"Listen to me, you godsdamned traitor—" Wall began.

"He is no longer on com," Cteel cut in.

"*Where is he?*"

"I cannot say, my lord. He could be almost anywhere."

Wall was shaking with reaction. Yes. He could be almost anywhere, and he knew too much without having had some powerful help to find it out. It was time to go, Wall suddenly knew. He would set his plan in motion. Tomorrow, right after he saw Nichole, he would leave.

Tomorrow.

\* \* \*

Outside Marcus Jefferson Wall's own medical center, the Man Who Never Missed touched a button and disconnected his electronic link with the Factor. He had another call to make.

The number Khadaji called existed only in the pseudo-reality of a computer's brain, halfway around the Earth. The scrambled signal relayed by the computer was bounced twice again before it established the communication Khadaji wanted. The voice that answered was that of Rajeem Carlos.

"Yes?"

"It's Emile, Rajeem. How goes it?"

"Emile! We're ready. And there is a new element."

"Good, I hope?"

"You might say that. Venture is with us."

Khadaji wasn't certain he had heard correctly. "Venture?"

"Supreme Commander of Confederation Ground Forces," Carlos said. "Now on Earth by the grace of President Kokl'u Himself."

"Damn. Are you sure about this?"

"You must have impressed the hell out of him, Emile. He has a definite desire to be on the winning side."

"I will be goddamned," Khadaji said softly.

"Likely, if there are gods. But Venture says we can only count on half or less of his Terran Corps. Many are personally loyal to the President, and thus Wall. You may be sure that they have taken pains to see to that."

"No doubt," Khadaji said. "Still, that's a lot more than we hoped for. And I think Marcus Wall will cease to be a factor – no pun intended – very soon."

"Ah."

"Yes. Discom, Rajeem. I'll see you at the agreed time and place."

"Good luck, Emile."

"And you, Rajeem."

Khadaji nodded to himself outside the com station. The gloves were about to come off.

\* \* \*

The Bender ship to Earth had bypassed three of its scheduled stops. Dirisha took that as a good sign. The boxcar from orbit was full of tension, though nobody did more than briefly scan her fake identification. They weren't looking for her here. She made it to the ground and into the giant multiplex multilevel city of Toronto. An hour later, she made the first of six transcontinental hops on her way to the meeting place in Canberra.

Red, his hair dyed black and his face altered by a skin-mask, met her at the terminal. To her unspoken question, he said, "Everybody's fine. Waiting for you to show."

Dirisha felt some of the tension ebb from her. They were together again. When they got back to the private house where the others were, Pen was also there.

"Emile sends his best," Pen said. "And some instructions, if you're interested."

Dirisha nodded. She was interested. She tossed the cheap bag she'd bought onto a couch. A cloth-wrapped bundle tumbled out. The cloth unrolled, revealing the curved knife, sans sheath.

Pen glanced at the weapon, then moved to pick it up. He spun it in his hands. "It's been a long time since I held this," he said.

"Might have been a lot longer," Dirisha said. She told them about the encounter with Massey. "It's funny. I don't remember what I did with the knife after I took it from Massey. One arm was numb and I had to use the other hand to punch in the door code to get into the lighter. I must have tucked it into my belt or under an arm. The next time I saw it, the knife was on the seat next to me.

"I guess I'll have to get a new sheath made for it."

Sleel waved his prosthetic arm. "You could go back and get the old one from Massey," he said. "He probably isn't using it."

Dirisha grinned at him. "You know, I never thought I'd say this, but I missed you, Sleel. There were times you'd have come in handy."

"You know me, I come in any way I can."

"Emile has something he'd like you to do," Pen said. "He says the time has come to put out the lights."

Dirisha looked around at the others. They were watching her, to see how she would react. Would they follow her, instead of Khadaji? What, were they crazy?

"Okay, Pen. So tell us. And keep it simple, so Sleel can follow along."

## TWENTY-ONE

WALL CAREFULLY INSPECTED the image produced by his holographic mirror. A handsome man, quite so. Too bad. He hated to give up the carefully built appearance, but it was necessary. Nichole would be coming by in a

couple of hours, she had to see him in his full glory; after that, he would go to his doctors. By this time tomorrow, he would be a new man. He'd have to go skinmasked, until the delicate cuttings healed, but he'd be taller, thinner, and darker, and his eyes would be a different color. He had dozens of prepared identities to choose from, though he would use none of them. He had the equipment for making ID tags hidden in his escape ship, and he would produce a new one there, one there could be no possible record of anywhere. Even the illusive Khadaji could not know that which did not yet exist.

It was a shame he couldn't take Cteel with him. Oh, it would have been easy enough to have the matrix transferred to the ship's computer, or into a storage medium, but that would be sentimental and foolish. If he were stopped by some zealous rebel, there must be nothing to tie the new man to the old. Records existed already, showing major contributions to various revolutionary enterprises. Wall's knowledge of those contributions, and the pseudonym of the donor, would show his sympathies. Hey, I helped, I'm part of the New Order. Conversely, Wall also had records showing he was a staunch supporter of the Confed, in case he ran into loyalists. Whatever it took, he was prepared.

He had originally intended to return to his homeworld, Rim, but Khadaji's meddling had scotched that idea. His research showed that Khadaji was from the planet of San Yubi, and Wall counted it an irony, for that had been his second choice of a place to hide. So it would be.

By tomorrow, Marcus Jefferson Wall would exist only as a memory, and the man who had used him so skillfully and long would be off for new adventures. In a way, it was not so bad. Certainly being the supreme power in man's galaxy had its compensations, that could not be denied. But the idea of starting fresh, to rise again with only his skill and a small fortune, had some appeal.

Wall regarded his twin, and nodded. His only real regrets were that he had not been able to destroy Khadaji – and that one could be accomplished still, in time. The other thing that bothered him was that he couldn't take his new flower with him. Ah, that would have made things perfect, but alas, it was too much a risk. The connection was known, and even if not, too many people knew of his generosity with the young ones. He had briefly considered passing her off as his daughter, but that left too many holes, were she to be

questioned carefully. No, he would have to go alone. But no matter, in the long run. The galaxy was full of lovely flowers, waiting for him.

Just waiting for him.

\* \* \*

In a small dojo on the outskirts of Tokyo, Khadaji stood alone, facing a wall of plastic mirrors. He bowed to himself, turned, and began walking the Ninety-seven Steps. He had been practicing the pattern for more than twenty years, since Pen had first taught him. He could walk it almost unconsciously now, as smoothly as silk drawn over a densecris globe. As he danced, he remembered those first days with Pen, then those that followed, on Rim. And Juete, the albino exotic he had loved there. She lived in luxury now, from a trust he had set up for her years later, when he'd had the money. He talked to her sometimes. It had been Juete who had given him the information about Wall, after he'd recognized the pheromonic touch of an albino when he'd kidnapped Wall. There were few albinos, and they all knew the stories of those who had escaped the harsh life they led on Rim. A name had turned up, and research had provided the likelihood of it being Wall. It must have been a hard psychological blow to Wall to have Khadaji's actor yell that name out. There had been four such actors, made up to look like the man Wall had killed. At least two of them had been seen.

Khadaji finished the pattern and turned, to repeat it. A martial dance, but a thing of beauty. He hadn't believed it was possible the first time he'd seen Pen perform it. But he'd learned. As his feet shifted over the tatami mats, Khadaji thought again about his purpose. So many years, so many lives changed, so many who would yet be changed. Was it all worth it? Yes, he still believed that. He had seen the Confed kill without compunction, coldly, carelessly. There was no room in man for that kind of thought, not the kind of man Khadaji envisioned. Yes, violence was sometimes necessary. He had learned to accept that over the years. But killing violence was to be avoided whenever possible, and if death was dealt, it must be as a final resort, when all else had failed. He had hated to use the tools of the Confed against it, had never quite resolved that in his own mind, but had recognized the need. Since his desertion on Maro, the question had ridden with him, along with his spiritual knowledge that human life was precious. Many would die in the time to come, and it would be partially his fault, and his karma to bear. But the end did justify the means sometimes, otherwise nothing would ever be accomplished. This was a hard time, but one which had to be faced.

The pattern complete again, Khadaji stood facing the mirror, on the same spot from which he'd started. The wheels were in spin, the magnetics in flux, the armies in motion. It remained to be seen how it would turn out. Even after more than two decades, he sometimes wondered, even against his mystical seeing: Am I doing the right thing? Who am I to decide the fate of Man?

A small voice that sometimes rose within him laughed. *Hey, you're the guy who did it, pal. Kinda late to worry about it now, ain't it?*

The Man Who Never Missed bowed to the mirror. Yeah. I guess.

\* \* \*

Red had the holoproj working. It showed a series of four huge satellites, shaped like old-fashioned ceiling fans. The six matadors watched as Pen told them what they were looking at.

"This is the geosynch grid that supplies power to the southern hemisphere of Earth. Each is capable of converting solar energy into electric power, then beaming that power to giant shortwave grids on Earth. The numbers are classified, but a single satellite can deliver in the neighborhood of nine million kilowatts."

"You want us to fly up there and shut them off?" Sleel chuckled. "It ain't gonna be like thumbing a tab, friend."

"No, the satellites are too well-protected. You'll have work on the receiving grids. There are six major ones, located in the uninhabited regions of central Australia."

"Yeah, right –"

"We can't destroy the grids," Dirisha cut in, "not with anything short of atomics. They are ten kilometers square. Each. But we can screw up the transmission equipment leading from the grids. We don't want any permanent damage here – we're going to have to live with what we do."

"A lot of people will suffer from a sudden loss of power," Mayli said. "Transports will fail, life support in large conclaves, food processors."

"We aren't going to short them all," Dirisha said. "Only the one that feeds Brisbane, the headquarters of the Confederation Ground Forces. And there will be some warning, to ground those vehicles depending on broadcast power."

"If they believe it," Bork said.

"It'll be a public warning," Dirisha said. "People don't want to listen, that's their problem."

"Is there a backup system?"

"They will be able to bleed the other grids, but it'll take time, a couple of days. That's all we'll need. After that, we're either riding high or in deep shit."

\* \* \*

Uninhabited was being kind, Dirisha thought. This part of the world was desert, broken here and there by rocks. No trees, no lakes, nothing. Getting to the rebroadcast couplers wouldn't be possible without some kind of ruse. The guards had a field of vision that reached the horizon. The only way in was in disguise. In the end, they chose a simple trick: they hijacked the supply van.

The driver wasn't happy, but the sight of all those spetsdöds pointed at him convinced the man to cooperate. If he didn't give the proper codes—which Dirisha had been given by Pen—he was going to be a dart board.

Getting inside the defensive perimeter was almost too easy. The security check consisted of a smile and a wave at the driver of the van. The big truck slid down its air cushion and into the compound. They weren't too worried, since the garrison consisted often quads of Confed troopers. Nobody would be stupid enough to run up against that kind of firepower. Almost nobody.

Aside from their spetsdöds, the matadors were dressed like Confederation troopers. Six new recruits would draw attention, but seen one at a time, it wasn't likely anybody would be too suspicious. The plan was simple enough: get to the electronics that controlled the transmission couplers and kill the computer and manual backups. Then get out. The trick lay in the timing. Dirisha had left a recorded message to be broadcast by Pen's pirate station on an old barge just off the coast of Brisbane. A hundred and eighty thousand watts, set to bleed all over the commercial holoproj bands. They'd hear it; they'd hear it for five thousand kilometers.

The power is going off in ten minutes, it would say. If your life depends on broadcast electricity, better make other arrangements.

Once that announcement went out, somebody might bother to check the garrison at the Gibson Desert Grid, just south of Lake Disappointment. That's where it would get tricky.

Bork and Sleel darted the four troopers who came to unload the van, and quickly dragged the unconscious men inside.

Mayli went to set up a field of fire at the rear of the loading dock.

Red and Geneva strolled across the interior of the warehouse as if they belonged there.



Dirisha walked toward the power complex, remembering the map she'd studied. In a shoulder bag, she carried enough thermoflex to melt a groundcar. She glanced at her chronometer. Ten minutes until the announcement. Bork and Sleel were to meet her at the power complex in five minutes. The others would maintain security at the van. In half an hour, they would be done and gone, if things went as planned. After that, according to Pen, Khadaji's allies would make their move. A coup was planned; Dirisha didn't know any of the details, but if it worked, loss of life would be minimal.

A guard watched Dirisha as she approached the entrance to the complex. She smiled at him. A hot wind blew through the compound, ruffling Dirisha's short hair. The guard must have noticed her spetsdöds, for he hooked a thumb under his carbine strap and started to slip it from his shoulder. "Hold up there a second, sister—" he began.

Dirisha shot him. The dart took him in the throat, and he snapped backward as the shocktox hit his system. His Parker carbine rattled against the plastcrete.

The matadora palmed the door wide, and stepped inside, pausing to drag the guard with her. The corridor was empty, a wide hallway of military-style hard foam.

Two technicians rounded a corner ten meters ahead of Dirisha. She shot them. The plan required directness, not finesse. Dirisha walked quickly toward her goal.

Another guard stood at the entrance to the computer room. He was good. As soon as he saw Dirisha, he snapped his carbine up from port arms and swung it toward her. Dirisha's spetsdöds coughed on full auto. Two darts hit the man's right hand, two more of the drugged flechettes hit his left. His hands spasmed first, triggering the carbine. As he fell, the gun stitched a line of craters up the hardfoam wall across from him.

Dirisha pulled the guard's entrycard from his pocket and opened the locked door. Four technicians flicked startled gazes at her as she pointed her left handgun at them. "Everybody on the floor, facedown, hands across the small of your back. Now."

The four complied. Dirisha shot them. Then she went to work.

She was rigging the third charge when the door monitor chimed three times. That would be Bork and Sleel. She finished setting her charges and the timer, and went to the door.

Bork and Sleel stood outside in the hall, watching in both directions. "Done," Dirisha said. She turned back to the door and jammed the guard's card into the reader slot, then twisted the plastic sharply. The card snapped in half and the door whirred, but remained closed. The Malfunction diode lit and flashed redly.

"Let's get to our stations."

The three moved up the hallway. "How about the back entrance?" Dirisha asked.

"Mined," Bork said.

"We've got three minutes before the 'cast."

Thirteen minutes. They had to keep anybody from getting to the control room for thirteen minutes. After that, it wouldn't matter.

Dirisha took the guard's place at the entrance, his Parker slung over her shoulder. Reluctantly, she removed her spetsdöds and put them in her bag. Sleel and Bork stayed just inside.

It took them six minutes, only three minutes after the 'cast, to send the first quad to check out the complex. The Sub-Lojt in charge said, "Where's Haney? He's supposed to be on duty."

"Diarrhea," Dirisha said. "I'm covering for him."

One of the three troopers behind the quadleader laughed. "Shut up, Deak," the leader said, without turning to see who'd been amused. To Dirisha, he said, "I don't know you."

"I just got here," Dirisha said. "Command is pulling Haney for medical evaluation. They think he's picked up an offworld strain of some new bug. I'm replacing him."

The Sub-Lojt looked suspicious, but only said, "Yeah, well, something is up. We're supposed to eyeball the whole complex."

"Go ahead," Dirisha said, affecting boredom. She moved to open the door for them. The quad entered the complex. Dirisha barely heard the sound of the spetsdöds. None of the quad returned fire.

At thirteen minutes, the door opened and Sleel and Bork stepped outside. In a few seconds the operations computer and manual backups were going to turn into slag. Not much damage in terms of the structure; the techs on the floor might get a little warm, but that would be all. And in those few seconds, nobody would be able to get there in time to stop it.

Dirisha leaned the carbine against the wall and pulled her spetsdöds from the bag. She reseated the weapons' plastic flesh against the backs of her

hands as the three began to walk across the compound. They had pulled it off.

As they neared the warehouse where the van awaited, at least two quads came running from their quarters. The computer must be dead.

The lights of Brisbane had just gone out.

One of the troopers yelled at the trio of matadors. The troopers weren't buying the fake uniform bit anymore.

The staccato sounds of spetsdöds on full auto were joined by the roar of Parker carbines.

## TWENTY-TWO

WALL FOUND HE WAS TREMBLING as Cteel made the announcement: Nichole had arrived. The man took a deep breath and released it. "Scan her. And I want to see it, but only after the skin." Mustn't kill the surprise.

The image appeared, blood vessels and muscles, unrecognizable as anybody Wall knew. The shadows of organs came and went; bones glowed with searching radiation.

"Clean," Cteel said. "She is unarmed."

"You're sure?"

"Hard Object scan is negative; Active Poison scan is negative; Explosive Compound scan is negative; Radiation Counters are within normal limits; Disease Scan shows only normal enteric and external flora and fauna – "

"All right, that's enough. Admit her. And keep this private, Cteel. No calls, no visitors." He was cautious, that was all. He had a spring gun in his gi-ban pocket, just in case Nichole had somehow learned some deadly martial art. Plus his zap fields and vouch. He was prepared.

The door slid aside. An old woman stood there, dressed in the clothes Nichole had worn when he'd seen her last. He would never have recognized her otherwise. The progeric process had made the child Nichole into a tottering and ancient crone. Her face was a mass of wrinkles, her eyes filmy, her features coarse. She shuffled in, atrophied muscles barely able to carry her. Her hair was dead white and stringy, so thin it barely covered her spotted scalp.

His moment of triumph felt flat. She deserved it, no mistake about that, but somehow the elation he thought he'd feel wasn't there. Still, she mustn't know that.

"Ah, Nichole. It has been so long, hasn't it?"

"Hello, Marcus." Oh, the voice was perfect. Scratchy, tremulous, almost a whisper. He felt a little better.

"Do come in and be seated. Can I offer you some refreshment?"

Nichole shuffled toward the nearer orthopedica, but only leaned against it instead of allowing the device to envelop her. She appeared to be breathing hard from the effort of that short walk.

Yes, Wall thought, this was what he wanted to see. To know that she was suffering, as he had suffered. He felt righteous joy suddenly, the triumph he deserved. She had schemed and lied and gotten more than she'd bargained for. It was justice, justice!

"Could I perhaps have some wine?"

"Of course." Wall grinned. He went to fetch it himself. He could be gracious, now.

He returned with the wine, one of the best vintages he had. The deep red liquid filled his finest crystal. Might as well use it, since he was leaving in a few hours. He handed Nichole the goblet and noticed how much her hand shook as she took it.

Wall raised his own glass to her. "What shall we toast, my dear? How about justice?"

Nichole nodded slowly. "All right, Marcus. To justice."

She gulped at the wine, spilling some, but downing most of it in big swallows.

Wall sipped at his wine lightly, savoring it; it, and her.

Nichole smiled. Still had all her teeth, Wall saw. But her gums had receded more than a little. The smile shut down, and Nichole looked as if she were in pain. Was she going to have a fatal attack right here? That was more than he wanted –

"...memories..." Nichole said.

"What?"

She was having trouble talking, but she got it out. "The people have... long... memories."

Horror swept over Wall. Khadaji! He dug for his spring gun. But Cteel had scanned her! She was unarmed!

Nichole's belly bulged under the thin silk cloth. She opened her mouth and retched. A thick cloud of black gas boiled forth from her lips and nostrils and

surrounded Wall. He backed away, yelling for his vouch, trying to hold his breath, still reaching for his gun.

Too late. Wall went cold, then numb. He couldn't feel his arms and legs, his body. He was like a man wrapped in thick meditation foam. He fell. He could still see and hear, but he couldn't move.

The vouch reached him. Wall saw Nichole fall against the orthopedia and slide to the floor. A needle probe from the medical mech stabbed into Wall's arm, but he didn't feel it. The vouch hummed, analyzing the poison, searching its electronic brain for an antidote.

Something that mixed with the wine, Wall realized. Khadaji had gotten to Nichole and given her some chemical that showed up as harmless on a scan. But when it mixed with wine, it made a poison gas. Diabolical.

Next to him, the vouch continued to hum. The device's holoproj screen flashed a rapid scan of compounds. It was the most advanced personal medical vouch in the galaxy, it would find an antidote! It had to, it had to—

The vouch's scanner stopped. The screen lit the air in front of Wall.

POISON UNKNOWN, it said. BASIC LIFE-SUPPORT TECHNIQUES INEFFECTIVE. AWAITING INSTRUCTIONS.

No! Call for help! But he could not speak.

Wall shifted his focus to the form of Nichole. She must be dying from the same gas; maybe she was already dead.

Wall saw that the old woman who had once been his favorite flower was smiling.

His chest muscles stopped working then, along with his diaphragm.

AWAITING INSTRUCTIONS, the vouch continued to pulse at him.

It was the last thing Marcus Jefferson Wall ever saw.

\* \* \*

Supreme Commander of Confederation Ground Forces Venture sat across a rickety table from Emile Khadaji, looking resigned. Khadaji was aware that the SC didn't like him; that at one time, he would have skinned the Man Who Never Missed with a dull shovel, had he gotten the chance. But Venture was a realist, and he didn't need ClimateSat to know which way the wind blew. So he said.

The café was a relic from pre-Bender days, in a slum on the bad side of Ipswich. There were no servers, organic or servomech; all the food and beverages were dispensed from old-style automatics along one wall. The

place was fairly crowded despite the seediness of its decor, but nobody took notice of the two men sipping coffee in the corner.

"...plans are complete," Venture was saying. "We will begin when the power is disrupted."

Khadaji nodded, listening.

"The New Somerset Dam is controlled by my men, as is the Manchester and Mount Crosby aquafloj. The garrison at the Presidential Palace is solidly in Kokl'u's camp, of course, but I may be able to make its commander see the light, after a few tactical strikes. Nothing is certain, but the odds are in our favor." The old man seemed as if he were going to say something else, but stopped.

"And...?" Khadaji prompted.

Venture shook his head. "Pardon me if you've heard this before, but life is so strange. Even six months ago, had each man in my command come to me and told me I'd be doing this, I would have never believed it. I still don't know why I'm here talking to you. A good soldier would shoot you where you sit and get back to his duty."

Khadaji allowed himself a smile. "I was taught that a good soldier knew when to retreat, Commander. And a career soldier's loyalty is usually to the army, isn't it?"

Venture sighed. "It is. I cannot say I have always been happy with my orders, but I followed them. Duty."

"Duty can be stretched in all directions," Khadaji said. "Is it better you and your officers find yourself heroes of a popular revolution or champions of the oppressor?"

"I wouldn't be here if there was any doubt about my answer to that," Venture said. Then, "Was this your intention as far back as your activities on Greaves? To tip the Confed over?"

"Since before that, Commander," Khadaji said softly. "Almost fifteen years before that I knew what had to happen. Just not how to do it."

"Buddha." Venture stared through the dirty plastic window at the street. "There was another reason," he said, without looking at Khadaji. "I've been a military man all my life, I was never afraid to die. But I didn't want to be the man standing between you and what you wanted. Not after Greaves. You scared the hell out of me, Khadaji. You still do."

\* \* \*

When the power broadcast to Brisbane failed, Khadaji was standing on the summit of Edenglassie Hill, a grass-covered mound which had once been a garbage landfill. He had a good view of the city, and he watched as public transporters ground to a halt, as buildings went dim. There were backup systems, of course, and some of them would even work. The trolley up this hill was dead, so only those willing to use the trail would be leaving today. It was likely that nobody would be coming up; the people down there were going to be very busy.

Khadaji turned slowly, to view the Pearl of the Confederation. It all came to this moment. Half the worlds in the Confed were in active revolution; a coup to take over the reins was in progress. So many years, and now he could rest.

He sat on a patch of thick grass, feeling very tired all of a moment. He felt something on his face and reached up to brush it away. To his surprise, he realized that it was a tear.

Even a dinosaur deserved something at its passing, and the Man Who Never Missed cried for the death of the Confederation he had hated for so long.

\* \* \*

Dirisha skidded into the cover of the warehouse, with Bork and Sleel right behind her. Mayli sent a hail of flechettes at the pursuing troopers. Explosive rounds shattered great chunks from the corrugated plastic wall. The supply van roared and cleared the ground, and dusty air blew toward the running matadors. Red ran toward Dirisha, which meant Geneva must be flying the van —

"Into the van!" Dirisha ordered. "Move!"

"Mayli!" Bork screamed.

Dirisha twisted, nearly losing her balance. Mayli was down. Bork lumbered toward her. Red was two steps ahead of the bigger man, Sleel three meters behind. Dirisha waved at Geneva. "Come on, get it moving!" Then she sprinted toward the others.

The withering fire of the troopers increased. Explosions filled Dirisha's ears. Red stood in the open, both his spetsdöds blasting, waving his hands back and forth rapidly, but using single fire for accuracy. Bork bent over Mayli and snatched her up. Dirisha saw a bloody crater in Mayli's chest. Oh, shit —!

Red stumbled backward, his arms going wide. He hit on his back and slid another meter.

Sleel screamed, "Motherfuckers!" and started to run toward the troopers, firing his single spetsdöd.

"Sleel!" Dirisha ran after him. In the craziness of it all, she saw Bork pause to grab Red from the ground. He had both Red and Mayli and he ran for the van: There was a vouch there –

Just ahead of her, a round hit Sleel. His cybernetic arm blew up, showering Dirisha with hot plastic and wire, spinning Sleel half around. He managed to turn back toward the troopers and stagger forward.

There were five, no six troopers still up and shooting. As though it were a holoprojic exercise, Dirisha picked her targets and triggered her spetsdöds. She aimed instinctively, one dart per trooper. A man went down, darted on the shoulder; another took a dart in the eye; she hit a woman on the chest –

Sleel was hit on the left foot. The force of it knocked his leg back and he did a half-flip and landed on his back. Goddammit, Sleel! Dirisha fanned both spetsdöds at the last two soldiers. One of them fell, but her weapons clicked dry as the final trooper swung her carbine toward Dirisha –

The woman spasmed and her shots went wild.

Sleel lay on his back, his arm extended toward the trooper, his spetsdöd still firing on full auto.

The van jammed past them. The back door slid open and Bork leaped out. He grabbed Sleel with one arm and Dirisha with the other and jumped back into the vehicle. The sudden acceleration threw them all to the floor. The van picked up speed and headed for the gate. Carbine fire rattled and shook the van, but it lurched forward faster. The metal of the gate screeched and let go. Fire followed them, but not far.

Dirisha crawled to where Mayli lay. Mayli had a hole in her chest deep enough to reveal backbone. Dirisha felt sick. She turned away and threw up. Mayli Wu, the woman who knew that love was the answer to almost every question, was dead. What about Red...?

The man who had taught Khadaji how to use a spetsdöd, the old soldier of fortune, smuggler, and teacher, was also dead.

Bork had connected Sleel to the vouch. The servomedic had begun pumping blood, coagulants, and antishock; plastic flesh patched the stump of Sleel's ankle, stopping the bleeding. There was nothing more to be done for him now.

Bork leaned back against the side of the van, crying.

"Bork...?"



He waved Dirisha off. "Not now. Please."

Geneva drove, not looking back. Dirisha made her way forward and touched the blonde's shoulder. "Hon."

"Is he dead? My father?" Her voice rode the edge of tears.

"Yes. And Mayli. Steel is hurt, but I think he'll make it. I'll drive, so you can —"

"No. No, it's all right. I'd rather drive." For a moment she didn't say anything. "I didn't know him very well for a long time," she said. "He was just a holograph and money every so often. It wasn't until I went to the school that I really got to know him. He — he was a good man."

Dirisha put her arms around Geneva. "He was the best. We all loved him."

Geneva's tears began to flow, and Dirisha's eyes blurred.

"He thought it was all worth it," Geneva said.

"I know. We all did."

"It was, Dirisha. It is. There's always a price for what you want."

Dirisha nodded, but didn't speak. Geneva was right, there was always a price. They had paid it.

## TWENTY-THREE

MARCUS JEFFERSON WALL, kingmaker, albino exotic and formerly the most powerful man in the galaxy, lay dead on his indigo and scarlet *tutch* wool carpet. He looked a lot smaller than Dirisha had thought he would.

Dirisha stood next to the Provisional President of the new Galactic Republic, Rajeem Carlos. They both looked down at the two bodies.

"It took us a while to get in here," Rajeem said. "He had programmed his computer to keep this meeting private. He had quite an array of defenses built in. The computer fought to the last millimeter."

"How did they die?"

Rajeem waved at the old woman sprawled on the floor a meter away from Wall. "A regurge spew, one his vouch didn't recognize. It wouldn't have done any good if his computer had called for help anyway — our analyzer didn't recognize it either." After a short pause, Rajeem said, "She hated him. She was only in her late twenties. He had her aged."

Dirisha took a step closer to the old woman and looked at her. "Why did he allow somebody who hated him that much to get close to him?"

Rajeem shrugged. "Who knows? He was a twisted man. Emile engineered it."

"Assassination? Emile?"

"He didn't order it. But he provided the poison. It was her choice."

Dirisha pulled her gaze away from the bodies. "What now?"

Rajeem rubbed at his chin. "New business. Three fourths of the galaxy is on our side, the rest, will mostly be soon. Soldiers tend to be loyal to whoever pays them, and we now control the money. The Supreme Commander of the Confed—ah, the *Republic's* army controls the Solar System Forces. He's professional Military all the way; most of the armies will follow him without problems. I'll have things to do to keep it all from falling apart."

"Is it going to be better, Rajeem?"

He turned toward her, caught her hands in his. "I hope so, Dirisha. I'll do my best to see that it is."

Dirisha nodded slowly.

"What about you?" Rajeem asked.

"I'm not sure. Geneva and I talked about it. We could just take off, catch the first ship out and see where it takes us. Or we could go back to Renault, to the school. That's where Bork is going."

"How is he?"

"Better."

Rajeem said, "Mayli is a heroine of the revolution. They'll be reading about her in the history texts."

"I don't think that's much comfort to him. We're matadors, remember. Life is more important than glory."

"How is Sleel doing?"

"He'll make it. They're growing him a new foot to match his new arm. He'll probably be getting laid every night with his hero-of-the-revolution story."

Dirisha smiled. "What about Emile? Where is he?"

"Gone. I saw him after the city fell. He wished me luck, then just disappeared. Nobody has seen him."

"You ask Pen?"

"Yes. No luck. I suspect he's all right."

"I'd bet on it," Dirisha said. "I'd like to see him, though." She dug at the plush carpet with one dotic boot. "Was it all worth it, Rajeem? All Khadaji's machinations, all the fighting, Red and Mayli and the others who died on dozens of worlds?"

Rajeem sighed. "I hope so." Then he grinned. "It had better be."

"Something funny?"

"When Emile left, he said if I fucked it up, he was going to come back and put me out of a job."

Dirisha laughed. "That wouldn't make me sleep any easier."

"What – that the Man Who Never Missed was keeping me honest? He could be running the whole show, if he wanted. But he didn't want any of it. I'll settle for him for a conscience."

Dirisha glanced down at the dead form of Wall. "Yeah, we could do a lot worse."

## TWENTY-FOUR

EMILE ANTOON KHADAJI stood in front of the window of the small pub that he had renamed the Red Sister, staring out at the driving storm. Business would be slow tonight; half a meter of new snow was predicted for the next few hours. He turned away from the thincris window and looked around the interior of the pub. A few of the regulars sat at tables or the gleaming black plastic bar, drinkers mostly. A couple of them smoked flicksticks, exhaling the odor of burned cashews with the purple smoke. Daito was a quiet coastal town on Muta Kato's lone continent, and the Red Sister was a family pub, a quiet place where nobody caused any trouble. A place where a man could enjoy a drink and feel no pressure. No pressure at all.

Khadaji, who used a different name in the pub he now owned, nodded at the server as he walked toward his office. The man returned the nod, and continued to wipe the top of one of the small tables bolted to the floor.

There was a piece of wadded paper lying on the floor in front of Khadaji. He picked it up and turned toward the nearest trash can. The container was all of three meters away. He tossed the paper, firing it almost as a skilled man might use a hand weapon, like, say, a spetsdöd. The ball of paper flew like a dart, hit the container's plastic lip... and bounced high into the air. The paper missile came down a meter past the container and rolled across the floor.

Khadaji started to laugh. He laughed until tears began to stream down his face.

The server walked a couple of steps toward his employer, then stopped. "Something funny about missing that, boss?"

Khadaji shook his head. "Private joke," he managed to say. "Maybe I'll tell it to you someday."