

The Amtrak Wars - Book 6 - Earth-Thunder

By: Patrick Tilley

Synopsis:

As the great mountain in the west speaks to the sky with a tongue of flame, the Talisman Prophecy is on the verge of fulfilment. The rulers of the Federation believe that Clearwater's unborn child is the Thrice-Gifted One, and they hold both in their power. Cadillac and Roz, who have combined their formidable talents, are determined to free her, but Steve, lured by the prospect of a dazzling career within the First Family, is no longer certain who to support or betray. He has little time left in which to decide, for in Ne-Issan, home of the Iron Masters, a lone woman intent on avenging her dead lover, is about to plunge her nation into a civil war that will set the whole continent ablaze.

Also by Patrick Tilley."

THE AMTRAK WARS BOOK 1: CLOUD WARRIOR THE AMTRAK WARS BOOK 2 FIRST FAMILY THE AMTRAK WARS BOOK 3; IRON MASTER THE AMTRAK WARS BOOK 4: BLOOD RIVER THE AMTRAK WARS BOOK 5 DEATH-BRINGER MISSION FADEOUT STAR WARTZ

The Amtrak Wars Book 6: Earth-Thunder

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ORBIT

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The following list is a guide to the Iron Master, Mute and Federation names for key locations mentioned in EARTH-THUNDER:

Aron-giren (Long Island, New York)

Awashi-tana (Washington, D.C.)

Banti-moro (Baltimore, Maryland)

Beoisha - Post-house Inn (Bishop, Maryland)

Bei-poro (Bellport, Long Island)

Bei-shura (Bay Shore, Long Island)

Beni-tana - Toh-Yota Palace (Benton, Connecticut)

Big White Running Water (Sioux Falls, South Dakota)

Bu-faro (Buffalo, New York State)

Cape Fear, North Carolina

Cloudlands - First Family enclave, Houston, Texas

Govo-nasa (Governor's Island, New York)

Grand Central (Houston, Texas)

Korina-gawu (Collingwood, Ontario)

Lake O-neida (L. Oneida, New York State)

Lake Ona-taryo (L. Ontario)

Mana-tana (Manhattan Island, New York)

Mira-bara (Millsboro, Delaware)

Monroe/Wichita - Divisional Base (Wichita, Kansas)

O-shawa (Oshawa, Ontario)

Osa-wego (Oswego, New York State)

Oshana-sita (Ocean City, Maryland)

San-Oransa (St. Lawrence River, Quebec)

Sara-kusa (Syracuse, New York State)

Sta-tana (Staten Island, New York)

Summer Palace, Yedo (Middle Island, L.I.)

Twin Forks (North Platte, Nebraska)

Uda-sona (Hudson River, New York State)

Winter Palace, Showa (Showell, Maryland)

Additional background information including various maps can be found in Book 3: IRON MASTER and in DARK VISIONS: The Illustrated Guide to The Amtrak Wars.

DEDICATION

I should like to express my gratitude to all the readers of THE AMTRAK WARS and everyone at Sphere Books, Forbidden Planet and Andromeda whose enthusiasm (and patience) helped make this series a success.

Special thanks to those of you who wrote, the many others who took the trouble to come and meet me in the bookshops, all you Australians who boosted AMTRAK onto your best-seller list, and last, but not least, to my fan in the Shetlands whose thoughtful Glaswegian friend got me to autograph a brown paper bag.

CHAPTER ONE

Armed with a stolen carbine, Cadillac marched slowly through the drifting plumes of smoke that rose from the charred remains of the huts which- just one brief day ago - had been the home of the Clan m'call.

Roz - clutching another carbine with the awkwardness of someone trained to save lives not terminate them followed him as he scoured the settlement from end to end. The soldiers had done their work with the thoroughness that was the mark of the Federation.

Goods and chattels had been put to the torch, every living soul regardless of age had been killed.

The decapitated bodies of the den mothers, their children, and the She-Wolves who had stayed to defend them were scattered everywhere.

Some, burnt beyond recognition, lay smouldering in the glowing rings of ashes that had once been huts of skin and wood; others, partially stripped, their naked bodies ripped by bayonet thrusts, lay sprawled awkwardly where they had been gunned down - either running away from, or towards the enemy: the tall faceless figures in their blood-red and flame-orange uniforms who showed no mercy and expected none.

When the last hope of finding any survivors finally expired, Cadillac turned to Roz, his eyes brimming with bitter tears. His lips moved but no words came. He had come down from the hills fearing the worst, but the shock of discovering this scene of senseless slaughter had driven the breath from his body.

Roz threw aside her carbine and supported him as he lurched towards her. She knew what he was thinking.

He was the last of the M'Calls; the only one still alive.

The remainder of his clanfolk - every man, woman and

child of fighting

age - had gone forth to do battle with one of the dreaded iron-snakes, the Mute name for the wagon-trains of the Amtrak Federation.

And despite falling into a trap, they had confounded their enemy, capturing and destroying The Lady from Louisiana before being surrounded by four more of the giant land-cruisers - each one carrying a thousand TrailBlazers.

When Cadillac had flown west, taking Roz with him on the orders of Mr Snow, the M'Call Bears and She-Wolves, bloodied but triumphant from their victory over The Lady, were preparing to make a last stand as the circle of fire closed in remorselessly around them.

Roz and Cadillac had escaped in the last aircraft to leave the flight-deck of The Lady and they had not been fired upon because no one on the advancing wagon-trains had suspected that the Skyhawk was being flown by a Mute. The same thing had happened when they had overflown the settlement and seen the groups of camouflaged Trail-Blazers moving through it sowing a trail of death and destruction. Some had even paused long enough to lower their weapons and raise their dark, visored faces as Cadillac circled overhead.

His first impulse had been to dive down and spray them with a prolonged burst from the mini-Vulk in the nose of the Skyhawk, but he did not dare risk damaging his precious cargo: Roz - the young stranger whom Mr Snow had given into his care. Gritting his teeth, Cadillac had made two low passes, dipping his wings to salute the murderers of his clanfolk.

The Trail-Blazers had waved to him. And then, as he flew off - wracked with guilt - to find a landing place higher up in the hills, those same hands had dropped back onto their weapons to continue the slaughter of the innocents.

From an overlooking crag, he and Roz had watched the distant fiery glow wax and wane throughout the night then, in the grey dawn of the following day, they had gone down to take stock of his inheritance.

But there was nothing left.

On the very same day he had become wordsmith to the Clan M'Call - the greatest clan ever to spring from the bloodline of the She-Kargo - his clanfolk had perished in a last blaze of glory and the hell-fires of vengeance.

As the first shock faded and new breath forced its way into his lungs, Cadillac stepped away from Roz, raised his face to the sky and howled with grief. A heart-rending cry that came from deep within the soul.

Inarticulate, more animal than human, but which expressed his deep-felt sense of loss and desolation in a way which mere words could not encompass.

Falling to his knees, he pounded the bloodstained earth then furrowed it with clawed fingers, scooping it up and smearing it over his neck, arms and chest.

Roz knelt down beside him- this clear-skinned, smooth-boned Mute whose future was now inextricably enmeshed with hers. They had met less than 24 hours ago, surrounded, as now, by the stench of death, but it had only served to strengthen the instinctive bond between them.

She watched patiently as Cadillac, oblivious to her presence, continued to claw at the crimson earth and daub it on his body. To the detached medical side of her mind, he seemed, by these frenzied gestures, to be trying to share the dying agonies of his clanfolk. Gradually, the raw edge of his guilt and anger became blunted. He slumped back on his heels, round-shouldered under the burden of sorrow and lapsed into total immobility, hands hanging limply between his thighs, his expressionless eyes blind to all external sensation - the classic symptoms of catatonia. For nearly an hour, not a muscle twitched.

Nothing moved except for the occasional tear which rolled down his cheeks then, suddenly, he jerked into life and when he turned his bloodied, dirt-streaked face towards her, the eyes were dry and clear.

'Come,' he said. 'We have work to do.'

Using Tracker machetes, they cut down and hauled back a large quantity of pine saplings which they hewed into eight-foot lengths and built a square funeral pyre, interleaving the layers of slim logs with the broken bodies

of the women and the young children, laid on a bed and under a cover of pine branches.

Despite her training, Roz found it a heartbreaking task. In the Federation, dead bodies were whisked away by the bag-men. Some were delivered to the Medical College for autopsies and dissection by students but once again the bag-men collected the bits. And it occurred to Roz that she had never enquired what happened next.

She had merely assumed that the mortal remains of its soldier-citizens were disposed of with the same clinical efficiency that characterised most of the procedures evolved by the Amtrak Federation.

True or false, she was certain of one thing. The operation was not something the kin-folk of the deceased were required to perform or watch - as she had to do now.

They piled more branches around the outside of the log squares to mask the bodies from view, then Cadillac set light to it using a potful of glowing ashes from one of the burnt-out huts. There was a pungent smell of resin as the pine needles caught fire, and with a crackling roar the flames leapt skywards, carrying the spirits of the dead into the arms of Mo-Town on a rising current of air.

With his half-naked body smeared with grey ash in the traditional style of the Plainfolk, Cadillac squatted before the column of fire, just out of range of the blistering heat, his arms wrapped around his rib-cage.

And so began the second period of mourning.

For the rest of that day and throughout the following night, Cadillac rocked silently back and forth, his heart and mind imprisoned in a private world of grief which Roz could comprehend but could not wholly share.

The funeral pyre blazed throughout the evening, then around midnight, as he maintained his vigil while she slept fitfully nearby, it slowly collapsed with a shower of sparks into a mound of glowing embers. By morning, all that remained was a grey-shrouded hump in the middle of a blackened square of earth. But it still gave off a fierce heat, and quickly ignited the odd branch and bits of debris that Roz threw onto it as she tidied up around her seated companion.

Cadillac did not utter a word throughout the whole of that second day.

And Roz did not attempt to engage him in conversation. She was content to be; to savour to the full the expansive beauty of the surrounding landscape, the fathomless depths of the blue sky world above her head.

A sky flecked with ever-changing patterns of cloud that stretched away towards a horizon that was so distant it surpassed understanding.

Up here in the hills, the world about her was much vaster than the one she had experienced from the flight deck of Red River. Coming from a life-time spent in the confines of the Federation, she had - like most Trackers - no proper sense of scale, no grasp of the truly awesome dimensions of the universe. If someone had told her that from where she now stood the farthest point she could see towards the east lay over a hundred miles away it would have meant nothing. And to have talked about the size of the earth or the distance between it and the

moon would have meant even less.

On the first day, while Cadillac sat grieving in front of the blazing pyre, she had taken the edge off her hunger by dipping into the emergency ration pack that all Skyhawks carried. Now, on the second day, as the sun reached its zenith, Cadillac rose, made a cooking fire and silently prepared a meal for two.

Not everything had been destroyed by the soldiers or thrown onto the funeral pyre. Cadillac had salvaged and set aside pots and pans, tools and implements, sleeping furs, some walking skins, even some dried food - everything they needed to survive the immediate future and were able to carry on trucking poles between them.

Without being asked, Roz had brought water from the stream that burst from the moss-covered rocks deep within the forested slopes to the north of the settlement.

The same stream that cascaded over the glistening tongue of rock overhanging the bluff then fell in a long filmy ribbon onto the rocks below. The same rocks on which

Steve Brickman had stood to refresh himself before his fateful second encounter with Clearwater.

Roz helped Cadillac prepare the meal, her gestures complementing his without a hint of awkwardness. They ate in silence, but on the occasions when their eyes met they fixed each other with an unwavering gaze that was only broken by mutual, unspoken agreement.

They were like two castaways, marooned on a wooded island amid an ocean of red grass. But although they had only been in each other's presence for a matter of hours, they were not strangers. Neither Roz nor Cadillac had anything to hide. There was no need for timid, furtive glances; no time for anything other than a frank appraisal.

There was no need to say anything. The eyes said it all.

The afternoon lengthened into evening. Roz helped him erect a hut using a selection of unburnt poles and a patchwork of skins, then they went into the forest to fetch more wood for the fire.

While they were there Cadillac bathed in the stream, washing away the grey ash that had covered his body.

Night fell. They communed in silence over the evening meal that Cadillac prepared with her help, then he gathered up the sleeping furs that had been warming by the fire and took them into the hut.

A short while later he crawled out through the low door flap and picked up the two carbines. Seating himself with his back to the hut, he laid one of the guns across his lap and placed the other on the ground beside him.

'Sleep now.' They were the first words he had uttered in two days.

Roz stood up and slowly unzipped her camouflage fatigues, then rolled them into a neat bundle. Cadillac averted his eyes as she stripped off her underclothes, but she stood before him and willed him to look up at her naked body, its smooth artificially-tanned skin tinted deep orange by the firelight glow. When their eyes finally met, she held up the garments that marked her out as a Tracker and dropped them onto the red-hot embers.

They both watched as the flames took hold.

When there was nothing left, Roz said: 'There is no need to stand guard. My power will protect both of us.'

She walked past Cadillac, brushing his head lightly with one hand.

Entering the hut, Roz saw the firestone had been trimmed, leaving only a tiny flame to light the way to bed. Picking up the stone, she pushed it out through the door flap then found her way back to the bed in the pitch dark and snuggled down between the soft layers of furs.

She knew what was going to happen; had known with an overwhelming certainty ever since she had been introduced to Cadillac on the flight-deck of The Lady.

It was just a question of time. Her whole life had been a voyage of discovery, but in the past year the pace had accelerated. One revelation had succeeded another with bewildering speed. It was like being in a sail-boat driven by a hurricane which preceded a gigantic storm: a storm that threatened to sweep away the world she had known.

She had learned that Steve was not a true kin-brother.

Neither of them had been born to Annie Brickman. They had been placed in her care by the First Family. And to the mystery surrounding their origins had been added another: inexplicably and without warning, her already extraordinary mental gifts had been expanded, giving her access to powers that enabled her to warp the perceptions of those around her.

Through her telepathic link with Steve had come the shared discovery that they were both Mutes and this had helped to open her mind further, enabling her to understand that her life had a deeper purpose.

With the deliberate burning of her uniform she had severed all links with her past, just as Cadillac's previous existence as part of the Clan M'Call had been consumed by fire.

They both had to begin anew. Together.

As she waited, she stroked her breasts and belly, and pressed down hard in an effort to contain the love-heat that was building up between her tightly-closed thighs.

A fleeting shaft of moonlight illuminated Cadillac's

glistening body

as he entered the hut on all fours and slid between the furs. There was a moment's hesitation before he edged into contact then they turned towards each other, bodies moulding, arms and legs enfolding, as if it was the most natural thing in the world.

Roz did not possess the detached professionalism of the Thai body-slaves who with the help of liberal doses of sake had inflamed his desires in Ne-Issan, but it felt right and it felt good. For both of them. Each in their own way had loved their former partners but this was different. Cadillac did not feel overawed as he had when sharing a bed with Clearwater, and Roz, for her part, was freed from the confused feelings of shame and desire which had always surrounded her furtive couplings with Steve. Feelings which, for the last two years, had been compounded by her jealousy for Clearwater.

With the opening of her mind and the realisation that her hated rival was a soul-sister, those negative feelings had been transformed. Now at last she was able to give full expression to her emotions. Here at last was the love she had yearned for - unencumbered, unrestricted; not hedged about with petty rules and regulations. A love that could now be expressed in words that had been denied to her since birth. An emotion which, through her inability to express it, had become distorted and misdirected towards her kin-brother.

She was still linked closely and intimately to Steve, but only through her mind. Her heart and body were now her own, and she had found the person with whom she was destined to exchange these precious gifts. In so doing she had found her place in the world, a new identity, and a mission which gave her life meaning beyond mere physical existence.

Then it happened. A sweet burning that brought a sharp cry to her lips and a juddering sigh to his.

Everything flowed together, their minds and bodies fusing in a convulsive star-burst of ecstasy that left them feeling utterly fulfilled for at least half an hour, at which point - being healthy young animals with the stamina to match their sexual appetite - both were ready to go round again.

The dawn of the fourth day (the third having been spent mostly in bed) found Cadillac hollow-eyed through lack of sleep but feeling on top of the world. The secret envy and lingering distrust of his rival, the confusion of brotherly love, jealousy and hatred had vanished, leaving him brimming with a new self-confidence which caused him to be immensely satisfied with the world in general and - being Cadillac with himself in particular.

As the days passed, the super-charged emotional state generated by their discovery of one another gradually subsided and their life together assumed its natural rhythm. But it was not achieved without a great deal of hard work. Hearing about life on the overground was not the same thing as being there. Even though Roz felt-like Steve- that she belonged to the blue-sky world, there was much to learn. And a great deal to do.

In the Federation, nearly everything came at the turn of a tap, or the flick of a switch. Food was literally handed to you on a plate. Okay, there were Trackers manning the hydroponic tank-farms, the water-pumping and power-gert stations, the materials and food processing units. And there were the Seamsters sweating away down in the A-Levels to keep everything going.

Roz herself had put in the statutory number of PD hours on a variety of mundane chores. The point was, in the Federation, all these processes were performed with the aid of mechanical or hi-tech equipment. If you wanted hot water you tapped a line that came from one of the geo-thermal plants; to prepare a hot meal you simply peeled the foil lid off a pre-pak and put it in a micro-wave cooker. Sixty seconds max. Dirty clothes you tossed into a unit at the block laundromat and selected the correct wash-rinse 'n' dry cycle; any worn, torn or damaged garments or kit you took down to the company quarter-master and exchanged old for new.

But not out here. Out here, there was nothing on line and there wasn't a serviceman in sight. Everything had to be figured out in advance. Hot water needed a fire, a fire needed wood, the wood needed to be cut from a tree, to cut it you needed a Tracker machete, an Iron-Master axe or saw, and you had to know how to put a keen edge on the blade. The only alternative was to go around picking up fallen branches, dead wood that was usually rotten and powdery and which burned quickly without producing any real heat.

In such an environment, you quickly came to realise the value of ready-made objects. The grinding bowls that turned the golden seeds of breadstalks into a powder which, when mixed with water and salt and puddled onto a hot stone, produced crunchy flat-bakes, the pots and pans, knives, machetes, fire-stones, a stoutly-sewn set of walking skins, woven-straw hood-mats, Iron Master needles, binding twine and thread were all precious possessions to be treasured and handed down to the next generation. These, and the skills which fashioned and used them, were the bedrock of existence and being aware of that gave you a whole new perspective on things.

In the Federation, with its sanitised, regulated, wall-to-wall video life-style, you were part of a world created by the First Family. But it was not the real world. This was the real world; the world of the Plainfolk. Out here, you were not a brain-washed cog in a soulless machine, you were a living being, interacting with every living thing around you. Not just the birds and the beasts and the bug-uglies, but with the earth and the rocks, the grass and the trees, the wind and water, the clouds scudding across the sky, softly melting snow-white towers, blue-grey blankets heavy with rain, rosy-pink at dawn, pearly-mauve in the evening, brushed with golden fire by the setting sun, and then the night with its stars and moon which, for Roz, was just as wondrous as the day.

Steve had experienced the same feeling of wonder, the same joyous sensation of being truly alive - but he had been trained as a soldier.

He was still enamoured by the gadgets and the hardware and the power they conferred.

The lack of such things had proved irksome. He did not understand that the two states were incompatible. It was the technology developed by man in search of a more comfortable existence which had alienated him from his natural environment. In attempting to master it, he had-through a mixture of greed and ignorance - destroyed it.

Roz could see this because she had been trained as a doctor, not a uniformed assassin. Her studies had led her to a greater understanding of the human organism, its incredible complexity and the miraculous, unfathomable nature of the force that animated every living thing; the force that, when you had reduced an organism to its smallest chemical component and its most elusive subatomic particle, still remained tantalisingly out of reach.

It was this knowledge, this awareness of the mystery that lay at the heart of all creation, that enabled her to merge the totality of her being with the blue-sky world.

Her kin-brother - for that was how she still thought of Steve - had only managed to go part of the way. He had been told he was a Mute, he knew he was a Mute, yet he was unable to accept it unreservedly. He was not content to know. He had to know why. There was nothing Roz

could do to change him. She could only hope and pray he would not destroy himself before he finally found his way.

With no one but themselves to look after, Cadillac decided to leave the flat land above the bluff which, since Steve's escape on Blue-Bird, had seen so much death and sorrow. The scarred, empty space brought back too many bitter-sweet memories.

The first move did not involve a long journey. Carrying their worldly goods on trucking poles, Cadillac led Roz to the small forest glade where Clearwater had been hidden on the orders of Mr Snow. The rock-pool in which she and Cadillac had washed off their body-markings was fed by the same stream that snaked

its way down over a series of rock steps and fern-covered banks before launching itself into space over the tongue-stone.

Here, surrounded by an endless supply of firewood and with fresh, clear running water close at hand, they would be sheltered from the attentions of any' hostile hunting posses. There was also a plentiful supply of game, but it was all small stuff. With only a limited amount of ammunition, Cadillac did not intend to waste it on anything less than a tusker - the MUte name for a wild pig.

Swallowing his pride, Cadillac led Roz down the face of the bluff in a dawn raid on a swift flowing river where he showed her how to catch the plump, brown-speckled fish with her bare hands.

It was a rarely-used skill he had acquired from Clearwater.

He had been a reluctant pupil but she had persevered. Male She-Kargo Mutes were renowned hunters of buffalo, fast-foot and bear; fishing was rated on a level with grinding bread-stalks - women's work.

This disdain had its roots in the warrior/hunter-ethic, the prowess displayed in battle which made the Plainfolk superior to the riverfolk such as the Clan Kojak who lived on the shores of Me-Sheegun.

Fishermen with cold water in their veins.

Cadillac knew from personal experience that this wasn't strictly true.

The Kojak had fought well. On the other hand, they hadn't had much choice. It was either kill or be killed. And it's not too difficult to be brave when your enemy is staggering ashore half-drowned onto a dark, booby-trapped beach and you have promise of Clearwater's magic to stiffen the sinews.

Back at their hidden campsite, they gutted and boned the fish, stuffed them with a mixture of dried herbs, pinned them round long skewers with thin slivers of wood, then roasted them over the glowing embers of a fire made with larch wood. When the fish were ready, they cupped them in several broad leaves and bit hungrily into the steaming flesh.

It tasted good. And as Roz juggled the juicy morsels around her mouth to avoid burning her tongue, she thought back to the time when she and Steve had watched the same dark brown shapes gliding beneath the rippling surface of the pool surrounding the base of Santanna Deep.

Fish. She hadn't even known what they were.

And she remembered the wave of revulsion that had swept over her when, without knowing why, Steve had said they were good to eat. And now, here she was, doing just that, enjoying it, and revelling in the sense of achievement.

It was incredible yet, at the same time, there was something inevitable about the way one thing had led to another, drawing her life towards this point, to this conjunction with Cadillac's life. The Mutes used the term 'life-currents' which they likened to crystal-clear streams that converged, ran alongside one another, merged into one or separated again, going their different ways. It was part of an immutable plan.

Destiny. The Wheel turns.

The Path is drawn. For good or ill, it was a force which the Federation, with all its weaponry, could not hope to match.

Over the days they had been together, Roz and Cadillac had exchanged life stories and touched upon the more private things that all lovers reveal as their relationship deepens and grows. With his tales of past battles and his adventures in Ne-Issan, Cadillac held the stage far longer than Roz. But that did not matter. She was eager to listen, and he told his story well. But although he mentioned the parts Steve and Clearwater had played in his past life, he did not dwell upon his feelings for them or speculate where they might be now. And Roz suddenly realised that neither had she. It was time to put that right.

Time to break the news

It took a little time to get round to it because, at the beginning, she was waiting for the right moment. But it quickly became clear that Cadillac was a creature of fleeting moods. Despite her supportive presence, his emotional barometer was constantly swinging between

highs and lows. One minute he was full of confidence and optimism and then, suddenly, his brow and eyes would darken as if a cloud had crossed the face of the sun. The smile was replaced by a sullen, brooding expression then, with equal suddenness, the shadows would lift and the eyes would shine again.

Roz, by contrast, was an extremely uncomplicated person, open-hearted, forthright, long on sympathy, short on guile even though she had learned to tread carefully since she had been forced to work with the people who were trying to manipulate her kin-brother.

Cadillac, she decided, was a suitable case for treatment, and the only way to straighten him out was to be herself.

Clad in a skin tunic and wrap-around skirt, Roz sat on the edge of the rock-pool with her bare legs in the water and watched Cadillac scrub his top half in the waist-deep water. He was not as powerfully built as Steve but he had strong shoulders and a slim, hard muscular body encased in a smooth coppery skin that Roz found immensely attractive.

'There's something you ought to know. About Clearwater.'

Cadillac paused in mid-scrub. 'Oh, Sweet Mother!

Don't say she's going to be permanently crippled?

'On the contrary. She'll have metal pins on her thigh for the rest of her life, but she'll be up on her feet within a couple of months. And if she gets some intensive physio, she'll be back to normal in another four. It's someone else's health I'm worried about. Clearwater's pregnant.' Roz waited a second or two then tried again.

'With child.'

'Clearwater...?' Cadillac didn't seem to be able to take the news on board.

'Yes. I reckon she's got about five months to go. Six at the outside.'

The words came slowly. 'Steve... is he the...?'

'Father? Well, I hope so. Do you have any idea who else it could be?'

'No.' Cadillac looked confused. 'When did this, uh, all...?'

'When did she conceive?' Roz knew exactly when. She had been there.

Inside both their heads. But this was not the moment to try and explain how or why. 'A short time before we picked her up,' she said.

'When the three of you were in the hands of Malone's renegades. Did, uh they...?'

'No! No . . .' Cadillac cast his mind back over their period of 'captivity' and realised he'd lain in a drunken stupor and watched it happen. It wasn't supposed to hurt any more but for a brief moment it did. He wiped the picture from his mind and cleared his brow. Looking up he found Roz eyeing him intently.

'It must be Steve. But how? From what he told me I thought the President-General was - ' 'The Father of All Life? He is,' said Roz.

'But Steve's not a Tracker. He was only brought up as one. If he's a Mute, like you, he carries the seeds of life within him." And maybe I do too

'The point is,' she continued, ' what are we going to do about it? I mean, we just can't leave them there."

'No, I suppose not." Cadillac hauled himself out of the water and began to towel himself dry. The towel, soap and the friction-glove he'd been using were some of the items he'd purloined from the wagon-train and stuffed into the Skyhawk before leaving. Not everything produced by the sand-burrowers was bad. 'What have you got in mind? Going into the Federation and bringing her out?"

'Not just Clearwater. All three of them."

Cadillac wrapped the towel round his waist and started pacing up and down. 'Have you any idea what you're asking? Where would we start? I don't know my way around - or how anything works down there?

'But I do." roz caught hold of his hand as he strode past and pulled him round to face her. 'And you can drop the pretence. If you can get inside Steve's head, you know enough to get by."

Cadillac went to turn away but she didn't let go of his hand. 'It won't be just the two of us. Steve and Clearwater will help too. It's an unbeatable combination.'

'Hah! Yes!' said Cadillac bitterly. 'You, me, an invalid, and a -' He was going to say 'a blood-brother I dare not turn my back on' but he caught himself in time. He knew he had to take his share of the blame for the injuries Clearwater had suffered; knew also that Steve, in putting her aboard Red River, had saved her life. But the old wounds ran deep, and even though Roz's loving presence was a healing balm it could not make them disappear overnight.

Looking at her, Cadillac saw that she knew exactly what had been going through his mind. But her sympathetic expression had a firm edge to it. The message in her eyes read: 'I know what's bugging you, I understand totally, but from here on in, neither of us have time to waste on this self-indulgent, recriminatory shit.'

Had she put it into words, Roz might have used a less abrasive form of language but Cadillac had seized the essence exactly. And it brought him back on a even keel.

'You're right,' he said. 'But we can't make a move until she's back on her feet and has given birth to her child.'

Roz used her grip on his hand to pull herself upright and stepped in close so that their thighs touched. 'Good.'

She gave him a placatory kiss. 'That means you'll have plenty of time to work out exactly how we're going to do it.'

There was another reason why Cadillac was unable to put the rescue of Clearwater at the top of his list of things to do. The first Council of all the Plainfolk was due to be held at Big White Running Water (Sioux Falls, South Dakota) in less than eight weeks. As the successor to Mr Snow and as one of The Chosen, he had to attend.

And Roz would have to come with him.

They could make no plans to enter the Federation until the Council had completed its deliberations. He had no inkling as to what might be on the agenda, but he was sure that the present and future state of relations between the Plainfolk and the Iron Masters would be one of the major talking points.

Looking back, he wished he, and not Brickman, had gone to the trading post. Had he done so, he could have seen the aftermath of the battle, shared the feelings of his blood-brothers, and taken part in the first, crucial round of discussions as a stand-in for the ailing Mr Snow. But events had conspired to prevent him from making the journey and he could see now that it was meant to be. · Nothing in life was insignificant, every gesture, every action was part of a larger pattern. The essence of each experience had to be distilled, each event had to be stripped down to its core elements, weighed and understood - because they were all related. And if, by clear thinking, you could pierce the fog of trivia and arrive at a true understanding of that relationship, you would find that the way ahead was illuminated. You could not change The Path, for that was already drawn, but you could proceed along it calmly, confidently, free of doubt; a wayfarer at peace with himself, his soul no longer tortured by unworthy thoughts and desires.

There were moments when Cadillac attained that state, when he felt he had been given a glimpse of the grand design, but then it slipped from his grasp and he found himself sinking back into a morass of doubt and petty emotions. To achieve and maintain that state of grace required a constant, and conscious, effort. Perhaps with the aid of Roz and the transforming power of her love he would become worthy of the role he had been given - to prepare the Plainfolk for the coming of Talisman.

The returning elders had told him of the astonishing progress that had been made towards the building of a lasting alliance between the clans of the She-Kargo, M'Waukee and San'Paul, and the willingness to accept any C'Natti and D'Troit clans who were ready to renounce their ties with the Iron Masters. But would that

first flush of goodwill hold
even among the clans of the She-Kargo?

The catastrophic loss of life at the trading post, the awesome nature of the tidal wave and the terrifying swiftness with which it had swept away friend and foe alike, must have shaken the survivors to the core.

Just over half the M'Call delegation had escaped with their lives and many of the returnees had continued to relive the nightmare, waking from their sleep with a scream on their lips as the violent death-laden images rose up from their subconscious and the huge roaring wall of water threatened, once again, to overwhelm them.

For the Clan M'Call, who were now in the arms of the Great Sky Mother, the nightmare was over, but the other participants must have been similarly affected. At that first gathering above the bluffs they would all have been suffering from shock, a condition which if not treated, as Roz had explained, could affect people's behaviour for a considerable time. With the landscape of death that lay below them, the scale of the losses suffered by both factions, the traditional rivalries between individual clans and bloodlines would suddenly have become pointless, grotesque. But how would the clan elders and delegates feel now - as the shock of the event began to recede?

Old habits die hard. When they assembled at Sioux Falls - if they came at all - would it be to build on those first expressions of solidarity or would it be to withdraw their hasty pledges of eternal blood-brotherhood?

As the Plainfolk entered the period known as The Yellowing and then The White Death, which was both an end and a beginning, they faced the prospect of a new year in which there would be no journey to the trading post. No walking on the water. No chance to exchange furs and skins for tools and weapons and the many other things that only the Iron Masters could provide. As that thought sank in, would they regret their stand against the Iron Masters? The treacherous D'Troit and their running dogs, the C'Natti and San'Louis had been dealt a blow they richly deserved, but perhaps the She-Kargo would, upon reflection, feel they had paid too high a price for their defence of Mr Snow, the Clan M'Call and the honour of their bloodline. And whatever conclusion the She-Kargo reached would be shared by the M'Waukee and San'Paul.

On the other hand, what could they do? Mr Snow and the entire clan had perished in the battle at Twin Forks or in the simultaneous raid on the settlement. He, Cadillac Deville, was the sole survivor.

No . . . that was wrong. He was no longer a M'Call

For the foreseeable future, the clan identity would remain the basic unit but there could be no going back.

They had to build on that first fragile consensus. The Mutes had to develop a wider allegiance, a bond that went beyond their clan and their bloodline. He and Roz - two of The Chosen - were the first members of the Plainfolk nation that would be forged by Talisman.

Cadillac knew he had to go to Sioux Falls and brave whatever hostility he might encounter. He had to impose his view, his vision of the future. It would not be easy. In fact, it would be incredibly difficult and, above all, dangerous. The change of heart and mind that were required would be seen as an attack on the cherished traditions

and fundamental beliefs of the Plainfolk.

Talisman, the Thrice-Gifted One, would no doubt have the power to impose his views by his presence and by the defeats he could inflict upon the enemies of his people. But Talisman was not here now - at a time when the Plainfolk were in greater danger than ever before. The first step towards nationhood had been taken. To maintain the momentum, Cadillac realised he would have to lead from the front.

His heart quailed at the prospect. From early childhood he had longed for greatness, craved recognition, adulation, standing. It was there for the taking, but would the warriors and wordsmiths of the other She-Kargo clans listen? He was not even twenty years old!

If only Clearwater was here! And Brickman too, with his flair for action and his devious mind. It was impossible to discover what his true motives were, but in their daring attack on the wagon-train, their talents had meshed smoothly and - for the first time - they had managed to work together without the usual backbiting.

Brickman, of course, would want to take charge, but his presence would be a challenge that he, Cadillac, would have to surpass. And it would not be like it was before. Roz had changed all that. She had restored the balance. He was no longer the odd man out. Her presence had given him the strength to face the woman he had lost and her chosen partner without any of the past bitterness and pain.

It was a great pity the other two were not here to witness this change and work with him in this new spirit of cooperation. It would have made his present task a lot easier. But they weren't, and there was not the slightest chance of them appearing magically over the horizon if things got tough. For the first time in his life he was faced with making major decisions without the steadying counsel of Mr Snow, Clearwater and, yes, even Brickman. This was the testing time he had both longed for and secretly feared. Roz, he knew, would help in every way she could, but he had to set the goal, take the lead, the responsibility - and the blame...

Cadillac walked over to where Roz was trying her hand at making another batch of flat-bakes. She looked up at him and wrinkled her nose. 'Fraid I'm not having much SUCCESS.' He hunkered down beside her, picked up an iron ladle and took a sample of the mixture, testing its liquidity by pouring it back into the bowl. 'Too much water.'

He tried one of the burnt offerings. 'And not enough salt.'

Roz sank back on her heels with a sigh. 'I don't believe this! Only three ingredients-bread-meal, water and salt.'

How the heck can it go wrong?!" 'There's more to it than that.'

There's the temperature of the cooking stone, the amount of mix you pour on and the way you spread it." Cadillac took charge of the mixing bowl, added more bread-meal and salt to correct the imbalance and stirred until it achieved the right consistency. He then checked the heat of the stone by pouring a thin stream of water onto it. 'That's okay.'

See the way it pops and dances as it boils off?"

Roz nodded and watched as he filled the ladle to the brim and with a practised flourish, quickly poured a ring of creamy dough mix then, spiralling inwards towards the centre, filled it with the last drop. 'There ... see? The right size, just over a hand's breadth across, nice even thickness.'

'Hmff!' Roz took the offered ladle, filled it to the brim and managed a lop-sided imitation. 'Is there any rule that says they have to be round?'

'No,' laughed Cadillac. He lifted the edge of the first bake with a flat tapered wooden flip shovel and turned it over. 'But once you start pouring, keep going otherwise it'll fall apart.' He removed his neat, circular flat-bake from the stone and passed Roz the small shovel. 'Don't overcook the top side, otherwise it gets too brittle.'

Just leave it long enough to brown."

'Yeah...' Roz tried to turn her mis-shapen bake over.

It broke into several curved fragments. 'Damn!' 'Never mind. It's still eatable.' Cadillac picked up a fragment, blew on it then took a bite. 'Delicious. You just need more practice, that's all.'

Roz handed him the mixing bowl. 'Show me again, champ. Several times.' She watched Cadillac produce ten more faultless flat-bakes in as many minutes then, when she was allowed to start turning the next batch over, she said: 'I thought this was women's work - like fishing.'

Cadillac smiled. 'The only real women's work is bearing children. The normal everyday tasks are shared by everyone in the clan regardless of sex and age. If the women seem to have cornered certain tasks, it's more a question of aptitude and convenience. There are no

hard and fast lines of demarcation. The females fight, and the male warriors can prepare food and make flat-bakes.

Comes in handy when you're away on a hunting expedition."

'Yes, well, it's going to take me a while to settle in.

I feel so useless! Nothing I've learnt up to now has prepared me for any of this. If you were to break a leg it would give me a chance to prove I was actually capable of doing something." Roz laughed. 'On second thoughts, don't. All I know is medicine the way it's practised in the Federation. I could probably give you a diagnosis, but without the equipment and the drugs I probably wouldn't be able to cure you!"

She toyed with her neck. 'It's really strange. I've carried a stethoscope round my neck for so long - and now it's not there, I feel half-naked!" Cadillac ruffled her hair playfully. 'Don't worry. I'll tell you everything I know about Mr Snow's herbal remedies, and show you the plants he gathered- and later on, you'll have a chance to meet other healers."

'Okay. But it's not the same thing. You already know all that." Roz tapped her chest. 'I want to bring something to this relationship."

'You already have."

She read the look in his eye. 'Yes. But agreeable though it is, liberating your sex drive is a social attribute, not a workskill. I'm talking about making a positive contribution."

'Roz! You're already doing that by just being here!

The hunting, gathering, cooking and all the other things - that's something we can do together. You've adapted even quicker than Steve did, and before long, your natural abilities will express themselves.

Just take it easy. We have all the time in the world."

Cadillac's last words triggered a sudden pang of anxiety.

'Do we?" Roz forced a smile to her lips. 'It's strange to think I've known about you all these years - well, .three, but it seems longer and never once did I dream that..."

She took hold of his hands. 'Whatever I felt before when I thought I was having a good time -' is nothing compared to the way I feel now."

The too..."

Roz tightened her grip on his hands. 'I don't want it to end.

Ever."

'Nothing is for ever, Roz. But I promise you this. As long as I have breath in my body, you and I will be together. My feelings for you will never change. I will care for you and protect you."

'No,' said Roz. 'That's my job. Let me at least earn my keep."

."That's something we need to talk about."

Cadillac hesitated. Ever since they landed in Wyoming he had been holding back a question which he hoped she would answer in the

affirmative. Be it 'Yes' or 'No' he couldn't put it off any longer.

'This telepathic link you share with Steve. Does it work with me? Can you reach into my mind?'

Roz shook her head regretfully. 'If it did, you'd know about it. On the other hand, you and I have something he never had.'

'I know...'

'But you're still upset.'

'Not really. Not about that, anyway.'

'Is it this meeting of the Plainfolk at Sioux Falls?'

'Partly. That and staying alive.'

Roz placed her hands on his thighs, leant forward and kissed the base of his throat. 'Our lives are in the hands of Talisman. I never thought I'd have to tell you that.'

'You don't. It was, well - a slip of the tongue. When something good happens to you - like what's happening between us, you don't want to lose it ... makes you realise how precious life is.'

'And how precarious...'

'Exactly. The four of us may have been born in the shadow of Talisman but that doesn't mean to say we're destined to live happily ever after.' He saw her eyes cloud over and moved on rapidly. 'Sioux Falls is about

five hundred miles from here. We ought to leave soon to make sure of getting there in good time."

The image of the fearsome Shakatak D'Vine and the vicious duel they fought came into his mind. 'Thing is-there are quite a few D'Troit and C'Natti clans between here and Sioux Falls. They may not be too pleased to find us treading on their turf."

'We could always fly there."

Cadillac shook his head. 'We can't. Remember those bear steaks we had the other day?"

'unforgettable. They were enough to put me off meat for the rest of my life."

'Yeah, well, I collected those up in the hills when I went up to check out the Skyhawk.Didn't set out to, but I found myself halfway there, so..."

'You went..."

'Yeah. And when I got there, I found a whole family of 'em - climbing all over it. A big male, about nine feet tall on his hind legs, two mothers and five cubs- ' 'Babies? Oh, I wish I'd been there!" 'I'm glad you weren't. The port aileron had been torn off and they'd ripped great holes in the underside of the wing. It was lucky I had my carbine."

'Did you manage to drive them off?."

'And store up more trouble? Of course not. I killed them."

'Oh, Caddy! How could you?!" Roz pounded his shoulders with her fists.

Cadillac caught them and squeezed hard. 'Listen!" he hissed. 'The bear is an animal you don't mess around with. Those cuddly little babies you're so upset about grow up to be big and mean, with paws twice the size of a man's hand and claws that can tear your head off your shoulders with one swipe!" Roz was surprisingly strong but it wasn't the physical force she exerted that made him let go. It was the look in her eyes. The same look that had chilled Steve to the marrow.

'Not my head..." She stood up.

Cadillac got to his feet with a placatory gesture. 'I didn't mean to hurt you. I was- ' 'You didn't..."

'Roz. There's another question I need an answer to.

The night we..."

'Yes, I remember..."

'When you went into the hut you said - "There is no need to stand guard. My power will protect us both." Steve mentioned something about it. Are you a summoner - like Clearwater?"

'A kind of summoner perhaps. I'm not sure. I have never seen anyone use earth magic. And I have not seen or. read a seeing-stone, but now and then - like you - my mind receives glimpses of the future."

'Why do you smile?'

'Because Steve has always thought he was gifted with a sixth sense, second sight. But it was I who glimpsed what was going to happen, and sent a message - in that same instant - into his mind.'

Cadillac stared at her in surprise. 'So... that evening, when the two of us were on the shore of Lake Mi-Shiga and I saw the sea burning, it was you and not Steve ' - who saw you trapped underwater and about to drown. Yes. From that moment on I knew you were both approaching a point of extreme danger. I didn't have the full picture, but I kept my mind open - ready to receive and act upon Steve's call the minute he came through.'

'Amazing...'

'No more amazing than the gifts you and Clearwater possess. I'm glad I was there to help. Otherwise you and I wouldn't be here now.'

'No. This other power Steve spoke of...'

'Ahh, you mean this... ?'

Cadillac found himself looking at Clearwater. And then, as he reeled back in astonishment, Clearwater became Steve Brickman, and then, before he could react fully, Brickman became Mr Snow!

'Old One!' cried Cadillac, stumbling forward.

Mr Snow, his blue eyes twinkling, reached out to steady his young protege, and chuckled mischievously.

'Did you think I had abandoned you? Why do you think I brought you together with this young girl?'

It was incredible. The voice! Every detail of his face!

The odour of the skins that made up his long cloak. The bony hands, attached to sinewy arms full of vigour! He could not be imagining this, it was far too real! Mr Snow had not died on the wagon-train.

He had come back!

'Don't go, Old One,' he begged. 'Stay with us!' Mr Snow met his plea with another throaty chuckle.

'Fear not! As long as you keep my memory alive in your heart, I shall never be far away from you. The powers that were gifted to me by Talisman now dwell within her and will protect you both in times of danger! Love her and cherish her and - above all - be valiant! There are perilous times ahead!' So saying, Mr Snow turned on his heel, his outstretched arm describing a great sweeping arc on the ground and, as he turned full circle, Cadillac found himself surrounded by a ring of D'Troit warriors, armed to the teeth and baying for blood. His stomach turned over and his mind went numb. It was like being thrown into a pit with the Hounds of Hell.

He turned to Mr Snow for help, but the Old One had vanished. Looking down, he found a Tracker carbine in his hands. There was a bayonet mounted under the barrel cluster and magazines in all three breeches.

With trembling fingers he selected full auto and began firing from the hip, spinning round to cover the circle as the screaming warriors closed in.

Volley upon volley of needle-point rounds chewed holes in their bodies, and shredded their faces in a spray of blood. But as each man went down, two more appeared to take his place! On they came - drawing closer and closer - the sunlight catching their flickering, probing blades.

The roar of their voices drowned his senses. He kept firing, firing, severing knife arms, pulverising bone and muscle. He could feel their hot breath, their spittle on his face. He drove the bayonet savagely into the nearest body, felt the barrels of the carbine press against the chest of the warrior as the blade sank in up to the hilt - and found himself looking into the grinning face of Shakatak D'Vine! He shut his eyes but he could not blot out the vision, could not escape from the nightmare that had engulfed him. He felt his own body convulse with shock as a dozen ice-cold steel blades pierced his flesh, felt the hot rush of blood, the screaming pain, the crushing, suffocating weight as the warriors fell upon him and began to tear him limb from limb .Oh, Sweet Mother. Save me. Ahhh. A-AHHH. AAA-AA-AA HHHHHH.

As his brain caved in, overwhelmed by terror, his physical and mental agonies vanished. An incredible lightness filled his body and, with it, a wonderful sense of release. He felt a cool hand upon his brow, the soft touch of lips upon his mouth. He opened his eyes and found Roz kneeling beside him.

What was she doing here? Had they killed her too? Cadillac stared at

her for a while, unable to understand then, as the memories of his death flooded back into his mind, he threw his hands across his face.

And when that failed to halt the tide of blood, he turned over on his belly and hugged the ground.

Roz stroked the back of his neck and whispered, 'It's all right. You are safe. It's over.'

Cadillac smelt the grass and the earth beneath him. It seemed real enough. He slowly eased himself up onto his elbows and scanned, his immediate surroundings. They were alone. No shattered bodies, no blood, nothing.

The D'Troit warriors whose breath, weight and steel had overwhelmed him had been summoned out of thin air. In recreating Shakatak, Roz had drawn upon and fleshed out his deepest fears. And she had used the same power to transform herself- in his eyes - into the Old One, Clearwater and Brickman.

It was terrifying...

She stood up and offered him her hand. As they came face to face she said, 'If I can do that to you - whom I love - just imagine what I can do to our enemies...'

Cadillac nodded but said nothing.

They ate in silence and later, when their bodies came together in the dark, he had not still uttered a word.

As he entered her, Roz whispered: 'I know what's going through your mind. Relax.' She locked her legs around the small of his back and thrust upwards to meet him. 'What you can feel is not a figment of your imagination. Trust me. This is for real!' And it was. Oh, yes.

It was. It was

CHAPTER TWO

In the heart of the Federation, a thousand miles southwest of the pine-forested slopes of the Laramie Mountains, Steve Brickman was busy working both ends against the middle.

Six weeks after his promotion to captain and probationary membership of the First Family, he still found it hard to believe his good fortune.

In Cloudlands the large overground estate where the First Family lived in colonial-style splendour - Steve was now the acknowledged companion and bed-mate of Franklynne Delano Jefferson, a close and favoured relative of the President-General. And the liaison with Fran provided him with an entree to the highest levels of the Family. The contacts at this stage were purely social but they provided Steve with an opportunity to make himself known and, above all, to be seen.

In eighteen action-packed months, he had risen from a workgang in the A-Levels to the charmed inner circle at the top of the tree. And in between, he had travelled further, seen things that others only dreamt of, and had been involved in more violence and intrigue than most other Trackers would meet in their entire lifetime - and he was still only nineteen!

Up to a few short weeks ago, Steve had always figured he had only another twenty or so years ahead of him.

Trackers who avoided a violent death usually died from natural causes between the age of 40 and 45. But Steve had discovered that he and his kin-sister Roz were Plainfolk Mutes - smooth-boned clear-skinned 'super-straight' - reared in the underground world of the Federation.

For some reason he had yet to fathom, Mutes had a

greater life expectancy than Trackers, remaining alert and active into their mid-sixties. Like the First Family.

They were also immune to the lethal radiation still present in the atmosphere - again like the First Family - a fact that had only become apparent to Steve after his arrival in Cloudlands.

At the first mention of the name he had guessed it was an overground installation, but he had been surprised to discover it was not a sealed environment. The entire estate was open to the sky.

Given the favourable circumstances in which he found himself, Steve decided it was wiser to accept the situation without comment, but it raised several questions that were impossible to ignore. The problem was - how could he discover the answers without jeopardising his newly-acquired life-style and the prospects of further promotion?

His delicate balancing act inside the First Family was not the only problem he had to contend with. Clearwater was still held in 'soft confinement' at the Life Institute.

Her shattered left thigh was mending well and she was expected to take her first tentative steps in September - the same month in which the Plainfolk were due to hold their first council at Sioux Falls: an item of news which Steve had not yet passed on to his masters. The child Clearwater was carrying within her was scheduled for delivery in mid-December. The official Federation calendar- designed for an underground world untouched by the passing seasons - had discarded the twelve pre-H months in favour of four quarters and three terms, but even after nine centuries old habits die hard.

The fact that he had actually fathered a child was something else Steve found difficult to accept. And he was not quite sure how he was meant to react to the situation. From the moment he was old enough to understand, Steve had been taught that the President-General was the Father of All Life, but now even that - one of the basic tenets of Trackerdom - was no longer true.

His feelings for Clearwater had not changed, but they were now tinged with a certain confusion and more than a little guilt. He kept telling himself that his physical relationship with Fran was nothing more than a smart career move; a means by which - through his new status and the valuable contacts he was making - he would be better able to organise their escape from the Federation.

But although he wanted to secure freedom for Clearwater and her child their child - he was beginning to lose the absolute certainty that his future lay with the Plainfolk. Steve was confident that in any contest for leadership of The Chosen, he would beat Cadillac hands down, but it was no longer that simple. The emergence of Roz as the fourth element in the equation had upset his calculations. Their guard-mother's revelation that they had been exchanged for her own new-born children, and as a consequence might not be related by blood, had undermined the kin-folk bond. They might still be linked by the mid-bridge but Roz was no longer under his control - the little sister content to bask in his shadow.

Steve could not understand why the mysterious force that the Mutes called 'destiny' - and which had so favoured him - had brought Roz and Cadillac together, but he knew his rival would grab this heaven-sent opportunity to even the score. He would make the most of the situation

and might even succeed in turning Roz against him. If she were to place her new, frightening power at Cadillac's disposal, it would be a whole new ball-game.

nd where would Clearwater - who from his own observations while on the Red River wagon-train had developed an unexpectedly close rapport with Roz stand in all this?

It was, Steve decided, a potentially dangerous situation.

If he did not tread carefully, he could find himself the odd man out.

And if that was so, it would be better off to remain where he was - in the Federation. But how could he sell that idea to Clearwater?

The short answer was- he couldn't. She would regard it as a complete and utter betrayal. And half of him agreed with her. Her return to the Plainfolk had been promised by Mr Snow. Steve had seen enough to convince him that prophetic visions and utterances were not to be taken lightly, but the other, darker half of his psyche found itself increasingly attracted to an alternative scenario based on the breathtaking supposition that the First Family themselves might be super-straight or, at the very least, were Trackers who had interbred with this rare, gifted type of Mute.

Steve had no hard proof, but once the germ of this idea had entered his head, it began to make more and more sense. Externally, super-straight Mutes were indistinguishable from Trackers. They also shared one important attribute with the known members of the First Family - both were immune to atmospheric radiation.

They might even share another- longevity. Steve had no proof of this since he had never met an old super-straight.

Or had he? Could he have Shaken the hand of one in the Oval Office?

Why else would the Family be so different from their loyal soldier-citizens? How else could people like Malone and other mexicans like Side-Winder operate for so long on the overground without pulling a trick?

It would also explain why the President-General took the Talisman Prophecy so seriously - along with Mute magic. A real true-blue Tracker, raised from birth in a hi-tech society where the physical sciences provided an answer for everything, would never, for one moment, have entertained the idea that some things happened 'by magic'.

In the Federation, there was a total ban on the discussion of such intangible concepts, and if ordinary Trackers so much as mentioned the idea it could earn them a trip to the wall.

More important still was the fact that the President-General knew something Steve had yet to discover-his true origins and the circumstances surrounding his birth. They knew he was a Mute and yet they had condoned the unthinkable: they had allowed him to jack up Franklynne Delano Jefferson. Not just once, but on a regular basis, sometimes notching up three or four ball-breaking sessions a night.

There was only one set of circumstances which would permit such a relationship. Fran was also a Mute. They all were - or had enough Mute blood in them for it not to matter. Which meant - in theory there was nothing to stop him from becoming the next but one President-General...

George Washington Jefferson the 33rd.

It was a mind-blowing notion, and the historical perspective it opened up was equally disturbing. At what point had Mute blood entered the veins of the First Family? Or had it always been there?

Mr Snow had told him that Mute and Tracker shared a common ancestry whose roots ran back to the Old Time - the pre-Holocaust era that the Iron Masters called the World Before. Super-straight like Clearwater and Cadillac were living proof of that- and so, it would seem, was he.

Their existence supported Mr Snow's claim that the Mutes had not

unleashed the Holocaust but were, instead, its principal victims.

If so, the bone and skin deformations and mental impairment that caused the Federation to classify them as sub-human did not precede the Holocaust; it was part of its dreadful legacy. Mutes did not exhale the poisonous elements that filled the air, and it was not exuded through the sweat glands on their multi-coloured skins. And touching that skin did not cause Trackers to develop gangrene. According to Mr Snow, that was another of the great lies invented by the Federation.

In the oral history of the Mutes, it was the servants of Pent-Agon, Lord of Chaos, who had unleashed The War of a Thousand Suns by launching countless numbers of iron birds into the air. Iron birds which rose into the sky-on plumes of fire, flew in a great arch towards the stars then returned to earth as falling suns.

Many of these birds, said Mr Snow, had been caged deep in the earth in underground cities - like those of the

Federation; others had burst free from the bodies of great iron-snakes that travelled on shining hard-ways. Not the crumbling remains that marked the routes once used by the giant, man-carrying beetles, but endless ribbons of polished iron which glittered in the sun like the flawless blades of the samurai.

In the last six weeks, Steve had seen those shining hard-ways, and a new kind of iron-snake whose fiery breath was used not to kill, but to power its massive wheels.

Steam trains, lovingly restored and maintained by the First Family, running on rails - two ribbons of rolled steel pinned to wooden 'sleepers'. They were part of a grandiose project still several decades from completion - the rebuilding of the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe railroad which, when eventually connected to rebuilt sections of the pre-H Southern, and Southern Pacific routes, would link the east and west coasts of America.

Such trains could have carried the iron birds Mr Snow had spoken of.

Steve, of course, had no knowledge of intercontinental ballistic missile systems, or the destructive force of nuclear warheads but he knew about small air-to-ground rockets, and the firework variety made by the Iron Masters which he had adapted into a propulsion system for Lord Min-Orota's 'flying-horses'. The 'iron birds' were obviously large rockets with an explosive warhead.

If it was true - if they had been launched from trains then - reasoned Steve - it was equally possible that the Founding Father and the Four Hundred whose names topped the Roll of Honour were directly linked to those 'servants of Pent-Agon'. If they were, their finger might even have been on the firing button!

After Fran, anything was possible. It meant adjusting to the idea that George Washington Jefferson the 1st had neatly shifted the blame for the Holocaust onto the Mutes and - even more incredible still - the nine-hundred year war of retribution waged by the soldier-citizens of the Federation against the Plainfolk and their southern cousins in the name of racial purity was being led by a carefully-bred selection of super-straight!

Were it not for the scale of suffering involved the idea would have been absurd - laughable even. But it also presented Steve with an exciting opportunity - and a difficult choice. He could either try and escape with Clearwater and her child and face all the hassle and uncertainty that joining up with Cadillac and Roz would entail or... he could stay where he was and ride the wire.

All the way to the top

This was no longer a case of them and us; the outgunned underdog fighting a ruthless and vastly more powerful opponent. It was Mute against Mute - except that one side held all the cards, and had the soldier-citizens of the Federation to fight its battles.

Steve was forced to admire the First Family's duplicity.

One could not ignore the fact they were a ruthless bunch, with the killer-instinct of the D'Troit, but they were also extremely smart cookies. Always one step ahead of the game - and that was exactly the way Steve liked to play it.

If he grasped this opportunity wholeheartedly, allied himself to the First Family body and soul, he could have the best of both worlds. He could have power and freedom, the space to breathe and all the hi-tech gadgetry that made life easier. And he might even get to grind Cadillac's nose in the dust.

But there was more to it than just besting his rival. As he developed these ideas in his mind, Steve saw an even grander opportunity ahead.

If he managed to manoeuvre his way into the highest reaches of the Family, he might be able to halt the present policy of extermination.

Instead of setting Tracker against Mute, the First Family could use their manipulative skills in a positive way, making it possible for the Mutes to be accepted for what they really were fellow human beings.

None of this could happen overnight, but gradually, rigidly-held attitudes could soften, bringing about an

eventual reconciliation in which both parties accepted each other's right to exist side-by-side in the blue-sky world.

It was not an impossible dream, but Steve knew he could never persuade Clearwater to share it. And it wasn't just a moral dilemma that confronted him. Even if she consented to stay and he succeeded in getting her released from the Life Institute after the birth of her child, how on earth was he going to maintain his relationship with her and keep Fran happy at the same time?

Steve's future sleeping arrangements was just one of the problems associated with Clearwater. Another arose from the fact that they were unable to discuss any of these startling discoveries and tentative conclusions.

Once again, he had no hard proof, but he had to assume that the unit in which she was housed at the Life Institute contained hidden microphones - and probably miniature video cameras too.

Way back - it seemed a lifetime ago - when he was returning in chains on the shuttle to Grand Central to face a Board of Assessors and a charge of desertion, Roz had reached out to him over the mind-bridge, warning him to be careful and telling him that they were watching her.

And it hadn't been some meat-loaf dogging her footsteps. When they'd showered side by side aboard Red River, Roz had told him of the videotapes Karlstrom had played back to her. Tapes which recorded the wounds that appeared in her face at the same moment Steve submitted to a Plainfolk test of courage known as 'biting the arrow'. There had even been a hidden camera trained on her while she was asleep!

Standing under or close to running water appeared to be the only way to have an untaped head-to-head. And you could bet your ass that the Family had come to the same conclusion and were working on that one too.

Sub-aqua conversations might be safe for the moment but they weren't a viable option in the present situation.

It would look a bit odd, to say the least, if he suddenly took to scrubbing himself down at the Life Institute in the next shower stall to an enemy prisoner. Because that - despite the relative luxury of her surroundings - was what Clearwater was.

The medical skills of the Federation were dedicated to making her whole, but those same skills were also being used to scrutinise every aspect of her physiology. Bone, organs, tissue, every nerve, brain and blood cell had come under or was due for microscopic examination.

Clearwater was the first really powerful summoner to fall into the hands of the Federation. Before her capture, to reinforce his image as a loyal soldier-citizen, Steve had already told Karlstrom about some of the things he'd seen her do - including her feats of magic at the Heron Pool. Which was just as well, because his testimony confirmed and fleshed out the garbled second- and third-hand reports AMEXICO had received from other sources inside Ne-Issan.

But Steve hadn't told the full story. No one, including Karlstrom, knew that she could plant a delayed mental imperative inside somebody's brain, which would cause them to say or do whatever she required.

Steve was keeping that to himself in case he needed Clearwater's help to get them both out of a tight corner.

Although the Family had taken the precaution of housing Clearwater in an overground annexe, they did not feel unduly threatened by the destructive powers of her earth-magic. Soon after their arrival, Steve had been at the foot of her bed when Karlstrom had issued his double-edged warning. One false move on her part would lead to his immediate execution - and vice versa. Comprendo . . .?

Si, si commandante

This meeting had preceded his heart-warming interview with the President-General and his promotion to captain'but he imagined the threat still held good. And with his elevation to membership of the First Family it meant he had even more to lose.

Steve had no intention of rocking the boat but the knowledge that his life depended on Clearwater's good

behaviour was a sobering reminder of just how precarious his position was. He had finally got his feet firmly on the golden ladder only to discover that the rungs could snap from under him at any moment. Steve was sure that Clearwater would not put the life of her unborn child at risk, but that only took them up to mid-December. If she then started to develop itchy feet and he appeared to be dragging his it could make things very difficult.

Not good. Not good at all.

Steve tried to remind himself why and how they'd both landed in this mess. He had put Clearwater into the hands of the Federation because that was the only way to save her life. And he'd wanted her to live because of the feelings she had aroused in him. She was the 'only person he really cared about, and it was through their relationship that his eyes, heart and mind had been opened.

For the first time he had been able to see the world as it was, in all its rich variety, its endless possibilities, and he had also discovered the untapped potential within himself which, if allowed to flower, would enable him to become his true self.

It was knowing how he felt about Clearwater which had driven Roz into that jealous rage. But she had changed.

That was how it was in life. Nothing stayed the same; it was a constant cycle of growth and decay. People changed, feelings changed, and if you wanted to change the world then, well. sometimes people got hurt in the process. Steve knew that if he had allowed his emotions to get the better of him, he could never have gunned down Commander Hartmann and the other crewmen he'd served with aboard The Lady from Louisiana. But it had to be done. He had found the strength to take the tough decision, to do the hard thing. Just like the First Family.

And now he had to do so again. When the time was right, he had two ways to go. Escape with Clearwater and her child, or come up with a plan that would get them out and leave him behind, without a shred of evidence to link him with their departure. Steve was confident he could figure out the mechanics of either scenario, but he was sorely tempted to go for the second, which would leave him free to climb the ladder - secure in the knowledge that with Clearwater gone, it would not break under him.

Steve tried to convince himself that staying behind was not the softer option. He might escape the daily grind of material existence but there were other pressures, other dangers. And it would involve sacrificing everything he had gained through knowing Clearwater and returning her love. Severing their relationship would mean the slow death of the soul. That was the price of reaching the pinnacle of power. And at some point during the next five months he had to decide whether he was prepared to pay it.

There was someone else who wanted to remove Clearwater from the Federation. Commander-General Ben Karlstrom, a.k.a. Mother, a member of the First Family and head of AMEXICO, the top-secret organisation to which Steve belonged.

Karlstrom's present anxiety could have been allayed just as easily by having Clearwater thrown down one of the many thousand-foot deep ventilation shafts after administering- for safety's sake - a massive, surreptitious dose of tranquillisers. But in the present circumstances

that was not a viable option.

It was the President-General who had ordered the capture of Mr Snow, Cadillac and Clearwater, and he had now allowed himself to be persuaded that the child Clearwater was carrying might be the Talisman. A scan of a gene sample from the four-month embryo had revealed the three vital 'markers' - the divine fingerprint which, according to the opportunist quacks running the psionics department, would have to be present in the individual destined to become the Thrice-Gifted One wordsmith, summoner and seer.

Karlstrom, who was implacably opposed to the current vogue for this pseudo-science, had been appalled to learn

that Jefferson the 31st intended to have the child reared as a member of the First Family. To safeguard his own position within the ruling hierarchy, Karlstrom was obliged to keep his views strictly to himself, but to his mind, the P-G's decision bordered on sheer lunacy. It was only storing up trouble. If the future could be foretold and the Talisman Prophecy was true, this individual would find his way back to the Plainfolk. The verses which predicted the end of the Federation would be fulfilled and the fact that the President-General had made him his adoptive son and heir would probably serve to hasten the process.

On the other hand, if you believed - as Karlstrom did - that the future course of events could be changed by resolute action, then the best way to begin was by eliminating every possible individual, of whatever age or complexion, who might become the Thrice-Gifted One, and every female whose genetic fingerprint marked her out as a potential mother of this troublesome sonofabitch.

Dumping Clearwater over the side now, while she still did not have two good legs to stand on, would save medical resources that could be better employed elsewhere and terminate her pregnancy in no uncertain fashion. If she was carrying the Talisman, he would have to go back to Square One and start his trip across the board all over again.

It was quick, simple and above all final, but Karlstrom knew he could not sell this idea to anybody, least of all the President-General. The only way out was to arrange her escape. But for that, he needed someone he could confide in, someone he could trust absolutely, someone who was prepared to betray his sacred oath of allegiance to the President-General in the higher interests of the Federation which - in this case - just happened to coincide with Karlstrom's.

In a society where informing on your errant comrades earned you the secular equivalent of sainthood, such qualities were hard to find, but Karlstrom thought he knew someone who might fit the bill. Steven Roosevelt Brickman

The thought of turning to Steve for help made Karlstrom laugh out loud.

He was always quick to appreciate the irony of a given situation and this one was doubly ironic. His future was already in Brickman's hands. Fran's new golden boy knew something which, if divulged to the wrong party, could threaten Karlstrom's position as head of AMEXICO and cause untold harm to the organisation itself.

From the operational summaries dealing with the loss of The Lady from Louisiana and the subsequent annihilation of the M'Calls, the President-General had assumed that the explosives used so effectively by the Mutes in their surprise attack had come from the Iron Masters.

Or, to be more precise, from the plundered wreckage of the five wheel-boats lost during the Battle of the Trading Post.

This was not, in fact, the case, but Karlstrom had decided not to set the record straight. Through an administrative error, real explosives had been supplied to a decoy unit made up of defaulters. As the sacrificial goats in an elaborate plan of entrapment, they should have been issued with dummy charges; AP mines filled with sand, foil wraps of PX containing a slab of modelling clay, and blank detonators. Some careless keyboarding lower down the line had resulted in them being issued with the real thing and it had ended up in the hands of the Clan

m'call.

It was a potentially messy situation which reflected badly on AMEXICO, but fortunately, an alert member of his personal staff spotted the error when checking the requisitions. The computer records had immediately been 'sanitised' using Track-Back - a top-secret programme designed to cover AMEXICO's corporate ass.

Conceived by Karlstrom and developed by a trusted subordinate, Track-Back could seek out sensitive blocks or trails of data stored anywhere on the network like a pre-H bloodhound following a scent.

Once it located

the rogue data, it deposited a virus which caused it to self-destruct then re-sequenced the surrounding material to cover up any blank spots left on the storage tape or disk.

In a world run by computers, it was his insurance policy, and spring-board to the Oval Office. Track-Back did not only locate and destroy potentially incriminating data, it could also insert it at any point in the system without leaving any electronic fingerprints.

Jefferson the 31st could not live for ever, and when the time came to arrange the succession, Karlstrom intended to use AMEXICO's electronic expertise to help him eliminate his rivals.

There was now nothing held on the network controlled by COLOMBUS that could lead back to the organisation, and no one on the stricken wagon-train had survived.

The Lady from Louisiana had been completely gutted by further explosions and fire, leaving the team of investigators with little to poke through.

Brickman was the only person, outside his personal staff, who knew the source of the explosives that had crippled The Lady. Had it been anyone else, Karlstrom would have had them shafted, but young Mr Brickman - the hero of the hour - had too high a profile. He had become a credit to the organisation and for as long as he found favour with Fran Jefferson he was fireproof.

Unbelievable.

What made it worse was the fact that Brickman knew there had been some kind of cover-up. Somebody close to the P-G must have commented upon the 'official version' over the dinner table. And on the first, and so far only occasion, when Karlstrom had encountered Brickman in Cloudlands, he had asked, with disarming casualness, to speak with him in private.

Agreeing - after a suitable pause - Karlstrom had allowed the rising star to steer him towards one of the many ornate stone fountains that graced the formal garden areas in Cloudlands. The young man was learning fast.

Karlstrom played back their conversation on his mental tape-recorder, picturing the look of transparent honesty on Brickman's face - the kind of expression that only arch-deceivers can muster.

B: There's something I need to draw your attention to, sir. And since it's a rather delicate matter, it's probably better we do it here rather than in a more formal setting.

K: Okay. What's on your mind?

B: Well, sir, I recently heard a garbled account of the engagement between the Clan M'Call and The Lady, at North Platte, Nebraska

K: Go on.

· B: There seemed to be certain inconsistencies with the facts as I remembered them, so I asked Miz Jefferson if she could access the official summaries for me. I hope that was okay?

K: I imagine that would depend on what you found.

B: Exactly, sir. It's the source of the explosives used to cripple The Lady. I was on board when she went up. It couldn't have been black powder, and gun-cotton fuses, sir. The blasts were too powerful, too well synchronised.

These were Federation demolition charges, detonated by battery-powered timing devices. Like the ones I found in the M'Call settlement. But there's no mention of them anywhere in these summaries.

K: I see. Did you mention this to Miz Jefferson? I imagine she would be interested to know why you wanted to access this material.

B: I haven't breathed a word to anyone, sir. And my interest in the summaries can be explained by the fact that I was involved in the operation.

K: Of course. Have you come to any conclusion based on what you have learned?

B: Well, sir, it would appear there's been some kind of cover-up. I obviously don't know at what level this occurred, but i felt duty-bound to draw it to your notice.

Whoever put those explosives into the hands of that fake SIG-INT unit bears a direct responsibility for the loss of The Lady from Louisiana.

I don't think the personnel

involved should be left in a position where they can make the same kind of mistake again.

K: I agree.

B: The way I see it, sir, this is a strictly internal matter and should be dealt with on that basis. My overriding concern is to protect the good name of the organisation.

My ass! thought Karlstrom. But what he had said was: 'I appreciate your concern.' And then, quite stupidly, he had implicated himself by adding: 'You will find that the organisation knows how to look after its own.'

What had prompted him, of all people, to say such a thing and play right into Brickman's hands?! Looking back, he could see why. Through Fran, Brickman had a direct route to the Oval Office. The slightest indiscretion on his part could open a can of worms that Karlstrom wanted to keep shut.

Officially, AMEXICO didn't exist. Karlstrom's official title was Director of Operational Research - a shell organisation with its own staff. AMEXICO was the hidden kernel within. Its sole purpose was to achieve the aims and protect the ass of the man in the Oval Office against his own kind if necessary. Jefferson the 31st would not do anything that might upset that arrangement - unless, of course, he suspected he was not being kept fully in the picture. If the true story behind the loss of The Lady came to light it could make him nervous.

And when President-Generals became nervous, no one was safe especially their nearest and dearest.

Thinking it over again, Karlstrom decided he was not in any immediate danger. brickman would keep silent because he thought he had acquired some leverage.

Karlstrom was happy to let him think this was the case.

It made him less dangerous.

For the moment, further overground assignments were out of the question. The President-General wanted Brick-man to remain close to Clearwater. Karlstrom was only too pleased to oblige. He called Steve in and told him he was being temporarily reassigned to the Eastern Desk; a department which analysed and collated data fed into AMEXICO from its contacts and agents inside Ne-Issan.

It wasn't a sinecure, or a pay-off for services rendered.

It was a responsible job in which Brickman's own direct experience of Iron Master society was a valuable asset - especially now, after the catastrophic loss of the last trading expedition.

Brickman was a shrewd operator, with many admirable qualities, but for nearly two decades, Karlstrom had been eating guys like him for breakfast. That was why he was the head of AMEXICO. He was glad brickman had tried to lean on him. That took a lot of balls. And that was the kind of man Karlstrom needed to help execute the plan he was putting together.

Cadillac was also making plans, and as Roz listened to him, she realised that in helping him, she could endanger Steve. Since

responding to his call after Clearwater had been wounded, the telepathic link between them had stayed open. Karlstrom and his masters knew this.

They had agreed to rescue Clearwater just as they had responded to an earlier call to rescue Steve from the wheelboat on Lake Michigan. Now, following her last minute escape with Cadillac from the stricken wagon-train, Steve had made the fatal mistake of telling Karlstrom that she was safe and well.

He had avoided suspicion falling upon them both by pretending that she was being held prisoner by Cadillac, but that had only complicated the situation. Karlstrom knew that she could induce hallucinatory experiences, and might begin to wonder why she did not use this new power to free herself. And as long as he believed her to be alive and well, he could pressure Steve to maintain telepathic contact with her in order to find out what Cadillac was up to.

After having demonstrated how efficacious that telepathic link was, it would look distinctly odd if Steve now claimed he could not get through. There was an even greater danger. If The Federation got wind of

Cadillac's plans and learned that she was helping him - against the Federation - Karlstrom might try to strike at her by harming Steve.

There was only one way to protect herself and Steve.

Roz Brickman had to 'die'. And in order to make it convincing, she had to warn Steve, then combine her powers in a new and terrifying way.

Fran emerged from the bathroom, tingling from a brisk rub-down after her morning shower to find Steve still lying in bed. She made a sarong of the bath towel and went over to haul him out of bed. As she got closer and saw his flushed face and drooping eyelids, she changed her mind. 'What's the matter, don't you feel well?'

'Not really, no. I don't know what the hell it is, but I've been feeling a bit off colour, and late yesterday I started getting an odd tingling in my eyelids. Now they won't open properly, and something's happening in my throat.'

Fran laid a hand on his forehead. 'Feels like your temperature's up, but it's not exactly raging. Stay there.'

I'll call a doctor.'

By the time Joshua admitted one of the Family doctors, Steve's eyelids were completely paralysed, and he had difficulty explaining what was wrong with him. The doctor prised his eyelids open, shone a light into his eyes, felt his throat, checked his temperature, took soundings with a stethoscope, then turned to Fran. 'Have any other people in Savannah been taken sick?'

Fran referred the question to Joshua, the grey-haired Mute who was Head of Service in the mansion.

'Not as far as I know, ma'am. Do you want me to make sure?'

'I think you'd better,' said the doctor. 'I can't be certain till we do some other tests, but it looks as if the captain's suffering from food poisoning - and it could be serious.'

The diagnosis caused Fran to explode. 'Food poisoning?'

How the hell can anyone here catch food poisoning?'

She broke off and looked down as she felt Steve tug at her trouser leg.

He was trying to say something but seemed unable to get his tongue into gear. He jabbed his right forefinger nervously at the bed, then carefully traced out three letters on the coverlet.

R...O...Z...

Fran exchanged a puzzled look with the doctor. 'Roz?'

Then she made the connection. 'ugh, jeezuss! Roz!' The doctor remained perplexed. 'I beg your pardon?'

'It's ROZ who's got food poisoning!' The doctor looked at Joshua for enlightenment, then returned to Fran.

'I'm afraid I don't understand' · 'You don't have to,' cried Fran.

'Just get him to the clinic and do whatever you have to do!' By the

time Steve was admitted to the Cloudlands clinic, he was exhibiting the classic symptoms of botulism - the deadliest form of food poisoning.

The toxin was known to attack the fine nerve fibrils, stopping the chemical reaction which, in a healthy person, causes muscular contraction.

With his speech muscles paralysed, it was not long before the toxin affected other parts of the throat, making it difficult for him to swallow. A breathing tube was inserted, and he was put on a ventilator to prevent any further deterioration. He was still fully conscious, but without an antidote, it was only a matter of time before the breathing muscles became paralysed. Without artificial respiration, he would suffocate, and with its supply of oxygen cut off, his brain would be irreparably damaged.

Unable to sit still, Fran paced up and down beside his bed, gripping his hand now and then to reassure herself that the masked, unmoving figure in the bed was still alive. Karlstrom had joined her in the intensive care unit, and now stood on the other side of Steve's bed.

Fran took hold of Steve's hand again. 'Can't they do anything? Isn't there some drug they can give him?!" 'It's not that easy,' said Karlstrom. 'There is an antidote - but that can end up killing you as well. What we have

to remember is that it's not Brickman that has been poisoned."

'But he's dying!' shouted Fran. 'Look at him!!' She let go of Steve's hand and strode angrily to and fro, clawing the air in frustration. 'I just don't believe this is happening!' But Karlstrom was right. The tests on several samples of Steve's blood revealed no trace of the botulinum toxin.

Just as Roz's body had reproduced Steve's wounds, his body was duplicating the creeping paralysis that was bringing her closer and closer to death's door.

Twelve hours later, Steve's chest muscles were almost completely paralysed. It was only the ventilator that was keeping his brain supplied with the oxygen it needed.

Karlstrom dropped in again to see how he was. Fran was still at his bedside. She looked worn and crumpled.

'I hear the verdict's not good.'

'No. They told me he could die within twenty-four hours of the first signs of paralysis. He could last longer - it depends on Roz. But if she's at the same stage without any of this equipment she hasn't a hope.' Fran gestured helplessly and gave a tired laugh. 'I don't know what I'm doing here. When I hear people talk about bedside manners this is not what springs to mind.'

'The fact that you are here shows him you care. That must be a help.'

'Maybe.' She became angry. 'Isn't there some way we can break this telepathic link?!' 'I've already asked that question. And as usual the psionics department doesn't have an answer. None of us know how this telepathy business works, but that's only part of the mystery that surrounds these two. We know of other telepaths, but what's happening here is absolutely unique.'

'I know that, but Roz is his sister, for crissakes! Doesn't she realise she's killing him?!' 'She must do, but perhaps in a situation like this the contact is involuntary,' said Karlstrom. 'I can't think that either of them would make the other suffer deliberately.'

We'll just have to keep our fingers crossed and hope that when she dies, she doesn't take Brickman with her.'

'So that's all we can do is it? "Keep our fingers crossed"?'"

Karlstrom smiled. As their controller, Fran had been overseeing the lives of Steve and Roz for the last five years. 'Look on the bright side. If they both die, it'll lighten your case load.'

Shrewd as he was, the head of AMEXICO was wrong.

With Steve's connivance, Roz had induced the progressive muscular paralysis that was the hallmark of fatal food poisoning which often arose from eating smoked, uncooked meats - a standard item in the diet of the Plainfolk. In the small hours of the following morning, Steve's condition deteriorated further. As the doctors and nursing staff clustered round him, his body was shaken by a series of violent convulsions, then he went completely limp and his eyes opened. When they removed the oxygen mask and the tube from his throat, he was able

to speak and breathe normally, but was completely exhausted.

Fran, who had snatched a few hours sleep in an adjoining room, welcomed him back to the land of the living with an exuberant kiss then shook his wrists.

'Don't you ever do this to me again!' She sat down on the edge of the bed and gave him a searching look. 'Roz is dead, isn't she?'

Steve nodded and made a show of mastering his grief.

Fran reached out a hand and gently brushed away the brimming tears.

'Never mind. You're safe. That's all that matters.'

Steve gazed out at the view through the triple-glazed window of Clearwater's hospital room. A well-kept stretch of red grass, broken here and there by beds of flowering shrubs and trees in full leaf, ended in a high wall of dressed stone.

The window didn't open, but a constant whispering stream of fresh filtered air entered through louvred ducts in the walls. The room itself was light and airy,

part of a small suite consisting of the treatment unit where Clearwater now lay, a tiny kitchen/utility room, bathroom and a sitting room, where the sealed windows reached from floor to ceiling.

From her sitting position on the high bed, Clearwater was able to see the trees and grass, and glimpse the blue sky above the wall. Steve could not help comparing her surroundings with the cell he had occupied at Pueblo following his first adventures with the M'Calls. And the A-Levels - which was one vast prison camp, where the air was filled with smoke, dust and constant noise, in which there was no night or day. Finding himself there, with a three-year sentence hanging over him after those eye-opening, mind-expanding months on the overground had been a hellish experience.

Never again

A female nursing orderly came in carrying two vases full of flowers part of a bunch that Steve had selected with the help of one of the Mute gardeners. It was a small token to help Clearwater keep in touch with the overground. He had brought the first soon after being given access to Cloudlands and had replaced them regularly ever since. The nurse brought them over for Clearwater to touch and smell, then placed one on the table and the other on the window sill. A third vase, containing yellow roses - which Steve hadn't brought on his last visit - stood on the bedside cabinet.

As he watched the nurse make a last adjustment to the floral displays, Steve reflected on how much he had changed. Two years ago, before that fateful journey aboard The Lady, he had had no interest in any kind of plant life. He had viewed flowers as just part of the poisonous junk that littered the overground.

And now

He closed the door as the nurse left. 'So... how are you feeling today?'

'Much better. Look -' Clearwater extended her arm and aimed her forefinger at the chair Steve was about to move from the table to her bedside. It shot away from his outstretched hand, slammed against the wall, then began to slide upwards as she raised her arm.

Steve leapt towards it and grasped the front legs. 'Are you crazy?!'

he hissed. The tubular metal chair remained glued to the wall with its back rest touching the ceiling, resisting all his efforts to prise it loose. 'Let go! I' Clearwater dropped her arm. Steve caught the chair awkwardly as it fell on top of him and lowered it to the ground.

'What are you trying to do?' he asked, in the same harsh whisper.

'Get us killed?'

'Don't worry. I know where the hidden eyes and ears are.' She pointed to the air vents around the room. 'But they cannot see or hear us.'

She beckoned him to sit beside her.

Steve eyed the vents uneasily as he carried the chair over and sat down. 'How do you know?'

'Because I have killed them.'

'You can't kill them,' hissed Steve. 'They're not animals, they're electronic devices!' 'But they are dead. The power that runs through them like the blood in your veins has vanished and can never enter them again. Isn't that the same thing?'

'I guess it is.' Steve threw his hands in the air, gave the vents another cautious glance then said: 'You can do that - to machines?'

'I'm learning.'

'I was right. You are trying to get us killed.'

Clearwater squeezed his hand reassuringly. 'No. I have done this twice before. They think it is their devices which are at fault. They blame and curse them, not me.'

'How long have we got?' laughed Steve.

'About fifteen flicks.' 'Flicks...?'

Clearwater indicated the wall-mounted digital clock.

'The numbers. The last two change - flick, flick, flick.'

Steve laughed again. 'Those are minutes! Sixty minutes in one hour, twenty-four hours in one day. You know what a day is, don't you?'

Clearwater withdrew her hand from his. 'Why do you

mock me? I have heard them talk of hours and minutes but it means nothing. Life in the sand-burrowers' world has a strange rhythm I cannot understand. Your time is not the same as ours."

'Maybe - but don't let's waste any of it." Steve stroked her hair, brushing it back away from her face. The Red River medics had cropped it short, shaving it down to the skull where a couple of bullets had furrowed her scalp. In the last six weeks, the spiky crew-cut had grown out into a soft, wavy bob just like Fran's.

He leant forward and kissed her on the lips. Nothing heavy, but the tingle which had first set fire to his loins was still there. He sat back to catch his breath.

Clearwater ran her hand along the sleeve of his silver-grey jump-suit, with its two broad dark blue captain's stripes, that marked him out as a member of the First Family, and looked deep into his eyes. 'You don't have to hide it from me."

'Hide what?"

'The other woman in your life. Fran."

Steve died a little. 'How do you know her name?"

'She came to see me."

Steve eyed the vase on the bedside cabinet. 'And brought you flowers ' He paused, not wishing to know more but the urge was too strong.

'What did she want?"

'To see me. To know me - and perhaps know more about you."

Again, reluctantly, Steve asked: 'And...?"

'She's very sure of herself."

'She has every reason to be. She's Family."

'She is also very..."

'I hope you're not gonna say "beautiful"."

'She's not ugly- at least, not on the outside. I was going to say, hard, calculating-but then that element of danger appeals to you. 'Be careful."

'I will be."

'Is she very. physical?"

The directness of the question caught Steve off guard.

He felt the colour rise to his cheeks. Damn.... 'It's not what you think. It's a relationship that was forced on me." Steve found the vengeful barb he'd been looking for. 'Like you and the Consul-General."

If the shot went home it didn't show, and he felt demeaned for having said it.

'I see. Does that mean I can take my revenge - as you did?'

'Watching him die made me feel better, but I didn't kill him because of what happened between you. I was following orders.'

.Clearwater took hold of his hands again. 'You don't have to justify yourself.'

'I'm not trying to. I want you to understand. What happened then is exactly what's happening now. You weren't the victim, he was. You manipulated him. And that's what I'm trying to do now.'

'With this woman...' . 'Yes! Fran is our ticket to ride. She has the contacts we need and she can make things happen - just like your friend the Consul-General and the guy I took advantage of, the Herald HaseGawa.'

Clearwater nodded. 'When the time comes, let me know if she needs persuading.'

'I will. Trust me.'

'Always.' She pulled him towards her and offered up her mouth to his.

Why, Steve asked himself, should one simple word like that make me feel so lousy? 'Listen ' The door opened and two servicemen came in. Each of them was toting a four-inch thick suitcase full of tools and test equipment, and they'd been running. Many more breakdowns like this, thought Steve, and there'll be guys camping out in the sitting room.

"Fraid we're gonna have to ask you to cut short your visit, Captain.

We seem to have a problem with the air-conditioning."

'Sure, these things happen.' Steve exchanged an

amused glance with
Clearwater which they didn't see.

'Thought it was getting a little stuffy in here.'

Three of the nursing staff came in, took hold of Clearwater's bed and bedside cabinet and began to manoeuvre them out through the door.

'We're just going to move you to another room for an hour or so,' explained the senior orderly.

Steve accompanied the procession down the corridor.

'You're free to stay if you wish, sir.'

'That's okay,' said Steve. He gripped Clearwater's hand and felt her fingers tighten round his. 'I think we've said all there is to say for the moment.' When they reached the chosen door he gave her a comradely pat on the shoulder and stepped aside as they wheeled her in. 'I'll stop by when I come off duty tomorrow.'

'Please do,' she said. As they wheeled her in she looked back over her shoulder, a knowing, conspiratorial gleam in her eyes.

Steve nodded to show he'd received the message.

Karlstrom returned the salute of the two ensigns guarding the turnstile, stepped into the gleaming metal cylinder and was rotated through onto the blue carpet of the Oval Office. The President-General stood in his usual opening position, gazing out at the computer-generated landscape beyond the tall, curved windows.

Today's picture was his favourite view of Pre-Holocaust New England in the fall, leaf-strewn grass overhung by yellow, gold and russet trees which framed a white wooden building surmounted by a tall spire with a cross on top. A church. A place where people gathered to worship.

Religion. The Family had retained the concept but dispensed with the buildings. Twice a day, the soldier-citizens of the Federation gathered in various-sized groups at their posts or work-places to offer up prayers to the Supreme Being which, in their case, was not God but the President-General.

Whenever Karlstrom entered the Oval Office for a one-on-one meeting, Jefferson always had his back turned. As a past-master himself in the art of manipulating people, Karlstrom believed it was a deliberate ploy by the PG, part of a continuing programme to create and maintain the aura of unchallengeable superiority. By ignoring the person entering, he was saying: This view from my window which holds my attention is more important than you and the business you have come to discuss and, what is more, I do not feel threatened by your presence.

And by averting his face in those first few crucial moments, the P-G left his visitor wondering what kind of reception they were going to get. The uncertainty usually put them at a disadvantage which the P-G would then exploit in the subsequent conversation. Rule One of Man-Management: If in doubt, maintain effective control by undermining the self-confidence of your subordinates.

None of this had quite the same effect on Karlstrom because he had grown up alongside Jefferson and, for the last ten years, as head of AMEXICO, had conferred with him daily. He understood the process, knew the whole thing was an act, but Jefferson still kept on trying to put

one over on him. Maybe he just liked to keep in practice.

Karlstrom halted at the appropriate spot, coughed politely, and waited for his presence to be acknowledged.

What would it be this time - silver-haired statesman, Prince Machiavelli, concerned father of his people, or the regular guy - one of the boys?

Having psyched himself up into the appropriate mood, the P-G ceased his contemplation of Pre-H New England church architecture and turned on the charm. 'Ben!' The P-G offered Karlstrom a firm hand and ten thousand volts of sincerity, then invited him to take a seat.

Regaining the high-backed swivel chair behind the blue leather-topped desk, Jefferson gestured towards his video console. 'I've been reviewing Brickman's summaries of what occurred at the trading post and -' He broke off.

'How is our young hero by the way?'

'Never better,' said Karlstrom drily.

'Good. Those casualty figures - nearly two hundred thousand dead can we place any reliance on that?'

'I think so. Brickman obviously didn't do a body count. That was the casualty figure the Mute elders came up with. Their day-to-day computations don't embrace numbers of this magnitude, but it squares with our own estimates based on the video-tapes made by the reconnaissance overflights.'

Jefferson nodded. 'Yes, I saw them.'

'They were subjected to careful analysis - but even if you allow for a thirty per cent error that still leaves a big pile of dead meat.'

'Plus five wheel-boats...'

Karlstrom nodded. 'Biggies. Great Lakes trade-ships with a hundred and fifty ratings and twenty-five officers.'

Plus military units; samurai cavalry - and perhaps infantry.

At least two thousand men. Bad news whichever way you look at it.'

'And the Yama-Shita lost a similar boat and its expeditionary force in the spring...'

'On Lake Michigan. Hirohito's stand-in at Syracuse must be tearing his hair out. Well - he would, if he had any.'

The P-G thought this over. 'What's been the feedback from our friends in Ne-Issan?'

The question caused Karlstrom to shift in his seat. 'The reaction's been somewhat mixed. Apparently, Ieyasu 'The Lord Chamberlain 'Yes ... was very upset when we sank the Lake Michigan wheel-boat without prior consultation.' Karlstrom spread his hands. 'I explained that our hand was forced by the time factor, but they seem to want to have their cake and eat it. The Shogun and the rest of the TohYota family are hell-bent on destroying the YamaShita and with it, the rest of the Progressive movement. The trouble is, they can't do it without our help, but they want to do it their way.'

'They're also still very angry over the number of high-ranking japs that Brickman's crew took out at the Heron Pool. The thought of out-landers killing samurai offends their code of honour. That bushido shit is a real heavy number. When it comes to killing their own kind they like to do things by the book. And that means settling things between themselves."

'But you managed to talk him round..."

'It wasn't easy, but-' Karlstrom shrugged. 'They've got more to lose than we have."

'You mean Ieyasu has. As I understand it, Yoritomo is still unaware that our covert support of Ieyasu's intelligence network is helping to keep the TohYota in power." . 'Absolutely - and we plan to keep it that way."

Gluing Karlstrom to his seat with an imperious gesture, the President-General got up and began to pace slowly between his desk and the fireplace on the far side of the room. Karlstrom slid round sideways on his chair to avoid getting a crick in the back of his neck.

'Have you considered how this latest episode might affect the Federation?"

'The Yama-Shita's military expedition?" The question caused Karlstrom to raise his eyebrows. 'It's nothing to do with us. They flouted the rules laid down by the shogunate. They tried to avenge the death of their domain-lord by an illegal act of war and came a cropper.

End of story."

'Not quite. They also tried to divide and rule the Plainfolk - and almost succeeded."

'until Mr Snow pulled the rug out from under them."

Karlstrom smiled. 'The sonofabitch may have wrecked The Lady, but in a round-about way we owe him a vote of thanks. If the deal with the D'Troit and C'Natti had gone through as planned, we could have been in big trouble."

'We still may be. Supposing they try again?"

'They won't,' said Karlstrom firmly. 'Not after the beating they took.

Our inside sources all report that, as yet, none of the families involved - the YamaShita, Ko- Nikka or Se-Iko- have a clear idea of what happened

at the trading post. All anyone knows - and that includes our friend Ieyasu - is that five ships were lost, probably with all hands."

'But the full story is bound to filter through eventually."

Jefferson paused half-way through a turn and pointed to the VDU on the side-table on the left-hand side of his desk. 'According to Brickman, anyone in the D'Troit, C'Natti and San'Louis delegations who survived was allowed to return home - to spread the word. That was nearly two months ago. More than enough time for that word to have reached any one of those five Iron Master outstations."

'That's true,' admitted Karlstrom. 'And the japs will then know that their boats were wrecked and their men were killed - along with thousands of others - by a tidal wave raised by She-Kargo summoner. Mr Snow might be dead, but as you saw from Brickman's report, there are other powerful summoners. We got one ourselves. And that's a threat the Yama-Shita can't ignore."

'I take the point, but the Iron Masters don't think like we do. They can accept defeat, but not loss of face." The P-G went on the prowl again. 'Let me run a scenario by you and see how it sounds."

'Okay ' 'You've mentioned the involvement of the Se-Iko and Ko-Nikka families. They were given that trading concession by the Shogun as a pay-off for switching their support from the Yama-Shita to the Toh-Yota and here they are, two ships down and out of pocket. I shouldn't be surprised if they haven't already sent a delegation to the Shogun to ask for redress."

'Tough on them,' said Karlstrom. 'They got involved in an illegal operation and ended up getting their fingers burned. They won't get any joy from Yoritomo - or Ieyasu."

'They certainly won't get any compensation,' agreed Jefferson. 'But there are other forms of redress."

'Such as a government-led punitive operation against the Mutes..."

'It's not out of the question. Despite their fall from grace, the Yama-Shita still enjoy the covert support of the other progressive domain-lords. And because of that support the Toh-Yota were unable to eliminate the Yama-Shita family and seize its lands - despite the treason charges levelled against them. Charges which were supported by the majority of the other domain-lords.

And we know why. They all knew that if they stood by and let the Yama-Shita family go to the wall, they could suffer the same fate.

Once the Toh-Yota had absorbed its most powerful rival, it could pick off the others 'one by one."

.Jefferson paused mid-way between desk and fireplace with an expansive gesture that matched the sweep of his scenario. 'The Yama-Shita may have overstepped the mark by setting up those out-stations around Lake Michigan, and in attempting to enlist the help of the D'Troit and C'Natti in enslaving the She-Kargo and M'Waukee, but you have to admit it was a great idea."

Karlstrom nodded.

'And I believe that the majority of domain-lords including those who

have always supported the TohYota - will also regard it as a step in the right direction. An inevitable step ' 'I agree,' said Karlstrom. 'But we've drawn the lines on the map. Everything west of Lake Erie and the Appalachians belongs to us.'

'For the moment. Forget about what the YamaShita were planning to do.

The fact that it was an act of war launched without the consent of the shogunate is a mere legal technicality. In losing those five wheel-boats and two thousand men, the Iron Masters - as a nation have suffered a major military defeat at the hands of savages.

Non-persons.

The Plainfolk are the unwashed rabble they make slaves out of! The Shogun can't walk away from this one,' cried Jefferson. 'The honour of the whole country is at stake!' Karlstrom leapt to his feet. 'Yes!

But what can he do?

We've made it clear what'll happen if they move troops

into Plainfolk

territory. We gave them the green light to continue trading but put the block on any military operations. We have every right to come down on them for this last stunt - ' 'Except, of course, we would be penalising the wrong people."

'Precisely. But if the shogunate succumbed to popular pressure and broke our agreement we couldn't just sit on our hands. We would have to make good our threat of retaliation."

'If push comes to shove, can we deliver on that?"

'The belief that we can is what's kept them in line up to now. That plus the whole raft of electronic equipment we've been supplying to Ieyasu's people. It's those goodies which have kept the Toh-Yota one step ahead of their rivals. Ieyasu would block any move by the Shogun that would rob him of our support."

'Yes. But that unwillingness to adopt any course of action which could lead to a conflict with the Federation could also undermine the Toh-Yota shogunate."

'Because... they'd be defeated ' 'Yes. And they'd be seen to lose because the traditionalist policies of Yoritomo's family have held the country back. As long as he maintains the edict against the Dark Light, they'll never be a match for us. Without electricity they ain't ever going to break out of the technological straight-jacket they've locked themselves into."

'I can't argue with that,' said Karlstrom. 'If I've got this right, you're suggesting that the pressure to get even with the Mutes and the reluctance of the shogunate to do anything that will bring us down on their necks will garner more support for the progressive movement...

and could eventually lead to the overthrow of the TohYota."

'Just airing a few thoughts,' said Jefferson modestly.

'How does it sound?"

Karlstrom nodded admiringly. 'It works for me."

'Good." Jefferson laid a friendly hand on his shoulder.

'That's why we must do our utmost to help the TohYota stay in power."

He smiled. 'I've always had a great respect for tradition. Families like ours should stick together."

His grip on Karlstrom's shoulder tightened. 'I'll leave you to work out the details."

Some weeks later, as a result of this meeting, Steve found himself being rotated through into the Oval Office.

Waiting on the other side of the 'stile was Karlstrom.

Jefferson the 31st - whom Steve had glimpsed on two occasions in Cloudlands but had never spoken to on an unofficial basis - was over by his desk. As he walked forward with Karlstrom to receive the warm Presidential handshake, Steve caught a glimpse of someone standing by the fireplace.

It was Fran. How strange! She must have known about this meeting and

yet she'd said nothing, even though that very morning she had been wriggling around on his con-rod like a speared fish.

'Steven! Good to see you looking so well. Sad news about your kin-sister. Such promise, but there it is.'

'Yes, sir.' The laying on of the hands, hearing that deep tich voice intone his name still made Steve go weak at the knees.

'We have a job for you. A very important job that will involve a long, and possibly dangerous, journey.'

'You look surprised,' said Karlstrom.

'uh, no, sir! I'm ready to undertake any assignment you care to give me. It's just that I thought you wanted me to stay close to Clearwater in case...'

Karlstrom laid on one of his thin, mocking smiles. 'I don't think she's going anywhere for the moment, do you?'

Sensing that Jefferson's eyes were on him, Steve pulled himself together and put on a bold front. 'What is it you wish me to do, sir?'

Jefferson invited him to take the second seat, to Karlstrom's right, that stood in line with the other corner of the desk. Fran remained by the fireplace, behind Steve's back.

The President-General laid his forearms on his desk and crossed one hand over the other. He had strong fingers. The hands of a craftsman.

'Steven. All the assignments you have undertaken have been important, but on this occasion, you will be acting not just for the Federation, but as a representative of the First Family. You will be dealing with affairs of state - at the very highest level. Do you feel able to take on this responsibility?'

'Yes, sir.'

'Good. You have given ample proof of your courage and resourcefulness, and we have the highest regard for your intelligence and loyalty. You have also gained valuable experience through your contacts with the Iron Masters. That is why we want you to fly to Ne-Issan - to meet with Ieyasu, the Lord Chamberlain and the Shogun, and put certain proposals to them. You will be acting as my personal messenger in the same way that the Herald Toshiro Hase-Gawa represented the Shogun.

Does the idea appeal to you?'

Are you kidding?

Steve fought to catch his breath. 'uh, I - wha - why, of course, sir!

There's just one snag. All the top Iron Masters speak Basic, but I only know the odd word or two of Japanese. Won't that put me at a big disadvantage?'

'That won't be a problem,' said the President-General.

'Commander Franklynne Jefferson speaks the language fluently.'

Steve felt two familiar hands slide onto his shoulders.

The contact was so unexpected his brain froze and his body went rigid.

It wasn't just because they were in the Oval Office, it was something about the gesture itself.

Like, as if... she owned him...

'S-Sir...?' It was the best he could manage.

Jefferson seemed to find Steve's momentary discomfiture mildly amusing.

He spelt it out once again. 'Commander Franklynn will be going with you.'

Steve's brain snapped back into gear. 'Yes-sir! I understand, sir!

The thing is ... there is no sexual equality in Ne-Issan. The Japs treat women as second-class citizens.'

'That's why you're going to be acting as front man,' explained Karlstrom.

'But you'll be taking your orders from me ' Fran loosened her grip on Steve's shoulders and moved to the right of his chair. He glanced up and found a different Fran looking down at him. This wasn't his

bed-mate, it was the President of the Board of Assessors who had sentenced him to three years in the A-Levels

'Any problems with that?' asked the President-General?

."None at all, sir!" None at all.....

CHAPTER THREE

Over the same time interval which ended with Steve getting his marching orders, Cadillac and Roz had also been preparing themselves for a journey into the Eastern Lands. Among the items Cadillac had recovered from the burnt-out ruins of the settlement were two of the three flags made from green and gold Iron Master fabric, and his own set of body colours - waterproof dyes in the form of a thick paste contained in small clay pots.

There was just enough for one coat each. After bathing in the rock-pool, Roz knelt on a talking-mat in front of the hut, closed her eyes and offered up her face. Beginning a little way inside the hairline, Cadillac slowly covered Roz's body from head to toe using four different skin colours plus her own golden UV-tan.

Once a year over the last five years, he and Clearwater had renewed each other's skin markings - markings that other Mutes were born with and the random pattern of swirls and patches that began on Roz's forehead and slowly spread to cover her whole body was a close copy of that same design.

When the last touch had been applied and rubbed into her feet and ankles, Cadillac stepped back to admire his handiwork. Roz turned around for his benefit then examined her arms and the front of her body.

'Can I touch it?'

'Yes. But you have to rub some wood-ash over yourself to take the raw edge off the dye. I'll do the bits you can't reach.' He walked with her to the shaded rock pool and watched her peer closely at her reflection. 'Does it feel strange?'

'No. The strange thing is, it doesn't. I think I prefer myself this way.' She got up off her knees and faced him. 'It's funny, here I am with no clothes on but...

somehow I don't feel naked. I feel...' she spread her arms, searching for the word '... complete. Except for one thing.' esponding to her unspoken invitation, Cadillac gathered her into his arms. 'What's that?'

'I need a Name of Power,' she whispered.

Bestowing names was one of the tasks performed by Mute wordsmiths.

Cadillac planted a kiss on the flowing dark brown stripe that now divided her forehead. 'I have one for you. I have seen you turn your face to the clouds, have seen the happiness with which you greet the falling waters. Your name shall be Rain-Dancer.'

Roz hugged him, then stepped away and leapt joyfully into the air, turning full circle before landing gracefully with arms outstretched.

'It is done! I have shed my other self like the snake emerging from its old skin. I am finally free of the Federation!' 'Don't celebrate too soon,' said Cadillac. 'They can still reach you.'

'Through Steve?' Roz shook her head. 'Not now that we've tricked them into thinking I'm dead.' The state of the telepathic link between herself and Steve was the one secret she kept from Cadillac. The last contact had confirmed that she and Steve were free of suspicion, but

since then she had felt his mind slip away each time she tried to make contact - just as it had when, at the age of eleven, he had announced his intention to compete for one of the coveted places at the Flight Academy.

Roz knew that Steve was perfectly capable of looking after himself, but in closing the mind-bridge, he had also shut her off from Clearwater.

She and Roz could communicate without the need for words, but it was not telepathy, it was empathy; a deep common bond of soul-sisterhood which allowed them to understand each other's emotional state, and to divine what the other was thinking.

But for this to take place, they needed to be in each other's presence. Steve was the link; the key connection that allowed her to speak to her soul-sister from afar. She could only enter Clearwater's mind if it was engaged with Steve's- as she had when Steve had cradled her wounded body while waiting for the Red River medics to arrive.

Roz guessed that Clearwater was probably being held in the Life Institute, but with Steve's mind drifting out of reach she no longer knew if she was safe and well.

Roz's close physical and growing mental relationship with Cadillac had allowed him to study her closely. He had detected a certain evasiveness whenever he had broached the subject of Steve and Clearwater- especially in respect of Brickman's intentions. Whatever he said was bound to get him into trouble, but it needed to be brought out in the open. 'He's gone off the air, hasn't he?"

'If he has, I'm sure there's a perfectly good reason."

'Yes. He's sold out,' said Cadillac. 'He's got Clearwater.

He knows you're with me. He knows what you can do. And now that you've got him off the hook, he figures he's safer where he is."

Roz's face darkened. 'Why must you always think the worst?!" 'Because I've been inside his head!" cried Cadillac.

'And part of him is in me now! I know how his mind works!" 'You have no right to judge him!" Roz thrust him away and walked towards the hut. Cadillac followed her. Snatching her skirt off the ground with an angry gesture, she wrapped it around her waist and fastened the ties with trembling fingers. Thrusting her arms into the fringed sleeves of the leather tunic, she pulled it on and turned to face him, eyes blazing. 'I am the only one who knows the pressure he's under! It's something you have never experienced! And I pray to Mo-Town you never will!'

'I bear heavy responsibilities? protested Cadillac.

'And you've got me to help you! It's not the same thing. Here, you've got room to think!" Roz pointed to the ground. 'Down there is a different world. I know Steve is still with us. And he's going to do his very best to get Clearwater and her child out of the Federation the same way he got you out of Ne-Issan."

'With a great deal of outside help,' said Cadillac sourly.

'And you may like to know that I built the aircraft which enabled us to reach the Hudson River! He didn't carry me. I played an active part in that escape!" 'Oh, really? That's not what Clearwater told me.

She said you were the one who didn't want to leave! Go on!

Admit it! You were having too good a time!" · 'I was until your kin-brother came along!" The words tumbled out before Cadillac could stop himself.

'Exactly!" cried Roz. 'You had sold out to the Iron Masters!"

'That's not true!" shouted Cadillac. 'That's not how it was!" 'All right, I believe you. You had your reasons- just as Steve has equally valid reasons for what he's doing now.

I know he hasn't sold out. And deep down, so do you, don't you?"

Cadillac didn't reply.

Roz tried again. 'Why can't you bring yourself to trust him?"

It took a while, but when his anger had subsided, the answer came:
'Because he seeks to know everything, but he does not use that
knowledge to change himself- only to gain power over those around
him."

'Give him time." Roz's voice was also calmer now. 'I did not see
things clearly at first, even though a voice deep within told me I did
not belong to the underground world. Knowing is not the same as
Understanding. How much have you changed since our life-streams were
drawn together?"

'Whose side are you on?!" cried Cadillac, his new spirit of
reasonableness wearing thin.

'Yours!" said Roz. 'But this jealousy, this rivalry between you must
end! The four of us are bound

together by ties far deeper and stronger than mere blood and friendship! The resentment and distrust you harbour gnaws at that bond like a cancer. Cut them out swiftly and cleanly, like a surgeon wielding a knife!

Act like the warrior you're supposed to be!" She saw her words strike home and laughed at his crestfallen expression. 'Do you realise we've just had our first quarrel?"

'I've a feeling it won't be the last,' said Cadillac.

Roz ran a teasing finger down his bare chest. 'So how can I make it up to you?"

'I can think of several ways,' said Cadillac. 'But first, this pale imitation of a warrior needs a paint job."

Protective colouring was not the only thing they needed.

The long journey Cadillac had in mind called for horses and some extra security en route. There was little doubt that Roz Could ward off almost any threat they were likely to meet but Cadillac was looking for a way to keep trouble at arms' length. He had seen how the act of summoning earth-magic had left both Mr Snow and Clearwater physically weakened and looking utterly drained.

All these gifts had their price, and just as Brickman had insisted on the need to husband Clearwater's power, so it was with Cadillac now.

Roz did not know why or how she was able to warp people's sense of reality, she just did it.

But would it always be instantly available? Summoners could not produce an endless stream of earth-magic. Her mental powers might have similar limitations; that was why it was important not to abuse them.

He did not want to arrive in Ne-Issan - where they would be in mortal danger every step of the way - only to discover that her 'batteries' had gone flat.

As a couple, rattling around the landscape on their own, they were too exposed. To a hand of warriors from a rival clan who were out to put some blood on their knives they looked like an easy kill - exactly the kind of trouble Cadillac was anxious to avoid.

There was only one answer - they had to seek the protection of another clan. The extended truce decided upon by the Great River Council, which had already enabled the M'Calls to gain the support of a She-Kargo and M'Waukee clan in setting up the surprise attack on The Lady, made such an arrangement entirely feasible.

Cadillac ran through a mental list of the She-Kargo clans who laid claim to the territory north and east of the Laramie Mountains and decided upon the Clan M'Kenzi.

While not as numerous as the M'Calls had been before their first encounter with The Lady, the M'Kenzi were a large clan and their delegation had supported Mr Snow's efforts to weld the She-Kargo and M'Waukee into a coherent fighting force: a gesture of solidarity which had proved costly on the day. The M'Kenzi delegation were still scrambling for safety when the edge of the tidal wave had barrelled along the face of the bluffs, sweeping away many of those who had survived the bloody retreat along the sandbars.

Magnum-Force, the M'Kenzi's wordsmith was one of the lucky ones. And also one of a rare breed; a female wordsmith.

Cadillac knew there had been others in the past, but Magnum was the only living example. He also knew that, as of last year, she had not found a similarly-gifted child to train as her replacement. If approached in the right fashion, she might view him as a possible heir, and that would be sufficient to overcome any objections the other clan elders might have.

Wordsmiths enjoyed a special status both inside and outside their clan.

They were regarded as being above the fray in which ordinary Mute warriors were embroiled.

As a result, their lives were rarely threatened by rival clansmen - not even by those disrespecters of tradition, the D'Troit. They did not have to 'chew bone' - to kill, or be blooded in battle - they were regarded as having 'standing' from simply being a wordsmith. This, of course, had not been enough for Cadillac. Raised in Mr Snow's shadow, he was so hungry for recognition,

he had sought every opportunity to prove his worth as a warrior and had finally succeeded due to the timely intervention of Clearwater - a fact he had conveniently overlooked.

The first priority, however, was the horses. On his return to the M'Call settlement in the spring, in the company of Brickman, Malone and his band of renegades, Cadillac had brought a number of Iron Master horses. Malone's men had appropriated most of them, but they had been recovered following the midnight massacre in which Malone and every single one of his men had been killed. Some had been used by Brickman's group in the attack on The Lady, but six or seven had been left in the care of the den-mothers and She-Wolves who had stayed to guard the settlement.

Searching the immediate surroundings of the burnt-out settlement in the first few days after his return, Cadillac discovered two bullet-ridden carcasses that were already being pulled apart by a jostling crowd of death-birds.

A week later, on lower ground some two miles northeast of the settlement, he and Roz came across the body of another horse. From the relatively intact state of the carcass, it had died from wounds some days after the first pair. That left at least three unaccounted for.

Despite the miles he had travelled on their backs, Cadillac's knowledge of horses was, still rudimentary, but he knew about herd animals. He reckoned the third, wounded horse had fled at the first fusillade, following its more-fortunate companions. They had moved on when he finally succumbed, but given the point where his body lay they had not travelled very far in that seven-day period. This seemed to indicate they had resumed their normal grazing pattern once the initial panic had died down.

Cadillac surmised that horses, in their natural state, behaved like buffalo, who only ran when alerted to danger by the scout bulls on the fringes of the herd. If the horses had enjoyed a relatively peaceful life since and with bears, jackals and mountain lions in abundance that was certainly not guaranteed - they might still be within reach.

There was only one way to find out, and that fitted in with another requirement; the need for Roz to learn how to run. If she was a full-blooded Mute, the ability to lope effortlessly mile after mile for hours on end would be lying dormant within her, but it could not be awakened at the snap of a finger. After his broken leg had mended, Brickman had trained himself back to peak fitness, but it had taken him time to reach the combination of speed and endurance required to keep up with a M'Call hunting posse.

Roz, like most Trackers, had followed a daily exercise regime since early childhood, but swimming came higher on the list than running.

During her first five-mile jog with Cadillac along mountain trails she thought she would die, but at the end of three weeks she was still on her feet after ten, but distinctly wobbly when Cadillac stretched it to fifteen. Five weeks into her overground existence she was able to overcome that pain-barrier and start pushing herself towards the target distance of twenty-five miles.

It took a lot of perseverance on both their parts, and the fact they were still speaking at the end of it testified to the closeness of their relationship. That perseverance finally paid off: the daily runs

took them further and further afield, and finally, as they crested a rise, they saw below them a loose cluster of larches grouped around a stream sparkling with sunlight as it rippled over a pebble bed.

Drinking from the stream were two horses, one a dappled grey, the other a golden brown with a flowing oatmeal-coloured mane and tail - one of several mounts Cadillac had ridden during the long journey from Lake Michigan to Wyoming.

Cadillac led the way down the slope towards the stream, moving with the same stealth the Mutes employed when hunting game. As they entered the stand of trees, the two horses turned their heads towards them several times to assess the danger then continued

to eat their way across the carpet of sweet fat grass, flicking their tails to express their annoyance at being interrupted.

Squatting down by the edge of the stream, Cadillac fished out the two bridles he'd been carrying around in a sling pouch for the last few days. 'Let's have a couple of those yellow-fists.'

Roz produced two yellow-skinned apples from her bag.

Cadillac sliced them in half, releasing a sharp tangy smell from the firm white flesh inside that made Roz's jaws tingle.

The dappled grey mare pricked up her ears.

Cadillac laid two pieces into the palm of Roz's hand.

'I'm hoping the roan will recognise my voice, but if he doesn't, you know what to do.'

'Wait a minute. I know what you told me, but -' Roz looked down at the apple halves. 'You don't seriously expect me to put these in their mouths, do you? With teeth like they've got?!' 'Relax! It's not dangerous. Look- keep your palm flat, with your fingers turned down, and offer it up at an angle - like that.' Cadillac arranged her left hand in the correct position. 'The flesh on the mouth is quite loose, and the front lips are soft and sort of leathery.'

'Err-uggghh!' The thought made Roz shiver.

'Don't be stupid. They can't eat you, they're not carnivores. And they're not going to slobber all over you. Their mouths should be quite dry. Just keep your thumb tucked well in.'

'Why?'

'So as not to get it bitten off.'

'That's it. That does it. You do it, I'll watch.'

Cadillac rose and stepped back out of reach as she tried to give back the sliced apple. 'I was only joking, Roz.'

How can you possibly be scared? I'm sure you can do anything if you put your mind to it.'

'Ho, ho, very funny.' She snatched the bridle from his outstretched hand. 'It doesn't work with animals. I know, because I've tried.'

'You didn't tell me.'

'Why should I? You'd have only made fun of me - like you're doing now.'

'Clearwater didn't have any problems. She even knew how to talk to them. Right from the word go. They were drawn to her like bees to honey.'

'Yes, well, I'm not her, and she's not here, so there's no point in talking about it, is there?'

'You're right.' Cadillac turned away.

'Where are you going?!' 'To the other side of the stream. I'm going

to try and work round behind the roan."

."But what do I do if they both come towards me?"

'You've got a bag full of apples. Keep feeding 'em until I get there."

The prospect of being run down by two large horses provoked a squeal of dismay. 'Don't go so fast!" But Cadillac was already over the stream and striding away through the trees in an attempt to head off the roan which had kicked up its heels and trotted away from its companion.

Cupping his hands around his mouth, Cadillac called to the horse with the same shrill voice he had heard the Thai stable-boys using when rounding up horses in Ne-Issan.

Reacting to the voice, the roan halted obediently and allowed Cadillac to get closer. Then, catching the scent of the proffered apple, it trotted towards him. Cadillac readied the bridle.

Roz, on the other side of the stream, forced herself to walk towards the dappled grey. The closer she got, the bigger it became. It was absolutely enormous! Gritting her teeth, she stretched out her right hand and offered it half an apple. 'Come on, take it! You great stupid thing!" The dappled grey sniffed the air then started to walk forward. In the last few weeks, Roz had discovered both the attractions and dangers of living with wild animals, but as the horse broke into a trot, all her lofty theories about the precious nature of lower life forms and their rights to co-exist with Man evaporated. All she could feel

now was the ground shaking beneath her, and to her ears, the booming thump of the four trotting hoofs sounded like a roll of thunder.

Oh, Sweet Mother. It weighs a ton and it's not going to stop!

Gripped by an unreasoning fear, Roz turned sideways, right arm still outstretched, ready to flee. She held her ground until the mare was some two yards away then dropped the apple, leapt across the stream and hid behind the nearest tree with Cadillac's laughter ringing in her ears.

The mare snaffled the fallen fruit with bared teeth, cleared the stream with one stride and headed towards Roz.

'Help! It's following me!'

'Exactly! That's the whole idea!' cried Cadillac. He led the roan downstream. 'Get your bridle ready then give her the other piece!' 'Oww-err! Can't you help? I'm not used to this!' 'Steve brought a horse onto Red River, didn't he?'

'Yes - but I didn't have to feed it!' Keeping the tree between them, Roz offered the grey another piece of apple. The horse caught it between its teeth just as Roz jerked her hand away.

'Now the bridle!' called Cadillac. 'Quick! Grab hold of her mane!' 'I can't reach!' said Roz. 'You'll have to do it.' She threw the bridle towards him.

Cadillac caught it against his chest and led the roan over. 'Think you can manage to hold onto this one?'

'TII try...'

'Give me another of those apples.' Cadillac turned and addressed the dappled grey mare soothingly, stroking its neck as it ate out of his hand. When the horse had quietened down, he gently eased the bridle over its muzzle, slipped the metal bit between its teeth, and hooked the head strap over its ears.

Roz watched him buckle the straps tight. 'You make it all look so easy...'

'That's because this's the easy bit,' said Cadillac. He handed her the reins of the grey and took control of the roan. 'Sitting on top of them and staying there is where it gets difficult.'

'But at least you know how.'

'Yes. And by the time we get to where we're going so will you.'

For Roz, who was almost a head shorter than Cadillac, the first major problem was learning how to get onto the horse. Without the aid of stirrups and a saddle to hang onto, it demanded a fairly high degree of physical agility and - for absolute beginners - a good deal of determination. Roz had plenty of that and she needed every ounce of it. Cadillac gave her a leg up until she had mastered the basics of riding bareback, then left her to struggle on her own. After countless attempts and a great deal of cursing, she finally worked out how to haul herself onto the horse's back, but not before she had suffered the ignominy of overdoing the first leap up and tumbling nose-first off the far side.

To her credit, she bore the knocks and the inevitable soreness without complaint and eventually her persistence paid off. Six days after running away in panic from the dappled grey, she was able to catch, bridle and control both horses well enough for them to begin the first stage of their long journey.

Using strips of buffalo hide cut from salvaged hut panels, Cadillac fashioned two wide girths to hold a part of a bearskin in place as a saddle, and he made horizontal chest and rump straps for them to provide an anchor point for the trucking poles.

These were long larch saplings, lashed together in parallel, just far enough apart for the horse's hindquarters to fit between. The top ends were lashed to the leather harness, the strain being taken by a back strap behind the saddle and the horse's chest; the bottom ends trailed at a shallow angle along the ground, well clear of its rear legs.

What possessions they had, including the constituent parts of their hut, were tied onto the light latticework platform that helped to keep the trucking poles parallel to one another. Roz helped Cadillac with the construction by cutting up thin strips of hide and binding everything together, firmly and neatly, with the same care she used when stitching up a wound.

When all was ready, they led the horses down the only suitable trail from the bluff to the undulating plain below.

As they were about to enter a thick stand of pines that lay across their path, Cadillac reined in the roan and cast a long backward glance at the slim, graceful plume of water that fell from the tongue-stone: the landmark which, for so many years, had served to guide hunting posses back to the settlement.

'Are you sorry to leave?' asked Roz.

'I'm not leaving anything. What's left of the past we're taking with us. But I was born up there. Even though it is heavy with death this place will always be special to me.'

'It's special to me too,' said Roz. 'This is where I came to life.'

Don't grieve. We'll come back one day.'

Cadillac clasped her outstretched hand and felt her fingers close reassuringly around his. 'What makes you say that?'

'Isn't this where you would like our child to be born?'

The question came as a total surprise. 'Why, yes, but surely you don't mean?!' 'No,' laughed Roz. 'Not yet. But when it's time, I want you to bring me here. Promise?'

'Yes, I promise' On their second day out, they encountered a hunting posse from the Clan K'Vanna, another branch of the She-Kargo bloodline. Not having a crossbow with which to send up a smoking arrow - the signal used by rival groups of Plainfolk when they wished to parley - Cadillac and Roz had to ride towards the posse, coming much closer than was usual at the preliminary stages of a parley, and running the risk of an itchy trigger finger sending a bolt through their chests.

When Cadillac was able to see they were facing warriors from a She-Kargo clan he motioned Roz to halt beside him. Placing his hand across his heart he raised it above his head to display the empty palm.

The leader of the posse laid down his crossbow and returned the gesture.

Cadillac dismounted, passed the reins of his horse to Roz and walked forward. He had prepared a big speech, but to his surprise, neither his eloquence nor Roz's power were required to get them over the next hurdle.

It soon became clear that all the clans who had sent delegations to the trading post at Du-Aruta had heard about the power and triumphal progress of The Chosen from Carnegie-Hall and the wordsmiths of the clans that he, Steve and Clearwater had encountered on their journey westwards to the point where they had run into Malone's renegades. The fact that he and Roz were on horseback, flying the green and gold

banner of Talisman, was proof of their identity and their ticket to ride - wherever they wished - across territory held by the She-Kargo and M'Waukee.

It was almost too good to be true.

Introducing Roz as Rain-Dancer, Cadillac asked the warriors how he could reach the turf of the M'Kenzi. The leader of the posse offered to put him on the right path but not until he and his companion had paid a courtesy visit to their settlement. Cadillac agreed, whereupon two of the K'Vanna warriors raced off to alert the elders.

When Cadillac and Roz arrived with the posse, they were received with some ceremony. The death-defying act that he, Steve and Clearwater had performed with the aid of rolled straw mats and a samurai sword had left a deep impression on everyone who had seen it, and the K'Vanna elders, led by their wordsmith DowJones-Index, were dearly hoping for a repeat performance.

, Cadillac, who had met Dow-Jones on previous visits to the trading post, made a great play of taking the elders into his confidence. In a hushed voice which drew the

circle of heads towards his, Cadillac announced that he and Rain-Dancer were preparing themselves for an encounter of earth-shaking importance with the Iron Masters. If brought to a successful conclusion, it would secure the future of the Plainfolk. It was, therefore, absolutely vital that he and his companion preserved their magical energies until that fateful moment.

Did they not agree?

Of course they did.

But Cadillac had another more important reason for not turning Roz loose. She was a key part of the presentation he intended to make to the forthcoming Plainfolk Council and he did not want to lose the element of surprise by giving sneak-previews to all and sundry.

Assuaging his disappointed hosts with the promise of further secret revelations at Sioux Falls, Cadillac and Roz resumed their journey and were passed on by the K'Vanna to the O'Shay. Once again their arrival created a wave of excitement followed by a sense of anticlimax which Cadillac quickly smoothed away with more artful diplomacy. Roz, who shadowed him throughout, watched and listened with growing admiration as he won over yet another audience.

Five days into their journey, they finally made contact with the Clan M'Kenzi and their wordsmith, Magnum-Force, a tough-minded, hard-bodied, handsome woman with over fifty life-beads on her necklace. She and Cadillac were well acquainted through her friendship with Mr Snow - a friendship that was something more than the professional link all wordsmiths shared.

Some years back, in a rare moment when one too many lungfuls of rainbow-grass had got the better of his discretion, Mr Snow had hinted at a deeper relationship dating back to the time when he and Magnum had first come to the trading-post as young pupils of their predecessors.

A mutual attraction which he claimed had never been requited because of the strict taboo on sexual relationships between members of different clans.

. Having recently discovered more about Mr Snow's early life, including the hidden cave which he allegedly used for illicit amorous liaisons, Cadillac was no longer sure that the old fox was any great respecter of tradition.

Magnum had survived the Battle of the Trading-Post and had seen Mr Snow lying grey-faced and totally exhausted on what many of his entourage said was his death-bed. Magnum had spent many hours by his side and had been close at hand when the young man she knew as Cloud-Warrior had had several whispered conversations with him. Later, when the first Plainfolk Council ended, she saw the Old One rally, and what remained of their two delegations had journeyed side by side towards Wyoming.

Mr Snow had been alive when they parted and one of the first things she wanted to know was his present state of health.

'Did you not hear of the great battle at Big Fork?'

'I have heard there was a battle with several iron snakes in which many of the Plainfolk perished,' said Magnum.

'One snake was consumed by fire, four more limped away with their backs broken.'

Cadillac squared his shoulders. 'The blood that was spilt was the blood of the Clan m'call!' he declared proudly. 'And the Old One died leading them in battle.'

The news left Magnum visibly shaken. She hung her head for a long moment and when she raised her eyes to meet theirs her face was streaked with tears. 'I shall miss him,' she said. And with that simple epitaph, she threw back her head, cleared her throat and became her brisk, no-nonsense serf. 'How can I help you?'

Cadillac explained the situation that he and Rain-Dancer found themselves in, and how he was hoping that the extended truce might permit their adoption by

the Clan M'Kenzi.

'For how long?'

'The foreseeable future.'

Had they been ordinary Mutes it would have been out of the question, but it was not without precedent

for wordsmiths who, for one reason or another, found themselves without a clan. Cadillac himself had been offered the chance of joining a D'Troit clan and had come close to getting himself killed for saying 'no'.

Magnum wiped the tear-stains from her cheeks with the back of her hand.

'You certainly don't believe in pussyfooting around.'

'Neither do you.' Cadillac shrugged. 'Rain-Dancer and I need a secure base. We won't be here all the time, but when we are we don't expect special treatment. We'll do our share of whatever has to be done like everyone else. You could benefit a great deal from what we know.

Always assuming 'we get back in one piece from the Eastern Lands.'

'Is that where you're going?'

'Yes. All will be revealed at the Big White Running Water.'

The Mute name for Sioux Falls...

'And we'd like to go there as part of your delegation,' added Roz.

Magnum eyed them both in turn. 'That's kay as far as it goes but what's in it for us? What exactly are these benefits?'

'I'll be in a better position to answer that question when the Plainfolk Council meets,' replied Cadillac.

'But Rain-Dancer is a healer and I know the ways of both sand-burrower and dead-face. And I can make you one promise now. If I outlive you, and provided your people so honour and accept me, I am ready to become wordsmith to the M'Kenzi - unless, of course, you find a worthier apprentice between now and then.'

The offer brought tears back to Magnum's cheeks.

'How strange life is! If Mo-Town's hand had caused me to be born in another's place, unfettered by the traditions which separate our clans, you might have been my son and Mr Snow might have been your father.

But it could never be. And now here you are...'

Magnum stood up. Cadillac and Roz followed. 'Welcome, my children.'

She embraced them both in turn.

'From this day on, you shall enjoy the same rights and be held in the same esteem as the most favoured of our own sons and daughters.'

'Thank you,' said Roz.

Cadillac could see that she was affected by Magnum's emotional reaction to the news of Mr Snow's death. He ran a comforting hand across her shoulders then turned back to Magnum-Force. 'Won't you need to clear this with the clan elders?'

Magnum's jaw-muscles hardened. 'When it comes to important decisions they usually end up doing what I think is best. But before I put this to them, there is. one thing. If you're serious about being our next wordsmith- '

'lam-' 'They will probably insist on you both adopting our clan name.

It means the end of Cadillac m'call. Are you ready for that?"

It was one of those rare occasions when Cadillac was at a loss for words.

Magnum-Force exchange an amused glance with Roz.

'No. Clearly not. Never mind. If the matter comes up - as it most certainly will - I'll suggest we postpone your formal adoption until you return from the Eastern Lands."

'Good thinking,' said Cadillac. 'I won't forget this."

'I don't intend to let you,' said Magnum.

That night, when they lay between the furs in their newly-erected hut, Roz said: 'They did ' Cadillac eased away from her. 'Who did?"

'Mr Snow and Magnum-Force."

'Did what?"

Roz hugged him fiercely and pressed her naked body closer to his.

'What we're doing now ' The first formally convened Plainfolk Council proved to be a rambling affair that spread itself over the first three weeks of September. With so many hatchets to bury, there was a great deal of argument, much of it

bad-tempered. The general truce agreed by the shaken delegates after the Battle of the Trading Post had not been universally observed by the young bloods of their own clans, but that had not deterred them from sending representatives to Sioux Falls. As a consequence, the opening round of debates degenerated into a series of interminable slanging matches in which accusations and counter-accusations were hurled across the ring.

Cadillac and Roz were probably the only participants not seeking redress for some real or imagined wrong.

After three days of verbal blood-letting had gone by without anything positive having been achieved he began to get a little impatient, but he was shrewd enough to realise that he stood a better chance of impressing his views on the assembly if he waited for the acrimony to subside.

It was in the second week that a constructive dialogue began to emerge, by which time Cadillac had had ample opportunity to discover how well or poorly each bloodline was represented, and to test the varying moods of the major delegations. As expected, the She-Kargo and M'Waukee were there in strength along with the San' Paul, the lesser bloodline who had stood with them against the D'Troit. There were a surprising number of C'Natti delegations and some from the San'Louis, but still less than half those who, in previous years, would have assembled at the old trading post.

There were no delegations from the D'Troit, but many reports that several big D'Troit clans like the D'Vine, D'Sica and D'Niro who had carved their way into territory which was once the sole preserve of the She-Kargo, had been spotted moving eastwards towards Lake Mee-Sheegun.

The migration seemed to indicate that the D'Troit intended to throw their lot in with the Iron Masters despite the clemency shown to the defeated warriors who had survived the tidal wave, and the fact that their illustrious patrons had also suffered heavy losses - plus a severe blow to their prestige.

So be it. . . .

To Cadillac, the fact that the clan delegations were here at all, and in such numbers, was a minor miracle in itself. The Battle of the Trading Post was a watershed in the history of the Plainfolk, but the traditions built up over nine hundred years could not be abandoned overnight. The changes that needed to take place before the Plainfolk could become a nation struck deep into the core of their belief-system.

A warrior measured his worth in hand-to-hand combat in which he or his adversary could die, and often did. Death or dishonour.

Raw courage was the cornerstone of Mute existence; physical strength and endurance the foremost attributes.

Their distant ancestors had survived through their ability to fight, and their readiness to kill for food, shelter, to protect their own and what they held to be theirs. Often, territory was the only thing they possessed; everything else of value had been turned to ashes.

With the passing of time, as the wastelands healed, the clans had moved into the vast, empty spaces. Red grass sprouted from the charred

earth, fruit trees came into bud. Herd animals, once driven to the edge of extinction by high-velocity rifles, grew in numbers; birds and fish multiplied. The murderous battles for scarce resources became ritualised combats in which the young braves of both sexes gained 'standing' - the first step to warriorhood.

Fighting became a way of life even though there was enough food and raw materials and more than enough space to go round. The need to defend your 'turf' was a legacy from urban life in the pre-Holocaust era when *the sidewalks around the block in which you lived were the only thing to which the ghetto-people could lay claim.

With few possessions, a crippling lack of education, work-skills and job-opportunities, courage was the only badge the young bloods could wear with pride before they, like their elders, were worn down into hopelessness or destroyed by the system.

Anyone who didn't belong, intruders from the next block had to pay tribute or be resisted - whatever

the cost..That territorial imperative, combined with sewer-rat cunning, energy and ruthlessness enabled a favoured few to survive the War of a Thousand Suns.

Many of these perished in the Great Ice Dark which followed, but some found the will to endure until the skies cleared and the blood drained from the face of the sun.

A new world was born but the old ways did not die with the Old Time.

The scattered groups of people who were to become the Mutes never learned to put their trust in one another. They remained fragmented.

Prior to the Battle of the Trading Post, Plainfolk Mutes made no distinction between the braves of a neighbouring clan and a company of Trail-Blazers. Certain 'rules of engagement' were observed when Mute clashed with Mute, but apart from that small distinction, both were regarded as the enemy and an incursion by either was resisted with equal ferocity.

This was the big hurdle that had to be overcome.

Somehow, Cadillac had to find a way to persuade the assembled elders that there was only one enemy - the Federation. Drawing their own blood did not strengthen the Plainfolk, it weakened them and allowed the Federation to score easy victories.

From his preliminary conversations it was clear that the elders knew this, but getting them to do something about it was a different matter entirely. The Plainfolk were prisoners of their own history, and it was this same inability to forget their differences and band together which had led to the piecemeal subjugation of the Southern Mutes. It was not yet complete, but those who had escaped the yoke of the Federation remained fragmented and did not pose a serious threat to the overground activities of the sand-burrowers.

The eventual fate of these remnants and the present condition of their blood-brothers provided a powerful argument for the Plainfolk to unite under the banner of Talisman. But that, in itself, would not ensure victory.

In addressing the burnt and blistered M'Call Bears after the battle with The Lady, Mr Snow had spoken of the need for new ways, new weapons. Physical bravery, for which the Plainfolk were renowned, was not enough. Not against the Federation.

That, at least, was something the assembled wordsmiths and elders at Sioux Falls were able to agree on. New weapons had to be obtained.

Powerful long sharp iron like the cannon plundered from the wrecked wheel-boats. Some of the iron balls they hurled through the air had been recovered, but no one knew how to make the cannons speak with a tongue of flame and a voice like sky-thunder.

.Cadillac knew how, but on making enquiries, he learned that the few unbroken casks of black powder had been prised open and emptied by the scavengers in the hope of finding something useful within. New weapons could only be obtained from one source - The Eastern Lands.

Ne-Issan.

A way had to be found to resume trade with the dead-faces, but after the calamitous losses they had suffered at the hands of the Plainfolk

how could the two sides be brought together to even discuss such a proposal?

Cadillac believed he, and he alone, was the man who could effect a reconciliation and clinch a new trade agreement. With Roz's help he was ready to venture into Ne-Issan and parley with those who now ruled in place of Hirohito Yama-Shita- the domain-lord who had fallen prey to Clearwater's earth-magic.

On the day he chose to announce his plan, it was Carnegie-Hall's turn to preside over the three-deep ring of wordsmiths from the various clans and bloodlines.

Sitting crosslegged behind them were the other delegates, mainly elders of both sexes. They in turn were surrounded by a shifting crowd of warriors, some of whom had been recruited to lend their vocal support to a particular faction or argument, others listening out of genuine interest or curiosity.

And when that curiosity was satisfied or their interest in the proceedings waned they wandered off elsewhere

to watch or participate in one of the many peripheral activities: bouts of wrestling, feats of strength, practice duels with the increasingly popular quarterstaff which Steve had introduced, and a host of other rough-and-tumble team events. A kind of bare-knuckle Olympics.

Elsewhere, more serious business was being conducted.

The process of inter-clan bartering which had started on the bluffs above Du-Aruta continued as the newly-styled 'vendors', who formed a key part of each delegation, honed their trading skills amid the hustle and bustle of a sprawling, open-air bazaar.

When it was his turn to take over the centre of the ring, Cadillac reviewed the options open to the Plainfolk. The resumption of trade was a vital first step but they could not go back to the old ways.

From henceforth, declared Cadillac, the Plainfolk must not go in fear of the Iron Masters. They must trade as equals. Cadillac spoke of what he had seen in Ne-Issan, of the Lost Ones - the journeymen and women who lived and worked in chains and were regarded as being lower than the beasts of the field, and of their offspring, the Iron-Feet, born into a life of unending slavery.

'Never again,' he cried, 'must we allow our blood-brothers and sisters to journey across the Great River!

All of us have closed our eyes and hearts, preferring not to know or even reflect upon the fate we condemned them to - through our inability to help ourselves!

'That time has passed! We must not only defend this sacred ground against those - on all sides - who seek to take it from us, we must pledge ourselves to win freedom for all those who toil in chains under the whips of the dead-faces and the long sharp iron of the sand-burrowers!" His words drew a rousing cheer from the outer ring of spectators, but the elders and wordsmiths were less enthusiastic. They nodded gravely to show they agreed with this ringing declaration of independence but remained sitting firmly on their hands.

Magnum-Force, wordsmith of the Clan M'Kenzi who had taken Roz and Cadillac under their wing, stood up and was given permission to respond. 'These are spirited words, in the tradition of your teacher, Mr Snow, architect of our great victory and in whose name we are gathered here today. But despite his vision, and all the recent declarations of goodwill - which still hang on the air - there are many of our own bloodline, of the M'Waukee, C'Natti and San'Paul still ready to cut each other's throats! We cannot go forward until those who sit amongst us with blood on their knives - ' Her words caused an immediate uproar. Those who felt unjustly accused, the unrepentant aggressors and their outraged victims, and the anarchic fringe who just liked sowing disorder, all leapt to their feet and tried to shout each other down.

It took several minutes for Carnegie-Hall and the silent majority to restore order. When everyone had subsided leaving only the M'Kenzi wordsmith and Cadillac standing, Carnegie-Hall motioned for Magnum to continue.

She surveyed the seated delegates, treating the most vocal of her detractors to a contemptuous stare. 'The Plainfolk will never be great while there are more yapping jackals than bears and mountain lions.

Those who have broken their solemn pledge may be able to ease their guilt by shouting me down but it is not our tongues that will defeat the dead-faces and sand-burrowers - it is our knife-arms!' 'Heyyyy-YAHHH!" yelled the crowd. And this time, most of the wordsmiths and elders joined in the chorus of approval.

Magnum-Force turned to Cadillac. 'I applaud the breadth of your vision but I think you ask too much of us. Those with wise heads and open hearts from the great bloodline of the C'Natti have chosen to join us, but many more have stayed away. There is not one amongst us who represents the D'troit.

'The Plainfolk is a house divided! How can we hope to overcome the armed might of the dead-faces and the

iron-snakes of the Federation?

We cannot! We know this and so do their great chiefs. And yet you talk of imposing terms on the dead-faces! You claim to be one of The Chosen who herald the coming of Talisman. You claim to speak for him

'That is true,' interjected Cadillac.

'It is true you have inherited the tongue of Mr Snow,' admitted Magnum.

'And you can read the seeing-stones but you have no earth-magic. You are no Storm-Bringer!' 'That is also true' 'Then tell us! How can you defend the interests of the Plainfolk when you cannot even defend yourself!' The question evoked a challenging roar from the doubters in the audience.

Cadillac held up his hands to appeal for calm, then sought out Roz and motioned her to join him. As she threaded her way through the seated delegates he said: 'My given role is to speak for the Plainfolk.' He swept his eyes around the ring of wordsmiths then aimed his words to those beyond. 'All of you know that a swift mind and tongue can achieve more than the sharpest blade. The tales a wordsmith spins and the wisdom he dispenses are the cords which bind us to the past and future and hold the clan together. Without the clan, without that bond forged by the shared memories of valorous deeds, we cannot know ourselves or why we tread the earth.

'That is why you honour us by giving me and my respected colleagues pride of place in this assembly! I seek to reason with our enemy because they have minds which can be entrapped by cunning argument just as bears are lured to honey! Talisman has given me the power of words and: . . ."

He broke off as Roz approached. Seizing her shoulders, he presented her to the four quadrants of the circle. '...

he has given this woman even greater power than the Storm-Bringer!' This claim triggered murmurs of astonishment and cries of disbelief.

Cadillac stood back and introduced Roz with a sweeping gesture.

'Rain-Dancer! Fourth and last of The Chosen! She will show you the magic that will confound our enemies!' As Roz cast her gaze slowly around the ring, an eerie silence descended. 'Stretch out your right hand towards me, and close your fist!' The wordsmiths and elders did so. 'And you!' she cried, to the crowd pressing in around the seated delegates.

The front ranks obeyed. Those further back, and people passing by, did not feel the same compulsion.

Cadillac found his right hand was also extended towards her and hoped whatever image she planned to implant would not be too awful to contemplate. He tried to catch her eye but she was already pivoting on her heel, snaring the minds of those around her with another spell-binding illusion.

Cadillac, like the crowd of spectators was pleasantly surprised to find himself holding the stalk of a bright red flower which opened in the blink of an eye. Cries of delight and amazement burst from those around them, but they were shortlived. As the perfume from the red

bloom reaches their nostrils, it became a thorn-stick with razor-sharp spikes like eagle's talons! And where the hand gripped the stick, the startled holder could feel the thorns buried deep in his flesh.

Many of those caught up in the mind-spell tried to let go, but each attempt to loosen their grip had the effect of tightening it even further. Blood oozed between their fingers and down the lower part of the stalk. The pain was considerable, but not unbearable. Mutes had an incredibly high threshold of pain. It was more the shock of the brutal transformation that caused them to cry out. But as they did so, the thorn-stick became a wriggling snake poised to sink its fangs into their forearm!

Roz allowed them to open their hands. The result was total pandemonium. Everyone leapt to their feet, hurled their snake to the ground and stampeded away from the centre, leaping and hopping over the carpet of writhing serpents thrown down by those behind them.

Cadillac held grimly onto his. He knew that none of this was real but his brain thought otherwise, and he had to force himself to grip the rattlesnake when all his instincts were telling him to throw it away!

And at the very instant his will failed him, the snake in his fist became another red flower which promptly vanished leaving only its scent lingering on the air.

The power which Roz was able to exercise, its scope, the ease with which she had snared several hundred people in her mental net was incredible. Those on the fringe of the crowd whose minds remained untouched could not, of course, see the flowers, thorn-sticks or snakes. All they saw was a crowd of elders recoil from their empty out-stretched fists then leap up and run in all directions, hopping and skipping as if they were walking on red-hot coals.

Since the front rows of standing spectators had also turned tail, those on the fringe were obliged to give way.

Jostled from all directions by senior clansmen of every stripe and colour babbling about a plague of snakes, they stared at the empty ring, totally bewildered by the eccentric behaviour of their leaders.

There was not a single snake to be seen. Discarded mocassins, sandals and leather helmets lay in the grass around the two people who had stood their ground -Cadillac and his smooth-boned female companion, Rain-Dancer.

Having retreated to a safe distance, the wordsmiths, elders and the smitten front rows of onlookers also turned and realised with some embarrassment that it had all been a trick of the mind. Some, whose sense of self-importance could not permit the idea they had also been made fools of, covered their confusion by a show of anger. Leading the surge back into the ring, the protestors closed in on Roz, waving their fists and hurling abuse.

Cadillac appealed for calm but she was ready for them.

Ice-cool, determined, and in complete command of the situation, it was hard to believe this was the same Roz who had fled yelping in panic from the dappled grey mare.

To the horror of those around them, the fists of everyone making a menacing gesture burst into flame. And this time, the pain was excruciating.

Screams and curses filled the air as those around the stricken protestors tried to smother the flames with articles of clothing. But as they did so, the flames vanished, leaving the flesh unmarked and whole. Everyone fell to their knees around Cadillac and Roz. Truly, this was great and terrible earth-magic!

'Will you not learn?!" shouted Cadillac angrily. 'What more proof do you need?!" He pointed at Roz. 'The power of Talisman flows through her! Our enemies are helpless against her magic because they only see what we wish them to see, and hear what we wish them to hear!" Roz pivoted on her heel, capturing the circle of kneeling spectators in one sweeping glance. Those nearest to her cowered away from her then gasped as she and Cadillac vanished from sight. More cries of amazement, some of the hardier spirits started to rise and were immediately flattened as the earth trembled beneath their feet and a deafening peal of thunder split the sky over their heads.

Everyone fell on their faces and hugged the ground.

The day the earth moved was a folk-memory seared into the minds of every Mute since the War of a Thousand Suns. A prolonged earth-tremor turned the bones of even the bravest warrior to jelly.

Once again, no one beyond the circle felt the ground shake or heard the thunder. Cadillac and Roz had not vanished. They only appeared to do so in the minds of those who had fallen under her spell. And when they both reappeared it was to an almost universal roar of acclamation.

Heyy-YAHH! Heyy-YAHH! HEYYYYAAHHH!!

The cheers that were less than fulsome came from the throats of those still shaken by the experience of having seen their right fists burst into a ball of flame.

Thrilled to be playing host to such an outstanding duo, their adoptive clan insisted on placing a special guard

around the hut which the M'Kenzis had put at their disposal. Taking her cue from Cadillac, Roz accepted what was, for the egalitarian Mutes, a signal honour. She had never been treated like a V.I.P before.

Cadillac took it all in his stride. learning up with Roz had dramatically increased his standing, but it was no more than his due.

They were, after all, The Chosen and about to risk their necks for the Plainfolk.

'You're getting better by the day,' he said, as the residue of the meal that had been prepared for them was cleared away. It had been cooked by three M'Kenzi women who had remained on their knees with their eyes averted while serving the various courses.

'I seem to have frightened everyone half to death,' replied Roz.

'That won't do us any harm. You know what the biggest problem is with the way Mutes run things? They talk too much. Everyone feels they have the right to stick their oar in.'

'Oar...?'

'A shaped wooden pole the fisherfolk use to propel their boats through the water.'

'Ahh... Don't you think that's a good thing - people having a say in what happens to them?'

'In theory, yes - but where has it got us? Too many conflicting opinions and aspirations. No cohesion. No vision! What the Plainfolk need is strong leadership!' 'Isn't Talisman supposed to provide that?'

'Talisman isn't here?' snapped Cadillac. 'For heaven's sake, Roz! I'm talking about what needs to happen now!

We're facing a threat from the Iron Masters and the Federation. The Plainfolk can only survive if they get organised. Someone's got to grab these guys by the scruff of the neck and start banging heads together.'

Roz eyed him as she washed the meat juice off her hands in the bowl that had been laid reverently in front of her. 'And is that what you see yourself doing?'

'With your help, yes.' He met her eyes with a confident smile. 'I feel ready to take charge- why be coy about it?'

'Why indeed?' said Roz. 'You sound just like Steve!' Cadillac wasn't sure if that was a reproach or a compliment. 'Really? I know one thing. If he was in my place he'd go for it.'

'Yes... I imagine that's just how the Founding Father felt.'

'This is not like that.'

'I hope not,' said Roz. 'I don't want to find myself being ruled by another First Family.'

Cadillac fixed her with a searching glance. 'What if you were part of it?' His question was met with silence. He tried again. 'Somebody has to lead. Will you follow?' · Roz thought about it for a while

then replied with a fatalistic shrug. 'The Wheel turns, The Path is drawn ' Cadillac reached out, took hold of her hand, and coaxed her to her feet. 'Then let's take it - one step at a time.

together."

CHAPTER FOUR

While Cadillac had been touring the encampment in an effort to gather support for his grand strategy, Roz had been busy on his behalf, trawling the open-air bazaar for Iron Master swords, clothes and accoutrements.

Cadillac wanted to acquire two complete sets of samurai battle-dress, from the items that were being offered under the barter system by which goods were exchanged. All the Iron Master clothes and artefacts now on display had been stripped from the gaping hulks of the wheel-boats and the sodden mud-caked corpses of their crews but they were not all on offer. Some adorned the vendors, and many of the She-Kargo and M'Waukee warriors were carrying sheathed samurai swords. Others had claimed the brass helmet crests and various other decorative bits and pieces as battle trophies and these were now attached to their own hand-sewn headgear and chest-leathers.

By the time Cadillac was called upon to formally address the assembly of wordsmiths, elders and paramount warriors, Roz had mentally noted the whereabouts of most of the items he had asked her to find. The trouble was, they had precious few goods of their own to exchange. Her stunning demonstration of mind-control solved the problem. When she visited the bazaar on the following day, the vendors competed for the honour of her custom, eagerly offering to give her whatever she required.

All those with samurai clothes and armour were asked to match up complete outfits using design motifs, cord-knotting and colour-trim as a guide. It took a whole morning to sort out the various bits and pieces but finally, with the help of Roz's analytical eye, the vendors managed to assemble several dozen sets which were laid out for Cadillac's approval.

Roz accompanied him down the line. His aim was to find the clothes, swords and head-gear of two high-ranking officers. Every time he came to a particularly fine-looking helmet he asked its new owner to place it in his hands. Roz and those around her watched with hushed attention as he felt its shape and texture. Sometimes that was enough, but if he got a positive feed-back, he put the helmet on his head and closed his eyes, creating a stillness at the centre of his being.

In this trance-like state, he was able to draw from the metal a series of pictures which gave him the identity and essence of the owner.

After a dozen or so tries he struck lucky, and by the time he reached the end of the line he had found the helmets worn by Samurai-General Oshio Shinoda, the supreme military commander of the ill-fated expedition, and one of his senior officers, Samurai-Major ^kido Mitsunari.

Shinoda's helmet had been correctly matched to his breast-plate, back and hip-armour but the rest of the apparel did not belong. Finding it was not too difficult.

Once Cadillac had tuned in on the residual vibrations of the dead owners he was able to assemble some eighty per cent of their original outfits from amongst the items on offer. Replacements for the missing gloves, shoes and, in the case of Shinoda, his swords, were chosen to blend in with the overall style and colour.

The last items on Cadillac's shopping list were two saddles and full

sets of tasselled harness. It was not necessary to match them to the battle colours of the riders. Not a single Iron Master or horse had survived the massive tidal wave but if, by a miracle, some had, it was highly unlikely that those who staggered from the receding waters would have emerged with their original mount.

The raggle-taggle effect reinforced the story that Cadillac intended to present as his passport to Sara-kusa the fortress home of the Yama-Shita family. Making use

of his ability to speak fluent upper-class Japanese Cadillac proposed to journey with Roz into the enemy heartland, disguised as high-ranking samurai - the sole survivors of the trading expedition.

The ferocious steel masks which had earned them the name of 'dead-faces' would camouflage their Mute identities for most of the journey, but for the occasions when people came within close range or in situations where they could not remain masked, Cadillac was relying on Roz's magic to convince any Iron Masters they met en route that they were aiding the return of their own kind. And that included their new vassals, the Mute clans from the bloodline of the D'Troit.

Cadillac's plan of action was staggeringly ambitious.

On their arrival at Sara-kusa, his first objective was to re-establish the trading links between the Yama-Shita and the Plainfolk, sweetening the arrangement by offering - once again - the secrets of powered flight and other aspects of Tracker technology he had acquired from dipping into the minds of Steve, Malone and his renegades.

If the Yama-Shita family proved amenable, Cadillac intended to reveal how Lord Yama-Shita had been betrayed and killed, and his family humbled, by an unholy alliance between the Toh-Yota shogunate and the Federation. Having already escaped from Ne-Issan with Steve, Clearwater, Jodi and Kelso, Cadillac now knew enough about the cosy relationship between AMEXICO and the spy network controlled by Ieyasu the Shogun's uncle and principal advisor- to blow the Toh-Yota family out of the water.

At the very least, this information would result in a messy civil war; at best, the Progressive Party led by the Yama-Shita would sweep aside the Toh-Yota and gain control of Ne-Issan. With the country torn apart by war, the Iron Masters would be unable to implement any policy they might have for territorial expansion, and if the Progressives gained power, the Amtrak Federation could not ignore the threat to its own position. It would be compelled to intervene, diverting men and resources away from their centuries-old conflict with the Mutes.

If Roz was able to keep them both alive long enough for him to lay this information before the new leaders of the Yama-Shita, he had not the slightest doubt that, in one short visit, he could destroy the status quo and plunge the continent into a ferment of blood-letting from which the Plainfolk would emerge victorious.

Cadillac outlined the broad aims of his plan to the assembled delegates but did not go into details. The tangled web of plot and counter-plot hatched by the opposing parties, and Ieyasu's treacherous use of the Dark Light to suppress those who sought to resurrect it would only have served to confuse his audience.

Persuaded by his eloquent presentation and the indisputable power of his companion's magic, the delegates applauded the plan and wished them both a safe and speedy return.

It only remained for the delegates to arrange a new date and meeting place. There were many who supported a return to Du-Aruta. Cadillac argued against this proposal.

If the Plainfolk were to deal with the Iron Masters on equal terms, the trading post had to be located on ground of their choosing, beyond the range of the wheel-boats' cannon and the threat of a surprise attack by

a waterborne army.

Never again, said Cadillac, must the Iron Masters vessels be allowed to dominate the skyline and the proceedings. Sioux Falls - the place the Mutes called Big White Running Water - was situated near the centre of Plainfolk territory; the journey would not only be much shorter for all concerned, the convergent movement towards it would also be a symbolic coming together, as opposed to a long parallel pilgrimage to the shores of the Great River.

From this day on, the Iron Masters would have to carry their goods across a Plainfolk sea of red grass. And instead of the alien timbers erected by the dead-faces, a new trading post- made up of elements representing each

of the bloodlines - should be planted in the ground.

His words triggered a heated debate. When this showed no sign of exhausting itself, Carnegie-Hall called for a vote.

It was close, but after a recount, Cadillac's challenging call for a new start and a new tougher attitude carried the day.

To ensure the new composite post fitted together, the dimensions of each piece were agreed, and from the clans who volunteered their services, five were given the honour of making them. They, in return, promised to deliver their part of the post to Sioux Falls for erection when the Plainfolk Council reassembled at the traditional time - the beginning of May in the following year. If all went as planned, Cadillac and Rain-Dancer would return on the first of the wheel-boats and lead the Iron Masters from the shore of the Great River to the lands once held by the Southern Da-Kota.

Escorted by fifty hands of warriors drawn from the five blood-lines represented at the Council, Cadillac and 'Rain-Dancer' headed north-eastwards on the next leg of their journey - a seven hundred mile ride from Sioux Falls to the Straits of Mackinac, where the northern tip of Lake Michigan made a sharp right hand turn to merge with the western end of Lake Huron.

They were dressed as Iron Masters, but flying from the tip of their tall lances were the green and gold cloth banners that had become the colours of the Chosen, heralds of Talisman.

At the northern end of Green Bay, Cadillac and Roz bade farewell to their escort, removed the banners from their lances, and pressed on alone into territory known to be occupied by clans from the D'Troit.

Following the decision of their leaders to adhere to the secret pact with the Yama-Shita family, the last one hundred and twenty miles passed without a hitch. Each clan escorted them reverentially across their turf, then handed them over with some ceremony to the next group down the line.

Cadillac's objective was navref Cheboygan, one of the five out-stations set up by the Yama-Shita in what was mainly D'Troit territory, to encourage year-round trade and to gather intelligence.

The out-stations consisted of a house-boat - a smaller version of the rear paddle-driven Great Lakes tradeships, a wooden jetty and a modest on-shore installation mainly small timber buildings and animal pens housing stores and various kinds of livestock the Iron Masters reared for the table. The extent and sophistication of these facilities depended on the degree of energy and enterprise of the Resident Agent and his wife, and the thirty-five sea-soldiers and domestic staff under their command.

The house-boats remained moored to the jetty but were always kept ready for sea in case the natives became restless. So when word reached the Cheboygan agent -Koto Shigari - that two Iron Masters in full battle armour were sitting tall in the saddle on the northern shore of the straits, he weighed anchor immediately.

And what an honour awaited him! There, battered but unbowed, were Samurai-General Oshio Shinoda, one of the senior military aides of the late domain-lord, and his companion-at-arms Samurai-Major Akido

Mitsunari!

And what a tale they had to tell!

Mitsunari, the junior-ranking officer, had a ragged, dirty bandage covering a deep throat wound that made it impossible for him to speak but after boarding the houseboat, Shinoda gave them a graphic description of a great battle in which thousands of grass-monkeys had perished under the swords of the samurai cavalry and the knives of their trusty auxiliaries, the D'Troit and C'Natti.

Shigari had already received incoherent accounts of the engagement from the very same grass-monkeys, and he told the General that a brief report had been sent to Sara-kusa by carrier-pigeon. But, he asked respectfully, had the lake really risen up and swept all before it?

Ahab! Yes!

Now firmly established in his impersonation of the Samurai-General, Cadillac used the wealth of anecdotal material he had amassed on the disaster to weave a spell-binding narrative that had the mouths of Mr and Mrs Shigari and their trusty sergeant-at-arms opening and closing like three goldfish glued nose-first to the side of their glass bowl.

Beginning at the point when the wheel-boats had come in sight of the shore, Cadillac took them through the battle as seen from the Iron Master's side, only pausing when he, as Shinoda, and the ever-silent Mitsunari had clawed their way out of a tangled mass of timber and bodies - unrecognisable fragments, torn from their great ships whose dismembered hulls now lay spread across the landscape. A scene of bloody horror and utter desolation.

Hhhhawwww!!

Shinoda went on to relate how he and Mitsunari had met while trying to round up the five half-crazed horses whose lives had been spared by the same divine hand.

They eventually managed to catch two, riding away as the hordes of Mutes came streaming down the bluffs to plunder the scattered heaps of wreckage and bodies of those who had died bravely at their posts.

But the wall of water, ventured Shigari, where had it come from?

Tsunami, the great wave that could appear on the oceans, overwhelming everything in its path, was a well-known and justly-feared phenomenon, but it was not one associated with navigation of the Great Lakes.

Exactly! replied Shinoda. This wall of water was not a work of Nature. This was witchcraft! It had been raised by diabolic forces called from the bowels of the earth - primal energies which certain of the despised grass-monkeys, known as summoners, were able to mould to their will and fashion into a weapon that could strike down whole armies!

Hhhhawwww!!

Shigari and his small entourage bowed low on hearing these startling revelations, but privately he was drawn to the idea that either Shinoda had been unhinged by the experience which - without any need for exaggeration had been an appalling tragedy, or he was rehearsing the story which he planned to use to cover his illustrious ass, and that of his silent companion.

As supreme commander of the expedition, the blame for any tactical blunders or lack of preparedness was bound to fall on his shoulders and would probably cost Shinoda his life.

To Koto Shigari, the idea that these misshapen grass-monkeys could conjure up evil kami at will and apply their diabolic force in such a selective way was quite laughable - but no hint of the amusement it caused showed on the Resident's face. As a middle-ranking 'commercial', Shigari was the social inferior of the military men who now sat facing him. Any sign of disrespect on his part could send his head rolling across the tatami. But witchcraft? No By the time his two war-weary guests reached Sara-kusa, they would need a better excuse than that.

As the house-boat headed eastwards across Lake Huron, Shigari and his staff were completely unaware that their illustrious passengers had vari-coloured skins just like the grass-monkeys whose magic powers they

had casually dismissed. Cadillac and Roz had removed their face masks allowed themselves to be undressed and assisted as they savoured the joys of a hot, deep bath, had donned fresh kimonos (furnished with the usual abject apologies for offering garments of such inferior quality to cover the bodies of those appointed to high office) and had eaten a meal served with yet more apologies without anyone seeing them as they really were.

What Shigari, his wife Ono, and their staff saw were two battle-hardened samurai, and the voice they heard was Cadillac's, speaking faultless japanese. Roz had drawn the physical shape of their characters from Cadillac's memory and implanted them in the minds of their hosts. And the images were so real that when the bandages on her neck were carefully unwound,

they revealed a deep, suppurating neck wound created from her own medical knowledge. A wound that Ono Shigari had cleaned with the utmost delicacy, without ever knowing that it was her own mind that was projecting the livid gash and surrounding inflammation onto Roz's unbroken skin.

It was only when their hosts retired, leaving them alone in their quarters, that Roz relaxed her grip on their minds.

But by that time, Shigfiri and everyone else aboard were totally convinced they were carrying two VIPs on the next stage of their journey to Sarakusa.

Steering a parallel course to the chain of islands that fringed the northern edge of Lake Huron, Shigari's vessel entered Georgian Bay via the Lucas Channel and headed south-east into the smaller Nottawasaga Bay, making landfall at navref Collingwood.

The first Iron Master cartographers, who had based their maps on a carefully-preserved copy of the Millennium Edition of the Rand McNally Road Atlas of the United States, Canada and Mexico, had revised the spelling of all place names to suit their mother-tongue and Collingwood was now known as KorinaGawu.

There was no Iron Master presence here, and nothing remained of the pre-Holocaust township, but the area had been explored by surveyors and engineers despatched by the Yama-Shita family, to study the feasibility of cutting a new canal across the hinterland to shorten the sea journey to the trading post at Du-Aruta (Duluth, Minnesota).

The surveying teams concluded that it was indeed possible but that it would require a great deal of time and money. If other road-building and construction projects were not to suffer, a huge new labour force would have to be recruited. The Chinese accountants working for the Yama-Shita family rattled the sums around on their abacuses and decided they didn't add up.

Even if an unpaid labour force could be mobilised, they still had to be fed. The slavemasters and construction supervisors had to be fed and paid. There were material costs, and when the canal was completed, the twelve massive locks required to compensate for the three hundred and thirty foot difference in the level of the two bodies of water would have to be manned and maintained 365 days a year.

Given the then-current vessel throughput, the savings on shipping costs in terms of reduced journey times would only compensate for a fraction of the costs involved. To balance the books, trading revenues from the Great Lakes would have to increase by some 300 per cent over the next three years and 15 per cent annually thereafter.

Even if a home market could be found, the Mutes could not produce the volume of raw materials required without a radical alteration, in their life-style. They would, to put it bluntly, have to start working.

The project was shelved. The samurai nobles might regard the merchant classes as their social inferiors, but they liked to keep the coffers well filled by taxing everything in sight. Making money was as important as dying a 'good death'. Poverty was a condition to be borne uncomplainingly by the lower classes, and any samurai who fell on hard times. These unfortunates who lost all social standing usually joined the ranks of the ronin roving bands of cut-throats and brigands who preyed on the road-convoys and outlying estates.

It was this abortive accounting exercise that led the late Domain-Lord Hirohito Yama-Shita to draw up his plan to divide and conquer the Plainfolk by setting the D'Troit and C'Natti against the other bloodlines. It would have provided the required massive new labour force, and permitted the exploitation of the natural and mineral wealth of the interior, providing the revenues the accountants required.

And it was this very same plan which his successor, Acting Regent Aishi Sakimoto, had tried to implement - with insufficient preparation and with disastrous consequences.

That was why Saldmoto had been greatly heartened by the arrival of the carrier-pigeon from the Cheboygan out-station concerning the appearance of

Samurai-General Shinoda and Samurai-Major Mitsunari.

Now, at last, he and the family council might get the chance of hearing what had happened from the horse's mouth, instead of having to make sense of the conflicting reports gathered from clans belonging to the routed D'Troit faction - the equivalent, in Sakimoto's view, of putting one's ear to the horse's ass.

Shinoda and the injured Mitsunari would be landed at Korina-gawu. From there they would ride south-east by east across the hinterland to O-shawa on Lake Onataryo.

Sakimoto had already despatched a wheel-boat to await their arrival.

Once safely aboard, they would cross to the small port of Osa-wego on the eastern shore of the lake, some thirty miles from their final destination - the palace at Sarakusa.

At Osa-wego, the returning samurai would be received with the honour due to their rank by two junior members of the Yama-Shita family council and the usual clutch of local dignitaries, before proceeding along the river and canal system to the Yama-Shita's palace-fortress on the shores of Lake Oneida.

And then the questioning would begin

As Cadillac and Roz watched the small house-boat turn about and start its 250 mile trip back to Cheboygan, they knew that Shigari had arranged for a second pick-up-boat at Oshawa.

Using the hand-drawn route map he had provided, they encountered no major difficulty in finding their way to the western edge of Lake Ona-taryo. The horses had been fed and rested while on the boat, but it still took three days to travel the eighty odd miles from shore to shore. Riders and mounts had already come a hell of a long way - seven hundred pain-filled miles; far enough to convince Cadillac and Roz that they might die from saddle-soreness before reaching Ne-Issan. When they boarded Shigari's house-boat and fell prey to motion-sickness, there were times they wished they had.

Cadillac had tried to plan for every eventuality but he was not prepared for the extent of the reception that awaited them at Osa-wego.

As the pick-up-boat came alongside the jetty and a gangway was manoeuvred into place, a number of well-dressed men and women - about fifteen or so - came aboard, accompanied by six men-at-arms, two of whom carried long poles bearing the black and silver house-flag of the YamaShita.

Cadillac, watching the scene below through the side window of the wheel-house, said: 'I think we may be in trouble.'

Roz peeked round his shoulder. 'Is that a reception committee?

Heavens! Do you think they might know us?

I mean, Shinoda and Mitsunari?"

'They're bound to, this close to. home.' Cadillac frowned. 'A couple of those women are little more than girls and see - there's a boy amongst them.' He slapped the hilt of his sword. 'Sweet Sky Mother!

Do you think they could be our wives?!" 'Don't ask me. You're the one who "read" their clothes."

'I just got a feel for the man, not his date of birth and the details of his domestic life!" 'You got the names..."

'The names were painted inside the rim of their helmets!" 'And here was I thinking how amazingly gifted you were..."

'Look! Another time, okay?!" Cadillac broke off and paced about the empty wheel-house. 'What a pill! It didn't matter with that crew from Cheboygan and these guys. As long as we looked the part it was good enough.

What the hell are we going to do?!" 'The first thing we're going to do is calm down,' said Roz. 'If I can get inside their heads fast enough, there shouldn't be a problem. They're all expecting to see Shinoda ,and Mitsunari, so their mental image of them should be at the forefront of their minds. There may be a slight hiccup, but once I get a grip on 'em we'll be '

'Sure. And don't forget to make them think this junk I'm wearing is a perfect fit. You look pretty good, but I must be almost a head taller than Shinoda."

The sudden return of Cadillac's confidence made Roz smile. He loved giving orders. 'You're probably bigger all round. His wife might like that."

'Roz! Be serious!" He motioned her to silence as he heard footsteps on the stairs.

It was the captain of the pick-up-boat. Roz trapped his mind as he came into view. Bowing from the waist, he begged leave to inform them that Tojo and Akori YamaShita were waiting to greet them in the small stateroom below. Would they be gracious enough to descend...?

Cadillac silently invited Roz to precede him.

Iron Master protocol saved the day. Only the two council members were in the room when Roz and Cadillac entered, strode forward and bowed deeply from the waist. Tojo and Akori experienced a momentary sensation of unease then relaxed as Roz cast her spell, trapping their minds like flies in a spider's web. Within seconds she had the information she needed to cloak themselves in the true likenesses of Shinoda and Mit-sunari.

Since the ship's captain had already given him the names of the two family councillors, Cadillac was able to coast through the welcoming formalities, skilfully extracting a great deal of useful information about Aishi Sakimoto the acting regent, and the other members of the reception committee. Most important of all, Cadillac succeeded in teasing out the names of the well-bred women who were anxiously waiting to be reunited with their soldier-husbands.

But first, said Tojo, there were the local dignitaries who were eager to have the opportunity of welcoming their illustrious personages on behalf of the townspeople of Osawego.

Tojo and Akori had already been obliged to endure the same rigmarole.

Two members of the Yama-Shita family, an army general and a regimental commander all in one day constituted a major event.

Hastily-commissioned commemorative scrolls were presented to Cadillac and Roz, together with small beautifully-wrapped gifts as a mark of gratitude for honouring the town with their presence.

Cadillac was gratified to discover they had also brought along several bottles of their best sake to drink to the health and safe return of all concerned, and to pledge their unswerving loyalty to the House of YamaShita.

Tojo and Akori allowed the Osa-wego reception committee one big swallow each then dismissed them, ordered the captain to get the boat underway and invited Cadillac and Roz to join them in some serious drinking on a strictly man-to-man basis.

Refilling their cups to the brim, Tojo said: 'This may sound rather odd, but when you first came into the room, I didn't recognise you. In fact I could swear you looked completely different to the way you do now."

'Indeed? In what way?' enquired Cadillac. He and Roz were now sitting cross-legged facing their two hosts.

'It's hard to say.' Tojo appealed to his cousin, Akori.

'Did you not notice anything?'

'Well, yes, since you mention it, I did.' Akori faced his guests with a baffled frown. 'You both seemed a lot taller, but now ' Cadillac exchanged a sideways glance with Roz. 'It must have been a trick of the mind, sire.'

The palace-fortress of the Yama-Shita family stood near the western end of Lake O-neida, several miles northeast of Sara-kusa. The Iron Master town with its bustling streets had taken its name from the pre-H city of Syracuse, but had been built around a loop in the canal linking Lake Erie with the Hudson River, some distance from the buried remains of its predecessor. Lake Oneida - a twenty-mile-long stretch of water was part of this liquid highway. Wheel-boats of every shape and size and barges carrying cargoes of every description passed in a constant two-way flow beneath the palace ramparts.

The port of Osa-wego was also linked to this inland waterway by the river of that name and it was along this that the vessel carrying Cadillac and Roz now sailed. A left turn at the junction with the main east-west canal led them into the lake and directly to the stepped stone jetty below the palace.

Cadillac stared up at the massive stone walls and the multi-storied wooden superstructure with its maze of galleries and tiled roofs. Two huge wooden doors decorated with spiked iron bolts barred the exit from the jetty steps. Flanked by stone towers, this was the keep - part of the outer defences like the surrounding moat. To reach the palace from the lake, you had to cross a drawbridge which could be raised to cover the equally massive inner gates.

Preceded by the two flag-bearers, Tojo and Akori Yama-Shita led the way up the steps. Cadillac and Roz, sandwiched between them and the rest of the welcome-home committee, had no choice but to follow. Cadillac edged shoulder to shoulder with Roz. 'This is the crunch-point,' he muttered. 'Are you going to be able to keep this up?'

'That's what we're about to find out,' whispered Roz.

'Just keep talking and leave the thinking to me.'

Cadillac was not at all happy with this somewhat arbitrary division of effort. It sounded distinctly like a demotion, but he could not afford to take umbrage.

This was no ordinary joint enterprise; he had to stay glued to Roz's side - the illusion could not be sustained without her! Cadillac made an effort to compose himself but when they reached the top of the steps his heart was still pounding - and it wasn't due to the climb.

On they went, across the drawbridge and through the yawning palace gates into the courtyard beyond. A series of court officials of ascending rank progressively weeded out their entourage until only Tojo and Akori were left ahead of them in the stairways.

The wives and children - who had found their husbands and fathers 'not quite themselves' - were among the first to be left behind, and then their armed escort was replaced by samurai from the Inner Household; a group of young, expressionless look-alikes, dressed in loose flowing short-sleeved robes, drawn in at the waist by a wide sash into which the scabbards of their long and short swords were inserted.

Cadillac and Roz were still dressed in the clothes and armour they had acquired at Sioux Falls. Having found enough bits and pieces to fit him, Cadillac had declined the offer of 'fresh clothes at both O-shawa and Osa-wego - all of which were on the small side. Tojo and Akori had accepted his request to be allowed to retain their uniforms. He and his 'wounded' companion, said Cadillac, were bringing a report direct from the battlefield, and they wished to present themselves to the Regent, bearing the scars of that bloody conflict out of respect for their fallen comrades.

As senior military officers, Shinoda and Mitsunari were allowed to bear arms inside the palace, but when entering the presence of the ruling members of the family they served, protocol demanded that they carry their helmets tucked under their left arm, and their two sheathed swords in their right hand.

The small procession halted outside the two large sliding screens that

led to the audience chamber. Six guards stood outside. After bowing to Tojo and Akori, one of them knocked on the wooden frame. The right-hand screen slid open a few inches to reveal another guard inside. Whispers were exchanged. The screen slid shut, then a moment later, both were drawn back revealing a large room covered in spotless tatami, with a raised dais at the far end.

Tojo and Akori entered the room, exchanged formal greetings with the Regent Aishi Sakimoto, then took their places on the low platform behind the six family council members already seated on either side of Sakimoto.

Cadillac and Roz strode forward on his signal to enter.

Six archers and six swordsmen were positioned around the edge of the room. The quartet of look-alikes stepped

inside and the screens were shut by the guards in the corridor.

These people certainly believed in protection. Some of it was a sign of status, but it wasn't just that. Cadillac had visited the palace of Domain-Lord Min-Orota and it had been the same story. Like Min-Orota, Sakimoto and the people around him were at the top of their particular tree but at what price? They lived behind eight-foot-thick stone walls, guarded night and day, haunted by suspicions and the constant fear of assassination. What a way to live!

Bowing low from the waist, Cadillac offered formal salutations, explaining that he also spoke for his wounded companion. On receiving the nod from Sakimoto, he and Roz dropped to their knees on the special mats provided. Cadillac laid his helmet on the left hand side of his mat and the two swords on the right, parallel with each other and with their hilts in line with the front edge of the mat. Roz, following his lead, did likewise.

Sakimoto expressed his satisfaction at their safe return, but his brusque manner made it clear that their state of health was of minor concern. What Sakimoto wanted to know was how one of his top generals had apparently managed to lose an entire expedition.

Cadillac was only too happy to oblige. Having already tested his story on the Cheboygan Resident, Cadillac had added more colour and drama to the weaker passages and was only too happy to step into the limelight with some spell-binding of his own.

Sakimoto, like the rest of Cadillac's audience, was impressed, but not to the point where he forgot the bottom line. When the person he thought of as Samurai-General Shinoda finished his story with a bow, Sakimoto eyed him pensively then said: 'This is, without doubt, a startling tale. And since it accords in many respects with other reports - albeit it from highly unreliable sources- I do not intend at this stage to question the veracity of the information you have laid before us.

'But I think it is right to question the state of mind of a person who brings such a story to me. You and Samurai-Major Mitsunari...'

Roz bowed as Sakimoto's eyes rested briefly upon her.

'... are the sole survivors of a military expedition numbering some two thousand men, carried into action aboard five of our largest wheel-boats! Someone less charitably disposed towards you than myself might be tempted into thinking that this story of "Mute magic" was concocted to conceal a degree of incompetence bordering on the criminal!' - 'On the contrary, sire,' said Shinoda with a deep bow.

'We seek to hide nothing. Those who in the past dismissed Mute magic were ignorant, misguided fools! It exists!

And we have brought you proof of its terrible power!' 'I see' Sakimoto exchanged cautious glances with the six members of the family council seated with him on the dais. 'And what shape does this proof take?'

'Ourselves, sire.'

Shinoda and Mitsunari went forward on their knees and touched the tatami with their foreheads. When they resumed their sitting position, Sakimoto and the other dignitaries found themselves looking into the

painted faces of two grass-monkeys - wearing samurai armour!

Hhhh-awwwwhhhh. I The sixteen swordsmen and archers who formed the Regent's personal bodyguard leapt to their feet, hands on the hilts of their weapons, arrow notched to bowstring, their spear-point tips aimed at the intruders' hearts.

Mastering their surprise, Sakimoto and his fellow-councillors stood up and backed slowly to the rear of the dais. The two grass-monkeys remained sitting calmly on their heels, hands on their thighs, heads raised, their eyes locked fearlessly onto Sakimoto and the other nobles.

For ArmyzGeneral Miyame Yama-Shita it was all too much. Drawing his sword, he stepped forward off the dais to confront Cadillac and Roz.

'You vile insolent dogs!

By what right do you presume to wear the dress and the

swords of noble

samurai?! And how dare you look upon us in this fashion! Lower your eyes this instant or - I' The threat died on his lips and was replaced by a roar of pain. The hilt of his sword had become red-hot! He could smell his flesh roasting! Throwing his long-sword down, Miyame clutched his right wrist and stared unbelievably at his charred and blistered right hand. The pattern covering the decorated hilt was seared deep into his palm! 'Kill them!" he shrieked.

'NO!" bellowed Sakimoto.

The archers paused uncertainly, the swordsmen froze, blades half out of their scabbards. The two grass-monkeys no longer knelt on the mats.

They had vanished. In their place stood Domain-Lord Hirohito Yama-Shita, arms folded, his thin, cruel mouth set firm, eyes blazing with unnatural brilliance.

'Do you threaten me, your liege-lord?" he cried.

Sakimoto and everyone else in the room fell to their knees. This was no wraith-like apparition, this was solid flesh and blood. Hirohito returned from the nether-world to life!

'M-m-my l-lord!" stammered Sakimoto.

As he spoke, the pair of grass-monkeys appeared at the far end of the room. And then another, and another, and another, until the entire room was ringed by painted samurai, leaving the Yama-Shita family council and their bodyguard completely surrounded and outnumbered three-to-one! Worse still, every man-jack was rooted to the spot, trembling like palsied ancients! Hhhhawwwwhhh!

Then Lord Hirohito vanished. In his place were two more grass-monkeys, standing on the mats from which the original pair had vanished. Were they the same?

It was impossible to tell! Sakimoto felt physically sick.

His mind was reeling, but by a supreme effort of will he managed to maintain a dignified posture.

The one who had been Shinoda raised his hand and snapped his fingers.

The grass-monkeys lining the walls of the room vanished. 'You are powerless against our magic,' he said. 'We come in peace, to meet with you as friends and allies to help you avenge the great wrongs visited upon the House of Yama-Shita by the traitorous TohYota!

'But we do not come as slaves! We are the emissaries of a new breed of Plainfolk who demand not only to be treated as equals but also the right to converse in your language. If the House of Yama-Shita is willing to receive us on those terms, and with the hospitality you would accord your fellow domain-lords, command your men to leave this room. We have many weighty matters to discuss." · Aishi Sakimoto thought he would burst a blood-vessel.

Army-General Miyame Yama-Shita nearly did. Never in their lives had they dreamt of being addressed with such disdainful authority by a grass-monkey - and in Japanese to boot! Their own sacred language, which outlanders were forbidden to use under pain of death! A death which began by having the offending tongue clamped and pierced several times by a white hot iron before being torn out of the offender's

head!

It was outrageous! But what could they do? First they had been faced by Shinoda and Mitsunari, then two grass-monkeys who could disappear and reappear at will, then multiply in the twinkling of an eye to become a small army! And now, where were the two faithful samurai?

Or had they never been there at all?

Oh, yes. this was indeed magic- of a very powerful kind!

And that was not all. Shinoda/Monkey #1 had uttered a magic phrase: '... avenge the great wrongs visited upon the House of Yama-Shita by the traitorous TohYota'.

Words like that, falling from the lips of anyone, were music to Sakimoto's ears. It would be worth enduring some small indignities just to hear what these painted upstarts had to say for themselves.

And when they revealed all, who knew what might happen then? A stout-hearted man, protected by the most powerful incantations of the palace priests, might

find a way to destroy their malevolent powers by means of a poisoned draught or a knife-thrust delivered in the dead of night.

As this idea passed through Sakimoto's mind, a slim dagger materialised out of thin air and buried its point into the tatami, a few inches in front of his toes. Sakimoto jumped back. Beside it appeared a blue and white porcelain cup, filled with a dark liquid. Staring down at it, he saw the image of a grinning skull reflected in its surface.

'You disappoint us, sire. Is that how noble lords of the Yama-Shita plan to reward those who come to their aid?'

By the Great Divine Oneness of being! These devils could read his unspoken thoughts as well... I Having blown their hosts out of their split-toed cotton socks with an unparalleled display of magic, Cadillac proceeded to whet their appetites with a promise to reveal a secret that could - if properly exploited by determined men - topple the TohYota.

Sniffing the air like a hunting dog, he declared that he could sense the evil presence of the Toh-Yota within the palace walls. At the moment, its form was too elusive to define, but if - beginning tomorrow - his hosts would permit Rain-Dancer and himself to examine any area of the palace they felt drawn to, he promised to root it out.

When found, it would prove that the Toh-Yota - who for so long had buttressed their sovereignty by claiming to represent the soul of the nation - had cynically betrayed the traditional values it sought to uphold by using devices powered by the Dark Light to maintain its grip on the reins of power.

The magic had been awesome enough, but this unexpected charge was absolutely staggering and, potentially, so explosive, no one in the Yama-Shita family regretted having to swallow their pride and treat these two grass-monkey witches as equals.

'The Dark Light is so feared it has become a mystery that many cannot comprehend,' said Sakimoto. 'This proof you speak of... will it be something that honest men can approach and recognise without placing themselves in mortal danger?'

Cadillac laughed. 'It is only the Toh-Yota who are in mortal danger!

The proof I intend to place before you will win over your most faint-hearted ally. Summon them now to a secret council and allow me to address them.

I promise you they will not leave here without having pledged to raise their battle flags alongside that of the YamaShita!" Aishi Sakimoto needed no further prompting. After ensuring that his two extraordinary guests were comfortably housed in a pavilion that nestled amongst trees and rocks in the landscaped gardens of the palace, he despatched coded messages via courier-pigeons to the neighbouring Ko-Nikka and Se-Iko, to the Hi-Tashi and San-Yo in the far south of the country and the Fu-Jitsu and Na-Shuwa in the north.

After a brief but intense period of reflection, he decided to issue two more invitations: to the SuZuki and the Min-Orota.

In the lists drawn up by Progressives and Traditionalists whenever coups were discussed, the Su-Zuki were classified as neutral but favouring the Shogun. It would be vital to win their support before

any military action could succeed.

The Min-Orota - led by Lord Kiyomori - occupied another strategic position. They were allied to TohYota by marriage, but that hadn't stopped Domain-Lord Kiyo getting together with Lord Hirohito Yama-Shita in a bid to resurrect the Dark Light. The bid had failed. The plot had been uncovered by Ieyasu, Lord Hirohito had been killed and Kiyomori Min-Orota had seized the chance to save the necks of his own family by naming names.

It was a sordid betrayal but Hirohito had known the risks he was taking in trying to win over the Min-Orota.

Kiyo was widely regarded as a devious sonofabitch, but given the circumstances, his swift dash back into the Shogun's camp was the mark of a political realist.

Kiyomori Min-Orota was not a supporter of lost causes.

In Ne-Issan, very few people were, for the simple reason that most people on the losing side of any overt political power struggle ended up as a small heap of grey ash inside a stone pot.

But now, with the appearance of these two powerful witches, there was a possibility that Fortune was about to smile on the Yama-Shita. The deaths, defeats and humiliations which the family had suffered over the last two years might yet be put to good account. And when the battle lines were drawn, Lord Min-Orota, who over the same period had signalled that he was anxious to effect a reconciliation, would not want to be on the losing side.

Sakimoto had no doubt he was still as untrustworthy as ever, but even potential traitors had their uses. The final reckoning could come later

Far to the south, in one of the several luxurious enclaves which made up Cloudlands, Steve followed Karlstrom across the tracks of the main depot of the railway that was the First Family's private plaything. A gleaming 4-6-2 locomotive stood outside the engine shed. Steam curled from the funnel and the huge reciprocating valves that powered the gleaming steel driving shafts.

Karlstrom paused and watched fondly as another engine shunted slowly past. 'Amazing, aren't they?' He crossed the last two tracks. 'This one's a real beauty.'

When they drew level with the cab, Karlstrom stood aside and motioned Steve to climb aboard first.

Reaching the footplate, Karlstrom unhooked a two-way radio and spoke to the yard marshal's office. 'This is Baker-King plus one aboard Southern Belle on Stand Five. You got any dear track for me?'

'Stand-by, Baker-King. Affirmative. We're switching you out of the yard onto the north-eastern section. You're clear up-line as far as Beaumont.'

'Roger. Thanks, Ned. Under steam and pulling away.'

Steve took the radio from Karlstrom's outstretched hand and returned it to its place on the wall of the cab. After leaning out to check both sides of the track, ahead and behind, Karlstrom released the brakes and eased open the throttle. The huge locomotive shuddered momentarily as the driving wheels got a proper purchase on the rails, amid a deafening hiss of steam, then began to glide forward. 'See that stack of logs behind you?'

Steve checked the loaded tender and nodded.

Karlstrom handed him a pair of heavy work-gloves.

'Stick a couple of dozen into the firebox.' He leant down and unlocked the door to the roaring furnace. 'Once they're in, push 'em to the back with that stoking iron.' · 'Yess-sirr!' Steve went to work.

When the firebox was full, Steve took his stand at the window on the opposite of the cab to Karlstrom. They had left the yard behind and were now rolling east through open country. They passed several work-details of Mutes labouring on the down-line under Tracker overseers.

Some of the Trackers were armed with carbines, and rode aboard blue six-wheel vehicles - a type Steve had never seen before.

'Bobcats,' shouted Karlstrom, sensing the question in Steve's mind. He checked the steam and brake pressure dials then leaned back out of the driver's side-window.

Steve, whose antennae were always extended in situations like this, was fascinated by the change in Karlstrom's demeanour. He was still issuing orders in the same peremptory manner but he was no longer the dry, ruthless Director of AMEXICO that Steve had first encountered.

Karlstrom seemed exhilarated by the rush of air on his face, mixing with the smell of engine oil, warm iron and woodsmoke. He was really enjoying himself.

Like a small boy

Karlstrom eyed him shrewdly. 'What d'you think?' he demanded. 'Isn't this great?!' 'Yes.' Steve rodded some more logs into the firebox, closed it off and straightened up. 'It's also tough on the back.'

'Nothing comes easy, Brickanan. If you want to be an

engine-driver, you have to learn to be a fireman first."

Karlstrom smiled. 'You ought to consider yourself lucky.

Some people never even get to ride in the cab."

'No, sir. I'm aware of that." Steve watched Karlstrom rub his oily rag tenderly over the gleaming pipe work.

The way you might caress a naked woman. 'Are all the First Family hooked on trains?"

'The ones that count are,' said Karlstrom. 'It's in the blood. It was the train that opened up America. Forget the covered wagons - the long lines of prairie schooners.

It's the men who built the locos and the railroads who were the real pioneers. That was the era when America first achieved real greatness.

You could travel coast to coast and north to south. D'you wanna know something?

In the golden years, there were three hundred and sixty thousand miles of track! Can you imagine that?! The railways were the arteries and veins of the nation, the trains its life blood."

Steve nodded respectfully. Karlstrom's eyes, fired up with a passion he had never displayed in more formal encounters, reminded Steve of good ol' crazy Uncle Bart.

'But then, weren't railways superseded by the highways and what the Mutes call beetles?"

'Automobiles." Karlstrom's mouth wrinkled with distaste.

'Worse thing that ever happened to this country.

That's what destroyed it! The auto and the truck changed people's values. Made people selfish and greedy. That didn't happen on the trains. When you travelled by rail, you were part of a community. The journey was a shared experience. The train came from somewhere, you boarded it, got off when it arrived at your destination, and the train went on to somewhere else.

'There was continuity. The rail head, the depot, was the link between the townships and central to the life of each. The point where goods and people came in and out, where you got news of what was happening down the line.

You were part of a beautifully controlled system that you could depend on. Where everything ran to a timetable.

But what held the system together, what kept the whole thing on the rails were people - working side by side.

From top to bottom of the organisation, everyone had a specific job to do and they did it to the best of their abilities."

'So in a sense, this railway thing was a role model for the Federation.

The whole wagon-train concept, the way-stations..."

'Exactly. Teamwork, Brickman. That's what was lost when the highways and the automobile came along. They gave individuals the freedom to go wherever they wanted whenever they wanted." Karlstrom saw Steve's reaction.

'Yes, that's right. Freedom. one of the word-concepts you've picked up from your Mute friends. It's not listed in the Federation dictionary, but amongst the First Family, it's the subject of constant debate.

'Like I said before, during the time you travelled on a train, you were part of a community, but as soon as two, three or four people started shutting themselves inside those wheeled trash-bins, their whole personality changed. They began to compete with the owners of other automobiles. Everyone wanted their trash-bin to be bigger, faster, better and above all different to their neighbours'.

'In those days, when America was run by money, there were organisations ready to pander to these kind of desires. But you can't satisfy them.

It just leads to more jealousy, greed, lawlessness and anti-social behaviour of all kinds. Just having transportation to get from A to B wasn't enough. Mobility became a way of life.

'Bored with your surroundings? You got into your box and went somewhere else. Looking for the end of the rainbow. But all that breeds is dissatisfaction because once the novelty wears off, you discover that there is just the same as here. Life has to be lived wherever you are."

Karlstrom massaged another length of copper pipe with his oily rag.

'used to be a state out west, California...

the word got around it was a great place to be. The only place to be.

And it was true. Great climate, sun, sand, sea, mountains. gorgeous landscape, beautiful

people. Only it didn't stay that way. From all over the rest of America, people packed their belongings into their chromium-plated, air-conditioned trash-bins and started moving west, looking to get themselves a piece of the same dream.

'And pretty soon, that dream turned into a nightmare.

They fucked up California just like they fucked up everywhere else.

That's what people used to call "freedom" in those days, Brickman. To be able, if you wanted to, to go to hell in a handcart. We call that being out of control - like a runaway loco. That's why this country went off the rails and into the ravine - and that's why the Family has to keep a tight hold on things. That was one of the harsh lessons we learned from the Holocaust.

You can't turn people loose if they don't have a sense of direction."

'Are you planning to instill one- or does that mean the First Family will never allow Trackers to have that kind of freedom again?"

'And risk letting another bunch of degenerate air-heads drag us into another Holocaust?" Karlstrom shook his head. 'I doubt it. Last time round they almost killed everything off for good. This planet can only take so much. If you're ever allowed to access the records, you'll find out just how bad it was. It's taken us over nine hundred years to haul ourselves out of the pit just to get back - in technological terms - to where we started. Nobody in their right minds would ever want to go through that again.

'understand this, Brickman. The Family is not against the concept of freedom. As you know for yourself, Trackers are free to do all kinds of things- within certain limits. What the Family has done, and will continue to do, is decide where the edges are. One day perhaps, you'll be making those kinds of decisions. And when you get that high, you'll realise that we, the people that run things, do so out of a sense of duty - not because we're a bunch of power-hungry maniacs ' 'Sir, I!"

Karlstrom silenced Steve with a raised hand. 'Brick-man!

Fer crissakes! I wasn't born yesterday! I once felt the same way!

How do you think you've got this far?

Why d'you think we've chosen to work with you? It's because we know you better than you know yourself!

We know what buttons to push! That's why Commander Jefferson had your marks downgraded in the final exams at the Flight Academy. Yes! After docking points for the couple of odd foul-ups you came the closest anyone has ever come to achieving the perfect score! So we arranged for you to come fourth. Are you going to tell me that didn't light a fire under your tail?"

."No, sir. It did."

'Damn right, it did."

'How did Fran - I mean, Commander Jefferson- come to be involved in that particular decision?"

'She hasn't told you? Maybe it's time you knew. She's been running you and Roz for the last five years."

'Running...?'

'She's been your controller. You two were put on a Special Treatment List at birth. There's a whole department of AMEX whose job it is to follow you people through every stage of your development. When Commander Jefferson went to work in that department she was given your file.'

'I didn't realise I was that important ' 'Oh, you are Brickman, you are. She's made it her business to know everything about you. And now you're pushing her button. Kind of ironic, don't you think?'

Karlstrom checked the steam pressure gauge and opened the door to the fire-box. 'Okay, fire her up.'

Steve tossed in several more billets- logs that had been sawn into thirty-inch lengths then quartered with an axe.

His technique was improving with each load, and the scorching heat that met his first attempts was now much less of a problem.

'Not bad,' shouted Kafistrom. 'You learn fast. That's what I like about you. You could have a real future with us, y'know that? And not just because of your present

relationship with Commander Jefferson.

That's not going to last, but I guess you've already figured that out.

I'm talking about AMEXICO. That's the best route to the top for a young man in a hurry." He paused to eye Steve.

'That's where you want to end up, isn't it?"

It was like being stripped naked. 'Sir, I, uhh - why I just never thought about it! I mean, y'know - that far ahead - ' Karlstrom laughed. 'Not much! Only every other second! Jeer! Don't you ever come clean?! I respect ambition! How the hell d'you think I got to be head of AMEXICO? I'm not bullshitting you, Brickman. Play your cards right and one day you could be the man to take over my spot when it's time for me to move on. And where would that put you?"

'One step away from the Oval Office..."

Karlstrom smiled and spread his hands. 'It could all be yours, Brickman. All you have to do is become a team-player."

'I thought I was, sir."

'I'm talking about getting your head totally together, Brickman. That means ditching any lingering thoughts about playing both ends against the middle - like keeping a door open to the Plainfolk in case things get too hot here. And don't insult my intelligence by trying to deny it. I understand.

'You aren't the only mexican to have run into problems.

That's the one danger about working amongst those people. It's not their skins that are poisonous, it's their fucking ideas! Once you take that shit on board, it's like a worm eating into your brain!

That's why you were only awarded probationary membership of the Family.

A lot of people who decide these things still don't feel you can be wholly trusted."

'But you aren't one of them. If you were, we wouldn't be here having this conversation."

Karlstrom leaned out of the window to check the line. When he turned back, he was smiling broadly.

'That's something else I like about you, Brickman.

Talk about brass neck! Beats me how you've got this far."

'Somebody up there must like me." Steve hesitated for a moment then added: 'Despite the fact that I'm a Mute."

The smile disappeared from Karlstrom's face. 'This is not the time or place to push that particular boat out, Brickman. In fact, I would strongly advise you not to broach the subject again until someone of the very highest rank invites you to do so. Comprendo?"

'Yes, sir."

'As for me trusting you, let me put it this way. You've got this far

this fast for several reasons, but also because you haven't been found out. I've said this before, but I'll say it again because you obviously still haven't got the message. I've got your number, Brickman. I know there are 'bodies' buried out there. But I don't propose to look for them because I'm not out to destroy you, I'm trying to find a way for us to work together."

'I'd like nothingetter, sir."

'Exactly. I knew you'd say that. In fact I could have written that line for you. But let's cut the crap. There's only one way for partnerships like this to work. Both of us have to get what we want.

Now I'm quite happy to be a rung on your ladder.

The question is - are you willing to be a rung on mine?"

I am getting into very deep water, thought Steve. But the bait Karlstrom was dangling was almost impossible to resist. Next to the President-General, Karlstrom - in Steve's reckoning - was one of, if not the, most powerful men in the Federation. And here he was offering a deal! It could be a trap, but it was the element of danger which got Steve's adrenaline flowing. The opportunity to match his wits against one of the sharpest minds in the Federation was an irresistible challenge. Yes... Karlstrom really did have his number 'I think we've got ourselves a deal, sir.' Steve pulled the work-glove off his right hand. 'If you would not

consider it an impertinence, why don't we shake on it 'Sure. Why not?' Karlstrom didn't smile but he couldn't hide the amused glint in his eye.

Reaching Beaumont they ran off into a siding and lunched in the small railside canteen. The signal staff and overseers were Trackers, but there were a number of Mutes dressed in faded blue shirts and bib overalls working in the railyard. Karlstrom had chosen Beaumont as his outward destination because it had a triangular spur which allowed the engine to be run off the up line - which went as far as Baton Rouge and back onto the down line, enabling them to run nose first into Grand Central.

'Clearwater,' announced Karlstrom.

Steve moved a step closer to avoid having to shout over the background noise of the loco. 'Sir...?'

'I think we could have a problem with her.' Karlstrom switched his attention back and forth from Steve to the line up ahead. 'You know she's undergoing these various tests at the Life Institute. And that she's due to give birth to your child about two weeks before the New Year.'

'Yes.'

'Good, well, there's a strong body of medical opinion who want to go for termination fairly rapidly thereafter.

They want to carry out a complete biopsy. Strip her right down to the bare bones- and beyond.' Karlstrom saw the look in Steve's eyes.

'Since you have a certain, uhh - attachment to this person, I thought you ought to know what's on the agenda.'

The idea of Clearwater's body being sliced apart like the carcass of a dead buffalo turned Steve's stomach over.

'Does she have to die?'

'Interesting question. But what alternatives are there?'

Steve chewed his lip and decided not to volunteer an answer until Karlstrom revealed more of his hand.

'All right. Let's take this one step further - and by the way, this conversation is completely off the record - '

'Of course '

'It must be clear from your present involvement with Commander Franklynne that Clearwater's presence is a complicating factor. And, given the choice, it's probably one you would prefer to be without.'

'I can't deny it would make life easier, sir. But you sent me out to bring her in, and that's what I did.

As for my relationship with Commander Franklynne, I responded to an approach by her in the manner which seemed appropriate.'

Karlstrom grinned. 'Yehh, sure. It was an offer you couldn't refuse.'

'Given her rank and position I certainly could not have taken the

initiative just as, in response to your question, it's not my place to countermand directives issued by you."

Karlstrom gave one of his thin smiles. 'Very neat, brickman. Here you are, dying to jump in at the deep end, but still frightened of getting your feet wet. It wasn't me who wanted Clearwater and her friends brought in, it was the President-General. I have to take orders just like you do, but for reasons we don't need to go into, her presence here is a problem I would like to dispose of.

'You're obviously suffering from a severe attack of discretion but if it helps, you might as well know that Commander Franklynne can't wait for the biopsy. She wants Clearwater out of the way, and I'm sure you don't need me to tell you why."

'Does the President-General have a position on this?"

'He's been persuaded by the medics that it's the only way to go if they want to get to the bottom of this earth-magic shit. As for me, well a biopsy is one way of solving the problem but it leaves me with another."

'Sir...?"

'You, Brickman. I'm concerned about the effect this may have on you.

If they cut her up and stick the pieces

in a row of jars, I don't think you're going to be able to live with yourself. In which case, you're not going to be of any use to me or my organisation."

Steve banged some more logs in the firebox while he digested this. He flipped the door shut with the stoking iron and straightened up to meet Karlstrom's unwavering gaze. 'So where would that leave me?'

Karlstrom repolished some pipe-work. 'In Commander Franklynn's bed.

Not what I call a secure position." He held up a hand to quell Steve's protest. 'Don't get me wrong. I gather she thinks very highly of you.

You may even have worked yourself a winning ticket. But it's only fair to warn you, she is notoriously fickle."

He watched his words sink home. It was going better than he expected.

'Let's face it, Brickman. A young man with your intelligence and resource shouldn't really allow himself to be manoeuvred into a situation where his future depends on someone's passing passion for his dong."

'No, sir."

'So what's the solution?'

Steve knew if he wanted to be taken seriously, he couldn't dodge the question any longer. 'Find a way of returning her to the overground."

'Bravo! Now we're talking."

'But once she was set free, she would pose a new threat to the Federation. Aiding and abetting her escape would be treason. A Code One offence which would be impossible to justify."

'That would depend on how you define treason, Brick-man.

There are offences and offences. Some of our own internal operations contravene the Federation legal codes. And I know you're not going to try to tell me you've done everything by the Book."

Karlstrom took another look out of the window then throttled back to reduce the drumming of the wheels on the track. 'I'm going to tell you something. And this is strictly between you and me - okay.?" I don't regard Mute magic as a long-term threat to our survival. The greatest danger comes from people inside the Federation who take it seriously."

'But, sin earth-magic is for real! I've seen it with my- ' Karlstrom cut him short. 'I'm not denying its existence.

What I'm saying is - it's not part of the future! It's an aberration!

Something that belongs to a distant age, way beyond what the Mutes call the Old Time, when hairy-assed apemen with inch-high foreheads and jaws like 'dozer buckets were knocking sparks off flints to make fire.

'I've read practically all the data COLUMBUS holds on the pre-Holocaust era. Even in the period just before America burned there were people

with special gifts who were able to find water and stuff like that.

But they didn't rearrange the landscape by shouting at it - like our friend Clearwater. There was no magic then, just conjuring tricks '

'Sir...?"

'Illusions, fakery, sleight-of-hand- like the guys on the mess-deck who score credits off you by moving a deck of cards around."

'Ahh, yehh, I see."

'You have to revise your whole mental approach to this,' said Karlstrom. 'Don't think of these people as being "gifted", think of them as freaks, throwbacks to the time when everyone lived like the Mutes. That primitive mode of existence produces a special and very intense kind of relationship with their environment.

'Make no mistake, there are dynamic forces which permeate the earth and sky. We already know what some of them are. In another thousand years we'll probably be using them the way we use electricity now. But no one will call it magic. And there'll be no more wordsmiths, summoners and seers."

'Why not. 'Progress ' Karlstrom paused to exchange waves with a group of Trackers supervising a track-maintenance detail. 'The Plainfolk have got three ways to go. They

can get wiped out, fall under our control and end up in work-camps like the Southern Mutes, or they can hold the line - keep us at bay. To have a hope of doing that, they have to make a giant leap forward. They not only have to be better armed, they have to undergo a complete change of lifestyle."

'And that will change their present relationship with their environment. They'll lose touch. And when that happens. there'll be no more earth-magic."

'Exactly,' said Karlstrom. 'You got it in one."

'Not a very pleasing prospect for the people running this psionics outfit you mentioned."

Karlstrom's face darkened. 'I don't think we need worry about those guys. They'll soon find something else to hitch their wagon to."

'But at the moment, their research programme is fully approved by the President-General."

Karlstrom was too fly to fall for that one. 'It's approved by everyone, Brickman - including you..."

'Absolutely, sir."

'And there's something else we need to get straight. I know it's your friend Clearwater who's been zapping the surveillance cameras, but at the moment no one else does. I'm happy to leave it that way providing you tell her to knock it off. Any further disruption could seriously jeopardise our interests and by that I mean yours, hers and mine. You got that?"

'Yes, sir."

'You will only be allowed this one visit. You will not reveal any details of this up-coming mission, or even that you will soon be leaving the Federation."

'No, sir!"

'Okay. Now for my part, I will ensure that no harm comes to her while you're away. In fact, I guarantee it."

'Thank you, sir."

'And in return, assuming you get back in one piece, you and I will have to put our heads together and decide what is to be done with her.

What's best for all of us. Give the matter some thought while you're away."

'I will, sir ' 'Okay. We've said all there is to say." Pulling the peak of his engineer's cap down over his eyes, Karlstrom resumed his Man of Destiny stance at the driver's window and laid a firm hand on the throttle. 'Back to work, Brickman. Start hauling wood!"

Yesss-sirrrrr

CHAPTER FIVE

The sudden convergence of so many high-born supporters of the progressive party did not escape the notice of the agents that Lord Ieyasu had managed to station inside the domain of the Yama-Shita and elsewhere.

Despite a great deal of effort and ingenuity, he had not succeeded in placing an agent in a key long-term position within the palace walls, but that had ceased to be a problem. Two years ago, one of his special agents, trained in the ancient arts of the ninja to perform what were often suicide missions, had succeeded in planting an electronic bug in the main council chamber before his presence was detected. Unable to escape, he had killed himself.

To the Yama-Shita family it looked like a failed assassination attempt which was also strangely ill-timed since Lord Hirohito, the presumed target, was absent on a tour of his domain. But the ninja had done his work well.

The chamber was used for important policy meetings, and the miniaturised listening device had relayed a great deal of useful intelligence to a secret listening post aboard an innocent-looking fishing boat that always cast its nets within a mile of the palace ramparts.

Ieyasu had been assured that the small, bean-sized battery - another long-dog miracle - had one more year of life, but now, as the age-old rivals of the TohYota gathered to plot new treasons, the device had fallen silent.

How tiresome! thought Ieyasu. Never mind. His network was resilient.

Messages would be sent, ways would be found. And if all else failed, he could always rely on Domain-Lord Kiyo Min-Orota, a true and trusted ally who had already passed on the wording of the invitation he had received to join a group of like-minded friends at Sarakusa.

Ieyasu was right about Sakimoto's motives for inviting his fellow-progressives, but he was wrong about the reason for the break in transmission. The electronic bug had not suffered battery failure; its presence had been detected and its location revealed by Cadillac.

Acting on a wild hunch, he used parts of the radio equipment stripped from the damaged Skyhawk to sweep several key areas of the palace, including the main conference chamber. Just when he was about to give up, the tell-tale feed-back noise had led him to the device which had been embedded in the underside of the long, low, eight-legged table.

After examining the bug, he deactivated it then restored it to its hiding place. There was no point in showing it to the Regent, Aishi Sakimoto, ahead of the meeting.

The device itself was physically insignificant and would mean nothing to anyone who had not grasped the concept of electronic surveillance.

It needed to be woven into a carefully-prepared scenario and revealed with a dramatic flourish when he had secured the undivided attention of his powerful audience. He had promised them proof of the Toh-Yotas treachery, and he intended to supply it.

The Skyhawk transceiver unit contained a tape-deck with an eight-hour

digital cassette which enabled pilots to record ground-to-air or air-to-air conversations. Using his gift of mimicry and his fluent grasp of japanese, Cadillac recorded two voices from a sending and receiving station, in which the sender reported that the secret conference summoned by the Yama-Shita was now underway, but that the listening device had suddenly stopped relaying the voices of the conspirators.

Both speakers referred to the Lord Chamberlain and the TohoYota by name, their voices rising and fading against a background of static created by rustling a crumpled piece of rice-paper close to the tiny microphone.

It took several tries before Cadillac pronounced

himself satisfied

with the balance of the voices and Roz's sound-effects, but the final version was impressive - with just enough roughness and depth to convince any listeners that the voices were coming from some point far beyond the castle walls.

His audience would not have heard voices 'captured' from the air before, so the impact would be even greater.

They would listen more intently, and when the full implications of what was being said dawned on them collectively, the Lord Chamberlain would be mired in shite right up to his hairless armpits.

The last guests to arrive were Lord Fu-Jitsu and Na-Shona, the domain-lords who held the far northern reaches of Ne-Issan. With the destruction of the pre-Holocaust locks on the San-Oransa, the river was no longer navigable along its whole length. The only way to reach Sara-kusa was by an arduous ride on horseback.

Sakimoto made them welcome, and granted a twenty-four hour respite to ease the soreness generated by so many days in the saddle.

The next evening, before joining the earlier arrivals for a lavish banquet, they were taken aside by Aishi Sakimoto and given a preparatory briefing on the strange nature of the outlandish couple that he intended to bring before them on the following day.

The encounter, said Sakimoto, would involve a grave breach of protocol, even an affront to their dignity, but it was absolutely essential that they - like the other nobles who had arrived before them - subdued their natural reactions and prejudices, and listened with an open mind and, above all, watched with open eyes.

'Outlandish couple ...?' Lord Fu4itsu exchanged a cautious glance with his neighbour and travelling-companion, Domain-Lord Na-Shona. 'What manner of creature are they?'

'Grass-monkeys,' replied Sakimoto, 'who are able to speak our sacred mother-tongue.'

Having been over the same ground with his other guests, the shocked reaction of Lord Fu-Jitsu and Na-Shona came as no surprise.

'Y-You expect us to sit in the same room and...' Na-,Shona could hardly bring himself to express the thought, . . . treat with'them as equals?!"

'You will certainly be expected to sit and listen to what they have to tell us,' said Sakimoto with undiplomatic firmness. 'It goes without saying they can never be accepted as our social equals. I am merely asking you to suppress - as I have - your natural feelings of superiority.'

."And disgust ' 'That too,' said Sakimoto. 'But once you have surmounted these mental barriers, I am confident you will find the experience most instructive. These are witches, able to grip and chill the minds of men by conjuring up spirit forms which are as real as you and I, and alter the world around us.' He saw their eyes widen in alarm. 'And they have come here to aid us to achieve what we all desire the most!'

When Cadillac and Roz were brought into the main council chamber, they found Aishi Sakimoto and the six senior members of the Yama-Shita

family council sitting at the long table, interspersed with their guests Domain-Lords Ko-Nikka and Se-Iko, their nearest neighbours, Lord Hi-Tashi and San-Yo from the far south, Lord Fu-Jitsu and Na-Shona and Lord Min-Orota of Masa-chusa and Ro-diren. Behind each domain-lord sat a trusted advisor, but there were no armed guards - although a number were stationed outside all the entrances and could be summoned in an instant.

Approaching the small, low table that had been placed opposite the centre of its larger neighbour, Cadillac and Roz knelt on the mats provided and put their noses briefly on the floor then, in impeccable japanese, Cadillac said: 'Noble lords of the Yama-Shita. We greet you and your illustrious guests on behalf of the Plainfolk.' He bowed

his head to Sakimoto. 'Sire, we have already spoken of our desire for friendship and cooperation between your great houses and the warrior clans we represent. It is our belief that we can help you gain the place that is rightfully yours. In order for your guests to be able to judge for themselves our usefulness in that regard, may we have your permission to offer a brief display of the powers at our command?"

'Proceed,' said Aishi Sakimoto, bracing himself.

Before the word was fully uttered, Roz had imprisoned their minds. The assembled, domain-lords rocked back on their heels as Cadillac and Roz and the small table disappeared and were replaced by a fully-armed samurai-warrior astride a magnificent horse with flaring nostrils. A black stallion, caparisoned in crimson and silver.

The samurai - whose face was concealed behind a fearsome battle-mask brandished a gleaming sword as he reined in the restive animal. The room was filled with the stamp of its iron-shod hooves. Its muscular neck with its flowing mane arched as the rider pulled the steaming muzzle in against its neck. Then, lowering its haunches, the stallion bared its teeth, flexed its rear legs and leapt forward as the masked rider loosed a tremendous yell.

Sakimoto - part of whose brain knew it wasn't real could not smother the instinctive desire to throw himself sideways as the horse flew over his head. Even those not directly in line tried to get out of the way then, to their utter consternation, horse and rider vanished in mid-leap.

Cries of astonishment filled the council chamber, cries which soon turned into strangled gasps of disbelief as the Iron Masters picked themselves up and found Cadillac and Roz sitting calmly behind their small table as if nothing had happened.

Lord Fu-Jitsu, angered at being tricked - and thoroughly frightened into the bargain - ignored Sakimoto's warning to keep his cool. He slammed his right hand down upon the table. 'You painted apes! How dare you mock us in this impudent manner!"

An audible gasp from his neighbours and a sudden crawling, burning sensation drew his attention to his hand. Starting at the tips of his splayed fingers, the skin began to steam and bubble. Within seconds, the bubbles had spread to cover the back of his hand, wrist and the exposed part of his arm then, beneath his horrified gaze, the bubbles became festering pustules which burst, revealing seething nests of maggots feeding on the rotting flesh beneath.

His fellow domain-lords recoiled in horror as he pulled back the wide sleeve of his kimono. The whole of his forearm was being consumed.

The stench was unbearable, the pain indescribable. Fu-Jitsu screamed and thrust the quivering limb towards Lord San-Yo who had been seated on his right. 'Strike! I beg you! Cut it off! Before it devours me!"

San-Yo found himself unable to draw his sword. But it was not necessary. Fu-Jitsu's arm and hand had been magically restored to their previously healthy state. Hawwwwwww.wwwww.

At Sakimoto's urging, the domain-lords settled down in their allotted places. A servant was summoned to pour out a cup of sake for the

shaken Fu-Jitsu, and many of the others took the opportunity to settle their nerves with a quick snifter.

When the hubbub had died down, Cadillac said: 'My lords, before we can offer you our aid, we must come to a certain understanding. We are not "painted apes".

We are of the Plainfolk - a warrior race as proud and courageous as the Sons of Ne-Issan. We do not accept the notion of inferior and superior beings. Every colour and shape of humankind born under the sky has an equal claim to the air that he breathes and the earth on which he stands. And it is our belief that the gods who rule the fate of nations, punish and cast down those who ignore this great truth by granting themselves privileges and considerations denied to those they deem unworthy.

'We acknowledge your society is both different and far more advanced than our own, but while it has much to

commend it, the Plainfolk are superior in other ways. We are armed with magical powers drawn from the ancient wisdom of heaven and earth - powers that can defeat the swords, bows and guns of your mightiest armies!

'Our magic makes us invincible because we draw our strength from those who would raise their hand against us. Your anger, your hatred, your evil intent fuels the magic and makes it more potent! Your wrath becomes our shield!'

It was all lies, of course. Cadillac was making it up as he went along, but after witnessing what had happened to Lord Fu-Jitsu none of the shaken Iron Masters was prepared to doubt his word.

When he felt composed enough to speak, Lord Fu-Jitsu said: 'I regret the rashness with which I addressed you.'

Cadillac bowed in return. 'I fully understand, sire. It is no easy matter to change the habits and attitudes of a lifetime.'

With Roz having helped him reduce his audience to a state of cowed attentiveness, Cadillac dispensed with further courtesies and got down to the business of nailing the Toh-Yota to the wall.

Placing a cloth package on the table, he announced in a suitably hushed voice that he was about to unveil an artefact fashioned by the long-dogs - a black box bearing hieroglyphs, hand controls and glittering red and green jewel-like eyes. A device filled with the Dark Light

His mention of the forbidden words triggered an audible intake of breath. With ritualised gestures, he and Roz carefully unwrapped the Skyhawk's radio set then refolded the cloth neatly and set it aside.

The Iron Masters loved ceremony. They even made a major production out of the simple process of preparing a hot drink by pouring boiling water on dried leaves. Not only did it take forever, you had to put on special clothes in order to participate.

Lord San-Yo eyed the radio uneasily and voiced the question on everyone's lips. 'Are we in any danger from that. device?'

'No, sire. It threatens only those who have abused the trust of this nation.' Besides the fake messages, Cadillac had also recorded several useful sound effects. The box, he explained, had several functions, one of which was its ability to detect the presence of other devices filled with the Dark Light. It was not, as many people thought, a demonic energy, but it was created by the interaction of elemental forces. It had many forms and attributes, but it could be likened to a flowing river whose dynamic force turned the water-wheels of grinding mills, and to bands of light - like sunbeams striking through a pine forest in the early morn - but invisible to the naked eye. It was these unseen bands that were able to join one device to another, and they also could capture and carry away the sound of the human voice.

Hhhawwwwwwww.

Selecting the appropriate track, Cadillac coaxed a faint high-pitched bleep from the radio. His audience, of course, had no idea that he was manipulating the controls to produce the desired noises - and that Roz had been doing so beneath the table even before the radio had been unwrapped.

They exchanged meaningful glances. 'Listen!" cried Roz. 'It speaks to another device!"

Most of the domain-lords present had a fair to good grasp of Basic, but Cadillac quickly repeated what she had said in Japanese. The Iron Masters reacted with murmurs of surprise.

Taking the radio reverently between both hands, he rose and moved carefully up and down in front of the long table, sweeping the room for the hidden device as he surreptitiously raised and lowered the volume control to simulate the technique of direction finding. Finally, as he neared the point where the device was concealed, he raised the volume and pointed an accusing finger.

'My lord! The device must be hidden in the table itself!"

'But that's impossible!" cried Sakimoto.

'Not so, my lord. You underestimate the cunning and duplicity of those who seek to destroy you!" Cadillac

scanned the table closely as the Iron Masters scrambled to their feet and backed away cautiously. 'It must be underneath! Allow me!' Handing Roz the radio, Cadillac grasped one edge of the heavy table.

'Wait! said Sakimoto. 'I will summon servants!'

Lord Ko-Nikka and several other domain-lords stepped forward. 'There is no need. The less people that know of this the better!'

They turned the table on one of its long edges. Cadillac drew their attention to the neatly-drilled cavity, carefully levered out the small device and held it up for all to see as the table was lowered back into place.

The domain-lords eyed the bug sceptically as Cadillac pushed it round the table for each of them to examine. 'It looks like a black stone from a go board,' said Mitiyake Se-Iko. 'Can it really capture voices?'

Cadillac shot a quick glance at Roz, then pretended to make a crucial adjustment to the bug. Roz quickly rewound a section of the tape and hit the play button as Cadillac raised the bug between thumb and forefinger.

To their utter astonishment, the Iron Masters heard the voice of Lord Se-Iko issue from the black box: 'It looks like a black stone from a go board. Can it really capture voices?'

Hhhawwwww-wwwww. This was magic indeed.

'But what does this mean?!' demanded Lord Min-Orota.

Cadillac twisted the two faces of the bug between his fingers and held it near the radio. There was no high-pitched bleep. Roz had switched tracks but no one had noticed. 'I have emptied the Dark Light from it.

It no longer hears. But while it was alive, it noted the words spoken in this room as faithfully as a scribe!'

Aishi Sakimoto and the other members of the family council paled visibly. 'Merciful heaven!' exclaimed Hide-oshi YamaoShita. 'It was around this table that our late and much-beloved Lord Hirohito held many of his most important meetings!'

Cadillac nodded. 'Which probably included his future plans for expanding trade and the strategies to be employed in countering the machinations of the TohYota.'

He did not wait for Hideoshi to answer. Holding up the bug, he said: 'You may be sure that every word was carried from this room to eager ears beyond these walls - by this cunning device! Ears belonging to the Toh-Yota! For it was the agents employed by Lord Ieyasu who placed it beneath this table!'

Lord Min-Orota, astounded by what he had seen and heard, was not yet ready to condemn the Toh-Yota. 'The device can only have come from the long-dogs, and it must have been placed there by someone, but there is, as yet, no proof they were agents of the Toh-Yota. The Shogun's feelings on this matter are well known. His family has always upheld the edict against the Dark Light. It is not possible for him to be involved in such an appalling act of treachery!'

ishi Sakimoto nodded then turned to Cadillac. 'Can you back up this charge?'

Cadillac bowed. 'Sire, if my accusation is well-founded, there will be agents of the Toh-Yota stationed nearby equipped with more powerful devices to capture the words spoken here. Their task is to despatch them unheard and unseen, together with any other intelligence, to their ultimate destination. Let us see what we can find.'

Returning to the small table, he sat down beside Roz, and whispered: 'I think we've got 'em.' Twiddling the controls of the radio, and manipulating the buttons controlling the multi-track tape, Cadillac succeeded in 'capturing' a conversation between two voices for his attentive audience.

The content of the transmission removed any shred of doubt in the minds of the listening domain-lords. The unidentified agent - who had apparently been standing by to eavesdrop on the present meeting reported that the listening device had stopped working before anything incriminating had been said.

Questioned by the 'home station' he expressed his certainty that the Yama-Shita family, led by Aishi Saki-moto were plotting a coup of some kind, and passed on the names of all those present. It was vital, said the agent, that Lord Ieyasu and the Shogun were informed of what was afoot. With the failure of the device within the Sara-kusa Palace, information on the plotters would have to be gathered elsewhere.

The domain-lords gasped as they heard the 'home station' tell the agent that that was not a problem.

Lord Ieyasu, said the voice, had been able to place a string of black beads across the length and breadth of Ne-Issan and with their help he would be able to strangle any conspiracy to remove the TohYota.

Seeing the effect this had on the domain-lords, Cadillac went for the kill. Addressing Sakimoto, he said: 'Sire! I promised you proof of the Toh-Yota's treachery. Now you have seen and heard it with your own eyes and ears!

They have not only betrayed you, they have betrayed the soul of the nation!"

Coming hard on the heels of his discovery of the listening device, these phantom voices banished all doubt - even in the mind of Lord Kiyo Min-Orota. The TohYota had abused the power accorded to them by their fellow domain-lords in the most heinous way imaginable - demanding death, money and other punitive forms of retribution for crimes which they themselves had perpetrated for years. And were continuing to do so!

Cadillac and Roz sat back calmly as the shocked domain-lords tried to hammer out a coherent response to these revelations. All were agreed that the TohYota shogunate had to be swept away, but they were hopelessly split over the means by which this could be best accomplished. Hawks and doves both knew it would require the use of considerable force.

Probably full-scale civil war. Despite their present sense of outrage, that was not a course the majority of the assembled nobles were ready to embark upon without careful preparation.

It would be better, said the doves, to gather more support for their progressive ideals by exposing the corrupt behaviour of the shogunate.

Quite so, said the hawks - but could it be done quickly and effectively before the Toh-Yota - who would be bound to learn what was afoot launched a pre-emptive strike on the Yama-Shita with whom they shared common borders?

When the steam ran out of the discussion without any agreed plan of action having being produced, Cadillac asked permission to speak.

Aishi Sakimoto, who was presiding over the meeting, invited him to do so.

'Great and noble lords, I have listened to your deliberations and sensed your rightful anger. The house of TohYota, the supposed guardian of tradition, has flouted the sacred edicts it imposed on the rest of Ne-Issan. For this alone, it should fall. But I would advise you against the use, at this stage, of military force.

'The Shogun and his principal advisors have shown themselves to be

cunning, unscrupulous adversaries.

They may well find ways to ridicule or deny the proofs I have laid before you. Through their great wealth and the patronage they can bestow, they may be able to purchase the support of domain-lords who are less principled than yourselves. The answer to this problem lies elsewhere.

'It is the Shogun and Lord Ieyasu who stand condemned.

If you remove them, the house of TohYota will be plunged into confusion. Ieyasu is like the head of a viper with a thousand forked tongues - spies and provocateurs who have poisoned the minds of this nation and filled them with fear and hatred for those - like you - who wish to see it strong and secure. Able to resist the Federation. For there, beneath the Deserts of the South, is where the real threat lies.

'A threat which the Toh-Yota cannot meet, because it lacks the will.

It has no vision of the future and, most of all, with its pretence of clinging to tradition, it deprives you of the means to adequately defend yourselves!"

His words met with strong murmurs of assent. Cadillac turned to Roz who sat cross-legged beside him and sought

encouragement with a raised-eyebrow 'how am I doing?' look. She maintained the same blank expression she had assumed on entering but nodded approvingly.

Lord Min-Orota, in whose domain the ill-fated Heron Pool had been built, said: 'Are you suggesting the assassination of the Shogun and Lord Ieyasu?'

'As the first step, yes,' said Cadillac. 'From what I have learned, Lord Ieyasu is the most powerful man in Ne-Issan and your most feared adversary. The Shogun, Prince Yoritomo, has certain strengths, but he is manipulated by his great-uncle - and is thus equally guilty.

'He has no male heir and he has no brothers. The question who would succeed him is bound to cause great dissension amongst the rest of the TohYota family - especially after his guilt is revealed. That is the moment when you should make your challenge against their authority.'

Sakimoto shook his head. 'I commend your insight, but the proposal you have just put forward has been considered and rejected on countless previous occasions.'

'Rejected,' added Lord Se-Iko, 'because of the difficulties of placing an assassin within reach of the Shogun. If anything, Lord Ieyasu is an even more difficult target.

The assassination of both of them simultaneously or in quick succession is not a practical proposition.

'On all formal occasions they are surrounded by guards whose loyalty is beyond question, and there are watchers who exercise extreme vigilance at all times. Access to the Inner Court is strictly controlled and no one is allowed to carry anything that might be remotely considered as a weapon when accorded a private audience.'

'What constitutes a "private audience"... ?'

Sakimoto swapped glances with his coconspirators.

'The phrase is usually applied to meetings between members of the Inner Court in which two individuals - although it can be more - engage in some form of sexual intercourse.'

Lord Se-Iko enlarged upon his colleague's reply. 'In the case of Ieyasu, these audiences are said to be a daily event. The Shogun, despite his youth, is somewhat less voracious.'

Cadillac looked at Roz, then said: 'Can you enlighten us further?'

'In what way?'

'By telling us what kind of partners, they prefer, how they are chosen and how they are introduced into the presence of Lord Ieyasu and Prince Yoritomo.'

'We can give you some information,' replied Sakimoto, 'but this is a blind alley. Anyone chosen to receive the intimate attentions of these gentlemen has to strip and bathe - and of course they are washed and groomed by trusted members of the palace staff.

'Every orifice is searched - even their fingernails are trimmed - and they are then dressed in clothes which have been specially prepared and checked, and offer no possibility of concealing any dangerous

objects."

'And,' said Lord Min-Orota, 'any food or drink served on such occasions is carefully prepared, inspected and tasted beforehand.'

The other Iron Masters seated around the low table took it in turns to reveal what they knew, providing Cadillac and Roz with an entertaining mixture of fact, speculation and gossip.

It emerged that Ieyasu's preference was for prepubescent young girls between ten and twelve years old.

These were supplied by a group of favoured ladies of the Inner Court.

On the much rarer occasions when the Shogun indulged his baser passions it was with partners nearer his own age - male and female.

An unsubstantiated rumour which had gained currency because of its juicy content hinted at a romantic attachment to several of the Heralds. Founded by Prince Yoritomo soon after his accession, the College of Heralds was a body of intelligent, dedicated, handsome young men, chosen by the Shogun to be his personal representatives. His 'eyes and ears'.

With their appointment came the privilege of direct access to the Shogun, a move which had threatened

Ieyasu's influence at court and his grip on the reins of power.

Cadillac sought further details about their exact role and it was at this point that the name of the Herald Toshiro Hase-Gawa came into the conversation. This, he recalled, was the Iron Master who had been closely involved with Steve.

It transpired that, following the successful unmasking of the conspiracy led by Lord Yama-Shita to resurrect the Dark Light, the Herald Toshiro Hase-Gawa - who had played a pivotal role in the Shogun's triumph had been obliged to take his own life because of a compromising letter that had been intercepted by one of Ieyasu's agents.

No one knew what the letter contained, but its penning and posting by Toshiro had led directly to his death.

Slicing open his own belly in the time-honoured fashion before being beheaded by his second - Kamakura, a Captain in the Palace Guard.

The recounting of this incident caused the assembled Iron Masters a great deal of merriment. Sakimoto explained: 'The good captain has five daughters and an ambitious wife, who entertained hopes of marrying one of them off to the Herald. Not only was he a good friend of the family, he was also Kamakura's pupil. The poor man - who is a magnificent swordsman - works lovingly for years and then has to cut off the head of his most outstanding pupil!'

Sakimoto slapped his thighs and roared with laughter.

His colleagues seemed to find it equally amusing.

When the laughter subsided, Moro Ko-Nikka, who was there to represent his brother, the domain-lord, said: 'I think the letter was an excuse.

The palace gossips say it was Lady Mishiko who sent the Herald to his death by asking her brother's permission to marry him- a little too soon after the death of her husband."

This met with a murmur of agreement.

The Consul-General Nakane Toh-Shiba had been the Shogun's official representative in Lord Min-Orota's domain. Cadillac not only knew of him, he had witnessed his fiery descent from the sky. He sensed a trail that might finally be leading somewhere

'Was he a man of noble birth? An acceptable candidate for her hand?'

'Indeed he was,' replied Moro. 'The house of HaseGawa has always been a staunch ally of the TohYota.'

'So why did the Shogun view this match with such disfavour?'

The Iron Masters around exchanged knowing glances.

Lord Se-Iko leant forward. 'Because the same palace gossips claimed that Yoritomo was secretly in love with Toshiro but had not yet found the courage to declare his affection! His carnal desire for men is something he tries to deny! You can imagine how mortified he was when he found that his favourite Herald loved another - and had been doing so for some time in secret!'

Lord Min-Orota, who had been a party to the plot with the Yama-Shita family and had only managed to save his neck by switching sides at the last minute, provided the capper. 'I happen to know there was more to it than that.

It was Ieyasu who pushed him into allowing Mishiko to marry Nakane - to bolster their alliance with his family.

'The Herald wasn't the only one who wanted Mishiko's husband out of the way. Yoritomo couldn't bear the idea of her being in Nakane's bed- and not just because he was a dissolute pig whose conduct dishonoured his wife and, by extension, the Toh-Yota. He couldn't bear it because he had been, and still was, in love with her himself!"

There were gasps of astonishment from those around the table who had not heard this particular nugget before.

Cadillac's pulse quickened. 'My lord, are you suggesting that the Shogun had his sister's lover killed because they had both rejected him?"

'Rejected is not the word I would choose,' replied Min-Orota. 'It seems pretty certain that Yoritomo slept with his sister fairly regularly over a number of years before Ieyasu managed to remove her.

The Herald was, I imagine, merely a consolation prize."

'That he didn't collect."

Lord Min-Orota shrugged. 'Whether he did or not doesn't really matter.

The important thing is that Yoritomo couldn't bear the idea of anyone else touching his sister."

'Or the idea that they might love her and were only humouring him,' suggested Cadillac.

'Very likely. In the past, ambitious young men have been known to use their bodies to gain preferment. We call it promotion by the backstairs. Women do it all the time, but they, of course, come equipped with two tunnels of love."

'The last time I counted it was three!" said Lord Se-Iko.

This provoked another round of thigh-slapping laughter.

Cadillac and Roz exchanged another glance. Her eyes told him she knew what he was thinking. And approved.

'Does the Lady Mishiko have any children?" he asked.

Aishi Sakimoto nodded. 'Yes. Two daughters, Miyori and Narikita, aged five and four - and a two year-old son."

'Toshi,' added Lord Min-Orota. 'There was a vague rumour he was fathered by the Herald."

'And she grieves for him still." Cadillac swept his eyes over his Iron Master audience. 'My lords, I think we may have found our assassin the Lady Mishiko."

The domain-lords and the other high-ranking nobles reacted with gasps of surprise. Sakimoto laughed. The idea seemed so preposterous. 'She obviously has access, but even if some way was found to smuggle a weapon in, what makes you think she would want to kill her brother?"

Cadillac responded with a bow. 'Sire, we are going to make her want to. When we have finished our preparations she will be unable to think of anything else. The desire for revenge will overwhelm all other thoughts."

He pointed to the electronic bug and the radio he had placed on the small low table in front of him. 'We will show her these devices, and persuade her to listen to the voices of Ieyasu's agents that I managed to draw from the air and trap inside this box.

'We will reveal Ieyasu's treachery, and we will tell her that her lover, the Herald Toshiro, discovered Ieyasu's secret pact with the long-dogs under which they supplied him with devices filled with the Dark Light for use by his network of spies. Devices which were also used to discredit the College of Heralds.

'We will tell her that Toshiro intended to reveal all this to the Shogun and that, in order to stop him, Ieyasu had the fatal letter forged and mailed in Toshiro's name in order to protect his own position.

'And we will tell her that her brother, the Shogun, ignored the Herald's protestations of innocence - even though he suspected he was

telling the truth - because he was insanely jealous of the intimate relationship she had - all too hastily - revealed. And she will believe this because that part, at least, is true.

'She and the Herald both wanted her husband Nakane out of the way, but it was the Shogun who ordered Toshiro to arrange his death." Cadillac paused and surveyed his audience, sensing their rapt attention.

'When these facts are laid before her she will want to kill Ieyasu and her brother because it all fits in neatly with what she already knows and because it is what she wants to hear.

'We must make sure nothing stops her. We have to arrange for the evidence she needs to be put in place, plus the means to commit murder." He gestured towards Roz.

'Rain-Dancer and I can provide much of this, but first we need more details about the organisation of the Inner Court and the personalities who surround the Shogun.

Plus a body of stout-hearted horsemen willing to ride with us into the Toh-Yota heartland and aid our escape when the deed is done."

Lord Min-Orota could hardly believe his ears. 'You intend to enter the Shogun's palace?"

'If necessary, yes."

There was a long silence, then Sakimoto said: 'I hate to admit this, but you may have actually produced a plan that could work. It has some exquisite touches.

You deserve to be made an honorary Iron Master."

Cadillac bowed low. 'You are most gracious, sire. But it would be too great an honour for such an unworthy outlander. We are happy to be accepted into your presence and your confidence as we are, and to offer you, on behalf of the Plainfolk, whatever assistance we can."

'There's something I'd like to know,' said Lord Na-Shona.

He was one of the few who had refrained from dishing up the dirt. 'If the Lady Mishiko takes the bait, how will she kill Lord Ieyasu and Prince Yoritomo?"

'That, sire, must remain a secret - for reasons I am sure you understand."

Aishi Sakimoto could hardly contain his excitement at the prospect of toppling the Toh-Yota family. 'If you succeed, you will both be richly rewarded."

Cadillac bowed again. 'We seek no reward, sire, other than a firm and continuing friendship between our two nations. But even though we are able to call upon powerful magic we need your help and guidance to gain access to the Lady Mishiko. Will you furnish us with the men, ships and resources we require?"

Sakimoto did not hesitate. 'You shall have them."

CHAPTER SIX

The large fortified residence known as the Winter Palace was situated at Showa, ten miles inland from the port of Oshana-sita, and some four miles south of the state line between Delaware and Maryland. The whole of the peninsular from Wilmington across to the neck of Delaware bay and down to the southern tip with its garland of islands which had been part of Virginia, belonged to the Toh-Yota. During their eighty-year reign, the family had built or taken over five similar strongholds on the mainland, but since his accession, the Shogun had chosen to spend the winter months at Showa - hence its name.

It was towards the Winter Palace that Lord Kiyomori Min-Orota led his mounted and wheeled entourage, after journeying in three boats, along canal, river and coastline from Sara-kusa to a small backwater port some fifteen miles north of Oshana-sita.

At the head of the slower-moving baggage-train was a closed carriage-box containing Cadillac and Roz, masked and cloaked in the style of travelling courtesans. This disguise had been proposed by Cadillac, who had already made one successful trip across Ne-Issan posing as a high-priced lady from the 'floating world'.

Following the baggage-train at irregular intervals and in three unevenly-sized groups were samurai horsemen supplied by Aishi Sakimoto.

These were also travelling in disguise. The two largest appeared to be road-convoys of merchants and cart-drivers carrying goods from Fin, the other a group of horse-traders with several promising-looking mounts in tow and papers which identified them as coming from the domain of

Toh-Shiba family. In a further attempt to conceal the fact that they formed one

coherent group, Lord Min-Orota's party was separated from the rearmost road-convoy by some four hours, and they were all travelling via different routes to their allotted positions around the Winter Palace.

Aishi Sakimoto, the acting head of the YamaShita family, had chosen Lord MinOrota to make contact with Lady Mishiko because of his face-saving leap into the Shogun's camp following the death of his coconspirator, Domain-Lord Hirohito YamaShita.

Kiyo Min-Orota was widely regarded as someone not to be wholly trusted by either side. Inviting him to the meeting had been a gamble but it had paid off. Kiyo, despite his opportunism, was committed to the progressive movement, and the task he had now been given fitted exactly with people's expectations of him.

Sakimoto knew that Ieyasu - who had learned of the meeting at Sara-kusa - would be expecting to hear from Lord Min-Orota. He would not be disappointed. Kiyo was on his way to tell Ieyasu that the Yama-Shita had uncovered damning proof that he had - with the help of the Federation - deployed a network of agents equipped with communication devices powered by the Dark Light: proof in the form of documents, equipment and two captured long-dog agents disguised as Mute slaves.

As a stalwart ally, Kiyo would say he had brought this news out of concern for the damage it would do to the Shogun and the Toh-Yota family once the accusation, and the attendant rumours, began to be spread by their enemies throughout Ne-Issan.

Min-Orota himself was convinced Ieyasu would do his level best to contain this dismaying news instead of passing it on to the Shogun.

Indeed, as he had argued at Sara-kusa, when everything was taken into account, it was obvious that Yoritomo did not know what Ieyasu had been up to. Keeping it secret over the past years had enabled Ieyasu to reinforce his position as the man who knew everything, and that in turn had helped him discredit the newly-created College of Herald's - forcing Yoritomo back into a position of total dependence upon him.

But there were two things Min-Orota, the loyal and trusted friend, did not intend to reveal. First was that, besides briefing the Court Chamberlain, he also planned to spill the entire can of beans to the Lady Mishiko who, because of her animosity towards Ieyasu for his past interference in her life, would be only too pleased to tell her brother the good news. And second, was that the conspirators planned to use a deadly mixture of fact, fiction and Mute magic to poison Lady Mishiko's mind and turn her into an assassin

Lady Mishiko, at this point in time, knew nothing of this.

Since the welcome death of her husband and the untimely demise of her lover Toshiro Hase-Gawa, she had become a semi-recluse living in her brother's household, while she tried to put the pieces of her shattered life back together.

With her three children and her small personal retinue of servants, she had her own permanent apartments in all the princely households, and followed her brother in his seasonal moves around his four domains.

Mishiko was the only close relative so favoured; her three elder sisters, all married, as she had been, into noble houses closely allied with the Toh-Yota, were only seen at court on great state occasions

such as the annual ceremony each spring when the domain-lords of Ne-Issan gathered in all their martial splendour to renew their oath of fealty to the Shogun.

But as the Inner Court gossips knew, Mishiko's sisters had not become one of the permanent focal points of their younger brother's warped desires. Each of them, before being married off, had been bullied or cajoled into submitting to varying degrees of physical intimacy and responding in kind, but for one reason or another his interest in them had slackened then disappeared entirely (to their great relief) as Mishiko began to blossom into womanhood.

Most noblewomen had small bosoms, some had almost flat chests like men, and this had become the accepted

fashion. The traditional upper-class Japanese style of dress was not designed to display the female bosom, and any woman whose chest measurements exceeded the norm took care to conceal her abundance under a binding cloth.

On reaching puberty, Mishiko's breasts had budded quickly and to her dismay had continued to grow full and firm, surmounted with generous nipples. Tormented by her slim-breasted sisters, she was haunted by visions of being weighed down by two overripe melons like her moon-faced Korean wet-nurse, but to her great relief this hadn't happened.

By her sixteenth birthday- the age when noble families started thinking about suitable marriage partners - Mis-hiko was left generously endowed but not grossly overburdened.

But by that time, she' was no longer a virgin.

Yoritomo, gripped by the feverish fantasies that plague young men as the sap begins to rise, had already forced himself upon her.

Having shared the bathtub with Mishiko and his other sisters from early childhood to the age of puberty, Yoritomo had seen her breasts begin to bud. From that moment on, using a great deal of ingenuity, he had contrived to spy upon her nakedness. The vision of her swelling body and the desire to fondle it - as she herself did in her most private moments - became an obsession.

It was, as he confessed to her later, like a worm in the brain - eating away at his sanity.

Given the dissolute atmosphere that permeated the Inner Court during his father's reign, it was hardly surprising that Yoritomo's incestuous desires were able to flourish unnoticed and unchecked. As the heir to the throne, the courtiers who served his father treated him with the utmost deference, and his sisters were also obliged to humour him for fear of what might happen to them when he became the Shogun.

It took some while for Yoritomo to realise this but when he did, and finally summoned up the courage to turn his youthful fantasies into reality, he began the fumbling sexual conquest of his sisters. One by one, singly and in pairs, with increasing proficiency, the secret liaisons continued until the magic moment when Mishiko came of age.

Like her sisters before her, Mishiko had submitted because she dared not do otherwise. The actual physical relationship had ended six years ago with her marriage to Consul-General Nakane Toh-Shiba. She had never spoken of it - not even to the Herald - and no one had ever alluded to it in her presence, but by the very nature of life at court, the affair had not remained a secret for very long. With her return as a widow to her brother's household, Mishiko had nervously awaited the summons to Yoritomo's bed-chamber, but to her great relief it had not come. Having lost an unloved husband and a lover who embodied everything she desired in the space of a few weeks, she was an emotional wreck. She had nurtured the dream that one day she might be free to marry the Herald, and with the death of Nakane at the Heron Pool that day had come. For one delirious moment her whole life had been transformed and then, just as quickly, the dream - which her children had shared - had been brutally crushed.

In the three years during which the secret romance had blossomed, Mishiko had learned to conceal her true feelings, but to have been

forced, so soon after the event, to give her body to the man who had sent the Herald to his death would have stripped away the last shreds of self-respect and destroyed her reason.

Fortunately, her fears proved groundless. It was clear from the way her brother looked at her in the brief moments of relative privacy that life at court afforded them, that his youthful desires for her had been rekindled, but the message in his eyes was not matched by word or deed, and was contradicted by a certain coldness in his manner.

Instead of gratefully accepting that she was no longer the subject of his unwanted attentions, Mishiko began

to wonder why this should be so and came up with two possible reasons for Yoritomo's detachment: he either regarded her as shop-soiled goods because of her illicit physical relationship with the Herald, or he was trying to suppress his own secret desires in order to live up to the incorruptible image he had created for his role as Shogun, Ruler of the Seventeen Domains of Ne-Issan.

Or both.

And with inexplicable perverseness, even though the emotional scars would never heal, Mishiko started to return his smouldering glances but made no other overt sign or gesture. While earning his forgiveness, she too would play the detached temptress. And with patient guile she would lure this saintly prince who had so ill-used her down from his lofty pedestal.

And destroy him

Lord Kiyomori Min-Orota was about to give a fresh impetus to this desire for revenge. His questionable loyalty was not the only reason he had been chosen as the go-between. He knew Lady Mishiko much better than the other progressive domain-lords. Her husband, Nakane Toh-Shiba, had served as the Shogun's Consul-General to Masa-chusa and Ro-diren- Lord Min-Orota's domain.

For the past nine years, the couple had occupied the official government residence not far from his own fortified palace near Bo-sona, and as the Shogun's senior representative to the Min-Orota court, TohShiba had been a frequent visitor. On most formal occasions, Lady Mishiko had accompanied her husband and Min-Orota had gone out of his way to maintain a cordial relationship. As the Shogun's nearest and dearest sister, Mishiko carried considerable clout. A favourable word from her on behalf of a petitioner often led to a happy result as, for example, in the three-yearly distribution of trading licences.

Lord Min-Orota had also played the role of a concerned friend and father-figure, being amongst the first to offer his condolences on the death of the Consul-General - a death he had witnessed and which, despite the surrounding terror, had caused him a great deal of quiet satisfaction. The Consul-General had been a dissolute pig who had behaved disgracefully towards his wife and family. Everyone had known what she was in for when the match was announced, but it had been a politically-sensitive marriage; another coup engineered by that old fox Ieyasu.

Mishiko had dutifully played the role of the heartbroken wife but she was well rid of him, and Min-Orota - knowing through his own informers of her liaison with the Herald, Toshiro Hase-Gawa, had expressed the hope that after a suitable period of mourning, she might find happiness elsewhere.

At the time, the source of that happiness had been standing by her shoulder. When he met their eyes, Min-Orota had been careful to give no sign that he knew what was going on, and the two lovers had given nothing away either. But it was not to be. Mishiko had suffered a doubly cruel blow, and since no one was supposed to know of the relationship, Min-Orota could not openly do or say anything to allay her sense of loss. This time the grief was genuine, and even more unbearable because it could not be shared with anyone.

As a domain-lord with one foot in the progressive camp, he was secretly

relieved to be rid of the Herald.

Besides being a highly efficient diplomatic messenger, Toshiro Hase-Gawa had been far too good at his real job - nosing into other people's business. On the other hand, as a father with two daughters of his own trapped in arranged marriages, he could understand what she was going through. When it was safe to do so, he had taken the opportunity to privately express his sympathy over the loss of 'a loyal servant and friend' - someone, he knew, her children would miss greatly.

The veiled phrases he used left Mishiko in no doubt that he knew the score, and that if she needed someone to talk to, or a shoulder to cry on, his was available. It

was a good move. Mishiko had responded warmly and it had left him better placed than before. As well it might, for under the terms of his settlement with the Shogun after the Heron Pool disaster, he had been landed with paying a huge sum in compensation for her husband's death.

The fine had been levied on the tenuous grounds that the Consul-General's death was due to 'administrative negligence', i.e. it had occurred in his domain, aboard a flying-horse constructed in workshops financed by him and under his jurisdiction. Faced with a range of unpleasant alternatives, it had been an offer he couldn't refuse. MinoOrota was still stumping up the cash in instalments, and the pain of parting with such large amounts of money was not eased by a growing certainty that Nakane Toh-Shiba's death had been engineered by the Shogun himself.

It was an example of the uses and abuses of power- and it had always been thus. That was why there were always people - like the Yama-Shita - waiting in the wings, ready to gamble everything in a bid to seize control of Ne-Issan and increase their share of its riches. The trick for middle-ranking players like Kiyō Min-Orota, was to hold the balance for as long as possible before committing yourself to what you hoped was the winning side. That was the good thing about this present move.

If the monkey-witches' plan to use Lady Mishiko to kill Ieyasu and Yoritomo succeeded, then the whole country was up for grabs. If it didn't, he would be on record as a loyal ally who had alerted the Shogun to the potentially damaging information uncovered by the YamaShita.

Whichever way it went, he couldn't lose.

Since the Yama-Shita and its progressive allies were not supposed to know that Lord Min-Orota was heading south to reveal their plans, it provided him with a reason for making a stealthy approach to the Winter Palace.

And delivering another hefty instalment into Mishiko's pension fund gave Min-Orota a perfectly reasonable pretext for meeting the lady face-to-face.

Heading south from the back-water port of Mirabara, Min-Orota and his entourage came to Be-isha, a well-appointed post-house inn some three miles north of the Winter Palace. Scattering chickens, pigs and peasants in all directions, Min-Orota rode into the courtyard with his fifty-strong mounted retinue and despatched his principal aide to arrange suitable accommodation for themselves, plus the drivers and domestics accompanying the baggage-train which was still a mile back down the road.

The aide returned with the post-house keeper and his wife in tow.

After the habitual orgy of bowing and apologising for their total unworthiness, the palm-rubbing proprietor explained that the rentable accommodation was almost fully booked. Only one pavilion - the most expensive remained. This might suit the noble lord, but there was no place for his mounted retinue, or the drivers and porters who had yet to arrive.

The post-house keeper did not need to explain why, and Min-Orota cursed himself for not remembering that business was always brisk at this time

of year. Whenever the Shogun took up residence in the Winter Palace, the permanent staff was overwhelmed by dozens of court officials, government administrators, various relatives of Yoritomo, friends and hangers-on - all with their own staffs and servants - plus a regiment of cavalry and foot-soldiers, drafted in to reinforce the palace guard.

This seasonal influx brought enticing amounts of disposable cash into the area. In off-duty hours, far away from home, government functionaries and soldiers of all ranks were always in need of entertainment and their arrival was welcomed by a small army of itinerant pedlars, jugglers, acrobats, prostitutes, pimps, gamblers and shysters who came flooding in from the back-streets of Awashi-tana and Bati-moro to set up shop around the palace.

Lord Min-Orota's solution to the problem was simple.

Announcing that he required the exclusive use of the

entire post-house

for himself and his staff over the next three days, he offered triple the going rate. And when the startled proprietor accepted, he tossed him a bag of gold coins and gave him two hours to clear out the riff-raft and make the place presentable.

Satisfied he had resolved the situation, Kiyo called upon his personal bodyguard to follow him, wheeled his horse around and rode off towards the Winter Palace preceded by two aides, each bearing aloft the blue and brown house-flag of the Min-Orota family.

After presenting his credentials to the Captain of the Outer Keep, Min-Orota followed the flag-bearers across the moat bridge into the walled centre courtyard of the Winter Palace. Soldiers - mostly bowmen - were ranged around the battlements. Anyone who forced their way through the main doors uninvited would find it hard to break out of this killing zone. The sloping walls offered no hiding place. There were several exits, each one secured by iron-studded doors. They were tall enough to admit fully-armed horsemen, but to force an entry under fire would require the hasty application of explosives. Or traitors on the other side.

If the monkey-witches succeeded in turning the Lady Mishiko, they would have their traitor. One flail woman, but so well-placed, she was worth a thousand battle-hardened men.

Shikobu Asakawa, one of a score of senior secretaries who, with the aid of their own staffs, handled the endless stream of paperwork passing through the Chamberlain's office, hastened to welcome Lord Min-Orota on behalf of his master.

Kiyo informed him he had come to deposit a further sum with the Court Treasurer for the upkeep of Lady Mishiko - for which he would like a receipt - then, lowering his voice, he requested a private audience with the Lord Chamberlain. He had, said Min-Orota, extremely urgent and vital information to impart, and it was essential for his own safety that the meeting be kept secret from everyone except the, Shogun.

Shikobu, who had already been briefed by his master Ieyasu to expect such a visit, said: 'My lord, for reasons of state, the Chamberlain cannot receive you personally, but he has instructed me on this matter which'- he paused then adopted the same conspiratorial tone - 'I believe concerns a certain meeting at Sarakusa.'

'That is so,' admitted Min-Orota.

'Then you may tell me,' said Shikobu. The secretary produced a slim scroll and passed it to Lord Min-Orota.

'As you will see from this document, I am authorised to receive any information you wish to bring to the notice of the Chamberlain.'

.Kiyo undid the scroll and read its contents with a frown. It was a brief letter addressed to him, confirming what Shikobu had said, and it was signed and sealed by Ieyasu.

Not good. Not good at all....

He rolled it up and handed it back to the secretary.

'I recognise the authority this letter gives you, but the information I bring is too sensitive to be communicated to an underling- even one as

trusted as you. Inform Lord Ieyasu that I must see him without delay.

The fate of the nation hangs in the balance!" Ieyasu, having foreseen this possibility, had provided his secretary with a range of responses.

'My lord, I regret that the Chamberlain has been called away from the palace.'

Min-Orota concealed his disappointment beneath a snort of irritation.

'I see. When will he return?'

Shikobu shifted uncomfortably. 'I am not at liberty to say.'

Min-Orota exploded. 'Impudent scribbler! Do you want the Toh-Yota to continue to rule this country?!' 'W-Why, y-yes, my lord!' 'Than I demand that you tell me! When will he return? I' 'In-run-run ab-bout fourteen days, my lord!' 'Fourteen days?! Merciful Heaven, we could be at war by then!' Kiyo Min-Orota paced up and down with a great show of agitation. He was now quite enjoying his

role. Planting himself in front of the secretary, he slowly pinched his lips together between his fingers then came to a weighty decision. 'This can wait no longer.

I must speak with the Shogun!" The unfortunate Shikobu wilted visibly.

Min-Orota turned away in disgust then came back to the attack. 'This is incredible. Do you mean to tell me the Shogun is not here either?!' 'They b-b-both left last n-night, sire!' 'And won't be back for fourteen days ' Min-Orota slammed his left hand down on the hilt of his sword.

'Don't just stand there, man! What are we going to do?!" 'Well, my lord, if you will allow me into your confidence, I can send word to the Chamberlain by courier-pigeon.

Or, if you are unwilling to do that, you can compose a message yourself and seal it in a message capsule."

Interesting, thought Min-Orota. It meant that Ieyasu and Yoritomo were on their way to one of the other palaces - all of which kept birds trained to fly to their home lofts in various parts of the country.

But which palace were they going to? He could always try asking, but it would have to be done obliquely. He had succeeded in rattling Shikobu, but the man was clearly under instructions to say as little as possible.

Min-Orota adopted a more conciliatory tone. 'I could, but how many hands will it pass through before reaching your master? You say they left during the night. How soon will the message reach him?"

Shikobu wilted again. As a member of Ieyasu's private staff he enjoyed considerable standing within the court, but he was bound by etiquette to defer to a domain-lord.

And in the case of Min-Orota, he had been instructed to be especially accommodating.

He braced himself for another explosion. 'Five days from now, my lord.

At the earliest."

Kiyo Min-Orota swore loudly and paced up and down again. Five days He mentally calculated the distance they could travel in that time in an effort to figure out where Ieyasu and Yoritomo could be going.

The TohYota had a fortress at Beni-tana in their northern domain, Koneti-kuta; a long strip of forested hills that ran along the east bank of the Uda-sona to the Great Forest Lake and onward to the San-Oransa, the river border between Ne-Issan and the Fog-People.

Koneti-kuta, the largest of the Toh-Yota's three domains, was their original home before their rise to power, but the river and lakes strung along its western border also formed the major part of the front line between the Toh-Yota and the Yama-Shita. Since the deterioration in their relationship, the Shogun had never stayed in the palace at Beni-tana despite the number of troops stationed in the domain.

Min-Orota had been told this by Yoritomo himself.

Five days The only alternative was the Summer Palace on Aron-Giren. But why on earth were Ieyasu and Yoritomo going there?

And why the secrecy? Min-Orota would have dearly loved to know the answers, but at this moment in time, where was more important than why.

What mattered was that the Chamberlain and the Shogun were travelling without their usual massive retinues. If they were going to Aron-Giren as he surmised, they would only have a limited number of personal servants and guards around them, plus the basic permanent staff whose job it was to maintain the palace in readiness for a surprise visit such as this.

With most of the Inner Court and Ieyasu's front men still on the mainland, it would make Lady Mishiko's task much easier. But she would have to move fast - and so would he

Lord Min-Orota turned to face the secretary. 'So...

they have gone to the Summer Palace?"

'My lord, I regret that I am - ' Min-Orota cut him off with a wave. He had caught the tell-tale flicker in Shikobu's eyes. That was enough.

'Of course, of course. In any case, I cannot go there. Your masters may have begun their journey in secret but how long will it remain one?

If I was seen to follow, I

would be hopelessly compromised. And since you won't confirm that's their destination, it could be a wild goose chase."

Shikobu bowed. 'The Chamberlain warned me that this situation might arise, my lord. If you will not pass on this information through me as he has requested - then I must ask you to wait here until he returns."

Min-Orota drew himself up, a move which caused the secretary to retract even further - like a tortoise sensing trouble. 'That is one solution.

On the other hand- seeing he cares so little for the future of this country - I could go home. And you could send him a message suggesting he might learn something to his advantage if he came to see me!" 'Y-Yes my lord!" 'And now,' said Min-Orota, 'kindly conduct me to the Lady Mishiko. I would like to pay my respects before leaving."

Kiyo Min-Orota had missed Ieyasu and the Shogun by just under eight hours. Travelling in closed unmarked carriages, with a heavily-disguised armed escort, the two principal targets of Cadillac's plan had left the palace through a secret underground tunnel in the dead of night and were now following a circuitous route to the Summer Palace for a meeting with two emissaries of the Federation.

There was a quicker and more direct way to reach Aron-Giren from the Winter Palace, and that was by ocean-going junk from the nearby fishing port of Oshana-sita.

But the Shogun, who was an even worse sailor than Cadillac, hated boats, and avoided travelling by sea whenever possible.

The last time he had been persuaded by Ieyasu to go to Bo-sona by sea, the return journey had been so dreadful he had vowed never to do so again. The longest boat journeys he was prepared to undertake were the ferry crossings from Nyo-Jasei to Manatana and on to Aron-Giren. Going by road and travelling only during the hours of darkness, stretched the journey out over several days, but for the Shogun, the attendant discomforts were cancelled out by the peace of mind that came from knowing that his carriage wheels were rolling on a firm foundation.

Apart from their immediate personal staff - riding ahead and behind the closed carriage - few people were aware that Yoritomo and Ieyasu had left the Winter Palace. The Shogun often cancelled his daily audiences and other scheduled court appearances when he felt the need to do so.

Since his accession, the conflict between what he judged to be the good and bad sides of his character and the pressures of high office in one so young had led to frequent and sometimes extended bouts of introspection.

The stone garden at the Summer Palace was a favourite place where he spent hours contemplating the harmonious arrangements of rocks set amongst a raked sea of gravel.

From the age of five, Yoritomo had developed into a secretive, solitary child who preferred reading for hours on end to more active, outdoor pursuits with boys of his own age. Studious, intelligent and imaginative, he impressed his tutors with his learning, but alongside the textbooks on the shelves of his father's library were other, less erudite but more enticing works such as - for example - the bulging

folios of delicately coloured prints depicting, in explicit detail, men and women engaged in every conceivable phase and variation of the sexual act.

There is little doubt it was his avid study of this massive collection of erotica which inspired the febrile fantasies Yoritomo had woven around his sisters.

Through fear, they had kept his secret, but the court and the whole country was awash with secrets and intrigue. In the upper reaches of Iron Master society, conspiracy was in the blood, and the Shogun was the focal point of the constant scheming - by those who sought to curry favour, and by those who sought to remove him.

In a world where false friends lay on all sides, the ruler

of Ne-Issan

needed the clear and concentrated mind of a Grand Master playing simultaneous games of chess with several opponents.

The few friends he had at court also knew that these periods of contemplation were sometimes used to cover a brief sexual liaison.

Unlike his late father, who positively enjoyed outraging people's sensibilities, Yoritomo liked to keep these affairs secret, and anyone who openly referred to them soon felt the weight of his displeasure.

Ieyasu, too, as the supreme puppet-master, preferred to do much of his work behind the scenes. The absence of either for a period of days inevitably raised a few curious eyebrows, but was not a cause for concern; Ieyasu, as the nominal head of the government, had a string of high-powered aides to front for him, and the layers of court officials ensured that the palace ran smoothly in the Shogun's absence. It was, in other words, business as usual.

But not for much longer

By the time Lord Kiyō Min-Orota reached Lady Mis-hiko's private apartments, she already knew the real reason for his visit. A trusted member of his staff had succeeded in delivering an invitation to pay an informal visit to the post-house. The letter stated that Min-Orota had uncovered new information concerning the death of the Herald Hase-Gawa, but because of its sensitive nature, it was essential that the proposed meeting took place without the knowledge of Ieyasu's staff or any other palace official who did not enjoy her complete and utter trust.

The lure proved irresistible.

While refreshments were served, Lady Mishiko's three children were summoned to pay their respects and receive several small presents from the domain-lord.

Mishiko - obliged to speak in code because of Secretary Shikobu's lurking presence - thanked Kiyō for his continued friendship and support, emphasised the pleasure this unexpected visit had brought her, and expressed the hope that it would not be too long before they saw each other again.

'My children,' said Mishiko, 'are so excited by the toys and gifts you have brought them, they will not sleep tonight.' Then with a slight change of emphasis she added. 'And neither shall I - for your visit has revived fond memories of happier times.'

There was no need to say more.

After spending an hour in her company, Min-Orota who had been closely shadowed by his personal guard - gathered up the remainder of his small retinue and returned to the main courtyard. As the palace grooms brought their horses out of the stables, Shikobu - who had excused himself from Min-Orota's presence as soon as the audience with Lady Mishiko had ended - reappeared with the Chief Steward of the Royal Household, Kenzo Tokugami.

Kenzo ranked immediately below the Chamberlain, but whereas Ieyasu ran the country on behalf of the Shogun, Kenzo was solely concerned with arranging the social and domestic activities of the court. It was his job to ensure everything ran smoothly. A flow chart would have shown Kenzo was responsible directly to the Shogun, but like most key appointees, he was in Ieyasu's pocket.

After exchanging the formal bows and greetings that prefaced all verbal exchanges between people of exalted rank, Kenzo Tokugami expressed his delight at being able to welcome Lord Min-Orota to the Winter Palace.

The Court was honoured by his presence, and he - as Chief Steward - was deeply distraught to discover that the noble domain-lord was not staying within the safety of the palace walls.

'Dare one express the hope,' said Kenzo, 'that my noble lord will accept the offer of an apartment befitting his station, in which he can rest and be entertained until the Shogun and the Chamberlain return.'?"

A simple 'yes' was all that was needed, continued the Steward. He, Kenzo Tokugami, would take care of every

detail, including the transfer of the noble lord's retinue from the post-house to the palace.

Kiyo Min-Orota thanked him, and answered with a simple 'no'. The accommodation at the post-house had already been paid for, and although he was sure the Chief Steward would be happy to reimburse him, it was not a question of money.

'I came here at considerable risk to myself to warn the Shogun of a serious threat that could topple the TohYota only to suffer the indignity of being rebuffed by this ink-stained dung-worm.'

Kiyo waved dismissively at Shikobu.

'I find it deeply distressing that a trusted friend of your family cannot be privy to Lord Ieyasu's movements, especially when - at this very moment- those movements might place him and the Shogun in even greater peril!' 'M-My lord,' stammered the hapless Shikobu, 'I beg you to believe it was not my decision to withhold this information from you!' 'Even I do not know where they have gone,' added Kenzo.

'That may be so,' replied Min-Orota loftily. 'For my part, I do not intend to impugn your honesty and reliability. But someone here knows.'

And I regret that they have seen fit to doubt mine!" Min-Orota mounted his horse and gathered up the reins.

'My lord!' cried Kenzo. 'Surely you do not intend to leave us!'

Without thinking, he grasped the chest harness of Min-Orota's steed. A bad move - and a grave breach of etiquette.

The atmosphere in the courtyard suddenly became charged with menace as Min-Orota's escort went for their swords and the watching soldiers took a firmer grip on lance and bow.

Min-Orota's party was hopelessly outnumbered but Kiyo was equal to the situation. 'Stand aside, sir!' he boomed. 'Or by the Gods, I'll have your arm off at the shoulder!' The Chief Steward leapt away from the horse as Min-Orota made it rear up threateningly and launched into a frenzied apology. 'Oh, my lord! My lord! A thousand pardons! It was never my intention to' Coming out of a deep bow he caught sight of Min-Orota's thunderous expression and lapsed into a cringing silence.

'Good!' said Kiyo. 'Now let me inform you of my intentions! I am going to leave this place and return to the post-house at Be-isha to review my position. You have two days in which to re-examine yours.'

If I am offered suitable redress for this double affront, I will reconsider your offer of accommodation within the palace until the Shogun returns. If not..."

He let the unspecified threat hang in the air.

For a moment, it looked as if the palace guard - who were gathered in front of the draw-bridge - might bar their exit. Min-Orota did not hesitate. He signalled his retinue to advance with a confident wave and spurred his horse forward. In the absence of the Shogun and Ieyasu, he knew the Chief Steward did not have the authority to order him to stay. Min-Orota might have taken an oath of allegiance to the

Shogun, but as one of the seventeen domain-lords of Ne-Issan he was also his social equal.

Taking his cue from Kenzo, the guard commander quickly reformed his men into two ranks on either side of the main gate, and bowed in salute as Lord Min-Orota trotted proudly onto the bridge across the moat, preceded by his two flag-bearers.

When his party reached the open road beyond the Outer Keep, Min-Orota breathed a sigh of relief. One false move in that courtyard and they could have all lost their heads.

Fortunately he had kept his, and had called Kenzo's bluff. Ieyasu's secretary had gone running to the Chief Steward in a last ditch effort to prevent him from leaving.

By polite persuasion, of course - but it was no accident that a large number of guards just happened to be blocking the only exit. They were obviously hoping that the implied threat would help change his mind.

Had Ieyasu been there, it would have worked, but he was the organ-grinder; Shikobu was just one of his monkeys, and Min-Orota knew that Kenzo, the Chief Steward, was a fat effeminate smoothie who became quite unnerved if he was shouted at.

In Ieyasu's absence, it was only natural for his staff to try and keep Min-Orota in their clutches. Now that the listening device in the palace at Sara-kusa had been destroyed, his testimony was invaluable.

But not quite beyond price. He was prepared to reveal all to Shikobu in exchange for definite confirmation that Ieyasu and the Shogun were on their way to the Summer Palace. Given the stink he'd kicked up and his parting demand for an apology, Min-Orota believed that confirmation would not be long in coming.

He was right, but it was pure guesswork. Despite the unveiling of the listening device at Sara-kusa, Min-Orota had not fully grasped the miracle of electronic communications. Ieyasu was able to leave the running of the government in the hands of his secretaries for two weeks because he was in constant radio contact with his staff- and would remain so throughout the entire journey. His grip on the reins of power had not slackened for one minute.

Ieyasu was not, of course, using any of this equipment himself and had never done so. The Shogun's carriage would hardly have been an appropriate place for conducting a conversation via any device powered by the Dark Light. A powerful transmitter concealed in the roof of the palace with an aerial built into a tall flagpole above, sent digitised messages to a compact receiver hidden in the luggage of a secretary who was travelling with him. This in turn, could be accessed electronically by a small, hand-held device similar to that used to extract messages down a phone line from pre-Holocaust answering machines.

This second device, cunningly hidden inside a heavy gold seal of office mounted on a chain around his neck, had a pulsator button incorporated into the chiselled design on its reverse side. When the seal was pressed between finger and thumb, the button responded with a series of pulses - indicating that a message was stored in the receiving unit.

Transmitted messages could be prefixed by two codes - Routine or Urgent - whose stored presence was announced by a faster pulse rate. The operator would then have to select a suitable opportunity to access the transceiver, which was fitted with a forty-character LCD and could also provide a print-out using Japanese characters on a slim ribbon of paper - a kind of mini-fax.

Because of the secrecy surrounding the use of such devices by Ieyasu's agents, the Federation had gone to considerable lengths to tailor the equipment to suit the highly sensitive operating conditions. Every item was built using state-of-the-art micro-circuitry, powered by the tiny, long-lasting batteries of which the Federation were justly proud and - above all, there were no telltale electronic beeps or flashing status lights.

AMEXICO, who had set up this deal with Ieyasu's intelligence network and had trained a nucleus of operators, was responsible for shipping the basic black boxes into Ne-Issan, but it was up to the Iron Masters to find ways to hide them. They had done so with their usual efficiency: Ieyasu had set up a special workshop to construct simple everyday objects with secret compartments in which a range of devices could be hidden - and several examples were now travelling northwards

in close proximity to the Shogun's carriage.

As a result of these arrangements, the news of Lord Min-Orota's arrival at the Winter Palace, his reason for being there, and his heated refusal to speak to anyone other than Ieyasu, soon reached the great man himself. Since he did not know the outcome of the secret meeting at Sara-kusa, he could only speculate on the reasons for Kiyō's apparent anxiety.

Ieyasu knew the listening device inside the council chamber had failed, but even if someone in the YamaShita family had stumbled across it by accident, they

would not know what it was - and nor would Min-Orota.

But something had happened to put Kiyo into this agitated state.

Something which he judged to be so sensitive, he refused to divulge it to even the most trusted and high-ranking official.

Anything that sensitive could also be dangerous. Which was why Ieyasu intended to make sure it passed through his hands first. All knowledge is power. Ieyasu, who was constantly striving to control the flow of all information to the Shogun, believed in telling Yoritomo just enough to keep him happy and feeling involved. Allow him access to all the facts and he might start taking decisions on his own again - like setting up the College of Heraldry; a problem that Ieyasu was still trying to unpick.

A second message from the Winter Palace reported Min-Orota's friendly but essentially harmless audience with Lady Mishiko, and the unfortunate circumstances surrounding his departure from the palace.

Min-Orota believed an apology was in order and Shiboku was of the opinion that revealing the Chamberlain's destination would be an acceptable gesture of good faith that would bring Min-Orota back to the palace, where some judicious flattery could loosen his tongue.

Reasoning that Kiyo Min-Orota could not jeopardise the secrecy surrounding the Shogun's journey to AronGiren if he and his entourage could be persuaded to wait inside the Winter Palace, Ieyasu despatched a message to Shikobu ordering him to reveal their destination to the tetchy domain-lord.

Shikobu, landed with the thankless task of wrapping this information in a face-saving formula, elected to postpone his visit until the following morning. A move which also allowed him to keep a private assignation with a lady of the court who had assured him of a warm welcome.

It was still light when Min-Orota arrived back at the post-house to find that his staff had prepared the best pavilion for his use: the two courtesans - Cadillac and Roz - had been placed in the second which lay nearby.

The remainder of his retinue now occupied the recently-emptied rooms attached to the post-house where, in their own modest quarters, the owner and his wife sat with the pile of gold coins between them, taking turns to fondle and count it for the umpteenth time.

The wife was thinking of the lengths of rich patterned silk cloth she would buy herself at the market in Fin; the husband was torn between re-tiling the roof and building a new bath-house, and setting up two of his juicier serving-girls in a small brothel near the same market who he could visit while his wife, as usual, spent most of the day doing the monthly shopping.

Their staff, who had had to work doubly-hard to clean out and install new bedding in all the rooms and spruce up the entire post-house from top to bottom, could only think how exhausted they were as they ran back and forth carrying hot water for baths, preparing food and generally waiting hand and foot on a bunch of northern bastards who had more money than sense.

Mounting the steps of the second pavilion, Lord Min-Orota ordered his bodyguard to wait on the verandah and went inside. The two Thai

servant-women who had been recruited to cater for the needs of the monkey-witches prostrated themselves at his feet in the hall-way.

Min-Orota dismissed them and entered the reception room, sliding the screens shut behind him.

Cadillac and Roz were dressed in the japanese clothes that the Yama-Shita had provided, but had removed the elaborate wigs and the heavy white make-up from their faces and necks.

Min-Orota found the juxtaposition of graceful silken kimonos and striped hairy faces momentarily distracting, but once the usual civilities had been exchanged he seated himself in front of this strange pair and launched into a blow-byblow account of his visit to the palace.

On hearing that Ieyasu and Yoritomo had left the palace, Cadillac cursed and translated the news into

Basic for Roz. 'That's it. I knew it was going too well."

If he was looking for sympathy he didn't get it. 'Isn't it a little early to be throwing in the towel?" she said.

'Why don't you wait until Lord Min-Orota has given us the whole story."

Cadillac swallowed hard and bowed to the Iron Master.

'I beg you accept my humble apologies, sire. Your words caused my over-hasty imagination to raise obstacles where none exist. Please continue."

'I will,' replied Min-Orota, in Basic. 'But perhaps it would be better to use a language we all understand."

'As you wish, sire,' said Cadillac, in Japanese.

'Good. But before we go any further, there's been something on my mind ever since we first met. You have the coloured skin and long hair of a Mute, but you remind me of a long-dog who was sent to my domain by the Yama-Shita to show us how to build flying-horses. We discussed the project on several occasions. He seemed to be an honest fellow, but I regret to say he betrayed me?

Having noticed the studied way Min-Orota looked at him during their recent encounters, Cadillac had been wondering when this would come up.

And he believed he could turn it to his advantage. 'You are wrong, sire.

He did not betray you. It was the Toh-Yota and the Federation who destroyed the Heron Pool. The Shogun and the Herald Hase-Gawa planned it all, and it was Ieyasu's agents working hand-in-glove with the long-dogs who helped the murderers escape."

Min-Orota sat there, his mouth open, stunned by Cadillac's response.

'You... are Brickman?"

'No, sire. I am Cadillac Deville of the Clan m'call, from the bloodline of the She-Kargo. But we have met."

Min-Orota slapped his thighs angrily. 'I knew it! By the Gods! It was you who built the flying-horses!" 'Yes, my lord. But you must believe me when I tell you I had no part in their destruction or the murderous events that followed. That was the work of the Federation and the TohYota."

'But you fled with them..."

'I had no choice. If I had stayed, would you have spared me?"

Min-Orota, recalling the slaughter of everyone connected with the Heron Pool who had survived the debacle, said grimly: 'I spared no one. But I still do not understand. You had the clear skin of a long-dog then."

Cadillac - who was aware of the speed with which Iron Masters could draw and strike with their swords hoped Roz was ready to quell any violent move by Min-Orota.

The domain-lord was trembling with anger. In the circumstances it was justifiable. He had been deceived then and thought he was being deceived now. The trick Cadillac had to perform was to deflect that anger onto the Shogun.

He squared his shoulders and looked Min-Orota fearlessly.

'Have you forgotten what you witnessed at Sarakusa?

We have the power to make you see us in any shape or colour we desire."

He reached out sideways and grasped Roz's wrist. 'Or become invisible like the kami of the forests!" Roz seized control of Min-Orota's mind.

The domain-lord gasped as the two monkey-witches disappeared from the room, and then the room itself melted away. He found himself sitting on the grass in a leafy glade in the middle of an immense forest pierced by the slanting rays of the sun. He could smell the pine-perfumed air, hear the rustle of leaves, feel the grass between his fingers.

Cadillac and Rain-Dancer materialised- seated in front of him. As they bowed, the surrounding forest faded away, the grass beneath him vanished - and they were back in the room with everything as it was.

Min-Orota was still trembling, but not with anger. He took a minute or so to compose himself then bowed his head. 'I acknowledge your power, I admire your truthfulness and. am left breathless by your audacity."

Cadillac bowed in return. 'My lord, the Plainfolk have always sought a just friendship with the Iron Masters

even though you have only treated us as slaves. We too feel betrayed! But because our code of honour is the equal of yours, I have returned to offer you restitution.

The real murderers of Lord YamaShita and the others who died at the Heron Pool are still unpunished! We are here to help you wreak vengeance on the Toh-Yota for the crimes they have committed against this nation! Are we to go forward together?"

'We are,' said Min-Orota. He drew the sheathed long-sword from his sash and held it up in both hands. 'I pledge my word and sword on that.' He kissed the scabbard reverently then laid the sword on the mat in front of his knees.

'And we pledge our power to your righteous cause,' said Roz, pleased to be able to get a word in edgeways at last. 'Speak to us of the Lady Mishiko.'

Kiyo Min-Orota told them about the secret message that had been delivered prior to meeting her face to face, and what had passed between them. He did not know how or when she would arrive, but after her remark about being unable to sleep, he was sure she would turn up at some time during the night. His men had been alerted to expect a visit from a high-born lady who might for reasons of discretion appear to be something else entirely.

Cadillac mulled this over, then congratulated Min-Orota warmly. From past experience he knew that with this guy, flattery never failed. 'If we can prime Lady Mishiko, this secret journey by the Shogun and Ieyasu could actually work to our advantage. But we will have to move fast.'

'My thoughts exactly,' replied MinoOrota. 'If she comes here tonight, as I believe she will, you will only be a day behind the Shogun. You will have plenty of time to get there and make your preparations.'

Cadillac frowned. 'I don't quite follow you. Get where?'

'To the Summer Palace, on AronGiren.'

Min-Orota uncapped a slim footlong black laquered tube he had laid down beside him on entering, and produced a rolled silk map of Ne-Issan. He spread it out on the polished wood floor and pointed out the relevant locations.

'We are here, just north of the Winter Palace. That is Aron-Giren, and the Summer Palace is there, at Yedo.'

The Chamberlain and the Shogun are travelling by road.

It will take them another four days to reach the Summer Palace. If you and Lady Mishiko leave by junk tomorrow from here, Oshana-sita, you can get there in twenty-four hours - a full day before they do.

'With the palace almost empty you will have the time and the opportunity to prepare the ground - as you explained to us at Sara-kusa. It would have been a hundred times more difficult here.'

Cadillac sought Roz's reaction and saw the answer in her eyes. 'You are right, my lord. And if we travel with the Lady Mishiko we will have longer to... influence her.'

This hadn't occurred to Min-Orota but he wasn't going to let himself be upstaged if he could help it. 'My thoughts exactly.'

Cadillac bowed. 'We are fortunate to find ourselves allied to someone so wise and far-seeing. May the Heavens bless and preserve you.'

Smug bastard

Min-Orota allowed himself a brief smile of satisfaction.

'Only one question remains. How is the interview with the Lady Mishiko to be conducted?'

Cadillac who, in concert with Roz, had thought about little else over the last twelve days, proceeded to tell him.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Having seen her children safely tucked up in their beds, Lady Mishiko donned the clothes of a Korean kitchenmaid, wrapped one of her own outfits in an empty rice sack, and slipped out of the Winter Palace on the back of an ox-cart, wedged between two trusted female servants and five of her guards.

As far as the sentries on the gates were concerned, they were just another off-duty group of workers heading for the crowded inn down the road for a jolly night out, but once they were swallowed up in the darkness, the driver turned right instead of left, and urged his plodding beasts towards the post-house at Be-isha.

It took just under an hour to cover the three miles.

Even though it was pitch dark it might have been quicker on foot, but it would have been unthinkable for someone like Lady Mishiko to walk along an open highway. Women of noble birth might take a stroll in the privacy of the palace gardens, but on any public outings they were always transported on the shoulders of lesser mortals.

Hearing the ox-cart trundle into the courtyard, the inn-keeper despatched his wife Shoshi to turn away the new arrivals. Opening the door that led onto the front verandah, she found the way barred by two of Lord Min-Orota's men. One of them told her to go back inside. The cart, he explained, belonged to their baggage train, and had been delayed by a broken wheel. There was no need to rouse her servants.

He and his companions would find somewhere for the late-corners to sleep. If anything else was required it could be attended to in the morning.

Faced by two armed samurai, Shoshi bowed obediently and beat a quick retreat, but her curiosity was aroused.

All inn-keepers were required by law to keep a register of all their guests. There were people who, for a variety of reasons, used forged identity papers and travel permits, and it paid - sometimes handsomely - to keep one's eyes and ears open. It was also a good form of life insurance.

Like most buildings in Ne-Issan, the post-house inn was bolted and barred at nightfall, and its windows shuttered, but there were still cracks and crevices through which one could peer out. Shoshi did so now. Spying on people was one of her favourite occupations and it had proved to be an efficient way of keeping her staff on their toes.

Several more of the domain-lord's men were positioned round the cart.

Another pair, holding lanterns, helped Inazo, the gate-keeper, close and bar the high double gates hung beneath the roofed archway that linked the courtyard with the road beyond.

As the stocky figure of Inazo hurried back to the little house built against the inside wall, Shoshi caught sight of two more lantern bearers escorting the northern domain-lord towards the ox-cart.

Including the driver, there were eight people on the cart, but no baggage. If a wheel had broken, any baggage would have been distributed among the other wagons - but why did it need eight people to watch a wheel being mended?

All of them were off the cart by the time the domain-lord reached it, and they all bowed. But one - a woman - did not bow as deeply as the others and ... the domain-lord bowed to her! Why was a person of high rank dressed in the drab outer garments of a servant-girl, and what was she doing here?

The mystery eclipsed all thoughts of the rich silk cloth that Shoshi had been planning to buy at Fin. Running to another peephole, she caught a glimpse of the lanterns lighting up the pathway to the pavilions, then drew back nervously as several-pairs of feet tramped along the side verandah towards the rented accommodation at the rear of the inn.

Returning to the front of the inn, she peeked through the crack between the window shutters. The oxen were

still harnessed to the cart, but they had been given nosebags.

Blankets now covered their steaming backs. The fact they were still in harness was a sign that the owner of the cart intended to use it again.

Soon. It was not part of the baggage-train. Shoshi would have dearly loved to go and wake Inazo the gate-keeper to discover what he had seen and heard, but one of Min-Orota's men was still patrolling the yard, and she could just see the silhouette of a second stationed on the verandah.

With a sigh of frustration, she gave up. Her husband, having placed the bag of gold coins under the floorboards, was already in bed.

Shoshi joined him, shook his shoulder until she had gained his reluctant attention and related what she had seen. Her story failed to rouse his interest.

'If whoever she is, is here for what you think she's here for, you can find out all about it in the morning.'

'Yes, but - ' 'Goodnight,' he said firmly. And for once, to his amazement, she lapsed into silence. Normally, she never stopped.

During the day, he got some respite because her attention was directed towards their domestic staff, but in bed she had him cornered - and that was when she usually got her way. He was glad to say 'yes' to almost anything just to get some peace and quiet.

From past experience, the inn-keeper knew the heavy silence meant she was staring at the ceiling, and that in due course he would pay for his temerity. It didn't matter, his unexpected good fortune had given him a new boldness and more interesting things to think about.

He closed his eyes and picked up the thread of the agreeable fantasy he had been weaving. The idea of setting up a house of pleasure had been abandoned in favour of a more practical but equally appealing scenario.

He would re-tile the roof and build a new bathhouse in which, given a bit of luck, he could tumble his two favourite serving-girls, while one of the gardeners took his place on the cart and drove his chattering jackdaw of a wife on the monthly trip to the market in Fin.

When Lady Mishiko had changed back into her own clothes, Lord Min-Orota obtained her permission to dismiss her servants. As they and her guards were led away to wait at the inn, Kiyō invited her to be seated, and took his place on the mat facing her.

After the usual exchange of courtesies he said: 'Mi'lady, you honour me with your presence. It is a gesture of the trust and friendship that exists between us and which, for my part, I have always treasured. In these dark days, trust is a rare and precious commodity.'

But let us delay no further. I promised you news of the Herald, Toshiro Hase-Gawa, and you shall have it. But not from my lips.'

He saw the look of puzzlement and explained: 'Just as the Fates drew your life and mine together through the appointment of your late husband as Consul-General to my domain, my path here was crossed by two

strange individuals who told me they had a message for you...

from beyond the veil."

Lady Mishiko caught her breath. "... beyond the veil?"

'Yes. They are spirit-witches. I do not know what they have to tell you, or how they knew that my steps were directed towards the Winter Palace, but they are here at the behest of the Herald."

Mishiko clasped her hands together over her heart.

'Mi'lord, if this is true, no words could express my happiness, but can they be trusted? I could not lightly forgive any charlatan who played so cruel a trick on me."

Min-Orota answered with a polite bow. 'Nor would I, mi'lady. Set your mind at rest. I can vouch for the wondrous power of their magic, but as to what or who they are I cannot say, for they can change their shape and the nature of the world around us in the twinkling of an eye!" The existence of spirit-witches had never been properly established, but the widespread belief in their supernatural powers was older than Ne-Issan itself. Tales of magic and witchcraft were rooted in the primeval mists that shrouded the birth of The World Before.

Spirit-witches were able to communicate with and conjure up the souls of the dead. They dwelt in the depths of the forests which still covered huge areas of Ne-Issan, and they were popularly believed to be grey-faced shadowy figures dressed in a mixture of leaves and rags remnants of clothes stripped from the rotting corpses of the unburied dead. And it was said they were hunch-backed, long-haired crones, with shrivelled claw-like hands, and green red-rimmed eyes that stared out of hideous faces covered with warts.

Mishiko gathered up her courage. 'Are they. are they dreadful to look upon?'

Min-Orota threw up his hands. 'You will see whatever they wish you to see, mi'lady! I can only say they have never shown themselves to me as the ghostly grey-faced creatures that are said to disturb the sleep of travellers in the forest when the moon is full. In my opinion, if those wraiths were ever caught by the light of day, they would turn out to be ronin - common cutthroats with artfully-applied hollow eyes and bodies dusted with chalk!

'Be assured. Our visitors know you to be a cultured and sensitive person who still mourns the passing of a loved-one. They are here to guide you, not to frighten you and, above all, they come at the bidding of the Herald.'

Mishiko composed herself. 'I understand, mi'lord. I am ready. Take me to them.'

They stood up together. Min-Orota said: 'They are in the next room, but before we enter, allow me to offer one last word of reassurance. I cannot remain with you for what you are to see is for your eyes alone.'

If at any time you find yourself transported by their powers to another place, do not fear for your safety. I shall be here, on this side of the screen, just a few paces away from you at all times. You have but to call and I will come immediately to your aid.'

Mishiko accepted this with a regal nod. Kiyo Min-Orota slid the framed wall-panel aside and ushered her into the darkened room beyond.

Mishiko allowed herself to be guided to a mat edged with silk ribbon, and sank gracefully into the straight-backed kneeling position that all noblewomen were required to adopt - sometimes for hours - during formal court ceremonies; heels splayed wide under the buttocks, hands laid midway along the top of the thighs, with fingers and thumb closed.

Min-Orota bowed then withdrew, sliding the wall panel shut behind him.

On the floor in front of Mishiko were two hooded lanterns which threw light onto her, but left the other half of the room in deep shadow.

Between the lanterns was a charcoal brazier. This was also half-covered. Behind it were two seated figures, one notably taller than the others. The spirit-witches

The arrangement of the lights and the glow from the brazier made it impossible to make out their features.

Their heads and bodies were reduced to black silhouettes that were only just visible against the darkness beyond.

Roz studied Mishiko intently as Cadillac addressed her in a throaty whisper. 'Please accept our humble greetings your highness. We have been directed towards you by the restless spirit of the Herald, Toshiro HaseGawa.

Betrayed by his master, deprived of his life before your love for each other was fully consummated, he cannot leave the Valley of Death for the Heavenly Plains beyond until he has made his peace with you. Will you speak to him?"

'Yes, I will,' replied Mishiko in a barely audible whisper.

'Then open your heart and mind to receive him, for his spirit draws nigh ' Roz, who had been gently delving into Mishiko's memory for the images she needed, took control of her mind.

Cadillac, sitting next to Roz, prepared himself to share the same hallucinatory experience, but he was no longer totally imprisoned within it as he had been during their first double act at Sioux Falls.

Although

he was not linked to her telepathically the way Steve was, he possessed formidable mental powers of his own and he had succeeded in tuning his mind onto the same wavelength as hers.

This enabled him to 'see' the images that Roz was feeding into the minds of their adversaries without being trapped, as they were, in the 'reality' of the experience.

So when Lady Mishiko recoiled as a cloud of pale grey smoke spilled out of the charcoal brazier and began to weave itself into a vaguely human form, Cadillac saw the smoke and the emerging figure as a semitransparent image superimposed on the room as it really was.

Lady Mishiko stared at the forms emerging from the shifting layers of smoke that continued to rise from the glowing brazier. It carried the scent of burning autumn leaves, but it was not the kind of smoke that stung the eyes or made you cough. It was not smoke at all. This was the Veil; the mysterious curtain that separated the world of the living from the world inhabited by the souls of the dead - and her beloved Herald was being drawn back through it by the power of her love and the magic of the spirit-witches.

An unseen external power drew her to her feet as the darkened room and the black shapes of the two witches faded away.

The scents of autumn, the rustle of golden leaves underfoot were an integral part of her first encounter with the Herald. Their lives had converged on a sunlit October afternoon, while she was walking through the woods that formed part of her husband's official estate.

Toshiro, resplendent in his black and crimson armour, with the house-flags of the Toh-Yota and HaseGawa fluttering from their back-staffs, had been on his way to present his seals of office to the Consul-General.

For Mishiko, accompanied by two maid-servants, it was love at first sight. A white knight on a black charger.

She had never seen someone so handsome, so ...

beautiful. As her path through the wood ran parallel with the road, she watched him spellbound, caught her foot under an exposed root and fell, twisting her ankle painfully.

Toshiro, hearing her cry, had dismounted and run to her aid. By the time he reached her side, her maidservants had restored her to an upright position. Toshiro was the very model of solicitude- and even better-looking close-up than he was from afar. A greater contrast to her bloated toad of a husband would have been hard to imagine.

There was the usual exchange of courtesies, and it was that which sealed their fate. Once Mishiko discovered that the young man who had rushed to her aid had an impeccable social pedigree, her ankle took a sudden turn for the worse. Toshiro - as she hoped - would brook no argument. He insisted on carrying her to his horse and placed her sideways on the saddle. Mishiko, on being lifted up in his strong arms, had almost fainted with pleasure, and from that moment on, she could think of nothing else but the moment when those same strong arms, stripped of their armour, would enfold her naked body.

The grey forms emerging from the swirling smoke coalesced into lifelike shapes and were suffused with natural colour. And there he was, magically and gloriously restored as in that first unforgettable

moment, seated on his horse, with the sun raying through the forest behind him, flaring brightly off the polished brass helmet crest that marked him out as a trusted servant of her brother, the Shogun.

His face was shadowed against the autumn sun, but her heart leapt as he dismounted, reached her in one stride and gathered her into his arms.

She embraced him eagerly, moulding her body against his, and as she did so, his armour seemed to melt away, becoming a soft silken kimono through which she could feel the muscled hardness of his stomach and thighs. She clasped his face in her hands and covered it with kisses.

It was only then, as he drew away, that she saw - and was shocked by his haggard expression, the

deathly greyness around the staring,
red-rimmed eyes.

Her beloved Herald had not been brought back to life.

She could feel his presence, hear his voice, but the physical contact was a bitter-sweet illusion wrought by the power of witches' magic.

Toshiro was, and would remain, a spirit entity, but there was more.

Despite the love which still bound them together, this was a soul in torment - a torment which only she had the power to ease.

Using the images stored in Mishiko's brain, Roz produced a series of vignettes featuring Ieyasu, the secretary Shikobu and the Shogun - her brother Yoritomo.

The vignettes were moving, three-dimensional recreations of the recent past that Mishiko was able to walk into and observe at close quarters without being seen by the characters within.

Roz was working to a script mapped out by Cadillac.

It was his voice Mishiko heard throughout. He could not use his powers of mimicry because he had never heard Ieyasu, the Shogun or Shikobu speak, but in this instance it did not matter. All Roz's powers were concentrated on a single mind and this enabled her to convince Mishiko that when she saw her brother speak, it was his voice she was hearing.

The sunlit woods dissolved into a shifting abstract pattern of rainbow colours then became a room that Mishiko recognised as being part of Ieyasu's quarters in the Winter Palace. The Herald took her hand and led her into it.

Ieyasu sat crosslegged on the floor with a strange black box in front of him. Shikobu, one of his senior secretaries, was seated at a low writing table, with paper, brushes and ink blocks ready to hand.

Mishiko circled slowly round the much-feared figure of the Chamberlain and was relieved to discover he was totally oblivious to her presence.

Both she and the Herald were invisible.

Ieyasu reached out a thin bony hand and twiddled various knobs and small levers. Little red and green studs spaced along the top of the box gleamed like jewels. Moving closer, she caught sight of several small white calligraphic symbols; the Japanese characters for 'send', 'receive', 'volume', 'frequency' and 'record'. But this box had not been fashioned by Iron Masters; this was the work of outlanders, those skilled in the High Craft.

Mishiko jumped back in alarm and sought reassurance from the Herald as the sound of a human voice burst from the box. Shikobu listened closely as Ieyasu touched two or three of the knobs. The disembodied voice became softer and clearer. Mastering her amazement at the fact that a box could be made to speak, Mishiko tried to grasp what it was saying.

-The Herald squeezed her arm and whispered: 'The voice comes from afar.'

It is carried on the air like a leaf in the wind, but it is propelled by the power of the Dark Light!" Mishiko took another step backwards.

She knew nothing whatever about this dread subject and didn't want to.

Even the mere mention of it was bad news. 'It cannot be!

Such things are forbidden!" 'To you and I, and the other loyal subjects of your 'brother, yes, they are! But Ieyasu has placed himself above the law! He uses this demonic power to betray us and gain more power for himself! Listen!" Mishiko turned her attention back to the voice coming from the box and caught her breath.

'... as you know, mi'lord, the Herald Hase-Gawa has long suspected that we have been armed with speaking and listening devices filled with the Dark Light to maintain control over the nation's affairs. At the moment, he has no tangible proof to offer the Shogun, but he is a dangerous adversary. He should be eliminated before he is in a position to harm our organisation."

Ieyasu responded with a thin smile. 'Do not worry, Tohijo. We have already laid plans to discredit him and destroy the Shogun's faith in the entire College of Herald's. Yoritomo will soon come back under our wing when he reads the letter Hase-Gawa will post- and which One of my agents will intercept."

'Which letter is this?' asked the far-away voice.

'The letter Shikobu is about to write! Besides having a gift for fairy tales, he is also an accomplished forger!' Ieyasu gave a gloating laugh and signalled his secretary to apply brush to paper.

Mishiko gasped in horror and once again turned to the Herald for support. 'Is this the letter which caused my brother to demand your life?!' 'Yes,' sighed Toshiro.

The room dissolved around them and became the room the Shogun used for confidential meetings at the Summer Palace. Yoritomo sat on the raised section of the floor with his personal bodyguard of five samurai ranged in a semi-circle behind him. The Herald left Mishiko's side and knelt down immediately below the dais. He put his nose to the spotless straw matting then sat back attentively and waited for the Shogun to speak, 'Have the' long-dogs agreed to help us destroy the Heron Pool?"

'Yes, my lord. The Federation has delivered the necessary devices and everything is in place. A massive, blow will be struck against those who have conspired to bring down your noble house."

'And will this blow rid me of Lord Yama-Shita and that swine Kiyō Min-Orota?"

'They cannot be targeted personally, sire, but the viewing stand in which they will be seated during the flying display will be destroyed."

'Good. I wish you to perform an additional task."

Toshiro bowed. 'I am yours to command, sire."

'The Consul-General Nakane Toh-Shiba. I can no longer tolerate his dissolute behaviour. He defiles my sister and dishonours my house. I cannot bear to think of her in his bed. The marriage must end."

'Yes, sire."

'For reasons which are obvious, I shall decline Min-Orota's invitation to attend the ceremony at the Heron Pool. The Consul-General will represent me, and as a gesture of my faith in this project, I will order him to take to the air in one of the flying-horses. You will deliver the letter personally."

'Yes, sire."

'I want him taken aloft. When the flying-horse has attained the greatest possible height, he is to fall from the sky. His body is to be split and broken like that of a stray mongrel crushed under the wheel of a passing cart.

I leave it to you to make the necessary arrangements."

'It will be a pleasure, sire."

'And when it is done, you will escort Lady Mishiko and her children to Aron-Giren." Yoritomo waved his hand to signal the audience was at an end. The Herald took leave of the Shogun and rejoined Mishiko who once again had not been seen by the other participants, even though she had been sitting on the edge of the dais just a few feet from her brother.

The outlines of the room broke up into shifting planes of colour. When they reformed, Mishiko found she was still in the Summer Palace but now she was with the Herald in the pebble garden - Yoritomo's favourite retreat.

Her brother sat on the raised wooden floor of the open-sided summer-house. The body-guards who shadowed him day and night were in their usual places behind him. Hearing footsteps, Mishiko looked to her right and saw Kamakura, an officer in the palace guard, lead her most trusted maid-servant towards the summerhouse.

She was carrying a letter- the letter Mishiko had written, asking Yoritomo's permission to marry the Herald.

Prostrating themselves, the maid and Kamakura handed over the letter then withdrew. Mishiko gripped Toshiro's arm tightly as she watched Yoritomo read its contents then crumple it angrily between his hands.

And although he said nothing, his unspoken thoughts blazed an angry path through her brain.

You bitch! You treacherous bitch! I did not free you from that pig of a husband to marry someone else! You belong to me! Vile, faithless slut! How could you allow the Herald to come between us?!

Mishiko pulled the Herald round to face her. 'Oh, my beloved! It was I who killed you! If I had not sent that letter you would still be alive!' 'No! Do not blame yourself! He had an even baser reason for ordering my death!' The Herald flung out his arm. 'See for yourself how they both conspired to betray me!' Mishiko followed his accusing finger with her eyes and found herself back in Ieyasu's study. The Chamberlain and her brother sat facing each other across a low table.

Shikobu placed a sheaf of documents on the table then bowed his way backwards out of the room.

Ieyasu perused the documents, nodding with satisfaction as he did so.

'I congratulate you, sire. Your plan to destroy the Heron Pool has succeeded better than we could have hoped. Lord Yama-Shita is dead, those around him have paid with their lives, leaving his family in disarray, Lord Min-Orota has returned to the fold and we have brought the allegiance of the Ko-Nikka and Se-Iko at the Yama-Shita's expense!'

He glanced through some more reports. 'And the blame for all this has fallen on the treacherous long-dogs and grass-monkeys that Lord Yama-Shita was unwise enough to employ!' 'Have they left the country?'

asked Yoritomo.

'Yes, sire. Their safe passage has been arranged. It was one of the guarantees I had to give our friends in the Federation in exchange for their assistance.'

'So... with their departure, the trail runs dead. Our enemies cannot link me to the destruction of the Heron Pool and the deaths of those who had the misfortune to find themselves trapped there.'

'Not through the long-dogs, sire,' said Ieyasu. 'But there remains one person who conveyed your orders to them - and who arranged the death of the Consul-General.'

Yoritomo drew back. 'The Herald Hase-Gawa? You cannot mean to suggest... No! That would be monstrous!

I may have guided his hand but he was the true architect of our success. A loyal servant who obeyed my instructions to the letter.'

'But one who also acted upon a few initiatives of his own ' Yoritomo frowned. 'Would you care to amplify that remark?'

'Do you intend to allow the Lady Mishiko to marry the Herald - as she has requested?'

Yoritomo appeared to stonewall. 'How do you know she has made such a request?'

Ieyasu met this with another thin smile. 'There is little that escapes my attention, sire - especially when it concerns someone so... close to the throne.'

The Shogun bridled at this veiled reference to his incestuous relationship with his younger sister. 'In my opinion, it is far too soon for her to think of marrying someone else,' he snapped.

'I agree, sire- but I doubt if she will. And I believe your refusal to

countenance such a match will come as a deep disappointment to the Herald Hase-Gawa. Especially in view of the valuable services he has just rendered. In my experience, the disappointment that arises from the failure to receive what is viewed as a just and proper reward often leads to disaffection.

'Could such a man be trusted? A man privy to secrets which must never be spoken of beyond these four walls?

A man crossed in love, who felt himself betrayed by one he has served so loyally? If he were to reveal to the Yama-Shita and the Min-Orota the part you played in the destruction of the Heron Pool, it could do great damage to 'our cause. And what would happen to our alliance with the house of Toh-Shiba if they learned you had initiated the murder of one of their favourite sons?"

Yoritomo's nostrils flared. 'Is there anything you do not know?"

Ieyasu spread his hands in a placatory gesture. 'Sire, your secrets are safe with me. I have but one concern to keep this country under the rule of the Toh-Yota. I have no wish to see you toppled from the throne by an

embittered young man. As long as the Herald remains alive, he will retain a hold on your sister's affections. If you deny them permission to marry and she comes back to court, you would have to be on your guard. Day and night."

Yoritomo mused on this for a while. When he spoke there was a bitter edge to his voice. 'I would, in truth, be glad to get rid of him. But I cannot condemn him for following orders. My heralds are men of honour who serve me loyally because we share a sacred trust. If it became known that Toshiro was killed for the sake of political expediency, that relationship would be totally undermined!' 'Of course,' said Ieyasu soothingly. 'And to punish him for bringing aid and comfort to your sister would be equally reprehensible.'

'Exactly! And she would never forgive me. No . . . ' Yoritomo opened and closed the clawed fingers of his right hand as he searched for a solution, 'I need a more acceptable pretext. Something stronger, that takes this right away from me and any personal animosity I might be expected to harbour. Some evidence of wrongdoing that would persuade everyone - including Mishiko - that his punishment was just and well-deserved.'

'Hmmm.' Ieyasu searched among the papers on the table and produced a letter. It had been opened, but still bore the undamaged seal of the Herald HaseGawa.

'By a stroke of good fortune, this document fell into the hands of one of my agents. I have a feeling it may be just what you're looking for - proof that he is a base and treacherous knave.'

Yoritomo took the letter and read it. When he looked up, his face reflected a troubled mixture of uncertainty, relief and guilt.

'Hase-Gawa wrote this?

'Why not ask him?'

'I will.' Yoritomo bowed to his grand-uncle. 'It seems I shall be forever in your debt.'

Ieyasu responded with a deeper bow. 'Your happiness and well-being is reward enough, sire.'

The room faded. Mishiko and the Herald were transported back to the sunlit woods where his horse now grazed peacefully by the side of the road.

Greatly distressed by what she had seen and heard, Mishiko seized the Herald by the arms. 'Why did you not defend yourself when my brother showed you this letter?'

'Why did you not tell him you stood falsely accused?!' 'Because I knew him too well!' cried Toshiro. 'He spoke of witnesses who could testify that I posted the letter. I could tell he knew it was a forgery, but in his mind he had already condemned me - as you have just seen. I could not defend myself!' 'Why?!' 'Because I had sworn a sacred oath to serve him until my dying breath. If he had not demanded my life, I would still have had to kill myself. To have lived on in the face of such treachery would have dishonoured me and destroyed any hope I might have had of marrying you.'

As the sister of the Shogun, Mishiko could understand the Herald's predicament. For any Iron Master worth his salt, loss of face was a

deadly serious business that brought many promising lives to an abrupt end.

Gin- duty, obligation to one's superiors, took precedence over everything else And there were occasions, when a master's conduct was viewed as particularly unworthy, that a samurai would commit seppuku ritual suicide- rather than remain in his service. Someone from the Federation, or the Plainfolk, might view this as a somewhat radical form of protest but it was perfectly comprehensible to someone who embraced bushido, the rigid belief-system which underpinned Iron Master society.

In this system, run]o, human feelings took second place. But feelings were what Mishiko had in abundance; feelings which had been bottled up too long - first out of fear of her brother, then out of a sense of duty towards the husband that had been forced on her by Ieyasu.

Feelings which had been crushed and imprisoned by grief; and which now had been released. An unstoppable

flood-tide of emotion that threatened to sweep all reason aside.

Mishiko reached up and caressed the Herald's haunted face. 'Had it not been for you, my life would have ended long ago. I cannot bear to be parted from you! And I cannot rest until I have freed you from this torment. Tell me what I must do!' Toshiro took hold of her hands and gripped them tightly. 'We need not be parted. I am condemned to this hellish haft-life because my soul cries out for vengeance!

Justice demands it! If your love for me is stronger than your fear of death, break free of the bonds that tie you to earth by killing those who betrayed me!" 'My brother... ?"

'Yes! And Ieyasu too!" 'But how can I... ?"

The Herald tightened his grip on her hands. 'The two spirit-witches who brought me through the Veil have the power to help you achieve anything your heart desires!

Taking the lives of the Chamberlain and your cruel and faithless brother will free me from this twilight world!

I shall be as you remember me, and you will taste the joys that life denied you. Strike these mortal blows and join me! One short step through the Veil, and we shall be together - never ageing, ever loving, for all eternity!" Mishiko knew that if she should succeed in doing what he asked, her death would be just the beginning. Killing her brother would lead to the death of her children and all her servants, and any acquaintances who might be thought to be implicated. When someone as highly placed as the Shogun and Ieyasu were assassinated, innocence took second place to the need for vengeance, and to discourage anyone else with similar ideas.

But in Ne-Issan, that was par for the course. Mishiko did not hesitate. 'I will do what you ask of me."

The Herald gathered her into his arms and for one moment, as they kissed, his haggard face was transformed.

The deathly grey pallor faded from his cheeks, his eyes were clear and sparkling, his whole body pulsed with youthful vigour. The ardour of his embrace left her breathless and tingling from head to toe.

He stepped back, loosened his grip on her outstretched hands and said: 'Do it soon. Each day without you is like living a hundred years in hell."

'Wait!" cried Mishiko. As she went to run after him, her foot caught in the hem of her robe. She fell to her knees. In a few swift strides the Herald reached his horse. Swinging into the saddle, he wheeled round, his right hand raised in farewell. The horse reared against the sun, its rays burning out the edges of its body and that of its rider.

Then the light swallowed them both, and as they vanished so did the the woodland glade.

Mishiko found herself back in the pavilion, kneeling on the mat in front of the charcoal brazier, with her arms stretched out imploringly.

She gave a despairing cry. The wall panel slid open and an instant

later, Lord Min-Orota was at her side.

'What is it, mi'lady?'

'Nothing. I... Do not worry, I have not been harmed.'

She used his arms as a support as she rose unsteadily to her feet. 'I cannot thank you enough. What I have seen and heard is beyond belief!

Such a journey! To so many places! Have you waited long?'

Min-Orota waved the question aside. 'It was but a matter of moments.'

'Then their magic is even more powerful than I thought.

For not only did they allow me to recapture the happiness we once shared, they have restored my hopes and given me a new sense of purpose.' The light in Mishiko's eyes faded. Her face became an expressionless mask. 'Where is my brother, Yoritomo?'

Min-Orota answered with a bow. 'I believe the Shogun and the Lord Chamberlain are making a secret journey to the Summer Palace.'

'I must go there. Immediately. Can you help me?'

'Yes, mi'lady.' Min-Orota smiled inwardly. The monkey-witches had done their work well. 'I will arrange

for a vessel to take us from
Oshana-sita to AronGiren.

If we leave at first light, you can be in the Summer Palace before they
arrive - a move which may be to your advantage."

'Can the spirit-witches accompany me?"

'They are prepared to follow you anywhere, mi'lady.

And I am sure that if you wish to speak again with the Herald, they
will be only too happy to oblige you. Their powers are yours to
command."

Mishiko cast a nervous glance at the two seated silhouettes. 'But how
will they ... ? What form will they assume?"

Roz took control of Mishiko's and the domain-lord's mind as Cadillac
stood up and stepped into the light.

To Min-Orota, he was no longer the tall striped grass-monkey dressed in
the robes of a courtesan, but a samurai dressed in black, with a white
headband bearing the house symbol of the TohYota.

'Whatever form is appropriate, your highness." Cadillac bowed to Lady
Mishiko. When he straightened up, she found herself looking at a
mirror-image of herself, who also bowed - and became Lord Min-Orota!

Kiyo stepped back in surprise and stared at his illusory twin. Mishiko
clapped her hands in delight. 'Does this not fill you with wonder?"

'Indeed it does,' said Min-Orota. Wonder and alarm.

The one thing Min-Orota hadn't bargained for was having a magical
version of himself turn up at the scene of the crime.

Cadillac stepped back into the darkness, then emerged a few moments
later, with Roz, their faces now concealed behind chalk-white masks and
their hands covered with the long white gloves that courtesans wore
whenever they appeared in public. Dropping down on one knee, they
bowed to Mishiko.

'Rise,' she said. 'It is I who should defer to you, for I am in awe of
your magic. The courtesies afforded me because of my exalted position
in this life mean nothing to me now. From this hour onwards, I exist
only to carry out the wishes of my beloved Herald and I count upon you
to guide me to him."

'In that case, we should board ship as soon as we can, your Highness.

How far are we from Oshana-sita?"

It wasn't a question Lady Mishiko could answer. When you were carried
everywhere, the distance from A to B was someone else's problem.

'About ten miles,' said Min-Orota. 'There is some urgent business to
attend to before we depart, but we should be able to reach the coast
before dawn."

'No, mi'lord. I cannot go directly from here. I must first return to
the palace - and the sooner the better."

Min-Orota was visibly taken aback. 'Mi'lady! With all due respect,
that is most ill-advised!" Cadillac weighed into the argument: 'You

have seen how the Chamberlain has armed himself with the Dark Light.

The black boxes convey the reports from his servants and his orders to them as swiftly as the sound from my lips reaches your ear. It is entirely possible that he already knows of Lord Min-Orota's visit to the Winter Palace and his audience with you. If you return, you might discover that he has ordered his men to keep you confined to your quarters."

'He might, but he won't. He has no grounds for suspecting me."

'But why take a needless risk?" insisted Min-Orota.

Mighiko looked more determined than ever. 'Mi'lord.

You are a dear friend and I thank you for your concern, but I cannot leave without my children, their nurse and my personal servants. And I certainly do not intend to embark on such a journey with only the clothes you see me wearing now!" 'Of course?' said Min-Orota. 'I understand perfectly.

But once the Steward of the Court sees you preparing to leave with your retinue -' Mighiko cut him short with an imperious gesture. 'Kenzo will not see me leave! I am the favoured sister of the Shogun - and as such, I am privy to the secret paths by which one may leave the Winter Palace in times of danger?

Min-Orota accepted this mild put-down with a polite bow. 'Then you must tell us when and where we are to meet.'

The distances one had to travel along various escape routes was something that high-born Iron Masters did know about. 'A mile due east of the Winter Palace, a track runs southwards off the road to Oshana-sita. The track crosses a stream by a wooden footbridge.

'Just past the bridge as you continue south is a wayside shrine. In the trees, immediately behind it, is a summerhouse - barred, shuttered and partly overgrown. It is joined to the palace by a tunnel. Wait for me by the roadside. I will be there one hour after sunrise. Two at the most.'

'How many will there be in your party?' asked Cadillac.

Mishiko did a rapid mental calculation. 'Twenty, not including myself.' She turned to Min-Orota. 'Can you provide transport?'

'Of course. But do you really need to bring so many?'

Her voice became frosty. 'My lord, I am normally accompanied by twice that number! I am assuming you will provide portage. It is impossible for me to travel with less. If I was seen to arrive in reduced circumstances, eyebrows would be raised. If our two friends are to accompany me, they can be concealed more easily in a larger group - or would you prefer just the three of us to fly magically from ship to shore followed by our luggage?'

'Of course not. Forgive me. My men will wait at the appointed place all day if necessary- and I shall arrange for our vessels to anchor in deep water so that we are not at the mercy of the tides.'

'Good. Now... please be kind enough to summon my maid-servants and have them bring the clothes I came in.

And after that I would like you to conduct me to the gate.'

Min-Orota bowed. 'At once mi'lady.'

Arrogant bitch

Hearing the clack of wooden-soled footwear on the steps to the verandah, Cadillac peered through the shutters and saw the quartet of lanterns wobble away down the path.

'Well, there she goes.' He threw an arm across Roz's shoulder and gave her a congratulatory hug. 'I've always been impressed by what you can do, but you're getting better all the time, y'know that?'

Roz turned to face him and slipped her hands around his waist. 'It couldn't have happened without you. And I like it. It gives me a real buzz. But I'd sleep a lot easier if I knew how it works and why.' She laughed. 'Did you hear that? Just goes to show that underneath the paintwork, there's still someone called Doctor Rozalynn Brickman.'

'Do you miss all that?'

'No. I always knew deep down that my life was going to take another turning - studying medicine was one of the steps along the way.' She smiled. 'Maybe Talisman gave me these gifts and sent me out here to save your life.'

'You already have.'

She nestled her face against his then said: 'Min-Orota's men are still outside. Don't you think we ought to put our masks back on, in case one of them comes in?

'Can't you handle that?'

'I could but the effort of concentration required to grab someone's mind really drains you after a while. I'd just like to be able to relax.'" She picked up their face masks and offered Cadillac his.

'I hate wearing these things. I like to be able to see what you're thinking.'

'Does not knowing what I'm thinking worry you?' Roz planted a light kiss on his mouth. 'Relax. I don't have real power, like Clearwater.

I can't make people do things the way she can, or move chunks of the landscape around.

I can only manipulate people's perception of reality - a lot depends on what I can find inside their heads. Or mine 'I wouldn't call that a limitation.'

'No. Perhaps it's a restriction I've imposed upon myself. My classes at school were slanted towards the practical aspects of medicine. The first time I heard people mention psychology and the subconscious mind was after I'd passed my intermed exams and went on to take my doctorate at Inner State U! I suppose if I started to dig really deep, there's no limit to what I might come up with."

'Does the prospect frighten you?"

'Yes." Roz smiled. 'I'd much rather have your amazing ability to absorb an alien culture and master their language practically overnight."

It was Cadillac's turn to laugh. 'It takes little longer than that."

'Maybe. The point is, you know what's going on, and I don't - at least not until you get a chance to tell me. It makes me feel so helpless.

And what's more, I'm sick of you doing all the talking!" He kissed the tip of her nose. 'Don't underestimate yourself. You've scared the hell out of these guys. They wouldn't dare make a move against us. As for Mishiko, I thought we laid on a really great blend of fact and fiction.

It's clear she went for it. The question is- will she still feel the same way tomorrow?"

'Oh, yes. That's the one thing you can be sure about."

'Good. We've got everything she needs to finish the job. That leaves just two more hurdles to clear getting her into place, and getting away."

'Yes." Roz turned towards the window with a sigh.

Cadillac watched her peer vacantly through the shutters.

'What's the matter?"

She kept her back towards him and ran a forefinger slowly back and forth along one of the wooden slats. 'I just ... find this all a bit upsetting. The fact that so many people are going to die. Is that why she insisted on taking her children with her?"

'Yes. Try not to think about it. The Iron Masters know how to handle things like this. When they purge their top guys, the whole family usually gets taken out. That's the down-side of belonging to the nobility. It's something they're taught to accept from the moment they're old enough to understand."

'But we are the ones who are killing them!" cried Roz.

Her eyes were still riveted on her moving finger which was now pressed down so hard, it had begun to turn white.

'Only indirectly. And if she arranges it, they probably won't feel a thing." Cadillac could tell from the set of her shoulders that she was close to tears. 'Listen. I know it's a tough thing to have to cope with, but it's better for these japs to be killing each other than to have them cutting down the Plainfolk."

He took hold of her shoulders and turned her around.

'You sound just like Steve." Roz wiped her eyes, drew the back of her

hand across her snuffiy nose, then poked him in the ribs. 'And what's more, you look ridiculous in that wig 'I can always take it off - if you're willing to cover me."

'No, don't-' It was too late. Cadillac was already lifting it carefully off his head. He put it on one of the shaped wooden blocks that had come as part of their wardrobe and shook his own hair free.

'Have you heard from him lately?"

'Steve? No. Not a peep. But something tells me I will."

'Yeah. And knowing him, it'll probably be bad news."

Roz sensed the hint of jealousy in his voice. 'It doesn't have to be."

'That's how it's always been, hasn't it? The only time he gets in touch is when he's in a jam. I can only think of one reason why you haven't heard from him in months - and that's because he's worked himself an easy ticket.

It's like I said. He's sold out."

'That's not fair, it's not true, and that's the one thing I hate about you! He saved Clearwater's life and he'll do whatever has to be done to keep her from being harmed until they can both escape! And that's not made any

easier by the fact that she's having a baby. Why won't you trust him?!" 'Because I have no cause to!" Cadillac circled Roz angrily. 'If he comes back into our lives, he's going to come between us!" 'I won't let him,' said Roz, firmly.

Cadillac halted in front of her. 'But the prospect scares you, doesn't it? Because he still has a hold on you.'

'Not in the way you think. He's worried by this power that's been given to me. He knows I'm no longer the little sister who was raised in his shadow and was content to remain there. But our minds are still linked. Even though he hasn't made contact, part of him still lives in here.'

Roz touched the sides of her forehead. 'That's what scares me.'

Knowing that if something bad happened to him, it could happen to me too. I want everything to go right - for all of us." She ran her hands along his shoulders and linked them behind his neck. 'Especially now' 'It will.'" Cadillac put his arms around her waist and closed the gap between them. 'But whether Steve is with us or not, you and I are going to win through. You've got to believe that.'

'I do - but you know how it is. The more you have, the more you have to lose.'" She shrugged. 'I - I... just feel that he and I have been too lucky for too long.'

'Your run of luck has just started,' said Cadillac. He sealed her lips with a kiss. It wasn't long before they sank onto the straw matting and began exploring some now familiar territory.

'Do you really think this is a good idea?" whispered Roz.

'Can you think of a better one?'

CHAPTER EIGHT In the pre-Holocaust era, there used to be an old saying: 'Dream of the devil and you wake in fright.'" Roz's premonition about her brother was not all that far off the mark. For as she and Cadillac lay in each other's arms, Steve was preparing to fly to Ne-Issan with his bed-mate, Commander Franklynne Delano Jefferson.

In the hour before midnight, Eastern Time, just after Lady Mishiko had slipped back into the Winter Palace undetected, Steve and Fran changed out of their pale grey uniforms into the familiar red, orange, black and brown fatigues, said goodbye to Karlstrom and were driven out in an eight-wheeled Bobcat to the air-base attached to Cloudlands - the First Family's private estate.

Two AMEXICO SkyRiders fitted with underwing long-range fuel-tanks stood waiting on the hangar apron.

Steve and Fran were logged through Flight Operations with the minimum of ceremony. The orders and clearances required for the trip had come down the line ahead of them, and the pilots had been fully briefed. By the time they reached the apron, their baggage had been stowed away in the cargo hatches. All that remained was to strap themselves into the passenger seats and sit back while the monosyllabic pilots alongside them got on with their job.

Four and a half hours later, after travelling some twelve hundred miles, the two planes broke formation and landed in semi-darkness on a flat, endless stretch of beach bordering a limitless expanse of water.

The beach was about thirty miles south of the point where the Cape Fear River, which marked the southern border of Ne-Issan, cut through the sands of North

Carolina; the water was the Atlantic Ocean, a vast grey blanket gently rising and falling in the pre-dawn twilight.

What pre-H sailors called an oily swell. With scarcely a breath of wind in the air, the normally thunderous breakers were reduced to token waves which reared half-heartedly then tumbled feebly onto the shelving beach.

Painted in low-visibility grey, the two SkyRiders were like insubstantial phantoms swelling and fading in the drifting banks of sea-mist. Steve and Fran climbed out of the passenger seats of their respective planes, pulled their trail bags and other luggage from the cargo holds, gave the cockpit canopy a flat-handed 'All set/Goodbye' thump then ran clear of the port wing tips. The SkyRiders moved off one behind the other in the same straight line, gathering speed before lifting off with flaps extended to climb steeply out over the sea.

The sound of their engines and their grey silhouettes were quickly lost in the gloom, leaving only the red wink lights above and below their fuselages to mark their position in the sky. And then they too vanished.

Touchdown to take-off had been completed in under three minutes. In half an hour, the advancing tide would wipe the tell-tale tyretracks from the beach, long before the first of the nearby Southern Mutes came to ready their beached cat-boats for another day's fishing.

Steve nudged Fran's arm and pointed out to sea. Half-concealed in the shifting banks of mist was the angular dark grey shape of an ocean-going junk. A point of light on the raised stern winked on and off. Steve turned and scanned the dunes for the recipient of that message - the person who had made radio contact with the SkyRiders before switching on the lights that marked the beginning and the direction of the landing strip.

Five diminutive figures rose into view and made their way down through the wind-hollows between the tufted tops of the dunes. As they drew closer, Steve recognised their leader. It was Skull-Face, a pint-sized undercover agent of the ruling Toh-Yota family. At their first meeting, Steve had been forced to kneel naked in front of him, tightly trussed with rope and twine like a rolled joint of buffalo meat. It had been question and answer time, and two of Skull-Face's friends had stood behind him, ready to refresh his memory with the aid of whipping-canes. It was an unpromising start to a working relationship, but his tormentor soon revealed himself to be an ally who later set up the travel arrangements which enabled Steve, Cadillac, Clearwater, Jodi Kazan and Kelso to get out of Ne-Issan.

This time it was Skull-Face's turn to bow, first to Fran and then to Steve. 'Commander Franklynne Delano Jefferson, it is a great honour for me to be the first to welcome you and Captain Brickman to Ne-Issan.

Allow me to introduce myself- Samurai-Major Iseko Fujiwara.

It will be my pleasure to guide you to rendezvous with Lord Chamberlain Ieyasu."

Apart from the sibilant pronunciation and a tendency to swallow certain consonants like d and l, Fujiwara spoke almost perfect Basic.

Steve, who had been given the running order before take-off, replied on

behalf of Fran. In Ne-Issan, it was the custom for high-ranking nobles to speak through intermediaries when speaking to inferior beings. 'We thank you for receiving us and look forward to our journey together.

Where are you taking us?"

Fujiwara responded with an even lower bow. 'Sorry, Captain. That is something I am unable to reveal. The final decision on the choice of meeting place has not been taken. Please follow me."

These japs, thought Steve. They really loved concealment and intrigue.

Fujiwara's silent companions picked up the baggage and tagged on behind as he led Steve and Fran to the water's edge. A large row-boat manned by two sailors appeared out of a bank of mist. Two of the baggage handlers ran into the shallows and turned the boat's bow to seaward then ran the stern end of the keel aground amid the fitful breaking waves.

Steve helped Fran climb over the backboard, then followed her into the bow of the boat. The luggage was quickly stowed away, Fujiwara took charge of the tiller, and his four colleagues ran the boat back into the water. Scrambling aboard, they fitted oars into the wooden rowlocks and helped the sailors pull away against the incoming tide.

Fifteen minutes later, they reached the heavy timbered side of a large steam-powered junk with two tapering four-sided sails and a rear jib-sheet on the raised stern.

There was no sign of any crew on deck. A rope ladder with wooden rungs hung down over the side, but it turned out that this was only for the lower orders.

One of the baggage handlers climbed nimbly onto the deck then, shortly afterwards, a wooden boom with a pulley block and rope tackle swung into view, and a carriage box was lowered into the rowboat. With a respectful bow, Fujiwara invited Fran to seat herself in the box then closed the door and rode up with it, hanging onto one of the rope slings. A couple of minutes later, the box came back down over the side for Steve.

When it touched down on the deck and the door was opened, Steve found himself facing an open passageway.

Portable side-screens closed off any view of the main deck. Fujiwara led him down a short flight of stairs and into a cabin where Fran stood waiting by a window in what was obviously the stern of the boat.

Fujiwara took them through the accommodation set aside for them; two mirror-image cabins separated by a wide corridor which together occupied the full width of the stern. Fran chose the port side whose windows offered a view of the distant shore. One of Fujiwara's men carried Steve's share of the luggage into the other cabin.

Steve followed him through the two sets of sliding doors. In the rear half of the intervening corridor was a small bath-house whose party-sized tub drained out through a stern chute when the plug was pulled.

Each cabin had a closet with a jugged supply of water and a similar pipe for evacuating what the Federation's A-Level maintenance manual referred to as 'solid waste', and in the rear half a similar pipe for evacuating what the Federation's A-Level electronic maintenance manual referred to as 'solid waste'.

The cabins were furnished in the usual sparse Iron Master fashion, with a minimum of furniture. The raised sleeping area was covered in straw mats, the rest of the floor was bare polished wood. Sliding paper wall-screens opened to reveal shelves and storage space to hang clothes. Beside the folded cotton mattresses and bed linen, their hosts had provided a number of loose kimonos in black and white. The cuffs and hems were trimmed with bright patterned material, and bore a lozenge-shaped decorative device on the back and breast.

After withdrawing to allow them to settle in, Fujiwara returned with four Vietnamese women in tow. Introducing them, the agent apologised in advance for any difficulties arising from the women's modest grasp of Basic and explained that the quartet would act as their body-slaves throughout their stay in Ne-Issan.

They would serve all meals, clean and carry water, and perform any

other tasks required of them. The bells provided would summon them from their quarters nearby, a minimum of two would be on duty at any hour of the day or night, and should they fail to give satisfaction, then he, Iseko Fujiwara, should be informed without delay.

Steve thanked him, with the usual exchange of bows.

When the four Vietnamese women had shuffled backwards out of the room, with their bodies bent forward as if suffering from severe stomach cramps, Fujiwara explained the remaining ground rules. As they had noticed by the manner of their arrival, the vessel's crew - apart from the two ensigns in the rowboat - had been confined below decks to prevent them from discovering the identity of their illustrious passengers.

In return, Fujiwara asked Steve and Fran to remain below deck. They could use the roofed balcony that ran across the flat, sloping stern outside their cabins but they could not- except in the case of an unforeseen emergency - come up on the main deck during the voyage.

Speaking for Fran, Steve said he understood completely.

It was disappointing not to be able to see where they were going, but it was better to arrive safely, without the knowledge of the Shogun's enemies.

Fujiwara bowed and expressed his immeasurable appreciation of such deep understanding. "These are troubled times."

"They are indeed," replied Steve. Ten-Four. Over and Out . . .

Listening at the window to the shouted exchanges as the junk got underway, Fran quickly established that the junk was officered by Japanese, and had a mainly Chinese crew.

Fran did not intend to reveal her knowledge of Japanese in order to eavesdrop on unguarded conversations that might put them ahead in their forthcoming negotiations.

It also avoided potentially embarrassing problems of protocol. The Iron Masters didn't like outlanders speaking their sacred tongue, and it wasn't necessary to do so.

As Steve had discovered on his last visit, a surprising number of Japs had a good working knowledge of Basic.

Their pronunciation and syntax might be a little rocky even comical but they had ways of getting their message across, especially to people who made the mistake of laughing at them.

As the sun rose, the mist banks quickly disappeared.

The wind freshened, deepening the troughs between the waves and carving the crests into serrated lines of white foam. With the sun now riding high over slow-moving heaps of cumulus, the swelling grey blanket of water had been transformed into a sparkling expanse of blue and green.

The broad-beamed junk ploughed northwards at a steady twelve knots, pitching slowly fore and aft.

Within an hour, the wind became a lot fiercer. The tranquil heaps of cumulus were quickly overshadowed by threatening grey storm clouds and the junk began to roll alarmingly as the mounting waves crashed against its starboard side.

Steve had never travelled on any kind of waterborne vessel up to the age of eighteen, when he'd stowed away on the Great Lakes wheel-boat to Ne-Issan, but he'd emerged in reasonably good shape, and had fared better than Cadillac when crossing Lake Michigan in a frail, narrow outrigger. And he was now quietly pleased to discover he had better sea-legs than Fran who he found clutching the stern balcony rail, white-knuckled and green around the gills.

She raised her voice above the background drumming of the steam-driven screw that churned the blue water beneath them into a broad swirling ribbon of green and white foam. "Did you know it was going to be like this?!" "Like what?" he replied, teasingly.

'Jeezuss! The way this thing is moving from side to side as well as up and down! Plus the vibration?! Can't you feel it? And the noise!

Boom, boom, boom! That goddam engine's driving me crazy!" Tough shit, thought Steve. You wanna try working down in the A-Levels for three months - like where you sent me. Bitch

He laid on a look of genuine concern. 'Do you want me to ask them to turn it off, and just use the sails?"

'And drag this out even longer? Forget it!" Steve suppressed his own feelings of nausea and smiled. 'Cheer up. The first twenty-four hours are always the worst I' Her eyes turned to ice. A moment of pure hatred. And screw you too, Commander

Two hours after sunrise, Senior Secretary Shikobu and Kenzo the Chief Steward each accompanied by two subordinates, rode out of the Winter Palace, followed by three troops of cavalry in battle-order, led by the Castle Commandant. During the night, Ieyasu had had

second
thoughts.

Shikobu was now empowered to use force to bring Domain-Lord Min-Orota to the Palace if all other means of persuasion failed.

By the time the cavalcade thundered through the roofed gateway of the post-house, it was not chickens and pigs that scattered, it was the displaced tarts, cardsharps, itinerant pedlars and street performers who had spent a cold and uncomfortable night dossed down in the barns and outhouses of nearby farms. Word of the domain-lord's departure soon circulated and they had all hastened back to reclaim their previous accommodation.

It was left to the alarmed inn-keeper and his wife to explain to Shikobu the circumstances of the domain-lord's early departure. Having already paid in advance, the parties in question had not deemed it necessary to take formal leave of the inn-keeper, but a quick check of the accommodation showed that all the furnishings and fittings were intact.

The riders and drivers had gone about the business of readying their mounts with the minimum of noise, but it was impossible to silence the gritty rumble of loaded carts, the squeak of harness, and the creak of wooden shafts as the oxen took the strain. It was this which had woken Shoshi and brought her first to one of her many spy-holes, then to the front door and the unguarded verandah.

Waiting until the last of the mounted rear guard had passed out through the archway, she gathered her nightclothes about her and ran across the courtyard to where Inazo was sliding the last bolts home in the gate.

Having been awakened three times during the night by the arrival and departure of some lowly servants on an ox-cart and now the departing northerners, Inazo, a faithful but crotchety old bugger, was not in the best of humours.

He told Shoshi that one group of horsemen and carts had gone north, the other had taken the east road.

Towards the sea

Which group, enquired Shikobu, had been led by the domain-lord?

At this, Inazo had bowed deeply and wrung his hands.

He could not be certain. The house flags carried by the domain-lord's party on the previous day had not been displayed. It had been dark.

His eyes were not what they were

Shikobu dismissed him with a wave.

It was true that no flags had been carried aloft, but Inazo failed to mention that someone on Min-Orota's staff had tipped him handsomely for all his trouble, and told him to look the other way.- a fact he did not intend to reveal in front of his tight-fisted cow of a mistress.

For the last three years she had refused to let her husband spend anything on the hovel Inazo and his wife were obliged to live in, and had she known about the lavish back-hander, she would have taken every penny.

On the grounds that all staff contributed to the smooth-running of the inn, neat little notices posted in each room requested clients to include any gratuities when settling their bill - the money being shared out later.

Some chance with Shoshi holding the purse-strings! If they saw a tenth of it they were lucky. Still what could you do when young men and women, eager to escape the endless cycle of back-breaking farm work, were lining up in their dozens every time there was a vacancy- willing to take any job at almost any price?

Shoshi, anxious to show her vigilance to these important men from the Palace, recounted the visit by what she believed was a lady of quality to Lord Min-Orota.

And she described how she had seen her arrive on an oxcart disguised as a servant-girl with seven companions who were clearly of inferior rank.

Shikobu exchanged glances with Kenzo, and questioned her further.

Shoshi was able to supply an approximate time of arrival but confessed to being asleep when the cart departed. Inazo, the gate-keeper, did not have any means of telling the time.

Having dozed off after their arrival he had no clear idea how long they had stayed. He only knew that when called upon to let them out, it was cold and late and, although

he could not be absolutely certain, he believed that the domain-lord had watched them go.

Shikobu would have liked more details, but it was enough to go on. He was beginning to regret not acting immediately on receipt of Ieyasu's first message. But on the other hand, permission to use force had only arrived on his desk an hour ago - and Lord Min-Orota had already left by then.

He held a hurried conference with the Castle Commandant.

Kenzo the Chief Steward, was a master of protocol, ceremonies and a gem at catering, but he had nothing to contribute at a moment like this. A decision was made to despatch two troops- sixty men plus their officers- to the north, and the remainder along the east road.

Shikobu, Kenzo and the Commandant would return to the Palace with their subordinates, and a fourth troop would be despatched from there to back up the third in case Lord Min-Orota was heading for the harbour at Oshana-sita.

Shikobu believed he knew the identity of Min-Orota's visitor, but he decided to keep his opinions to himself.

It appeared that the ox-cart had taken the road back to the palace but had she been on it? Or was it a real servant-girl that Min-Orota had made the pretence of bowing to? The answer to this question and others, that were equally disquieting, lay at the Palace.

At Showa, Shikobu was met in the courtyard by Kenzo's distraught deputy. Lady Mishiko was nowhere to be found. She, her three children, their nurse and sixteen of her personal servants had vanished! He had questioned her remaining staff, but none of them had confessed to knowing where she might be. All they could tell him was that she had retired in the usual manner the previous night and, in the deputy's view, they appeared to be as surprised as everyone else.

Shikobu briefly considered lining the servants up and having them whipped, one by one, into insensibility until someone decided to save his or her skin by talking. But with no proof of any wrong-doing by Lady Mishiko, his hands were tied. She was, after all, the Shogun's sister and, in theory, was entitled to go where she liked. An unwarranted attack on her servants could quite easily be construed as a violation of her rights and privileges - granted by her brother, the Shogun.

Dangerous waters

Fortunately, there was another avenue he could follow.

On the orders of the Palace Commandant, the soldiers who had served on the night-watch were hastily assembled for questioning. Those detailed to guard the gate were able to confirm that an ox-cart carrying eight of Lady Mishiko's servants had been allowed over the drawbridge at about eight in the evening, returning some three hours later.

Since most were known to the soldiers concerned, they had not been required to show gate-passes or proof of identity - and this was a perfectly normal procedure. The personal servants of Lady Mishiko were regarded as being a cut above the rest, and on a par with those who worked for Yoritomo, and the Lord Chamberlain.

Their testimony, added to that of the inn-keeper's wife, told Shikobu

all he needed to know. Lady Mishiko, disguised as one of her own servants, had left the Palace for a secret meeting with Lord Min-Orota at the post-house inn. Something she had learned there had caused her to return, gather, her children and her most trusted servants together, and leave some time during the night. Since no one had passed out through the gate since the ox-cart's return and his own departure earlier that morning, she must have left by a secret passageway known only to the Shogun's immediate family.

She had met Lord Min-Orota at a pre-arranged rendezvous, and they had travelled on towards Oshana-sita. It was the only destination that made sense. To escape in secret implied an intention to evade discovery. A journey by sea was the best means to accomplish that.

Somehow, Min-Orota or she had discovered the end-point of the

Shogun's

present journey and intended to reach AronGiren by boat.

If they succeeded in hiring a vessel and left today, they could reach the Summer Palace before Ieyasu and Yoritomo. Shikobu could only think of one reason for their journey and the secrecy surrounding it. The highly sensitive information Lord Min-Orota claimed to have uncovered at Sara-kusa was not for the Lord Chamberlain. It was about him.

Something damaging

That was why the domain-lord had refused to speak to anyone else. And why he had enlisted the help of Lady Mishiko. She was the only one who had direct access to Yoritomo. Anyone else wishing to gain audience had to apply to the Lord Chamberlain's office. More often than not, if their case was accepted, Ieyasu acted as the intermediary or, in the rare event that the supplicant was actually allowed to see the Shogun, Ieyasu was always present. And since Toshiro Hase-Gawa's death, that now included Yoritomo's own select band of messengers- the Heralds.

It was pointless to speculate on what this possibly damaging information might be, but it had to be serious. Serious enough to prompt Lady Mishiko to take her children with her ... to avoid them being held hostage to secure her silence. But it was not too late to act. The officers leading the mounted troops towards Oshana-sita were intelligent and resourceful. If they failed to intercept Min-Orota, they would at least return with every scrap of information they could glean about his departure.

None of the war vessels owned by the Toh-Yota were fitted with radios.

These devices were only used by a trusted 'inner circle' of agents less than a tenth of the army of informers employed by the Lord Chamberlain.

There was little that could be done to intercept the boat, but it could be met on arrival. Forewarned was forearmed. Lady Mishiko may have slipped away but she had yet to reach the Summer Palace. All was not lost. Shikobu hurried towards the secret communications room, mentally composing the message he would send to his master

By nightfall, the stormy weather had eased noticeably but the the junk was still rolling several degrees and shipping water as she nosed down into the troughs between the waves that angled in across her bows.

After sharing dinner, Steve retired to his own cabin as Fran, in her role of Commander, bade him a frosty goodnight. Still plagued by motion-sickness, she had only pecked at her food. Steve, by contrast, had made a point of clearing the decks - a fact that probably contributed to her ill-humour.

Sometime after his mind had filtered out the steady beat of the engine, allowing him to doze off, he was woken by a sudden coldness on his back.

'It's only me,' a familiar voice whispered.

With the shutters closed, it was pitch dark. Steve turned obligingly as Fran dropped the coverlet back into place and wriggled her naked body into close contact with his. She slid her right arm under and round his neck and used her other hand to pull him half on top of her so that they lay with legs entwined. The heat in the high point of her

pelvis started a fire in his loins.

'I couldn't sleep,' she whispered. 'The thought of floating on a few pieces of wood with all that water beneath us.' A shudder ran through her body. 'Hold me.

Please!" This was Fran at her most vulnerable. Make the most of it, Brickman. Score a few brownie points while you've got the chance.

Slowed at the onset of their voyage by the same bad weather that was giving Fran her first taste of seasickness, the junk carrying Cadillac, Roz and Lady Mishiko took nearly thirty-five hours to cover the two hundred and twenty-five miles between Oshana-sita and Aron-Giren. By the time the look-out in the crows-nest

sighted the coastline, at four o'clock in the afternoon, the wind was no longer whipping clouds of spray from the white-capped waves - a sign that Lord Min-Orota took as a good omen as he and his entourage prepared to leave.

Cadillac and Roz had already agreed with his suggestion that he could be of more service to the Progressive cause by returning to his domain and readying his troops to answer the call to arms that would follow the deaths of the Shogun and Ieyasu. It was also a move which put him well out of the line of fire if anything went wrong - but only temporarily. If the plan came unglued he was one of the first people the Toh-Yota would come looking for.

Bidding a fond farewell to Lady Mishiko, the domain-lord transferred to the second vessel that had been following in their wake, and sailed away on an easterly course that would take his party beyond the reach of any coastal patrols mounted by the TohYota.

With the light now fading rapidly, the junk captain pressed on towards the channel between the two long, overlapping sand-bars that protected the southern shore of Aron-Giren from the waves of the Great Eastern Sea.

His objective was the harbour at Bei-shura, but as they neared the entrance to the long coastal lagoon, a junk flying the house flag of the Toh-Yota and the long blue and white pennant which marked it out as a naval vessel came into view. It was moving on a course that would bring it across their bow. A red signal rocket, fired from its for'sle, soared into the sky - the order to heave-to and prepare to receive a boarding party.

The throbbing beat of the steam engine slowed, and from the deck above came a shouted command to haul in the big square-cut sail.

Cadillac and Roz watched the navy boat turn and head towards them on the seaward side. 'Well, we expected trouble,' said Cadillac. 'And I think this is it' A sea voyage was the only way of getting to the Summer Palace before Ieyasu and the Shogun arrived by road, but from the outset Cadillac and Roz had known that the Chamberlain would always be able to stay one jump ahead if, as they believed, he was linked by radio to the Winter Palace. If this was so, then there was bound to be a similar set-up at the Summer Palace on AronGiren.

With virtually instantaneous communication between all three points, it would not take long to organise a blockade of the island, and the ship now bearing down on them was proof that Ieyasu was trying to head off trouble.

It now looked as if Lord Min-Orota's sudden departure from the post-house had been discovered and tied in with Lady Mishiko's disappearance from her quarters.

They had also been tracked to Oshana-sita. With every vessel logged in and out of port, it would not take long to establish the identity of the two junks they had boarded. Min-Orota had given the destination of both vessels as Bo-sona, but someone had clearly decided not to take any chances, teyasu had been alerted, and he had contacted whoever was manning the radio at the Summer Palace and ordered them to intercept all in-coming boats from the south.

Cadillac was still wondering what to do when Lady Mishiko joined them at the starboard window. Roz shifted to the right to make room for

her. The window was stepped out from the hull, allowing them a view forward along the side of the ship. They watched in silence as the navy ship swung about to bring her bow in line with the junk's and threw her engine into reverse.

The sea boiled under her stern as she came to a dead stop some fifty yards away.

The six pillar-mounted deck-cannon spaced along the port side were manned and aimed at the junk. They looked too puny to do any serious damage to the hull bfit, loaded with grapeshot, they were probably highly effective at clearing decks of hostile crewmen.

An oar-boat containing five men was lowered into the calm water between the two vessels. The crew of the junk dropped a rope ladder over the side and the captain got his papers ready to show the boarding party.

'Two of my guards are on deck,' said Lady Mishiko. 'They will warn us if we are in any danger.'

'Good.'" Cadillac gave Roz a questioning glance. She nodded reassuringly.

'This may be a routine inspection,' said Lady Mishiko.

'On the other hand, these men may have been ordered to prevent me landing, or take me into protective custody.

When we discussed the possible moves open to Ieyasu, those two seemed the most likely - but I have since thought of another which would be even more effective."

'And what is that, your highness?"

'Rather than risk half-measures that might cause difficulties later, he might have decided it would be safer for him if I never saw my brother again. I am travelling under an assumed name. Apart from Ieyasu's men, no one knows I am here. It would be relatively easy to arrange for this ship to be lost at sea - with all hands."

Roz saw Cadillac react uneasily. Whatever Mishiko had said was clearly bad news, but since they were speaking Japanese, she didn't know what it was.

'I hadn't thought of that. It is indeed effective. But it is also a very drastic solution. Would the Chamberlain dare do such a thing?

His suspicions may have been aroused, but surely he would not try and murder you without trying to ascertain the real reason for this journey?"

'You do not know my great-uncle,' said Mishiko. 'We call him the Old Fox. He is ruthless, cunning, but also very cautious. There is a saying from the World Before which has always guided his actions.

"Better to be safe than sorry"."

Cadillac nodded, then said: 'Please excuse us, your highness. I would like to have a brief word with my companion in private.'

Beckoning Roz to follow, he led the way into the adjoining cabin, and gave her a whispered translation of this latest exchange with Mishiko.

'So what do you want me to do?"

'Nothing as yet. I just want you to understand what could be about to happen so we can react in the appropriate manner as and when the time comes."

'I'll do my best,' said Roz. 'Just so long as you understand that I can't solve every problem we run into! I can react pretty quickly, but it would make things a lot easier if I had some kind of advance warning. If I see or feel us getting into a threatening situation I can do something about it, but most of the time I don't have a clue what's going on because you don't explain enough, and I can't understand a word anyone's saying! And it's very frustrating!" 'I know, you already told me."

'Well, I'm just reminding you! All I can do is to entrap the minds of

the navy men who have boarded this boat- if they threaten our safety and providing they stay together.

But even if I manage to neutralise them, I can't stop their shipmates firing those cannon at us!" 'Yehh, point taken. Let's hope she's wrong and I'm right."

Lady Mishiko appeared in the doorway. 'They're leaving!" Cadillac gave Roz a whispered translation then followed Mishiko over to the starboard window.

It was true. The long-boat containing the boarding party was making its way back to the Toh-Yota patrol ship. A few moments later, one of Mishiko's guards admitted the captain.

Cadillac and Roz, secure in their disguise, remained in the background while Mishiko listened to the captain's account of what had happened on deck. After checking the ship's papers and the master's licence, the officer in charge of the boarding-party had informed the captain that because of a rumoured coup attempt by the YamaShita, all incoming vessels were being directed towards five 'controlled' harbours. On docking, the ship and its cargo would be thoroughly searched; any passengers intending to disembark would only be allowed to do so if their papers were in order, and if they could show good reason for coming to AronGiren.

Cadillac cursed silently. He and Roz didn't have any papers. It simply hadn't occurred to him that they might need them.

The captain continued to recite the orders he had been given. His junk was required to dock at Bei-shura, but because of the backlog of vessels awaiting inspection, it would have to take its place in the queue. As soon as the junk was underway, the patrol ship would lead it through the channel into the bay where it was to anchor overnight. Any further orders, or information about when they would be able to dock, would be issued in the morning.

Mishiko accepted this with a regal nod. 'Did they examine the passenger list?'

'No, ma'am. And they did not check the cargo manifest.'

They simply enquired what I was carrying. I told them I had a number of passengers on board together men, women and children - with their personal baggage, plus a small amount of commercial cargo in the forward hold."

'And they did not ask how many of us there were, nor seek to discover our identities?'

'No, ma'am.'

'Thank you, captain. Do not let me detain you further.'

The steam engine deep in the bowels of the junk resumed its regular beat and soon afterwards, the three-bladed brass screw beneath the stern began to drive the junk towards the channel between the long sandbars.

Three-quarters of an hour later, the navy patrol ship signalled the junk to drop anchor landwards of a group of small islands in what was once known as Great South Bay, Long Island. With the shoreline beginning to merge with the blackening sky, the small port of Bei-shura, which lay about four miles to the north-west, was just visible as an untidy cluster of dim yellow-orange lights. The Iron Masters had no organised system for illuminating their towns and villages. When darkness fell, most people retired to the safety of their houses and locked themselves up for the night.

During this period, Lady Mishiko went off to spend some time with her three children and their nurse, and two of her servants brought trays of food down to Cadillac and Roz.

By the time Mishiko returned, the junk was riding at anchor in the bay.

Five other vessels of varying size were moored nearby. With heavy clouds covering the night sky, it was too dark to see them clearly, but their positions could be identified by the red and green lanterns hung amidships and the white lights hung from bow and stern.

The patrol vessel off their portside had almost its whole deck illuminated by a string of lanterns. The cannon mounted along the starboard side could be seen clearly in the overlapping pools of light.

The muzzles were all aimed at the junk, and the gunners were stationed nearby. Other sea-soldiers, armed with crossbows and long-barrelled rifles with revolver-type magazines, took turns to march slowly back

and forth around the edge of the deck.

In a cabin now lit by four rose-coloured lanterns, Roz watched patiently from the sidelines as Cadillac and Mishiko had another long discussion. The captain was sent for, and appeared carrying a rolled map. This was examined by all three in some detail. An agreement was reached. The discussion ended with the usual exchange of bows, the captain left, then Cadillac signalled Roz to follow him out of the room for another private head-to-head.

'Okay, here's the situation. You and I don't have any papers. Now you might be able to magic our way round that, but only if they allow us into harbour. They could keep us stuck out here in the bay until Ieyasu and the Shogun have come and gone.

'Mishiko doesn't know why they're coming to AronGiren, but because the journey's been made in secret and the rest of the court has been left behind, she

thinks they'll only be here for a few days at the most.

And according to Min-Orota, they're due the day after tomorrow.

'With so many unknowns, we have to be inside the Palace by tomorrow morning. That'll give us twenty-four hours to set everything up the way we've planned - or make alternative arrangements. That means we've got to leave within the next hour.'

'How?'

'We've done a deal with the captain. Or, to be more precise, Mishiko has. In return for a bag of gold pieces, he's going to let us take one of the junk's long-boats. It'll be a tight fit, but we should manage to squeeze everybody in. The plan is to row up the coast and land on a beach directly south of the Summer Palace. The Palace itself is about nine miles inland.'

'And how far is it from here to the beach?' asked Roz.

'About sixteen miles.'

Roz pulled off her mask. 'You're planning to row sixteen miles with a boatful of people in the dark? Pulling on those long paddle-things?'

'Oars. There are six of them, and we do have a sail. It will take us about four hours to travel up the coast, then another two to three hours to reach the Palace and get inside. With over ten hours left to first light we should make it easily.'

'You're crazy. I saw those boats when we came on board. There won't be room to move. Anyway, why go in one, when there are two of them?'

'The starboard long-boat is the only one we can lower without drawing attention to ourselves. If we row east-north-east - which is the direction we want to go - we'll be hidden from the patrol ship by the hull of the junk.'

After that we'll be swallowed up in the darkness.'

Cadillac saw the doubt in her eyes. 'It's not as crazy as it sounds.'

The captain says that in a little while we'll be on an ebb-tide. That means the current will be flowing away from the land and out to sea- 'Ohh, great!' 'Let me finish! The sand-bar we passed on the way in runs all the way along the coast past the spot we're aiming for. Since we're inside the bar, the current will carry us more or less parallel to the shoreline. We'll be rowing with it, rather than against it.'

As a first-time sailor, Roz found this difficult to grasp.

'And that will make a difference?'

'Yeah. Like the difference between rolling a large stone downhill and trying to roll it uphill.'

'Okay. Assuming we survive the trip, how do we get into the Palace without being seen?'

'Leave that to me.' The cool, clear voice, with its clipped pronunciation, took them completely by surprise.

Cadillac turned on his heel, covering Roz as she hurriedly put on her face-mask. Lady Mishiko stood in the doorway. How long had she been

there?

'I did not know you could speak the language of the long-dogs,' said Mishiko.

'Nor we you,' replied Cadillac. 'We decided to converse in this strange tongue to avoid alarming you while we expressed our fears for the outcome of this journey.'

His reply drew a laugh from Mishiko. 'Can witches as powerful as you be frightened?'

'Very easily, your highness,' said Roz. 'Our magic requires careful preparation and the accurate casting of silent spells. If our minds are not completely attuned to the spirit world and the magic powers it contains, we are as vulnerable as any other mortal creature.'

Mishiko's eyes opened wide as they fastened onto Roz's masked face.

Cadillac realised it was the first time that Roz had uttered a sound in her presence.

They had gotten this far by convincing Mishiko they were jap spirit-witches and it was vital to maintain that illusion. He had to move in and kill this conversation before Roz was caught off guard by a chance remark by Mishiko in her own language. If she discovered Roz's vocabulary consisted of less than three dozen words and

that her
accent was atrocious, it could ruin everything.

He switched over to Japanese.

'We are but vessels, your highness. The power comes to us from beyond
The Veil. What we have done, and will do, is made possible by the
strength of the love that flows between you and the Herald and which
binds you together with a force that can never be broken asunder!'
'Then your power is assured, for my love for HaseGawa grows stronger
every day.'

'And will never die ' Cadillac switched back to Basic. 'With your
permission, I will speak for a while in the long-dog tongue to my
companion. We need to acquire a certain fluency if our plans to help
you avenge the Herald's death are to succeed.'

'Then pray continue.'

The cash that was the key element in securing the captain's cooperation
came from a small chest full of gold coins. In Ne-Issan all
high-ranking persons carried hefty amounts of money with them to buy
their way out of trouble while travelling from A to B and Mishiko was
no exception. That was why road convoys were attractive targets for
ronin. The fact that they might be heavily protected only added to the
excitement.

While the captain was stashing away his golden handshake, the
crew-members on the night-watch were swiftly overpowered, bound and
gagged, and carried into one of the cabins. The hatches and
companionways were battened down to prevent the rest of the crew
getting into the act, then the captain supervised the lowering of the
starboard longboat.

Before being gagged, he insisted on receiving a blow to the head which
would draw blood - and thus lend credence to his story - but which, he
devoutly hoped, would not prove fatal.

One of Mishiko's guards obliged.

Roz had not believed it was possible to lower the boat without it being
noticed by the sea-soldiers pacing back and forth along the deck of the
nearby patrol ship. Her imagination had magnified the squeaks and
groans from ropes and pulleys into piercing shrieks and shuddering
thunderclaps of sound that - to her mind were guaranteed to rouse the
crews of the surrounding vessels from the deepest of slumbers.

But there had been no challenge, no warning rifle shot or cannonade.

Just the whistling sigh of a light breeze through the rigging, the
quiet creak of stressed wooden joints and beams, and the constant
lapping of waves against the hull.

She had also not believed there would be enough room for everyone, but
when the last of Mishiko's guards clambered down the rope ladder and
wriggled his way through to his seat at one of the six oars, she was
proved wrong yet again.

Seeing her 'okay, you win' look, Cadillac decided not to tell her that
the combined weight of people and baggage had pushed the long-boat
dangerously low in the water. The wind was light and the sea
relatively calm, but if a squall blew up on the way to Bei-poro it
wouldn't take long for waves to swamp the boat.

Having two-thirds of the hull below the waterline also put an added strain on the oars-men, but Mishiko's guards proved up to the task.

They let the ebb-tide current carry the boat away from the junk, stroking the water gently to keep the long-boat from drifting into view of the patrol ship. When the last of the moored vessels had slipped by, they hoisted the small, square-cut foresail, and began to pull strongly on the oars.

Cadillac felt a surge of excitement as he heard the water begin to ripple past the hull. He would have liked to take his turn at the oars, but his disguise did not allow him to do so. As far as Mishiko's servants were concerned, he and Roz were two courtesans - a gift from Lord Kiye Min-Orota to the Shogun: rowing boats did not figure in the list of services they were expected to provide.

He and Roz sat crammed in the bows of the boat on the leeward side of the foresail with Lady Mishiko, her three children, their nurse, three female servants and a stack of

baggage - for despite several appeals to reason, Mishiko had stubbornly insisted on taking every single item.

The rest of the baggage, the five remaining women and two men - one of whom manned the tiller - sat in the stern behind the six rowers.

Cadillac looked up at the sky. The massive blanket of cloud was beginning to break up. The moon showed its face briefly, casting a tarnished silver gleam over the sea.

Resting on top of it, like two thin, uneven strips of black paper were the coastline of Aron-Giren, and the sandbar which lay to starboard.

As long as they stayed more or less parallel to the sand-bar, they couldn't go wrong. According to the map it converged gently with the shoreline. Bei-poro, the small harbour they were aiming for, was three miles from the north-eastern corner of Great South Bay where the shore of Aron-Giren made a sharp ninety degree turn to the right towards the sandbank, closing the gap between them from two miles to less than four hundred yards.

Like most harbours, Bei-poro would probably have some kind of transportation for hire, but Cadillac did not intend to land there.

Given the present situation, it might also have a bunch of beady-eyed clerks or soldiers with orders from the Chamberlain's Office to check everyone going in or out. The captain had assured him there were plenty of accessible beaches beyond it.

Anywhere between Bei-poro and the narrows would do just fine.

Acquiring the wheels they needed could wait until they were back on solid ground...

Leaving the junk was probably the wisest decision Cadillac ever made.

Half an hour after the longboat slipped away unnoticed into the darkness, another longboat, with muffled oars, made a similar journey from one of the other moored ships - towards the junk. The six oarsmen - clad in black and with their faces covered with a head cloth that left only a slit for their eyes guided the boat alongside the junk, shipped their oars, then used their hands to manoeuvre the boat towards the stern.

Once underneath the overhang formed by the two floors of cabins and the stern deck, the long-boat was secured in place, then two of the black-clad figures climbed nimbly upwards, carrying coils of rope.

These were tied around the arched timbers supporting the protruding sections of the stern accommodation and pulled taut across its full width.

By hooking their bodies over the two lines, the climbers were able to traverse quickly back and forth below the underhang and this allowed them to complete the second stage of the operation, the positioning, beneath the cabins, of six barrels of gunpowder, twenty-four inches long and fifteen inches in diameter.

While they were busy with this task, their companions in the boat were lashing two more barrels into place in the centre of the stern, just above the waterline. Stage three involved inserting carefully measured slow-burning fuse wire into the barrels under the overhang and

gathering the strands together. These were lit from a shielded oil-wick lamp passed up from below.

The two climbers then slid quickly down the escape rope into the boat where the flame was applied to the fuses of the waterline barrels.

These ignited with an angry hiss and burned with a dull red glow.

Their task now completed, all six men used the oars to push their boat clear of the junk, dropped them into the rowlocks and pulled away molto rapido into the darkness.

Planting the prepared explosives had taken about twenty minutes. The fuses took another fifteen fateful minutes to burn down to the barrels enough time for the black-clad rowers to reach the safety of their own vessel.

The captain of the junk, who had been dumped in Mishiko's cabin, was probably the only one to hear the faint scuffling sounds beneath the overhanging floor on which he lay, but he thought it was caused by rats who were constantly scampering around the dark recesses of the ship.

Had he known the danger he was in, there was little he could do about it. He had been bound and gagged as securely as the remainder of the night watch and had resigned himself to remaining there until released by his crew when they awoke in the morning and found the deck deserted.

He did not, however, fail to identify the collective hiss as the six lengths of fuse wire burned down through the last twelve inches into the barrels beneath the overhang, and in those last few seconds, his brain was able to appreciate the full horror of what was about to happen BA-BA-BABOOOMMM!!

The high, wide stern of the junk disintegrated in a billowing orange-white sheet of flame, reducing the luckless captain and the rest of the night-watch into gobbets of flesh and bone not much bigger than the gold pieces scattered by the same blast into the waters of the bay.

And a split second later -BA-BOOOMMM!!

The two barrels of powder on the waterline exploded, demolishing what was left of the stern right down to the keel. Water flooded in through the gaping hole, and the junk began to sink. The off-duty crew, thrown from their bunks in the fore'sle by the shock of the first explosion, found themselves sliding down the deck as the bows rose out of the water. Scrambling up the companionway in blind panic, they found the door had been barred from the outside. A few quick thinkers found alternative exits they could wriggle through, the rest were reduced to battering down the door.

When it finally gave way, those at the front fell forward and found themselves tumbling down the main deck.

With the junk now settling fast, the deck was only some fifteen degrees off the vertical and the lower half of the mast and mainsail were already under water. A few more of their crewmates followed. Anyone who hesitated was trampled underfoot by those clawing their way out from behind, and there were still men wedged in the doorway as the bow section sank into a grumbling, frothing pool of debris.

Cadillac, Roz and the rowers were the first to see the fan-shaped orange starburst light up the night sky. Their gasps caused everyone's head to turn. What they saw was a roiling cloud of smoke lit from beneath by a blood-red glow. Silhouetted briefly against its flame-bright heart was a tiny black shape.

Everyone knew, without being told, it was the junk which had carried them to Aron-Giren. In the last hour they had travelled some four miles, and now, in the wake of the distant fireball, the sound of the explosion reverberated across the water.

... bbbaaa-bbbaa-bbboooooooooooo ... bbbaboooooooooooo ...

Cadillac looked across at Mishiko and saw her arms tighten around her two young daughters, Miyori, and Narikita. Toshi, her two-year-old son, cocooned in a sleeveless, padded cotton pouch to protect him from the cold, was held securely in the strong arms of his nurse.

Pitching his voice higher for the benefit of the servants huddled round Mishiko, Cadillac said: 'You were right, your highness. We owe our lives to your superior wisdom.'

'Do not thank me,' replied Mishiko. 'Thank the loved one whose power

guides our steps."

Cadillac accepted this with a bow of the head. There wasn't room for any of the usual extravagant kowtowing.

Pulling the hood of his cape as far forward as it would go, he huddled down beside Roz in a space he'd created between the baggage. A December night was definitely not the best time to go sailing on the Eastern Sea, but there was one small advantage of being dressed up as a courtesan; the close-fitting face-mask kept your nose warm.

From the deep shadow cast by his hood, Cadillac studied Lady Mishiko and her children, and the uncomplaining servants perched on the baggage that surrounded her. Ever since Roz had aired her own misgivings, he had felt increasingly guilty about driving this woman to her death.

Mishiko was strong, intelligent and - by Iron-Master standards strikingly beautiful. She was also extremely stubborn, haughty and used to being waited on hand and foot.

It was crazy, yet oddly touching, the way she had insisted on bringing all her luggage into the boat. If all went as planned she only had another forty-eight hours to live - so what did she want it all for?

It was also sad to see her son who was condemned to die with her, wrapped up and cuddled protectively to prevent him catching a fatal bout of pneumonia.

But it had to be done - for the good of the Plainfolk.

Killing Ieyasu and her brother would give the YamaShita the chance they and their fellow-Progressives needed to topple the Toh-Yota. The Chamberlain's desire to control every aspect of government had put too much power into one aging pair of hands. Removing him and the Shogun, and his nearest male heir, would plunge the ruling family into disarray. Any hesitation over the succession would create a power vacuum at the centre, unleashing the pent-up hatreds harboured by the less-favoured domain-lords. Hell-bent on settling old scores, they would split into warring factions, bring a period of instability and with luck - a protracted civil war that would halt any plans to expand westwards.

That would take the pressure off for a while. If the Progressives led by the Yama-Shita came out on top, then the centuries-old edict banning the Dark Light would be cast aside. In time, the technological gap between Ne-Issan and the Federation would start to close.

The sand-burrowers wouldn't let that happen because it was their superior technology that gave them the edge.

They would have to wage war on Ne-Issan - and that would divert men and valuable resources from their current campaign against the Plainfolk.

And by the time Tracker and Iron Master had fought themselves to a standstill, the Plainfolk would be ready. One nation under Talisman, the Thrice-Gifted One.

Cadillac believed the time when Talisman would enter the world was drawing near, but he was equally sure there would be no overnight miracles. 'Man-Child or Woman-Child the One may be . . . and He shall grow straight and strong as the Heroes of the Old Time.' So ran the Prophecy.

No matter how prodigious his or her talents were, the Saviour had first to reach adulthood. The promised victory under Talisman's banner lay far in the future.

Meanwhile there was a great deal to be done, and very little time in which to do it

CHAPTER NINE

Cadillac had been overly optimistic. When the packed long-boat grounded in pitch darkness on a stretch of beach to the east of Bei-poro, his concealed digital watch showed the time as 2:58 am.

Mishiko's eight guards had been taking their turn at the oars for nearly six hours instead of the estimated four.

The first task was to deposit Lady Mishiko and her children on dry sand. When this had been done, the guards returned for Roz and Cadillac to discover that both had climbed out of the boat. As the tallest person in the party, Cadillac did not intend to suffer the indignity of being given a chair-lift by a couple of bandy-legged japs whose heads only just came up over his shoulder.

That they had any energy left at all was testimony to their toughness and resilience. But then these guys didn't have an ounce of excess fat on them, and as Roz had pointed out, their diminutive stature and the shortness of their well-muscled limbs gave them an excellent power-weight ratio.

They had been born and raised as work-machines. That was one of the more admirable aspects of Iron Master society - its vigour. Once these guys woke up, they were on the case. Calculating the profit on a deal with an abacus, writing contracts, hammering, sawing, forging and beating metal, fashioning swords, creating beautiful objects, constructing boats and buildings - they put body and soul into it. And they applied the same zestful energy to eating, getting drunk, sexual intercourse and killing people.

All in all an amazing race. As he waited for the baggage to be unloaded, Cadillac's thoughts turned briefly to the Mute slave population. The Lost Ones. What would happen to them if Ne-Issan became embroiled in a civil war?

It had been foretold that one day they would cast aside their chains and rejoin the Plainfolk- before the climactic moment when Talisman would draw the clans from each of the bloodlines together under his or her banner.

When it came, their departure would trigger another round of bloodletting. Ne-Issan's prosperity was based on the concept of firstand second-class citizens, underpinned by a pool of slave labour non-persons. The Iron Masters would not let them go without a fight.

But even if they did escape what would happen when they returned home?

A considerable majority of the Mute slaves had been born in captivity.

Would they cope with their new-found freedom when it came? More important still was the question of their reintegration into Mute society. Would they be able to adapt to a way of life they had never known? Would they even want to or was it the Plainfolk who would be forced to adapt to accommodate them?

Sweet Sky Mother! As if he didn't have enough to worry about!

Cadillac silently berated himself for having dredged up yet another insoluble problem. That was what happened when you sat on your butt while other people did the work. Ever since Sioux Falls there had been

too much talking and scheming. Too much 'How about?' and 'What if?', and not enough 'Who cares?' What he needed was some action. A chance to get out from behind the fancy dress, the wig, the stupid pasty-faced mask and into some mindless mayhem: the kind of thing his rival, Brickman, enjoyed. Roz was right when she'd said he sounded like Steve; he was beginning to think like him too.

Before leaving the junk, Mishiko had secured a number of tarred torches from the captain. With the moon now back behind the clouds, four of these had been lit and stuck in the sand to provide some illumination.

With the exception of Mishiko, her children, Cadillac and Roz, everyone helped to turn the boat over, then

got ready to carry it into the sand dunes. Cadillac and Roz picked up two of the torches and walked alongside to light the way as mi'lady's servants staggered off under the weight of the boat like a tipsy centipede. When they got to the dunes, they lowered the boat onto its port side, then propped up the hull with the oars to make a shelter from the wind.

Leaving Roz standing on top of a dune, Cadillac went back to Lady Mishiko and her children. Giving five-year-old Miyori the torch to hold, Cadillac hoisted her onto his left hip. Katiwa, the nurse carried Narikita, and Lady Mishiko in a breath-taking display of egalitarianism, gathered her son Toshi into her arms and actually walked the fifty or so yards to the upturned boat, while the guards and the maidservants transferred the baggage from the beach to the dunes.

Roz beckoned to Cadillac as he passed. He set down Miyori in the shelter of the long-boat then scrambled with as much decorum as he could muster to the top of the dune. 'What is it?'

Roz pointed inland. 'There's a light over there.'

See... ?"

Cadillac sighted along her arm and peered into the darkness. 'Can't see a damn thing. Where is it?!" 'There! But it's just gone out!' 'For chrissakes, Roz - I' 'No, look! There it is again! See? It keeps moving about!" Cadillac caught sight of a minuscule point of orange light and hugged her shoulders. 'Well done. Keep your eye on it." He turned towards the long-boat and called out a string of words in japanese to the samurai who led Mishiko's guards.

Hearing that a light had been seen, the samurai and a couple of other guards scrambled up to the top of the dune to check it out. Agreeing with Cadillac that it could be from a house, they got a bearing on it with the aid of a pocket-sized compass box.

Cadillac and Roz followed them back down to the upturned long-boat where Mishiko and her children were now installed, surrounded by her precious luggage. A small fire, started with the aid of some driftwood, added a little warmth to the torchlit scene.

The samurai explained that a light had been seen and proposed to investigate. If it came from a house, or better still a farm, then the occupants might be willing to provide some transportation to get his mistress and her entourage to the Summer Palace.

Cadillac, who had learned from Lady Mishiko that she intended to enter the Palace via a secret tunnel known only to the Shogun and members of his immediate family, asked permission to speak with her in private.

The samurai withdrew to a discreet distance.

'Mi'lady, time is running out. If we are to achieve what we have set out to do, I urge you to follow this advice.

You and I, and my companion, should go forward with three of your guards and one maidservant to where we have seen the light.

'If it is a dwelling place whose occupants can provide help and shelter to a noble lady in distress, then one of the guards should return here to fetch your children, their nurse, and the other servants while we press on using whatever means of transport is available."

'Leave my children??

'Only for twenty-four hours, mi'lady! If we three plus two guards and a maidservant can get into the Palace tonight, we can prepare the ground as we have discussed.

When that has been done, we can make arrangements to bring your children and the rest of your entourage into the Palace by whatever means you choose, or as circumstances dictate. It is for you to decide when, but I think they should remain in hiding until tomorrow night."

'Very well."

'Now - is there anyone at the Summer Palace in a key position whose loyalty to the Shogun is beyond question - whom you could rely on to come to your aid?"

Mishiko replied without hesitation. 'Yes. Captain Kamakura, one of the senior officers of the Palace Guard.'

'Good. Let us hope he still holds that appointment.'

Now, mi'lady, if you will be so good as to tell your samurai what has been decided and pick those who are to go with us ' The faint glimmer of light Roz had been lucky enough to catch sight of turned out to be from a lantern carried back and forth by a farmer who was tending a cow that had fallen sick inside one of his barns. Cadillac blessed the Great Sky-Mother for striking the animal down. Had all been well, no lamps would have been burning, and the farm itself would not have been visible until first light.

Apart from knowing they had landed west of a place called Bei-poro which they dared not approach - no one in the party knew the lie of the land or where the roads and houses were. With no light to guide them, they could have easily missed the farm in the dark and wandered around for hours before finding another.

Walking due north with the aid of the compass would have put them in the vicinity of the castle, but Cadillac knew there was no hope of persuading Mishiko to travel nine miles on foot across open country, and after six hours of hard rowing he did not intend asking her guards to carry her - as they were doing now. With typical Iron Master ingenuity, they had cut up one of the oars to make two poles, and had used the sail to make a crude but serviceable litter on which she now sat with one of her clothes chests as a backrest.

And she had insisted on four guards plus the samurai and three maidservants. The lady might be going to her death but she was hell-bent on doing it in style.

As it turned out, her apparent lack of consideration for her underlings worked to everyone's advantage. When they reached the outskirts of the farm, the samurai went forward alone bearing a torch. The startled farmer nearly died with fright when he saw an armed man bearing down on him. On learning that the Shogun's sister had been shipwrecked and needed his help to get to the Palace, the sudden onrush of emotion came close to triggering a cardiac arrest. Begging the samurai to bring the noble lady towards his humble and totally unworthy abode, he rushed inside to awaken his wife.

Neither of them knew Mishiko by sight, but when she was ushered respectfully into their presence, she was quite unruffled and her clothes were virtually spotless.

Compared to Cadillac, Roz and the guards, she was - to use a pre-Holocaust phrase - 'in showroom condition'.

Pristine, untouchable. In the eyes of the lowly farmer and his wife now rocking back and forth on their knees repeating a litany of greetings and apologies she could not be anything else but an illustrious member of the ruling house.

Could they - she asked - furnish her, as a matter of some urgency, with an ox-cart and directions to the Summer Palace? Of course, immediately! Had she asked, man and wife would have willingly placed themselves between the shafts!

Could they shelter and feed her children and the rest of her servants until they were sent for on the following day? It would be an

honour!

No effort would be spared!

Could they keep her visit and their presence a secret if they knew the Shogun's life depended on it? Wild horses would not drag a confession from them!

Such selfless loyalty and devotion could never be influenced by mere monetary considerations - but there was nothing like gold to cement a relationship. Lady Mishiko instructed her samurai to hand over a generous number of coins not - she emphasised - as a reward, but to defray some of the costs incurred in offering such warm-hearted hospitality.

At 05:46, when the enveloping darkness had changed from black to a dark, leaden grey, the ox-cart drew up by a stone mausoleum patterned with lichen and carpeted with decaying leaves. It lay some way back from the road at the end of an overgrown path amid

trees and tangled undergrowth about half a mile south of the Summer Palace.

It had lain neglected for over eight decades because the occupant - a former Shogun - was from the Dat-Suni, the family which had ruled Ne-Issan before being deposed by the Toh-Yota, ably assisted by the Yama-Shita, the Min-Orota and others. Over those same eight decades, ambition and envy had eroded the blood-bond forged in battle.

Gratitude had been replaced by suspicion, culminating in the present barely-concealed struggle for power in which Lady Mishiko was an unwitting pawn brought into play by Cadillac.

On leaving the farm, the samurai and one guard had gone back to bring the beach party to safety. Another guard now coaxed the sweating oxen round and trundled off southwards to return the cart to its owner.

That left Cadillac, Roz and Lady Mishiko, one maidservant to provide an arm for Mishiko to lean on, two more to carry the chest of clothing, and a brace of armed men to help meet any trouble on the way in.

Mishiko had a key to open the rusty iron door, but with the usual Iron Master cunning, it did not fit into the open keyhole but into another lock which was concealed under a large decorative iron stud. There were thirty-six of them, arranged in a geometrical pattern covering the door. Thirty-five of them were immovable; the third one down from the top in the row to the right of the open keyhole could be loosened by three turns to the left, pivoted to one side - and hey, presto! - a well-oiled lock that opened the door onto a pitch-black tunnel about seven feet high and just wide enough to accommodate two people side by side.

The guards lit the two new torches they had brought with them. One entered the tunnel first followed by Lady Mishiko and her supportive maid, then Cadillac and Roz, the two baggage handlers, then the second guard with the other torch. The door was relocked under Mishiko's supervision, the key was handed back to her and off they went.

The tunnel did not run in a straight line. It had several ninety degree turns to right and left, with other tunnels running off it every now and then. Mishiko, who gave directions to the guard ahead, seemed to know exactly where she was going. Cadillac counted off the paces as they went. Towards the end, there were several short upward flights of steps and it was here that the corridor narrowed, forcing them into single file.

Mishiko took over the lead from the torchbearer.

Motioning them to make as little noise as possible, she shed her sandals and walked on, leaving them for her maid to pick up. Everyone followed suit and proceeded with equal caution on their stockinged feet.

They now came to a wooden staircase whose top end spiralled through ninety degrees and came to rest against a timbered ceiling supported by heavy beams. Mishiko signalled for absolute silence. Cadillac and Roz watched her creep up the steps until her head was against the ceiling.

She listened for a moment, then gently eased what turned out to be a short length of planking upwards, then slid it aside. She repeated this action with the adjacent plank.

Those below found themselves looking up into a dark, narrow passageway.

Signalling them to follow, Mishiko mounted the angled steps at the top of the stairs, and stepped carefully over the loose planks onto the solid floor beyond. As soon as Roz, Cadillac and the others had joined her, the planks were quietly replaced.

The secret exit beneath the floor was cunningly concealed.

The planks were extremely close-jointed, and immediately beyond the hidden staircase was a flight of three steps leading to a closed door.

Mishiko had gone in the other direction, using the same key to unlock a similar door across the end of the short passageway, after first checking through a spyhole that the room beyond was empty.

Cadillac joined her. 'Where are we?' he whispered.

'These are my private quarters. We are in the Summer Palace.'

At last. . . .

Cadillac took in his torchlit surroundings. As with most Iron Master interiors there was very little furniture.

Sliding doors indicated that other rooms lay beyond. All the windows he could see were fitted with inside screens and heavy external shutters which in daytime would keep out most of the light. 'How can we get from here to where Ieyasu and the Shogun will be staying?'

'I will show you, but first I must see that my servants get some rest and we must also contact the good Captain gamakura.'

Turning to the maid who had served as an arm rest during the trip through the tunnel, Mishiko took her aside, issued a set of whispered instructions and handed her a key. The maid bowed and slipped quietly out of the spacious apartment.

'Is it going to be difficult for her to get to him?' asked Cadillac.

'Not if the gods are with us,' replied Mishiko. 'Oyoki has only been in my service for the past year, but I am sure she will be able to deliver my message. She is one of the Captain's five daughters.'

Mishiko then explained that Kamakura had been the Herald's sword-master and also a firm friend who had nurtured the hope that the young man might honour him by marrying one of his daughters.

He was to be disappointed. When the Shogun ordered the Herald to commit seppuku - ritual suicide - Toshiro had asked Kamakura to act as his second. The kaishakunin was entrusted with the task of beheading the victim to spare him further agony once he had started to cut his stomach open.

'The death of the Herald was a cruel blow to the Captain and his family. They grieve for him still,' said Mishiko. 'Fortunately, they are still unaware of the full extent of his relationship with me - and that could be to our advantage.'

It could indeed. Cadillac bowed. 'Allow me to congratulate you once again, mi'lady.'

Mishiko responded with a brief smile then switched her attention to the servants who had remained discreetly out of earshot. 'This perilous journey could not have been achieved without your tireless efforts.'

Please accept my grateful thanks. I and my travelling companions must now leave for a short while. You are to stay here until we return.

Make as little noise as possible. Extinguish the torches. Bring me two lanterns then take some bedding from the store cupboards and try to sleep. Oyoki will wake you if and when you are needed.'

The servants bowed and hurried away to do her bidding. One of the guards came back with the lanterns, then shuffled off to get his head down.

Lucky sonofabitch, thought Cadillac. Roz had dozed off in the ox-cart, but he had found it impossible to relax and was now almost out on his feet. His eyes itched with tiredness. He longed to rub them but could not do so without removing his face mask - and he couldn't do that in Mishiko's presence.

He blinked himself awake, stifled a monster yawn another luxury denied to anyone wearing a mask - and willed himself to keep going. The plan they had hatched called for three more vital objectives to be achieved during the night. It was now 06:31 and still dark, but the lower ranks who were saddled with the daily task of lighting fires, fetching and heating water and preparing food would soon be up and moving around.

Ten minutes later, when the exhausted servants were sleeping soundly, Mishiko led Cadillac and Roz back into the corridor, up the steps at the end into the room beyond. Behind an ornate folding screen, was the entrance to another secret passageway. This one was concealed behind a large, seemingly solid, vertical slab of wood, supporting a heavy ceiling beam at the point where it met the wall.

Anyone passing through the narrow aperture had to squeeze through sideways, but the passageway beyond widened to accommodate them in single file. Roz and Mishiko were able to proceed without hindrance, but

the restricted dimensions forced Cadillac to walk with hunched shoulders and lowered head. Like its underground counterpart, the passageway twisted and turned and was joined to others, equally narrow and shrouded in darkness.

Was the entire palace riddled with similar secret bolt-holes?

And how had they been built without their existence becoming common knowledge?

Cadillac did not intend to press Mishiko for answers to such questions.

The system was in place, and it served their purpose admirably, but it was a sad commentary on life at the top. It also presented a strange paradox.

To build a castle with a network of secret escape routes implied that the past and present Shoguns lived in constant fear of. coups and assassinations - yet the belief system by which samurai lived demanded a calm acceptance of death. Perhaps that calm acceptance only applied to those samurai lower down the pyramid, whose job it was to die defending their lords and masters.

After a journey lasting a fraction under nine minutes, but which seemed to take forever, they arrived at their destination. Emerging through a similar fake wall beam, Cadillac and Roz joined Mishiko in Yoritomo's deserted bedchamber.

Working to a pre-arranged plan, Roz took control of Mishiko's mind and conjured up a ghostly smoke-wreathed image of the Herald Toshiro HaseGawa.

Mishiko stood rooted to the spot as he strode forward, drew her protectively to him and begged her to watch and listen to the spirit-witches.

It was, of course, Cadillac's voice she was hearing, but in her mind, it was the Herald who appeared to speak in the same tired, husky voice as before.

Prior to leaving Mishiko's apartments, Cadillac had taken a cloth-covered bundle from the small amount of baggage he and Roz had brought with them in the long-boat and had carried into the castle.

Kneeling down, he placed it on the floor and unwrapped it carefully.

It was the radio unit from the wrecked \$kyhawk.

He prayed to Mo-Town that it was still working, then uttered some deep-throated mumbo-jumbo for Mishiko's benefit and caressed the radio with his hands, switching on the various functions as he did so. The jewel-like status lights gleamed.

'The box lives, sire,' intoned Cadillac in the same spooky spell-casting voice.

The Herald squeezed Mishiko's hand. 'I have devised a fitting punishment for the Lord Chamberlain. He is to be trapped by the self-same devices he has used to maintain his grip on the reins of power! That box is filled with the Dark Light - but have no fear! It cannot harm you - only those who are evil! Ieyasu's own words will betray him and deliver him up to the Shogun's wrath. Once Ieyasu is

dead, the way will be clear for you to wreak vengeance on my betrayer!

Tempt him with the honeyed words he cannot resist, and when it is done, step through The Veil and join hands with me in a bright shining world without end!" 'I will not fail you,' whispered Mishiko.

'Then put your faith and trust in the spirit-witches, for it is their magic that will bring us together!" The Herald embraced Mishiko fiercely. 'I must go, my love! But do not fear! I am never far away and will return to you tonight!" And with that he was gone.

Roz caught her as she swayed, overcome by the shock of seeing, holding and hearing her dead lover then being torn with equal suddenness from his arms.

It took Mishiko a few moments to recover her composure then she asked: 'What does the box do?"

'I am told it captures voices that pass through the air like autumn leaves carried on the wind. It was taken from a spy employed by Lord Ieyasu - as was this." Cadillac produced the miniature listening device and placed it in his open palm.

Mishiko took a cautious step forward. The kneeling witch appeared to be holding a black go stone. 'And what is this?"

'It is an ear, mi'lady. If this is placed in the room where the Lord Chamberlain converses with his secretaries and officials, it will pass their words into this box. Everything they say will be overhead and remembered.'

Cadillac grasped the bug between his thumb and forefinger and offered it up for Lady Mishiko to take a closer look. 'The box has another magic attribute. It can speak with the voices passed to it by this black stone.'

If the Shogun could be persuaded to listen, he would hear all that the Lord Chamberlain had to say as clearly as if he were in the same room!' Mishiko got the picture in nought seconds flat. 'Then let us hide the stone where it will do the most harm.'

The secret passage linking Yoritomo's apartments with Mishiko's also gave access to Ieyasu's darkly luxurious quarters. After planting the listening device in the Chamberlain's study- the room in which, according to Mishiko, he received his closest aides for confidential briefings, they returned to the Shogun's empty apartments.

The first glimmerings of daylight were beginning to filter through the shutters as Cadillac tuned the transceiver unit onto the wavelength of the hidden bug, and quietly blessed Steve Brickman for providing albeit unwittingly - a basic grounding in the science of radio-communications.

When placed in position and activated, the operator manning the receiver could induce the device to transmit a measured series of electronic bleeps to check (a) that it was working and (b) the quality of reception.

Cadillac got an extra bonus - voices and the sound of movement- the rustle of stockinged feet over straw mats.

He quickly turned up the volume and hit the Record button.

'... as you see the rooms have been cleaned and prepared.'

Mishiko gasped in surprise as the disembodied voice came out of the box. 'That is Tokimasa, the Palace Steward.'

The bug captured another voice: 'Have them swept and dusted again tomorrow morning. They must be spotless when the Lord Chamberlain arrives.'

'They will be. Do you know the hour we may expect him?'

'Around midday. The last message said they had been delayed by heavy rainstorms.'

'Who is that?' hissed Cadillac.

'I'm not sure. 'Mishiko listened intently.

'This place is freezing cold, Tokimasa! Unlike you, he doesn't have several inches of fat to keep him warm.'

Please arrange for someone to place charcoal braziers in all the rooms, and make sure they are kept burning all night.'

'I shall attend to it immediately.'

'Good. I have also received confirmation that our two visitors will

also be arriving tomorrow morning. Are their rooms prepared?"

'Yes. On the second floor of the southern tower. But as yet I have received no instructions as to what kind of food should be prepared for them.'

The mystery speaker laughed. 'They only look different from us, Tokimasa! Slice their bellies open and you'll find their guts are exactly the same as ours. The normal palace menu will suit them perfectly- but make sure their rooms are warm and the windows are kept shut. They are not used to fresh air!'

'Strange people. I would love the chance to see one.'

'I cannot promise anything, my friend, but I will see what can be done '

Sounds of movement. The voices receded.

Mishiko clapped her hands together. 'Of course! Oh, dear, what was I thinking of? The second voice belongs to Tekko Ichiwara! He is the man I told you about - the Lord Chamberlain's Resident Private Secretary!' Cadillac cursed inwardly. Ichiwara was the third and final element in the audacious plan he had hatched with Roz to bring down the Toh-Yota. Having talked to Mishiko about his role in the palace, Cadillac was

convinced Ichiwara was the link between Ieyasu and the communications unit which - if his reasoning was correct - was hidden somewhere in or close by the Summer Palace.

The plan had called for them to get to Ichiwara during that same night.

Roz would then do a number on him, and trick him into revealing the location of the hidden radio room.

Knowing where to find it was the last, vital element.

The bug they had planted might provide the evidence they needed - but only if Ieyasu was unwise enough to incriminate himself in his study.

If he switched venues, or spoke guardedly at all times, they would be well and truly screwed.

Locating the radio and its operator was the only thing guaranteed to nail him to the wall. Tekko Ichiwara, the man most likely to lead them to it, was already out of bed and out of reach for the next twelve to sixteen hours, depending on when he went to bed- and always assuming nothing happened to him in the meantime!

There was this Guard Captain of Mishiko's who had to be talked into doing his bit, but otherwise they were now stuck twiddling their thumbs till nightfall. Even so, they had done amazingly well to get this far.

Cadillac consoled himself with the thought that they still had a day in hand, but he could have done without the suspense.

Satisfied that the equipment was in working order, he rewound the tape, switched off the transceiver, wrapped the cloth around it, then hid it under one of the wooden steps inside the secret passage that led up to the Shogun's bedchamber.

This time, as Lady Mishiko guided them back to her apartments, Cadillac made a mental note of the distance and the route. Emerging into the empty room where their journey had begun, they found that daylight was now streaming through the shutters.

Accompanied by his daughter Oyoki, Captain Kamakura entered Lady Mishiko's apartments unobserved. He was met 'by the Lady herself. She looked drawn and somewhat dishevelled, but Oyoki had already explained how they came to be there, after a narrow escape from violent death en route.

After the ritual exchange of greetings, Mishiko asked Kamakura to follow her into the room she used for private audiences. Oyoki was ordered to remain outside and admit no one until they emerged. If she needed any assistance, she was to wake the sleeping guards.

Oyoki bowed, slid the wall panel shut behind them, and seated herself in front of it.

Inside the room, Mishiko took up her usual position on the raised section of the floor. Behind her was a folding screen decorated with a painting of long-legged wading birds. Kamakura seated himself on the cushioned place-mat immediately below the dais. The difference in levels, a feature of all such audience rooms, was designed to emphasise the separation and superiority of nobles from ordinary mortals.

'Captain, I speak to you as one who is known for his absolute loyalty to the Shogun, Prince Yoritomo, and who knows me as someone who serves him with the same devotion. But there are others in this family, who while paying lip-service to him as their supreme lord, chief of the armies and ruler of the seventeen domains, seek to take unto themselves the powers that are rightfully his.

'They have done so under the pretence of giving advice, but my brother has been ill-used by those intent on feathering their own nests. But that is not all. I have discovered he has been betrayed by those closest to him, and that is why I need your help.

'The Yama-Shita have proof that the Lord Chamberlain has entered into a secret alliance with the long-dogs who live beneath the southern deserts without the knowledge of my brother! They have supplied him and his agents with devices filled with the Dark Light, and these have been used to extend Lord Ieyasu's control over the Shogun and this country in defiance of the

Sacred Edict and the other honourable and ancient traditions we revere!

'Lord Ieyasu has undermined everything the TohYota and their allies have fought to maintain down the centuries - the purity and simplicity of our way of life. He has played into the hands of the YamaShita and their allies who - were they given free rein - would unleash the madness which afflicted our ancestors and bring down upon us the wrath of The Shining .One who sent fire from heaven to consume the World Before!

'They intend to spread word of Lord Ieyasu's duplicity throughout this land, and parade the proof they have - strange devices that send voices through the air and captured long-dogs who have been sent here to instruct the Chamberlain's servants on how they may be employed.

And when they do, our friends will think all this was done with my brother's connivance, or that he is a gullible weakling. Were this to happen, his position and authority could be fatally compromised.

'This I know and more. You can now understand why it is vital that I gain access to my brother without Lord Ieyasu intervening. The Shogun has to act swiftly - to cut out this rotteness before it brings down the Toh-Yota. Can I count on you to help me?"

Kamakura moved from a cross-legged to a kneeling position and went forward on his hands. 'To the death, mi'lady."

'I am deeply grateful, Kamakura. Happily, we are not alone. The gods have blessed our actions, and they have made their powers available to us through my two gifted companions." Mishiko extended her arms sideways and snapped her fingers.

It was the signal for Cadillac and Roz to step out from behind the screen. The kneeling samurai stiffened at the sight of the two white-masked, travel-stained figures, dressed in hooded capes whose hems were spattered with mud. They bowed to him, then knelt down on either side of Lady Mishiko.

Cadillac drew his voice from the depths of his throat.

'Greetings, Captain. Do not be alarmed by what you are about to hear or see. We are spirit-witches from the depths of the Red Hills, and we are here at the bidding of someone who remains dear to your heart - the Herald Toshiro Hase-Gawa. He has a message for you."

Kamakura gasped. Like Lady Mishiko and the overwhelming majority of Iron Masters, he believed in good and evil spirits and the existence of witches able to communicate with and conjure up the souls of the dead.

But he had never undergone such an experience and the prospect alarmed him.

Mishiko stepped down from the dais and knelt beside Kamakura.

'Courage, Captain,' she whispered. 'What you are about to learn will strengthen your resolve to protect my brother's honour." She addressed Cadillac.

'We are ready."

On being given the signal, Roz took control of their minds and made the

Herald appear before them. By the time he faded from view, Captain Kamakura was left in no doubt that Ieyasu and his aides had plotted Toshiro's death and poisoned the Shogun's mind in order to achieve their objective: the discrediting of the College of Herald's and its takeover by the Office of the Lord Chamberlain.

Before falling under Roz's spell, Kamakura had already pledged himself to aid Mishiko. Now, as his spirit returned to his body - or so he believed he was prepared to offer her strange allies the same unquestioning assistance, for in a final twist to the seance, Roz had relinquished her control of Mishiko and concentrated on the samurai, ending his mind-trip with a scene filled with light and majesty in which the Shogun rewarded Kamakura's loyal endeavours by arranging for his daughters to be married to the scions of various well-connected families.

For this honest, long-serving soldier, it was the realisation of his most cherished dream. It was also the cruellest of deceptions, for if Cadillac's plan succeeded, Yoritomo

would not live long enough to reward anyone, and the Captain and his family might soon suffer a similar fate

Mishiko resumed her seat on the dais, between the two spirit-witches.

Now fully aware of the task which lay ahead, Kamakura applied his mind to the practical problems that faced them. Mishiko and her party could not remain concealed in her apartments all day. Apart from needing a hot bath, they would need a supply of food, fuel and water. There was also the basic but unavoidable problem of sanitation.

The chamberpots in the wooden cabinets would have to be emptied if they were not to stink the place out.

None of these things could be done without risking discovery. Mishiko and Cadillac were forced to agree.

It would be dangerous to remain. What did the Captain propose?

'Mi'lady, if I may be so bold, I suggest you leave the castle by the way you came. I will meet you and your servants at a pre-arranged spot with a few trusted men, and convey you to my humble abode which as you know is situated beyond the Palace walls.

'Once you are installed in as much comfort as can be provided I will send my men with one of yours to collect your three children and the rest of your retinue from the farm. They too will shelter in my house for the rest of today and overnight, then tomorrow you and your companions can re-enter the Palace. I shall meet you here, by which time I hope to have found a way to conduct you to the Shogun's apartments without being stopped by men loyal to the Lord Chamberlain."

'I already know of a way, Captain. All you have to do is meet us here - leaving us enough time to be in position when the Shogun reaches his apartments."

Kamakura bowed. 'I shall not fail you, mi'lady."

Cadillac leaned forward. 'There is one more task which has to be completed before dawn tomorrow. We need to make contact with Secretary Ichihara during the hours of darkness. Do you know this man?"

'Yes, I do, uhh. sire." Kamakura wasn't quite sure how you were supposed to address a spirit-witch.

'Good. By nightfall, we shall require a plan showing where his bed-chamber is situated within the palace, together with details of when he sleeps and whether or not he sleeps alone. If his servants are lodged nearby, we also need to know their names and how many there are, and whether the corridors leading to his quarters from Lady Mishiko's apartments are patrolled by guards around the hour of midnight."

And if his door is locked, I imagine you will require a key,' concluded Kamakura.

."That is correct, captain. We have power over natural objects, but locks, being man-made, do not readily respond to magic spells."

When it was their turn to enjoy the facilities of Kamakura's bath-house, Mishiko ensured that Cadillac and Roz were left to relax in complete privacy. Having his back scrubbed by naked body-slaves was

something Cadillac had enjoyed during his previous stay in Ne-Issan, but that was one of the minor details of life under the Iron Masters he had omitted to mention to Roz. The way he told it, the long months had been spent in unremitting hard work in an atmosphere of constant danger made even more hazardous by Steve's double-dealing.

As always, Roz had refused to let him blacken the character of the person she still regarded as her kin-brother.

This continued support for someone whom she had assured him - she no longer loved was a constant source of annoyance. But since Roz wasn't frightened to stand up to him, he took care to avoid heated arguments wherever possible, contenting himself with taking the odd sidelong swipe at Steve's character and credibility when a suitable opportunity occurred.

Captain Kamakura had been cautioned not to reveal they were witches.

As far as his family and Mishiko's retinue were concerned, they were still high-class courtesans.

sans hiding their identity, in the time-honoured manner, behind the white-masks that signalled their calling. And if they wished to bathe without assistance, then that was their right.

It was fortunate they could rely on their hosts' discretion.

Had anyone entered the steam-filled room and caught sight of their long-dog features and multicoloured skins it could have ruined everything. In an emergency, Roz could mask their appearance, but it was not something she could do continuously. The mental effort was less debilitating than the act of summoning, but it was still exhausting.

As they wallowed neck-deep in the hot tub, Cadillac related the cryptic conversation about the Shogun's visitors, picked up by the bug they had placed in Ieyasu's room. 'From what Ichiwara said they're obviously outlanders - and they don't like fresh air. What does that suggest to you?'

'Trackers. Who else would fit that description?'

'Exactly. Two emissaries from the Federation. What are they up to?'

'Well, they haven't come all this way to wish everyone a happy New Year!' said Roz. 'It must be to negotiate some kind of a deal. The outfit Steve works for is already supplying radio equipment to Ieyasu's spy network ' 'Yeah, but the Shogun doesn't know about that. This has to be something else. Something bigger maybe.'

'So what? If Mishiko does her stuff, there won't be anyone for them to do a deal with!' 'You're missing the point. It would be useful to know what the Federation is after. If the Shogun and Ieyasu supposedly the most powerful men in Ne-Issan - have travelled here to meet with them, these guys aren't going to be talking about doing a trade in cotton socks. This has got to be high level stuff - which means that the Federation will have sent a couple of heavyweights to represent them. Right?'

'Yes, I suppose they would. But I still don't see - ' Cadillac could not contain his excitement. 'Isn't it obvious?! If we could capture them and get them out of here, we could trade them for Clearwater and her child!' Roz fixed him with a wide-eyed stare. 'On top of taking out the Shogun and Ieyasu? You must be out of your mind!' 'On the contrary. It's the best idea I've had yet.'

'Not from where I'm standing. If- and it's a BIG "if" - we manage to do what we came to do, we're going to have our work cut out just getting away without adding any further complications!' 'What do you mean?'

· 'What I mean is you've got everything plotted beautifully up to the point when Ieyasu and Yoritomo are stopped in their tracks, but I'm still waiting to hear about our escape plan!' 'I'm working on it.'

'I hope you are!' 'I am! But this could be a golden opportunity to grab a couple of hostages. Why rely on Brickman when we can set up a deal ourselves?!' 'Caddy! I've already told you! We've got enough on our plate as it is. These emissaries you're so excited about may not be as important as you think. We don't know why they're coming here and we're not going to have time to find out. Steve is still our best bet as far as Clearwater is concerned, so quit bad-mouthing him

otherwise you and I are going to fall out. Okay?"

'Okay, okay. I'm not going to push you on this - ' 'You'd better not!'
'Just bear it in mind.'

'Right! That's it!" Roz slapped two handfuls of water into his face, grabbed hold of his hair, and held him under.

As Cadillac and Roz struggled playfully, neither of them had any idea that Steve was one of the emissaries the Federation had selected. And because the mind-bridge linking her to Steve remained blocked, Roz

was

unaffected by his physical condition. Which at that moment was something to be thankful for.

The steam-powered junk Steve and Fran had boarded off Cape Fear was still two hundred miles south of Aron-Giren. After a second day and night of pitching and rolling in rough seas, Fran lay, drained of colour, on her mattress bed, unable to stand on her feet without assistance. Faced with the grim prospect of another day trapped in a wooden box that heaved sickeningly in all directions, death seemed to offer a welcome release.

Steve, the nursemaid, comforter and macho mariner, was now feeling pretty wretched himself. His earlier feigned nonchalance had gone, along with all pretence at having a cast-iron stomach. The merest smell of food made him feel sick, and he had now reached the point where it was proving difficult to hold even a glass of water down.

All either of them could think of was that longed-for moment when they set foot on solid ground. Neither had any inkling they were soon to be swept into even more dangerous waters

Since the Shogun and the Lord Chamberlain had not yet arrived at the Palace, Kamakura's duties as the senior Captain of the Palace Guard were not particularly onerous. Apart from a meeting with Tokimasa, the Resident Steward, and Ichiwara, he was able to delegate inspections and guard-mounting ceremonies to his junior officers, giving him most of the day to attend to the needs of Lady Mishiko.

When night fell, he suggested that it would be wiser if she remained in his house with her children and retinue, leaving him to enter the Palace with the two spirit-witches via the secret tunnel. He had obtained the required information about Secretary Ichiwara, and as an officer privileged to bear arms in the presence of the Shogun, he had unchallenged access to all parts of the Palace.

If he were seen, no one would think to question his presence, and if by chance they did, he could say he was making a last-minute check on the security arrangements.

If Lady Mishiko, on the other hand, ran into a member of Lord Ieyasu's staff or one of his place-men, then the vital element of surprise would be lost.

Mishiko agreed without hesitation. Cadillac also voiced his approval.

It was a good move - always provided they didn't lose their way going through the tunnel. Asking for ink, writing brush and paper, Mishiko quickly prepared an annotated route map and handed over the key.

Once again, the conversation left Roz on the sidelines, but when she saw Mishiko prepare the map and give Kamakura the key, it all became clear. As soon as they were aboard the covered cart, with Kamakura seated up front with one of Mishiko's guards as driver, the rumbling clatter of the wheels allowed Cadillac to explain everything in detail.

By the time they reached the drop-off point for the mausoleum, Roz knew what she had to do. The final scenario would have to wait until she got inside Ichiwara's head.

Recruiting Kamakura onto their team proved to be their biggest stroke

of luck so far. It was obvious from the purposeful way he walked that he knew his way around the Palace, but he hadn't known about the secret tunnels.

He had long suspected their existence, but actually seeing them, and the maze of run-offs, had come as a big surprise.

Once they were out of Mishiko's apartments, it didn't take long to reach the area occupied by senior administrators.

They encountered several guards on the way, but only one or two at a time. Roz dealt with them all in turn, taking control of Kamakura's mind on each occasion.

Cadillac had already warned the Captain that they would change their appearance if danger threatened, but he was still staggered by the speed and power of their witchcraft. Every time they sighted a guard, he turned to find that the white-masked figures behind him had been magically transformed into splendidly-dressed, high-ranking noblemen.

It was little wonder that the guards dropped to their knees and kept their eyes on the floor until they had swept by.

On reaching Secretary Ichiwara's quarters, Kamakura gave them whispered directions on how to get to the bedroom, then remained on guard in the corridor while they went in. Cadillac and Roz tip-toed across the floor past Ichiwara's sleeping man-servant, grimacing at every heart-stopping creak as one of the ancient floor-timbers flexed under their weight.

The servant stirred, muttered something, then rolled over onto his back. His sleeping face with its half-open mouth slowly sagged towards them. His nose twitched.

A hand appeared from under the heavy quilted coverlet to rub the troublesome organ, then vanished.

Motioning Roz not to move, Cadillac caught Kamakura's eye and gestured towards the servant. Seeing their predicament, the samurai entered, moved soundlessly to the far side of the servant's floorbed and delivered a carefully-aimed punch just below the right ear. The sleeping body went completely limp.

Ichiwara opened his eyes to find his mother gently shaking him by the shoulder. Seeing her came as a shock because another part of Ichiwara's mind knew she had been dead for over ten years, having died after catching pneumonia at the age of sixty-nine. But here she was, with the lines etched in her face by the inexorable passage of time magically wiped away.

This was the face he remembered leaning over his bed during his childhood years, a face filled with love, accompanied by gentle hands that caressed his brow. And he knew he was not really awake, for he often dreamt of returning home and discovering his parents - who he had seen cremated - were still living there. And they would explain their absence by saying they had just been away.

But this dream was so real! He could feel her hand on his shoulder.

But what was she doing in the palace?

'lchi! lchi! Wake up! There is an important message from Lord Ieyasu!' 'Message? What does it say?'

'I don't know! Your father says it's something to do with Lady Mishiko! Quick! You must go and fetch it! There is no time to lose!' 'But Mother - I' 'Don't argue! Your father and I will come with you.'

Ichiwara felt himself being lifted out of bed and set on his feet.

Message... important. he had to get the message. A lantern appeared in his hand.

Roz and Cadillac helped Ichiwara don a long robe, then stayed within arm's length as he gathered up a set of keys and walked out of his bed-chamber and past the unconscious man-servant. Ichiwara's eyes were open, but he was on auto-pilot. It was the first time Roz had taken control of someone's mind while they were asleep but it seemed to be working.

'Good boy, Ichi!' whispered Cadillac. 'Your mother and I are right behind you.'

Kamakura joined them as they tailed the secretary along the corridor.

If there was a hidden radio transmitter then, reasoned Cadillac, it would be hidden within easy reach of Ieyasu's base of operations within the Palace.

And so it proved.

After climbing a couple of flights of back stairs, the semi-conscious Ichiwara used one of his keys to unlock a heavy door and led them into what looked like a records office.

There were several rows of low writing tables, and the wall spaces between the narrow windows were lined with racks of pigeonholes and shelves, all stuffed with sheaves of documents. Some of the rectangular compartments were fitted with doors.

Ichiwara, whose dark blank eyes gave no sign of registering his surroundings, shut and locked the outside door, then crossed the room and used a smaller key to open one of the sealed compartments at eye-level.

It was empty. He shut the door and withdrew the key.

'There is no message,' he murmured.

'There is! There is!' whispered Cadillac with a touch of desperation. 'So be a good boy and find it before we all get into trouble.'

Ichiwara gave a long-suffering sigh, then bent down, reached under one of the lower shelves and pressed something. As he heard the oiled click, Cadillac waved frantically to Roz and Kamakura to take cover.

They dropped out of sight among the lines of writing tables.

He followed them to the floor and got a line of sight on Ichiwara as a door-sized section of shelving swung outwards on concealed hinges.

Behind it was a wall made of dressed, mortared stone.

Or what looked like stone. Ichiwara used the key to rap several times on a particular stone. The beats and pauses were obviously a form of code. For a moment or two nothing happened, then the exposed slab of stonework hinged inwards, revealing a hidden chamber illuminated from within.

Cadillac caught a brief glimpse of a bald operator in a black, short-sleeved tunic over a bare chest. Behind him, he saw part of a shelf and the right-hand edge of a neat stack of radio equipment. He clenched his fists exultantly and only just managed to stop himself from drumming them on the floor.

Sweet Sky Mother! They'd got him!

He strained to hear the muttered conversation between Ichiwara and the radio operator.

'There is no message, sir. You've been dreaming. Go back to bed. If anything urgent comes through I'll drop a ball down the tube.'

'You're sure' Ichiwara's voice was slurred.

'Absolutely, sir. Now go back to bed.'

The radio-operator turned Ichiwara around, propelled him gently back in the direction of the locked outer door and pulled the shelf-section shut behind him. Ichiwara blundered against the line of writing tables close to where Roz and Kamakura were hiding. Amazingly, the blow to his shins failed to wake him up. Roz got to her feet and renewed the image of his mother in Ichiwara's mind.

Ichiwara allowed himself to be led to the door where Cadillac joined them. He had never seen anyone sleepwalk before, and he couldn't get over the fact that Ichiwara could find his way from A to B, select the right key to unlock the door and do all the other things he had done without being fully conscious. It was quite amazing. The three of them followed Ichiwara back along the deserted corridors to his quarters. The servant hadn't moved.

'Is he dead?' whispered Cadillac.

'No,' said Kamakura. 'That particular neck-punch merely knocks a man senseless for an hour or more.'

Do you want me to kill him?"

'No, that won't be necessary.' Cadillac tip-toed into the bed-chamber and found Roz drawing the coverlet over Ichiwara's sleeping form.

'There was no message, mother.'

'There, there, never mind. It's not your fault. It was all a mistake.

Your father is so busy these days, he must have got things mixed up.

You know what he's like. Just go to sleep and don't worry about it any more."

'All right, but you must promise not to go away.'

'Of course i'm not going to go away! Whatever makes you think I would such a thing? I love you, my darling, and I always will.'

Deep within the subconscious where external reality becomes the stuff of dreams, Ichiwara thought: what strange tricks the mind can play!

For years he had believed his mother was dead, but here she was miraculously restored to life and as beautiful as in his tenderest memory of her. She leaned down over his bed, tucked the goose-down quilt snugly round his body then stroked and kissed his forehead. He felt warm, happy and secure.

And he was glad to be home

CHAPTER TEN

The stormy weather, which had plagued Steve and Fran, finally blew itself out during the third night leaving the junk gliding across a tranquil moonlit sea. When they felt they could trust the deck not to throw them off balance, Steve helped Fran to her feet and over to a stem window.

A three-quarter moon had bleached a big grey hole in the sky, but where it shaded off into solid black it was sprinkled with stars. The jewelled eyes in Mo-Town's cloak Beneath them lay the Atlantic Ocean, a vast gleaming sheet of hammered silver whose distant edges were shadowed by the thin band of frosted blue clouds that rimmed the horizon.

'Now you've got to admit that's beautiful.'

'Ask me that again when they start pouring concrete,' said Fran. 'I've had it with oceans.'

'Yeah, well, it's been a pretty rough ride. Fujiwara says it's going to stay calm from now until we dock tomorrow morning.' Steve tried walking back and forth across the floor then halted in front of Fran 'Makes a change being able to move around without being pitched on your nose.'

You oughta 'try it. Might make you feel better if you stretch your legs - do a little exercise. And who knows?

You might even be able to face a - ' 'Don't say it, Brickman! Don't even think about it!' Fran had not only gone off food, after an abortive attempt on their first night at sea, she'd given up on screwing as well - which in her case was a sure sign she was seriously indisposed. But as Steve knew from previous experience, sea-sickness, as opposed to drowning, is not fatal, and the victim recovers rapidly on reaching shore.

After several hours of restful sleep on a calm sea, he was already on the mend, and upon waking he saw layered shafts of pale winter sunlight piercing the darkness of his shuttered cabin. He leapt out of bed, splashed cold water on his face, went out onto the stern balcony to fill his lungs with cold, fresh air, then put himself through the limbering-up exercises he and his classmates had been required to perform every morning for three years at the Flight Academy. After the last fifty press-ups, his body was tingling from head to toe and he suddenly realised he was very hungry.

And this time, the meal stayed down.

Fran joined him after it had been cleared away by the Thai servant girls. She was still unable to face solid food, but she looked a lot better. Her tanned skin had regained most of its usual colour; this time yesterday, her face had been a greenish grey. All it lacked now was a smile.

Spending three days at sea with Fran had taught Steve a great deal.

The adverse conditions they had encountered had brought out and reinforced the most unappealing aspects of her character. The pampering and the privileges that had been part of her birthright might have taught her how to order other people around, but they had left her woefully ill-equipped to endure any kind of hardship. On the other hand, that may have been why the President-General had decided to send

her on this mission. To give her a taste of life at the sharp end
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Having been fully briefed on the geography of Ne-Issan as part of their preparation for this high-level encounter, Steve was able to recognise the land mass they were approaching. Prior to the Holocaust, it had been known as Long Island. The Iron Masters, who had kept many of the old place names but had problems getting their tongue round certain consonants, called it AronGiren.

If this was where they were due to land, it meant they were headed for the Summer Palace.

Steve checked the serf-winding wrist watch he had been given in place of his battery-powered digital model. It was just after nine a.m. Before leaving, they had each been

issued with a special miniaturised communications pack for use in an emergency. These had been concealed in a layer of foam padding under the false bottom of their trail bags.

Karlstrom had told them that the Chamberlain's office would report their safe arrival over their secret radio link with AMEXICO. The communications pack was only to be used as a last resort, in the direst of dire emergencies.

Not of course that he was expecting anything to go wrong.

The meetings with the Lord Chamberlain and the Shogun and their officials were scheduled to last three days. He and Fran would return by junk to Cape Fear then by SkyRider to the AMEXICO base near Houston/GC.

Karlstrom's warning about their electronic aids had been aimed at Fram Steve already knew from personal experience how nervous most Iron Masters became when confronted with devices powered by 'the Dark Light'.

The ruling Toh-Yota and their traditionalist allies were implacably opposed to the use of electricity in any form, but as Steve had discovered since going overground, nothing in this big wide world was what it seemed. A special cadre of agents employed by Ieyasu, the Lord Chamberlain, had been using powerful handsets and a variety of surveillance equipment for over a decade.

If the existence of AMEXICO was the best-kept secret of all, this covert use of radios by Ieyasu's agents ran it a close second - and it was destined to remain so.

It was Karlstrom who had set up the deal on behalf of AMEXICO following a series of secret discussions with Ieyasu's most senior aide.

Karlstrom and Ieyasu had finally met on Mute territory close to Ne-Issan's southern border to put their signatures to a mutual aid treaty between their respective intelligence organisations.

Now, Steve and Fran were on their way to propose another aid package, but this was not another hole-in-the corner deal between two spy-masters: this time the goods and services on offer were so comprehensive, they could only be supplied with the full knowledge and approval of the Shogun.

Passing through the channel between the overlapping sand-bars which guarded the south-facing coastline of Long Island, the junk entered Great South Bay, and turned eastwards, towards the cluster of small islands where the junk carrying Cadillac and Roz had been moored some thirty-six hours earlier.

Now that they were close inshore and within hailing distance of other coastal traffic, Fujiwara had asked them not to use the stern gallery.

The shutters protecting the cabin windows against the storm also had to remain closed. Through the angled slits Steve saw the crew of a small oarboat fishing broken timbers out of the water.

Looking farther afield, he saw there were several other boats doing the same thing. He heard people shouting on deck, then the junk came to a shuddering halt as the propellor slowed and was thrown into reverse,

causing the sea to boil thunderously under the stern.

Fran came through from the portside cabin. 'Quick!

Someone's spotted a body in the water!" She ran back so as not to miss anything. Steve, his curiosity aroused, joined her at the window. It was the first time she'd had a smile on her face in three days.

Karlstrom was right. This girl was dangerous to know.

There was more muffled shouting from the deck above.

'What's happening?" asked Steve.

'They're calling out to that small boat over there - see?

Telling them where the body is. It's close to the ship. But of course with these things in the way you can't see a bloody thing!" She slammed the heel of her hand against the locked shutters to vent her frustration.

The oarboat was now making its way towards the junk.

There was another exchange of shouts. 'It's now almost underneath us,' said Fran. 'It's got no head. Half of one leg is missing and its arms are tied behind its back. That's kind of weird isn't it? What d'you think happened?"

'No idea,' said Steve. 'This is a big stretch of water.

Maybe it has big fish in it that eat people."

'You mean they tie people up and throw them overboard?"

'Commander, compared to some of the ways the Iron Masters have of killing people that's nothing, believe me.'

Although Steve and Fran didn't know it, the junk was now covering the same stretch of water as the loaded longboat.

Its destination was Bei-poro, the small harbour that Cadillac had taken care to avoid. As they drew closer to shore, Fujiwara knocked on the outside cabin door and entered to explain the landing procedure. Two of the servant women followed him in, carrying several neatly folded garments.

When the junk had been secured fore and aft by ropes to the iron stanchions of the jetty, Fujiwara came downstairs to collect his visitors. Steve and Fran now wore the classic loose black tunic, sash and trousers normally reserved exclusively for samurai, white, split-toed socks and rope-soled sandals. The camouflage fatigues and boots they had worn up to boarding the junk had been packed away in their luggage, alongside the silver grey and dark blue First Family uniforms they planned to wear when meeting the Shogun.

Fujiwara had also furnished them with lacquered papier maché masks moulded to cover their faces from hairline to chin, and from ear to ear. A pair of gloves and a warm hooded cloak with the cowl drawn well forward completed their disguise. At the top of the companionway, they found the same side and roof screens obscuring their view of the main deck. Directly in front of them lay the open door of a two-seat carriage-box.

'What about our baggage?' enquired Steve.

Fujiwara bowed. 'That will follow with servants.' He made sure they were securely seated then closed the door.

The interior was comfortably padded and furnished with richly coloured fabrics, but there were no windows.

The Iron Masters who used this class of carriage-box liked their privacy, but there was adequate ventilation, and the outside world could be glimpsed through the tiny .262 apertures in the pierced wooden screens fitted at shoulder height on either side of each passenger.

The four Vietnamese serving-women, who had never travelled in anything better than an open ox-cart, could hardly believe their luck when Fujiwara told them they would be travelling in two more closed carriage-boxes with the luggage.

Make the most of it, thought Fujiwara. He had been instructed to have them killed as soon as the long-dogs left Ne-Issan to return home. No one, outside Ieyasu's most trusted group of special agents, was allowed to know that this visit had taken place.

Fujiwara, now wearing the same traditional black travelling-dress as Fran and Steve, took leave of the ship's captain and officers, and strode down the gangway followed- at a respectful distance - by the servant-women in their baggy brown tunics and trousers that were drawn into a cuff around the neck, wrists and ankles.

His four companions were already astride their horses.

When the servant women had boarded the waiting vehicles, Fujiwara took the reins of his own mount from the groom and swung into the

high-backed saddle with the fluid movements that were the mark of a skilled horseman. He waved to the porters waiting on the deck of the junk.

Steve and Fran felt themselves lifted into the air.

The box angled forward as they were carried down the gangplank, obliging Fran to hold onto the wall handles to avoid sliding into Steve's lap. The box levelled out again, then rose, wobbling from side to side as it was manoeuvred onto the two-wheeled chassis. The retaining pegs were slid into place and hammered tight with a single clout from a wooden mallet, then there were two dull clunks as the fore and aft cross-bars were fitted to the slab-sided carrying poles.

From his previous time in Ne-Issan Steve knew the number of porters depended on the importance of the passenger - which bore a direct relationship to the amount they could afford to pay. Merchants usually

hired six, two at the front and four at the rear. During the journey, each pair would take it in turns to man the front bar.

There was a shouted command - probably from Fujiwara.

The porters got a grip on the chest-high crossbars and pushed. The wheels trundled noisily over the cobblestone jetty, rocking Steve from side to side. The Iron Masters did not use sprung chassis on their wheeled vehicles; that was why the inside of the carriage-box was padded.

'Yo!" exclaimed Steve. 'We're up and rolling." He removed his face mask. Fran did likewise. 'Are you frightened?"

She had been during the sea-voyage, but it was the wrong word to use that morning about Commander Franklynne Delano Jefferson, now that she was back on solid ground.

'I'm a little apprehensive, aren't you?"

'Not this time. On my last trip there were many occasions when I was scared shitless. But now we're honoured guests- representing the First Family. With the whole weight and authority of the Federation behind us."

'And I've got you to look after me."

'You could do worse, ma'am. You could do worse."

Fran's mouth hardened as her natural arrogance came to the fore, then gradually her face and eyes softened.

Steve's winning smile broadened into a grin.

'Relax. They might not accept what we're going to put on the table, but apart from that, what can happen?" What indeed

The perforations in the side-screens allowed them a partial view of the countryside, but they could only see outwards horizontally; the thickness of the wooden panels and the smallness of the holes prevented them from seeing what lay ahead. The first intimation they were approaching the end of their journey was the sudden change in the sound made by the horses' hooves then the carriage wheels, as their mounted escort left the stone and dirt road and drummed across a planked wooden bridge.

There was a noticeable coolness, a feeling of a massive stone enclosure. The light outside was briefly eclipsed then returned just as swiftly as the horses clattered and the wheels trundled evenly into a courtyard whose walls were made of dressed stone. They were inside the Palace.

Steve motioned to Fran to replace her face mask and did the same, pulling the cowl of his cloak forward so that his head was deeply shadowed. Outside, people were shouting and responding to orders; wooden-soled sandals clattered to and fro.

Fran listened to the babble of voices then said: 'This is not quite the end of the line. They are taking us to the. Inner Court."

The carriage-box was hoisted off its wheeled chassis onto eight new sets of shoulders then carried on a twisting course that took them through a series of walled courtyards containing neatly pruned trees,

shrubs, and ponds fed by small waterfalls, into a long dark passageway and up a flight of stairs, emerging again into the light on a balcony.

Fran and Steve both caught a brief glimpse of a neatly raked stone and pebble garden then a sharp right turn took them back into the shadows.

A moment or two later, they were lowered gently to the floor and the two side poles were withdrawn. They heard several pairs of bare feet shuffle away, followed by the smooth swish of closing wall-screens.

There was a respectful knock on the door followed by Fujiwara's voice, inviting them to step out and remove their masks and hooded cloaks.

Fujiwara stood facing them, flanked by his four companions.

All of them now wore white headbands bearing the red disc - the hinomaru - the rising sun emblem of Ne-Issan. On the left breast of their loose black tunics was a white circle containing two overlapping horizontal bars with chamfered ends - the house badge of the TohYota family.

After everyone had tried to outdo each other in the bowing contest and finally called it a draw, Fujiwara said: 'Allow me to show you to your quarters.'

Steve caught Fran's look and didn't need further prompting. 'When do we get down to business, Major?'

'I regret this is not for me to say. Decisions as to when and where any meetings will take place are made at a very high level. My orders are to ensure that you are properly housed, fed and supplied with every convenience until you are granted audience by those who wish to hear what you have to say.'

As they followed Fujiwara down passages and up more stairs, ever deeper into the Palace, Steve's earlier bravado began to wear off. He hadn't forgotten what had happened on his previous trip but he had put it firmly at the back of his mind. But now, the sights, the sounds and smells wafting on the air were starting to trigger freshly-minted gut-churning memories of his many narrow escapes from violent death.

And with the memories came a growing realisation that if anything was to go badly wrong, he hadn't the faintest idea where the emergency exit was.

On the command of General Tadoshi, the three companies of soldiers stiffened to attention as the Shogun's road convoy rumbled across the drawbridge into the main courtyard of the Summer Palace.

The 4th Guard Company had been allotted the task of manning the outer keep and battlements, much to the relief of the soldiers involved who had been spared the extra bullshit involved in formal parades, plus the inevitable waiting around. The road convoy had been expected to arrive at midday: it was now nearly three in the afternoon.

Backed by his juniors officers, Captain Kamakura stood next to his flag-bearing ensign at the head of the centre company. Captain Mashimatsu headed the block of troops to his right; Captain Setsukane commanded the third company on his left. It was not normal for a samurai-general to lead so small a unit, but the post of Castle Commandant was something of a sinecure. Social rank and the right background were more important than military competence, which was why Tadoshi - an ageing member of the Toh-Yota family - had been given the job.

The Commandant moved forward with his two aides to join the welcoming party: Tokimasa, the Resident Steward and his fawning retinue of floor-polishers, Ichihara, Permanent Secretary of the Chamberlain's Office, and a clutch of senior clerks.

Everyone bowed as first the Shogun, then Ieyasu, descended from their double-width carriage-boxes via the wooden steps that had been rushed into place by their personal servants while grooms steadied the four pairs of sweating oxen.

Anyone armed with the knowledge that the Iron Masters had introduced horses into the Eastern lands several centuries ago might have wondered, with good reason, why they had never harnessed them to carts.

The answer lay in the class system. Only samurai were allowed to ride horses. It was a jealously guarded privilege, conferring unmatched mobility in time of war, and the noble attributes of the rider were deemed to be shared by his steed.

To an Iron Master, it would have been unthinkable to use the same animal as a beast of burden when there was an ample supply of porters

from the lower social classes for short journeys, and field-oxen for the heavier loads and longer hauls. That was why it had taken four and a half days including stop-overs to cover two hundred and seventy-five miles.

Top people like the Shogun and Ieyasu had ridden horses in their early youth, but they were not allowed to do so now. Riding horses was regarded as a life-threatening activity which was all right for military men and noblemen of lesser rank, but not for the ruling elite.

A great deal of effort by a large number of people ensured that when Yoritomo ventured beyond the silken cocoon spun by the Inner Court, he was protected from every possible danger, spared any discomfort and shielded from casual encounters with the lower classes - whose

appearance and behaviour might accidentally offend his finer sensibilities.

Once the formal greetings had been exchanged between the top brass, General Tadoshi conducted Yoritomo and Lord Ieyasu to the covered dais in front of the assembled troops. Kamakura, as Senior Captain of the Guard, bowed from the waist, then drew and raised his sword, and called upon the soldiers to join him in the loyal greeting to their Shogun.

The junior officers' swords flashed into the air, the ensigns and soldiers raised their right arms in a clenched-fist salute, and the air shook as over four hundred full-blooded voices followed Kamakura phrase by phrase, ending with a rousing cheer.

The Shogun bowed, the troops bowed even lower, and stayed down until the VIPs had cleared the dais.

Boarding smaller carriage-boxes, Yoritomo and Ieyasu were carried into the Great Hall of the Summer Palace, surrounded by their servants, bodyguards and the resident officials. Stepping out onto the spotless floor, Yoritomo announced his intention of taking a long hot bath before attending to any other business.

Tokimasa, the Resident Steward, whose staff had been frantically keeping gallons of water piping hot for the last six hours, assured him that everything was ready, adding that the kitchen staff had also prepared quantities of food for the entire retinue that could be cooked at a moment's notice.

When Yoritomo and his personal staff had left the hall with Tokimasa dancing in attendance, Ieyasu dismissed everyone except Watanabe, his Principal Private Secretary who had travelled with him, Ichiwara and the secret agent Fujiwara who was listed on the official payroll as Personal Courier to the Lord Chamberlain.

Ieyasu's gaze fastened on Fujiwara. 'You have the envoys from the Federation?'

'Yes, sire. We arrived about four hours ago. They have been placed in the guest rooms in the North Tower. The sea voyage left them somewhat indisposed, but they are anxious to meet with you as soon as possible.'

'They'll have to wait. I have had a rather tiring journey.

And as the years go by, it seems to get longer and longer.'

He switched his gaze onto Watanabe. 'Go and see them.

Take Ichiwara with you. Find out what's on the table and report back to me.'

'Yes, sire.'

'Make sure they have been offered the appropriate degree of hospitality, convey my apologies and tell them they'll be granted a formal audience tomorrow.'

'Yes, sire. I, ahh. think they are expecting to see you and the Shogun.'

'They will- providing they have something to say that's worth listening to. But don't tell them I said that.'

His aides shared Ieyasu's amusement. Fujiwara said: 'I assume these meetings will be conducted in Basic.'

'Of course,' said Watanabe.

'Then I would advise you to be prudent in any conversations between ourselves. From my observations during the voyage, I am fairly certain one of the long-dogs can speak Japanese - and may even be fluent in Chinese as well. It's the woman.'

Ichiwara looked surprised. 'Woman?'

'Yes,' said Fujiwara. 'She also outranks her male companion.'

'You mean socially?'

'Not as we understand it. The Federation is run like a vast army, commanded by a privileged General Staff to which the envoys belong.

She holds the rank of Commander, he is a Captain.'

'unbelievable,' said Ichiwara. 'They send women into battle?'

Watanabe laughed. 'He said she belongs to their General Staff, Ichi.

That means they leave the fighting to others!' 'Even so, it all sounds very strange to me.'

'They are strange,' said Ieyasu. 'And one day we will destroy them.'

Meanwhile we must use their power to make us stronger. They are so eager to help us, it would be churlish to refuse.'

Taking their cue from his thin smile, his aides laughed again then Ichiwara said: 'Sire, Captain Mashimatsu, the officer who was entrusted with certain travelling arrangements, has asked permission to present a report.'

Ieyasu waved the matter away. 'Later, Ichiwara. I'm going to take a two-hour nap, then a bath before I see or talk to anyone else.'

When the Shogun's personal five-man bodyguard had made their usual check of his apartments, he and Steward Tokimasa entered followed by Yoritomo's valet and two chambermaids. Soldiers of the 'Shield Unit', a select body of men from Kamakura's 1st Company, took up their allotted positions. In theory, all access points both outside and inside were covered - but, of course, the security plan did not include the secret passages that Kamakura now knew about.

Having made the usual conducted tour, Yoritomo walked through into his bed-chamber as two of his silent samurai pulled the doorscreens aside.

Tokimasa, nervously perspiring and anxious to please, backed in ahead of him and swept his arm around the room.

'As you see everything is in order, sire. I hope you find it to your Ii -' Tokimasa dried as he caught sight of a wooden head block sitting on top of a black lacquered table.

Seated on the block was a female wig, combed and pinned in the swept-up style used by high-ranking ladies of the court on formal occasions. It had not been there during his last tour of inspection some forty minutes ago.

He gasped with annoyance and apologised profusely.

'A thousand pardons, sire! I cannot think how that came to be in your room. One of the maids must have - I' He turned to the junior of his two assistants. 'Remove that object at once!' 'No, leave it!' said Yoritomo sharply. His voice softened.

'It doesn't upset me in the least, Tokimasa. So no more apologies are required. You and your staff have done splendidly. Please convey my thanks to them for all their hard work. Now be so good as to leave me.

I wish to spend a few moments alone.'

Tokimasa and his staff bowed from the waist. 'Sire.'

Yoritomo turned to his valet. 'Go and prepare my bath. I will call you when I am ready.'

Everyone withdrew. The door screens slid shut behind them.

Yoritomo took a deep breath and turned towards the wig. He had recognised it immediately. It belonged to his sister Mishiko. He walked over to the table and circled it slowly then carefully lifted up the wig. Pinned inside it was a small, folded piece of paper. He took it out, replaced the wig on the block, unfolded the paper and read the message several times before burning it on one of the charcoal braziers that warmed the room.

The five samurai stationed outside the bedchamber leapt to their feet as Yoritomo slid back one of the doorscreens. 'Find Captain Kamakura

and bring him here at once. He is to enter alone!" The screen closed again.

A few minutes later, Kamakura reached the anteroom.

Outwardly calm, but inwardly filled with trepidation, he handed his two swords over to Ryoku, the chief bodyguard, and was admitted into the bedchamber.

Yoritomo stood by the black table on which the block bearing Mishiko's wig had been placed. Kamakura fell to his knees and greeted his sovereign lord with the usual deep bow then when Yoritomo motioned him to relax, he sat back, crossed his legs and placed his hands on his knees with his arms splayed outwards.

The Shogun approached, gazed at him thoughtfully, then paced slowly from side to side. Kamakura followed him with his eyes. 'You have embarked on a dangerous game, Captain.'

'The danger to my life is of no importance, sire. If I lose it trying to preserve your honour then that will be reason enough for my existence.'

Yoritomo accepted this with a nod then walked over to the low table and brushed the fingertips of his right

hand over the wig. 'Who else knows my sister is in the palace?'

'Only my wife and daughters, sire. The secret is safe with them.'

'And where is Lady Mishiko?'

'She is waiting for you to admit her, sire.'

Yoritomo looked puzzled for a moment then his eyes swung towards the fake vertical wall beam. 'You mean... ?'

Kamakura dropped his head onto his chest and kept it there. It was a polite way of saying 'yes', and by lowering his eyes, withdrawing himself symbolically from the scene that was to follow.

Yoritomo went over to the fake beam, released the hidden catch and opened the narrow door. Mishiko knelt on the step beyond the narrow opening, silhouetted in the glow of a lantern, her hands clasped together in a gesture of supplication.

'At last! Oh, my dearest brother, master, lord! Grant me leave to speak for I have a strange and terrible tale to tell!' Mishiko threw herself forward through the opening and slid her hands across the floor to touch her brother's feet.

It was only then that Yoritomo realised she was not alone. For the light from the hidden lamp now fell on the striped faces of two hairy grass-monkeys crouching on the steps below

An hour-long soak in a hot tub and some underwater sex with Steve helped Fran regain most of her former zip and even gave her an appetite. Nothing fancy - just a bowl of clear soup and a small dish of plain boiled rice, but it stayed down. Having exhausted the views from their shuttered apartments, they stretched out side by side on the bed and browsed through the briefing documents which listed the proposals they had come to place before Ieyasu and the Shogun.

The Iron Masters manufactured and used huge quantities of paper for their written records but it was the first time Steve had held sheets of paper printed with lines of text in Basic. Apart from the plasfilm issued to overground units, all data in the Federation was displayed on video screens, or portable LCDs. These sheets were a rare example of what was known as 'hard copy', and as far as he knew, documents in this form were only made available to members of the First Family.

Steve watched Fran scan the text, her grey eyes fastening avidly on each line. She looked up. 'I can't see them buying this idea of us loaning them signal units, do you?'

Steve shrugged. 'Depends on how far they're willing to bend the rules.'

Let's face it, privately, Ieyasu has broken every one in the book, but after ramming their Sacred Edict down everybody's throats for centuries, even a limited turn-around on the Dark Light might be hard for the nation at large to swallow."

'It would also cut the ground away from under the Toh-Yota. Isn't the upholding of the Sacred Edict their main claim to fame?'

'Yeah. That's why they let us blow up the Heron Pool.'

'That's what I thought." Fran re-read the proposal.

'This was one of Karlstrom's ideas. But not one of his better ones. I think we should kill it - okay?"

'You're the boss."

In Steve's eyes, Fran's saving grace was her intelligence.

That, plus the fact she was also physically attractive, made the relationship bearable. And to be fair, the negative aspects of her personality had their positive side. She might be mean and overbearing, but she was also strong and forceful. It was an interesting combination and not unappealing, because on her better days she could be good company.

It was in those moments she became almost likeable.

Karlstrom had warned him that an intimate relationship with her was like riding a greasy pole, but it had been the wrong thing to say.

Steve had always been unable to resist a challenge. Fran could damage his career prospects but

she couldn't hurt him emotionally because, deep down, she meant absolutely nothing to him. His one real, true and lasting attachment was to Clearwater. Fran Jefferson was just part of his survival plan - and there were plenty of worse ways of staying alive. The difference between the two was that Clearwater, without saying anything, made him aware of his failings. Fran, on the other hand, brought out the worst in him and that, perversely, made him feel better.

Around three o'clock in the afternoon, they heard the clatter of hooves on cobbles followed by a series of shrill commands then a tumultuous roar. Fran, who had run to the windows at the sound of the horses, listened intently then said: 'They've arrived! That shouting at the end was the troops giving the Shogun a standing ovation.'

Steve scrambled to his feet. Fran fisted his chest.

'C'mon. Let's get dressed! Show 'em what we're made of!' The gleam in her eye told him she was back in the driving seat.

When their guide Fujiwara reappeared with Watanabe and Ichiwara in tow, he found Steve and Fran dressed in the silver grey uniforms that marked them out as members of the First Family. The high collared tunic with its inverted triangular dark blue trim running down from the shoulders to a point at the waist and with matching rank stripes on the sleeves, flared grey riding breeches, supple mid-grey leather jackboots rising high on the calf, dark blue cavalry caps and silver topped canes.

Steve and Fran sized up the opposition. Unlike Skull-Face, who was clearly an old hand, Watanabe and Ichiwara had sleekly rounded features and were of indeterminate age. They were both soberly dressed in long black robes, and wore oddly shaped pill-box hats on top of their samurai wigs. In Ne-Issan, hats were a status symbol, and when Skull-Face made the introductions, Watanabe, the jap with the fanciest headgear, was revealed as being the senior paper-pusher.

Looking at them, Steve was reminded of the smooth executives who lived in the Black Tower at Houston/GC.

White or yellow, these guys were all the same. Fran had told him not to emulate their hosts when exchanging the usual bows of welcome. They were to be courteous and correct, but there was to be no kow-towing.

Steve tried to argue, but Fran was not disposed to listen. As a result, they both remained erect, responding to their hosts with a polite nod of the head. If their hosts were miffed, it didn't show.

At Ichiwara's invitation, Steve and Fran followed Skull-Face across the corridor into another room where two pairs of low tables and sets of cushions had been placed opposite each other, and a pale-faced japanese girl in a printed silk kimono knelt ready to serve jasmine tea.

Skull-Face invited them to take their places then took a back seat behind the two secretaries. As they sipped the bowls of teas, Watanabe explained that the journey to the Summer Palace had proved something of an ordeal to the Lord Chamberlain. Out of courtesy to his visitors he had decided to postpone meeting them until he was fully rested and could give his undivided attention to the important matters they had come to discuss.

'Meanwhile,' continued Watanabe, 'he has instructed Secretary Ichiwara and myself to obtain a general picture of your proposals in order to

prepare an agenda for the meetings which will follow. I trust you have no objection?"

'None whatsoever,' said Fran. She had decided, despite the original plan, to do most of the talking herself. When Steve had asked why, she had said: 'You've had direct experience of these people, but it was as a slave-worker, on the receiving end. They make you nervous. I can sense it. Don't get me wrong. If we were to get in a tight corner, I know you'd come through. You're the ideal action man, but when it comes to representing the Federation, I'm better equipped than you are - because I know how to dish it out.'

When the tea lady had retired from the room, Watanabe, whose pronunciation was almost faultless, said: 'With your agreement, these discussions will be conducted in your language. My colleague Ichihara will act as translator for the Lord Chamberlain and, if your proposals are deemed to merit his attention, his Highness, Prince Yoritomo, the Shogun.'

Watanabe gauged the effect of this on both of them, then fixed his eyes on Fran. 'I am aware that you, Commander, have a working knowledge of our language.'

Since, in doing this, you must also have learned something of our cherished traditions, you will know that we do not welcome outlanders speaking our sacred mother tongue. You would cause grave offence if you attempted to do so in the presence of Lord Ieyasu or His Highness Prince Yoritomo. We hope you will respect our feelings in this matter.' 'I'll bear it in mind,' said Fran drily. 'Would I be correct in thinking that both these noble gentlemen speak fluent Basic?'

'They have a comprehensive understanding of the language. But because of their exalted rank, you will not be able to address either of them directly. Anything you wish to communicate will be relayed by myself or Secretary Ichihara.'

'I see. Am I to understand that what you're attempting to do now is establish the ground rules?'

Watanabe inclined his head. 'We are indeed, Commander.'

Fran gave Steve a sideways glance and muttered: 'Can you believe this?'

We come all this way to talk to the organ-grinder and we've got his monkey telling us how to behave ' If their opposite numbers managed to catch what she said, they gave no sign of having done so, but that was one of their great attributes - keeping a straight face when the roof was falling in.

'Hang on to your hat,' whispered Fran. She cleared her throat. 'Chief Secretary, your mastery over our language is less skillful than you suppose and your attempts at politeness have failed to mask the fact that you view us with disdain.'

She balled her fists and slammed them down on the low table in front of her. Steve went cold, but he knew from the set of her jaw there was no stopping her now.

'Just who in bell's name do you think you're talking to, you unctuous, inky-listed toad?! I and my companion come from the highest ranks of the First Family! Rulers of the Amtrak Federation, the greatest power on this earth!

My father is a senior member of the Supreme Council, second only in authority to George Washington Jefferson the 31st, the President-General himself! He also happens to be the President's brother, and I have the honour of being an executive officer on the President's personal staff!

'That was why I was selected for this mission. Captain Brickman, my aide-de-camp, is the personal representative of Commander-General Karlstrom who has already dealt directly with Lord Ieyasu on other matters of which you are no doubt aware' - she glared at Watanabe 'since I understand you were there at the time.'

'Listen to me carefully. When we speak, it is with the voice and the authority of the two men on this continent who are the equal of your masters in rank, stature and power. So don't ever address me in such an insolent manner again. Is that clear?!" Watanabe, who like Ichiwara had been left white-faced at this outburst, inclined his head.

'Yes, my lady."

Fran switched over to japanese, complete with the inflections employed by the upper classes. 'Good. Now understand this. In my eyes you are lower than a heap of ox-dung. Furthermore, I intend to inform your master of this incident, and will suggest to him that negotiations between our two countries would proceed more smoothly if you were given lessons on how to address your betters!" Steve didn't know what Fran had said, but it was obvious she hadn't been handing out gold stars.

Watanabe's face didn't move an inch but it went whiter than

ever. The veins on his temples bulged and the tension was reflected in his knuckles. His fingers were dug in so tight, it looked as if he was trying to rip his kneecaps off.

Ichiwara, sitting alongside him, and Skull-Face in the second row, looked like a couple of blasted oaks.

Watanabe hung his head and tried to collect his thoughts. Never, in his whole life, had he received such a vitriolic dressing down! Here he was, the most senior secretary in the Lord Chamberlain's Office - a man who told government ministers what to do - and he had been humiliated in front of two junior colleagues by an outlander who had doubled the affront by addressing him abusively in Japanese! And this indignity had been inflicted upon him by a woman!!

It was an unbearable loss of face. Nevertheless business had to proceed. He suppressed a perfectly justified desire to see this foul-mouthed bitch flayed alive and used his renowned mental discipline to clear his head. Three deep breaths was all it took to restore the necessary stillness at the centre of his being and find a face-saving formula. 'I apologise sincerely for my clumsiness. The journey that tired my master also seems to have had an adverse effect on my professional competence and manners- and has, in fact, left me feeling distinctly unwell. With your permission, my lady, I shall withdraw and leave Secretary Ichiwara to note down the information required.'

He took his final bow, and got a curt nod in return.

'As you wish.'

Ichiwara and Skull-Face paid their respects to Watanabe then moved up into the firing-line as the door-screens closed behind him.

Fran threw Steve a quick glance then said: 'Okay.'

'We've drunk the tea and cleared the air. Can we now get down to business?'

'By all means,' stammered Ichiwara. He turned to Skull-Face. 'Will you take notes, Major?'

'Awgh! For crissakes!' snapped Fran. 'We all know what the score is!' She reached into the side slit of her tunic, fished out a small pocket recorder and slapped it on the table. 'And you know what this is.' She switched it on. 'If you want to talk Basic, then we're going to do things our way. Comprendo?'

Ichiwara looked at Skull-Face and got the answer he wanted. 'Okay. Go ahead - shoot.'

Steve shook his head in wonderment. He'd pulled some strokes in his time, but never anything like this. The bad sea voyage had obviously raised Fran's bile, but this was something else. She had come out of her corner like a mountain bear with a swarm of bees up its ass and just bitten these guys' heads off! He caught the eye of his old sparring partner, Skull-Face. Fujiwara read the unspoken question and winked to let Steve know how things stood.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Receiving word that the great man was now awake and in his bath, Chief Secretary Katanabe ordered Ichiwara to bring up the rest of Lord Ieyasu's luggage and the travelling cabinets of paperwork that followed the Lord Chamberlain on his travels.

The task was almost completed when Ieyasu emerged from his quarters looking a great deal better than he had on arrival. Two hundred and seventy-five miles of shake, rattle and roll would have left anyone feeling the worse for wear and Ieyasu - now a gaunt eighty-year-old bag of bones - had long passed the point where he could take such a journey in his stride.

The reason for much of the discomfort endured by travellers was not hard to find: despite their amazing virtuosity in many areas of construction and design, Iron Masters had not got around to building wheeled vehicles with sprung chassis. Ieyasu's recovery after a two hour nap was a testimony to his tenacious hold on life.

Watanabe signalled the servants to put down the last of their loads where they stood, then waved them from the room. Ieyasu's guards followed, closing the door behind them.

Ieyasu motioned his secretaries to be seated and eased himself creakily onto his cushions, using his long staff as a support. 'So... have you tested the mettle of the long-dog envoys?'

'We have, my lord.'

'And how did you find them?'

Watanabe searched for a suitable phrase. 'Sharp-tongued ' Ieyasu, who had built up a dossier on the key personalities in the upper echelons of the First Family, chuckled.

'Yes, I believe she can be.'

Watanabe failed to see the joke. 'Secretary Ichiwara made a note of their proposals. It is, as we anticipated, an offer to supply us with military, industrial and technical assistance.'

'Good. But before we speak of this, let us deal with the other matter that was causing us concern these past few days. I believe you have some good news for US?'

Ichiwara bowed and backed away. As he left the room, Watanabe said: 'Will you require a written record of this meeting, sire?'

Ieyasu shook his head. Ichiwara brought in Samurai-Captain Mashimatsu, No.2 Company Commander of the Palace Guard, then took his usual place at the writing table on Ieyasu's left, opposite Watanabe.

After the ritual bow and exchange of greetings, Mashimatsu gave Ieyasu an account of an 'incident' that had occurred during the night before last at Beishura.

Following a mysterious explosion an ocean-going junk had gone down, stern first, with the loss of almost everyone on board.

The vessel, chartered at Oshana-sita, had been ordered to anchor off-shore pending customs inspection by harbour officials. There were a handful of survivors crewmen who were asleep in the forward part of

the vessel when the explosion occurred - but no trace had been found of the twenty or so passengers believed to have been on board at the time.

Ieyasu gave a satisfied nod. 'Good fortune smiles upon us, Captain.

We were warned that a team of assassins sent by the Yama-Shita might attempt to land from just such a vessel. It looks as if they have blown themselves up while preparing explosive devices which they intended to use against us.

'Make sure all the bodies are brought out of the water, and search the outer islands in case there are survivors

hiding there. No one must be allowed to escape justice.

Do I make myself clear?"

'Yes, sire."

'See that the men are rewarded. And you shall have your long-awaited promotion. I shall not of course tell the Shogun the real reason for the glowing recommendation I will make on your behalf."

Mashimatsu gave a deep bow. 'To be able to serve you, is honour enough, sire. Your generosity overwhelms me."

Ichiwara accompanied him to the door then returned to his place as his colleague asked: 'What are we to say when the lady and her children are reported missing from the Winter Palace?"

'We say nothing, Watanabe! We simply look as puzzled as everyone else!

In time it will be discovered that she and the traitor Min-Orota boarded two ships at Oshana - bound for an unknown destination.

Questions will have to be asked. We must pursue the matter with our usual zeal, but her fate will remain shrouded in mystery.

'It will be a sad loss to our family, as you can imagine and I fear her brother will feel it more keenly than most."

Ieyasu gave a dry laugh. 'We will have to find another young soft-eyed bum-boy to console him. But this time, we must make sure he is one of ours and not another of those accursed Heralds!" Ieyasu clapped his hands together. 'Excellent! Now that tiresome business has been attended to, we can all sleep more soundly in our beds." He turned to Ichiwara.

'Let us return to our friends from the Federation. But before you say anything, I think Watanabe should explain the factors which have led us to this point, so that you can put these proposals into the proper context. Before any agreement is concluded, we shall need to consider the possible impact of these alien goods and services on our society and decide if the dangers outweigh the benefits.

Your opinion, as always, will be invaluable."

'I am deeply honoured, sire."

Ieyasu invited Watanabe to speak.

'As one of the Inner Circle, you are aware that the secret treaty with AMEXICO has enabled us to detect and control many of the subversive elements within Ne-Issan.

We have scored some notable coups against those who seek to overthrow the Toh-Yota, but our enemies are as numerous as ever, and never tire of hatching new plots.

'For the last ten years, the Federation has supported us in our aim to maintain the present era of peace and stability in Ne-Issan under the house of the TohYota.

They recognise the wisdom and foresight of Lord Ieyasu has been the principal factor in preserving this stability, but they fear - as we do

- what may happen when his steadying hand is no longer at the helm.

'The Shogun is a young man dedicated to upholding the ancient traditions we all revere, but the inflexibility of his principles will make it impossible to continue to govern the country in the same way.

Compromise will be replaced by confrontation, and the peril of armed conflict will remain with us until Prince Yoritomo reaches the age of wisdom, or can be persuaded to adopt a more pragmatic approach.

'Therein lies our problem: for there is no one who is able to influence him in the way Lord Ieyasu has done in the past. We had hoped to groom Lady Mishiko to act as our intermediary but as you know she has suddenly become a potential liability. Until a replacement can be found, we have to draw up and put into action a plan that will enable the Toh-Yota to withstand the dangers that lie ahead.

'That is why the Federation wishes to help us. In their view, the balance of power within Ne-Issan is not sufficiently weighted in our favour - as evidenced by our inability to solve our problems with the House of Yama-Shita by military means. We have had to resort to subterfuge, but despite the successful action against the Heron Pool and the removal of many of our enemies, the Yama-Shita continue to provoke us.

'We should have applied sanctions against the YamaShita and its trading partners for mounting their ill-fated and illegal armed expedition against the Plainfolk, but we dared not risk doing so. Our friends in the Federation believe that this failure to enforce the law could embolden the Yama-Shita, leading to other treaty violations and further unrest - within our borders.

'To counter this, they have offered to strengthen our hand by a massive programme of aid in exchange for supplies of certain raw materials. We need their help. If our enemies take up arms against us we must be ready and able to strike a blow from which they will never recover.

'But we are not helpless supplicants. We do not beg for aid. It is the Federation who have expressed the wish to help us - as opposed to our enemies. That is why we have come here in secret to meet their representatives."

Ichiwara bowed his head. 'I am grateful for this clarification of our position. But why do they choose to help us when the Yama-Shita and the other progressive domain-lords would sell their souls for a chance to embrace the Dark Light?"

'A good question, Ichiwara,' said Ieyasu, 'which I can answer easily.

The Federation have used the Dark Light to make themselves masters of the High Craft, but they do not intend to allow others to take the same path.

'They are ready to support us because we are the defenders of our ancient faiths and traditions. If we win, it will not threaten their present supremacy, but if the Progressives gained control of Ne-Issan it could lead eventually to war with the Federation and the destruction of our country.

'Only we can ensure its survival. Our traditions, our beliefs, our code of honour are the blood, bone and sinews of the one nation that will endure! The Plainfolk will remain fragmented, doomed by their idle-minded existence to be enslaved by their betters! The Federation too will fall victim to its over-weening ambition to rule the earth and rot from within. For it has no art, no heart, no sense of honour, no faith in anything beyond its ability to create more fiendish weapons of destruction, and its brain is a machine without a soul - a monstrous creation of the Dark Light that knows everything and believes in nothing!" Ieyasu broke off and favoured his two secretaries with a thin smile. 'There, you have my predictions for the future. Consider them when I am gone." He slapped his thin, bony thighs. 'So, Ichiwara!

What delights have these long-dogs come to bestow on us!" Ichiwara referred to an aide-memoire he had prepared.

He and Major Fujiwara had agreed not to mention the provocative offer of the voice-recorder. 'The aid proposals come under three main headings - military equipment, industrial machinery and techniques and training. The most important military item is the establishment of an air arm.

'The Federation is prepared to supply us with two hundred and fifty flying horses, fitted with weapons of destruction and powered by a new system of propulsion which does not flout the Sacred Edict banning the Dark Light. Samurai selected to pilot these machines would be trained within the Federation, and then return with theft aircraft.

'They would do so in two batches. Of the first batch of a hundred and fifty, the top fifty pupils would receive further training as flying instructors and participate in the training of the second batch of one hundred pilots. Senior officers would also be instructed on the tactical use of aft power against ground targets.

'An appropriate number of ground staff would be trained to service the flying horses, and a similar proportion would graduate as master technicians and instructors. The agreement to supply the first batch of flying horses and trained personnel also includes the provision of a stock of spare parts enabling us to repair and maintain the engines, airframes and instruments.

'There are a number of basic infantry weapons on offer - all capable of high rates of fire and which also do not infringe the Sacred Edict.

Before enumerating these, I

would like to pass onto the second heading
- industrial machinery and techniques.

'The Federation is offering to supply the necessary machinery, precision tools and specialist metals to enable us to set up home-based production lines for these flying horses and other weapons including new and extremely powerful explosives.

'They are also willing to introduce into Ne-Issan, two new sources of motive power based on' - Ichiwara switched into Basic - 'gas and diesel technology." He reverted to his mother tongue. 'The first can be found in marshes, rotting vegetation and heaps of animal manure, the second is a liquid fuel extracted from ground-oil, and will be used in the engines of the flying ' He was interrupted by a rapid tap-tap on the door screen.

Ieyasu motioned him to see who it was.

Reaching the anteroom, Ichiwara found two of the Chamberlain's guards, with Tokimasa, the Resident Steward. After the usual exchange of bows, the Steward - who seemed greatly agitated- asked if the Chamberlain would receive him as a matter of some urgency.

'May I know what it is you wish to speak to him about?"

Tokimasa mopped his sweating brow. 'The Lady Mishiko."

Ichiwara invited him in and told the guards they were not to be disturbed until further notice.

Shedding his indoor shoes, Tokimasa shuffled across the floor and knelt before Ieyasu. 'My lord! Excuse this interruption, but I have just discovered that the Lady Mishiko, her children and half her retinue are in the Palace! How they came to be here I cannot say. No one informed me they were expected and I was not on hand to greet them. I hope you will not think me negligent.

Her tiighness has been gracious enough to make light of the matter but - ' 'Yes, yes, yes!" cried Ieyasu. 'Did she tell you what prompted her to journey here?"

'She did indeed, my lord. She wishes to speak with you privately on an affair of the utmost importance."

'I see... Does the Shogun know she is in the Palace?"

'No, sire. The Shogun has withdrawn to his apartments and his guards have been ordered to admit no one."

'Good. Until I order otherwise, it is vital that her presence here remains a secret. Those on your staff who share your knowledge must be sworn to secrecy.

Let me explain why. We have reason to believe that Lady Mishiko may be involved in a plot to kill her brother - ' Tokimasa's jaw dropped. 'My lord, I had no i - I' 'I said "may", Tokimasa. We have no proof- only grounds for suspicion. I'm sure you will be the first to agree it is best not to take any chances."

'Of course!" 'That is why the Shogun must not discover she is here.

We cannot allow her to approach him until we are satisfied that she poses no threat to his safety."

'Of course, of course!" 'Good! Tell her I will send Watanabe to escort her here.

We shall need a sealed carriage-box."

'I will arrange everything!" Tokimasa made his exit, bowing each time he took four backward steps.

The guards outside slid the screen shut.

Ieyasu looked at his two crestfallen aides. 'That fool of a Captain!

You assured me the plan could not fail!" Ichihara hung his head. 'His men must have blown up the wrong boat."

'That's not possible,' said Watanabe. 'There must be some other explanation. She must have - ' Ieyasu cut him off with an angry wave.

'How she escaped does not concern me! If our men are to blame they can be dealt with later. What matters is that she is here now!" He turned on Ichihara. 'Find Mashimatsu.

Tell him I want this meddlesome woman's quarters sealed off from the rest of the Palace by an armed guard. No one in her entourage is to be allowed out - and that includes her children."

'Yes, sire."

'When she returns after leaving here, she is to remain there. And if she demands to know why, Mashimatsu is to say 'she is being held on my orders pending a possible charge of high treason!' 'Yes, sire!' 'And you can tell the Captain he has one last chance to save his promotion and his head. When I wake up tomorrow morning, I want to be surprised and distressed to hear she and her brood have taken poison rather than face the disgrace of a trial. He is to despatch her servants as well.

That will be proof of their guilt. Go quickly - and return here as soon as it has been arranged!" Ichiwara left. Watanabe waited until the door closed again then said: 'Do you think she knows we - ?"

Ieyasu exploded again. 'You are wasting time, Watanabe!

We will know the answer to that question when we hear what she has to say! Go and fetch her!" A fleeting coolness touched Roz at the centre of her being and a vague, fuzzy image of Steve came into her mind.

Her body stiffened as she tried to seize it and bring it into sharper focus in the hope of hearing that familiar inner voice, but it eluded her like a handful of smoke.

And was gone

Roz tried to make contact. Nothing happened. Steve remained tantalisingly out of reach, but she was left with an extraordinary feeling of being physically close to him.

But that was impossible. How could she be? Steve was in the Federation with Clearwater. Roz opened her eyes and found Cadillac gazing at her warily.

'What happened just then?"

'Nothing, just. daydreaming."

'At a time like this?!" Roz would have loved to have told him, just to wipe that look of disdain off his face. But it would have to wait.

She had to be sure before saying anything. With their lives poised on a knife edge, Steve was the last person Cadillac wanted to hear about...

Lord Ieyasu sat alone in his study listening intently to Lady Mishiko.

Chief Secretary Watanabe had been instructed to wait outside and prevent anyone from entering. Ichiwara, who had been despatched to brief Captain Mashimatsu, had not yet returned.

Considering the physical strains imposed by her recent sea-voyage and escape from death in a crowded longboat, the Shogun's sister was remarkably composed. A slight tremor in her voice told him she was extremely nervous even though he had welcomed her with his usual show of warmth and affection. As her grand-uncle, she had always remained in awe of him, but her nervousness was no doubt increased by the extraordinary nature of her story.

Mishiko, her heart pounding, continued to relate at breakneck speed how Lord Kiyomori Min-Orota, acting as a double-agent for the Toh-Yota, had accepted the invitation to meet with other 'progressive' domain-lords at Sarakusa '... and when they were all assembled, he learned - to his

amazement that the Yama-Shita family had discovered an alien device hidden beneath the table in their conference chamber. A device the size of a go stone which acted like a servant's ear at his master's door - which they claim your agents placed there!" Ieyasu laughed. 'I know nothing of such devices, nor do I seek to! Is this the charge Lord Min-Orota feared the Yama-Shita would lay at my door? He is even more gullible than I thought!

'As chief counsel to your illustrious brother, it is my business to discover the strength of our enemies in the outlands. I know, for instance, that the long-dogs whose cities are hidden deep in the ground are masters of what is known as the High Craft. They have machines of unimaginable complexity which are filled with the Dark Light, but in capturing it they have become enslaved by its power.

'They cannot exist without it. It makes their false sun

rise and their underground rivers flow! But we, who are strong, have no need of such devilish devices. If there is such an object, as Kiyo has described, then it must have been made by long-dogs. Ask yourself this - if the Yama-Shita claim to be the innocents in this affair, how was it they knew what this device was and how it functioned?!" 'I also asked that question, mi'lord. The stone ear was not all they found.

The Yama-Shita family have also apprehended two individuals with another larger device.

A black box which speaks with two voices - in our own sacred mother tongue."

Ieyasu's face betrayed nothing, but this piece of news was not to his liking. If two of his agents had allowed themselves to be captured with an incriminating piece of hardware, it was not only the most reprehensible form of negligence, it was a breach of trust. All the men selected to operate such devices were equipped with fast-acting poison pills for use on such occasions to ensure the secret they had sworn to keep died with them.

'This all sounds rather far-fetched. If there's such a box, and there are two such men, it is probably a clumsy attempt on the part of the Yama-Shita to discredit me. I repeat - the objects you describe can only have been made by the long-dogs and obtained from them! The Yama-Shita have already paid dearly for attempting to resurrect the Dark Light - and now, barely a year later, they are in league with our enemies again!

'Mark my words, they will pay dearly for this treachery.

And it greatly saddens me, my lady, that you should wish to help spread such vicious lies about someone who had always done his best to ensure your health and happiness and. protect you from harm."

Mishiko matched his honeyed insincerity: 'I have never doubted your good intentions, great-uncle which is why I am not spreading "vicious lies". Since Kiyo expressed his deep concern to me, you are the first and only person I have spoken to about this matter."

Ieyasu inclined his head. 'I am greatly relieved to hear it."

Mishiko continued: 'Like Kiyo, my first concern is to preserve the supremacy of the Toh-Yota - by whatever means and at any cost. Neither of us wish to do anything which might cause a rift between you and my brother, but Kiyo and I felt it was our duty to alert you to the allegations the Yama-Shita seem intent on laying before the Shogun."

Ieyasu accepted this with a grateful bow. 'I never realised such a wise head rested on such beautiful shoulders."

Etiquette required Mishiko to respond in a similar fashion. 'I was fortunate to inherit my mother's good sense instead of the madness that ran in my father's blood."

'It is we who are fortunate, my dear Mishiko. Is that the end of your strange tale?"

'I wish it was." Mishiko smiled inwardly, savouring the information she was about to reveal; information that would wipe the disdainful expression from her great-uncle's face. 'The two individuals captured by the Yama-Shita were outlanders - long-dogs who had disguised

themselves as Mute slaves by growing their hair and painting their skins - and who spoke our mother tongue! In the hope of saving their lives, they confessed all they knew."

She paused and gestured helplessly. 'Their story is so unbelievable, I hardly dare repeat it for fear you will think I have lost my senses!' 'I assure you I will think nothing of the kind,' said Ieyasu. 'Hold nothing back, my dear Mishiko. And above all do not be frightened.

You have my word that nothing you say will go beyond these four walls."

He looked at her expectantly.

There was a moment's silence while Mishiko overcame her reluctance.

When she spoke, it was with a small, timid voice. 'These painted spies are a male and female long-dog. They claim to work for an organisation called

AMEXICO. They say this organisation has worked hand-in-glove for many years with a network of secret agents controlled by you. They say they are able to speak Japanese because you have sent teachers into their underground domain and, in return, AMEXICO have supplied your agents with..."

'Go on. Let us hear the whole of this sorry tale.'

'... with devices animated by the Dark Light.'

Devices which can capture voices and can send reports and commands undetected through the air from one end of the country to the other."

Ieyasu's air of disdainful superiority had vanished but his voice still had a sarcastic edge. 'I see. But apart from the box found in their possession, would I be correct in thinking they had nothing to offer in the way of proof that their story was anything other than sheer fantasy? Ha! The Yama-Shita must be in desperate straits if they hoped anyone would believe such a tissue of lies!' 'I agree, mi'lord.'

You can see now why I hesitated. If that were all Kiyō Min-Orota had to tell me I would not have bothered to make this journey." Mishiko saw her great-uncle's eyes harden.

'There is more?'

'Yes. The long-dogs claim to have had dealings with your secretary, Ichihara. They say they delivered several "black boxes" to him, and these were installed in a secret chamber inside the Summer Palace. 'Enough!' shouted Ieyasu. 'That is absolutely outrageous!' Mishiko bowed. 'Those were my exact words to Lord Min-Orota. I knew you would be angry. Do you wish me to remain silent, or will you allow me to repeat their most dangerous charge against you?'

'Very well! Go on, if you must!' Mishiko moistened her lips. She had been waiting for this moment. 'The long-dogs claim to know where this chamber is. Kiyō says they have drawn a plan which is now in the possession of the Yama-Shita. A plan which purports to show its location.'

Ieyasu's lined face turned to stone. 'I see... And did he describe this plan to you?'

'No, mi'lord. But he saw it with his own eyes, and urged me to make you aware of its existence.'

Ieyasu nodded thoughtfully, the slowness of the gesture in marked contrast to the speed at which his mind was working. 'You have done well to bring these matters to my attention, my child. I have underestimated the cunning and determination of our enemies.'

'Yes,' said Mishiko. 'It is obvious they planned to play upon my brother's hatred of the Dark Light in all its forms and his determination to uphold our most sacred traditions. By linking you to the long-dogs and their infernal devices, they hoped to destroy the trust that exists between you. Or - if I may venture to say so - make him feel he had been utterly betrayed.'

'Exactly!' cried Ieyasu. 'There you have seized upon the nub of the matter! And with admirable shrewdness and economy! As your Highness knows, I have never subscribed to the belief that women are the weaker and inferior sex, even though the laws of Ne-Issan have always denied

them positions of real power.

'Were it otherwise, you would make a worthy candidate to occupy the throne! Strength of character, nobility, intelligence, insight and above all - discretion! A quality never more needed than now. This conversation must remain a secret - between us.'

'Of course.'

'Not a word to anyone - especially your brother.'

'No, great-uncle ' 'We have journeyed here to conduct great affairs of state - delicate negotiations away from prying eyes and the little-tattle of idle tongues that is the bane of court life!'

'Alas!

I know them only too well.'

'Exactly! Exactly! That is why this malicious tale must not be allowed to reach 'your brother's ears. His concentration on the matter in hand must not be diverted.

He is, I regret to say, not as strong as you. His confidence

in me is
absolute. It is like a rock- but it is a rock fractured by
self-doubt.

'The wrong word at the wrong time would be like a steel wedge hammered
into a fault line by a quarryman. One well-aimed blow and the rock
splits asunder! You and I must see that never happens. He needs our
love and support."

'He has them, mi'lord. And you have my vow of silence."

Ieyasu, scenting things were once more going his way said: 'Then what
reason will you give for following us here?"

Mishiko had her reply already prepared, but she paused to make it seem
as if it came from the heart. 'I shall tell him that I had a
premonition he was in mortal danger and rushed to be at his side to do
what I could to prevent his death - or share it."

She gazed directly into Ieyasu's eyes. 'For were he to die, I would
not wish to live a moment longer. And that part is true, I swear
it."

Ieyasu rose to his feet and offered Mishiko his hand.

'I wish there was someone who held my life in such high esteem."

'Oh, come, mi'lord! Does not my brother love and respect you? It is
you who has been his father in all but name."

'True, true. And you have not hesitated to confide in me. That is
reward enough. Go, my child. My secretary Watanabe will conduct you
back to your quarters. And there I must urge you to remain for the
moment for I fear our enemies may be plotting more mischief."

Mishiko frowned. 'I do not understand '

'Your brother and I journeyed here in secret, my child.

To disguise our presence we are not protected by our usual number of
guards. My worry is that this tale of black boxes and painted
long-dogs may have been a cunning ruse to fill you with alarm."

'You mean they...?"

'Yes! You may, unwittingly, have led them to us at a time when we lack
the means to defend ourselves."

'May the Gods forgive me!" cried Mishiko. 'If that were true I would
kill myself!" 'Tush, my child. I doubt that will be necessary. Your
actions were inspired by a desire to protect the House of Toh-Yota.

And I shall be forever in your debt." He struck the floor three times
with the point of his gold-topped staff.

Watanabe and Ichiwara entered and bowed as Ieyasu walked Lady Mishiko
towards them.

'Watanabe. Convey her highness to her quarters. I have made her aware
of certain dangers. Make sure she is guarded well."

'Yes, sire." Watanabe ushered Mishiko into the carriage-box that stood
in the corridor immediately outside.

Ieyasu signalled Ichiwara to close the door and strode back into his private office. The benign expression which had concealed his true feelings as he bade goodbye to Mishiko had vanished. When he turned to face his secretary, all pretence had gone. This was no longer the kindly great-uncle: this was a vicious, cornered animal with a voice like cold steel.

'For the time being, it is no longer safe to operate the radio network.

Get the operator to send a signal to the other base units warning them we are going off the air. The communications equipment is to be removed from the box-room, destroyed by fire and the remains broken and buried in more than one place. All traces that might point to the room having been occupied are to be eliminated, and it is to be filled with rubble and completely sealed. I don't want it hidden. I want it to vanish - you understand?"

'Yes, sire."

'Good. Attend to it immediately! That order also applies to the equipment that came with the road convoy.

Everything must go. Our lives depend on it!" Ichiwara left and strode hurriedly along the side corridor and up the flights leading to the Records Office.

When the full court was in residence, a small army of scribes sat at the lines of desks, but now the long room was deserted.

After satisfying himself that he had not been followed, and that there was no one on the stairs or in the corridor above, he entered the room, and locked the door behind him. Stepping lightly across the room to the wall of shelves and pigeon-holes, he pressed the 'knot' beneath the lower shelf and stood back as the hinged segment of shelving unlocked itself and opened towards him.

A spine-chilling sight met his eyes. Instead of the trusted operator rising from his seat to greet him, his severed head sat on top of the neat stack of radio equipment. A sheet of blood had run down the dials, knobs and meters on the front panels, spread along the table and dripped over the edge onto the floor below.

Ichiwara stepped into the box-room. The seat had been overturned.

There was blood all over the floor, but there was no body. The implications were obvious - and chilling. He backed out slowly, then froze as he heard a movement behind him.

'Do you not dare to face us, Ichiwara?'

The voice turned the secretary's knees to water. Supporting himself on the shelf unit, he inched round, keeping his eyes averted until the last moment.

Prince Yoritomo, the Shogun, and his sister, Lady Mishiko, stood on the far side of the room flanked by samurai and men from the Palace Guard led by Captain Kamakura. Kneeling on the floor between four of the guards were two painted grass-monkeys - Mute slaves dressed in kimonos, their wrists pinioned with ropes. The taller of the two had a radio transceiver hung around his neck.

They were not the only prizes. Another member of the Palace Guard held a string bag in each hand. They contained the severed heads of Watanabe, Ieyasu's Principal Private Secretary, and Samurai-Captain Mashimatsu.

'You have betrayed us, Ichiwara,' said Yoritomo, in a voice stripped of all emotion. 'You, your master, and all who serve him have sold your souls in the hope of gaining power over me.'

Ichiwara fell to his knees and hung his head. Nothing he could say would save him. With Watanabe gone, all was lost. Death, when it came, would be a welcome release.

'For such a crime,' continued Yoritomo, 'your life cannot be spared, but you can, at least, expect an honourable death if you will answer me truthfully. How long has your master been served by these infernal devices?'

."Many years, sire."

'And how were they obtained?'

Silence.

'Must we tear your flesh with red-hot irons? Pluck out your eyes and roast them slowly on their stalks?'

'By... by a... secret treaty with the Federation, sire.'

'And who signed this treaty - your master?'

'I cannot say, sire - because I do not know. Only Watanabe and the Lord Chamberlain met with those who rule the Federation!' 'How convenient. For as you see, Watanabe lost his head in attempting to escape retribution. Never mind, I am sure ways can be found to prompt your memory.'

Yoritomo turned to Captain Kamakura. 'Have this wretch searched and stripped of any means to kill himself. He is to be secured in irons and thrown into a cell.'

Two guards seized Ichihara and pinioned his arms behind his back as they hauled him to his feet.

'Sire!' he cried. 'I do not seek to save my life, but I beg you to believe that in doing what we did, we had but one goal- to safeguard your life, preserve your family and the future of the nation!' Yoritomo's anger burst through. 'Ignoble dog! You sought to preserve the power of the Chamberlain's Office and the baleful influence of your master! You and the other jackals who serve him have conspired to thwart

my will from the very beginning! And for this lie you will all suffer the most painful death that can be devised! Get him out of my sight!" The luckless Ichiwara was bundled out of the room.

Ieyasu's guards backed slowly into his official apartments as Yoritomo's party advanced. The Chamberlain emerged from his private study and took in the sea of faces. His eyes gave nothing away as they alighted on Lady Mishiko and the two captive Mutes.

The radio hanging from the strap around the neck of the taller Mute told him all he needed to know. But he was not beaten yet.

'Ahh, sire! How extraordinary! I was on my way to advise you of your sister's unexpected arrival, but I see she has forestalled me." Ieyasu bowed respectfully to Mishiko then pointed to Cadillac and Roz who had been forced to their knees. 'Why have these two grubby animals been brought before me?"

'They are here,' said Yoritomo, 'because they have an interesting tale to tell."

'Since when has the word of a grass-monkey been worth more than the spittle on the lips of an Iron Master?"

'They are not grass-monkeys, mi'lord,' said Mishiko.

'These are the long-dogs I told you about."

'You brought them here? Then I was right! You and Min-Orota are in league with the YamaShita!" 'No, you are wrong, mi'lord. Kiyo Min-Orota stole these dogs from under the noses of the Yama-Shita to prevent them from being used to destroy the authority and honour of the TohYota."

'If that was his reason, why bring them here?!" thundered Ieyasu.

'Why did he not kill them?!" 'Isn't it obvious? I' cried Yoritomo."Bringing them here was the only way of rooting out the cancer which has been eating away at the body of the Toh-Yota! The cancer which is the source of the weakness our enemies are so eager to exploit! And that cancer is you, great uncle!

Your place-men, your servants, your army of spies who are in thrall to the Dark Light! This evil growth is your creation!

You, whom I relied upon to uphold the rule of law and maintain our most cherished traditions, have betrayed everything we hold dear!" Ieyasu, unbowed by these accusations, responded with a dry laugh. 'In thrall to the Dark Light?! What nonsense is this? You condemn me on the word of this treacherous harlot?! Are you so blind you cannot see the thrust of this game? She is a pawn of the Yama-Shita, and her motive is revenge because you and I took away her plaything - the Herald HaseGawa!" Yoritomo did not waver. 'You are wrong, great-uncle.

YOU stand condemned by your own words. The devices that you used to extend your own power over me and this country have betrayed you!" He turned to the guards standing over Cadillac and Roz. 'Free the long-dog's hands! Let him make the box speak?

Ieyasu's face turned a paler shade of grey.

Using the counter as a guide, Cadillac rewound the LP tape to a certain point, set the transceiver down on the floor, pressed the 'Play' button

and turned up the volume.

Everyone apart from Cadillac and Roz listened in awed silence as the disembodied voice of Samurai-Captain Mashimatsu issued from the box, followed by Ieyasu then Watanabe.

'... There were a handful of survivors- crewmen who were asleep in the forward part of the vessel when the explosion occurred - but no trace had been found of the twenty or so passengers believed to have been on board at the time.'

'Good fortune smiles upon us, Captain. We were warned that a team of assassins sent by the YamaShita might attempt to land from just such a vessel. It looks as if they have blown themselves up while preparing explosive devices which they obviously intended to use against us.'

'Make sure all the bodies are brought out of the water, and search the outer islands in case there are survivors'

hiding there. No one must be allowed to escape justice.

Do I make myself clear?"

'Yes, sire. ' 'See that the men are rewarded. And you shall have your long-awaited promotion. I shall not of course tell the Shogun the real reason for the glowing recommendation I will make on your behalf."

'To be able to serve you is honour enough, sire. Your generosity overwhelms me."

Sounds of movement, the rustle of robes and the noise of door screens being slid aside. Stockinged feet walked across straw matting then Ichiwara's voice 'What are we to say when the lady and her children are reported as missing from the Winter Palace?"

'We say nothing, Watanabe! We simply look as puzzled as everyone else I In time it will be discovered that she and the traitor Min-Orota boarded two ships at Oshana bound for an unknown destination'.

Questions will have to be asked. We must pursue the matter with our usual zeal, but her fate will remain shrouded in mystery. It will be a sad loss to our family, as you can imagine- and I fear her brother will feel it more keenly than most."

A dry laugh.

'We will have to find a -' Cadillac stopped the tape as the Shogun sliced the air with his right hand, then pointed down at the transceiver.

'It is all here, great-uncle. Every word you have uttered today - to the moment when you ordered your faithful secretary Ichiwara to destroy the contents of the "box-room".'

Yoritomo indicated the kneeling figures of Cadillac and Roz. 'But thanks to these long-dogs, we had already found it and were waiting for his visit. He has already told us a great deal and will no doubt be persuaded to tell us more before suffering the fate of these two -' Yoritomo stepped aside, revealing the soldier with the two string bags who had been standing among the guards clustered behind him.

Responding to his signal, the soldier walked forward, bowed to Ieyasu and laid the bags containing the heads of Watanabe and Mashimatsu at his feet.

Ieyasu looked down at them, unmoved, then faced Yoritomo with a defiant, straight-backed stare.

'It is not my sister who plots against me, but you, great-uncle.

This box holds the proof in your own words! Proof that you tried and failed to kill my sister - and planned to rid yourself of her for a second time - tonight!" Yoritomo levelled an accusing finger at Ieyasu. 'Seize him!" The hands of Ieyasu's bodyguard flew to the hilts of their swords as they formed a protective screen in front of him- a gesture matched with equal speed by the Shogun's men. But neither side drew their deadly blades. Ieyasu's guards were torn between defending their master and obeying the Shogun. As the ultimate ruler of Ne-Issan, he commanded their higher obedience; to disobey him meant certain death, but Ieyasu's reputation and the aura of power he radiated was so awesome, he was able to stare his would-be captors

down. No one dared make the first move against him.

'By the Gods!" cried Yoritomo. 'You will pay for this; you spineless rabble!" He turned to Captain Kamakura the only man whose blade was half out of his scabbard.

'Give me your sword!" Kamakura, his face blanched with shame, dropped down on one knee and placed the hilt of the sword in the Shogun's out-stretched hand.

Yoritomo cut the air with two or three classic sword strokes to get the feel of it then advanced on Ieyasu's bodyguard. 'Stand aside!" he thundered.

Ieyasu's guards ceded to his authority with a bow and backed off. His own men took a menacing pace forward.

Everyone held their breath as the Shogun came face to face with the Lord Chamberlain. Nephew and granduncle.

Ieyasu, who was the taller of the two, looked at Yoritomo with mocking disdain. The way one might eye a particularly tiresome child whose demands could not be taken seriously.

'Have you taken leave of your senses? Can't you see this is a plot hatched by our enemies to discredit me?"

Ieyasu pointed to Lady Mishiko. 'Give me her for an hour and you will hear from her own lips the names of those who have conspired to bring me down!" His words failed to sway Yoritomo. 'There is no plot-other than the one you and Watanabe hatched with the masters of these long-dogs! Ichiwara had told me of the secret treaty which enabled you to secure these devilish devices! For years you have deceived me and corrupted the soul of the nation!" Ieyasu responded with a contemptuous laugh. 'You foolish boy! The whole world is built on deceit and corruption! But I have harnessed the venal appetites and duplicity that surrounds us to a noble purpose - a nation at peace under the flag of the Toh-Yota! There is only one principle I cleave to - the maintenance of power- by any means! For without power, all your lofty principles and moral posturings are worthless! Strong governments survive, the weak fall to the sword.

'Of course I have lied and cheated! I have stopped at nothing to ensure our family continues to rule this land . Our enemies know me for what I am. That is why they fear me. They may bow to you, but privately they mock you because they know that behind your monkish habits and your pious air of self-denial is a flawed human being inflamed by unnatural desires! Truly a son fit for his father's shoes?

Enraged by Ieyasu's public denunciation and mortified with shame, Yoritomo raised the sword and adopted a threatening posture.

'Go on!" urged Ieyasu fearlessly. 'Strike! Show us you are fit to lead this nation into war - for that is what will follow as soon as you have dispensed with me?

The trembling blade remained poised as Yoritomo tried vainly to steady his shaking hands. The suspense became unbearable. Most of those watching thought the Shogun would throw down the sword, but Kamakura knew the blow would fall. Failure to act would have resulted in irretrievable loss of face. Ieyasu had goaded the young Shogun beyond endurance, and the old fox had done so deliberately in order to avoid a slower and more agonising death by torture. Traditionally a public spectacle, it was, for a nobleman, the ultimate humiliation.

Ieyasu grasped his long staff in both hands and raised it threateningly. The blade flashed forward, piercing him through the abdomen. Once.

Twice. The Chamberlain gasped, but did not cry out. He sank slowly to his knees, clutching the wounds. Blood gushed out between his fingers.

'You fool!" he croaked. 'You blind fool! You have thrown everything away. It is not me you should have killed...

it is these. worthless. creatures that. surround you!" His last words fell on deaf ears. Yoritomo handed the blood-stained sword back to Kamakura. 'Behead him ' The Guard Captain did so with one swift, precisely-aimed stroke as the dying Chamberlain toppled forward.

Yoritomo stared down at the severed head of his mentor then kicked it aside as he led Lady Mishiko out of the room. Two of his bodyguards ran ahead of him and slid the door-panels aside. As he passed through, Yoritomo turned back.

Everyone bowed.

'Captain Kamakura!' 'Sire...?'

'These rooms are to be sealed and guarded until a thorough search for incriminating documents can be organised.'

'Yes, sire!' 'All members of the Lord Chamberlain's staff, from those who hold high office to the lowest of his servants, his appointees within the palace, his gaming cronies and female procurers are to be arrested, put in chains, and placed in close confinement. I want them all under lock and key before dawn.'

Yoritomo pointed to Ieyasu's crestfallen bodyguard. 'And you can start with these insolent swine! Is that understood?"

'Perfectly!' 'Good. Report to me when it is done."

'And the long-dog envoys, sire?"

'Seize them too! We will show their masters what happens to those who seek to enslave us with the Dark Light! And throw this pair in with them!" Roz and Cadillac looked at each other in dismay as their arms were seized by four of Kamakura's men. Being tossed in the slammer had not been part of the plan

CHAPTER TWELVE

Surrounded by his bodyguard and a dozen soldiers from the Shield Unit, the Shogun and Lady Mishiko swept out of the dead Chamberlain's apartments, leaving Captain Kamakura and twenty of his men to carry out his orders. Kamakura, shocked by the speed of events, found himself in something of a dilemma.

Jailing Secretary Ichiwara and Ieyasu's six guards was a simple, straightforward matter, likewise the seizure of the envoys in the North Tower. They might protest, but would offer no resistance - but how was he to deal with the two spirit-witches whom the Shogun had taken to be painted long-dogs!

When they had removed their masks in Lady Mishiko's audience chamber, he had seen their gnarled grey faces change shape and colour - becoming smooth-boned grass-monkeys in the twinkling of an eye! It was widely believed they could turn ordinary mortals who offended them into all manner of birds, animals and insects.

Kamakura had no wish to anger them but when the Shogun gave an order, he had to obey. What on earth, he asked himself, was he to do?

Lady Mishiko had not told him what was to happen after they had played their part in exposing Lord Ieyasu's treachery, but he could not believe she intended them to be locked in a prison cell!

Kamakura clasped his hands behind his back and wandered back and forth in front of the witches, hoping for a look or a word that would resolve his dilemma.

Neither was forthcoming. Forced down on their knees by the pressure on their arms, they hung their heads like the other prisoners whose plight they shared.

Aware that his men were looking at him expectantly, Kamakura came to a decision. The witches were protected by powerful magic. They would free themselves at a moment of their own choosing, and in a way which would not cast doubt on Lady Mishiko's role in this affair. Or his own. All well and good - but when it happened, how was he going to explain the loss of two important prisoners?

Just as Kamakura was about to issue the order to have the prisoners taken away, one of the Shogun's bodyguards appeared in the doorway.

'Captain! You are required to attend the Shogun!" Kamakura clicked his heels to acknowledge the summons.

The gods were with him. With a bit of luck, the spirit-witches might disappear while in someone else's custody. He turned to the junior

officer who had been placed in charge of Ichiwara. 'Carry on in my absence, lieutenant! Send six men to pick up the long-dogs from the North Tower, and convey them and these swine to the dungeons!" His departure, combined with the lieutenant's assumption of command and despatch of six men to arrest the two Tracker envoys, led to a great deal of heel-dicking and foot-pounding, which allowed Cadillac to pass a whispered message to Roz.

'Time to go - by the back door - need a minute to pick up a few things without anyone seeing- so put these guys out of action - and do it now!" One of the guards holding his arms brought his knee round and slammed it into the side of Cadillac's head.

'Shut your mouth[' The jarring blow inflicted by his knee was nothing compared to the sharp jagged pain that shot through the guard's own skull from ear to ear as the room exploded in a dazzling burst of white light. He let go of Cadillac and clutched at his head, but even with his eyes closed and covered, he could not shut out the light that was burning into his brain.

Nor could the other soldiers and their captives. Crippled by the agony and blinded by the light and with their vocal chords paralysed by the pain, they stumbled into each other then fell to the floor clutching their tortured skulls and screaming soundlessly.

The mind-warp Roz had produced was so powerful Cadillac could not stop it invading his own brain. Fortunately, the mental rapport they had developed enabled him to 'tune out' much of the unpleasantness but it still left with him a king-sized headache. A shimmering white haze filled the room, blurring the outlines of people and objects, and bleaching out nearly all the colour.

Screwing up his eyes against the light, he gave Roz's arm a reassuring squeeze. 'You're amazing. Here, take the. radio! Unlock the door to the secret passage and get ready to go through!" 'I can't! I have to stay here where I can keep a visual fix on these guys. That's how it works!" 'Okay, I'll do it. But when I call, get there fast!" Picking up the hem of his kimono, he stepped quickly over the bodies in his path and recovered the hidden listening device.

The next task was somewhat messier. Skirting the pool of blood that had poured from Ieyasu's severed neck and his punctured body, Cadillac tipped the heads of Watanabe and Mashimatsu out of their string bags and collected the head of Ieyasu.

With this grisly task completed, he relieved the lieutenant of his sword, took the radio from Roz and ran through the intervening rooms into the bed-chamber. Releasing the catch on the hidden door, he carried the radio and the headbag into the secret passage beyond then returned sword in hand, leaving the door closed but with the catch open.

Running back to the study, he found Roz had backed into the doorway, ready to make a fast exit. Beyond her, the soldiers and their captives were still on the floor with most of them curled up into a foetal position, their arms wrapped round their heads.

'Okay! Let's go!" He spun Roz around and pushed her ahead of him.

'C'mon! Move, move, move!"

'What's with the sword?' gasped Roz, as they reached the door and slithered through. 'Mind-magic not good enough?'

'This is just for emergencies.' His face twisted angrily as he slammed an open palm against the wall. 'Oh, shit!

I forgot to bring a lantern!' 'That's okay. I left one here under the bottom step when we came to plant the bug. And a flint lighter.'

Cadillac pulled the secret door shut and slipped the inside catch into place. 'You're a genius.'

'I'm glad one of us is.' Roz felt her way down the steps, retrieved the hidden lantern, lit the oiled wick and trimmed the flame. Looking up, she saw Cadillac with the radio in one hand and the head bag in the other. 'Did you have to bring him along?'

'Yes.'

'And the other bag - is that for the Shogun?'

'Yes.'

'You're crazy.'

'That's what you said when I suggested rowing sixteen miles in a crowded long-boat. I know what I'm doing, Roz, so don't argue. We came here to do a job, and the only way to prove we've done it is by handing the heads of Yoritomo and Ieyasu over to the Yama-Shita.

They're not going to start a war just on our say-so!' 'No, you're right.' She raised the lantern. 'Where do we go from here?'

Back in the study, the soldiers and captives had started to come round soon after Roz had broken her hold on their minds but they were not able to leap immediately into action. The crippling head pains had gone, leaving them with the dying residue of a monster hang*over and troubled vision. The after-effect on their eyesight was similar to having a series of flash-bulbs popping off in your face and it took a few moments to clear.

Some people recovered faster than others, notably Ichiwara and four of Ieyasu's personal guard. Driven by the basic instinct for self-preservation they were on their feet and heading for the exit while everyone else was trying to haul themselves off the floor.

The soldiers fell on the remaining pair of Ieyasu's guards and disarmed them before any more damage could be done. Seizing one of their long-swords to replace his own, the distraught lieutenant sent several of his men in pursuit of the fleeing prisoners, and despatched six more as ordered to the North Tower.

The Shogun had summoned Captain Kamakura to ask him whether, in the light of Mashimatsu's involvement in the attempt to kill his sister and her children, the company of soldiers under his command could be trusted to remain loyal. 'If you consider the conversation we overheard,' said Yoritomo, 'it's clear that several men were involved.'

'That's true, sire. But if they were soldiers from the Palace Guard, I do not believe they would have known who the target was. In fact, there was every reason not to tell them.'

'True... But if we are to secure the Palace and rout out the rest of the scum in Ieyasu's employ, we need to know who is with us and who is against us.'

With so many of Lord Ieyasu's place-men on the resident staff of the Palace, it was a difficult question to answer. In Kamakura's book, the rank and file soldiers were simple, honest fellows with no interest in, or understanding of, political intrigue. That only afflicted the higher ranks who saw the chance of preferment and privilege by backing one camp against another, and the opportunists within the Inner Court whose empty lives left them with little else to do.

The men could be counted upon to follow orders, but their subsequent conduct would depend on who took command and the reasons that were given for doing so. At the moment, No.2 Company did not even know Mashimatsu had been beheaded.

Once again the gods were with him. Just as he was about to reply, the Shogun's guards admitted the breathless lieutenant who fell to his knees and broke the news that Secretary Ichihara, four of Ieyasu's

guards and the two painted long-dogs had escaped from custody.

'We were blinded by a brilliant light that robbed us of our senses! It pierced our skulls like red hot skewers!

No one could withstand it! We fell like dead men to the ground. When the light vanished and we found our feet again, Ichiwara and the others were gone!" 'By the gods!" cried Yoritomo. 'Do they threaten us with yet more of their devilish devices?" He turned to Kamakura. 'Could the envoys from the Federation have had a hand in this?"

'I cannot say, sire. I only learned of their presence from the Lord Chamberlain's conversation. Their reception was handled by his staff and kept secret from everyone else." He glared down at the hapless lieutenant. 'Did you send men to arrest them as I ordered?"

'Y-Yes, sir!" Yoritomo cut in. 'Then sound a General Alert! The traitor Ichiwara and others whom you allowed to escape must be recaptured before they can rouse their friends and resist us! Are the gates sealed?"

Kamakura clicked his heels as he stiffened to attention.

'Yes, sire! And you can rely on the men from the 3rd and 4th Company, as well as my own!" 'Perhaps the 2nd Company too,' said Yoritomo. 'If Ichiwara evades us, it will not be long before word reaches them that the Lord Chamberlain, his Chief Secretary and their commander have paid the penalty for trying to usurp my power. These soldiers are not stupid.

They are bound to realise that any sign of disaffection would be pointless." He laughed. 'With Ieyasu dead, who is there to serve other than he?"

Kamakura bowed his head. 'No one, sire."

'Exactly! And that is what I shall tell them." He extended his hand to Mishiko. 'Come, sister. The Captain and I will escort you to your quarters."

This was not at all what Lady Mishiko wanted. She fell on her knees before the Shogun and clutched the front of his dark, richly embroidered kimono.

Kamakura and everyone else backed away politely and bowed their heads.

By the convoluted rules of Iron Master etiquette, they were now deemed to be invisible and deaf to what passed between Yoritomo and Mishiko.

'My Lord! Dearest brother! If you love me, let me stay in your quarters for the rest of this dreadful night! Lord Ieyasu ruled over a secret world of shadows and you may be sure that this palace has its share of spies and assassins.

When they hear that I denounced their master they will seek revenge. I will not be safe until every one of them is under lock and key!"

."Then I will place guards outside your bedchamber,' said Yoritomo. He took hold of her hands and pulled her gently to her feet. 'You shall have as many as you wish. You shall have protection night and day for as long as you desire it."

Mishiko shook her head. 'No! No! You will need every man you can spare to arrest the traitors within these walls!" She dropped her voice to an urgent whisper. 'Let me lie in your shadow. Your love is all the protection I need ' 'Mishiko! There is so much to do! I must send word to our family, telling them of Ieyasu's treachery. His place-men will have to be removed from the government, but with so many of them holding key positions it will cause absolute chaos."

'Then don't do it. At least not yet. News of Ieyasu's death, the details of how and why he died, need not pass beyond the Palace walls.

Time is on your side. In the coming days, when your head is cooler, you will find ways to profit by what has happened.

'No one need know the truth. He was an old man whose lustful appetite never waned. If we announce he was sucked to death by one of his little strumpets, no one at court will raise an eyebrow." Mishiko lifted both hands from his chest and caressed his face and neck. 'I could wish for no better fate than to meet a sweet death in your arms."

'Sweet death' was the courtly euphemism for an orgasm.

Yoritomo felt his heartbeat quicken as her nearness brought back the memories of their secret couplings. The killing of his great-uncle and the realisation that he was at last master of his own destiny had made him feel quite bullish. He could do anything.

'Very well. Wait here. I will arrange to have your children and their nurse sent to you. My servants can make up beds in one of the other rooms.'

'Send Oyoki too,' whispered Mishiko. 'I shall need her help to prepare myself.'

Yoritomo clasped her hands tightly in his arms. 'Be patient. I will return as soon as I have made certain that the Palace is in our hands.'

Entering the Shogun's bed-chamber, Mishiko caught a fleeting glimpse of two shadowy figures which vanished as an icy hand seemed to clutch her brain. Recognising the presence of magic, she dismissed the servants whom Yoritomo had ordered to wait on her, and asked not to be disturbed until her brother returned.

As the servants withdrew, Roz released the mind-lock she had placed on them all. To Mishiko, the two hooded white-masked witches appeared to materialise out of thin air, but their previous invisibility was only a trick of the mind. Roz's mesmeric power enabled her to create optical illusions. It is a well known fact that the brain sees what it thinks it sees, not what is actually there and this was the phenomenon that Roz exploited. Mishiko and the servants had seen her and Cadillac, but were persuaded to delete that piece of visual information from their mental picture of the room and fill in the resulting gaps using data from their memory banks.

'You have done well, mi'lady,' husked Cadillac. 'The prize is within your grasp, but we remain close at hand in case you have need of us.'

Roz took control of Mishiko's mind and conjured up an image of the Herald. In three strides he had crossed the room and gathered Mishiko into his arms. His 'face was still pale but it was no longer grey and haggard. His eyes were clear and his voice stronger. 'Can you see how the death of Ieyasu has given me new hope and strength? We are but one step from eternal happiness in each other's arms I' Rooted to the spot, her eyes closed, Mishiko lifted her face to the invisible Herald. In her mind's eye, her body was crushed against his in a passionate embrace.

She could feel, with dreamlike intensity, the soft moist texture of his lips on hers, the warmth of his cheek against her face, the muscled strength of his arms and the heat in his loins.

Cadillac sidled up to Roz and whispered: 'Okay, I've planted the bug.

Is she gonna go through with it?'

'Oh, yes,' said Roz, her voice breaking. 'Don't worry.

She's not going to let anything stop her now.' She backed towards the false beam and followed Cadillac through into the passage before releasing her mental grip on Mishiko.

Whispering a declaration of undying love, the Herald stepped back and

vanished. Mishiko found herself standing in an empty room, with her arms stretched out in front of her. She could still feel the lines traced over her hands by his fingers as he slipped from her grasp.

Wrapping her arms around her ribs, Mishiko fell to her knees on the mattress bed and rocked slowly back and forth, nursing the unbearable pain of separation. Soon, my love. Soon....

Roz and Cadillac sat sideways on the narrow set of steps that led up to the secret doorway into the Shogun's bed-chamber with their backs against the same wall. The lamp, its wick trimmed to conserve the precious oil, stood on the floor of the passageway below. The dim light did not reach all the way up the stairs- an arrangement which suited Roz because it meant that Ieyasu's head-bag was lost in the shadows. Her elbow was parked on the same step as Cadillac's feet and between them was the radio, tuned to the listening bug he had placed under the small

black lacquered table. If all went well, it would broadcast the sounds of death and its aftermath sometime between now and dawn, and would help them gauge when it was safe to enter to obtain the final piece of evidence they needed.

Cadillac sensed that Roz was deeply troubled by the trail of violence she had helped to unleash and the knowledge that the blood-letting had barely begun. He reached down and tried to lay a comforting hand on her shoulder. It felt hard and unwelcoming.

'Roz, listen - I know what this is doing to you. But now we've started, we have to see it through. Just remember this woman is no different from the rest of them. These people are merciless. If she didn't want vengeance, we couldn't have made her do this.'

Roz averted her face. 'Good. That makes me feel a whole lot better.'

She drew a finger across both cheeks to dry them. 'You don't seem to have grasped she's not just driven by hate. Mishiko's about to kill herself because of her love for a dead man. She can't bear to live without him.'

To Cadillac, this all sounded depressingly familiar.

He sighed wearily and received an unexpectedly painful punch in the thigh. 'Owww!!' 'Don't try and yawn this one off, you bastard! Have you any idea what that means - to love someone that much?

The one worthwhile emotion in this world and what have we done?

Exploited it for our own ends in the cruellest of deceptions. We pushed her into. this by building up her hopes and what's she going to end up with? Nothing!

You may find that a big joke, but it makes me feel sick inside.'

Cadillac rubbed his thigh and prepared to ward off another punch. 'At least she'll die happy. Disappointment is an emotion you can only suffer from when you're alive.'

'It must feel good to have a pat answer to everything.'

She brushed away his hand as it reached out for her shoulder again.

'This is the wrong time for us to fall out, Roz. I know what love is, and I know what we've done and why. If you still think I'm the bad guy by the time we get home take it out on me then. Meanwhile we've got work to do.'

'Sure,' she sniffed. 'Just blowing off steam. Don't worry. The doctor will still be on call.'

Cadillac 'decided it would be wiser not to respond. That was the trouble with words. They could always be twisted around to give them a meaning you never intended. Once uttered, words could never be un-said- and no amount of apologising could ever erase them from the mind. 'Could you pass me up the lamp? I'd like to take another look at this alternative escape route Mishiko sketched out for

US.'

Roz handed him the lamp without a word. The fate of Lady Mishiko and

her children was not the only thing troubling her. Roz now knew, without any shadow of doubt, that Steve was in the Summer Palace. The shock of his arrest and the rough treatment meted out by his captors had triggered a clean contact. The mind-bridge was open again.

Steve's companion was a woman- and with that image had come the feeling of power. She was a member of the First Family. Someone close to the President-General-someone whom Roz had never met but who knew her almost as well as she knew herself.

Cadillac had floated the idea of capturing the envoys and trading them for Clearwater and her child, but since their argument in the hot tub he hadn't said anything further. And with the envoys now in the slammer, he had probably decided it was one problem too many. If so, he would have to think again because Rozalynn Roosevelt Brickman wasn't leaving without her kin-brother

The dungeons of the Summer Palace were situated below the main courtyard. A square, raised stone structure with heavy iron grilles in the side which served as a kind of clerestory, surmounted a vertical shaft that ran from top to bottom of the subterranean cell-block and provided

the only natural light to reach into the passages running off it.

The cells nearest the shaft were provided with some light and ventilation; those at the far end of the passageways remained shrouded in gloom during the day.

The air was stale and fetid, and at night the pitch darkness was only relieved by the occasional glow of a lamp carried by a patrolling prison warder.

It was in one of these less favoured units on the second floor down that Steve and Fran now found themselves, after being hauled out of bed by six frenzied armed men who had pushed them around and yelled abuse in their faces as they complied with the order to dress. The trail bags with their hidden radio packs had then been rammed against their chests and they were given a few more seconds to pack the rest of their belongings before being hustled down a bewildering maze of passageways into a foul-smelling Japanese underworld.

There was no point in protesting. Steve knew when these guys were hyped up anything could happen and it was likely to be very unpleasant.

That didn't stop Fran trying, but before she'd uttered three words, she had been silenced by a rain of blows to her head and back delivered by the Soldiers behind her. Steve got it in the neck too, just for being there. The nightmare journey had ended in a dank corridor with a cell-door being slammed shut behind them as they were sent sprawling on their faces in a bed of straw that reeked of urine and human excrement.

Having been raised in the Federation, neither of them felt claustrophobic, but the sudden transition from relative luxury to a dark, stinking cell had left them feeling totally disoriented. No one had offered a word of explanation, but it was obvious something had gone badly wrong. A major upset in which they were deemed to be implicated. This was definitely not a fun place. The clammy stone walls smelt as if they were coated with blood, sweat and fear.

Steve was alarmed at the sudden downturn in their fortunes, but he wasn't frightened. For in the same instant as he collided with the floor, the wall he had built around his mind blew apart, allowing Roz to enter.

The telepathic bond between them was like a videophone line down which he could send words and pictures.

But for Steve that was where it ended. Roz had the uncanny ability to search him out with her mind and locate his position with the aid of a map. And because Steve had been the only one, so far, to have suffered serious injury, the mysterious process by which her body produced replicate wounds appeared to be another unique attribute.

The link was clean and strong, just as it had been when he'd sent out the desperate May-Day appeal from the locked cabin of the wheel-boat, but the unexpected contact left his mind reeling.

Roz wasn't in Wyoming. She was here, in the Summer Palace- with Cadillac!

They were involved in an operation against the TohYota.

That was the reason for the present uproar, and why he and Fran had been arrested.

Terrific. Just what he needed!

What the hell did Cadillac think he was up to? Steve didn't give a damn about the deal the Federation had been trying to set up, but he did care about the fallout.

Even if Roz was able to make good her unspoken promise to spring him from this rat-hole it would still leave everything totally messed up.

The overthrow of the present ruling family might be a good enough reason for returning empty-handed, but if the P-G found out the deal had been blown by Roz and Cadillac, 8902

Brickman S.R. could kiss goodbye to the high life and look forward to getting his balls roasted.

His involvement with both of them was too deep for him to disclaim all responsibility. Even though he and Roz hadn't been inside each other's heads since she'd left the Red River wagon-train, he couldn't prove it. Karlstrom and the P-G were bound to believe he was

in this up to his neck. Prior knowledge and active involvement. A tough rap to beat.

If the flak came his way, Fran would step aside. You could bet your last credit on that. It made better sense to try and get Fran out on his own. At least that would earn him an E for Effort. Yeah... plus an A for an Amazing escape from a locked underground cell.

The only way it could be done was with outside help. Between them, Roz and Cadillac had the skill and the power. If they concealed their true identities from Fran, Brickman S.R. could avoid being fatally compromised. All well and good, but AMEXICO had men inside Ne-Issan with their ear to the ground - guys like Sidewinder. If the Toh-Yota fell and the shit hit the fan, the truth was bound to come out.

Steve found himself smiling as these thoughts ran through his head. It was one crazy kind of world where being rescued was the worst thing that could happen to you.

From further down the corridor came the sound of a flurry of blows, followed by hoarse screams and curses. A woman gave a shrill animal-like scream of pain. Another heavy, iron-clad door slammed shut. Bolts were rammed home. The noise subsided, leaving only the sound of someone sobbing quietly.

'Any of that make sense to you?' asked Steve. All he could see of Fran was the barely discernible outline of her head framed by a square of dark grey that marked the barred window in the cell door.

'Not much,' she replied. 'The woman who cried out was saying she was innocent. Of what, I don't know.'

Not that it matters. Whoever's running this place doesn't seem to be taking much notice."

Steve heard more faint voices. 'What's happening?'

'If you will just keep quiet, maybe I'll be able to tell you!' Fran listened intently, then said: 'Must be one of the warders. He was asking where he should put the new arrivals.'

Steve joined her by the door and feigned ignorance.

'Why are they arresting so many people in the middle of the night?' As he asked the question he realised he was standing next to someone who'd seen this kind of thing before. But from the other side. 'Some kind of purge, huh?'

Fran nodded. 'Looks that way.'

'But why us? Hell - we're here at the invitation of Ieyasu and the Shogun.'

'Exactly,' said Fran. 'Maybe they're not in charge any more.'

Steve caught his breath and continued to play the innocent. 'Hey, c'mon, that's crazy! Karlstrom and the P-G wouldn't have sent us here if they'd known something like this was brewing.'

'Karlstrom? Huhh! Don't be fooled by him. He's the worst head of AMEXICO we've ever had!' 'You're kidding!' 'I'm telling you, Brickman!

You're just a new boy, okay? He's hanging onto that job by his fingertips - and has been for years. And the only reason he's still there is because the P-G keeps on giving him another chance.

They were childhood buddies."

'I'm amazed. He's always given me the impression of being in total control. Like he had the inside track on everything and everybody
....

' 'Yeah, sure,' said Fran, letting go of the bars. 'So how come we're in this mess?" She slid down the wall onto the straw and drew her knees up against her chest.

Steve couldn't believe what she had said about Karlstrom was true, but it was an interesting piece of malicious gossip that warranted further investigation.

It was also typical of Fram Unable to blame him for their present predicament, she had converted her anxiety into a spiteful attack on the head of the organisation he worked for.

The thing was - did she have the necessary resilience to pull through something like this? She had faced down Ieyasu's aides with some tough talking, but that was all

it had been - talk. As far as he knew, Fran had never suffered a day of discomfort in the whole of her privileged existence. When she'd put the verbal boot into Karlstrom there had been a noticeable quaver in her voice. Anger or the first signs of panic?

He dropped down beside her and laid a reassuring arm across her shoulders. 'Listen. I know this doesn't look too good at the moment, but don't let it get to you. We'll figure a way out.'

Fran bristled and pushed his arm away. 'You can be a real pain in the butt, y'know that?! Yeah, sure, I'm scared. Who wouldn't be? But I'm not about to come apart at the seams. Y'got that, Captain?'

'Yessurrma'am!' 'Good. Now get this. You may be the best thing that happened to me so far, but if you ever lay that "poor little woman" shit on me again, you'll find yourself back in the A-Levels. And this time you'll stay there!' Fran seemed to have completely forgotten her first night at sea when she'd clung to him like a terrified child.

I'm dealing with an irrational human being here, thought Steve. If I show no concern, I'm unsympathetic. If I offer comfort, I'm being patronising. And if I disagree, I'm insubordinate.

It was a no-win situation, but there was nothing he could do about it.

He was stuck with her

On being respectfully informed that Oyoki, her personal maid-servant had arrived in the anteroom, Mishiko emerged from the Shogun's private suite of rooms.

Oyoki was- accompanied by Nitobe, one of the eight guards who had helped to row the long-boat. He had a bloodstained bandage around his neck and over his left ear, and another on his left forearm. Oyoki looked distraught, and when she and Nitobe fell to their knees before her, she burst into tears.

Mishiko went cold inside. 'You have not brought my children?'

Oyoki answered with a wailing incantation and began to sob uncontrollably, rocking back and forth with her hands clasped to her chest - the traditional way of mourning the dead.

Mishiko's outward demeanour did not change. Anger and joy were permissible emotions, but it was not proper for someone of noble birth to display any sign of weakness in front of lesser beings.

She addressed the guard. 'Nitobe...?'

The wounded man touched the straw matting with his forehead then sat back on his heels. 'Your highness, it shames me to bring you such grievous news. Your children are dead. Secretary Ichiwara and four of Ieyasu's personal guards burst into your apartments and put everyone they met to the sword! They were like men possessed! We fought back and killed them all, but not before Ichiwara reached your children and their nurse.'

His face crumpled. 'Your maids tried to shield them with their bodies.'

Only Oyoki and Katiwa survived."

Mishiko received this news with the same blank face.

'And my valiant guards...?'

Nitobe lowered his head. 'Four died, your highness.

Another may not live beyond morning. Two more received sword thrusts to the body. I am the only one who can walk unaided."

'I commend your bravery, Nitobe. Go and tend your wounded companions and give them my thanks."

The guard bowed and left. Oyoki choked back her grief. Mishiko motioned her to rise.

'Dry your tears, Oyoki. Only the common people display their grief outside the temple precincts. Ask my brother's servants to prepare me a bath then bring two cups and a good supply of sake. If we are to be denied happiness, we can at least drown our sorrows!' It was after midnight when the Shogun and his escort returned. He looked tired, but there was a firm set to his jaw and a hard glitter in his eyes.

Captain Kamakura was with him. Mishiko bowed in greeting. Yoritomo sat

down on the stool that had been placed under him and spread his arms and legs to enable his servants to remove his armour.

'The Palace is ours. The future is assured. Did you hear the cheers?

That was me winning the hearts of the second company." He gave a quick laugh. 'If there were any waverers, they soon fell into line when Mashimatsu's head was paraded past them on a pole!" His face tightened as he saw her kneeling maidservant.

'You know then?"

'Yes, my lord. Oyoki has spared you the pain of telling me yourself.

The Fates have played a cruel trick on us.

Just when we are about to savour victory, they hand us a poisoned chalice?

'It should never have happened. That fool of a lieutenant and the soldiers who let Ichiwara go will pay dearly for this."

Mishiko fell to her' knees before him. 'No, my lord!

I beg you! Do not punish them. What will their companions think when they see those who serve you loyally so cruelly rewarded?"

Her appeal for clemency was an oblique reference to the fate of the Herald Hase-Gawa. If Yoritomo made the connection, it didn't show. He stood up as the last of his armour was removed and helped her to rise.

'My dearest sister! An example must be made! The death of your children must be avenged!" 'The hot blood of those who conspired with Ieyasu will satisfy me,' she whispered. She extended a hand towards Kamakura. 'Let us give thanks that the gods have shown favour to your loyal Captain by sparing his daughter."

'Hah! Then he is doubly blest? cried Yoritomo. 'For I have made him Castle CommandantI' 'And General Tadoshi?"

'With the rest of my grand-uncle's vile cronies! In a cell!" Mishiko favoured Kamakura with a regal nod. 'I could not think of a more fitting recompense for your service to this family."

'Your highness is most gracious ' Mishiko beckoned to her maid-servant. 'Come, Oyoki.

Go with your father. Have him convey you to the safety of your family home. Remain there until I call upon you to attend me - and do your best to put this dreadful night out of your mind."

'Yes, my lady."

Catching the look in his sister's eyes, Yoritomo ordered his bodyguard and the other members of his entourage to remain on call, then ushered her into his private suite.

As his valet and personal servants went to follow, he motioned them to wait outside.

.When the doors closed he confronted Mishiko. 'You astound me. How can you concern yourself with the welfare of servants when your own

children have just been murdered?!" 'Because I share your royal blood, my lord. Have you not shown your magnanimity tonight? It is by our actions towards the living that we are measured. We can do nothing for the dead except honour their memory. As for my children, I will bear their loss with the same fortitude that has helped me endure our separation.

'May the gods nurture their innocent souls and grant me forgiveness! I bore them and treated them tenderly but I could never take them into my heart because they were never fully mine! They sprang from the seed of my late, unlamented husband, the Consul General-pumped into me by the same organ that was thrust daily into his gutter-whores!

'Now he is nothing - and I have nothing to remind me of him! I can wipe away ten years of shame! It can be as it was between us before Ieyasu drove me away!" 'Mishiko! Soon perhaps, but not ,now. This is not the time!" She seized his hands. 'Yes! Yes! This's the time!

We must seize the moment! Can't you feel it? With Ieyasu's death you have been reborn! I can see it in your eyes! You are the master now!"

She drew his hands onto her breasts.

'Seal our victory by giving me your child tonightt Do not

deny me

this, for without your love, I have nothing to live for?

Yoritomo could feel her nipples pressing through the silken robe into the palms of his hands. The sensation rekindled the old desires he had never fully suppressed.

Mishiko was right. This was a rebirth. And tonight those youthful desires had been given an extra spice.

The killing, the blood, the violence, the heady taste of absolute power, his sister's emotional turmoil formed a potent cocktail. For the first time he felt unashamed.

There was no need to hide. Let those around him disapprove if they dared. Yes! He was the master now!

'I shall deny you nothing, Mishi,' he whispered. 'For you were my first love, and will be my last ' After Yoritomo's servants had prepared them, they met again in the darkened bed-chamber, now perfumed by burning joss-sticks. Four charcoal braziers cast their warming glow over the large mattress-bed. Lady Mishiko greeted her brother with the required degree of respect for his position as supreme ruler of Ne-Issan, then slowly undressed him, covering his naked flesh with lingering kisses as more and more of it was revealed.

When the last garment fell away, and he stood before her, his pale skin tinted orange by the firelight, she gathered up the hem of the filmy silken shift she had been given to wear, lifted it over her head and cast it aside.

Keeping her arms lifted high and wide, she presented her heavy rounded breasts with their erect nipples raised for his inspection, then turned her back on him.

Act One

These preliminaries were part of a ritual that her adolescent brother had cajoled and bullied her into.

She had quickly learned what pleased him, and over the years their furtive couplings had always followed the same pattern - like actors playing traditional roles in a Noli drama about star-crossed lovers.

Yoritomo's hands slid under her arms and up onto her breasts, flattening them against her rib-cage and drawing her body back against his. This was how it had begun during that long hot summer; the very first movement he had made on entering the shaded coolness of her room and stealing up behind her. Then as now, she felt her nipples sprout between his parted fingers as his great stick wedged itself between his belly and the cleft in her buttocks.

Then she hadn't known what he expected of her, but there was no hesitation now. Raising herself up on tiptoe, she parted her thighs and straddled him as he slipped through.

Act Two... Even now, fifteen years and countless penetrations later, Yoritomo felt his mind reel as he relived the moment when his innermost desires were fulfilled. It was all he had dreamed of and more. She had become an ardent slave that he could bend to his will, could submit to, could suffer any indignity he fancied at her hands without losing control of the situation or her respect.

Mishiko also remembered that moment. He had come upon her like a rutting stag. And she, like a young doe in heat, had responded. Their first encounter left her feeling confused and ashamed, but it had opened a well-spring of desire. She had never loved Yoritomo, but she was - like their father- highly-sexed. Their semi-secret relationship had provided the opportunity to satisfy her physical needs without going through the whole tiresome business of having to get married to a young man that her family approved of but who, by the very nature of things, she was bound to detest. Which was precisely what had happened when the family married her off to the Consul-General Nakane TohShiba.

It was only with the Herald, Toshiro Hase-Gawa, that she had experienced the joy and pain of true love, and the fulfillment it could bring to a physical union.

Mishiko thought of the Herald as she closed her thighs, trapping her brother in the honey-pit. Yoritomo gasped with pleasure then buried his face in the free-flowing shoulder-length hair she wore on these

occasions as he continued to claw greedily at her breasts.

Ohh... Mishi!... Mishi. His right hand slid down her belly, his fingers searching out the cleft between her thighs. He was ready. She slipped from his embrace and led him to the mattress bed.

Act Three... They clung to each other beneath the coverlet like lost children, their bodies touching from head to toe. She brought her lips close to his ear. 'At last! Oh, my lord and master! My one and only love!' Yoritomo drew his head away from hers. The past could not be expunged without calling his sister to account - and the need to do so overwhelmed his desire. 'No! How can you say that when you betrayed me? You gave your love to the Herald Hase-Gawa! You wrote to me, asking to marry him! Just the thought of it drove me mad! I wanted to kill you!' Mishiko brought his face back within reach of her lips.

'You would have been wrong to do so. Yes, I loved the Herald, but do you know why? Because the love that brought us together was our love for you! He never shared my bed, and never thought to!' This was quite untrue, but it was precisely what her brother wanted to hear.

Mishiko fed him more lies.

'Toshiro brought me news from court, but most of all he talked about you. I never tired of listening and he never tired of my questions.

When my husband was killed, falling from the sky, I took it as a sign from the gods. I thought that if I married your favourite, I would be able to return to live in the palace. To be near you.' 'Was Toshiro aware of this?'

'Of course! Have I not said he loved you?!' Yoritomo sat up. 'May the Gods forgive me! I have killed my one true friend!' Mishiko hugged him. 'Your other true friend. You still have me. Do not grieve. He will never die as long as you and I are together.

Come...

lie down beside me."

The pangs of guilt had robbed Yoritomo of his erection, but Mishiko knew how to arouse his desire with whispered words and a range of artful caresses.

He lay back, eyes closed as she brought him back up with her lips and tongue, then mounted him and deftly positioned the lips of her vagina against the head of his penis. The delicious sensation generated by that first deep thrust filled Yoritomo from head to toe and made his nerve ends tingle.

She stretched out her body on top of his, framing his face with the long tresses of Mute hair that adorned her bare skull. Placing her legs outside his, she pressed his thighs together with her knees, then angled her feet in, planting them firmly over his. Starting in the middle of his forehead, she drew her hands round his face onto his neck then slid them along his shoulders and down his arms. Hand on hand, she entwined her fingers with his, locked them tight, drew them upwards to rest on either side of his head, and laid her elbows on his pinning him down on the mattress.

His penis, lying deep inside her, jerked and stiffened.

Yoritomo liked to be dominated during the sexual act.

The pretence of not being in control eased his feelings of guilt and shifted the blame for what happened onto his partner. His humiliation at their hands was a less painful version of the monkish habit of mortifying the flesh as a penance for harbouring sinful thoughts. When his desires had been satisfied he would berate himself for being weak and despise his partaer for exploiting that weakness.

Until the next time

But there would not be a next time. Yoritomo, who had come close to killing any capacity she had for real emotion through his warped desires, had destroyed the one great love of her life, the Herald Toshiro' HaseGawa, and now Mishiko was only seconds away from avenging his death.

Sliding her belly back and forth on his, she pleased Yoritomo with practised vaginal contractions and felt the head of his shaft swell as he neared the point of orgasm. She gave one more gentle squeeze.

Another gasp of delight broke from her brother's lips. His

mouth
opened wide as his body 'began to shudder.

She felt his stomach muscles tighten and he started to suck in his breath in a last desperate effort to prolong the moment.

With his hands elbows and legs still secured, Mishiko pressed down upon him, tightened her own belly muscles to hold him firmly inside her, then rolled the small glass phial she had been hiding in her cheek onto the tip of her tongue.

Yoritomo opened his lips and loosed a long, shuddering sigh of delight.

It was the moment Mishiko had been waiting for. The final curtain.

Crushing the phial between her front teeth, she kissed her brother hungrily, plunging her tongue and its poisonous contents into the back of his throat. For a brief instant, Yoritomo smelt the odour of almonds, then gagged and swallowed involuntarily as the cyanide took hold.

Mishiko, her face contorted in agony, was close to death as he threw her aside. Screaming with pain, Yoritomo staggered to his feet, clutching at his throat as he tried to spit out the poison.

Alarmed by what sounded like a cry for help, his samurai bodyguard entered his private suite and burst into the bed-chamber in time to see the Shogun sink to his knees then fall dead at their feet, tongue extended from his gaping mouth, his lips blue. Behind him, on the bed, lay the naked body of Lady Mishiko.

The guards held their lanterns aloft and surveyed the scene, momentarily bewildered. Only three hours ago they had witnessed the death of the Lord Chamberlain, and now they had lost the Shogun!

Uesagi, Yoritomo's valet, and his two assistants, drawn from their quarters by the commotion, appeared in the doorway and cried out in horror. They were joined by several more who were soon jostling each other to get a better view.

Ryoku, the chief bodyguard, cursed them roundly, then ordered them to return to their quarters and stay out of sight. Uesagi, who had served Yoritomo for the last fifteen years, protested he had a duty to be at his master's side.

'With or without your head?!' cried Ryoku. He called to one of his four companions to draw his long-sword and kill anyone he found loitering in the Shogun's private suite after a count of three. The valet and the servants fled for their lives.

Ryoku borrowed one of the lanterns and took a closer look at Lady Mishiko. She appeared to have been killed by the same poison, but there was also blood on her lips. Something glinted as it caught the light. Ryoku stooped over her and saw it was a tiny sliver of glass.

One of several ... Merciful Heaven! The poison had been concealed in her mouth!

Ryoku stood up and tried to work out what to do next. He had never faced such an appalling predicament before. The two most powerful men in Ne-Issan removed from office in the space of one night! And by the hand of the same woman! For it was Lady Mishiko who had been ieyasu's

principal accuser.

But who was behind her? Was it a family cabal which had yet to reveal its hand, or was it the work of the Toh-Yota's enemies? And was Captain Kamakura to be trusted? The Shogun had placed him in command of the entire Palace Guard, but it was he who had helped the Lady Mishiko unmask the Lord Chamberlain! Who should they turn to for orders? To whom should they give their allegiance?

Ryoku and the other guards were under no illusions as to their probable fate if the blame for Yoritomo's death was to fall on their shoulders.

Their working lives had been dedicated to preventing such a tragedy.

They were the last line of defence - and a single woman had by-passed all the checks and body-searches because the Shogun himself had waved them aside.

But who would be disposed to believe that? No one was going to say it was the Shogun's fault. The family's grief would not be assuaged until the blame had been pinned on someone else. Someone who was alive.

There was no

satisfaction to be gained by punishing culprits who were already dead.

Ryoku cast these dark thoughts aside. If they could not avoid dishonour by taking their own lives, their fate at the hands of torturers on a public scaffold would have to be met with the same stoicism with which they had faced the daily possibility of death in the service of the Shogun.

Their obligation to him demanded they remain alive to give their account of this black day. With their help, the true architect of this conspiracy might yet be uncovered.

Ryoku pulled five dried flowers from a vase, cut off part of the stalks then cut one of the pieces in half.

Aligning the tops, he concealed the unequal ends in his closed palm.

'Whoever draws the shortest is to inform the Castle Commandant of what has taken place. The others are to stay here and mount a vigil over the Shogun's body until we receive orders from a higher authority.

Agreed?"

His four companions accepted with an impassive nod.

Ryoku didn't have to elaborate. If Captain Kamakura was in league with those who had set out to kill the Shogun, then they - his personal guards - would be on the extermination list. There was no guarantee that whoever carried the news to him would return alive.

Shimoya who, at 24, was the youngest of the five samurai, drew the short straw. He bowed to his companions and hurried away.

Ryoku and the remaining guards carried Yoritomo's naked body over to the bed, laid him alongside Mishiko and drew the silken eiderdown over them. Forming a line facing the foot of the bed, the four samurai knelt down and paid their last respects to the Shogun with a deep bow then sat back cross-legged, hands resting on their knees, and sank into a trance-like state of meditation.

Nothing moved. Silence filled the room.

Roz and Cadillac, crouched on the steps in the secret passageway, heard the death cries of Mishiko and the Shogun, and the thud of running feet as Yoritomo's bodyguards and servants rushed to his aid, the angry exchanges between them, imprecations, squeals of panic, the choice of someone to carry the news of Yoritomo's death to Kamakura, the soft shuffling of feet then silence.

Praying that the steps would not creak under his weight, Cadillac stood up carefully, uncovered the pin-hole in the beam that gave a blurred-edged view of the room and put his right eye against it. Roz heard him sigh.

'I don't believe this!' He sat down again. 'The Shogun and his sister are in the bed and there are four samurai sitting in front of it! What do we do now?'

'Why don't we just leave' whispered Roz. 'You've got Ieyasu's head.

Isn't that enough?"

'No! We've got to have both! Don't argue about it. I'm not giving up on this - okay?!

'So..."

'Well, don't just sit there! Help me!" Roz let out a sigh that spoke volumes and squeezed past Cadillac towards the top of the stairs. 'You can be really stubborn - anyone ever told you that?"

'Later, Roz. Just do it!" 'Okay, okay. But when this is all over and you're raking in the glory, just remember- it may have been your idea, but I made it happen."

Iron Masters were renowned for their toughness and resilience, and it was the samurai who set the standards to which all others aspired.

They were fearless warriors whose martial skills made them formidable opponents, but in one vital respect they were no different to the rest of tile population. They believed the world around them was also the home of good and evil kami - and spirit-witches.

Superstition, the fear of hob-goblins was their Achilles Heel, so it was not surprising that when a howling banshee burst through the outer wall and hurled streams of fire in their direction with her right hand, Ryoku and his companions came perilously close to a collective

cardiac

arrest. A second burst, from the fingers of the banshee's left hand struck the mattress-bed, turning it into a blazing funeral pyre.

To their credit, they tried to draw their swords - and found themselves clutching the necks of fiery snakes!

Throwing them down only compounded the horror, for the serpents shattered like a porcelain vase and the burning fragments grew in the twinkling of an eye into a swarm of hideous, claw-fingered, orange-skinned devils who were clearly intent on tearing them limb from limb.

Captain Kamakura, returning with Shimoya and fifty men, found the four unarmed samurai outside the entrance to the Shogun's apartments, still trembling from their experience. Listening to their account - which caused the soldiers behind him to mutter nervously amongst themselves Kamakura realised with growing dread that they had been the victims of witchcraft. There were, as far as he knew, only two exponents of this grey art in the palace - and he had met both of them!

'Where is this banshee and her horde of devils now?'

'I do not know,' said Ryoku. 'They pursued us from the bed-chamber but' - he paused, visibly perplexed 'the flames we saw consume the Shogun did not spread.

Yet we saw the fire and smoke! We smelt the odour of burning flesh!' 'Come with me,' said Kamakura grimly. 'The rest of you wait here!'

The five samurai followed him into the bedchamber.

There was no sign of fire, the woven straw matting was unscorched. The naked bodies of Yoritomo and Lady Mishiko lay exposed on the blood-soaked bed. Both their heads were missing.

Roz had not changed her mind and started a collection.

She had urged Cadillac to behead Mishiko to take the heat off Captain Kamakura and his family. From her trip around his brain she knew he was one of the few honest men they'd come across. There'd been enough killing. If he had his wits about him, he would - she reasoned quickly realise that Mishiko had also been bewitched. The authors of this crime lay beyond the palace walls.

She was correct. Kamakura cottoned on fast. The fact that Lord Ieyasu's head was also missing changed the whole nature of this affair.

The power of magic had been present - that was evident - but the two spirit-witches had done more than cast spells. They were agents who had skillfully plotted two audacious murders, and who had gained access to the secret passages within the palace - passages that not even the Shogun's bodyguards appeared to know about!

The heads had not vanished into thin air, they had been taken, in the time honoured fashion, as proof that the Toh-Yota family had suffered a mortal blow. The hand of the Yama-Shita lay behind this, and Lord Min-Orota had been their treacherous intermediary - for it was he who had brought the spirit-witches to Lady Mishiko in the Winter Palace and provided the boat to bring her to AronGiren.

The witches and their valuable trophies were probably still moving

through the secret passageway. Kamakura knew the entrance lay hidden behind the right-hand wall beam, but because he had kept his eyes averted when Lady Mishiko had made her secret visit to the Shogun, he did not know where to find the release mechanism. The beam would have to be smashed open. To do that, heavy implements would have to be brought and valuable time lost. And when an opening was made - who would have the courage to go in after them?

And there was something else he had to consider.

If a subsequent enquiry found that the assassins had made use of a secret passageway to the Shogun's bed-chamber, and he revealed his knowledge of it, someone who resented his meteoric promotion to Castle Commandant might accuse him of complicity in the crime.

Kamakura decided to say nothing. When the big names in the Toh-Yota family arrived for the inquest, the air would be thick with charges and countercharges.

There was no point in rocking the boat when he already had more trouble than he could handle

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Steve checked the luminous hands of his old-style watch.

Two fifteen . . . over three and a half hours since they were yanked out of bed and thrown into a stinking hole in the ground, and they were still without any clue as to what unpleasantness their hosts had in store. The only cheering note had been his contact with Roz, otherwise they were in the dark, literally and metaphorically - just the kind of situation he hated.

He sat down opposite Fran, leaving the width of the doorway between them.

Her aggressive attitude and the threat to demote him stopped him feeling sorry for her. His wing-man training, followed by two years of roughing it on the overground, in constant danger of losing his life, enabled him to cope with this sudden downturn in their fortunes. Fran, on the other hand, was used to giving orders; being waited on hand and foot. Being sent to Ne-Issan with him was probably the biggest and riskiest adventure of her life, but she had still been wrapped in cotton wool. Until their sudden arrest and confinement, they had been privileged visitors, transported in relative luxury with japs bowing to them all along the way. There had been no whipping canes laid across her back.

A pity. Steve recalled the painful beating he'd undergone at the post-house prior to his transfer to the Heron Pool. An experience like that might make her a lot easier to get on with.

Pushing Fran and her personality problems out of his mind, Steve dozed fitfully for the next hour or so, then woke to the sound of several pairs of feet tramping along the corridor. The orange glow of an approaching lantern illuminated the square hole in the cell-door and spilled

enough light inside for him to be able to make out Fran's upturned face.

They both rose as the footsteps halted outside, then stepped back as the heavy bolts were withdrawn. Steve didn't resist as Fran searched for his right hand and gripped it tightly. The door was thrown open, and the all-enveloping darkness inside the cell receded as the jap holding the lantern raised it above his head.

Steve and Fran found themselves looking at five men.

Two were prison warders. There was another pair, dressed as soldiers, with helmets bearing the winged heron badge - worn only by the Shogun's personal troops. The face of one of them seemed vaguely familiar.

Steve couldn't place him but there was no mistaking the diminutive jap who stood under the lantern.

It was Skull-Face, aka Fujiwara. In his glittering battle-dress, with its overlapping plates, he looked like an overgrown armadillo.

'Are these the prisoners you seek?' asked one of the warders.

Skull-Face nodded. 'Bind them!'

The two warders and the soldiers entered the cell.

Steve and Fran offered no resistance as their arms were pinned behind their backs and clamped into two sets of manacles; one around their wrists, the other around their arms, just above the elbow. The upper manacles were attached to an iron bar which forced their shoulders back unnaturally and soon proved extremely painful to wear - as was probably intended. As a final touch, their trail bags were hung around their necks, pulling their heads forward when the rest of their spine wanted to lean a different way.

With Skull-Face in the lead, Steve and Fran were sent stumbling along the corridor towards the stairs that ran around the sides of the square ventilation shaft.

Anxious faces crowded the windows of the other cell doors. Hands clutched the bars. A confused medley of voices, begging, complaining, protesting, swelled into a meaningless barrage of sound that was quickly silenced as the two warders lashed out right and left with their whipping canes, driving the frightened occupants back into the darkness.

Steve's heartbeat quickened as they mounted the stairs, passed through the last set of iron gates, then stepped out through the heavy timbered entrance door into the main courtyard. Fresh air and freedom. He was sure of it as soon as he saw the two soldiers who were waiting outside.

These were part of the group who had been with Skull-Face on the beach.

The pair who had been keeping watch outside quickly threw hooded capes around Steve and Fran's shoulders, as. Skull-Face masked his lantern and switched from Japanese to Basic. 'Follow me. Stay close to the wall.'

He strode off quickly. Fran went next, then Steve, each of them steadied by one of Fuji's colleagues.

The scene in the courtyard was one of controlled confusion. Squads of foot-soldiers and cavalry were being assembled and despatched through the open main gates and across the bridge into the darkness beyond.

Armed men patrolled the outer walls and galleries of the palace.

Glancing back over his shoulder, Steve saw a handful of cowed suspects being hustled towards the underground jailhouse. More late arrivals.

For many, besides themselves, this was obviously going to be a night to remember.

They reached a large set of double doors, one of which contained a smaller door. Producing a key, Fujiwara opened it, then stood aside until everyone had passed through. Locking and barring the door behind him, he unmasked the lantern and ordered his men to remove the trail-bags and unshackle their prisoners.

'A thousand apologies for inflicting this painful subterfuge upon you.

It was necessary to apply constraints in order to convince prison guards we were taking you away for interrogation under torture."

'That's okay,' said Steve. He and Fran rubbed the cramp out of their arms and necks and took stock of their surroundings. It was a vehicle store. Several carts,

carriage-boxes and their wheeled chassis were stacked neatly together, making the most of the available space.

Around the walls, at chest and shoulder height, a variety of saddles hung over two staggered lines of short poles stuck into the stone walls.

Fran addressed Skull-Face: 'I appreciate you getting us out of prison, but before we go any further would you mind telling me just what is going on?'

The diminutive samurai answered with a polite bow.

'We are removing you from the Palace for your own safety. As they say in the Federation, "the shit has hit the fan".'

'That's obvious!' cried Fran. 'But you haven't answered my question!'

We were sent here as envoys of the Federation on matters of state and we have been treated outrageously! I must warn you now, Major - if we are subjected to any further serious breaches of protocol, the consequences to your country will be dire!' 'Cool it,' muttered Steve.

'These guys are on our side.'

Fran gave him a look that was pure venom. 'When I need your input, I'll ask for it, Captain! I'm the head of this delegation!' She turned back to Skull-Face. 'I'll ask you once again, Major- what is going on?'

Fujiwara remained cool and inscrutable. 'The Shogun is dead - killed by his sister, the Lady Mishiko. Four hours after the crazed bitch put paid to our master.'

'Ieyasu? The Lord Chamberlain?! Jeezuss! Both of 'em?'" Steve turned to Fran. She looked as stunned as he was. When Roz had come through on their private line, she had not revealed why she and Cadillac were in the Palace. Now he knew. Unbelievable

'The Major wasn't kidding when he said the shit had hit the fan. This could split Ne-Issan right down the middle!' Fran gave Steve another withering look. 'Even I can see that. But why were we arrested?'

'Because it was the Lord Chamberlain who arranged for you to come here.'

Everything was going according to plan until tonight when, without warning, Lady Mishiko- who had only recently arrived from the mainland - exposed my master's secret use of your communication devices. I cannot say how because none of us were there, but it must have been arranged with the help of our enemies. She was too stupid to have done it by herself. Lord Ieyasu knew the risks and -' He spread his hands.

'- has paid the price.'

'And the Shogun ordered the arrest of everyone who owed their position to him,' concluded Fran.

Fujiwara bowed politely. 'Precisely.'

Steve frowned. 'Yehh, but. if the Shogun is dead, why are people still being arrested?'

'The news has not yet been made public.' Skull-Face extended a hand towards them. 'That is why we must hurry. We must reach the mainland before the island is sealed.'

Fran didn't move. 'One last question, Major. Why are you doing this?'

'Why not just dump us and save your own necks?'

Fujiwara responded with a thin smile. 'Because, Commander, I and my colleagues here have just lost our employer and all prospect of a comfortable retirement.'

Fran smiled. 'You're speaking my language, Major.'

'Get us home in one piece and you can write your own ticket.'

'That's what we're counting on,' said Fujiwara. 'May we now proceed?'

'Sure. Let's go!'

What this arrogant bitch needs, thought Steve, is to have her tongue stapled to the roof of her mouth

Still smarting from the public put-downs, he beamed hate into Fran's back as Skull-Face ushered her towards the far corner of the room where his four colleagues were now gathered. A couple of them had flat iron bars inserted between two of the large flagstones. There were two clicks as the bars triggered concealed locks then a brief grinding noise as the cornerstone pivoted upwards against the rear wall of its own accord, revealing a narrow flight of stone steps.

Taking the lantern from one of his subordinates, Skull-Face led the way down into a small chamber with a

tunnel leading off it. He paused for a moment while the counter-balanced cornerstone was pulled down and locked in place, then hurried forward with Steve, Fran and the soldiers following in single file.

Cadillac lifted up the lantern as he reached the four-way junction and saw the scrape-mark on the wall of the narrow tunnel running off to the right. He sank down on his heels with a sigh and looked up at Roz. 'I hate to tell you this, but I think we're lost. I made that mark about half-an-hour ago.'

He fished out the crude sketch map furnished by Lady Mishiko and tried to figure out where they'd gone wrong.

Roz sat down with her back to the opposite side of the tunnel and perched the lamp on top of her knees so that he could bring the map close to the dimming light.

'There's something I've been meaning to tell you as well.'

Cadillac didn't look up. 'And what's that?'

'Steve's here - in the Palace.'

Cadillac marked their estimated position with a fore finger and slowly raised his eyes to meet hers. 'He was

one of the envoys...?'

Roz braced herself for the inevitable blast. 'Yes. He was sent here with a member of the First Family to set up some kind of a deal for the Federation.'

'And got himself arrested!'

Roz ignored the resigned sarcasm. 'You heard the Shogun give the order.'

Cadillac digested the full implications. 'And now I suppose you want me to rescue him' Roz gave her voice a cutting edge. 'How strange.'

I had the impression this was a joint enterprise. And now, at the mention of Steve's name, it's suddenly become a personal burden.'

'You know what I mean!' 'Yes!'

And I heard what you said! You're a wordsmith-aren't they supposed to know how to express themselves properly? I' 'And we're partners!'

cried Cadillac. 'Aren't they supposed to share everything- like secrets for example? I How long have you known he was going to come and screw everything up? From when we talked about him in the post-house? Or have you been stealing in and out of each other's minds since we left the wagon-train?!" 'No!" hissed Roz.

'It wasn't till we got here! And he's not screwing everything up!

What happened to the idea of grabbing the envoys and swapping them for Clearwater and her baby?

Remember how excited you were about that?'

."Roz, c'mon-be realistic.

The Federation are not going to exchange Clearwater for Brickman. What do they need him for?"

Forget Steve!

I'm talking about the woman he's with! She's someone close to the President-General! The feeling I got was of a very strong attachment."

'So what are you suggesting - that we free both, take her with us, and send Brickman back to break the good news?"

'Yes!" Cadillac's eyes narrowed as he thought it through. 'He's going to love that. When the Family find out you helped to capture her, they'll blow him out of the water!" 'True but he's not going to tell them. If we can keep my involvement here a secret, Steve will be in the clear."

'Yes, of course." Cadillac nodded admiringly. 'Not bad." 'Not bad?

C'mon, Caddy, it's brilliant! All he has to do is explain how he lost her, then tell them they can have her back in exchange for Clearwater and her baby."

'It may not be that simple,' mused Cadillac.

'That's why I'm leaving the details to you,' said Roz. 'All I'm doing is outlining a deal that will keep Steve up and running."

'Yes, I can see that- but it may not be enough. From what I've learned about the First Family, they're not going to hand him a medal for losing one of their own -especially if she's as important as you suggest."

'He'll manage,' said Roz. 'Steve's talked his way out of worse jams than this. If he was sent to Ne-Issan as the escort for this high-wire then the Family must trust him.

We have to make sure they go on trusting him- enough to let him help organise the hostage swap. It could provide a golden opportunity for him to get away too. We'd all be together. Wouldn't that be fantastic?"

'Yeah." The idea of Steve coming back into their life was the less appealing part of the plan. 'Meanwhile, that leaves us with two problems- finding out where Brickman and this woman are being held, and coming up with a rescue plan - and figuring how, in the name of the Sweet Sky Mother, we're going to get out of this gopher hole before the light-' Cadillac broke off and moved the lantern to a place of safety as he saw Roz's attention turn inwards. She pressed her fingertips against her forehead and frowned, then her eyes widened in surprise and a delighted grin spread across her face. 'We've only got one problem.

Steve just came through. He's free! Some Iron Masters are helping him escape from the castle - through a tunnel like this!" 'Great,' said Cadillac sourly. 'Why don't you call him back? Maybe he'll send one of his friends to show us the way."

Roz got to her feet and extended a hand to Cadillac. 'I don't need to, Mr Grouch. Just follow me!" Steve and Fran followed their rescuers down several short flights of stone steps which took them deeper and deeper below the castle. Every so often, they came to a T-junction or a crossing. Some were ignored, but at others Skull-Face would suddenly turn left or right. The time and effort that must have gone into the planning and construction of this stone warren was incalculable.

After several twists and turns, Steve asked: 'Do all these passages lead somewhere?"

Skull-Face glanced over his shoulder. 'No. Some are designed to confuse pursuers. The route we're following is part of a network that allows the upper crust to travel to and from the key areas of the Palace - and out beyond its walls."

'So how come you know about it?"

Skull-Face smiled his thin smile. 'I make it my business to know these things ' After a while, there were no more junctions, but the tunnel they were in was broken up into fifty yard stretches built on alternate sides of an imaginary centre-line and joined together by a right-angle section twelve yards long.

Being Steve, he had to ask why.

'Safety measure,' replied Skull-Face. 'If this tunnel ran in a straight line from start to finish what chance would you have with a bowman behind you?"

'Yehh, right,' grunted Steve, mentally reeling from the message Roz had just left inside his head. Compared to the trouble that was coming his way, a bowman would have come as light relief

When they finally surfaced via a spiral stone staircase and out through a hidden compartment in the back of an imposing roadside shrine, it was nearly a quarter to five on a bitterly chill, pitch dark December morning. Steve had failed to keep an accurate count of the number of

steps he'd taken. Following Skull-Face had prevented him from taking a full stride, but he reckoned they were now about half a mile from the Palace.

'There's a small house a little way down the road from here,' explained Skull-Face. 'Belongs to a minor government official- but it's only used by his family when the court moves to Aron-Giren. I suggest you take cover there while we organise some transportation, or you can squat in the tunnel- whatever you prefer.'

The tip of Fran's nose appeared from the deep hood of her cape. 'The house sounds fine.'

'Don't tell me you have a key,' said Steve.

Skull-Face laughed. 'We're not that organised- but our skills include breaking and entering.'

Their guides moved off. Steve stretched out his right hand as Fran went to shoulder her trail-bag. 'Here, let me carry that.'

'It's okay, I can handle it.'

'I'm sure you can!' Steve pulled it from her grasp. 'I don't mind you fucking me around in front of these guys, but if you want to play top dog you've gotta act like one.'

In Ne-Issan, the boss doesn't carry the luggage. So after you, Commander ' The single-storey house - built clear of the ground like most private dwellings in Ne-Issan - was shuttered and barred, but Fujiwara's team had a man inside in under two minutes. He opened one half of the main door and invited them in with a sweeping bow.

Skull-Face made a quick tour of the premises and returned. 'You're in luck. There's some quilts in a cupboard through there. Use those to keep you warm.'

There is some brushwood and a few logs in the kitchen but you must not light a fire. And I also regret to say there is no food.'

'That's okay. We have some emergency ration packs in our trail-bags,' said Steve.

Skull-Face nodded. 'Are you carrying any other useful items?'

'Such as?'

'A small powerful device we could use to send a message to distant friends...?'

Steve referred the question to Fran. 'You mean like now?'

'No, later, Commander. Your aircraft may be able to reach Aron-Giren but there are seven of us. Unless I am mistaken, that will require at least two aircraft, possibly three. To stand any hope of success, the pickup would have to take place in darkness - which means tonight at the earliest or tomorrow morning. By that time, this island will be swarming with troops from end to end. Nothing will be able to get in or out. We have to get onto the mainland.'

'But that's over sixty miles away!' cried Fran. 'The sun'll be up in less than three hours!' 'I'm aware of the difficulties, Commander. If we can't find a way to move you overland in broad daylight, we may have to take to the water.'

'Steal a boat?' asked Steve.

'Or talk our way onto one.'

'llnng! Marvellous,' grunted Fran. 'I can't wait!'

Steve exchanged an understanding look with Skull-Face.

'Do your best, Major ' Fujiwara spoke rapidly to one of his colleagues then presented him to Fran. 'I will leave Yoshijiro and the lanterns with you. The rest of us will return as soon as we can. I'm sure I have no need to urge you not to do anything that might draw attention to your presence.'

Steve laid his cape over the lanterns as the four japs edged sideways out of the door, then put it back on again as Yoshijiro shot the top and bottom bolts and dropped the bar back into place. The agent was short and stocky like most of his compatriots, but what marked him out was his amazingly wide, flat-featured skull set on top of an equally

wide neck. It was like a dinner plate with a face drawn on it.

Yoshijiro removed the long flat quiver containing a bow and thirty arrows from his back and settled down impassively to guard the door.

Steve weighed him up.

The two swords that marked him out as a samurai were still tucked into the sash wound around his waist. His hooded eyes had that deceptively sleepy, watchful look of a man who could spring into action - fast.

He turned to Fran. 'Why don't you try and grab some sleep? I'll help this guy keep watch.'

'Yehh, why not? It'll make a change from watching you snore your head off.'

He followed her into the bed-chamber and dumped the trailbags on the floor. Fran pulled a couple of thick quilts from the wall-cupboard, sniffed at them suspiciously, then wrapped herself in both and lay down using her trail-bag for a pillow.

Steve took out the three-barrelled air-pistol that was packed alongside the compact radio and the emergency rations in the false bottom of his own bag, stowed it in his tunic, then laid a third quilt over her and made sure she was well tucked in.

'I'll be in the other room. If you want anything just call.'

It was important that Fran was warm and comfortable.

Her going to sleep was part of the plan, just as earlier he'd insisted on carrying her luggage. He had not turned into a spineless toady; the reason he'd given was pure hog-wash. Walking behind her in the dark had enabled him to ease back the zip of her bag, remove the pistol and empty the magazine before replacing it in its foam-lined compartment.

Sweet dreams, Commander

He left quietly, taking the remaining pair of quilts with him.

Entering the main room, he passed one over to the silent Yoshijiro, wrapped the other round his own shoulders and sat down by the door to the bedchamber and waited for Fran's breathing to ease into the rhythmic ebb and flow associated with deep sleep.

Not yet, Roz . . . but soon....

Yoshijiro's sleepy expression vanished as he heard the faint voices.

Steve detected four or five, of varied pitch - all speaking what sounded like Japanese. He could not understand what they were saying, but the voices sounded tense.

He rose to his feet. Yoshijiro beat him by several milliseconds.

'Trouble...?'

The samurai put a crack in the door, listened intently, then whispered: 'Search party from Palace.' He held up six fingers. 'Officer give order to surround and investigate this house.'

Steve whispered back: 'What should we do- hide?'

Yoshijiro shook his head. 'Not possible. Must eliminate.'

He took off his white head-band and wrapped a strip of black cloth around his face.

'Then count me in. Two against six is a challenge but it's not impossible if we make the first move.'

Yoshijiro smiled. 'We have advantage. These are foot-soldiers not samurai. Fujiwara say you have great daring.'

Steve bowed his head. 'He honours me. Will you also do likewise by allowing me to use your bow?'

He knew there was no hope of borrowing the samurai's swords. The right to wear them had to be earned the hard way. It was not just a prized status symbol. Weapon and warrior were bound together by a strict code of honour and the only thing that could separate them in battle was death.

Yoshijiro handed over the quiver and bow without hesitation. Steve took possession of it reverently, then hung the quiver on his back, tested the pull of the bow and notched an arrow to the string 'Okay, what's the plan?'

The samurai drew his sword and gestured towards the door. 'I go left along verandah, you go right. Soldiers will have white head-band.'

Only shoot them, not me!" Steve gave him a thumbs-up then looked in on Fran.

She hadn't stirred. He shut the door to the bedchamber, doused the lanterns. Yoshijiro unlocked both doors, eased each one open in turn to check the left and right flank then signalled the all clear.

Steve followed him out, tip-toeing along the verandah to the right as Yoshijiro went left. It was still quite dark.

Steve stopped and listened. Not a sound. He tightened his grip on the bow and felt the cold sweat on his palm.

Do it, Stevie. People are waiting. One more, one less.

You can live with it

He turned, extended his left arm, drawing the spear-point of the arrow back towards the bow and aimed at the back of Yoshijiro's neck.

Theee-yunngh. The samurai heard the action of the bow and was halfway through the turn when the arrow struck him below the jaw, severing the jugular vein as it passed through his throat. A second arrow punched through his rib cage as he toppled like a felled tree off the far end of the verandah.

Steve heard a movement behind him. It was Roz. He loosed a great sigh of relief and hugged her fiercely. 'That was harder than it should have been. I must be developing a conscience ."

She hugged him back. 'I'd call that good news, wouldn't you?"

Cadillac appeared out of the darkness. He took a look at the body they couldn't see then walked along the front of the house and up the centre steps. 'Good shot... All we need now is the sound of a violent struggle to wake your friend. Let's hope she likes you enough to come to your aid."

Steve handed him the bow and quiver. 'Stand by." Roz and Cadillac faded into the darkness of the side verandah.

Drawing the pistol from his tunic, Steve threw himself violently against the wooden wall of the house, stamped and slid his boots on the verandah, grunted, huffed and puffed, and finally collapsed face-down with the pistol lying a few inches away from his outstretched hand.

Fran, jolted awake by the noise, sat up and found herself in a pitch-dark room. 'Steve?!'

No answer.

She ran her fingers nervously through her hair while she got her bearings, then yanked open the zip of her trail-bag and found the concealed air-pistol. Crossing to the door, she slid it back a few inches and saw that the main room was also in darkness. There was no sign of Steve or the jap agent. The lanterns had all been extinguished - and both panels of the front door which had been bolted and barred how hung open, black against a dark grey sky.

'Steve...?"

No answer.

Fran swore quietly. Easing off the safety, she selected Full Auto, then tip-toed over to the door and peeked out to check both ends of the verandah. Steve's body lay sprawled face downwards in the right-hand corner. 'Ohh, jeezusss!' she breathed. 'This is all I need!' Heedless of any external danger, she ran towards him and fell on her knees, laying down the pistol in order to have both hands free to turn his body over. As she got him half-way round, a tall hooded figure stepped into view.

Fran made a frantic grab for Steve's pistol but never reached it. A searing pain filled her head, billowing through her consciousness like a scarlet veil

Steve pushed her unconscious body aside and hauled himself upright.

'You certainly took your time getting here.'

'We had to find a pair of wheels first.'

Steve followed Cadillac and Roz into the house. 'What did you get?'

'A hand-cart and some rope. Saves carrying her.'

Cadillac spotted the two quilts as he entered. 'Marvellous.'

We can wrap her in these. Are there more?'

'Yeah, in here.' Steve brought them then went to fetch the trail-bags.

He placed his own pistol back in its hiding place, slipped a full magazine into Fran's and showed Cadillac how to peel back the false bottom. 'There's a radio in there that might come in handy - later on.'

And some of her clothes. Do you want any help tying her up?'

'No.' Cadillac took out the grey leather holster, stuck the pistol in it and strapped it on underneath his kimono.

'Have a word with Roz in case there's anything that needs to be straightened out.'

Cadillac went outside, and sliced the dead samurai's long black scarf into strips which he used to blindfold, gag and bind Fran. Then he rolled her up inside two of the quilts, roped these tightly round her calves and shoulders, then enclosed her in a third, and passed rope round again, and lengthways, leaving enough space for air to get through. He then wheeled the handcart up to the verandah, and used the last two quilts to make another bundle containing the heads of Yoritomo, Mishiko and Ieyasu, and the trail-bags - roping it tight in a similar fashion.

When both bundles were securely tied down onto the handcart, he went back inside the darkened house. He found Roz and Steve sitting on the raised edge of the split-level bed-chamber with a lamp between them and the door closed.

'Are you sure you're going to be able to manage without a gun?'

'I don't have much choice,' said Steve. 'If Fujiwara and his friends find I've been packing a pistol, they're going to

wonder why I didn't use it to help fight off our attackers instead of borrowing that bow and arrow."

'Yehh, I see what you're getting at. Smart move."

'Which I'll probably live to regret - but it's a chance I've got to take. Skull-Face knows his way around. If his team can't get me out of here, I doubt that having a handgun is gonna save the day. And I don't need a radio. These guys have their own hand-sets - courtesy of AMEXICO."

Cadillac accepted this with a nod.

'Has Roz explained the setup?"

'Yeah." Steve stood up. 'I can't say I'm overjoyed at being handed the shitty end of the stick but..."

'You can't be the hero all the time."

'No." Steve brightened. 'Roz told me how you did it. I'm impressed.

Whose idea was it?"

'Mine from start to finish. This is one operation you can't claim any credit for."

'True. This time round you had another Brickman to lean on."

Roz jumped up as she saw Cadillac's face darken. 'Now stop this, right now! Clearwater was right about you always snapping at each other's heels! What is it with you two?! We're supposed to be in this together!" Steve couldn't leave it alone. 'So why's he trying to score off me?l' He fingered Cadillac. 'I taught this guy everything he knows! He's been sucking on my brain from Day One!" Cadillac laughed derisively. 'Listen to him! Still peddling the same old shit!" Roz placed herself between them and thrust them apart.

'Shut up, both of you! And keep your voices down! You're wrong, Steve. You haven't been standing at the wrong end of a one-way street.

You've both learned- from each other - ' 'Yeah, that's right. Like me teaching him to fly, and him showing me what kind of leaf to wipe my ass on!" Steve saw the disappointment in his kin-sister's face and wished he'd kept his mouth shut.

Cadillac took hold of Roz's arm. 'Let's go. We're just wasting our breath!" 'No! We've gotta get this straight once and for all' 'Absolutely! It's a great idea! But let's beat our breasts some other time, when we haven't got half of Ne-Issan on our tail! Have you seen outside? It's getting lighter by the minute!" 'I don't care! There may not be another time!" Roz pulled free and faced up to Steve. 'You learned something far more important than that on the overground.

Cadillac helped you discover who you were and why you're here.

That's worth a great deal. Everything you done since- and everything that he's done - has flowed from your meeting each other. Why can't you bring yourself to admit it?"

Steve looked at them both then asked Roz: 'Why can't he learn to stop crowing?!' Roz turned a beady eye on Cadillac. 'Yes. Good question...'

'I can't believe this!' He saw her resolve and capitulated.

'Okay, okay, I spoke out of turn. Killing the Shogun and Ieyasu was my idea, but without the background information you gave me I couldn't have got started, and without Roz's power I'd have been dead a dozen times over.'

'We both would. Put it there, blood-brother.'

Roz watched them exchange the grips and handclasps that made up the warrior's greeting then threw her arms around both. 'And don't either of you forget that Clearwater also saved both of you.' She hugged them in turn then said: 'I'll make sure everything's okay outside.'

Cadillac weighed up his long-time rival. 'I feel bad about leaving you in the lurch like this. You going to be able to handle it?'

'Sure. It'll be a breeze. How are you planning to get away?'

'We're heading north to the coast. It's not far about six miles.'

Lord Min-Orota has promised to have a boat waiting offshore.'

'And from there?'

'We've got a delivery to make at Sara-kusa, then - all being well - we should be home by the spring.'

'Where's home these days?'

'Not far from our old hunting grounds. Roz and I have been adopted by the Clan M'Kenzi.'

Steve grimaced. 'I still can't understand why all the M'Calls had to die like that. It seems so pointless.'

'We destroyed one wagon-train and cracked open four more. I wouldn't call that pointless.'

'Yeah, but at what cost?'

'It was in the stones, Brickman. The Wheel turns...'

'... and The Path is Drawn. How does it pan out?'

Do we all make it?'

'The Plainfolk will. How's Clearwater?'

'She's fine. Back in one piece, getting better every day - and dreaming of home.'

'And her child?'

'Due any day now.' Steve laughed awkwardly. 'I still can't get used to the idea.'

'But otherwise everything's okay?'

'Between us? Yes. Nothing's changed- why should it?'

'How do you stand with the Federation?'

Steve shrugged. 'I'm a hero. That's why I was tapped for this trip.'

Promotion, privileges, I'm allowed to visit Clearwater whenever I want.'

Things couldn't be better for both of us.'

'Don't you find it strange - being underground again?'

Steve grinned. 'It's a long story. But there is one thing I miss - Mr Snow.'

Cadillac's eyes reflected his feelings at the mention of his old teacher's name. The too. When he died, it left a big hole in my life.'

'In all our lives,' said Steve. 'He was a wise man who knew that life was not meant to be taken seriously.' He eyed Cadillac. 'He gave us a lot of good advice. Maybe it's time we started acting on it.'

'Yehh, maybe we should.' Cadillac looked at the wristwatch he'd taken from Fran. Six thirty-five. 'We'd better go. I'll send Roz in to say goodbye.'

They shook hands briefly. Cadillac hesitated then said: 'About Mr Snow. This used to upset me but. he liked you. A lot.'

Steve smiled. 'I like to think he did - even though I didn't always deserve it.' He reached out and gripped Cadillac's shoulders. 'Thanks for telling me. I know what he meant to you.'

'Take care' Cadillac gave him a friendly thump on the ribs and headed for the door.

'I will! And Caddy-' 'Yeah?'

'I love the dress!' Roz came in. 'Caddy says we have to keep this short.'

'Like the last time.'

'You can always reach me.'

'Are you happy?'

Yes. Very. Can't you sense it? This is how it was meant to be, Steve." She read his thoughts. 'We'll always be like brother and sister, but you must let go of the old me. The colours on my face and body are more than skin deep. They go right through to my soul! We are of the Plainfolk! I know you're involved with Fran, and I know why, but be careful. Don't let them tempt you into betraying us! You must help to free Clearwater!' 'I will!' Cadillac poked his head through the door. 'Roz!' 'I'm coming!' She embraced Steve. 'Give my love to Clearwater - and tell her we'll soon be together.'

They walked out onto the verandah. Cadillac was hefting the stick he'd used to knock out Fran. He grinned, 'This is the bit I've been looking forward to.'

Where d'you want it?'

'At the end of the verandah where Fran found me. It'll help keep the story straight.' Steve got into position and knee'd down.

'I was thinking of a wound to the scalp - a little blood is always impressive - then a knock-out blow to the back of the head.'

'Whatever. Just don't knock my brains out. I'm going to need my wits about me when I wake up.'

Cadillac moved behind him. 'Okay, this may hurt.'

'Go ahead. It's all in a good cause.'

The first blow struck Steve on the right side of the head just above the temple, knocking him to the ground.

'Owww! Fuck me!' He felt the blood start to trickle down his cheek.

Gritting his teeth, he raised himself groggily on all fours and then a thunder-bolt collided with the back of his skull

When he came to, Steve found himself lying gagged and bound inside the house, next to the body of Yoshijiro.

Sometime around dawn he heard the sound of horses, and a little while later, Skull-Face and two of his colleagues entered. Finding that Yoshijiro had been killed in their absence produced the predictable reaction, but again Steve didn't understand what they were saying.

Skull-Face looked at his head wound then cut him loose. Steve sat and nursed the lump that Cadillac had raised on the base of his skull. Get a grip on yourself, Brickman. It doesn't really hurt. You're a Mute, remember? Learn to shut off the pain. Yeah, thanks a bunch

'What happened?'

'What ...?' Steve blinked painfully. 'uhh, I'm not sure. We both heard voices. Speaking Japanese. Yoshijiro thought there were six of them. Soldiers from the Palace... coming to search this place.'

'They couldn't have been - otherwise you wouldn't be here.'

'No... obviously ' 'Did you see them?'

'No. Your man wanted to take them out. I offered to help. We went outside. He went left, I went right - got as far as the end of the verandah and. that's the last thing I remember.' Steve dropped his hands from his head and looked around in alarm. 'Where's Commander Jefferson?!' 'Gone missing,' said Fujiwara. 'That's one of the things that puzzles me. why did they leave you?'

Steve looked bewildered. 'Search me. If we knew who jumped us, maybe we'd have the answer.'

'Yes.' Skull-Face stared at him intently, but Steve's head wounds provided him with a perfect excuse to screw his eyes up and look away while he thought of what to say next.

'Does this mean our trip to the Federation is off?'

'No,' said Fujiwara.

'Because I'm sure I can cut you a deal. I don't have the same pull as Commander Jefferson, but I do have access to the President-General, and the head of AMEXICO.'

'Good. We found some horses, but I think it's going to prove too dangerous to try for the mainland. We'll ride south to the coast and try to get hold of a boat.'

'Now - in daylight?'

'It shouldn't be too difficult." Skull-Face swallowed a smile. 'This is supposed to be one of the strongholds of the Toh-Yota, but it's amazing the number of people that can be bought with money.'

'That's something we don't have in the Federation.'

'Wise decision.'

Steve knew he was treading on dangerous ground but his need to know overrode his caution. 'You mentioned one of the things that was puzzling you, what was the other?'

'Ahh, yes." Skull-Face's inscrutable black-button eyes fastened on Steve. 'I can't understand how Yoshijiro came to get himself killed with his own bow and arrow.'

'I'm afraid that's partly my fault,' replied Steve. 'He gave it to me to use when we went outside to beat off the intruders and that's when ' 'You got hit on the head,' said SkullFace. He gazed at Steve intently then gave a satisfied nod.

'i'm sorry.'

Skull-Face waved off the apology. 'These things happen '

It was some time later, when they were running south with a full head of sail away from Aron-Giren, that Steve discovered a major flaw in their escape plan.

Fujiwara and his three remaining colleagues had ditched the powerful hand-sets they had been using soon after hearing that Ichiwara had been caught red-handed!

Terrific. They were now left literally at sea, with no way of contacting AMEXICO or any other Federation agency or outpost. And that meant there would be no quick, cosy airlift from the beach at Cape Fear to Houston/GC. They were going to have to do it the hard way

Back in the Federation, Karlstrom had passed the news of Fran and Steve's arrival to the President-General, and both now expected this to be followed up in a day or so by a progress report on their negotiations. Neither man had any inkling that the operator who had sent the message from the hidden radio room had been killed, along with Ieyasu and his top aides, for with their demise the lines between Ne-Issan and the Federation had gone dead.

Supreme authority was vested in the Shogun but the real power had been exercised by Ieyasu. An unceasing stream of decisions and directives flowed down from the top through layer upon layer of bureaucrats for implementation at the appropriate level. There were no independent ministries. Each layer of the pyramid was subservient to the one above, and all officials, major and minor, worked within strict guidelines. Any problems that fell outside those parameters were referred back up the chain.

While alive, Ieyasu had controlled everything- and had made it look easy - but there was now a black hole at the centre of the web he had spun and the strands were starting to fall apart.

That was why the radio operator still safely concealed in the Winter Palace did not report Ieyasu's death to AMEXICO when the news reached Showa by courier-pigeon.

Senior Secretary Shikobu, his immediate boss, who had been left holding the fort, was not empowered to initiate transmissions with the Federation. But there was another more pressing reason. The same courier-pigeon had brought word of Yoritomo's death and the last order he had given - the arrest of all members of the Lord Chamberlain's Office on a charge of suspected high treason.

The sudden removal of the top two men in a single night, and the accusation levelled by one against the other, had thrown the Court into total disarray. Promising careers came to a grinding halt, everybody's position was imperilled, no one knew who to give their allegiance to.

In the circumstances, it was not surprising that contacting AMEXICO did not even figure on Shikobu's list of things to do.

The only people with a compelling reason for bringing this critical situation to Karlstrom's attention were the small number of mexicans working inside Ne-Issan, disguised as Mute slaves. As it happened, none of them were stationed on Aron-Giren, but even if one of them had managed to get wind of what had occurred, Karlstrom would have been none the wiser.

The disguised mexicans were not working directly for him; they were on

loan to Ieyasu's spy network - and it was the secret section of the Chamberlain's Office which controlled all communications between them and AMEXICO.

This organisational weakness delayed, by several days, the news that the Toh-Yota family was in serious trouble.

Indeed, it was not until a steam-powered junk sailed boldly into Galveston Bay (the first ever to do so) that the hard facts began to emerge.

At this particular point, however, the junk- with Steve Brickman and Skull-Face on board - was still en route, heading south past Cape Hatteras towards Florida and the Gulf of Mexico, and in Grand Central, Karlstrom and the P-G, confident that everything was proceeding smoothly, had switched their attention to news from another quarter.

According to Mr Snow, the Talisman Prophecy had first been uttered by a wordsmith called Cincinatti-Red, some six hundred and fifty years ago - a century before the Trackers emerged from their concrete burrows in 2465 AD - an event known in the annals of the Federation as the BreakOut.

It was another three hundred years before the first garbled version came to the notice of the Family and was quickly dismissed as the pipe-dream of a race which - confronted by the growing might of the Federation sensed it was destined for oblivion. For a subhuman species, this was a remarkable deduction; the plans to eradicate the savage Mutes had not yet been drawn up, and the Trail-Blazer Division which would conduct the fire-sweeps did not exist. The first priority, following the Break-Out, had been the construction of way-stations across the Home State of Texas.

Way-stations were Tracker equivalent of the US Cavalry forts built to garrison the West during the 1800s, and served a similar purpose; to protect and house the new pioneer-soldiers whose future task was to renew the exploitation of natural resources, mineral, vegetable and animal - in the shape of marauding bands of Southern Mutes. In those early days, the emerging Federation was unaware of the existence of the Plainfolk, their northern cousins.

The long-drawn out programme of construction between 2465 and 2700 AD was a remarkable achievement.

It established, in an undeniable fashion, the Federation's claim to the blue-sky world, but the transition from an underground to a semi-overground existence was beset with problems which, at times, brought the whole enterprise dangerously close to collapse.

Four hundred and fifty years of living in a warren of concrete tunnels within the earth-shield had produced a race of agoraphobic pack-rats soldier-citizens with an extreme fear of open spaces. Prolonged exposure caused disorientation which the victim tried to cure by seeking shelter. If no remedial action was taken, muscular and mental paralysis set in, leading to death from exposure or starvation. Some Trackers were not affected so severely, but even they could only function coherently when engaged in some form of group activity which also kept them in relatively close visual contact with each other.

Isolation induced panic then collapse.

That was why the way-stations were little more than overground versions of the divisional bases within the earth-shield - windowless structures whose view of the outside world was supplied by batteries of video-cameras - and why later, in the period of territorial expansion which began in the early 2700s, the first wagon-trains were similar enclosed environments, secure, sanitised, mobile bases into which the same agoraphobics could retreat from the terrors presented by the overwhelming vastness of the land- and sky-scapes and the unknown perils of the night.

Around the same time, the first microlite aircraft, forerunner of the Skyhawk line, had appeared - piloted by members of the First Family.

Aerial activity remained limited until the moment when - after a long period of biological experimentation - a new type of Tracker started to fill the cots in the Life Institute: an individual with a high-resistance to ground-sickness - the disabling and potentially fatal psychological state produced by the twin fears of open spaces and

isolation from the combat or workgroup.

Wing-men were able to resist both; the problem was their scarcity - a result of the continuing high percentage of infertile males and females in the population and the relatively short average life-span of forty years. Even now, nearly a thousand years after the birth of the Federation, its population was only a little over 750,000 men, women and children and the statistics showed zero growth for the last nine.

The latest conservative estimates put the combined total of Southern Mutes and the more numerous Plainfolk at around fifteen million.

These odds, combined with the now undeniable fact that the ancient verses contained clear references to wing-men and Skyhawks ('cloud-warriors') and wagon-trains ('iron-snakes') made over four hundred years before the Federation had gotten around to actually building them, had forced the Family to rethink their attitude to the art of prophecy.

If the creation of Skyhawks and wagon-trains had been foreseen then one had to accept the other more sinister events predicted in the verses would also come to pass.

Which was bad news since they described- in unequivocal terms - the total destruction of the Federation by the Plainfolk led by Talisman, the Thrice-Gifted One - a messianic warrior whose birth would be heralded by a volcanic eruption.

Jefferson the 31st, and the hand-picked medical team at the Life Institute were convinced the child that Clearwater was carrying within her was the long-awaited saviour. And they believed that the 'great mountain in the West' that would speak with 'a tongue of flame that burns the sky' was either Mount Rainier or Mount St Helens - both located in what had once been the Pacific coast state of Washington, home of the Seattle Supersonics and birth-place of the Boeing Jumbo-jet.

Of the two, Mount Rainier was the highest, peaking at over 14,000 feet, but the pre-H geological records held by COLUMBUS categorised Rainier as extinct, with no evidence of any volcanic activity over the previous 2,000 years, whereas Mount St Helens, 9,600 feet high and situated fifty miles SSW of Mount Rainer, had exploded with great violence in May 1980, blowing off the entire top section and part of the north-facing slope, in what was classified as a Vulcanian-type eruption - the highest of four grades capable of registering up to 9.9 out of a possible 10 on the Richter Scale.

The records for the world as a whole also showed that even extinct volcanoes could come to life through shifts in the underlying geological formations. Mount Rainer was only one of several volcanic peaks in the Cascade Range, which was why a long-dead Supreme Council had decided a watch should be kept on them all.

Earth tremors could be detected at long range by seismographs which produced the familiar needle-traces of the shockwaves travelling outwards from the epicentre of the disturbance through the earth's crust. These were routinely monitored by all nine divisional underground bases as part of their own security procedures, but it was not always possible to differentiate between a severe earthquake and a volcanic eruption.

To eliminate any misreading of the signs, electronic packages designed to record the frequency and strength of earth tremors and then broadcast the data at weekly intervals to the Federation had been placed on the slopes of the likely candidates and had been in operation for the last one hundred and fifty-seven years.

'The only snag was maintenance. Because the instrument packages were concealed to avoid attracting the attention of passing animals or Mutes, solar panels had not been a viable power option. The Federation had used its unparalleled expertise to produce batteries that only needed to be changed every two years. Recently, a new version with a five-year life-span had been perfected and installed. These were now due for replacement, and the usual SIG-INT field engineer unit had been

despatched from Johnson/Phoenix, the divisional base beneath the parched wastes of Arizona.

Travelling in six Bobcat amphibs, each armed with a multiple rocket-launcher, and hauling a heavy trailerload of fuel, the team of twenty-four combat engineers under the command of Lieutenant Jack Marriot drove north past the way-stations at Flagstaff and Page, retracing the route taken by the old US Highway 89 across Utah to Salt Lake City, before swinging north-westwards onto the even more ancient Oregon Trail which would take them through the vanished cities of Boise, Idaho and Portland, Oregon - now both reduced to navref points; names on a plasfilm map that marked turn-off points on the crumbling hard-ways.

From here the Bobcats used their stern water-jets to propel them across the Columbia River towards Mount St Helens on the western flank of the Cascade Mountains.

The usual procedure was to start at the most northerly target peak and work their way back down and this year was no different. St Helens would be their last stop before the fourteen hundred mile run for home.

For several decades, the expedition had been mounted in the winter to take advantage of the fall-off in the movements of Plainfolk Mutes.

The White Death was a period of semi-hibernation in which few hunting sorties were made, and there was a corresponding drop in the number of armed clashes when groups of young warriors invaded the 'turf' of a neighbouring clan.

To a SIG-INT unit, a long way from home, it meant a relatively quiet ride, and that outweighed any problems posed by floods, freezing rain or heavy falls of snow. The Bobcats were tough, reliable, all-terrain vehicles with puncture-proof tyres and skin and a sting in the tail.

The odd, rare breakdown was something the engineers could handle, but carrying out repairs under accurate cross-bow fire from unseen hostiles was something everyone preferred to do without - and that also applied to checking instrument packages and changing the batteries.

The fact that Marriot's unit happened to be in the Cascade Mountains in the same month that Clearwater was due to give birth to an eagerly awaited baby was a fateful, but quite accidental, coincidence. The expedition had been scheduled for December 2991 because the batteries installed in 2986 were nearing the end of their useful life.

And so, unfortunately, were some of Marriot's engineers

Jefferson the 31st rose to greet Karlstrom as he was rotated through the turnstile of the Oval Office. The President-General was not what you would call an excitable man, but on this occasion he was positively bubbling.

'Ben! Glad you could make it. Sit down, sit down.'

'Glad you could make it' was a polite extravagance.

Nobody turned down a summons to the Oval Office.

The P-G kept a firm grip on Karlstrom's hand as he guided him over to the chair facing the desk and the curved window behind. Today, they offered a view of the snow-capped Rocky Mountains.

Jefferson went behind his desk and resumed his seat. 'I could have screened this news through to you, but it's so good I wanted to tell you face to face. The Mute, uhh - 'Clearwater...?'

'Yes. She's gone into labour. The first pains came an hour ago. The duty nurse logged the time.' Jefferson shook his head in wonderment.

'And this is the unbelievable part. I checked with the Geo-Survey Section. They were processing the data on a strong underground tremor that was picked up at Johnson/Phoenix, Monroe/Wichita and here in Grand Central.

'The bearings from Johnson and Monroe were enough to give them a fix on

the location and with the aid of some geological jiggery-pokery they were able to calculate the event-time." He gave his voice dramatic emphasis. 'The tremor came from Mount St Helens, and it coincided with the onset of Clearwater's labour pains! This has got to be it, Ben!"

He slapped the desk top. 'By Johnny! If we pull this one off, we'll sweep the board!" The 'Johnny' he'd sworn by was John Wayne, hero of the First Family and the nearest thing the godless Amtrak Federation had to a patron saint.

Karlstrom, whose organisation kept tabs on all over-ground movements, cast his mind back to that morning's overview presented by his operational command staff.

'Don't we have a SIG-INT unit in that area at the moment?"

'Yes, we do. They're in radio contact with Johnson/ Phoenix. When they called in, they were between Mount Rainier and Mount St Helens. I instructed SIG-INT to tell them to re-set the monitoring package so that it broadcasts the seismic data every hour."

Jefferson read the unspoken question in Karlstrom's eyes and spread his palms. 'They're out there to replace the batteries, Ben. This adjustment I'm asking for takes fifteen minutes at the most. The people at the Life Institute tell me a woman can be in labour for anything up to eighteen hours.'

'Or less than four' 'There's no set time, Ben. But since this is Clearwater's first child, she'll probably be in labour for several hours. The SIG-INT unit will have plenty of time to get clear.'

Jefferson smiled. 'It's not like you to be squeamish.'

'I'm not - but getting run down by a stream of molten lava must be a hell of a way to go.'

Jefferson disagreed: 'No, I've been screening the data on this. Unless you're very unlucky, lava streams are something you can run away from.'

The thing you want to avoid is what they call a nue ardente - a fire-cloud of hot gases and small, incandescent particles of rock like coarse grains of sand.

'These fire-clouds- which are triggered by an explosive release of gas - burst out of a volcano, then roll down the side like an avalanche.'

Burns everything in its path - and here's the real bad news - they can travel at speeds of up to a hundred miles an hour.'

'Jeezusss!' Jefferson laughed. 'Fortunately, nobody inside the Family can access this data if they have a below-5 rating. Which means that most people outside this office - including this SIG-INT unit knows squat about volcanoes. They were sent out to service some equipment and that's what I expect them to do - whether the ground is shaking or not.'

'In other words, if it blows, they won't know what hit them.'

Jefferson sat forward in his chair. 'Why the sudden concern, Ben? You didn't turn a hair when we sacrificed the crew of The Lady.'

Karlstrom made a calming gesture. 'I must be sending out the wrong signals. It's not the men. It's this whole prophecy thing that makes me uneasy. The birth tied in with the eruption. If this child is the Talisman, and he has these powers, we could be letting ourselves in for more than we bargained for.'

'That's why I've done everything to make sure the cards are stacked in our favour. We're playing for high stakes, Ben. It's not just the lives of the men in that SIG-INT unit that are at risk, it's the lives of everyone in the Federation! If we want to secure the future, it's a gamble we have to take.' He smiled. 'There is, of course, always the possibility that I've allowed myself to be totally misled by the Institute. And overexcited.'

The cramps could be a false alarm, and the fact that this earth-tremor occurred at the same time could be pure coincidence.'

He hadn't, they weren't and it wasn't

The bi-annual expeditions to the Cascade range had kept a road open through the dense pine forests from Mount Rainier to Mount St Helens.

It had once been a state highway, but was now little more than a muddy

logging track, running south-west to Davisson Lake. Lieutenant Marriot led the Bobcats across the headwaters at the eastern end, then snaked round the western flank of Winter Mountain to begin the eleven mile run south towards the strange, cratered, mud and lava landscape that surrounded the meandering headwaters of the Toutle River.

From here, a track - last cleared five years ago - ran eastwards for nine miles up towards Spirit Lake, a big stretch of water that filled the saucer-shaped hollow between Mount Margaret and her southern sister, Mount St Heleus. From the lake, the track turned sharp right towards the shattered mountain and continued on up for another three and a half. The equipment package was at the top of this spur, in the open-ended caldera formed by the 1980 eruption.

It was as the column of Bobcats came out from behind Winter Mountain that It Marriot had the luckiest breakdown of his life. A fractured drive shaft. Fortunately, the unit carried a range of crucial spare parts but it was a three to four hour repair job.

Marriot consulted his watch. 12.45. This was his second run out to the Cascades, but his first as commander. To reach the equipment, the 'Cats had to travel another twenty-three miles over difficult terrain, the package had to be fitted with a new power pack, then reset for hourly transmissions and checked using its own built-in diagnostic programme, and finally the radio signal had to be tested and confirmed by Johnson/Phoenix. Three hours at the most, but if they all waited until his 'Cat was back on the road, they would run out of daylight.

Marriot talked it over with his No.2, Ensign Cantrill, and Sgt Lyman who had logged three such trips. Both agreed there was no point in losing another day. Marriot called the unit together and explained the revised plan.

One Bobcat crew would stay behind to cover his own crew and help speed the repairs, a third would wait at the Toutle River turn-off and the remaining three, led by Ensign Cantrill and Sgt Lyman would head on up to Spirit Lake, from where Lyman's crew would service and reset the equipment while a second 'Cat rode shotgun.

The third, Cantrill's, would remain on stake-out by the lake at the foot of the mountain road.

When the repairs were completed, Marriot's two vehicles would rendezvous with the waiting Bobcat to which Cantrill's section would also return. The column would then proceed down river, pick up the old Interstate, cross over into Oregon and then keep rolling with each of the four-man crews taking turns at the wheel till they reached Arizona.

Yess-surr. Once the job was done, Marriot didn't believe in dragging ass.

Three and a half hours later, as he stood wiping the grease from his freezing fingers, the ground - which had been giving off the odd rumble even before they left Mount Rainier - shook violently under his feet, pitching him against the vehicle. The second Bobcat was parked up on a rocky outcrop which gave a better view of the terrain. The unit hadn't sighted any Mutes on the out-run, but when you were in Plainfolk territory you could never afford to relax between sunrise and sundown.

These lumpheads had a habit of popping up when you least expected it.

There was a sharp hiss from inside Marriot's vehicle as the parked 'Cat made radio contact. A voice burst from the speaker grille on the dash.

'Better get up here, loo-tenant. Somethin's happening' and it . . .

smokin' lumpshit!" There was a confused babble of voices. Marriot looked up the slope towards the parked 'Cat.

In the sky beyond, it looked as if someone had turned a huge orange spotlight on the thick blanket of grey cloud.

The top hatch of the 'Cat flew open. A figure hoisted his butt onto the rim and beckoned frantically. Marriot signalled he was coming and

shouted over his shoulder to his three crewmen. 'Lock down the engine covers and get inside the vehicle!' He reached the top of the slope in time to see a huge fireball collapse into a doughnut-shaped cloud around the truncated peak of Mount St Helens. A glowing necklace of death, pink, orange, red and scarlet billows, roiling and boiling like a speeded-up film of clouds - as they tumbled over each other in the race to be first down the mountainside.

The densely-packed pines covering the ridged slopes were flattened by the pressure wave and left blazing from end to end. Sgt Lyman's crew, who were busy servicing the instrument package, and those in the second vehicle mounting guard, barely had time to comprehend the horror before it engulfed them.

Down by the lake, Cantrill and his crew still had two minutes and thirty seconds in which to react to the oncoming avalanche of fire.

Cantrill ordered his driver to high-tail it back down the road. The 'Cat took off with the ensign standing in the roof hatch.

Seeing the unbelievable speed at which the glowing cloud was descending, Cantrill realised they had no chance of getting clear.

Reasoning that a large expanse of water was the best antidote to fire, he dropped back inside the speeding amphib and yelled at the driver to change course. The driver - who had arrived at the same conclusion was already turning the wheel.

The sixty seconds spent driving in the wrong direction proved fatal.

They were still zigzagging wildly through the pines and down to the water when they were overrun by the rolling wave of incandescent gas and volcanic ash. Trees crashed down around them and burst into flame.

Others fell across the vehicle, pinning them down.

Escape was impossible. Within a few seconds, the cabin temperature rose to furnace heat, searing their lungs and blistering their skin.

The tyres caught alight, the fuel tanks ignited, and the metal and glass-fibre hulls buckled and melted, frying the crew in their seats.

The fire-cloud rolled on, instantly turning the surface of Spirit Lake into steam that exploded upwards, tearing the glowing mass to shreds and hurling molten particles in all directions.

Four miles downstream, on the north bank of the Toutle River, the stunned crew of the fourth vehicle saw the mountain grow a crown of fire. They had already been jolted out of their seats by the same earth-tremor which had thrown Marriot off balance. Now, this wall of flame was expanding outwards and barrelling down the mountainside, consuming all in its path at incredible speed.

Realising they had to reach'-higher ground, the driver turned the 'Cat's nose towards Winter Mountain, put his foot on the floor and forgot about the damage he was doing to the suspension.

The fire-cloud swept across the lake, washed up against the southern flank of Mount Margaret, then turned left, like a flash-flood, driven by its own momentum to seek the lowest level. The encounter with the lake had slowed it down and taken some of the heat from its turbulent core but it was still lethal by the time it reached the rendezvous point.

All it found was the fuel trailer that the crew of the fleeing BobCat had wisely ditched.

Marriot ran over to the vehicle as it slid to a halt. It was covered with ash and hot to the touch. Tiermeyer, the crew-chief, tumbled out of the portside door, his face as grey as the pumice-stone coating.

'Sheee-itt!" he croaked. 'What the fuck was all that?!" 'Something they forgot to tell us about,' said Marriot.

He led Tiermeyer and his crew up to the vantage point where the other men were clustered, and stood side by side, watching the mountain burn.

Both of them knew there was no point in speculating about the fate of the other crewmen. Nothing in the path of that cloud could have survived, and repeated radio calls had been met with silence.

Zwemmer, the crew-chief of the parked Bobcat, looked down from his perch on the rim of the roof hatch. 'Hey, lootennant! Ain't it time we got out of here?'

'No,' said Marriot. 'I think we ought to stay here on the high ground and wait till things quieten down.'

Two hours later, after a series of minor tremors, they heard a long, rumbling roar like the boom of the Trans-Am shuttle hurtling through the approach tunnel towards a subway station. Then there was another, much louder, muffled peal of thunder that seemed to come from the very bowels of the earth.

The ground shook- throwing the watching crewmen off balance.

'Jeezuss. H. Kurrist!' cried Tiermeyer. 'It's happening again?'

He was right and wrong at the same time. This wasn't another fire-cloud, this was the big event; a full-scale eruption, the like of which the Trackers had never seen - or hoped to see again.

A vast underground pocket of gas and glowing magma exploded with colossal force, sending a towering column

of fire into the sky and taking the lining of the vent with it. The SIG-INT team arched their necks and watched, open-mouthed, as several thousand tons of incendiary debris rose several thousand feet into the air, reached its apogee then arched outwards like one of Versailles' elegant fountains and rained streamlined gobbets of magma and jagged lumps of red-hot rock over the surrounding terrain.

The outcrop they were standing on was eighteen miles from the eruption and on the fringe of the fall-out area.

Everyone dived for cover inside their vehicles as they saw a wide-spaced shower of volcanic 'bombs' heading their way.

Marriot, realising the need to document the event as part of his operational report, timed the second, main eruption at 16:42.

At precisely the same moment, at locations thousands of miles apart, two other events occurred. Both were linked to the eruption and each other by the strange geometry of fate, forming a triangle whose importance was to remain hidden by those who sought to gain control of Talisman.

At 16:42, in the Federation's Life Institute, a dark-haired child was gently eased from Clearwater's body and drew in its first life-giving breath with a sharp, choking cry.

Clearwater, her vision slightly blurred from a drug injection, searched for sight of her baby, but a raised green sheet, prevented her seeing the lower half of her body.

The masked nurse who had sat at her shoulder during the delivery, leant over and mopped the sweat from her brow. 'It's a boy,' she whispered.

'A strong, healthy boy.

Lie back, they'll bring him to you in a minute as soon as he's been cleaned and weighed."

Clearwater was overwhelmed by a feeling of desolation.

The nurse attempted to soothe her. 'Don't cry ... don't cry."

Watching the scene on television, Jefferson the 31st could hardly contain his excitement. Talisman was in the hands of the First Family.

The world was within their grasp

In Ne-Issan, in the domain of the Yama-Shita, in the family stronghold at Sara-kusa, Roz lay sleeping in the bed-chamber that had been prepared for her and Cadillac by their grateful hosts.

Placing the severed heads of Yoritomo and Ieyasu before Aishi Sakimoto and the other members of the family council had won them the praise they expected, and had left the Iron Masters in even greater awe of their power than on their last visit.

They were, in fact, regarded as unassailable - and even if they weren't, who would be foolish enough to kill two geese which laid such

golden eggs?

The hospitality they now enjoyed and the circumspection with which they were treated came as a welcome relief. On boarding the junk that was waiting offshore, both Roz and Cadillac had been shocked to realise that they were mentally and physically drained.

The long land and sea journey from Sioux Falls, the deceptive imagery they had been forced to weave around themselves, the plotting with the Yama-Shita, the mounting tension of the journey south with Lord Min-Orota, the nail-biting suspense and the blood-soaked climax had taken their toll. They had been running on a high octane mixture of fear and adrenaline and the tanks were now empty.

Even so, they had not been able to unwind until they were out of reach of the Toh-Yota in the relative safety of the Sara-kusa palace. Then, at long last, they had been able to take shelter in each other's arms and shut out the world for a long, loving, tender moment.

That had been yesterday. And now, as Roz lay in the darkened room, a crucial chemical change was taking place inside her body.

Clinging to the wall of the uterine tube was a newly fertilised egg.

An egg which had succumbed to the

advances of one out of two hundred
and fifty million potential suitors implanted by Cadillac.

Shorn of its tail, the sperm head had pierced the protective membrane,
then had chemically sealed it against his rivals. And in the wondrous
alchemy that governs our existence, the successful suitor had been
transformed into what is known as the male pronucleus.

Within the maturing egg, a female pronucleus had also formed.

At 16:42, as Mount St Helens spoke with a tongue of flame, the two
pronuclei moved towards the centre of the egg, shed their protective
membrane and fused together.

And in that instant, a new, unique human being was created

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Mount St Helens continued to erupt with varying degrees of violence
over the next seventeen days, pumping out a column of dense smoke and
hot ash into the upper atmosphere. It was like an upturned space
heater incinerating the laundry that had been placed on it to dry.

The cold moist air sweeping in from the northwest over the Pacific
found itself riding a giant thermal which lifted it up over the Rockies
onto the plains beyond where it collided with the polar air stream also
warmed by the spreading plume of volcanic ash.

As these two unseasonably warm air masses came into contact with the
freezing earth, the result was not the expected heavy falls of snow,
but rain - precipitation on a scale that had rarely been equalled in
the annals of North America and which, in falling, dragged the
thousands of tons of grey ash out of the sky and cast it across the
landscape like a death shroud.

The snow that had already fallen was washed away, and the melt which
normally filled the streams and rivers in April and May was turned into
a flood as the incessant downpour drained off the surrounding land
bringing to pass the third line of the Talisman Prophecy: And the earth
drowns in its own tears

From the Milk River, the northernmost tributary of the great Missouri,
from the Yellowstone, the Cheyenne, the Niobara, and the Platte, the
silt-laden waters rushed eastwards to join the huge flood heading down
from the Dakotas, while from northern Minnesota, the mighty Mississippi
fed from both east and west by the St Croix, Chippewa, Cedar, Rock,
Iowa, Des Moines and Illinois swept south towards the looping junction
with the Missouri just north of navref St Louis.

By the time it was joined by the swollen waters of the Ohio River, a hundred miles further south, the Mississippi had become an unstoppable grey-brown tidal wave that overwhelmed the remains of the concrete levees and run-offs which had been put in place during the mid-20th century. In the aftermath of the Holocaust they had been an irrelevance, and by 2465 AD, the year of the Break-Out, they were judged to be beyond repair.

Work on shoring up the river banks had begun following the incorporation of Mississippi, Louisiana and Arkansas to the Federation, but the continuing shortages of labour and heavy equipment and other more urgent tasks had turned it into yet another on-going construction project - which in this instance was still incomplete after two hundred and forty-three years.

Even if the original flood-control system had been in place, it probably could not have held back the gigantic volume of water now descending onto the coastal plain.

The uncompleted system stood no chance at all, and within a matter of days, some thirty thousand square miles were submerged - creating a vast inland sea.

It was not just overground facilities that were affected when these floods burst upon an unsuspecting Federation.

Surface water, percolating down through the sub-strata, raised underground levels to a point where the pumping facilities of the divisional bases at Le May/Jackson, Truman/Lafayette and Lincoln/Little Rock were strained to the limit.

And as is always the case, the build-up in pressure found the weak points in the outer concrete skin. Cracks became open fissures then gaping holes allowing water to gush through, flooding entire galleries before cascading down through vent and lift shafts, escalator and service tunnels to the levels below. At one point, the TransAm subway system was menaced, but sMft action brought the situation under control- although not without loss of life.

Flooding of underground facilities was an ever-present danger in the Federation and a great deal of thought and effort had gone into methods of containing inflows. In the same way that everyone knew the emergency drill in the event of a fire, every Tracker on an underground base had an assigned role with a Flood Control Team.

To help cope with a dangerous inflow, all levels were fitted with watertight doors and vertical shut-offs which could be closed rapidly to isolate a flooded section - and most of the fatalities occurred amongst those unlucky enough to be in the wrong place when they lowered the boom.

In an earlier age, closure had been a manual operation, but this had not proved 100 per cent effective because of what an AmExec report had called 'the emotionally-induced delay factor'. Those ordered to close the doors were found to be holding them open to allow their buddies to escape - in some cases for far too long, leading to more widespread disruption.

COLUMBUS, whose primary task was to ensure that the Federation functioned efficiently, did not have the same problem. Its logical analysis of the situation and the resulting decision to implement closure of a particular door was not affected by the hammering fists

and desperate entreaties of those trapped by the rising tide.

'Welcome back." The President-General invited Steve to take the armchair by the fireplace he had occupied on his first, memorable visit to the Oval Office. 'Must have been quite a trip."

'It was, sir. But I learned a great deal - including the fact that I wasn't cut out to be a sailor."

'You and a few thousand others. That's one of the reasons why we don't have a navy." Jefferson sat back in his rocker and stretched out a hand towards the gas flames that leapt through the cast iron logs and mica ash. Karlstrom wheeled another chair in to complete the triangle.

Steve waited, not knowing how it was going to play.

The P-G had welcomed him'with the usual ten thousand

volt hand-shake,
but this time the voice had lacked warmth and he had not been greeted
by his given name.

Karlstrom caught Jefferson's signal to start the proceedings.

'Okay, Brickman, we've talked at some length to Major Fujiwara, now
we'd like to hear your side of the story." He saw Steve's reaction.

'Relax. We're not exactly overjoyed at what's happened but you're not
about to be strung up by the thumbs."

'Thank you, sir."

'And to save time, we accept Fujiwara's assessment as to who
master-minded this coup. The Yama-Shita family - who used Lord
Min-Orota to set up Lady Mishiko.

A shrewd move. Fuji's probably told you why she was happy to
oblige."

'Yes, sir, the Hase-Gawa connection. Small world Karlstrom nodded.

'You and Commander Franklynne just happened to arrive at the wrong
time, but we were also taken totally by surprise. Lady Mishiko
obviously had outside help - though how the Yama-Shita managed to
breach the island's security cordon is a complete mystery. Anyway, the
people helping her must have been the ones who jumped you and Fram What
we can't figure out is why they didn't take you as well."

Steve knew this question was bound to come up, and throughout the
voyage home he had been searching for a plausible answer. 'If I knew
what hit me, sir, I might be able to answer that. The jap who was
guarding us figured there were six soldiers closing in on the house.

We went out to take them on and. the next thing I knew -' 'Fujiwara
was untying you, and Commander Frank-lynne was gone." Karlstrom
pinched his nose thoughtfully.

'Okay ... here's another question - how d'you think the Yama-Shita
managed to get the goods on Ieyasu? Who uncovered our deal to supply
his organisation with radios and surveillance devices? One of his own
people?"

'I doubt it, sir. You can check with Skull-, uhh, I mean Major
Fujiwara, but in my opinion, if any of Ieyasu's people were caught in
the act, they'd face death by torture rather than talk."

'Yes, well, to save them the trouble we also supply cyanide capsules.

A press-pack of five is included with every item we supply."

Steve nodded. These guys had thought of everything. He answered
Karlstrom's question. 'Sir, there is someone who could've tipped off
the Yama-Shita." He paused before letting the name drop. 'Cadillac
M'Call."

Karlstrom and Jefferson looked at each other, then the P-G said: 'Would
you care to elaborate?"

'Yes, sir. When Cadillac and I escaped together from the Heron Pool,
he was in a position to observe what happened every step of the way.

If I may recap briefly, we ditched our gliders at a pre-arranged

rendezvous near the Hudson River, set them on fire, then were hidden in a house by an associate of Major Fujiwara until the wheel-boat arrived to take us through the canal system to Bu-faro.

'This jap used a hand-set while we were in the house.

Side-Winder - a mexican - was on the boat disguised as a Mute, then more of Ieyasu's people helped us get onto a fishing boat, from where we transferred into inflatables to reach the air pick-up point on the western side of Lake Erie.

'It was obvious they were all hooked into an efficient radio network.

From what I learned during my training at Rio Lobo, the hand-sets Side-Winder and I were using weren't powerful enough to reach the Federation. The signals had to be relayed - probably from inside Ne-Issan."

'It's an interesting supposition,' said Karlstrom.

Steve continued undeterred. 'Cadillac is one smart Mute. Once he saw that Side-Winder was working alongside Ieyasu's agents, and that they had radios, it wouldn't take long for him to put it all together."

'I can see that,' said Karlstrom, 'but what makes you think he's been talking to the YamaShita?"

'Because of something he said to me after Mr Snow

and the She-Kargo had destroyed the wheel-boats and most of the D'Troit. He was going on about how the Yama-Shita - when they realised they'd made a big mistake in allying themselves with the D'Troit - might be persuaded to cut a deal with the winners."

'And he was going to try and set this up?"

'That was the idea, yes."

'So how come you didn't mention this when you came back in with Clearwater?" asked Karlstrom.

'Because I- didn't believe he was serious. You have to understand that this is someone who believes he's a man of destiny. He's full of big ideas, but most of them are pure fantasy-land." Steve shrugged. 'To be honest, sir, I just couldn't see it happening."

'And now?" said Jefferson.

'Maybe he found a way to get to them. Having had a chance to think it over, I realised that the YamaShita don't know that Mr Snow - the She-Kargo's secret weapon - is dead. After the way he wrote off their punitive expedition I'd say they might be prepared to listen - wouldn't you, sir?" Steve addressed the question to the President-General.

'That would depend on what Cadillac had to put on the table."

'Exactly,' said Karlstrom. 'And it's now clear it wasn't furs and buffalo skins. It was a plan to destabilise the whole goddamn fucking country! But where did he get hold of the equipment? The Yama-Shita wouldn't have bought this story without some tangible proof!" 'Didn't he steal a Mark 2 Skyhawk from The Lady, sir?"

'An aircraft was seen to take off shortly before she blew up, yes."

'Then that's where he got a radio from. He also learned to speak japanese while he and I were in Ne-Issan. With the record facility, it wouldn't be too hard to put on a convincing show of picking up a transmission."

The P-G fixed him with pale, hard eyes. 'You make it sound like you were there."

'With respect, sir, I am only putting together a scenario based on my own experience. The Iron Masters are scared stiff of anything to do with the Dark Light. They're not going to get too close or ask too many questions. As for Cadillac having the necessary expertise, he's been inside my head and Malone's - and he got hands-on experience when we were setting up the M'Calls for the attack on The Lady from Louisiana."

'But you're not suggesting that it was his idea to murder the Shogun and Ieyasu."

'No, sir, it couldn't have been. He had no knowledge of the political set-up. On the other hand, if he was working closely with the Yama-Shita, it would explain why whoever hit me on the head only took Commander Franklynne."

ti don't quite follow,' said Jefferson.

'It would be a way of getting his own back for what happened to the

Clan m'call. Instead of having his jap friends capture or kill me, he left me to take the full rap from the Federation for coming back without a deal - and losing Commander Franklynne."

Karlstrom pinched his nose again. 'Yes, well, that's one explanation.

But how did he - or they - figure you were going to make it?"

'I'm not sure, sir. But since we'd managed to get out of the Palace after being tossed in jail, it must have been obvious to the guys who jumped us that we were in the process of being rescued. The meeting at the Summer Palace was supposed to be top secret, but whoever set up this coup knew exactly what was going on, who was going to be there and when - and had access."

'Ye-esss ' Karlstrom sought Jefferson's reaction to this.

Steve watched the silent exchange and knew he was out from under He jumped up as the P-G and Karlstrom vacated their seats. 'Sir, I realise that my failure to provide Commander Franklynne can't be erased from the record ' 'Damn right!" exclaimed Jefferson.

'- but I'd like an opportunity to make restitution."

'Don't worry, you're going to! This screw-up has brought her father and half his kin-folk down on my back. And pressure from that quarter is the last thing I need."

Jefferson treated Steve to a mocking smile. 'But at least you've learned you can't win them all. Even so, you're still a lucky sonofabitch. In fact we both are. It was Fran who talked me into giving her this mission against my better judgement, and insisted on taking you - instead of someone with similar experience who could actually speak the language!" He waved dismissively. 'Take him away, Ben."

When Karlstrom and Steve emerged into the glistening marble lobby, Steve asked: 'What's going to happen to Major Fujiwara and the other men who helped me escape, sir?"

'They've been temporarily assigned to our language laboratory. But we'll probably send them back in to Ne-Issan to make contact with the operatives we still have there and - hopefully - set up a new network working directly for us. If the Toh-Yota lose control of the ball, it could all get very messy. It's vital we keep tabs on what's happening, so that we can be in a position to help the winning side." A thin smile. 'Who knows? You may soon find yourself back in there dressed up as a Mute - but this time with lumps in your face."

'Does that mean I still have my job on the Eastern Desk?"

'Not yet, Brickman. You're down for a crash course in Japanese - and you're also going to be wargaming in the Simulation Room. The Desk Controller's office will give you the details?"

'Thank you, sir." Steve stiffened to attention.

Karlstrom returned his salute, then remarked casually: 'Oh, by the way - there's something we didn't tell you in there. Your hunch about Cadillac was right on the money."

'Beg pardon, sir?"

'While you were all at sea, Monroe/Wichita picked up a signal from Sara-kusa. The Yama-Shita family are holding Commander Franklynne hostage. You'll be pleased to know she's alive and well."

'Wowww... jeezuss! That's a relief."

'It's more than just good news, Brickman. Remember our train ride?"

'Very clearly, sir."

'Then we may have one thing less to worry about. The Yama-Shita family have cut a deal with the She-Kargo.

They're offering to swap Commander Franklynne for Clearwater and her baby son." · Steve's jaw dropped. 'Baby...?"

'Yes, I forgot. You're a father. Congratulations."

Karlstrom stuck out a hand. 'But before you go rushing over there, ride down to my office with me and I'll give you the rest of what we have on the hostage front."

Steve looked down at the little screwed-up face then sat on the side of

Clearwater's bed. They squeezed each other's hands and exchanged kisses.

'Have you given him a name yet?'

'Yes, Sand-Wolf." Clearwater lifted the dark-haired week-old baby out of the bedside cot and cradled him in her arms. 'Because he was born in the Great Desert of the South.'

Steve laughed. 'Why do you still call the Federation a desert? Don't you ever look out of the window? There are trees and grass out there.'

'I know - but what lies beyond the wall?'

'More trees, more grass, streams, rivers-things you've never dreamed of. There's more to the Federation than concrete warrens and wagon-trains.'

'Yes, I know. It was the skill of their medicine men who saved my life - while their brothers continue to wage war on the Plainfolk. Do you expect me to ignore that?'

To forget how my kin-sisters and their children died?'

I was not spared because they took pity on me, but whatever the reason I will always be grateful - not to

them but to you. For it was you who summoned help and gave me something to live for. But not here."

Clearwater stroked Sand-Wolfs head. 'It doesn't matter how favoured a life you can secure for us. I don't want my son to grow up in a world where they build walls."

'He won't have to.'" Steve reached out and was allowed to take the baby. He held it awkwardly in the crook of his arm and slipped the little finger of his right hand into one of its tiny clenched fists.

'Got some good news for you, Sandy. You and your ma may be going home soon."

Clearwater jerked forward off the stacked pillows. 'Is it true?!' 'Yes, well - let me put it this way. It's true in the sense that it's a serious possibility.'" Steve explained about the message from the Sara-kusa palace offering to exchange Fran for her and the baby.

Clearwater lay back with a puzzled frown. 'But why do the Iron Masters want me?'"

Steve flashed a warning glance the hidden cameras couldn't see. 'I'm not sure. There's an unconfirmed report that suggests they may be doing business with the She-Kargo. If it's true, then getting you back could be part of it."

Clearwater caught on. 'And when is this going to happen?'"

'Dunno. That still has to be arranged."

'But you will be involved?'"

'Oh, yes. I've been given the job of making sure the hand-over goes smoothly."

'Which means...?'"

'That it will.'" Steve's eyes gave another warning. 'If I don't get it right this time, I'm finished."

Clearwater reached out to stroke the baby and the arm that held him.

'Has it occurred to you that my son and I might not want to leave you?'"

Steve grasped the outstretched hand and squeezed it affectionately as he raised his voice for the benefit of the concealed microphones.

'That's tough, because neither of us have any choice in the matter."

He looked down at the baby. 'Hey, you! Small fry!

Don't just lie there. Talk some sense into your mother."

He laid Sand-Wolf in Clearwater's arms.

'Are you pleased to have a son?'"

'I think so. To tell you the truth, I'm still getting used to the idea. Y'know - the two of us making a human being.

I grew up believing that the President-General was the creator of All Life."

'And now you know it isn't true.'

Steve gave another warning glance. 'Correction. We know he doesn't create Plainfolk.'

'That's right. There's something I have to show you.'

Clearwater peeled off Sand-Wolfs white nightshirt and turned him face down on the bed. On the light peachy-brown skin of his back were several darker zebra stripes, running from his shoulders down to the terry-towel nappy, and forming a roughly symmetrical pattern on either side of his spine.

Steve ran a finger down one of the stripes. 'So what?'

'You're not angry?'

'Why should I be? I think he looks great - don't you?'

'Of course I do.' Sand-Wolf gave a disgruntled gurgle as she replaced his nightshirt and laid him in the cot.

'Then why are you crying?'

Clearwater brushed the tears from her face. 'If you were a woman, you'd understand.'

'But as I'm not, I can't.'

'One day perhaps.'

Steve took her hand. 'I'm sorry I wasn't here when -' 'You're here now. That's enough.'

Steve glanced at the wall clock and sighed. 'And now I've got to go.'

See you this evening.' He kissed her lightly on the cheek then placed a hand on the baby's chest and rocked him gently from side to side.

'G'bye, Sandy.'

As he turned to go, Clearwater threw aside the bedclothes.

'Wait! I'll walk you to the door.'

'Walk? You mean without -?'

Clearwater laughed at his astonished expression. 'Yes!

Did you think I was going to be in this bed forever?'

She pulled up the hem of her knee-length maternity shift. It was the first time Steve had seen her legs in months. The bullet wounds had healed but her right thigh still bore the scars of the surgical operations that had rebuilt her shattered thigh bone.

'Jeezuss, that's look brutal. Does it still hurt?'

'Mutes don't feel pain. Isn't that what they say?'

Clearwater pulled on a long white bathrobe and knotted the sash. 'I still have a slight limp, but the nurses have told me that will gradually disappear.' She linked arms with Steve.

'Are you sure this is allowed?'

'Of course. You're a member of the Family. The nurses seem to think you're a very important person now.'

'Then make the most of it. It may not last.'

No one challenged them as they walked along the passage towards the reception area. Clearwater stopped at the double-doors that divided the Long Term Care Annexe from the rest of the Life Institute and turned towards Steve, her face raised expectantly.

They kissed and hugged one another, then separated.

A passing medical orderly picked up the cap which had fallen from under Steve's arm.

Steve put it back on and adjusted it to the right angle.

'Are you sure you can make it back on your own?'

'Just watch me.' Clearwater held onto his hands for a moment longer then turned and walked away. With no arm to lean on, the limp was more pronounced. When she reached the side corridor, she looked back, waved briefly and was gone before Steve could respond.

I should be happy, thought Steve. I've got out of that fiasco in Ne-Issan without anyone guessing what really happened. Roz is safe and has knocked some sense into Cadillac. Fran will be handed back, shaken but unharmed. I have a son. The woman I really care about is almost restored to health and may soon gain her freedom. So why do I feel something terrible is going to happen...?

Ten days after the death of Yoritomo and Ieyasu, while the TohoYota family were still trying to sort out the succession and the chaos caused by the dead Shogun's order to arrest everyone working for, or associated with, his great-uncle on a charge of treason, the YamaShita family struck again - this time with their armies.

Before Cadillac and Roz departed for the Winter Palace, the Yama-Shita and their allies had spent some time working out what action each would take if the planned coup were to succeed, and the call to arms had been sent by courier-pigeon to the expectant domain-lords within minutes of Cadillac's arrival at Sarakusa with the severed heads of Yoritomo and Ieyasu.

In a simultaneous pincer movement from east and west, foot-soldiers and cavalry units from Min-Orota's army crossed over the Connecticut river into the lower quarter of the Toh-Yota's huge northern domain a few hours after the Yama-Shita had ferried troops across the Hudson under

cover of darkness. Their objective was to secure a fifty-mile deep strip along the coast facing Long Island.

A second Yama-Shita strike-force swung south into New Jersey, to secure the remaining section of the west bank and mouth of the Hudson River where it ran out past Staten Island into Lower New York Bay.

In the far north, the Fu-Jitsu family, long-time allies of the Yama-Shita, launched an attack along the south bank of the St Lawrence River, to link up with a third strike-force moving eastwards around the northern tip of Lake Champlain.

But not everything went as the Yama-Shita family had hoped. In the north-east, the Hase-Gawa, regarded as 'reliable' neutrals by the Toh-Yota, declined to join the Progressives despite being informed of Lord Ieyasu's treachery, and his betrayal of a son from their noble house. They had fought alongside the Toh-Yota to depose the ruling Da-Tsuni, and they responded to the Yama-Shita's invitation by attacking the Fu-Jitsu's left flank. The Ho-Nada family promptly joined them,

foiling the planned pincer movement.

On hearing of this vigorous response, the Na-Shona family, whose domain covered the north-eastern tip of Ne-Issan, and who had pledged their support during the secret meeting at Sara-kusa, decided to remain on the sidelines - a move which left the Hase-Gawa, Ho-Nada and Naka-Jima free to send their coastal fleets to harry the Min-Orota.

In the centre, its other principal allies, the Ko-Nikka and Se-Iko began the process of mobilising their reserves.

Of the two, only the Se-Iko was in a position to menace the enemy's front line. Its domain butted onto the Traditionalist strongholds of the Mitsu-Bishi, SuZuki and Toh-Shiba. It was not strong enough to take on all three at once and, in any case, multiple forested ridges of the Appalachian Mountains barred a swift advance onto the coastal plain. The Se-Iko responded to the Yama-Shita's appeal by moving its regular troops into defensive positions along the border, causing the three opposing domain-lords to rush troops to the same area, thus weakening the forces available to meet any further southward movement by the YamaShita.

The news from the far south was as disappointing as that from the north. The Dai-Hatsu, another so-called neutral domain in the traditionalist camp, was still wavering despite the lure of being allowed to expand its territory beyond the Western Hills.

The neighbouring Da-Tsuni - the smallest and least powerful domain neutered by marriage to Yoritomo's family - could have been easily overrun, but without the Dai-Hatsu, the noose could not be drawn tight around the Toh-Yota and its staunchest allies, the MitsuBishi, Su-Zuki and Toh-Shiba. Faced with the DaiHatsu's dithering, the San-Yo and Hi-Tashi, the two families whose domains were at the southern end of Ne-Issan, decided to sit on their hands.

The struggle for control of Ne-Issan had begun. With the help of Cadillac and Roz, the Yama-Shita had dealt the Toh-Yota a major blow and had seized the military initiative, but a swift victory for the Progressive faction was far from assured.

Despite Fran's absence, Steve continued to use the same suite of rooms, commuting each day from the white colonnaded mansion to the Simulation Room and underground language lab, where Samurai-Major Fujiwara - now wearing a cut-down Trail-Blazer parade uniform with yellow rank stripes - was endeavouring to explain the mind-boggling complexities of the Japanese language.

To cite just one example: each of the simple personal pronouns - the 'I, me, my, you' and 'your' in Federation Basic - could be expressed in several quite different ways in Japanese, and the correct choice of word depended on whether the speaker was of superior rank to the addressee - or vice versa - their social relationship and the degree of intimacy between them, the nature of conversation, and the age and sex of the person doing the talking.

Cadillac had acquired his mastery of the language through the magical equivalent of a brain transplant, but how in the name of the Great Sky-Mother had Fran done it?

Steve's renewed respect for her linguistic abilities might have been tempered had he known that Fran's studies had begun at the age of three as part of a First Family programme to create a special cadre of

potential administrators that could take control of Ne-Issan when it was finally subjugated by the armies of the Federation.

Whatever their faults, no one could accuse them of not thinking ahead.

The Federation-wide celebrations held to mark New Year's Day, 2992 AD, were matched on the overground by glittering receptions, dinner parties and dancing on the various colonial-style estates spread across the First Family's private enclave.

The twenty-four hour break from Fujiwara's language class gave Steve's brain a chance to come off the boil, but

the rest of his body remained restless. As someone who had spent his life training for active duty and had loved every minute of it, he still found it difficult to adjust to the idea of 'spare time' - one of the many privileges enjoyed by members of the Family.

Ordinary Trackers were allowed R&R, but the normal priorities of an off-duty soldier were sleep, food and more sleep, and maybe- but not necessarily- jacking-up whatever came within reach. To be able to wallow in your bunk long after reveille had sounded and have a buddy bring you food down from the mess-hall was the dog-soldier's ultimate dream.

In the past, it had been Steve's too, but since his promotion and elevation to Cloudlands, he had been introduced to a more elegant life-style that offered a greater element of choice and a range of diversions that went far beyond the Shoot-A-Mute type arcade games-that was the major legal form of entertainment for those down under.

And on this New Year's Day he discovered another.

From midday onwards, the presidential cortege conducted a leisurely whistle-stop tour of the various estates, to meet, mingle and press flesh with the inhabitants of each mansion at a lavish outdoor or indoor reception.

The itinerary varied from year to year, and on this occasion, Savannah, the mansion to which Steve had been assigned was the last call of the evening. Answering the summons to greet the P-G, he joined the other residents assembled on the front steps; the men in their ' Confederate grey uniforms and sword belts, or formal civilian attire, the women resplendent in their wide-skirted ball gowns, soft elbow-length gloves and silk or woollen shawls to protect them from the cold.

They did not have long to wait. These visits were always carefully timed. The horse-drawn presidential cortege drew up, two lines of ensigns from the honour guard formed on either side of the welcoming red carpet, and Jefferson the 31st was warmly cheered and applauded as he mounted the steps with his immediate entourage to be greeted by the Chief Estate-Holder then taken inside.

Steve glimpsed Karlstrom among the pack of top brass.

Steve himself was not on the short list of people due to be presented to the P-G, but as he mingled with the chattering throng sipping his third glass of white wine, he felt a hand grasp his elbow. It was Karlstrom.

'Good evening, sir. Happy New Year." They raised and touched their glasses.

'And to absent friends,' said Karlstrom.

'Have you heard any more about when the YamaShita are going to hand over Commander Franklynne?"

'.Not yet. But when I do I'll let you know. How's it going at school?"

Steve grimaced. 'My toughest assignment yet. That language is a real bitch. Given the choice I'd rather be out doing damage to people and property."

'There'll be plenty of time for that later. If you put your back into it, you should be able to read and speak with reasonable fluency in six months.'

'Six months...!' 'Six to eight. That's all it took me. And I was over thirty. Jeezuss, you're not even twenty yet! Stop complaining.

Just get in there and give it your best shot.'

'Don't worry, sir. I will.'

'You'd better - otherwise you could lose your star rating.' Karlstrom eyed the surrounding throng of men and women then adopted a friendlier tone. 'Have you lined up anything for this evening?'

'uhh, no, sir?' said Steve. If Karlstrom meant what he thought he meant, that would have been asking for trouble.

'Good.' Karlstrom checked his watch and began to move away. 'We're due out of here in about fifteen minutes. Come back with us to Grand Palisades. We're going to be running a little item that may interest you ' Grand Palisades was the President-General's mansion - the place where the very top echelons of the Family

congregated. As he dismounted from Karlstrom's carriage, his host pointed out a dark-haired powerful-looking man who had buttonholed the P-G. 'That's Theodore "Bull" Jefferson. Member of the Supreme Council, and States-General of Texas. If you leave AMEXICO out of the picture, he's the second most powerful man in the Federation - and the father of your missing bed-mate.' Karlstrom laughed. 'So keep well back because I don't intend to introduce you.'

After entering the mansion - which was even more spacious and splendid than Savannah - another round of drinks and refreshments was offered to the presidential party then a group of about thirty led by Jefferson split off and filed out. Karlstrom signalled Steve to follow.

Thickly carpeted stairs took them below ground level into a room with panelled walls, a stepped sloping floor and eight rows of five comfortable armchair-type seats like the one he'd seen in the apartment in Santanna Deep. Karlstrom signalled Steve to take a seat in the back row, then walked on to join Jefferson and Fran's father at the front.

The P-G took the centre seat, facing a high curtained wall about fifteen feet in front of them.

Turning round, Steve saw a line of four small square holes in the wall behind him. Weird. Everyone was clearly waiting for something to appear from behind the curtain - but what? He settled down in his seat as the lights dimmed. Stirring music - richer than the usual stuff piped through the Federation - issued from banks of speakers on the side walls. The curtains parted soundlessly to reveal a large white rectangle - several feet wider than the block of seats, then as the music swelled, a ray of light shot from the back wall and filled the screen with colour.

How strange! thought Steve. This is not a video-wall - this is some entirely different process. This picture's being projected onto some kind of special material. The colours are so bright! And the sound!

He watched openmouthed as the story unfolded. A story about a fight to the death by a small band of heroes facing overwhelming odds. Steve was watching his first cinemascope movie: The Alamo starring and directed by the First Family's favourite hero. John Wayne

Incredible. And of course Steve believed he was watching the real thing. He was still rooted in his seat while everyone else was heading for the exit.

'You planning to stay there all night?'

Karlstrom's voice brought Steve back to earth. He leapt up.

'What did you think of it?'

'Staggering. To have a visual record of something that happened over a thousand years ago.'

."Yehh... 1836 - what's the problem?'

'Nothing, sir. It was kind of strange, y'know - the mexicans being the bad guys.'

Karlstrom smiled. 'They were the old kind. Nothing to do with us.'

Steve followed him to the door. 'D'you mind if I ask you something

else? How did they make the cameras work?

There wasn't anything in that fort that used electricity.

And how did the guys who were taking the pictures get over to the enemy side without being shot?"

The question made Karlstrom laugh. 'That language course really has burnt your wires out! What you just saw was a recreation of an actual historical event. Nobody got shot, nobody died. Those weren't real soldiers. It was staged for the cameras in 1960 - more than a hundred years after it happened!" Steve tried to take all this on board. He had discovered that the Iron Masters made up stories about nonexistent people and imaginary events, but for someone brought up on a diet of training videos and educational documentaries, who had never held a book in his hands and who knew nothing about the creative or cinematic arts, the concept of fiction as entertainment was difficult to grasp.

Watching the story unfold on the screen had been a totally new experience that had held him spellbound from start to finish, but after learning from Karlstrom that everyone involved had been pretending, he could not

help wondering why anyone should want to make a fake version of a real battle. Having only received a practical education which virtually excluded the imaginative process, the question was quite natural, but he didn't ask it for fear of making a fool of himself.

'What was the process we were watching?'

Karlstrom took him into the projection room and provided him with a succinct explanation of how film images were captured and displayed on the big screen.

'That's why they're called movies.'

'Sounds kinda primitive ' 'It is,' said Karlstrom. 'But it's also part of our heritage.

You've only seen one, but we've got dozens of these movies. They are stories about heroism and self-sacrifice.

They express a set of values which have guided the First Family from the very beginning. They are the source of our inspiration. They represent what the Federation stands for, the kind of America we are going to rebuild when we have conquered the blue-sky world."

Well it was certainly more watchable than the guff they pumped out on the nine video channels. 'If that's so, sir, why keep them to yourselves? If they're as valuable as you suggest, wouldn't it boost everyone's morale if they were shown nationwide?'

Karlstrom responded with a mocking smile. 'That's just the kind of question I've come to expect from you. Let's just say that they will be shown one day, but not yet.'" He led Steve out of the projection room and back upstairs. 'What did you think of John Wayne?'

'uhh, yes... I saw the name. Is that the same man whose ' Yes. John Wayne Plaza. When you see more of his work and realise what he represents, you'll understand why.'" Karlstrom paused. 'What's bugging you now?'

'They called him Davy Crockett... was that his code-name?'

Karlstrom propelled him in a friendly fashion towards the liveried Mute manservant waiting by the huge front door. 'Forget it, Brickman. Just go home and go to bed!' January the 15th turned out to be another day to remember. Forced to study late into the night to catch up with his course-work Steve was unable to get over to the Life Institute to see Clearwater for three days in a row. On each occasion he had sent three video-grams through to the LTC Admin Office asking them to pass his apologies to the occupant of Room 18 together with the promise to be there without fail on the 15th - the day when Sand-Wolf would be one month old.

He passed his new up-rated ID card through the monitor on the reception desk, waited while the relevant details were flashed onto the screen, then got the nod from the duty clerk and was through the turnstile in a matter of seconds. The guy hadn't even bothered to read the data. If you had a valid ID and a silver-grey uniform formalities were kept to a minimum. You could bypass any line-ups at security barriers and, best of all, the truncheon-wielding Provos all became fawning brown-nosers.

Bastards...

Steve followed the now-familiar route down the sterile pale green corridors, rappa-tap-tapped on the door to Room 18 and entered. The room was empty. The bed had been stripped, the cot had disappeared along with the vases of flowers. A plastic cover had been placed over the medical computer terminal. The air was scented with the smell of antiseptic cleaning fluid.

He went back outside and checked the number on the door. No mistake there - what the hell was happening? 'Simple. She'd been moved somewhere else during the last three days. He stopped a passing nurse.

'Room 18. There was a mother and child in there. Can you tell me where they've been moved to?'

'uhh, I'm not sure. I think they been discharged, sir.'

Steve's stomach turned over. 'Discharged?! Where to?!" 'No idea, sir - but the Chief Nursing Officer should have the details. If you go to the end of this corridor and -, 'Yehh, I know where it is.

Thanks."

To avoid the confusion of inserting alien Plainfolk names into the computer, Clearwater had been logged into the Life Institute as Brickman C.W. The given name had not been spelt out; the W stood for Washington- the divisional name for those born in Houston/GC.

The Chief Nursing Officer was not there when Steve arrived, but one of his admin staff obligingly screened the nursing records. 'Here we are ... 9616 Brickman C.W. and 0987 Brickman S.W. Discharged from LTC, 1200 hours, 12 January 299 -' 'Jezusss! Three days ago? Where were they logged out to?"

The staffer studied the screen then tapped some more keys and studied the result. 'Strange... No destination has been entered."

'That's crazy,' said Steve. 'Let's get this straight. I'm enquiring about a 19-year-old woman and a newborn child. Those are the records you're looking at?"

'Yes. Brickman S.W - born 1627 hours, 15 December, 2991." The staffer tapped a few more keys. 'I'll just check through the B file on either side in case there's a double entry. If someone types in the initials back to front, the computer thinks it's a different person. If the mistake is repeated, you can end up with data held in two separate files."

Steve contained his frustration. 'I thought the system was foolproof."

The staffer smiled. 'Yes, I heard that too." She studied the screen again. 'Nope. Sorry, sir, there -' An item caught her eye. 'Wait a minute. What's this...?" She looked across the counter at Steve.

'The subject of your enquiry. she just had the one child, right?"

'Yes, why?"

'Well, there's another Brickman listed here. Lucas W. Brickman, born 1642 hours on the same day - 15

December. Just fifteen minutes apart. Multiple births are very rare, but that's a typical time scale - which is why I asked if she'd had twins."

This is getting stranger by the minute, thought Steve.

'Who's listed as the guard-mother?"

'Of Lucas Brickman...?"

A hard-edged voice behind Steve said: 'That's okay, Jenni, I'll handle the captain's enquiry."

The staffer made a diplomatic exit leaving Steve facing the CNO. A brisk figure of authority who introduced himself as Major Bradman.

Steve repeated his original query about Clearwater.

Bradman checked the screen. 'Ahh, yes. This file has a data lock.

One moment..." He inserted his ID, typed in an access code and read the displayed information.

'llnh! I'm afraid you're out of luck, Captain. The woman and child were discharged on receipt of a presidential order. A PO-1. Which means it came from the Oval Office as opposed to somewhere else in the white House. There are no other details - and no onward destination.

See for yourself-' Bradman swung the screen round towards Steve, who read the sparse strands of information with a sinking heart. 'But you must know something! Who took her away? I' 'All I can tell you is what's on the screen, Captain. I don't know how well you're connected, but as a member of the Family you can access more information than I Can."

'Maybe. what about this Lucas Brickman?"

Bradman spread his hands. 'I'm not authorised to answer that query, Captain."

'Then who is, Major?"

'I can't answer that either. Ask someone inside the Family."

Steve saluted curtly and walked out. who the hell was he going to ask inside the Family? He had met both the

President-General and Karlstrom, but he had only ever been in their offices in answer to a summons from on high. He was a serving officer. He wasn't able to drop in on them whenever he felt like it. There were channels to go through, desks manned by senior officers who could bin any request he made without giving a reason.

On the social front, it was the same story. Wearing Confederate grey didn't entitle him to walk into Grand Palisades and accost Jefferson in the privacy of his famous rose garden. Door-stepping Karlstrom wasn't any easier.

The head of AMEXICO was the kind of man who was only seen when he wanted to be seen - and Steve did not even have his Cloudlands address.

No. He was screwed.

Yet again

Coming out into the main reception area, Steve was so wound up with his personal anxieties, he barely noticed the people around him. He threaded his way towards the exit through the blur of faces like an industrial robot programmed to avoid obstacles.

'Stevie...?!' A voice from the past. Unforgettable.

He halted as someone stepped in front of him, focused on their face and gasped. It was Annie Brickman, his own guard-mother, in a dark blue and white jumpsuit with red insignia - the uniform worn by admin officers of the Provost-Marshall's Division. They both stared at one another, unable to believe the evidence of their own eyes, then hugged one another happily.

Annie, her face flushed, held him at arm's length and gazed at him approvingly. 'My! You look just fine!' She blinked away the tears and lowered her voice. 'Roz told me you weren't dead, but I knew that.

inside. And here you are. And she's gone."

Annie snuffled into a nose-wipe and dried her tears.

Steve hugged her again. He wanted to tell her that Roz was still alive but knew he couldn't. 'I never thought I'd see you again.' He held onto her hands as he stepped back. 'What on earth are you doing here?l' Annie hesitated. 'Didn't they tell you?'

'Tell me what? What is it, Annie?'

Before she could answer, another voice made Steve's blood run cold.

'Ahh, there you are! Been looking all over!' Steve turned to find Annie's kin-brother Bart Bradlee standing right behind him. Crazy Uncle Bart, State Provost-Marshall of New Mexico. His piercing blue eyes flared as they alighted on Steve.

'Christo! Will you look at this, Annie! Your little Stevie!' He pounded his nephew's shoulders. 'You son of a gun! Last time I saw you, you were chained to the godamn floor!' 'That's right, sir.

Waiting for the shuttle at Santa Fe.

November 2989."

Bart nodded. 'And now here you are all-dollied up in Family grey! And a captain, no less! By Jimmy! Poppa Jack would've been proud of you, boy! Hoo! Why he'd've been doin' somersaults in that chair of his!"

He laid a hand on both their shoulders. 'All this time I've never been able to breathe a word about seeing you, not even to my kin-sister here - but this stubborn ole' mule always refused to believe you were dead."

He sighed. 'Cryin' shame about Roz. No call for her to volunteer for overground duty.

Bright girl like that, could have gone right to the top. But what can you do?"

'Yeah ' Steve paused reflectively then asked: 'So what are you both doing here?"

Bart moved to Annie's side. 'Just seeing a friend, Stevie. Just seeing a friend."

Anyone I know?"

'Can't say."

'Can't say, or won't say. sir?"

'Don't press me, boy. I don't need to tell you how the Family run things. You're one of them now. If I didn't tell Annie you were alive 'cos I was told not to, I certainly ain't gonna start breaking the rules now!" 'Of course, sir. I understand. And I apologise for asking."

'That's okay,' said Bart. 'As long as you know how things stand '

'I'm just a little bit messed up right now. I came here to see somebody and they've, uhh. just disappeared.'

'Ain't nothin' I can do about it, boy.'

A senior medical officer appeared at Bart's elbow.

'Marshal Bradlee? I'm Colonel Halliday.' He gestured towards Annie.

'Is this S.A.O Brickman?'

'It is.'

'Good. Would you both follow me, please?'

'Sure. G'Bye, Steve. You take care now, huh?' The mad blue eyes widened as they shook hands.

As Bart turned away with Halliday, Annie embraced Steve, planted a hurried kiss on his cheek and whispered: 'They've given Lucas to me!' She slipped from his grasp and was gone before Steve had time to react.

He stood there and watched her walk away flanked by Colonel Halliday and the forbidding white-suited figure of Crazy Uncle Bart.

They've given Lucas to me... What the hell was he supposed to make of that? Who was this mystery child who shared his name... ?

Steve exited into the lobby served by six elevators and hit one of the down buttons. The elevator announced its arrival with a soft ting. He stepped inside and was followed by just one other person.

'Captain Brickman?' It was the young staffer from C.N.O. Bradman's office. Her face was drained of colour. She spotted a couple more customers and hit the Door Close button before they could enter.

The elevator started down. Steve stood against the opposite wall with his hands clasped together in front of him and waited for the next move. She hit the emergency stop button - halting them in the shaft between two floors.

He read off her name tag, then eyed her quizzically.

'What's going on, Sutton?'

She stayed pinned against the wall by the lift controls and grimaced nervously. 'Listen, Captain. If anyone finds out I've been talking to you, they'll shaft me. I mean I'm dead, right?'

'I'm listening.'

'Look, I made a big mistake, back there. I checked again, and there's no entry for Lucas Brickman. I don't know how the mix-up happened. It was just one of those days. So, look - I know I have no right to ask you this but please, please, don't take this query any further.'

Because if it gets back to Bradman it's going to make all kinds of trouble for a lot of people who don't deserve it.' She turned and slammed her hands against the wall. 'Fucking computers!' 'Did Bradman send you? Tell me the truth, Sutton- or I will report this conversation!' 'Yes, sir. That information was supposed to have been wiped.'

'So who is Lucas Brickman?' He saw the terrified expression on Sutton's face. 'Don't worry, I promise you this won't go any further.'

'He's... he's the baby that the woman in Room 18 gave birth to. The one you saw was a...'

'... a substitute? What's going on here?!" 'Ohh, shit,' groaned Sutton. 'Please, Captain! Don't ask me any more! That's all I know!

It was all taken care of by people from the White House. I'm nobody!

I made a mistake and I'm in way over my head!" Steve made a calming gesture. 'Okay, okay. I'm not going to make any waves. Hit the button.'

Sutton did so.

'Now ruffle your hair and undo that front zip.'

Her eyes widened. 'Beg pardon, Captain?!" 'Just do it! When we reach the next floor, people are going to be wondering what happened in here.

We'll both live longer if they think I've been inside your pants. Or would you rather I told 'em you've been passing me state secrets? I' Sutton yanked down her front zipper- revealing a good firm pair of breasts under a green T-shirt.

Steve ruffled her bobbed hair and pinched her cheeks.

'Now try and look as if you enjoyed it.'

They switched lifts at the next floor. Any questions people in the lobby might have had died on their lips when they saw Steve was Family.

Sutton hurriedly rearranged herself and went back up. Steve carried on down to take the short subway ride to the White House interchange and the special turnstile that only accepted Family ID cards.

The first stage of the journey back to Cloudlands

Despite his casual demeanour in the lift, Steve's mind was in even greater turmoil than before. Clearwater had vanished with the wrong baby. Did she know they had been switched? She must have, surely!

Was that why she had cried?

But why did she not say anything? Was it to protect him? Or was it to protect Lucas Brickman? Who had chosen that name for their son? His son - who had been handed over to his own guard-mother. To be raised by her and Crazy Uncle Bart.

It was a nightmare which didn't make sense. If the PG was ready to swap Clearwater for Fran after mounting a costly operation to capture her, what was the point of the substitution? Why would Jefferson want to keep her baby? And why was he, the father - the supposedly loyal and well-rewarded servant - being kept in the dark?

Steve couldn't figure it out. But then he didn't know that Mount St Helens had erupted as Clearwater delivered her child into the world, or that Jefferson the 31st was convinced that he, 8902 Brickman S.R had sired the Talisman

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

As he turned off the shower, Steve heard muffled ,voices coming from the bedroom. The deeper one belonged to Joshua, the grey-haired Mute Who was Head of Service at Savannah. Steve pulled a bathrobe over his dripping wet body and emerged, to discover who his visitors were.

He caught sight of Joshua exiting into the hall then glimpsed a sudden movement behind him. He whirled around and was sent staggering backwards as Fran flung herself at him with an excited laugh.

'You pleased to see me?!" Steve loosened the choking embrace and put some warmth into his voice. 'Of course I am! I'm only sorry I wasn't there at the hand-over. Karlstrom told me I was down for it and ' 'Who cares?" Fran silenced him with a hungry kiss.

'You're here, I'm here - both safe and sound. That's all that matters." She hugged him happily. 'When I saw you lying face down on the verandah, Christo - I thought you were dead! Jeer! Now that really did frighten me!" She looked as if she meant it too. But for how long?

Being around Fran was like walking on quicksand. Steve hugged her back. 'How d'you think I felt when I woke up, tied hand and foot and found you were gone?!" He led her over to the table which held the crystal decanters of wine and the stiffer kind of booze he'd come to rely on when Fran was around. 'What happened?"

'Can't say exactly. Someone hit me over the head.

When I came to I was blindfolded and gagged and wrapped inside what

felt like a bed quilt." She took the offered drink, toasted him, then moved around the room as she talked, touching familiar objects like an animal putting down territorial markers.

'Goddam nearly choked to death. I was on or in some kind of wheeled vehicle then, after a while I heard waves breaking on the shore. I was slung into a rowboat - I could tell that by the way it bobbed up and down then transferred onto a junk. Once that got underway, the sound of the engine told me all I needed to know."

She came back for a refill. 'Anyway, they cut me loose from the quilt, and took the gag off but I still couldn't see anything. They put me some place where I could hear water sloshing around - and there were rats too!" She shuddered at the memory. 'Jeezuss!" Steve gave her a soothing shoulder-hug. 'Sounds like you were down in the bottom of the boat. The bilges."

Fran resumed her walk-about. 'Yeah, well, it was goddam awful wherever it was. They kept me tied up, but some jap came and fed me spoonfuls of boiled rice and a little tea. They left the blindfold on till we reached Sara-kusa. The first thing I see is the inside of another prison cell. Only this one was clean. It was me that stank."

She stopped in front of him. 'D'you know that all the time I was tied up those jap bastards didn't let me go to the john?! For nearly three days! First you go through the agony of trying to 'hold your water, and then you suffer the humiliation of having to pee in your pants!

Ugnnhh! I wanted to die!" 'Yeah, I know how it feels,:' said Steve.

He'd been in the same jam after being 'posted' by Malone's renegades.

He poured himself another drink. 'Then what?"

'Things started to get better. They brought in a tub, soap and hot water. towels. and took my clothes away to be washed and pressed."

Fran unzipped her grey tunic and tossed it aside, sat down on the edge of the bed and offered up her right leg. 'And I met your friend Cadillac ' Steve straddled her leg and eased off the close-fitting boot. 'He's no friend of mine."

'You're right there." She raised her left leg. 'He made it quite plain he hates your guts."

Steve worked up some indignation as he wrestled off the second boot.

'The feeling's mutual. That bastard took Roz from The Lady and then stood around and let her die."

'Yes." Fran drained her glass and placed it on the chest that ran along the foot of the bed. 'I asked him what happened - just to keep the records straight. He said she was one of several people who died after eating some smoked meat. Ironic, isn't it? All the talents she possessed - and yet she couldn't protect herself from the poisonous crap these lumpheads stuff down their throats."

She stood up and caressed Steve's face. 'And she very nearly took you with her. It's really weird, isn't it - how your body reproduced all the symptoms...?"

'Yehh - but none of the toxin. It drove the doctors crazy."

'And me too. That was one of the worst weeks of my life." She kissed him. 'At least there's no danger of that happening again."

'Don't be so sure. You know what they say - "Trouble always comes in

threes.'" 'Well, I'm going to make sure you stay out of trouble from now on." Locking her arms round his neck, she pulled him down onto the bed beside her. 'So what happened after you came round? How did you get away?"

Steve outlined the nail-biting suspense that had accompanied the theft of a junk, then touched upon the long sea-voyage around Florida and across the Gulf of Mexico where the sea had been discoloured by a huge plume of mud nearly a hundred miles long.

'Yeah, it's from the Mississippi,' said Fran. 'There's been massive flooding in the east. Some of the divisional bases and way-stations have been badly hit."

Steve drew his head back. 'There's been nothing on Channel 9."

Fran kissed the tip of his nose. 'That's 'cos we don't believe in broadcasting bad news. What have you been up to since you got back?"

'Learning japanese and playing games. And let me tell you - that language is a real bitch. I'm way behind."

'Don't worry. I'll help you from now on. If you want to learn a language, there's nothing better than a sleeping dictionary. We can make love in japanese. I've got one of their sex manuals. We can go through it, page by page." Fran snuggled closer. 'And just who have you been playing games with?"

Steve laughed. 'I've been assigned to the Simulation Room. It's full of computers and big screens, and there's this team of programmers who set up various scenarios and strategies involving the Mutes, the Iron Masters and the Federation, and then play 'em through and see how it works out. At the moment I'm pretending to be Cadillac."

He grinned. 'And the Mutes are gaining ground."

'Knowing you, that doesn't surprise me - the genuine article is no bonehead either. But he has one major character defect. He can't resist telling people how clever he is - especially if he's got a captive audience. It was . . . most revealing."

A cold dart of fear struck Steve's heart. When Cadillac had the upper hand he tended to shoot his mouth off. He tried to sound casual. 'Oh, yehh - what about?"

Fran hesitated then half-rolled on top of him. 'No.

Maybe I'd better not tell you."

'Please yourself." Steve braced himself for the inevitable assault.

She kissed him then lowered her voice to a whisper.

'I've finally got something on that boss of yours."

'Karlstrom?"

'Shuhh! Yes 'I'd have thought he'd be the last person you'd want to make an enemy of."

Fran's voice became a snake-like hiss. 'After the way he dumped us in that mess?"

'Oh, c'mon! It wasn't his fault ' . 'No? He's had it coming for a long time - and now we've finally got a chance to cut his balls off!' 'How d'you mean - get him fired?"

'Among other things. There's a lot going on here you don't know about, Stevie. Let's just say that President-Generals don't live for ever and leave it at that." She sat up and stripped off the rest of her clothes. 'You and I have got a much more urgent problem to attend to, Captain."

'Yessirr-ma'am ' Steve moved obligingly towards the middle of the bed.

Fran landed beside him like a cat on all fours and pinned him down with a long, devouring tongue-sucking kiss that came close to tearing his lips off. 'uhh, Stevie! This is what I've been missing! Those jap rice balls are okay, but there ain't nothin' to match a regular diet of firm red meat!" She slipped her hand inside his bathrobe.

'Mmmm-mhhh!

Y'see?

Things are looking up already!" Regardless of what his body was saying, there was only one thought in Steve's mind: I've had enough. I gotta get out of here.

A couple of days later, Fran and Steve were invited to watch another late evening movie at Grand Palisades. 'Is your father going to be there?' asked Steve. 'He might be,' said Fran. 'Why d'you ask?'

'Ohh, it was just that... Karlstrom advised me to stay out of his way.

On account of-' Fran fastened the high collar of his jacket together.

'Don't be stupid. If my father was out for your blood, d'you think I'd be here?'

'Yehhh,' mused Steve. 'I never thought of that.' He watched Fran check her appearance in the long bedroom mirror.

Tonight she had chosen a dark blue evening dress with puffed elbow-length sleeves and a deep curving neckline that offered an enticing view of uplifted breasts and a smooth tanned back.

The transformation of Fran into a 'southern belle' for these formal occasions never failed to amaze Steve. The effect was always stunning, but he could not understand

how someone with so short and so vile a temper could patiently allow herself be squeezed and trussed into a tight-waisted corset by her Mute maid-servant before donning layer after voluminous layer of petticoats. And it took as long again to add a new face and arrange the curled, beribboned hair pieces.

Fortunately they didn't have to dress up every night.

Steve parted the window curtains and looked down at the empty driveway.

'Are we going by coach?'

'No, it's too cold. We'll take the trolley.' She fluffed out the sleeves of her dress, gave herself the final seal of approval and presented herself to him.

'Terrific.' Steve picked up the matching shawl and draped it around her shoulders. 'What's a trolley?'

'Follow me and you'll find out.'

They went downstairs into the large hall and into a side-corridor.

Fran halted opposite a marble side table bearing a huge bouquet of imitation flowers, and grasped the right hand side of a small framed picture of a landscape.

Instead of being hung on a hook, it was hinged down the left hand edge.

Behind it was a card-slot and keypad.

Fran produced an ID card from her small evening bag, inserted it into the slot, keyed in four digits, then retrieved her card and swung the picture back into place as two complete wall panels moved six inches backwards and parted to reveal an elevator the size of the living room Steve had shared with Roz and his guard-parents at Roosevelt/Santa Fe.

They stepped inside and were carried down to a lower level which led directly to a miniature, marbled subway station.

A two-car train running on a twin set of rails was drawn up at the platform which was at the same level as the track; a second set of rails ran alongside it and both disappeared into lighted tunnels lined with glazed white tiles. Each car, or 'trolley', was wide enough to accommodate a lady in a full skirt and long enough to hold six of them with their 'beaus'. Motive power was gathered from an overhead line through a sprung metal frame mounted on the roof.

The car bodies were made of framed polished wood panels with metal reinforcements, mounted on two sets of four-wheeled bogies. Everything in sight was gleaming, spotless.

'Incredible,' breathed Steve. 'Who cleans all this?'

Fran laughed. 'Cleaners! Who d'you think?'

Of course. Stupid question. An underground army of Mutes

A scanning device sensed their presence and obligingly opened the sliding double doors. Steve followed Fran inside. The cars were fitted with folding seats, but the row of polished brass poles that ran

down the middle of each car showed that they were designed to encourage stand-up travel. Fran punched in a six-figure code on the key-pad mounted on a side partition by the doors, causing them to close as the driverless vehicle whined into life.

Steve put a hand around Fran's waist and held onto the same pole as the trolley gathered speed and moved towards its chosen destination at a stately ten miles an hour. 'Quaint,' he said, surveying the antique wooden interior. 'Is this another Family exercise in nostalgia?'

'Yes. These are scaled-down versions of the trolley-cars that used to run above-ground in a place called San Francisco. Several decades before the Holocaust.'

'Never heard of it.' Steve looked out of the window as they came to a wide intersection with curving rows of columns supporting the roof.

Between the columns he could see twin tracks running away into other tunnels.

Other directions. He turned back to Fran. 'How big is this system?'

Does it run under the whole of Cloudlands?'

'The most important parts.'

'Like the estates?'

'Among other places.'

'So basically, it will take you anywhere you want to go.'

Fran answered with a teasing smile. 'Provided you have the right card and know the codes.'

When they stepped out of the elevator at Grand Palisades, the P-G's guests were already filing down

the carpeted steps' into the viewing theatre. This time, there was an ensign posted by the door and armed with a scan board and a light pen. He checked everyone off as they entered and gave them a seat number. It was a full house. Steve and Fran had drawn seats in the centre of the fourth row, but as they settled in, he saw people preparing to sit on the aisle steps by the exit doors.

This time Steve was better prepared for what he was about to see. He had cottoned on to the idea the characters in movies were impersonated by 'actors' in the same way that Side-Winder had disguised himself as a Mute. So he was not at all perplexed when John Wayne put in an appearance as a marine sergeant in an army where they didn't wear racoon-skin hats.

The movie was called Sands of Iwo-Jima - a story about men trying to capture a heavily-defended island. The one disappointment was the lack of colour. The movie was set in a drab grey world, but it was still an enthralling experience.

The big surprise came in the shape of the enemy.

The tenacious defenders of the island were Japanese, but the only connection with the Iron Masters he had encountered were the samurai swords carried by the officers. In every other respect, the soldiers were part of a recognisable modern army with modern weapons.

Steve was completely baffled. If they'd reached that stage a thousand years ago, why were they now riding around in suits of armour, brandishing spears and firing bows and arrows? What was it about the past that made them and the First Family want to put the clock back?

The curtains closed, the music ended. Everyone stood up and waited until Jefferson the 31st and the top-ranking brass left, then joined the general exodus. Steve waited while Fran gathered her skirts together then followed her along the row of seats.

She took his arm as they reached the aisle. 'Did you enjoy it?'

'Yes, amazing - but it looks like you didn't.'

'Oh, no, it's not the film.' 'She took a deep breath and gritted her teeth. 'It's sitting down in this goddam corset. It's practically cut me in half! Come on, let's get a drink.'

Four glittering chandeliers hung from the high ceiling of what was called the Rose Room, and beneath them, liveried Mute servants carried trays of drinks and snacks to the chattering clusters of movie-goers and house* residents who'd dropped in to spread or catch up with the latest scuttle-but.

Fran introduced Steve to a trio of women who were obviously old friends, -but he soon found himself on the margin of an animated conversation about someone he had never met. Making his excuses, he slipped away, culled a glass of wine from a passing tray and set about inspecting the paintings hung on the walls of the Rose Room.

The only pictures in the underground Federation were those supplied on screen by the nine tv channels, or the holographic portraits of the President-General. These were different. They reminded him of the decorated screens and wall-panels he'd seen in Ne-Issan.

As he stared up at a large framed portrait of a man dressed in a

strange hat, long jacket and knee breeches, and carrying a long-barrelled rifle and accompanied by two four-legged relatives of the jackal, .he became conscious of someone standing beside him.

It was Karlstrom. 'What did you think of the movie?"

Steve told him - and relayed his puzzlement about why the Iron Masters had chosen to go backwards in time instead of forwards.

Karlstrom smiled and made a sweeping gesture. 'The answers are all here in Cloudlands, Brickman. But your trouble is you want to know everything, and you want to know it now. Slow down. You'll get a great deal further if you take one small step at a time. But let me give you a friendly warning. There's a saying- "A little knowledge is a dangerous thing". Knowing too much can also be bad for your health."

They both saw Fran making her way towards them.

Karlstrom's voice changed gear - becoming louder and more abrasive.

'So tell me - are you pleased to have your bed-mate back?" He acknowledged her arrival with a wintry smile and raised his glass. 'We were just celebrating your safe return, weren't we?"

Steve felt Fran's fingers slide through his left hand and tighten. He returned the supportive squeeze. 'I'm certainly glad things worked out, sir, but I thought you had given me the job of managing the hand-over. It was only when I discovered Clearwater had gone missing from her room in the Life Institute - and ran into a wall of silence that I realised it had gone ahead without me."

'Ye-ess." Karlstrom eyed them both. 'A change of plan.

The P-G decided the job should be given to someone else. And I agreed.

Let's face it, you'd already managed to lose Commander Franklynne once.

Another foul-up would have reflected badly on the organisation."

'I can see that, sir - but why wasn't I told?"

Karlstrom gave a dry laugh. 'I think you overestimate your importance, Brickman. You're just a member of the team. An elite team with a good track record. Don't do anything to spoil it."

'No, sir ' Steve stiffened to attention and held his salute as Karlstrom walked away.

'The bastard!" breathed Fran. 'After all you've done.

Don't worry, we'll wipe the smile off his face one of these days ' Steve was destined to see that face. the very next day. A trim female lieutenant wearing White House insignia on her olive green fatigues beckoned him out of the lunch line-up on the language lab's mess-deck and took him through the usual obstacle course of card-controlled turnstiles and elevators to their leader.

Karlstrom met him with a firm handshake as he entered, and shepherded him to the chair in front of the desk which was only marginally less splendid than the one in the Oval Office.

'Sorry to spoil your lunch, but I've got a tight schedule.

If you're hungry I can call you up a snack tray."

'No need, sir - but thank you." What was happening?

Steve could not remember Karlstrom ever apologising for anything.

'Okay. I'll get to it." Karlstrom leaned forward and laid his hands carefully on the desktop. 'I just want to explain that little exchange we had last night. That put-down over Clearwater was purely for Commander Franklynne's benefit. You, unfortunately, were the meat in the grinder. I felt it necessary to explain that personally, and to reaffirm your standing within this organisation.

We still regard you as a key player."

'Thank you, sir." Boy! thought Steve. This really is a snakepit! He laid on some clear-eyed sincerity. 'I'm grateful for this opportunity to see you, sir, because there's something I think you ought to know.

Commander Franklynne was visited by Cadillac while she was held at Sara-kusa and ' 'He gave her information that she intends to use to discredit me."

'Yes, sir. She didn't tell me what it was, but I think it could be related to that problem we talked over last year in Cloudlands. About The Lady from Louisiana."

Karlstrom nodded and sat back. 'I remember it well.

And you're right on the button. Your bed-mate has already paid me a visit and threatened to make trouble if I don't fall into line on certain sensitive issues."

'And can she...?"

'She has no hard evidence to support her claim. We could argue that Cadillac's motive in saying what he did was to create internal dissension - and thus wreak more damage on the Federation." Karlstrom settled deeper into his chair, steepled his fingers and tapped them thoughtfully against his chin. 'But if you, for example, were to tell her what you told

The surprises were never-ending. 'Finger the organisation...?"

'Think about it. Apart from the wing-men who were already airborne, you're the only survivor. And you're the only man who was on The Lady when those explosions occurred - and lived to tell the tale. That makes you a key witness."

'But ' 'Just reveal your suspicions, Brickman. About the nature and force of the explosions and your conclusions as to how the material may have fallen into the wrong hands. What you do not tell her is that you actually found the M'Calls' cache of PX, dets and one-oh-eights and let it slip through your fingers. She knows you're not perfect but there's no need to give the impression she's working with an idiot. Just feed her enough to make her feel that (a) she's got a hot lead on this story, and (b) she has you in her pocket."

'And then what?"

Karlstrom threw up his hands. 'Let's see where it takes US."

When the right moment came, and Fran's head lay close to his on the pillow, Steve rolled over to bring his mouth close to her ear, and whispered the poisoned words as per instructions. The cumulative effect on Fran was almost orgasmic - lending substance to the saying that power is the ultimate aphrodisiac. She kissed him fiercely, hugged him to the point of suffocation then leapt out of bed to send a video-gram to her father.

Theodore Bulloch Jefferson. Known to his friends and enemies as 'Bull'.

The following weekend, Steve found himself crossing the railyard towards Bull Jefferson's personal train. A 4-6-2 loco and tender hauling three luxury coaches and a long guard's van that housed the Mute staff and a kitchen capable of providing three meals a day for the passengers.

Steve pointed to the flatcar that was hitched to the front buffers of the loco. 'What's that for?"

Fran threw him an odd look. 'In case of accidents." She exchanged familiar greetings with the driver and firemen as they passed the cab.

Both wore Union hats and striped bib overalls and were clearly having a great time.

'They family?"

'Yes." Fran stopped as she reached the steps to the centre wagon.

'They're both cousins. Not everyone's crazy about trains, but those that are take turns to man the footplate." She grasped the side rails and climbed in.

'Come on - time to meet Dad."

Steve - who had been steeling himself for this moment since the meeting had been announced - took a deep breath and followed.

Fran had already explained that the coaches were fitted out in a style inspired by the furnishings of the white colonial mansions. They were

certainly different to the harsh functionality of the wagon-trains.

The centre carriage was one big room with a conference table and chairs at one end, deep buttoned leather banquettes and comfortable armchairs at the other, and there was even a small counter with decanters of wine and glasses racked on the wall behind. The floor was carpeted and the walls panelled with polished wood which rose to meet an ornately carved cornice. Two shallow crystal light bowls hung from the white ceiling, and there were smaller fittings on the walls between the brocade curtains that fringed the six large windows.

The antique decor contrasted oddly with the clothes of the occupants, who were dressed in open-necked camouflage fatigues, or silver-grey jumpsuits - like Steve and Fran. The only difference was that most people on board appeared to be two-, three- and four-star generals.

Everybody looked round but only Bull Jefferson rose from the head of the table as Fran ushered Steve in. He wasn't overly tall but he had broad shoulders and looked fit and strong. A tough customer with a bullet-headed crewcut going grey at the temples and a deceptively pleasant smile.

'Hello, honey -' Bull gave his daughter a shoulder pat and friendly peck on the cheek.

'Dad- this is Captain Brickman."

Two deep-set grey eyes drilled into Steve like lasers as he stiffened into a salute.

'Pleased to meet you, son. It's Steve - right?"

'Yes, sir!" He'd always fancied he had a strong grip, but Bull's handshake was a real bone-crusher.

'Welcome aboard." He turned to the only other captain in the room.

'Tell Torn we're ready to roll."

The captain left. Bull introduced Steve to the other top brass around the table and each one rose in turn to greet him with a brief handshake.

The three most important were: John Adams Jefferson, Commander-in-Chief of the Wagon-Train Division -CINC-TRAIN himself. The top Trail-Blazer; Andrew Jackson Jefferson, C-in-C Military Engineering Division - whose men actually built and serviced the wagon-trains, and Zachary Taylor Jefferson, current Head of the Design Bureau of MED - which had originally created the wagon-train and was still engaged in a rolling programme of modifications and improvements.

And they were all related to Bull. John Adams was a brother; the other two were cousins.

Bull steered Steve into the seat at the opposite end of the table where everyone could see him, and resumed his place with Fran immediately to his left. 'Okay, Steve. I've got the gist of your story from Fran, but I'd like to hear it again in your own words." He saw Steve's reaction. 'You have my assurance that nothing you say here today will get back to AMEXICO.

Y'understand?"

'Yes, sir." The train started with a series of jerks as the couplings tightened and the buffers collided, then it moved slowly out of the railyard.

'Okay. Take us through it from where you put Clearwater on Red River to the action on board The Lady - and don't miss out what you told Fran about the explosives."

Steve gave them what they wanted, editing the story so that he was no longer the prime mover for the attack on Red River. As he now told it, the idea to draw the Mutes into a rescue attempt had come from Karlstrom to Malone and his renegades. He was merely the hardworking go-between building on the links he had already forged with the M'Calls. Links which were now fragile because Cadillac was no longer sure he could be trusted.

He re-lived the moment when he and 'Malone' reached the train, seconds before the M'Calls launched their attack with a series of explosions that had immobilised The Lady and crippled its defensive systems, and took his audience up to the time when he had been flown off on Karlstrom's orders to Red River, while The Lady's crew made a last desperate effort to hold back the invading horde of Mutes. And he

repeated his suspicions about the type of explosives that had been used in the attack and where they might have come from.

When he finished, his hosts exchanged thoughtful glances and muttered amongst themselves. Outside the windows, the overground stretched away into the distance, muted tints of grey, brown and yellow under a pale wintry sky.

Steve sat there, not knowing whether they were going to turn on him and expose his duplicity before throwing him under the train, or award him a Gold Merit Star. But nobody tore into him. Fran sent a 'Well Done' signal with her eyes, and Bull's aide asked him if he'd like a drink.

Steve asked for a KornGold - a tangy synthetic orange-flavoured cordial.

The generals ordered the more potent Southern Comfort and stood up to stretch their legs.

Nobody in the wagon appeared to have the slightest suspicion that there was a murderer sitting in their midst. Someone who had helped slaughter Hartmann and his execs - Buck McDonnell and the others - in an unforgivable but necessary act of betrayal. Talking about it again had made Steve wonder how he managed to sleep at night with so much blood on his hands. The blood of friends as well of enemies

Bull heightened the colour in his cheeks with a generous shot of grain alcohol, and laid his folded arms on the table. 'Thank you, son. We appreciate your frankness in this matter. Let me give you some more background on why we asked you to come on this ride. And this too is strictly between us, okay?'

'Absolutely, sir.'

'Last spring, CINC-TRAIN had a mutiny on their hands. Yeah, I know what you're thinking - inconceivable.

The crews called it a protest, but technically it was a mutiny." He motioned John Adams to take up the story.

'Only Red River stayed in line. Basically what they wanted was official recognition that there was such a thing as Mute magic. But they also demanded a relaxation in certain disciplinary measures - the removal of ASE's from all trains, and elimination of judicial sanctions against crews who failed to achieve their operational targets.

'The protest was quiet, orderly, contained within the division and the whole thing was settled inside forty-eight hours with the aid of a closed-circuit video address by the P-G. As to whether or not any of the concessions we made were justified is immaterial. The point is, demands were made and - more importantly - this whole thing blew up without warning. Internal security totally failed to pick up on this.

You can imagine how this made us look."

Yeah, thought Steve. Like a bunch of Bull cut in. 'One of the demands was for the reinstatement of the executive officers of The Lady, led by your old boss, Commander Hartmann. It went against the grain but we agreed - and that put us in an even bigger hole when AMEXICO decided to use The Lady as a decoy."

'And dressed her up as Red River ' 'That's right. We ain't never gonna know how those M'Call Mutes managed to get close enough to plant those explosives under that wagon-train but if Hartmann's crew had been on the ball it could never have happened. That night watch must have been sleepin' on the job. That's the only answer. Whichever way it was, it pointed up even further the woeful state of on-board discipline. It wasn't just sloppy. It was criminally fuggin' negligent!

Okay, so they paid the price - but once again it's CINC-TRAIN who ends up holding the bag - for a decision made by Karlstrom and the PG!

'But that isn't all!" continued Bull. He pointed to his cousins.

'Andrew here oversees the construction of our wagon-trains and Zach is in charge of the Design Bureau. Those explosions didn't just cripple The Lady, they showed up every design fault and constructional weakness of the current model and damn near blew these boys' careers away!

Right, Zack?"

'Yehh! Only it wasn't through lack of foresight on our part! The prototypes were built way before my time, but there's nothing in the original specifications about making the wagons capable of withstanding explosive charges."

'Right,' growled Andrew Jackson, C-in-C Engineering.

'There's plenty of people bad-mouthing us now, but none of them ever mentioned it before. It has never been an operational requirement!

Hell, as far as any of us knew, we were up against a bunch of half-naked boneheads armed with knives and crossbows!" Steve nodded sympathetically. 'On the other hand, sir, this wasn't the first explosive strike against a wagon-train.

Cadillac blew up the flight car of The Lady in the previous year."

'I agree,' said Zack. 'But that was an internal explosion in a particularly sensitive area. If on-board security had been tighter and if the fire doors had been closed - as they should have ' 'But they weren't!" roared Bull. 'And that's why Hartmann and his execs were relieved of their command and tossed in the slammer - only to be reinstated by that sonofabitch Karlstrom so's he could play one of his silly fuggin' games!"

He fixed his eyes on Steve. 'You've probably figured out why I'm so fired up by what you told us. The loss of The Lady from Louisiana has dropped everybody round this table into deep shit and it was Karlstrom who put us there! We got the P-G and the rest of the Supreme Council accusing our family of letting things slide, but the fact is none of this would have happened if that slimebag hadn't handed a batch of lethal, ordinance to the Mutes on a plate!" 'With respect, sir, it would be convenient to shift the blame for everything onto Commander-General Karlstrom, but it wouldn't be fair. Some of the responsibility is mine. If I'd managed to capture Cadillac and Mr Snow - which is what I was sent out to do- The Lady would not have been destroyed."

'Well that does you credit, son. But these Mutes turned out to be a .lot smarter than anyone bargained for. If Karlstrom had told you right from the outset that the decoy unit was carrying live explosives you might have been able to get on top of the situation. But you were kept in the dark. As it happened, we didn't come out of it too badly.

We may have ended up with our buns in a vice, but we did get rid of Mr Snow - and you brought in Clearwater. She turned out to be a prize and a half.

'Having said that, you're probably wondering why we swapped her for Commander Franklynne. Well, it wasn't because she was my daughter.

The Family are prepared to make the same sacrifices we demand from everyone else." Bull reached out and gave Fran's hand a fatherly pat.

'She knows that if it was her life against the future of the Federation, I'd face the pain of losing her. Hell, if I wanted her wrapped in cotton wool, would I have let her go to Ne-Issan?"

'I guess not, sir."

'Damn right. We made the swap because Clearwater had become surplus to requirements. The guys in the research labs would have loved to have had her as a specimen, but we've got something much more valuable - her baby."

Steve took another chance and played dumb. 'But they were both exchanged for -' 'You're wrong." Bull grinned. 'She was given another boy in the delivery room. We have her son. Your son, Steven. And like you, he's no ordinary baby. Know what I'm getting at?"

'uhh, no sir."

Bull glanced at his kin-folk sitting around the table as if seeking their approval for what came next. 'It really cuts me up to see how some of our people are treated.

Guys like you put your life on the line for the Federation, and end up being cheated by those they serve. By people like Karlstrom and, yes my brother - who talk about trust and loyalty and then sell their dog-soldiers down the river.

'I'm going to share a secret with you that they wouldn't trust you with. A secret which is yours by right!" Bull paused then said: 'We have reason to believe your son is Talisman. The child-saviour the Plainfolk have been waiting for."

Steve's jaw dropped. His surprise was totally genuine.

Everything was starting to drop into place. Clearwater had not been shedding tears over Sand-Wolf, but for the child the Federation had taken from her. Lucas... Had she known who he was?

'I won't go into the whys and wherefores,' said Bull, 'but it all lines up with the Prophecy, and is confirmed by the medical evidence. We got him, Steve - and you gave him to us. That's gonna earn you a place in the history archives.'

Steve gestured in surrender. 'This is all kind of, y'know overwhelming. I just had no idea.' He ran his eyes around the table and came back to Bull. 'Will I be able to see him, sir?'

'Sure, all in good time. Don't worry - he's in safe hands. One thing you can be sure of, he's gonna get the best of everything - and that's what we want you to have too.'

Bull took hold of Fran's hand again and squeezed it

affectionately.

'Now you know how much Karlstrom trusts you. Don't blame my brother.

He listens to the wrong people. And if I'm not wrong, Karlstrom has probably tried to poison your mind against Fran here.

Am I right?"

'Well, sin ' 'Yeah. He probably said you were just the latest of a long line of jack-dandies that got the heave-ho every six months. Is that near the mark.?"

Steve looked at Fram 'Something like that, yes."

'Well it's not true,' said Bull. 'No point in pretending my daughter was tempted by the fact you were a handsome young buck, but we both knew you were also intelligent, resourceful and brave."

Steve accepted this accolade with a modest shrug.

'Fran has kept tabs on you and Roz for several years.

She's been your Controller. Now that may sound sinister but it isn't.

Controllers look after the people we regard as "special". Watch over them - protect them." Bull grinned. 'She's the last of a long line.

You and your late kin-sister have been on the Special Treatment List since Day One. It's all down in the file, Steve - and we both like the way it adds up.

'This may embarrass you, in front of all these folk, but contrary to what that slime-ball has said, she has deep and genuine feelings for you, son."

'I've become aware of that, sir." :eve made eye-contact with Fran again. There was complicity in her regard, but not the heart-warming feedback he got from Clearwater.

Bull noted the exchange. 'Did you know she wants to pair off with you.?"

'Beg pardon, sir.?"

Bull laughed at Steve's bafflement. 'You know what a pairing-off party is, don't you?"

'Yes, sir. It's where potential guard-mothers and fathers meet and then, if they hit it off, they take out a co-habitation bond."

'Right - but in the Family, it's called "marriage". The man and woman become husband and wife - father and mother to their children. I'm not Fran's guard-father, I'm her natural father. That's something else which sets us apart from our soldier-citizens We can reproduce our own kind - like you, son."

Yeahh, and I know why. Because you're all super-straightts

Bull continued: 'The First Family is a collection of families, united by one dream - the conquest of the blue-sky world and the restoration of America. Our America - good, honest and true - swept clean of striped lump-heads and yellow trash. But although we share the same

dream, some of us believe the wrong people are in charge of the train and that if we just stand by and do nothin' it could come off the rails. Know what I mean?"

'Yes, sir ' 'That's why we'd like you to join us. A man in my position needs people around him he can trust- and after the way Karlstrom has treated you, I reckon you'd like to feel you were among people you could rely on."

'Yes, sir."

'So how about it - would you like to marry my daughter?"

'I-I-I... don't know what to say, sir!" The prospect was absolutely staggering. Appalling.

'Try saying "yes"!" snapped Bull. 'I don't offer a deal like this to every trouser-snake that comes along!" 'Dad!" cried Fran. 'Give him time to catch his breath!" 'I-I'd, uhh- be honoured, sir! If your daughter believes I can make her happy, then I'd like nothing better than an opportunity to prove that she made the right choice.

She has ... come to mean a great deal to me too, sir."

'A great deal more than you know, son. You're looking at the next President-General. As my son-in-law, that's gonna put you in the line-up. Twenty to thirty years from now, it could all be yours."

Steve nodded. 'Sir, you must, uhh - excuse me if I seem to be reacting like a stumble-bum. Getting hit with

Talisman, then a possible marriage and now this, well ... it's one helluva lot to take on board."

'Sure. There are a couple of problems, tho'. If you marry my daughter it will mean changing your name to Jefferson."

Steve managed a smile. 'I think I can live with that.

And the other one?"

'Commander-General Karlstrom.

He's the real stumbling-block."

'Why is that, sir?"

'Because he's the other candidate for the big chair in the Oval Office when my brother hands in his card. He's a threat to my future and yours."

Steve was conscious that all eyes were upon him. 'And you'd like me to help remove that threat?"

Bull slapped the table happily. 'Now we're talking, Stevie! Now we're talking!' He addressed one of his aides. 'Get John in here."

The aide got up and walked past Steve into the next carriage, returning a short while later with another man wearing a silver-grey jumpsuit.

Bull invited him to sit in the chair vacated by the aide. It took a few seconds for Steve to realise the newcomer had played a key role in his past.

It was John Chisum. The mysterious medic and parttime fixer, supplier of black-jack tapes and rainbow grass, owner of fake ID cards and the Provo's friend. The same man who had proved so helpful to him on his arrival in Grand Central after his return to the Federation in chains.

The man who had boosted his morale during his trial before the Board of Assessors - chaired by Fran

The man who had set up a secret meeting with Roz in Santanna Deep before his transfer to the A-Levels where they'd last met and almost come to blows after Chisum had blamed her for bringing about his demotion.

And all the time he had been working as an undercover agent for Fran his Controller - and probably her father too. Steve felt sick. Where did it all end?

Bull Jefferson smiled. 'I can see from your face there's no need to introduce you. John's one of us."

Chisum half-rose and reached across the table. 'Just doing my job. No hard feelings I hope."

'Of course not,' said Bull, as Steve took the offered hand without rancour. 'This boy here is another master of deception. He conned his way in and out of the Plainfolk, then in and out of Ne-Issan after blowin' half of it sky-high.

An' it was his contacts there who helped get him and Fran out of prison

- and undoubtedly saved her life."

'That's very generous of you, sir."

Bull's smile vanished. 'You misjudge me, son. I reward loyalty and endeavour, but I'm not a generous or a forgiving man. If I thought you'd connived in some way with Karlstrom to destroy The Lady from Louisiana and put my kin-folk in the dock, I'd personally shove you feet-first into the fire-box of the loco that's haulin' this train."

'Dad! Don't you dare accuse -' 'That's okay, ma'am. I'm happy to say my conscience is clear on that one. But I get the message."

Bull eyed him shrewdly. 'Only there's still something' bothering you ' 'Yes, sir. I took an oath of allegiance to the President-General.

I'm willing to help you in any way I can, but before this conversation goes any further I have to tell you I couldn't do anything that would go against that."

'Well said, son. Let me put your mind at rest. By helping us to nail Karlstrom, you won't be betraying the President-General. You'll be rescuing him! AMEXICO's been bamboozling my brother for years! He thinks it's one hundred per cent behind him,' but he's wrong!

Karlstrom's organisation is working against the rest of us!

He's turned it into his personal springboard to power!" 'I see, well.

then I don't have a problem, sir."

'Attaboy!" Bull turned to Chisum. 'Did you bring that gizmo with you?"

'Yes, sir." Chisum produced a flat rectangular box not much bigger than two video-cassettes placed on top of

one another. He placed it on the table in front of Steve.

'This is a portable tape-streamer. Battery-driven. It can record a hundred megabytes of information in fifty seconds. What we want you to do is to plug it into one of AMEXICO's computer terminals, call up certain information from their data-base and copy it onto the tape.

Once it's plugged in, it's just a matter of pressing buttons. I'll show you how to attach the unit to a standard terminal before you leave the train."

'You've got a computer on the train?!" Chisum laughed. 'Can you think of a safer place?"

Steve turned the box this way and that and thought it over. 'Isn't there some way we can access this data from the outside?"

'No,' said Chisum. 'The data we want to get at is held on a sealed system. AMEXICO's communications with the outside world is handled by an entirely separate network."

'But aren't all these computers part of the system controlled by COLUMBUS?"

'Yes, they are- but it's not as simple as that. That name - COLUMBUS is misleading. It makes it sound like one massive box of flashing lights and steaming microchips, when in fact there are hundreds of boxes each one dedicated to performing a particular function.

'It's known as the controlling intelligence of the Federation, but don't think of it as a brain - think of it as being the equivalent to the complete central nervous system regulating the bodily functions of the Federation as well as reasoning, calculating and remembering. And just as doctors can use drugs to prevent pain-bearing messages from reaching the brain, AMEXICO has rendered COLUMBUS partially insensitive to its presence."

'That's pretty damn clever. What d'you want me to look for?"

'Well, in the first instance, we want you to copy off the list of files, programs and any special routines held on the data-base. Once we've had time to analyse that, we'll get down to specifics."

'Okay, but what about access? If this is a secure system, it's not going to hand over this data to just anybody."

'You're right,' said Fran, breaking her uncharacteristic silence.

'We're going to give you a copy of Karlstrom's personal ID card and his personal verifications codes."

'Jeezuss!" exclaimed Steve. 'When you guys get into something, you don't mess around! How d'you manage that ? I' 'With great difficulty,' said Chisum.

'So are you ready to do your bit, son?" asked Bull.

'Yes, sir. I feel a whole lot easier in my mind now I know I'm working for the A-Team."

Bull slapped the table with his powerful hands. 'Atta-boy!" Chisum picked up the tape-streamer. 'C'mon next door. I'll show you how to

work this gizmo."

Bull Jefferson acknowledged Steve's salute and watched him exit with Chisum. As the door closed on them he turned to Fran. 'Y'know something? Marryin' that boy ain't really such a bad idea. Ambitious young stud, from a good stable. Could do a lot worse."

Fran greeted the suggestion with a scornful laugh.

As he emerged from the Simulation Room, after another day-long session of computerised war-games, Steve was intercepted by one of AMEXICO's female staff-officers and taken via a backstairs route to Karlstrom's office.

Karlstrom introduced the senior officer who rose to meet Steve as he was ushered in. 'This is Torn McFadden, Deputy-Director of AMEXICO."

'How d'you do, sir."

'And your escort was Jo-Anne Casey. One of his assistants."

'Ma'am." AMEXICO's addiction to secrecy required all staff to remove the Velcro name-tags from their uniforms while working within its sealed headquarters.

Karlstrom left his imposing desk and invited everyone to take one of the armchairs set around a low table in

a corner of the room. Jo-Anne poured out cups of Java from a heated jug and handed them round.

'So... did you enjoy the train ride?'

'Yes, sir. It was very instructive. Gave me a chance to see how the other half lives.'

'And what exactly do they want you to do in exchange for the Commander's fair hand?' Karlstrom smiled as he saw the question hit home. 'Just a lucky guess. It would be counter-productive to bug the train.'

'And next to impossible,' said McFadden. 'It's swept for bugs every time it goes out and their security screen is tighter than a gnat's ass.'

Steve turned to Karlstrom. 'So how did you know they'd made me an offer I couldn't refuse?'

'I'll ask the questions, Brickman.'

Steve gave them a blow-by-blow account of his meeting with Bull Jefferson, but concealed his knowledge of the facts surrounding his son's birth. Karlstrom pulled and pinched his nose - which was no doubt the reason why it was long and thin. The others just sat back and listened.

As he neared the end of his account, Steve produced the tape streamer device and pushed it across the table.

Karlstrom gave it a cursory glance then passed it on to Casey and McFadden.

'My first job is to pull out the list of files and programmes held on AMEXICO's data-base. And they've provided me with a copy of your ID card and your access codes, sir.'

'Fine.' Karlstrom stifled a yawn. 'Give them whatever they want.'

Steve couldn't believe it. 'But, sir - ?!' Karlstrom snapped back to life. 'Brickman! How many times do I have to tell you? The world doesn't revolve around you! This is a big organisation! At any one time we're running a hundred field-ops and scams like this.'

Maybe not at this level, I grant you, but we know what we're doing.

'It was only a matter of time before Bull Jefferson tried to get a foot in the door; Everything's set up. They're going to get a long list of files and programmes - but it won't include everything and you won't get it all on this.'

Karlstrom picked up the tape-streamer and passed it across to Steve.

'You'll need several bites at the cherry. Which is good, because we need to put certain counter-measures in place. So spin it out over the next few months, and build in some suspense. Make them appreciate the effort you're making. The danger, the difficulties, the constant fear of discovery - you know the kind of thing. If you get stuck, Jo-Anne will provide you with a scenario - and she will also be your contact from now on. She'll give you the details of a video-terminal you call up when you need to make contact.' He stood up. 'That clear?'

Steve jumped to attention. 'Yes, sir!" 'Good. Well done." Karlstrom skirted the table and gripped Steve's left arm briefly. It was the first informal physical contact he'd ever made, and its warmth took Steve by surprise.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Clearwater's return in exchange for Fran gave Cadillac an immense amount of satisfaction. It could not have been achieved without Roz's help, but if he had not ignored her initially scornful reaction to the idea, Clearwater and her child would still have been prisoners of the Federation. Knowing that he had also stolen a feather from Steve's cap made him feel even better.

All his rival had to do now was save himself- assuming he still wanted to. In the past Steve's true motives had been open to question, but Cadillac was now more than ready to give him the benefit of the doubt.

Roz's unshakeable faith in her kin-brother and the conciliatory mood of his last meeting with Brickman, had caused him to take a hard look at himself. For the first time in his life, he was now able to admit that his own peculiar blend of pride, arrogance, insecurity and vaulting ambition had been the root cause of much of the trouble between them.

The destruction of The Lady from Louisiana and Roz's arrival had marked a new beginning, a chance to remake himself from the inside out. And despite the occasional twinge of jealousy, Cadillac had made remarkable progress. In expressing the hope that Steve would find a way to rejoin them, he was being perfectly sincere.

Steve was, after all, the fourth Chosen One. Despite the arguments and the bitterness they had proved they could work together in the past and they would do so again.

Only this time their relationship would be on a different footing. The sheer brilliance with which he had conceived and executed the plan to destabilise Ne-Issan would force his longtime detractor to accept him as an equal.

At the beginning of their relationship when they had used bits and pieces salvaged from wrecked Skyhawks to build the powered hang-glider on which Steve had then taught him to fly, there had been a period of real rapport.

It was Steve's involvement with Clearwater which had sown the seeds of distrust. In the interval between that painful episode and now, Cadillac had come to understand that the betrayal - in which his ex-soulmate had been a willing accessory - was part of a larger pattern of events; a pre-destined step along The Path which had led to Clearwater's journey into the Federation and the appearance of his true life-partner - Roz.

Bringing the four of them together was more than a question of simple symmetry. Despite the bitter words that had passed between them, Steve was the only close male companion - apart from Mr Snow - that Cadillac had ever had. The 'otherness' of his straight-boned body and unblemished skin, and the fact he had been chosen as the next wordsmith of the M'Calls, had always distanced him from his clan-brothers. They had shown respect for his status, but his peer group had cruelly mocked his appearance as a child and later, on entering manhood, they had treated him with benign disdain for not being a true warrior.

Brickman had been no better, but in a different, more exciting way.

Having expressed his gratitude for being pulled from the burning wreckage of his Skyhawk, he had proceeded to show him absolutely no

respect at all.

He had challenged every assumption, questioned every decision, demanded endless explanations - and had even muscled in on his own pupil-teacher relationship with Mr Snow.

Cadillac had borne all this - though not always nobly because he regarded Brickman as his intellectual equal.

A stimulating companion and thorn in his side, whose own courage and daring had set the standard by which he now measured himself. The loving partnership with Roz had given him a new assurance and sense of completeness, but there was still a gap which only Steve could fill: the deep-seated bond between male warriors who have faced danger and death together.

A similar bond united Roz and Clearwater. A bond which went far beyond the spoken word. They were soul-sisters, twin spirits united in mind and body by a shared destiny and the pain and joy of motherhood.

Clearwater had given birth to a child she would never see, the dark star whose life-task was to destroy the Federation from within, and now Roz carried the other half of this cosmic equation, Talisman, the Shining One, who would become the saviour of the Plainfolk.

For the moment, this knowledge was theirs alone.

Cadillac did not know that Roz was pregnant, or that Sand-Wolf was not Clearwater's true son. Which was just as well, because he had more than enough to occupy his mind - namely when they should leave Ne-Issan, what they should demand by way-of payment, and how they should deal with any attempt by the YamaShita to double-cross them.

Given the services they had rendered to the YamaShita, they should have been able to sleep easily in their beds, but Cadillac did not wholly trust their hosts, or any dead-face for that matter. His familiarity with their language and customs had enabled him to detect a subtle shift in their hosts' demeanour since returning with their grisly trophies from the Summer Palace, and it had made him realise - more forcibly than ever the unbridgeable gulf that lay between Iron Master and Mute.

They might have made him an honorary samurai, but it was nothing more than a convenient device to circumvent protocol and facilitate face-to-face discussions on how to remove the Shogun. In all other respects, he, Roz and Clearwater were still regarded as non-persons.

The Iron Masters' sense of superiority did not flow from their territorial conquests or their social preeminence.

It sprang from an inner certitude, and was so deeply engrained in their psyche, it could not be eradicated by a military defeat. When the Plainfolk finally became a nation and their warriors swept into the Eastern Lands to liberate the Lost Ones, the Iron Masters would die with a contemptuous sneer on their lips rather than submit.

It was a pity. Putting his taste for sake on one side, there were many positive and pleasureable aspects to Iron Master society that he was loth to abandon.

Unfortunately, the same could not be said for Clearwater and Roz. Both were anxious to return to the Plainfolk, and the combined pressure was irresistible. After spending weeks in alien environments in constant danger of one kind or another, they longed for the moment when they could let their minds relax and their guard drop - secure in the knowledge that they were among their own kind. Flying north with Sand-Wolf, knowing that she would soon be gaining her freedom, had been a wonderful moment for Clearwater. No one had told her she was to be handed over to the Yama-Shita family at the borders of Ne-Issan.

Finding herself a house-guest in the Sarakusa Palace had been the second unpleasant surprise.

In setting up the exchange, Cadillac had completely overlooked the possibility that someone might recognise Clearwater as the 'white witch' who had killed Lord Hirohito Yama-Shita and dozens of his compatriots at the Heron Pool, just as Lord Min-Orota had eventually seen through his own disguise.

Karlstrom had provided her with a set of body dyes and a spare pair of hands to transform herself back into a painted Mute before leaving the Federation,-but this had merely compounded the danger because her skin markings now matched those she had carried on her first visit to Ne-Issan. It was only after Clearwater had voiced her concern that Cadillac made all the connections and realised he had seen officials in the palace who had been part of the original reception committee which had grilled them before passing them on to Lord Min-Orota.

Officials who had seen Clearwater painted up just as she was now

The flight from Wyoming to the domain of the YamaShita had taken place over two years ago, but in view of what had happened afterwards, this particular set of Iron

Masters were unlikely to forget. If just one of them made the connection, or Lord Min-Orota decided to drop in to offer his congratulations, it could make life extremely complicated.

But not dangerous. Despite the nail-biting uncertainty attached to summoning, the combined power of Roz and Clearwater over mind and matter made them virtually invulnerable to any form of violence.

Cadillac's optimistic assessment of their situation was shortlived.

Clearwater made it quite plain that he need not expect any awe-inspiring displays of earth-magic from her while she was carrying a babe-in-arms or from Roz- who chose that moment to tell Cadillac he was going to be a father.

It was up to him to protect his brood, and the best way to do that was to take them home. Now.

Unbeknown to Cadillac, their principal host, Aishi Saki-moto, Acting Regent of the Yama-Shita, was working on the same problem. He and the other leading members of the family had wanted the Shogun and the Lord Chamberlain removed, but their pleasure was marred by a lingering dissatisfaction which stemmed from the fact that the murders had been engineered by grass-monkeys - albeit with their full support and the direct involvement of Lord Min-Orota.

Even though it was Yoritomo who had killed Ieyasu, and Lady Mishiko who had poisoned her brother, the knowledge that it was Cadillac who had removed the Shogun's head left several members of the family council feeling that the honour of the nobility had been besmirched.

Witchcraft might have achieved what a brave and selfless band of samurai could not, but in their eyes, it was an unwholesome and unacceptable way of achieving power which demeaned the warrior ethic and should not be pursued further.

Sakimoto himself was privately unrepentant. The deed had been done and not one of the 'purists' now expressing reservations had raised this issue before the Mute witches had been despatched. What they wanted was to have their cake and eat it, but Sakimoto - who did not enjoy the same autocratic power as his predecessor - could not afford to alienate them by pointing this out.

To maintain the unity needed to win the war against the Toh-Yota, he agreed to dispense with the services of Cadillac and Rain-Dancer forthwith, and reduce the lavish reward they had been promised to a minimum.

All of which was easier said than done. The friendly demonstration of the grass-monkeys' magic had been alarming enough. What hellish creations might they unleash if they became angry?

With Clearwater and Roz demanding action, Cadillac knew he had to move fast, but it was becoming increasingly difficult to cut through the swathe of officials and gain an audience with Sakimoto. The Regent, who blamed the current civil unrest for his unavailability, was always courteous and deeply apologetic for the brevity of their meetings, but kept evading the question of the promised reward each time it was raised. Cadillac realised he was being given the runaround but he was determined not to leave empty-handed.

Removing the Shogun and Ieyasu had not been the only reason for coming to Ne-Issan, but it was the stunning success of that venture which now

hindered his hopes of concluding an agreement on trade and cooperation between the Yama-Shita and the She-Kargo.

Aishi Sakimoto repeatedly assured him of the family's desire to maintain trade-links with the Plainfolk, but explained that the bulk of their energies and resources were now being poured into the armed conflict with the Toh-Yota and the handful of domain-lords who had rallied to their defence.

The giant wheel-boats used on the Great Lakes trading expeditions were needed to ferry troops and to act as mobile gun-platforms in the river war now being fought along the navigable length of the Hudson, and around the island garrisons - such as Manatana,

Sta-tana and Govo-nasa that controlled access to the sea, to Aron-Giren and the coastal domains further south.

Sakimoto also pointed out - with a remarkable lack of rancour - that the present shortage of suitable vessels had been aggravated by the loss of five large wheel-boats at the hands of the She-Kargo. He accepted Cadillac's assurance that he and his two female companions had taken no part in that particular battle, but - as his honoured guest 'must surely understand - there could be no further trading expeditions until those vessels had been replaced and the present conflict had been resolved.

In other words, 'don't call us, we'll call you!' Cadillac knew the Regent was bluffing. The Yama-Shita were pretending they didn't need the business in the hope of wringing concessions from the Plainfolk.

The family needed to trade; opening up the Great Lakes route to the Western Lands had boosted their wealth and power.

But they could afford to wait - and get even at the same time. Having squeezed the Mutes dry for years, they had a layer of fat to live off until their raggedy-assed clients became so desperate, they'd cut each other's throats in order to be first in line to do a deal.

Just like it was before

It didn't seem a good time to tell Sakimoto that the new Plainfolk Council had decided to shift the trading post inland to Sioux Falls, or that from now on barter rates on all goods would be fixed collectively by the Plainfolk and - best of all - none of the clans in the She-Kargo faction would be sending any more journey-men down the river to fill the slave compounds and the dreaded Fire Pits of Beth-Lem

It was a frustrating time, but Cadillac refused to give up, and finally managed to pin Sakimoto down on the question of the reward and the provision of a suitable conveyance to take them to Du-Aruta. Sakimoto promised to do his utmost to find a seaworthy vessel- not easy in these troubled times. As for the reward, Cadillac should submit a list of goods which, in his estimation, would be fair recompense for his praiseworthy efforts.

The list, added Sakimoto, should not be too large, since it would only be a small boat.

Okay, thought Cadillac. If it's a list you want, that's what you're going to get

The next time he appeared before Aishi Sakimoto, Clearwater was at his side. They both knelt on the appointed spot, touched their foreheads to the floor then, as they sat back, Clearwater rekindled the blue-ice fire in her eyes and speared the mind of the unsuspecting Regent just as she had caught and controlled Nakane Tgh-Shiba, the Consul-General of Masa-chusa and Rodiren.

Sakimoto found himself seized with an overwhelming desire to grant these grass-monkeys whatever they wished. He tried to fight it off, and was struck with a blinding headache. Yes, yes, of course! What was he thinking of? He wanted to help them. It made him feel so much better! Two scribes? He sent one of his secretaries to fetch them.

The leading members of the family? An aide was despatched to summon all those within the precincts of the palace to the council chamber.

As they arrived, Clearwater transfixed each of them in turn with the same electrifying stare, leaving them with but one thought burning in their brain - to show their gratitude for what their honoured guests had achieved by an unmatched display of generosity.

Cadillac dictated the list of items they required, the scribes wrote them down one by one, the YamaShita family council nodded approvingly then added their signatures and seals to both copies

At the beginning of March, 2992, when the heavy rains unleashed by the eruption of Mount St Helens had given way to wind-driven snow, a hunting posse of San'Paul Mutes from the Clan Shawnessee were alarmed to see a ghostly white wheel-boat moving across the Great River towards the site of the vanished trading post.

Those blessed with a vivid imagination took it to be a phantom vessel returning to collect the wandering souls of the dead-faces who had perished so far from home, but the boat was as real as the dark plume of smoke that gushed from its funnel then was torn to shreds by the keening wind. Its ghostly appearance was due to the fact that its decks and galleried superstructure were encrusted with snow and ice collected on the long journey from Bu-faro on Lake In.

Inside the boat, the huge cargo decks were packed from stem to stern with goods, animals and people.

The loading manifest, which ran to several pages, was akin to the one compiled by Noah for the ark. Ten stallions, fifty mares, twenty-five breeding pairs of oxen, a similar number of ox-carts, wheels and subassemblies to make a hundred handcarts, pigs, ducks, chickens, a small mountain of farm implements and tools ranging from adzes, anvils, augers, axes, brad awls, chisels, drills and hammers to lathes, mallets, picks, pincers, rakes, saws, spades, shovels and vices; various seed grains and vegetable plants, boxes of dried fish, sacks of rice; cooking pots, pans, nails, knives, needles, thread, buckles, bolts of woven cloth, straw matting, six hand looms, spindles, woollen yarn, dyes, rope, pulleys, chains, candles, tinderboxes, lengths of metal rod, angle iron and flat strip, finished timber; five hundred crossbows, several boxqoads of metal parts for assembling two thousand more on wooden stocks made by the Mutes themselves, five thousand cross-bow bolts, boxes of arrow and spear heads, et cetera, et cetera, and - the biggest prize of all - seven hundred and sixty-eight Mutes from She-Kargo, M'Waukee and San'Paul clans who had journeyed eastwards and had ended up as slaves in the Yama-Shita domain.

Their release had been Cadillac's proudest achievement.

The wheel-boat sent up the usual salvoes of green rockets to indicate its peaceable intentions, but the beach was deserted as the flat nose ran aground on the sloping shingle. From the wheel house perched on the roof of the top deck, there was no sign of last year's battle. The piles of bodies had been burned or picked clean by the death-birds; the wreckage of the five wheel-boats had been stripped by hordes of human scavengers and the remaining structures dismantled. Every plank, beam, pillar and bolt had been prised loose and carried away along with the cannon and roundshot by teams of sweating Mutes who recognised them as weapons of war, but did not know how to make them spit sky-fire and earth-thunder.

Cadillac had acquired that knowledge. He knew that the three ingredients of black powder could be found in Plainfolk territory, and that it was possible to grind and mix them by hand. The problem lay in the extraction process; obtaining worthwhile quantities required a degree of cooperation and organisation that was beyond the present capabilities of the Plainfolk.

They regarded themselves as warriors and hunters, not workers. If his own plans were to bear fruit, and Talisman was to forge them into a nation, the old ways would have to go, their entire lifestyle would have to change.

Dramatically

When the newly-liberated Mutes had unloaded the collection of goods and animals, the wheel-boat captain bade Cadillac a polite farewell and headed for home.

None of his fellow officers had returned from the last expedition, but he had heard the stories gathered by the out-stations from the stricken D'Troit and C'Natti clans. He and his crew had no wish to remain a minute longer than necessary on a lake which could throw up a murderous wall of water to the height of the surrounding hills.

Cadillac, Clearwater and Roz - all warmly wrapped against the cold watched the wheel-boat gather speed as it pulled away from the shore.

Around them, the liberated Mutes whooped and yelled, hugged one another and danced for joy.

Roz and Clearwater - who was carrying Sand-Wolf against her chest turned to Cadillac and gave him two fat kisses, one on each cheek.

'You're a genius,' said Roz lightly. 'But shouldn't there be someone here to meet us?'

'It's all under control,' said Cadillac. He interrupted the celebrations of the nearest group of Mutes and asked them to pass the word. Buffalo-Soldier was wanted.

Now.

'The warrior from the Clan Shawnessee?' asked Roz.

'That's right. Their turf is just south of here. We can stay there till the snow melts.'

'And then move on to Sioux Falls.'

'Yes. For the Plainfolk Council. It'd be crazy for us to go all the way to Wyoming in this weather then have to come all the way back again.'

Clearwater brushed a fleck of snow from Sand-Wolf's face, re-adjusted his hood, then surveyed the cheerful throng of Mutes who milled around them. 'Do you think they'll have room for all of us?'

Having got this far, Cadillac had no intention of letting the freed Mutes disperse. They, along with the goods and animals he had acquired, were a vital part of the triumphal entry he planned to make at the second Plainfolk Council. Despite his youth, he wanted to come away from that meeting as the leading policy-maker of the She-Kargo faction.

'We'll make our own room,' he said. 'We've got tents, poles, rolls of sailcloth, food - ' He broke off as Buffalo-Soldier appeared. Just the man I need.'

They both climbed up onto one of the ox-carts to get a clear view over the crowd. 'Now - where exactly do we go from here?'

Buffalo-Soldier cast a loving eye over the surrounding terrain. 'Many snows have fallen since I last stood here but that is the one thing I have not forgotten. The smell and the shape of this land is in my blood.' He pointed in the direction of his home turf. 'You will find my people beyond the third hill.'

As he spoke, the Shawnessee hunting party, who had been watching the proceedings from a safe distance, decided to send up a 'white arrow', a smoking tuft of grass tied to a crossbow bolt. It was the signal used when opposing groups of Mutes wished to parley.

Cadillac watched the trail of white smoke rise towards the dark grey blanket of cloud then curve down towards them. The Mutes clustered around him greeted it with the traditional cry of approval.

'Heyyyaaaghh!' Buffalo-Soldier leapt off the cart and darted forward to join several Mutes who were running towards the point where they expected the smoking arrow to land. When they got there, they formed a loose arc and stood with upturned faces as it fell towards them. The bolt buried its point in the snow-covered ground a few yards in front of where they stood, extinguishing the smouldering tuft of grass.

Cadillac waited expectantly as the Mutes clustered round it. They would be looking for the notches on the shank - the clan mark which established ownership.

Buffalo-Soldier gave a delighted whoop, grabbed the arrow and ran back towards the crowd, waving it excitedly in the air. 'Shawnessee, Shawnessee. Shawnessee!!' 'Heyy-yaaaghh!' The watching crowd of returnees gave a ragged shout as the hunting party rose into view and formed a line along the crest of a rise to the south of the landing beach. Each one raised an arm and displayed the open palm - the traditional sign of greeting.

The crowd responded. 'Heyy-yaaghh! Heyyyaaghh!--Heyyyaaghh!'

Cadillac looked down at Roz and Clearwater and turned on his modest 'man of the moment' smile.

'What did I tell you? Stick with me and you can't go wrong.'

Clearwater eyed Roz. 'I see what you mean.' Cadillac was becoming more and more like Steve. But not copying him. It was as if their two personalities were fusing together

In Sara-kusa, Aishi Sakimoto and the other leading members of the Yama-Shita family were still shaking their heads over their copy of Cadillac's shopping list.

The baffled whispers quickly became howls of rage and disbelief as the bills from outside suppliers started coming in and the abacus beads clicked to and fro under the nimble fingers of their accounting staff.

Day after day the cost of their largesse mounted inexorably, like a rising tide, and with it came the growing realisation they had been duped.

But how? What on earth, they asked each other, had persuaded them to do such a thing?! The Mute witches had made no threats, had conjured up no demons. They had been immensely grateful, and the family had been delighted to provide them with what they had asked for.

Everyone could remember the overwhelming feeling of joy as they waved goodbye to their guests from the dockside, but now that the euphoria had worn off they realised it was not at all what they had intended.

These damned grass-monkeys were supposed to have been dismissed with a flea in their ear - instead of which they had sailed away with an emperor's ransom!

At the second Plainfolk Council, Roz and Clearwater were content to let Cadillac steal the limelight. The freed Mutes were given a rapturous welcome from their clansmen; the animals, tools, weapons and other goods were shared out between the various bloodlines.

Everyone undertook to make weapons, but some clans were allotted specific tasks- the breeding of horses, oxen, pigs and poultry which would then be traded as their numbers grew; others took on the job of making carts and simple sailboats for use on the lakes and rivers. In the years to come, transportation and communications would play a key role in bringing and holding the Plainfolk together.

Striking the balance wasn't easy, but eventually a consensus was reached and no one was left feeling deprived. The plan was to build on the inter-clan trading that had proved so successful the previous year, but Cadillac proposed that from now on, bartering should be a year-round process. Delegations from each clan would still meet at the annual Plainfolk Council, but the venue should be changed from year to year. So far, these gatherings had managed to avoid the attention of 'arrowheads' from the Federation, but they could not expect to remain immune to attack from the air.

Cadillac also won the delegates' support for two other parts of his master plan: first, the setting up of a skills cadre, formed by the newly-returned Mutes. Aided by wordsmiths from the three bloodlines, they would draw together everything they had learned about animal husbandry, crop cultivation and the other occupations which had filled their working day. The wordsmiths would help to organise this information into a coherent body of knowledge, and the ex-slaves - who had already broken through the mental barriers that separated one clan from another - would become the first generation of itinerant teachers who would train others to pass on what they had learned, and so the process would be repeated until all the Plainfolk were versed in the 'New Ways'.

The second proposal involved the election of equal numbers of male and

female delegates to a permanent council which would travel around the territory held by the Plainfolk, visiting the various clans to bring them up to 'date with what was happening elsewhere, check on how they were progressing and settle any disputes that had arisen with their neighbours.

Cadillac knew that the changes he was trying to introduce were not going to bring peace and harmony overnight, but when the Second Council broke up and the delegations departed, he had every reason to feel satisfied with what had been accomplished. Best of all, he had established his authority and, despite his youth, had gained the respect previously accorded to his much-loved teacher, Mr Snow.

Through the late spring and summer, as Roz's child grew within her, and Sand-Wolf learned first to crawl, then attempted to take his first faltering steps, Clearwater was never far from her side. Both had now settled down to life with the Clan M'Kenzi, and had become firm friends of Magnum-Force, the clan's female wordsmith.

Cadillac, now heavily into his role as the first of The Chosen, was totally immersed in his twin tasks as head teacher and member of the roving Plainfolk Council.

Both took him away for weeks at a time, but he had promised faithfully that he would be at Roz's side during the last month of her pregnancy from mid-August to mid-September when the baby was due.

All the Plainfolk knew of the eruption - the word that the great mountain in the West had spoken with a tongue of flame had been passed around during the gathering at Sioux Falls. Everyone's expectations had been raised, but Cadillac still had no idea that the Sky Voices had told Roz she was carrying Talisman.

An inner voice also told her she should pass on the parts of her medical knowledge that could be usefully applied in a world where there were no thermometers, stethoscopes or diagnostic instruments of any kind, no antibiotics, sterile bandages, swabs, IV-drips, scalpels, suture needles, thread, clamps- in a word, nothing.

Apart from Dream Cap - a narcotic used as a painkiller - all the Mutes had were herbal remedies to cure sickness, stop infection and heal wounds. They knew how to set simple bone fractures and amputate limbs, and there was the occasional shaman, like Mr Snow, who had 'healing hands', but basically, only the healthy survived. The process of natural selection.

As a doctor, Roz's primary concern was the coming birth of her child.

Her studies had covered the various stages of pregnancy and childbirth and it was this, above all, that she wanted to pass on to Clearwater.

All clans had female elders who acted as midwives, but their knowledge was based on practical experience and observation. It was totally unscientific and they had very little idea of what happened inside the womb.

The fact that infant mortality was relatively low and complications few was entirely due to the basic toughness and physical fitness of female Mutes.

Roz had Mute blood in her veins, but she had been brought up in a softer environment, inoculated against infection and knew far too much for her own peace of mind about the changes taking place inside her body and the dozen and one things that could go wrong.

There was also one extra factor the video-texts hadn't covered - the telepathic link with Steve and its bizarre side-effect which caused her body to reproduce' wounds inflicted on him. Roz wasn't plagued with every cut, bruise or knock Steve suffered; the wounding or injury had to be accompanied by a severe emotional shock. It was mental trauma that was the trigger, and the basis for Roz's unexpressed fears that Steve might unknowingly endanger the life of her unborn child.

Clearwater understood this without being told, for Steve was also uppermost in her mind. Her love for him had not diminished. She continued to hope that he would find his way back to them, and the

knowledge that her soul-sister shared her feelings drew them even closer together. Now, when Roz's mind reached out towards Steve, Clearwater's thoughts travelled with her and in that moment they became one

Steve had got the message, but so far he had been denied the means and the opportunity to escape. From New Year's Day through spring and summer, he had been working below ground, wargaming in the Simulation Room, and learning japanese in the language lab.

With Fran's help, he was becoming increasingly fluent, and had even managed to impress Major Fujiwara. The Major had been assigned to the Eastern Desk, but had hinted that he might soon be leading his team back into Ne-Issan to try and re-establish a network using known agents which would be run directly from the Federation.

Steve knew there was little hope of being given another field assignment in the near future. With Karlstrom's tacit approval, he had been trawling through AMEXICO's private data bank and passing on enticing morsels to John Chisum. With Fran, he was now a regular visitor to Bull Jefferson's train, and had even been awarded the privilege of stoking the fire-box and in July - as a special treat for his birthday which had come and gone - he was allowed to drive it over a fifty mile stretch of track and toot the whistle.

And these men were going to rule the world. It was insane

Near the middle of August, Karlstrom met the other AMEXICO operative who was working inside Bull Jefferson's camp. 'Is everything in place?'

'Yes. What about Brickman?'

'Brickman?'

'Aren't you planning to tip him off?'

'No. He's served his purpose - and he knows too much.'

The operative smiled. 'Don't we all?'

'There's a difference. Brickman is concealing information.

You're not.' It was Karlstrom's turn to smile.

'At least, nothing of any importance.' Which was not the case with Brickman. Karlstrom now knew about Steve's chance meeting with Annie and Bart Bradlee and his conversation in the stalled elevator with Sutton.

Karlstrom had called Crazy Uncle Bart and asked him to apply some pressure. Fearing she might lose custody of Lucas, Annie had immediately revealed her indiscretion.

Given her relationship with Brickman it was a for-giveable lapse. But the young man had said nothing, and to Karlstrom that spelled bad news.

Given Brickman's track record, he could not risk him gaining access to his son. Now or later.

Steve had said nothing because Roz had come through to explain the painful sacrifice he and Clearwater had to make. He had already abandoned any idea of rescuing his son - but Karlstrom didn't know that. Which was a pity, because if he had, and had then proceeded to ask himself why, the Federation might have avoided the trouble that was coming their way.

But that was not how it was meant to be

At the end of the second week in August, Steve and Fran boarded Bull Jefferson's train to inaugurate a newly completed 200-mile stretch of line from Grand Central to Eisenhower/San Antonio. As this was a special celebration, everyone was dressed up 'Southern style'; Steve in the rebel grey, and Fran in a full-skirted walking-out dress made up in her favourite colour buttercup yellow.

They steamed out of the yard to the sound of music, piped from the concealed speakers inside the wagons.

Everyone joined in with the recorded voices, echoing the words and bouncing to the rhythm of a song about a railroad called 'The Aitchison, Topeka and Santa Fe'.

The railway took them outside the protected borders of Cloudlands, but the First Family had ensured their privacy by erecting a chain link fence backed up by robot watchtowers at a distance of one mile on either side of the railway line. It was along this wide corridor, adorned with landscaped clumps of trees and small grass-fringed lakes, that Bull Jefferson's three-car train now travelled at a steady fifty miles an hour.

The morning sun, already high in the sky, had begun to bake the landscape. Much of the dusty terrain beyond the fence, where gangs of sweating Mutes worked under Tracker overseers to extract mineral ores from the ground, was blanked out by a heat haze.

Steve still found it incredible that these two contrasting lifestyles could exist alongside each other. He knew that the First Family were feared and revered by ordinary Trackers. Though less impressed than most, he had shared those emotions, and accepted that because of their exemplary role as leaders and visionaries, they had to hold themselves aloof from the lower ranks.

That faith had been misplaced; the vision which had inspired uncounted generations of Trackers was a flawed illusion. The First Family might live longer, but in all other respects they were no different to, or better than, anyone else. In fact they were worse, because they knew the truth and had buried it beneath a monstrous edifice of lies. They demanded continuing sacrifice and preached unity, while they enjoyed undreamt of luxury and plotted to unseat each other.

Steve had tasted that luxury and been tempted by it, but the enormity and extent of the deception had proved too much even for him to swallow. And the realisation that the Family owed much of their pre-eminence to the Mute blood in their veins had left him with nothing to hang on to. There was no hidden Store of Truth waiting to be discovered. The only thing he could be sure of was himself.

He heard two sharp clicks and found Fran snapping her fingers in front of his face. She was sitting on the opposite side of a small table set against one of the train windows. Behind her, at the big table, Bull Jefferson and his cronies were playing a game of stud poker. The other guests had formed conversational groups or were looking out of the windows.

'You playing this game or what?'

'Wha- ? Ohh, yes!' He looked down at the chessboard and saw the threatening position taken up by Fran's black queen. 'Whose turn is it?'

'Yours.'

'Ohh, yehh . . . shit.' His hand hovered indecisively over his beleaguered pieces.

'You're absolutely hopeless, I don't know why I bother. What were you dreaming about?'

Steve moved his one remaining knight. The...? Oh, I was just wondering what the people on the other side of those fences think when they see us and this train going past."

'It's not their job to think,' replied Fran. 'And there's not much they can see anyway. They're too far away.'

Those robot watch-towers have proximity sensors which trigger loudspeaker warnings to keep away from the fence."

'And we have the same system around Cloudlands?'

Fran smiled. 'Why? Are you thinking of running away?'

Steve swept a hand around the carriage. 'From all this?'

I'm not that crazy. No, I'm just amazed that in all the years I spent down below, no one ever breathed a word about Cloudlands. I can't figure out how it's remained a secret for so long. Okay, no one can get through the fence or past the watch towers, but with all the air activity that's going on, how come nobody's spotted all those big white mansions?'

'I'm surprised you have to ask,' said Fran. 'But then we did have a heavy night. It's a prohibited zone. No one's allowed to fly over it or near it. That's why we have our own air force.'

'Of course. The silver Skyhawks."

'The wagon-trains roll out from Nixon/Forth Worth, so their 'hawks only operate north and west of the state line - unless of course they're on supply runs to way stations.

Any planes put up by the divisional bases are normally on routine patrols or supporting a ground action against marauding bands of hostiles. I hardly need to tell you that pilots are not allowed to take off from any of our bases without filing an approved flight plan but' - she smiled 'even if someone was consumed with curiosity, nobody but us gets to fly within a hundred miles of Grand Central.

Satisfied?"

'Yes." The First Family airbase was definitely the answer to his problems. 'Sounds as if you've got it all covered."

'We've got everything covered, Brickman." She picked up the black queen and took the white knight with it.

'Checkmate."

'Again,' sighed Steve. He pulled out the side drawer and swept his pieces into one of the boxed sections.

Fran did the same with the black. 'I'm surprised you're not better at this. I mean ... when you consider I

managed to teach you
japanese."

'Yes, I know. Maybe we ought to take a chess set to bed with us."

'That sounds like a good move."

Steve looked up to find Eleanor Jefferson, Fran's mother standing at his shoulder. John Chisum was just behind her.

Eleanor's smile broadened. 'But first, we'd like you both to join us for a picnic."

Steve jumped to his feet. 'With pleasure, ma'am!" The train stopped about fifteen miles from 'San An-tone' as it was called. Everyone climbed down off the train and trooped across to the edge of a tree-shaded lake, where they sat down on rugs and reclining chairs in the dappled sunshine, or strolled around the lakeside while the Mute servants brought out hampers of food and drink and laid everything out on folding tables covered with sparkling white linen cloths.

Sighting a narrow landing stage with a railing on one side, Steve walked over and found it was attached to a small boat house containing two slab-sided dinghies.

Fran accepted his invitation to row on the lake, and sat on the rear seat under her yellow parasol, trailing one hand in the water. The air was cooler over the lake, but Steve decided to strip off his jacket and roll up the sleeves of his white shirt.

Pulling on the oars reminded him of the journey across Lake Michigan with Cadillac. Compared to the idyllic scene that surrounded him now, that had been a nightmare. Fran, seen in repose, conveyed the impression of someone soft and alluring - demure, even.

Animated chatter and laughter drifted across from the people dispersed along the shoreline. Sunlight sparkled on the crystal glasses and polished cutlery being laid on the buffet tables by the Mute servants quiet as shadows.

What were they - rejects from the Life Institute?

How did they feel about what they saw around them?

He'd meant to ask Joshua the Head of Service back at Savannah, but had never gotten around to it. Compared to the Mutes in the chain gangs, they had it easy - and if they'd been born into it, they probably didn't even question their status.

Steve heard the rapid tinkle of a small silver bell. 'That sounds like lunch."

'Don't worry, there'll be plenty for everybody. Take me across to the far side of the lake."

It didn't take long. The lake was only about two hundred yards wide.

Steve shipped the oars and let the boat glide towards another small landing stage.

'Now get out." . 'What?"

'Get out! I'm going to race you back to the picnic!" Fran closed her parasol and tossed it into the bow of the boat and took her seat at the

oars. 'Wait till I turn around!" she commanded.

Steve checked the perimeter of the lake. 'Do I get to choose the way I go?"

'No! You have to go the long way!" Fran paddled the boat towards him until the stern touched the bank then got a firm grip on the oars and positioned them just above the water for the first pulling stroke.

'GO!" Steve started running. It was a lot further than it first appeared - and Fran was rowing strongly despite being hampered by her wasp-waisted corset. He piled on the speed. Bull Jefferson, his wife Eleanor and their family guests, seeing the contest, divided their support between the two, some shouting encouragement to Fran, others urging Steve to make a greater effort.

By now, Fran was halfway across the lake and Steve was flying like the wind. The running brought him back in tune with the overground. With who he really was. It felt good! Fran's strike rate had dropped, but she wasn't the type to give up. The cheers from the shore spurred her on.

Coming round the second bend, Steve switched from thinking he couldn't make it to thinking that perhaps he could, briefly considered throwing the race to humour

Fran, then decided against it. No! Screw her He kicked into a higher gear, making a controlled finish, reaching her arrival point while she was still three yards out.

Everyone cheered themselves hoarse.

Bull slapped him on the back. 'Well done, boy! For a minute there, I thought you were going to throw the race.

But, heh-heh - that's not your style. An' that's good. I like it. I got enough brown-nosers around me already!" Steve retrieved his jacket and the yellow parasol then helped Fran ashore. She pinched his hand and gave it a savage twist. Steve responded with an even harder squeeze.

She didn't flinch. 'You bastard!' 'You can't win 'em all.'" Steve returned her defiant stare, then they both let go by common consent.

'Bring me something to eat."

Steve bowed politely and handed back the yellow parasol. 'My pleasure, ma'am!" Just after two in the afternoon, when everybody had finished lunch, Steve saw John Chisum heading back up towards the train with some of the other men. He ran to catch up with them. 'Where are you going?"

'We're going to take the train down to the end of the line and turn it around - then pick up everybody for the return trip. D'you want to come?"

'Of course he does.'" Bull Jefferson came up from behind and moved between them. He gave Steve another pat on the back as they walked on.

'Bean meaning to thank you for that last batch of tape you brought us.

You're doin' a great job."

'I'm only sorry it's taking so long. I never imagined the data files would be encrypted.'" He looked across at Chisum. 'How're you doing on that?"

'We're managing,' said Chisum.

Bull slapped Chisum's back and said to Steve: 'Cleverest man I've met.

Don't know what we'd do without him."

Ten miles down the line from the lake the single line track ran out into a small shunting yard with several sidings, a turntable, water tower, coal hopper and a shed containing a squat shunting loco powered by massive batteries and plugged into the mains supply. And all this had been installed so that the First Family could play with trains.

This was where Steve discovered that riding the rails was only part of the fun for Bull and his friends. He was given a pair of overalls, and a union hat to change into, then put to work with an uncoupling hook as the carriages were shunted back and forth, swung on the turntable, then reassembled in the right order behind the big loco which now stood with its nose pointed towards Grand Central. While Steve and his workmates had been ducking in and out under the buffers and tapping the wheels,

Bull's half of the team had topped up the engine with coal and water, oiled every bearing in sight, hosed off the dust and polished the brasswork.

The shunter was rolled back into its shed, then everyone went into the shower and changing room built against the outside wall, tossed their overalls into a hamper that was carried off by two of the Mute train staff, then soaped off the grime under the line of shower heads while they sang several rousing choruses of 'She'll be coming round the mountain'!

Chisum, who was standing alongside Steve, caught his eye and winked.

'This is the life, eh?'

'I'm not so sure,' said Steve. He twisted the tap around to cold and jerked as the ice-cold needles hit his chest.

'when are you and I going to have that long talk you promised me?'

'Soon. Things are a bit difficult right now.'

They donned their uniforms and rejoined the train, along with the footplate crew who had handed over their oily rag and shovel to Zachary Taylor Jefferson, head of the wagon-train design bureau, and another relative of Bull's for the return trip.

Steve stood on the rear observation platform on the way back to the lake. Looking up the line, he caught sight of the picnickers moving in small groups towards the

track and heard the driver whoop the whistle in greeting.

As the distance between them narrowed, the passengers formed an expectant line along the track. Steve glimpsed the bright yellow splash of Fran's dress near the head of the line. He climbed down onto the bottom step of the platform as the train slowed then jumped off as it ground to a halt.

Fran took the offered arm. 'Did you enjoy yourself?'

'Yes, but not as much as your father. He was in his element back there.' He helped her climb up onto the observation platform. 'Am I forgiven?'

She folded her parasol and gave him a backward glance as she entered the carriage. 'For the moment,' Steve paused in the doorway.

'Wouldn't you prefer to stay out here?'

'And get soot all over my dress?' Fran walked along the corridor past the galley towards the centre carriage.

Steve followed as the Mute train staff loaded the picnic hampers and the folding tables and chairs in through a side door. In the centre carriage, everyone was settling down for the return journey. Some were yawning from their exertions in the fresh air. Steve saw the member of the Family who was acting as the guard on this trip walk past outside towards the rear of the train, flag in hand. The whistle sounded. The loco hooted. There was a series of squeaks and clanks as the couplings took up the strain, then the train moved off.

'I'm going to lie down for a while,' announced Fran.

'By myself. Okay?'

'Sure, go ahead. Want me to unhook your dress?'

'As long as you don't get any ideas.'

'I don't think this is quite the place for it, d'you?'

'You'd be surprised.' Fran threaded her way around the armchairs and past the big table where Bull had started another card-game.

The lead carriage was fitted out with toilets, six sleeping compartments, a small private study cum bedroom reserved for Bull, and closest to the loco, the room housing the computer workstation, the radio equipment that kept Bull in touch with Cloudlands and the railway control system, and the battery of small videoscreens linked to the tv cameras that displayed views of the roof, sides and underside of the train and the track beneath.

Steve helped Fran out of her dress and caught the sullen look in her eye. 'Don't tell me you're still upset about - ' 'The race? Of course not. While you were down the line, I had to listen to my mother telling me what a wonderful person you were, and how they both couldn't wait for me to marry you.'

Steve concealed his own feelings. 'Would that be so terrible?'

'It would if I had a baby.'

'Which is what they want '

'Don't try to pretend you didn't know.'

'I didn't. And you've got to believe that. None of that means anything to me.'

'Not even the child you had with Clearwater?'

Steve shrugged. 'That was an accident.'

Fran gave him a searching look. 'Yes, well, all this mother, wife and baby talk has given me a headache.'

She hung up the yellow dress then flopped down onto the bunk bed and vented her exasperation by pummelling the mattress.

Steve opened the-door, placed the 'Do not disturb' sign into the eye-level slot, then looked back and smiled. 'See you later.'

Emerging into the corridor, he walked past the other sleeping compartments, knocked on the door of Bull's stateroom then, receiving no reply, entered and went on through to the communications room. One of the two ensigns detailed to watch the screens turned in his swivel chair. 'Can I help you, sir?'

Steve looked around the room. There was another door on the far side, marked 'Toilet'. 'Is Captain Chisum through there?'

'No, sir. I haven't seen him in a while.'

'Okay, thanks.'

Steve closed the door behind him, exited from the stateroom and checked the other five sleeping compartments.

One of the doors was shut, the other four were empty. He knocked on the locked door. 'John . . . ?'

No reply. He knocked again, but there was no response.

Pausing in the doorway to the crowded centre carriage, he surveyed the interior then walked through into the last carriage.

In the crowded galley, some of the Mute staff were catching a late lunch while others washed up the dishes from the picnic. He went past the guard's cabin, towards the door that led to the rear observation platform. It had a glass panel in the top half with a view of the track running away into the distance behind them. He opened it, fully expecting to find John Chisum admiring the view.

The platform was empty. Where the hell had he got to...?

There was only one answer - Chisum had to be in the second occupied sleeping compartment. And if he hadn't answered, it was because he'd got lucky and didn't wish to be interrupted. So why hadn't he put out the 'Do not disturb' sign?

Steve felt his stomach tighten. He had started out with the idea of pinning down Chisum for that promised talk while Fran was asleep and out of the way. The observation platform would have been ideal. But now a more alarming idea was creeping into his brain. He went back inside, checked the guard's compartment, baggage room, store and galley on his way through.

As he came back into the centre carriage he suddenly felt giddy. He steadied himself in the doorway. Ahead of him was a sea of blurred, animated faces. Their laughter sounded tinny and their voices echoed sharply - as if the sound was coming down a long tunnel. And then other voices filled his head, a growing whisper that swelled to a warning crescendo like the wind building to a storm-force gust. Steve suddenly realised what he had to do, and knew he had only seconds in which to do it.

He stepped across to the nearest free-standing armchair, grabbed hold of its female occupant, threw her aside, picked up the chair, hurled it through the nearest window then, to a chorus of startled cries, launched himself head-first through the gaping hole in the shattered glass.

The window was only some eight feet above the track bed but it seemed an eternity before he hit the ground.

He stretched out his hands in an instinctive effort to break his fall.

As he curved downwards he saw the observation platform flash past him, and as it did so, all three carriages exploded sideways and upwards, throwing the rear of the tender and loco up in the air and Steve's own world blew apart

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Roz's eyes opened wide with the shock. She staggered forward as her legs buckled under her. Clearwater and Cadillac caught her outstretched arms and saved her from falling. They eased her gently to the ground and knelt beside her.

'What happened?!" cried Cadillac. 'Is it the baby?!" Roz leaned back and tried to regulate her breathing as she clutched her swollen belly.

'No, no... I It's, uh...

uh, someone just tried to kill Steve!" She drew in several deep breaths through her nostrils. 'But it's. it's okay.

He's... alive. It's all right!" The M'Kenzi elder who had come with them to act as a midwife, brought a waterbag from the ox-cart and applied some to her patient's forehead. True to the promise he had made, Cadillac was bringing Roz back to the place where the M'Calls' settlement had been to wait out the last month of her pregnancy. She had been riding on the ox-cart, but had insisted on taking a short walk.

Cadillac looked worriedly at Clearwater. 'What are we going to do?"

'Pray to the Great Sky Mother that he comes to no harm. What else can we do?" The idea of losing Steve and Roz did not bear thinking about.

Roz clutched at her left shoulder and gasped: 'Oh!

Jeezuss!" 'Steve...?" asked Clearwater.

'Yes." Roz's mind got on top of the pain. 'Feels as if he's broken a collarbone."

'Don't move,' said Cadillac. 'I'll fetch the cart."

The impact with the ground knocked all the breath out of Steve's body.

He tried to drag some air down his throat but his chest seemed to have locked up. In fact, he seemed to be paralysed from head to toe.

Eventually, as the shock wore off, some movement returned to his limbs, but despite the high threshold of pain he was supposed to possess as a Mute, it hurt like hell whenever he tried to move anything - especially up near his left shoulder.

He kicked and rolled himself over onto his right side and found himself looking at the smouldering carcass of a Mute - with no head or arms and only one leg. There was debris everywhere, and more mangled bodies with most of the clothes stripped off them. The three carriages had been turned into matchwood. The bogies had been tossed carelessly off the track, and the loco he had seen lifted into the air by the force of the explosion had been sent. into a sideways spin, rolling along the track before splitting open and spewing red-hot coals and scalding steam.

It was still spewing out now. Steve was glad he hadn't been riding the footplate - or in any other part of the train for that matter. He lay back and thanked the Great Sky Mother. The sixth sense that had saved

his neck so many times in the past had come to his aid again. But how long would his luck hold? And where - assuming he could walk - was he going to go from here? He would never know whether Chisum had been in that locked sleeping compartment or not, but it no longer mattered.

There was only one person who had both the means and the motive to destroy the train and everybody on it - Karlstrom, perhaps with the tacit approval of the P-G. And you could bet your last meal credit Karlstrom had a list of the people who'd been invited to the picnic.

Yehh, and he'd decided that 8902 Brickman, S.R. was surplus to requirements. Steve wiped the dust off his tongue and lips, then rubbed his forehead. Pulling his hand away he saw the palm was smeared with blood.

What a mess. and he had no one to turn to. Now that Karlstrom had pulled the plug, he couldn't go back to Cloudlands. Annie - the only person that might help

him - was locked up tight with Crazy Uncle Bart. He was going to have to get out of the Federation - but how?

On his own two feet, that's how. C'mon, move, Brick-man!

He rolled over onto his belly and hauled himself up onto his hands and knees. Looking down he saw his knuckles were scuffed and bleeding. He had definitely done something to his left shoulder, any pressure on it soon became unbearable. Well, he was going to have to bear it. He put the weight on his right arm and tried to get his left knee up and under him, but his left ankle didn't seem to be working properly.

It was in that position, with his head hanging down, that he heard the sound of a vehicle. He looked over his left shoulder and saw a camouflaged Bobcat bumping across the railway line in his direction.

It stopped nearby and the two occupants jumped down and ran over to him.

Both of them were dressed in red, black and brown camouflage fatigues and field caps, with shoulder badges that showed they were with an overground Mines and Mills Unit based at Eisenhower/San Antonio. Their breast tags named them as Coombs and Murchison.

Coombs squatted down beside him. 'You okay, good buddy? Jeezuss! You must be the luckiest man alive!' Murchison surveyed the litter of broken bodies. 'Looks like he's the only man alive! Shee-itt! This is something, ain't it?'

'Could you help me up?' gasped Steve.

'Sure!' said Coombs. 'Let's get you over to the 'Cat.

We got a first aid kit in there.'

'Looks like you need it,' added Murchison. He sat Steve up against one of the wheels while Coombs climbed into the vehicle to get the kit and some water.

'How did you get here?' asked Steve.

Murchison shrugged. 'Saw the'explosion, reckoned something' was wrongdrove straight through the goddam fence.'

'I'm glad you did.'

Coombs knelt on the platform that ran alongside the cabin section of the amphib and cleaned Steve's headwound. 'uhh, that's not too deep, but you might need some stitches.' He applied some antibiotic gel then gave Steve the wet cotton swab. 'Clean off your hands, they look like they could use some gel too.'

Murchison hunkered down in front of him. 'How's the ankle? D'you want it splinted up?'

'No. I think I just twisted it. It'll come right.'

Murchison eyed the grey leather boots and the rest of Steve's torn and dirt-covered Confederate uniform as he straightened up. 'Pretty fancy rig you got there - what's left of it.' · 'Yeah,' said Steve. He loosened some buttons on his tunic, reached inside and produced his silver ID card.

'Family... can you run me to San Antone?'

Murchison saluted. 'Yessirr, Captain?

Steve gestured towards the scattered wreckage of the train. 'Have you called this in?'

'No, sir. We just saw it happen and steamed over. Who would you like us to call? We can do it right now.'

'That won't be necessary. I'll make the calls when I reach your divisional base. This is the work of subversives - I'm going to have to speak with the State Provost Marshal and the White House. But I shall need you to come back here and guard that breach in the fence until our people get here.' He masked the pain that wracked his body.

'Okay, let's hit the road!' Murchison pulled out the retractable step ladder between the second and third portside wheels. As Steve turned towards the vehicle, he saw a crumpled swathe of yellow material pinned underneath the rear tyre of the Bobcat. It was part of the dress Fran had been wearing.

The one she had hung up before lying down to take the nap she would never wake up from

He climbed onto the hull, entered the four-seat cabin through the side door and settled down in the back row.

Coombs, the smaller of the two, got in behind the wheel.

Murchison took the seat on his right.

Steve saw the two carbines racked on the side walls of the cabin and glanced at his watch. 16.24 . . . the afternoon was almost gone.

'Can you make the base by 17.007' 'We can try, but it's gonna rattle your bones,' said Coombs.

'That's the least of my worries,' said Steve. 'Go for it.'

The duty crew watching the screens in the observation tower atop the huge concrete bunker that formed the interface between the overground and the subterranean world below, saw the camouflaged Bobcat approach at speed, then slew round and stop facing the other way as it neared the main entrance ramp. An onscreen check of the code letters painted on its roof identified it as belonging to the Mines and Mills detachment which had been booked out that morning to PFC.Coombs and Murchison.

A voice through the speaker tuned to the open channel. 'Tower, this is 8753 Coombs, Cat H-94. We're dropping off someone from Grand Central who's been involved in a traffic accident. He's able to walk in, but requests assistance at the ramp. We're heading back out to complete our assignment. Over.'

One of the duty Comm-Techs responded. 'Roger, H94.'

Over and out."

He looked at the screen relaying pictures from the tv cameras monitoring the ramp. A guy with blond crewcut hair, dressed in camouflage fatigues emerged from the driver's side of the Bobcat, waved to the people inside, then closed the door and jumped down as the vehicle moved off and headed across country.

The Comm-Tech who had taken the call keyed himself through to Main Ramp Security and told them they had an incoming who might need medical assistance.

Steve pulled the field cap firmly down over his scalp wound and limped through what was known as the single access door onto Level Ten-10 of Eisenhower/San Antone. Two Provos, anonymous behind the mirrored half-visors of their red and white helmets, and a medic, stepped forward to meet him.

'Where's your name-tag, soldier?'

Steve pushed his silver ID card towards their faces. 'I'm not required to wear one, Sergeant!' The realisation that they were dealing with a member of the First Family brought a radical change of attitude.

'uhh, no SIRR, Captain?' barked his first interrogator.

'How can we be of assistance, sir?!' barked the second Meat-Loaf.

'Help me over to the Ramp Office. I need some information, and while you're getting it, I'd be grateful if the medic could bandage my left ankle.'

'Yes, SIR! This way, SIR!' Brown-nosing bastards...

The medic and the first Meat-Loaf assisted Steve to the Ramp Office, while the second cleared the way ahead.

Steve slumped down gratefully into the offered chair and fought off the

pain generated by the bone-shaking ride, and his leap off the moving Bobcat. He looked down at the kneeling medic. 'Just bind it up as tight as you can.

And if you've got a couple of Cloud Nines, I'll personally arrange a Class One Citation."

The medic passed them over to him, tested the swelling on his ankle, ,sprayed on some Novocaine and began to bandage it. Steve swallowed haft of one of the strong pain killers, pocketed the rest for later and caught the eye of the desk clerk. 'Could you check the time of the next shuttle to Monroe/Wichita?"

'Rightaway, sir!" She called up the information on the nearest video screen. 'That'll be the 17:15, sir, stopping at Fort Worth and Tulsa... arriving Wichita 23:00." She looked at the wall clock. The time was 17:11. 'Looks like you're going to miss than one, sir. The next is at ' 'Call the Platform Master. Tell him to hold the train.

'But, sin ' 'Just DO it!" yelled Steve. He flashed his silver card.

The clerk looked uncertainly at the two Provos. They gave her the nod. She switched her video to communications mode and keyed in the required number.

Steve levered himself upright.

'I'm not through with your ankle!" said the medic.

'You can finish it in the elevator!" cried Steve. He limped out of the office, followed by the medic. When he reached the turnstile to the elevator lobby, Steve turned and jabbed a finger at the Provos.

'And you! Make sure they hold that fucking train!" The two sergeants leapt to attention and saluted as one.

'Yess -SIRR!" As they doubled back to the Ramp Office, Steve carded himself through the turnstile, followed by the medic. He passed the first major hurdle. The fact that the computer-controlled mechanism had let him through meant his card was still valid. Karlstrom must have been so certain that everybody on the train would be killed, he had not yet gotten around to arranging for his card to be cancelled.

He was in with a chance. If he could cover the next six hundred and thirty miles without running into trouble, he would be in Kansas, one of the new Territories.

The divisional base of Monroe/Wichita had just been completed, but they were still not fully up and running - and best of all, Monroe was the only base in the whole state. Wagon-trains were still busy trying to drive out the Mutes. If he could get to Level Ten-10 and past Ramp Security, he was almost home and dry.

The medic followed him into the nearest open elevator and got to work on the ankle as Steve hit the button marked 'Subway'!

When Bull Jefferson's train failed to show up at the Cloudlands railyard at 19:00 hours, the time originally scheduled, no alarm was raised. It had been a warm, sunny day - ideal for outdoor pursuits his party had probably decided to extend their outing. Even so, it was no way to run a railway. There had been no radio contact between the train and the Line Master's office since its reported departure from the shunting yard in mid-afternoon.

At 20:00 hours, after repeated attempts to contact the train, the Line Master's office called Security Brigade HQ. They put a Skyhawk up to fly down the line. It wasn't long before the pilot discovered the wreckage of the train and whilst manoeuvring to make another low pass, spotted the breach in the security fence.

The President-General was immediately alerted to what looked like a major act of sabotage by subversives who had penetrated the enclave.

The first question he asked was how the fence could be breached without triggering the alarm system which was supposed to indicate the sector where the illegal entry was taking place.

An embarrassing question. The red-faced respondent was obliged to explain that the sector alarm system was not yet operational, and the video cameras had not been installed in the robot watch-towers. Only the proximity sensors - which reacted to the movement of any solid body towards the fence and issued a recorded warning through loud hailer were up and running.

For Karlstrom, the breach in the security fence was a heaven-sent bonus - especially as Bull Jefferson had known about the uncompleted alarm systems when planning his inaugural trip down the new stretch of line.

The mystery deepened and took a new twist when Mines and Mills at Eisenhower/San Antonio sent out four Bobcats to look for a missing vehicle and received a radio message at 21:15 that it had been found, nose-down in an irrigation ditch. Coombs and Murchison, the two crewmen, were strapped in the back seats.

Both had been shot in the head. Murchison had also had his neck broken by a heavy blow to the side of his skull. His boots, camouflage fatigues and field cap were missing. The engine had stalled but the vehicle's cruise control was still set and locked on 40mph.

This information was routed through the communications room in the observation tower that had handled the earlier exchange with H-94. But there had been a change of shifts. The new crew were unaware that H-94 had returned to base and dropped off a passenger. Steve's desperate ruse might have succeeded had it not been for the chance social visit of an off-duty Comm-Tech from the earlier shift. Hearing his colleagues discussing the incident, he recalled the arrival of the camouflaged 'accident victim', and alerted Ramp Security - mainly to cover his own ass.

The two Provos were also off-duty. Summoned in mid-swallow from the mess-deck, they couldn't remember the name on the ID card that had been thrust in their faces.

The shock at being confronted by a First Family ID card had frozen their brains. All they had recorded was that the photo on the card matched the face and that the owner held the rank of captain.

The Provo Commander - like everyone else on the base - knew nothing about the explosion that had occurred some twenty miles away. He wasn't over-eager to get involved in Family business, but the fact that the captain with the silver card had been wearing camouflage fatigues with M&M and San Antonio shoulder badges indicated that he'd taken them from one of the dead crewmen. Which linked him to their murder.

Whatever happened later, a Code One violation had been committed within his jurisdiction - and it was his duty to follow it up.

The first thing he had to do was establish the captain's identity. The card-operated turnstile to the elevator lobby recorded the name and number of everyone who passed through - and the card would have been used again before boarding the shuttle. The computer records could be accessed - but not instantly. The Provo Commander set the ball rolling.

As soon as they had the captain's name and number, the information could be fed back to the central computer.

Once alerted that the card was invalid, the computer would deny entry to all controlled sectors, elevators and long-distance transportation.

It would also alert local security as to his whereabouts - for there was no guarantee that the mysterious captain was still heading for Monroe/Wichita. He could have already changed at Fort Worth and gone west to Santa Fe, northeast to Little Rock or . . . back to Grand Central. In fact he could already be there.

The Commander was aware there was still time to alert the Provo Commander at Kennedy/Tulsa, but he was reluctant to meddle with the Family. They operated in a realm of their own and were not answerable to the ordinary law enforcement agencies. He was not prepared to jeopardise his career by acting without the proper information. When that was at his disposal, he would contact the Black Tower and ask them to relay it to the White House.

While the Commander was wrestling with his little local difficulty, the senior office-holders of the White House were trying to come to terms with the full horror of the disaster which had wiped out an entire branch of the First Family. Neither the President-General - who had taken on the task of informing the nearest relatives of the train's passengers - or Karlstrom, knew about the dead crewmen inside the

Bobcat, or about the long-distance traveller who, with each passing minute, was getting nearer and nearer to the end of the line

Having made up the initial delay on the run to Fort Worth, the MagLev shuttle slid smoothly into the subway station at Tulsa at precisely 21:45. for its second fifteen minute stop before the last leg to Monroe/Wichita.

Steve had taken one whole Cloud Nine at Forth Worth to deaden the pain from his ankle and left shoulder.

Unless he could get some more, that left one half dose to carry him through the rest of his journey to Wyoming.

On the jolting drive in to Eisenhower/San Antonio, he realised he'd cracked some ribs too but there hadn't been time to bandage them. It hurt to breathe, but the pill plus

the right mental attitude made it bearable. The next big hurdle would be getting out of Monroe/Wichita.

The three months spent working as a Seamster had given him some knowledge of the behind-the-scenes passageways of the Federation, but he certainly wasn't in any shape to climb up one of the thousand foot-deep ventilation shafts.

The pill had made him feel drowsy, and he slept through most of the journey from Fort Worth to Tulsa.

Now it was time to sit up and look alert. At each stop, a four-man team of Provos always walked through the train checking the cards and movements orders of anyone who caught their eye. Steve knew he was bound to attract attention. Trackers didn't normally travel in camouflage fatigues, and if they were moving between bases, they would usually have a trail-bag.

His ID had been sufficient to allay any suspicions at Fort Worth, but sooner or later, that Bobcat would be found and the hunt would begin if it hadn't begun already. Until he got to Monroe/Wichita there was nothing he could do but sit tight and brazen it out. The quarter-hour ticked by minute by interminable minute.

Steve glanced out of the window and saw a group of Provos on the platform. They were all facing inwards as if listening to a briefing, but now and then one of them would glance up and down the platform or at the waiting shuttle. The tension was unbearable.

'I don't believe this!' said a voice. 'Steve Brickman?'

Steve looked, up at the owner of the voice, dressed in wing-man blue, who was standing in the aisle just behind his seat. He could hardly believe his eyes. It was Pete Vandenberg from Condor Squadron, Class of '89 at the Flight Academy. A fellow-graduate who had come third in the honours list, relegating him to fourth position by two points.

Steve ignored his burning joints and levered himself up. 'Pete! What the heck are you doing here?!' 'I was going to ask you the same question!' Pete shook Steve's hand vigorously and fisted Steve's injured shoulder. Steve almost fainted. He sat down quickly, with his left side out of harm's way against the side wall of the compartment.

Vandenberg stowed his trail-bag on the overhead rack and sat down facing him. 'Jeer, man! We got word you were dead! What happened?'

'It's a long story,' said Steve.

'Well, we got an hour to Wichita. You can give me some of it.'

Vandenberg gave Steve's left knee a friendly slap.

That hurt too. The blood from the skinned kneecap had stuck to his trouser leg and kept tearing away every time he moved.

'Great to see you!' Vandenberg leaned forward. 'Did you know the left side of your face was swollen?'

'Yeah. I tripped over my own feet and fell off a Bobcat.'

Vandenberg put his face to the window, checked the platform then said: 'So how come the uniform?' His nose wrinkled. 'Mines and Mills?'

'That's another long story.'

Vandenberg caught sight of two people passing the window. He rapped hard with his knuckles, then leapt up and ran along to the open door.

Steve didn't look to see what was happening. Keeping perfectly still seemed to be the best remedy to all his ills.

Vandenberg returned and gestured towards Steve.

'Now do you believe me?'

Two overlapping voices chorused: 'Holy shit I - Sonora-bitch!' Steve found himself looking into the grinning faces of Mci Avery and Sonny Ayers, two other '89 graduates of the Flight Academy. But Melanie and Sonny had been his classmates in the top-rated Eagle Squadron. They were also dressed in blue with gold wings above the left-hand tunic pocket and lieutenant's sleeve stripes. Steve shoved out his hand but didn't get up. The two of them were so excited they almost pulled his arm off.

'What the hell are you doing here?' they both asked.

'He won't say." Pete Vandenberg tapped the side of his nose.

'Special assignment."

'That's right,' said Steve. 'So why don't you guys tell me what you're up to?"

Before they could reply, two Meat-Loafs walked along the centre aisle and stopped as their eyes lighted upon Steve. 'You got no name, soldier?" asked one of the sergeants.

'Step out into the aisle,' said his colleague.

Steve reached into his pocket and held out the wallet containing his ID card, but made no move to get up.

The second sergeant took the wallet, lifted the flap, showed the card to the other Meat-Loaf, then handed the wallet back to Steve and gave a short salute. 'Sorry about that, Captain."

'That's okay, Sergeant."

'A captain? With no rank stripes?" Vandenberg eyed Steve then exchanged glances with Avery and Ayers.

'Tell me about Wichita,' said Steve.

'We're going out to join Leatherneck,' said Mci Avery.

Steve tried to sound casual. 'The Fighting Leathernecks?

The wagon-train? You're kidding."

'Why?" asked Sonny. 'Are you shipping out on it too?"

Steve grinned. 'Wish I was. Unfortunately I've got some other business to attend to. But I'd love the chance to come on board for an hour or two. When are you due to leave?"

'Day after tomorrow,' said Pete. 'We're replacing a guy who bought a farm and a couple more who got injured."

He held out his hand. 'Okay, Steve, show us the ID."

Steve locked eyes with him for a moment then laid the wallet on Vandenberg's palm. Vandenberg opened it and studied the silver ID then angled it towards Avery and Ayers before handing it back.

'Does that mean what I think it means...?"

Steve nodded.

'Family...?" breathed Avery.

Steve nodded again.

'Smokin' lumpshit!" muttered Ayers.

It was Vandenberg's turn to nod. 'Always had you down as someone who knew where they were headed."

If only they knew! Steve responded with a modest smile. 'Just the luck of the draw, Pete."

Mci Avery tapped Vandenberg on the arm. 'Did you tell him who we're

meeting up with at Wichita?"

'No,' said Vandenberg. 'Let that be another surprise ' With a dozen different escape scenarios milling around inside his head, Steve mentally gathered himself up for a final effort as the shuttle eased to a halt at the brand new subway station. Part of it was still festooned with construction trestles. Vandenberg secured a wheelie for which Steve was quietly thankful - and they all piled in and drove up the ramp to the domed central plaza. The main concourse had been paved and planted, but they were still pouring concrete over on the west side.

As the wheelie droned along the vehicle track that ran around the concourse towards the cluster of elevators, Steve saw someone with sandy hair and a blue uniform rise from one of the tables outside a coffee and soft drink unit.

It was Captain Bob Carroll, the Chief Flying Instructor from the Flight Academy at Lindbergh Field, New Mexico. The man who had watched over the progress of Steve and his fellow graduates for three years. It seemed too good to be true.

Carroll, now sporting commander's rank stripes, returned their salutes and greeted Steve warmly. 'Good to see you, Brickman.'

'It's Captain Brickman, sir,' said Vandenberg.

Carroll looked Steve over. 'In that case I won't ask what happened to your wings - or why you're working for Mines and Mills.'

'I'm not, sir. I'm still on active duty.' He passed Carroll his ID wallet.

Carroll eyed the contents with raised eyebrows then passed it back.

'Congratulations - and good luck. Always knew they couldn't keep a good man down.'

Steve pocketed the ID. 'Same goes for you, sir. Still at the Flight Academy?'

'Yes, but I'm on a three-month detachment. Always good to get a taste of the real thing. I'm shadowing the Wagon-Master and the Flight Operations Officer on Leatherneck.'

It was getting better by the minute. Steve went for it. 'Can I ask you a big favour, sir? I don't have to meet my contacts until tomorrow morning. Is there any chance of being able to come aboard tonight?'

Apart from a brief spell on Red River last year, I haven't seen the inside of many wagon-trains lately. Been too busy driving SkyRiders to strange places.'

Carroll didn't know about AMEXICO or its private air force but he got the message. 'Sure.' He grinned. 'If we can't find you a bunk, we'll ask Mel here to move over.'

Let's go.'

After passing through Ramp Security, Carroll led them out through a bulkhead door into the warm night air.

A full moon hung in a cloudless sky, obscuring all but the brightest stars. Two Bobcats stood on their shadows, headlights gleaming. The wagon-train lay about a quarter of a mile away, drawn into a straight line. Its flight deck was extended and lit, and circling high above were two winking red points of light attached to dark, winged silhouettes - Skyhawks. It was all coming together

Steve paused, slipped the remaining half-dose of painkiller into his mouth, took a deep breath and strode forward, willing himself not to limp. You can do it, Brickman. Bear it. Walk tall. You are a Plainfolk warrior.

Carroll led them up the ramp into the belly of the forward command car and took Steve to see the wagon-master while the other three reported to the Trail Boss and went aft to settle in. 'Shack' Torrenson, the Leathernecks' commander, cast his eye over Steve's ID, listened to Carroll's pitch, arranged for Steve to be logged in as a visitor and issued with a pass, then shook his hand and expressed the hope he would enjoy his short stay.

Carroll pulled a wheelie off the line for the run back to the flight car. 'I imagine you'll want to go topside.'

'If I can, sir. Why have you got aircraft up this late?'

'New routine we're trying out,' replied Carroll. 'We've heard that Mutes usually keep their heads down after dark. So we're working up for night operations. The idea is to have a high-flier pin-point the settlements during the day, then go in after dark behind a navigation leader who will mark and light up the target with flares for the main force. We'll be able to go in low and fast, lay down the napalm, then strafe them as they come running out with their pants down. And of course the night sky gives us perfect cover. Can't fail.'

'No. It sounds good,' said Steve hollowly.

They went up into one of the duck-holes set along the edges of the flight deck and watched several dummy approaches, hook-on landings and catapult launchings from the steam-powered booms. Half of the wing-men on board had been tapped for night-flying exercises, and they were taking it in turn to practise take-offs and landings, using the faster, twin-boom Skyhawk Mark 2.

Pete Vandenberg, Mel Avery and Ayers joined Steve in the duckhole.

Carroll turned to Steve. 'Do you want to try your hand at a couple of circuits? May be your last chance for a while.'

Steve tried to sound interested but not overeager.

'Well, yes - if you're sure it's okay.'

'Go ahead,' said Carroll. 'I trust you.' He stopped as a thought struck him. 'You have flown the Mark Two, haven't you?'

'A few times,' lied Steve.

'Then you should be okay. Most of the systems are duplicated on the SkyRider. Should be no problem. Do a few dummy approaches. If you find yourself running

out of deck, go round again and land alongside.

We'll haul you aboard on the boom."

Sonny Ayers chortled at the prospect."Ohh, this I gotta see!" They waited until the next Skyhawk landed on, then climbed out and followed it as the deck crew manhandled it onto the starboard catapult. Carroll stopped the departing wing-man and borrowed his helmet. He handed it to Steve with a smile. 'This takes me back a few years."

'Yeah, me too, sir. There's another question I've been wanting to ask.

Maybe you'll feel unable to answer it, but . . ."

'I think I know what it is, but go ahead anyway."

'The passing-out exam. Were the final marks rigged?"

'Yes, they were. You scored 197 - close to the double century you were aiming for."

'So what happened?"

Carroll shrugged. 'An order came through to mark you down. That's all I can tell you - and don't ask me why. But you're still top in my book. Best pupil I ever had. And that silver card shows that other far more important people think very highly of you too."

Steve laughed. 'Yehh, you're right." He shook Carroll's hand. 'Thank you, sir. You don't realise how much this means to me."

Carroll waved his words away. 'Just show us what you can do, Brickman - and don't bend it!" Steve saluted, climbed into the Skyhawk, exchanged his field cap for the visored bone-dome, checked the instruments and control movements then closed the cockpit cover. The catapult boom lifted to form an angle of fifteen degrees with the deck.

The crew chief crouched low on the deck, and gave Steve the windup signal. He selected ten degrees of flap and opened the throttle to full revs. When the needle hit the mark, he braced himself in his seat with his head against the backrest and spoke into the helmet mike.

'Flaps set, trim set, speed set, Go!" WhhooooosssshhhHH! Steve gave an exultant yell as he soared into the night sky and climbed steadily upwards towards the beckoning moon.

Some fifteen minutes after Steve had left the flight-deck, the central computer system picked up his exit from the elevator lobby on Level Ten-10 at Monroe/Wichita and Karlstrom was now on the case. It did not take long to discover that he had talked his way on board the Fighting Leathernecks, and had coolly borrowed a Skyhawk that he obviously had no intention of bringing back.

Brickman had demonstrated his resourcefulness yet again. How he had escaped the blast was a mystery Karlstrom did not intend to waste time solving. The runaway had to be stopped, not because he could damage AMEXICO, or the Federation, but because he had become a challenge Karlstrom could not ignore.

This was personal. He could not allow anyone to get the better of

him.

A crestfallen Commander Carroll had supplied the necessary information.

The Skyhawk, which was powered by methane gas, had not been fully tanked up. The maximum distance Brickman could travel before he ran dry was one hundred and fifty miles. That would bring him down far short of Wyoming.

Karlstrom checked his watch. If he was flying at the most economical cruising speed, Brickman would be making a dead-stick landing on unfamiliar terrain at around one o'clock in the morning. The reports from Ramp Security at San Antonio had established that the damage to his ankle would severely hamper any journey he attempted to make on foot. Come first light, he would not be too hard to find

'Do you feel better now?'

Roz opened her eyes to find Clearwater sitting beside her bed of furs.

She eased herself up into a sitting position and found she could not support herself on her left arm.

Clearwater saw her grimace. 'Steve...?'

'Yes...' Roz touched the crown of her head, her left shoulder, ribs then pointed towards her left foot. 'He is hurt in so many places.

But he has escaped. I can feel it. He is much nearer than before."

She closed her eyes and turned her thoughts inwards. 'Two rivers running together."

Cadillac poked his head through the door flap in time to hear this.

'That is where we fought the battle with the Iron Snake! Is that where he is? Shall I gather a posse and go to meet him?"

Roz laid a hand on her swollen belly. 'No. You are to wait here with me." She stretched out her right hand towards Clearwater. 'Come closer. He wants to speak to you through me."

Clearwater bent over her. Roz laid both hands on her forehead. They both remained motionless for a long moment, then Roz said: 'Help me outside. I want to see the sun."

Cadillac backed out and held the flap open. Clearwater wiped the tears from her face and helped Roz onto her hands and knees. Roz clutched her arm and whispered: 'Get Meri! It's close. I feel it!' Mexicali-Rose was the M'Kenzi midwife. Clearwater said: 'But you still have another moon!" Roz shook her head violently. 'Get everything ready and remember the lessons I gave you!" Clearwater and Cadillac helped her from the tent into the morning sunshine. She knelt down by the deep metal pan - one of the prizes from their trip to Ne-Issan and splashed water on her face to hide her own tears.

Steve blinked himself awake from a confused dream in which he had surmounted a series of ever increasingly difficult obstacles with a growing feeling of powerlessness, and found himself slumped down low in the cockpit of the downed Skyhawk.

The full moon had helped him pick out some reasonably flat terrain when the fuel ran out. Without a map, he had been obliged to guess the right course for Wyoming.

He decided to head north-west, and had spotted the line of the North Platte river when the fuel ran out. Gliding down from his cruising altitude of four thousand feet he managed to add several more miles to his journey and, by a curious stroke of fate, had come down within a few hundred yards of the confluence of the North and South Platte near to the spot where The Lady from Louisiana and the Clan M'Call had both been destroyed.

The site of his last great betrayal

With only one shot at a landing, he had done his best, but had ripped off the nose wheel and portside main wheel on landing - and no doubt had mangled the propeller. Not that it mattered. The semi-controlled crash hadn't improved the condition of his left ankle or his cracked ribs. But he was still a lot closer to home.

All he had to do was get out and start walking.

He hauled himself upright in the seat and took stock of his surroundings. Spread out in a line ahead of him, walking cautiously towards him were twelve, thirteen, no . . . fourteen Mute warriors.

Half of them carried loaded cross-bows raised against the shoulder,

ready to fire. The others had their knives out.

And 8902 Brickman, their Plainfolk brother was sitting in a Federation Skyhawk, dressed in the camouflage fatigues worn by the hated occupants of the iron snakes.

No good relying on the nose-mounted Vulcan. The six barrels were buried in the dirt underneath the nose and in any case, since it fired on a fixed line, all they would have needed to do was step out of the way. The only gun on board, the pistol in the emergency survival kit, was in a special outside compartment behind the cockpit on the port side.

Nice one, Stevie. . .

While he was trying to work out an appropriate way of introducing himself, death and deliverance dropped out of the sky. A blue 'Hawk came round the far edge of the larch forest behind his starboard wing and swept in at zero feet with all six barrels pumping steel. The line of Mutes attempted to scatter, but the 'Hawk pilot had

positioned himself well, catching the line end on. All fourteen went down spraying blood as the needlepoint rounds scythed through their bodies.

Steve threw the cockpit cover open, and hauled himself out with infinite care. He could no longer put any weight on his left ankle.

Terrific He shifted his butt onto the rim of the cockpit and watched the Skyhawk make a climbing turn to port. Steve shuffled along to the port side emergency panel, released the catch, and got his hands on the survival kit. He tossed the rations and first aid packages aside, revealing the loaded pistol in its neatly packed shoulder-holster. Pocketing the spare magazines, he pulled out the pistol, then limped back towards the cockpit and stood with his right hand thrust inside, concealing the gun.

He was hoping the Skyhawk pilot might land and offer a lift on his buddy frame. If he did, Steve planned to shoot him and move on. But the Skyhawk did not land.

It continued to circle overhead.

Commander Bob Carroll was not in a rescuing mood today

Steve gazed up at the 'Hawk and tried to work out what to do. The problem was solved by the arrival of a camouflaged SkyRider. The kind used by AMEXICO.

Definitely not good news.

The SkyRider made a low pass over Steve's position, then climbed back to make an approach and landing on his port side, bumping to a halt about eighty yards away.

Beyond the effective range of his air pistol. The pilot kept the engine running. The passenger canopy opened.

A helmeted figure in camouflage fatigues got out, came round the nose of the SkyRider and stood watching him.

Steve tightened his grip on the hidden pistol.

A second helmeted figure came out from behind the SkyRider carrying a rifle. He went down on one knee and took aim. The rising sun that warmed Steve's back flared briefly off the lens of a telescopic sight as a triple volley tore into his right shoulder, slamming him back against the cockpit. The pistol flew out of his hand as it jerked open, bounced off the seat and fell beyond reach.

It doesn't hurt, Brickman. Nothing hurts any more. Steve straightened up and put his weight on his good leg as the first helmeted figure pulled a pistol from his shoulder holster and walked towards him. As he got closer, he raised his helmet visor.

'Hiya, John. So this is how it goes, huh?'

Chisum nodded and levelled the pistol at Steve's chest.

The three barrels were barely a foot away. 'I hope you understand.

This is nothing personal."

Steve gave a tired laugh, remembering Malone. Forgive me little

sister! A short agonised cry burst from Roz's lips as she was hurled backwards from the water pan by an invisible blow to her chest. The force lifted her off her knees and sent her sprawling on the dusty ground.

Cadillac, Clearwater and Meri rushed to pick her up, carrying her by the arms and legs to where a blanket had been spread out. Cadillac knelt down and cradled her head. Roz looked shocked and bewildered.

Her eyes moved desperately from face to face but didn't seem to focus.

'Oh, Sweet Mother!' cried Cadillac. He threw out a hand to try and staunch the blood that welled from a jagged hole between her breasts.

Roz gripped Clearwater's wrist fiercely. 'The knife!

Use the knife! Save my child!' Clearwater began loosening the thongs that held Roz's leather bodice together. There was blood everywhere.

She turned to Meri. 'Quick! Unwrap her skirt, then bring the cloths and water.'

As the woman got busy, Clearwater ran to fetch the knife which lay on the whetstone. When she returned, Roz's eyes had started to glaze.

Clearwater straddled her right thigh and told Meri to hold her down her other leg.

'What are you going to do?!' cried Cadillac.

Clearwater blocked his outstretched hand and pushed it away. 'What she asked me to do! Be strong' She took a deep breath, called upon Mo-Town to aid her, then placed the knife against Roz's distended belly and made a lateral cut through the skin and then another deep cut through the abdominal wall. A crescent-shaped gap opened up, exposing the swollen uterus, covered with a film of blood. Clearwater began to cut it open from the top down, to free the unborn foetus within.

Cadillac gave an anguished shout then shut his eyes and held onto Roz as her life drained away. He heard the sucking cry of a new born' child.

'It's a girl,' said Clearwater.

Cadillac looked up. The lower half of Roz's body had been covered up.

The baby' lay on a clean cloth, its umbilical severed and tied. Meri cleaned its eyes and finished drying it then passed it to Clearwater, who cradled it tenderly and let it suckle her left breast.

Cadillac read the comforting message in her eyes. The shared sorrow, the shared love. Their lives had come together again. The bond between them had always been.

Now it would take on a new richness, for they both knew that within them lived the spirit of the one the other had loved and lost. As long as they drew breath, Roz and Steve would never die.

He laid Roz gently to rest on the blanket, kissed her still warm lips then reached out to touch their child. The baby's head was perfectly formed and covered with wispy white hair. She was smooth-boned with a pale flawless body and dark arms - like wings.

And they called her Snow-Raven.

"... Man-Child or Woman-child the One may be Whosoever is chosen shall grow straight and strong as the Heroes of the Old Time The morning dew shall be his eyes the blades of grass shall be his ears and the name of the One shall be Talisman..."