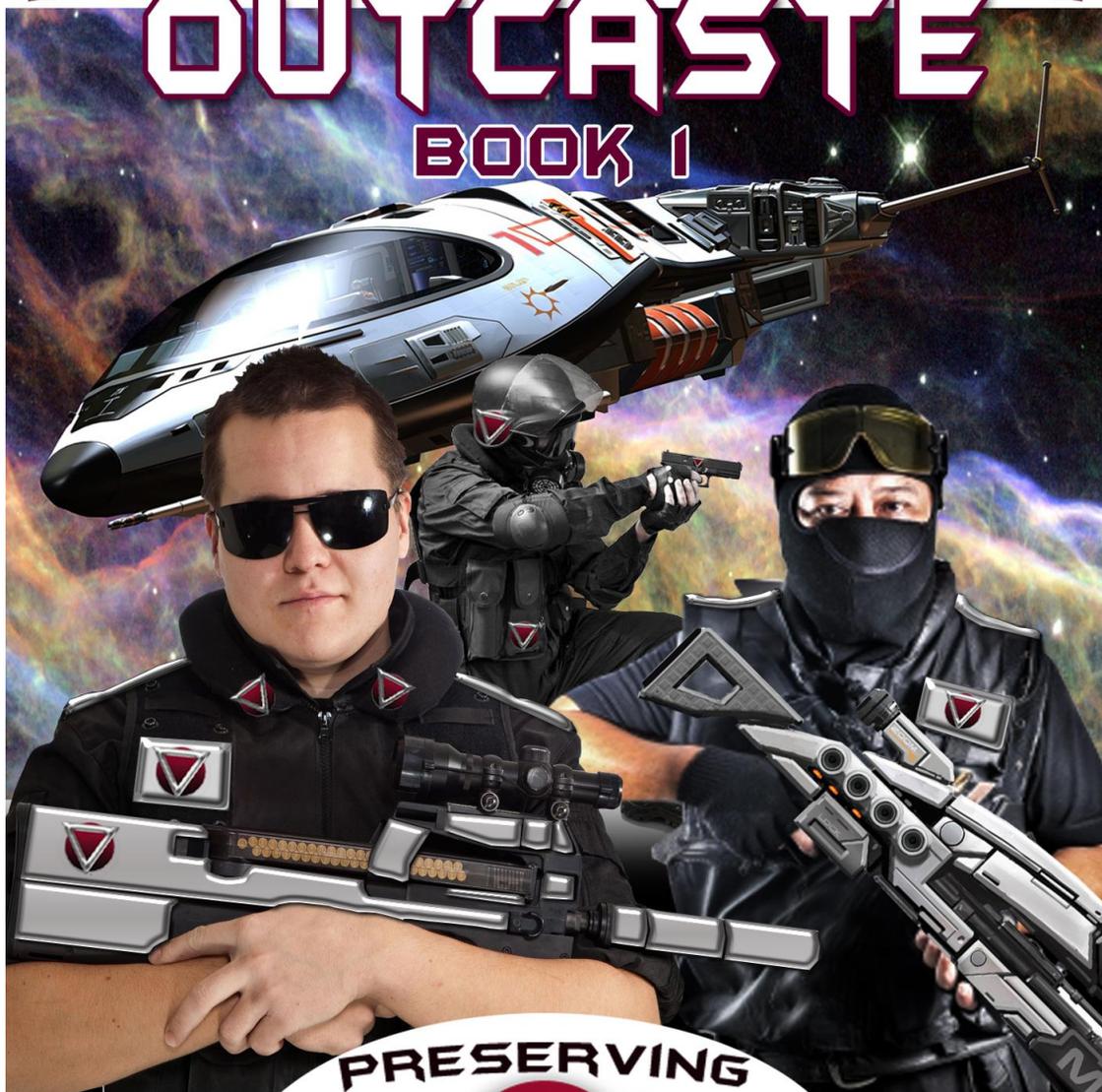


SPACEFORCE OUTCASTE BOOK 1



PRESERVING



THE
PEACE

PENELOPE IRVING

OUTCASTE

Episode One of Spaceforce

by Penelope Irving



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One

The boy kept his head bent down as he heard the footsteps, vellum on glass, soft as a whisper. The library was almost in darkness, and he had no idea whether there was anyone else in the temple. If they were not alone, he knew she would not stop.

A light bobbed at the edge of his field of vision, and her intense, spiced scent reached him. She smelled of a mixture of incense, musk flowers and something else he could not identify.

“Jhal. Still here? It’s very late, you know.”

He lifted his eyes. She was standing in a pool of light created by the votary candle she held, casting shadows under her face. “I know. But I want to finish this chapter.”

“Do you have to be in the forge tomorrow?”

“Yes. At dawn.”

“Then it is very late for you.”

“What other time do I have to study, Murai?”

The light, the smell, came closer. He stayed still, listening to his own heartbeat and feeling the heat of shame on his forehead. The proper attitude, he knew very well, was to feel pride in his apprenticeship, and peace in his calling to work metal in the forge to make swords, spears and other things for the town’s swordbearers. He should not feel dread in his soul to think that he would have to spend the whole of tomorrow’s daylight hours bent over an anvil under his father’s eye, his skin reddened in the heat of the fire and his hands growing calluses.

It might have been worse. His family could have been Earthturners, called to work in the fields, or Dustgatherers, who gathered refuse and swept the streets. But an understanding of the reality of what his life would be had come over him in the last three months since he had left school and started his apprenticeship; day after day, year after year, stretching ahead from sixteen to one hundred and seventy, entombed in a boiling forge from daybreak to dusk.

Fingertips brushed his jaw. They were alone.

“Close the book, Jay,” she said, in her soft authoritative murai’s voice. “You’ve done well for one night to get so far into such a difficult text.”

He shut the pages carefully, and looked directly into her face. He had determined to say this now, before he lost courage, and before he was too much in her power. “Murai Shiell - you know that I can do this, don’t you.”

“I know you can do lots of things, Jhal.”

“Studying the scriptures, commenting on them, making sense of philosophical writings. When I was sweeping the floors and you let me sit in on your classes, I could keep up with your students, and they were two or three years older than me and had been learning those things since they could talk.”

“Keep up with them? You were far ahead of my brightest students last year. That’s why I’ve encouraged you to come here and continue studying, even though you have to work during the day now.”

“But why? Why have you encouraged me, if I have to spend my life making swords and buckles? Is there no way I could become an acolyte? Is there any path I could take to become Priest Caste?”

She laid the candle on the table and kneeled by his chair. “Jhal. There is no path. You know that.”

“Lonn doesn’t say anywhere in his Word that we have to stay in the caste we were born into. Lonn says we should gaze into our inner flame and see the image of God.”

“Lonn, my little candleflame, says many things which we, mortal souls, can’t live up to in real life. On Anhual, of all places, we are as bound as the rock to the ground.”

“Why here, why Anhual?”

“Oh Jay, we are so far from anywhere, so far from the great worlds of the Empire, from Taysar, from the Court, from anyone who thinks, or lives, or does anything but just exist.”

“If you don’t like it here, why did you come?”

“I was sent by the temple elders. It wasn’t my choice. But there are some good things, even on Anhual.”

Darkness of disappointment and confusion clouded his mind, mingling in with the rush of excitement as her mouth covered his and her hands slid under his tunic against his burning skin. Of all the things that he shouldn’t do, this was so far beyond inappropriate that he had no fear any longer. Besides, she was Murai, and she had taught him what to do.

Two

He lay on the warm flagstones before the great fire, between the triangular shadows of the two triluminary statues. The only light came from the flames. Beyond the shadows, the boundaries of the hall disappeared into vast darkness.

Strange to think that in less than eight hours the hall would be filled with sunlight and the acolytes of the town, offering their morning devotions. Shiell would be leading the ceremony not far from where she lay now on her cloak, her skin glowing amber in the firelight.

He felt detached and curious about the contrast, now that the flame was doused. He was emptied, mind and body and emotion.

She opened her eyes and ran her gaze over him. "What a fine body you have, Jay, so young."

He looked at his hands. They had rough pads on each finger, and burn scars on the knuckles. So young, so soon. Four months ago he had been in a schoolroom.

Shiell saw, and laid her own fine, soft hands over his. "It isn't fair, Jay. But it's the way things are."

"Is this the way things are, Murai? Who else does this?"

"You question things a lot."

"How many other people live normal lives on the surface, but do this when the doors are closed?"

Her head lolled back, towards the fire. She was not Murai now. "Not many. It finds itself out, for most people. I'm - unusual."

"Why?"

She rolled round quickly and looked directly at him. "You know very little, Jay. What do you think usually happens when people are close, like this? Why do you think it's reserved for marriage, and all the ceremony that goes with that?"

"Tradition, I thought."

"Reproduction, you fool. Sex makes babies, didn't you know that?"

"Yes, but - not for you?"

"No. Not for me. When I was a little girl, I was ill, and I had to be treated with strong chemicals and rays, and the doctors told my parents that I would never be a mother. At that time I knew that I should become a celibate Murai, because I would never marry. But I get so lonely, Jay. Lonn may have been a great prophet, but he's a poor bedfellow. When I saw you - your eyes full of fire and hunger - " She reached out and traced her fingers on his cheek.

There was a noise, far back in the room.

Shiell snaked to her feet in a flash of movement, her face suddenly pale and tense with actual terror. She threw her cloak around her, and stood still until the silence grew again.

"There's nobody there," Jay said, but in a whisper. He did not move.

"Ssh!"

There was no further sound, no more movement. Eventually, Shiell relaxed and wrapped her cloak more firmly around her body. "You should go."

Accepting his dismissal, Jay climbed to his feet and pulled on his few discarded garments. The mystery, the distance, was crystallising around the Murai again as he glanced back at her.

"Jhal - I'm sorry there's nothing I can do for you."

He stopped at the door. "Why are you afraid?"

"Because - if they caught me - it would be the end. I told you earlier that I didn't want to come here, to this God-forsaken world. I was exiled here, because they guessed my proclivities,

and they thought I would keep out of trouble out here. I was given a second chance, but if they ever find me out for sure - "

She left the consequences unstated. He couldn't properly imagine them.

Her face softened, and she came forward with an outstretched hand. "There may be a way. I didn't want to say it, because it would mean sending you away."

He said nothing, not wanting to appear to encourage something that she clearly did not like.

"You've learned a lot in this last year, enough to pass as a religious acolyte. If you were to disappear from Anhual, and reappear somewhere far away – Taysar itself perhaps - no-one would know you, you might be taken in by one of the temples - you would have to change your name, and to live an untruth. Could you really do that, Jhal?"

Could he? He thought he was born without that essential moral element, the one that urged all men to speak the truth; and with the intellect to weave the elaborate dance that helped almost everyone to avoid it. He had never had any difficulty in telling outright lies, and he had, in early childhood, learned the power that gave him.

"Stay after class tomorrow night," she said. "We'll talk about it further then. I have some robes you could take, and a spare copy of the Writings of Lonn. If - you do this, it would be good to go soon - there will be so many pilgrims in the Capital on Taysar for the Festival of Stars, no-one would question you closely."

He tried to look solemn when he parted from her, but his heart was blazing with eagerness as he sneaked home along the unlit road.

Three

There was a disturbance in the town the next day. His father's forge was on the main street, and from where he worked he could see through the door, always open in the heat, directly out to where people walked past. At around midday there was a small scurrying crowd, followed by a procession of figures in robes, followed by some more onlookers.

His father left his anvil and stood at the doorway to watch. After a few minutes, he turned back to his work with a grunt, saying nothing.

Jay did not ask him what he had seen. As far as possible, he never spoke to his father. And his own interest was only faint; everything that happened on Anhual now seemed diminished and insignificant, and of no importance to him. He hardly even resented the forge, or his father's bent, glowering figure.

As soon as dusk fell, and he could escape, he ran straight for the road that led up the hill to the temple, without going home first to wash or eat. If he could catch the Murai before classes began, he would not have to wait another two hours before hearing what else she had to say about her plan for him.

He was hoping, too, that she would give him some money. He had a little, but he knew that it would be nowhere near enough to buy passage on a starship, let alone to masquerade as a priest.

He sensed that there was something wrong as soon as he reached the gates. The doors to the temple were standing open, and outside, knots of acolytes and students were huddled in groups like gawpers outside a house fire.

An acute and sensitive fear stopped him going any nearer, and making himself conspicuous in his worker's clothes amongst all those robes. Instead, he hid behind the tall gatepost and watched.

Murai Shiell emerged from the main doors, flanked either side by four priests in elaborate robes. Her demeanour, and theirs, told him that she was being led away, and the atmosphere of disarray amongst her students and the temple staff - he recognised the candle-lighters, and the polishers - suggested confusion, sudden catastrophe.

He shrank further back against the gatepost, desperate that she should not see him. Even if she did not betray him, he was afraid to catch her eye.

When he looked round again, there were another two priests leading out someone else. Jay craned his head dangerously from his hiding place to see whose face was half-concealed under the robe and recognised Lean Duhal, one of the young novices serving his first few years of dedication to the temple. Duhal's head was bowed low, quite clearly in shame, and with a physical sensation of coldness Jay understood that she had been with him too.

He crouched down lower and forced his mind to work. There was every possibility that they had looked for him in the temple and, not having found him there, they were going now to seek him at the forge or at his family's house. Even if they did not know about him now, Shiell might betray him when they questioned her. The decision was made for him now, in this brutal way. He could not even risk going back home before fleeing, but he could not set out as he was.

The crowds were outside watching the retreating prisoners and their guards. Jay walked quickly round to the side gates and through the back entrance to the temple, which was never locked, unnoticed. As he had expected, the building was empty. If they were looking for him, they had finished their search in here. He slipped into the Murai's private robing chamber.

Her scent still lingered in the atmosphere. He paused for a moment in the low candlelight, looking at a scene which told him that she had been surprised in here; with Duhal, presumably. On the bench was a neatly folded novice's robe. When he picked it up, some other garments and a bag tumbled out onto the floor.

It was a strong fabric satchel, bearing the crest of a temple he did not recognise, finely worked in silver. Inside was a well-read copy of the Word of Lonn, with the same crest stamped on the inside cover, and a pouch full of silver coins.

She had prepared this for him, he was sure of it. She had meant to give him this embroidered shift and silver-wrought belt and acolyte's robes to enable him to impersonate a pilgrim from a good Priest Caste family.

A curious transformation happened when he put them on. It seemed as he looked at himself in the mirror that the boy whose image he saw was not an imposter, but a reality separate from himself. He had created a new person, he had become something different in the very act of clothing himself. After all, who ever dressed in the clothes of another caste? What servant ever wore fabric like this? Who, looking at him, would begin to guess that he was not what he seemed? He practised the shy, downturned look of the novice priest, sneaking an upward glance from under his eyelids.

It was the same power that the ability to speak untruths gave him, except that this was orders of magnitude more exciting. Emboldened, he swung the bag over his shoulder and stepped out into the main hall.

He walked almost straight into one of the unfamiliar priests.

Jay bowed, reacting on instinct. "Greetings. Excuse me, I wonder if you could tell me - I'm looking for Murai Shiell."

"You won't find her here."

"Indeed? I thought this was her temple."

"It was, until today. She's been reassigned."

"Ah. I had a message for her from the Murai of my own temple. I'm on a pilgrimage to the Capital for the Festival of Stars and I was asked to stop off here. Where might I find her now?"

"I couldn't say."

Jay bowed his head again and tried to move past.

He held his breath as the priest touched his arm with his staff, and turned back to him respectfully.

"What is your name, novice?"

"Jhannon," he said, at random.

"From the Temple of the Triluminary on Calcua, I see."

"Yes, sir."

"I've heard it's very beautiful."

"It is, sir, yes."

"You've come a long way and you've a long way to go. I'm sorry you will have to take disappointment back to your Murai, but you may tell him that Shiell will not be able to receive messages for quite a while."

Jay nodded, bowed and escaped, his heart thudding with excitement. With each step he put between himself and the temple, his sense of exultation mounted. There was no sign of Shiell or Lean Duhal on the road, and the crowd had dispersed entirely. He longed to break into a run, past the turning that would take him back down into the town, and straight ahead towards the sea where the local docks were, but he made himself fall into a typical slow, drifting pace.

He passed two lay members of the Priest Caste walking together up the hill, and exchanged bows with them without hesitation or recognition. It was going to be easy, he realised, because no-one expected deception and yet he had no difficulty practising it. He had not, before this day, recognised the extent of his gift, and the immensity of its value.

At the docks he gave his name as Jhannon of the Temple of the Triluminary, Calcua, and paid for his passage to Anhual's only starship dock in the Land of the West with two of the silver coins. He was shown respectfully to a window seat in the vessel by two uniformed servants who would not even look directly into his face. His fear of being recognised by someone from the town had vanished now. Everyone saw what they expected to see.

And Jhal the apprentice metalworker no longer existed, if he ever really had. He had been a bad dream to himself since descending from school into the forge. As the transport lifted from the ground with an odd, cushioned sensation of flight, he wondered very briefly about what would happen to Shiell. She had run her own risks in full knowledge of the probable consequences, and it wasn't as if she had confined her favours to him.

A sharp sensation of unease spoiled his euphoria as the coastline receded, and he watched the familiar shore become like a line in a drawing. Despite his disgust at the thought of her with Duhal, the image stirred a craving that he knew he could never satisfy again. He glanced across at his immediate travelling companion, a sedate young woman of the Swordbearer Caste, and tried to imagine what she looked like without all the clothes swordbearers wore. There were so many elaborate layers of armour that peeling each one off must add to the excitement, and the body eventually uncovered must be all the softer and slighter and sweeter.

The swordbearer looked up from her pad, and their eyes met briefly. He dropped his lids in the correct fashion and inclined his head respectfully. No, never again.

Four

It was a long journey, even by military corvette. When the moon came into view at last, it had been seven hours since they had lifted off from the camp on Antra. As the ship began its descent towards the moon's main city, Paril moved closer and said in a low voice, "Everything below us belongs to Lord Carral, sir."

Jay made an expression of interest, and continued to watch the farmlands rolling below. Captain Paril would not have said that to Neveth, their commander on Antra, on two counts. He would not have used the archaic honorific, as if Carral, technically nothing more than a Swordbearer Caste general in rank, were of the Noble Caste, and he would not have implied that he owned the lands as his clan had done in the old days. But then, Jay had made it safe for Paril to say things like this to him.

When he stepped out of the ship, the first breath of cold air was like breathing in the past. He stopped for a moment to take in the dark, bleak landscape and the castle – it really was a castle – brooding on the hill above the landing site. It was home, or unpleasantly like it.

"Impressive, isn't it, sir," said Paril, with quiet confidence.

Jay nodded, feeling real and unexpected misgivings for the first time. There seemed to be no-one there to meet him, though he was supposed to be taking command of an entire army, and as they walked up the rough-made road towards the castle gates, the sky darkened overhead and icy rain began to spit against his face. He had left Antra that morning in brilliant warm sunshine, but he remembered weather like this.

"Is it always this cold?" he said.

"No, no, sir – in winter, it's colder."

"Delightful."

"You'll get used to it, sir. Cold purifies the soul, they say."

"My soul is pure enough."

It ought to be, he added to himself. Seven years in the temple, becoming a perfect imitation of a young priest, turning from novice to acolyte until the prospect of having to choose a particular path galvanised him to escape the robes and rituals. He could not face spending the rest of his life pretending to be a murai, or an administrator, or even a martial arts master. He never wanted to light a candle or fake meditation again.

He had prepared the path very carefully for his second unconventional caste conversion. Instead walking out on the spur of the moment with a bag of stolen money, he had solemnly informed his Murai that he felt called to go on a solitary, itinerant mission amidst the scattered communities on the forest world of Neelor. He planned to walk with a staff and the Word of Lon through that planet's vast forestlands, stopping at towns and villages to offer instruction, aid and inspiration to people who saw little of other worlds. It was a perfect place to disappear. Others who had trodden that path had followed it for years, reporting back to the temple only very occasionally. As far as the temple was concerned, Jhannon the missionary was still wandering in the forest on a distant planet.

Perhaps he was, too. As Captain Paril knocked with the hilt of his sword on the great iron doors of the castle, Jhaval the newly-made commander squared himself to meet his master.

Six thousand years ago his kind ruled the Empire. The great, hereditary dynasties of warlords, feuding amongst and allying themselves with each other, and all resenting the scholars and the priests; in this remote satellite world, a colony planted in the earliest days of imperial

expansion, the influence of civilisation and the Court had not really changed the way the people had lived for millennia. Carral was a general, trained at Par Sheval and presented at Court to pledge service to the Empress, but as he advanced down the length of the great hall his bearing and his manner made it obvious that he considered himself to be a warlord still. He was massive, bearded, his hair bronzed and arranged into elaborate spikes. At either side, pacing at a steady distance, were two swordbearers who comported themselves like a feudal retinue.

Paril made a kind of deep, sweeping bow that Jay had not seen before. Jay, in his turn, inclined his head in the usual way.

“Commander Jhaval at your service, sir.”

“You’re young. Younger than I thought you would be.”

He had an odd accent, much deeper than Paril’s faint lilt.

“Eventually I will overcome that fault, sir.”

Carral’s expression was unreadable for a moment, then he grinned and held up his fist in a gesture of welcome. “It’s what I asked for. What Car’a’vil needs. Send me your rising star, I said to Neveth. But see that he’s a good man, I said to Paril. Let’s hope they haven’t let me down.” He punched Jay on the arm, and turned with a sweep of his cloak to lead the way back into the fortress.

Paril flashed him a look of half-smiling apprehension. Jay returned a neutral gaze, and followed the general. Soon, he thought – as soon as he was sure of his ground here – he was going to have to start distancing himself from Paril. It was good to have an ally, it had been imperative to cultivate his confidence on Antra when he had heard that there was urgent need for a commander on Car’a’vil, but he was wary of letting someone get too close. He lived over a thin surface of danger, and anyone who got to know him might slip through it.

Carral led them through wide, half-darkened stone corridors into an extraordinary vaulted chamber larger than the great hall in the Temple of Lonn. The main light came from a huge fireplace, which seemed to be burning something organic.

“The great hall,” said Carral, flinging his arms up and making his voice echo. “In the old days, the clan would gather in here to feast, and debate laws, and hold trials.”

“Yes, I see. It’s certainly large enough.”

“When the clan of Vil ruled this world, every mountain and all the sea, and the priests and scribes feared the sword. Does this kind of talk bother you, eh?”

“Not at all, sir. Why should it?”

“It bothers the straw men on Antra. Nobles and swordbearers running around for the scribes and the priests like servants. We don’t live like that here on Car’a’vil.”

“So I’ve been given to understand.”

“But I wanted fresh blood, to give us new training, new techniques. My cousin, Naril – you heard what happened.”

Jay knew of course that Carral’s previous commander had died in a hoverspeeder, flown into a mountain. He nodded sympathetically.

“When this one’s old enough he’ll take over.” He indicated Paril. “He’s my closest kinsman, the next in line – I have no son. He told you this?”

“Yes, sir.”

“I sent him to be trained on Antra, but I’d rather have him here. With Naril gone, I need my close clansmen around me, and I need a fully trained commander in the meantime. Teach him everything you know.” He waved his hand, and a servant, who had been waiting near the door, brought him two drinking vessels from the back of the room.

Jay received his, watching carefully, unsure of the ritual. The same servant fetched a jug and poured a dark liquid into Carral's tankard, and then his own.

"Glyn juice," said Carral. "The noble drink of Car'a'vil. Made from the berries of the glyn bush – only grows on this moon. We leave it to ferment. Ever tried fermented juice?"

"No, sir." It was in fact illegal both to make it and to consume it, and he continued to watch the general. If this was a test, either of his warrior daring or his moral integrity, he did not want to be wrong-footed.

But Carral tossed the juice carelessly back, and Jay immediately followed suit. It seared his throat, making him swallow hard to stifle a cough. Carral grinned at his reaction, then turned to the door.

"Here she is! Where have you been lurking? Come in and meet our new commander."

She came out of the shadows of the doorway, not hesitantly but calmly. For a moment, Jay thought he was looking at a daughter whose birth must have disappointed Carral. As she came towards him, he saw an expression of longer years than that in her eyes. The eyes arrested his senses. Not only were they dark, which was unusual enough; they were deep, rich brown, glinting almost black like an animal's.

"My wife, Dazil of Vil," said Carral, without ceremony. "This is Jhaval – don't know his clan."

"It's a very small obscure one," said Jay, locked into the velvet gaze. He deliberately savoured the few moments it took before he could break off and linger over the rest of her. Her face made intriguing angles of the firelight, her skin was white and asked to be touched, her body – firmly enclosed in brass, leather and layers of long silk robes – was a strong, slender secret.

"You are welcome to the hold of Car'a'vil, Commander Jhaval."

Her voice was low and lilting, and though he did not know the local ceremonies Jay could guess that she was greeting him somewhat more correctly than her husband had. He made a general-purpose bow. "I'm honoured to serve here, my lady."

"May your time with us be full of fire and song."

It sounded almost like a hope, or a promise.

Five

Find the job that no-one else wants to do, and do it well.

That was the advice an old alai had given him once when, as a novice, he had confessed to being ambitious. He found that as a way of gaining favour it worked as well in the camp as in the temple.

It was obvious why Carral had been unable to find anyone senior or experienced to take over command of the Car'a'vil battalion. Quite apart from the remoteness of the world and Carral's reputation as a difficult and capricious general, it was soon clear that his initial impression that the way of life here was backward had not been a superficial prejudgement. On his first walk through the town near the stronghold, servants actually gathered in the main street and bowed as he and his men passed. The smith who took his sword from him to embellish it with the crest of Car'a'vil would not look at him, keeping his eyes downcast like an acolyte in the presence of an alai. On the other hand, when a group of priests walked on the other side of the street the swordbearers actually stared at them, with something near hostility. Jay inclined his head nonetheless, and the senior priest looked affronted at the acknowledgement.

In fact, he had never seen such caste segregation before. Even on Anhual, where life had been provincial and traditional, there had been a proper, practical degree of interaction in everyday life. On Car'a'vil, the swordbearers and the scholars and priests seemed to hate each other, and the servant castes were regarded by them all as a form of sub-sentient life.

The atmosphere this generated was strange to Jay, who had become very used to the civilities of Taysar and the Capital. Amongst these swordbearers, there was little culture and less spirituality. There was also a lack of something else, which he had not expected.

On his second day, he was introduced to the battalion by Commander Saghat, an older swordbearer not of the clan Vil.

From what Paril had intimated – not directly, since the young captain was too polite to speak ill of a superior and an elder – Jay had realised that Saghat could be a problem for him. He was an outsider who had been posted to Car'a'vil from some other world many years ago, but he had not found favour with Lord Carral and – not being a clansman – had not advanced in his service. Very obviously, he had not been given Jay's assignment despite his great seniority.

Jay stepped up onto the platform and surveyed the ranks of men before him, stretching in well-polished, geometrical lines to the far distance of the parade ground. He raised a fist and, in precise unison, the men returned the salute.

He had never addressed a parade ground before, but he had seen it done. After a hesitation which might have seemed like a thoughtful pause, he spoke out.

“Swordbearers of Car'a'vil.” His voice rang off the stone walls. “You will know already that my name is Jhaval, that I am a commander from Antra, and that I am your new chief. I'm sure you all serve with honour. I will expect more than that of you. I want to see fire, too. Of myself, you should find that I grant no favours, and make no preferences. I look at each of you on your own merits as a swordbearer and a warrior. Be true to your heart, and you will prosper.”

He turned to Saghat, who looked ill-tempered. “Where are the women?”

“What?”

“This army appears to consist entirely of men. Where are the women?”

“Women don't serve as swordbearers on Car'a'vil.”

“Then you’re wasting half your fighting force. Carral told me you have too few swordbearers here – no wonder. Issue an edict that all willing girls above the age of sixteen should report to the barracks immediately.”

“Girls! Who would train girls!”

“I will, if necessary.”

“Who would they train with? They can’t fight.”

“You’re wrong. Women don’t have the same physical strength as men, but strength is only part of what makes a warrior. Technique, precision, mental focus are all as if not more important. On Antra, there are some women masters of the firestaff and long sword that no man I know could beat. You should know this, Saghat. There might be no women swordbearers on Car’a’vil, but there are elsewhere in the Empire. You don’t come from here, do you?”

Saghat disdained to answer, turning aside with a sneer. At the back of his mind, a soft click of insight suggested to Jay that Saghat’s posting here so long ago might well have been exile in all but name.

The edict demanding daughters went out to the swordbearer families of the world and returned, out of a possible three hundred or so, four nervous but determined-looking girls. Jay was not discouraged. There were at present no facilities to train or accommodate three hundred extra swordbearers anyway, and once he had proven his point with these four recruits, more would follow.

It was hard at first, though. None of the girls had even handled a weapon before, and could not train in the same classes as their male contemporaries, who had been learning to fight since they could walk. Anything they did know, they had picked up ad hoc from playing with their brothers. One of the girls, called Mareil, was her parents’ only child and had not even that advantage.

It was necessary to give the girls lengthy daily training sessions to bring them up to a basic level, so that they could join the other cadets as soon as possible. All four were keen, but Mareil was talented. She had a tall, lithe strength that made her particularly adept at moving a sword or rapier swiftly. With practice and instruction, she would be a good fencer.

She was also - attractive. All women were, and that was a problem, but he had to stand too close to her to position her hands on the sword and swing her arms round in the correct movement. One moment he was concentrating on executing, through her, the perfect starstriker arc; the next, he could smell her skin, and feel the strength of the body almost wrapped in his arms.

Carefully, consciously, he stepped away. “Now you try.”

She swung the sword through the arc, a movement of elegant beauty, and sought his approval with a smile.

“Excellent.” He turned to the other three. “I want you all to do it like that.”

As the other girls stepped forward in turn to practice the stroke, he noticed Paril hovering at the edge of the ground. He joined him. “Come to see that girls can’t fight?”

“No, sir – no. I agree very much with what you said to Commander Saghat, actually. I never thought anyone could make it work on Car’a’vil, though.”

“I’m making the best use of the resources here, that’s all. That’s my job, or part of it.”

“And there are some advantages,” Paril added, warmly.

Jay was surprised for a moment by his tone, but his meaning soon became clear. When he called the end of the session, Paril held out his hand to Mareil.

“Mareil and I have been betrothed for nearly a year,” said Paril, rather shyly. “We didn’t see each other for weeks on end, before.”

“I’m glad to have been of some service,” said Jay.

Mareil looked disconcerted. “It’s not the reason I joined, Commander. I wanted to.”

“I know. In fact, I’d like to give you some extra lessons, get you started on the firestaff. Tomorrow night, at twenty-two hundred hours. Can you stay up that late?”

“Yes, sir,” said Mareil quietly, and smiled again.

After a day’s training, the swordbearers ate together in the banqueting hall at the castle. Jay had tried to encourage the women to join the men, but they were still congregated in a group slightly apart from the others. Mareil was not with them that evening.

The officers, equally, tended to group themselves together at another bench, although the evening meal was supposed to be a time of intermingling and camaraderie. Sometimes Carral would put in an appearance, but tonight, Jay was alone until Paril joined him.

“Sir? Can I talk to you?” he said in a low voice.

“Of course. Always.” He moved along to indicate a seat on the bench.

“Not here. Somewhere private.”

Jay gestured to him to rise, and they walked out into the cold moonlight of the battlements. Although winter was closing in, the night was fine and dry.

After a long silence, Paril said awkwardly, “I mean no disrespect, sir.”

“Of course.”

“I think – well, I think that Mareil may admire you.”

“You’ve already told me that Mareil is betrothed to you,” said Jay, unblinking.

“She is. We are. But we’ve only gone through the first few preliminaries – nothing irrevocable. We haven’t got near the blood ceremony, or anything like that. If you wanted – there would be nothing to stop us dissolving it, no dishonour.”

“Don’t talk nonsense, Paril. I’m not interested in Mareil – though she’s a nice girl. I’ve no intention of marrying anyone. What woman would want me, anyway?”

“They all do,” said Paril abruptly. “You don’t seem to realise.”

“I have no intention of marrying anyone,” said Jay again. “Stop worrying. And hurry things along with Mareil, hm? It’s this long betrothal that’s making you nervous.”

Paril lifted his head for the first time, and half smiled.

“Why don’t you do the bit – what’s it called, where you spend a night awake together. It would be easy to arrange now you’re both living in the same barracks.”

“Her parents might not like that too much, sir.”

“Her parents be damned. I’ll be guarantor for your honourable conduct.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“No more nonsense, then?”

“No, sir.”

He clapped him on the arm, and they returned to the hall.

Next night, in the moonlit courtyard, at the end of a long and tiring day, he taught Mareil her first firestaff moves. She used a wooden dummy, as the weapon itself was too precious and too dangerous for a complete beginner to handle.

“See your target in the air, in your mind. Strike out, not with your body, but with your soul. There! Good, but not quite fast enough – you see, I can catch the staff and disarm you.”

He snapped his fist around the end of the pole and held her along it, feeling the tension in her hands.

It would be so easy. She was watching him cannily, quietly waiting for him to do something. And he could toss aside the end of the pole and show her the next move, or he could pull her hand along it and take hold of her. He could hear her breath caught, though her lips were slightly parted.

Carefully, he tipped the pole away and stepped back. "Try again."

She set her mouth firmly, nodded, and lunged.

It would be easy, but it wasn't difficult either to walk away from a frivolous temptation.

That night, however, he suffered for it. He lay sleepless, dry-mouthed, staring at the bright moon framed in the window above his bed. He wouldn't interfere between Paril and his intended because he chose not to, because – frankly – it wasn't worth the risk. But why, when his situation was uniquely precarious, did he have to suffer from this deep, dangerous craving? Surely, building a life out of nothing and lies like a fragile structure of chakram chips was a hard enough task, without every other woman setting his senses on fire and tempting him into trouble.

He got up to rub cold water into his face, then tried once more to settle by staring at the whitewashed wall instead of the moon. He had done Paril a favour and unfortunately Paril was unlikely ever to know, which was irritating but necessary. Perhaps, he thought, the universe would reward him in kind by keeping him safe from the same affliction. Love, that apparently compulsive and overriding state of being in love, was something he had escaped so far, and he had some reason to hope that he was immune from its power.

After only a few weeks of intensive training, he moved the women, without ceremony, into the cadet class. Although he did not personally supervise these sessions – in fact, it was Saghat who was commander in charge of cadet training – he went along on the first morning to watch his own success. He was rewarded by the sight of Mareil easily and elegantly overmastering three of the boys in a close jousting bout.

It was a quiet triumph over Saghat, who had no choice but to ignore the fact that four of his cadets were female. There was no need to drive the point home, so Jay watched from the edge of the field without approaching him. If Saghat treated the girls more severely than the boys, it would be one more experience for them to learn from. He did not intend to intervene unless he heard of gross unfairness.

Satisfied, he was about to leave in silence when he noticed that someone else was watching too. High above on the rampart which overhung the courtyard, Carral's wife was leaning over the battlement.

Since the battlement was also a pathway into the castle, he had an excuse to go that way. He took the stone steps as rapidly as he could without appearing to hurry.

Dazil, however, did not move as he approached, except to turn her head to greet him with a cool half smile. "Good day, Commander."

"My lady." Jay bowed shortly. It was politic to adopt the local mode of address. "Do you often watch the cadets train?"

"No. But Lord Carral told me that your girl swordbearers would be joining the others today, so I thought I would take a look. I've never seen women fight before."

"And what do you think?"

"From up here, I can't tell them apart from the men."

Jay looked over the courtyard. It was true that the girls were indistinguishable from the other cadets, at least at a first glance over the neat pairs of sparring partners.

“I can,” he said. “Women always move differently. You see the cadet in the front row, two from the right?”

“The one whose partner just fell over?”

“That’s Mareil. She’ll make a first class swordbearer.”

“It sounds very odd to hear someone say that about a girl. But Lord Carral always says we’re out of step with the modern world here.”

Tactfully, Jay did not comment on this. Instead, he said, “Would you like to learn?”

“I doubt Lord Carral would think that was appropriate.”

“So do I. What I asked was whether you would like to.”

He had moved close to her as they both leaned over the wall to watch the cadets. Now she drew herself up and looked at him, fully.

He was alarmed, just for a moment, that he might have made a mistake. Her unusual dark eyes were clear with meaning. But her expression softened as she held her gaze, and he felt the connection as distinctly as if she had reached out to touch him.

“No,” she said. “I don’t think so.”

“If you change your mind, I’m at your service.”

She bowed her head, and turned back to the castle.

Jay stayed where he was for some minutes, pretending to watch the activity on the field but instead sensing everything else immediately around him. The cold stone under his hands, the freezing wind against his right cheek, the smell of ice, and the distant, abrupt shouts from below. Winter, he thought, would be harsh on Car’a’vil.

Six

It was one mistake he never made, in fact; for if he had, he would not have survived so long. He saw and understood when the light of willing admiration shone in a woman's face. He knew for certain who would let him touch her, and not betray him. Sometimes the look was innocent and uncertain, as Mareil's had been, and sometimes it was direct, enticing, excited... as hers was.

He was kept awake at night now not by frustration, but by painful excitement and compulsive searching about in his imagination for an opportunity. As commander in chief of the Car'a'vil battalion, he was quartered in one of the principal bed chambers of the castle in the same wing as Carral himself. Carral's suite of rooms was at the far end of the same corridor, within hailing distance, and as far as Jay knew Dazil slept there too. So he was close to her at night, but the convenient proximity of the bed chambers also made his own room an impossibly dangerous meeting place. He knew of several possible venues outside the castle, such as an abandoned temple high on the north plain where he and the battalion camped overnight sometimes on long-range manoeuvres, but Dazil's ordinary routine was so bound by the confines of the castle that her going far beyond it would certainly be noticed by others. And it had begun to snow.

During the day, he conducted his duties as energetically as usual, but every action and every conversation, every sight and sound seemed transparent. Beyond them, he saw her dark eyes, touched the hot smoothness of her skin, tasted her mouth, and heard nothing. The heat of his thoughts was so intense that after dinner, especially if he saw her there – and she was always somewhere nearby now – he would walk out into the snow just to cool his brow.

He was careful to behave normally, and not to give any outward signs of his preoccupied state. All the while, he watched for any chance to be alone with her.

It was nearly three weeks before the Feast of the Vanishing Sun.

They had celebrated the archaic festival of the Feast of the Vanishing Sun on his homeworld, too, but it was unknown on the warmer worlds of the Empire where the length of the day did not vary dramatically with the changing seasons. It was supposed to have originated in the days before Taysans first sailed the sea-beyond-the-sky, in the now-uninhabited northern lands of Taysar where the sun shone feebly and coldly for only a few hours a day in the deepest part of winter, or did not rise at all for some months of the year. It was said that the Feast had been taken by early sailors to these colder worlds, to alleviate the hardship and gloom of dark times.

On Anhual, he recalled that it had been a festival full of spiritual significance and fervour. As kept by the swordbearers of Car'a'vil, it was an excuse to spend an entire night gorging on rich foods and drowning in fermented juice until no-one could stand upright, or move if he could.

The great hall of the castle was decked in gold, representing the hope that the sun would return, and tables had been moved in from the dining hall and piled with roasted animals, exotic fruits which were certainly not indigenous to Car'a'vil, mounds of melth stuffed with berries, and wide bowls full of steaming glyn juice. A warlord's throne of honour, a huge stone seat covered with elaborate carvings, had been carried to the podium at one end of the hall so that Carral could take his place in state and oversee his carousing henchmen.

It was an extraordinary scene. Jay wondered how much the Swordbearer Caste leaders knew about what went on out here; whether they were aware that General Carral was routinely addressed as 'my lord' by his warriors as if he were of the Noble Caste, that he presided over his

army like a figure from a historical drama, even that fermented juice was freely available and openly drunk.

He had developed a simple technique for avoiding glyn juice, which involved accepting a full pitcher at the beginning of the evening, keeping it with him, and regularly raising it to his lips without actually drinking any.

Carral, on the other hand, had clearly begun imbibing before the feast had properly started. When he stood up on the podium to open the festivities he had a goblet in one hand and his face was flushed.

“Men,” he said. “Swordbearers.”

The hall fell silent.

“Every year, every year at the Feast of the Vanishing Sun, we look back at the past, and we look forward, look forward to the future. Since I last stood here – since last year – Car’a’vil has seen bad times, and some good. Bad, Naril has gone beyond the mountains. Who would have thought, at the Feast last year, when he stood at my right hand. Good – we have a new commander in chief, Jhaval. Jhaval. Come here.”

Without enthusiasm, Jay joined Carral on the podium.

“He’s only have been here – what, six months? But in that time, he’s turned you all around. I don’t recognise the lacklustre spineless bunch of near-priests you were last summer. A toast! To Jhaval! Finest chief I ever had!”

The company raised their tankards over their heads and cheered, but Jay found himself catching the eye of Saghat, who stood at the edge of the hall. He had lifted his cup only as far as his mouth, and his eyes were filled with a cold, speaking dislike. The intensity, the naked envy, surprised him; he had another moment of connection with this man, and for a few seconds – while everyone else in the hall shouted the name he had assumed – he tried to work out what it meant. He was not afraid that Saghat knew his secret, because there was no way that he could and anyway he would surely have denounced him already if he did, but his instincts were firing danger signals.

“You’re popular, Commander.”

He broke off eye contact with Saghat and found that Dazil was almost pressing against his arm, having appeared closely behind him.

“Service is the only honour, my lady,” he said, stepping back to make a formal bow, and to get a clearer view of her.

She had dressed for the feast in the most magnificent of traditional warrior queen’s outfits, an elaborate, impenetrable shell of gleaming leather and metal with boots that didn’t end and a cloak of swirling dark red fabric. Only her hands and her face were bare; her fingernails were painted gold, her lips, blood red. It was impossible and delicious to imagine that there was a soft body inside that carapace.

“Let the festival begin!” cried Carral, and there was uproar as the crowd surged towards the tables of food. “Jhaval, take Dazil down there and make sure she gets something to eat before that mob devours it all,” he added, sinking back onto the throne and waving to the attendant servant for more glyn juice. It was clearly his intention to preside, warlord-like, for a while longer.

“It will be an honour, sir.” Jay held out his hand to her and she took it, with a dark sideways glance. Jay did not return the look. It was not necessary. Almost no verbal communication was. He could feel the tension in her fingers as she pressed them into his hand, he could sense her

excitement sharpened to a pitch of terror. As they approached the table he deliberately let her hand drop away from his.

“Glyn juice?” he offered, dipping the ladle into the central bowl.

She shook her head. “I don’t drink it.”

“Well, don’t tell the men, but nor do I.”

She smiled slightly. “I know that. I’ve noticed before.”

It occurred to him that before the night was very far advanced, nearly everyone around them would be in an intoxicated stupor. It was good to have established between themselves that he and Dazil would not be.

“So what does Lord Carral think of your abstemious habits?” he said. “Knocking back glyn juice seems to be an obligatory act of warriorhood here.”

“As I said before, Lord Carral doesn’t consider it appropriate for the lady of Car’a’vil to behave like a swordbearer.”

“You know, in other parts of the Empire most swordbearers want a warlike wife. It’s a mark of status if your wife can go several rounds with your clan rival.”

“How about you, Commander? Is that the kind of wife you want?”

“I’m quite content to remain unmarried for now, my lady, so I haven’t got round to thinking about specifics.”

She had taken some of the stuffed melth, and was using the spoon to mash it flat.

“I honour all women,” he added. “The choice would be difficult.”

“All women would return that honour, I’m sure. Choice is not always in our power.”

“Choice is the strength of the heart. It’s a Priest Caste saying.”

“How do you know it?”

“For one, on other worlds, the castes mix more freely together. And if I tell you something else in confidence, will you promise not to let the men know this either?”

“Of course.”

“My mother was a priest.”

“Your mother!”

“Quieter. Intermarriage isn’t entirely uncommon, on my homeworld. I realise it would be unthinkable here, so I’ve kept it to myself.”

“No wonder,” she said, but he could tell by her tone that she impressed by this exotic information. And she gave him a glance, openly curious now, as if she were studying him to see if his mixed caste origins showed somehow.

He smiled at her, deliberately, once, brilliantly.

There was a clatter from the far end of the room, and the hubbub dipped as everyone looked in the direction of the podium. Carral had attempted to climb down from the throne, apparently to move towards the feasting tables, and had staggered and half-fallen against one of the servants. With an inelegant movement, he lashed out at the man and struck him on the side of the face. The servant tottered and fell back under the force of the blow, but picked himself and Carral’s goblet up uncomplainingly.

Jay felt Dazil freeze at his side. With satisfaction, he helped himself to some melth.

The feast went on late into the night, with new dishes and refilled bowls of glyn juice brought to the tables in lengthy succession. When at last the servants began to clear the tables, Carral called for storytellers, and the men grouped in a loose gathering around the great fire.

This was an element of swordbearer culture which was crystallised into an art form in the civilised worlds, left to specialised performers with desirable qualities such as training and talent. On Car'a'vil, the tradition could still be seen in the raw. The swordbearers, most of them half-incoherent with the effects of glyn juice, would sit in a baying semi-circle and nominate a volunteer to tell a story of some heroic deed attributable either to the narrator or another famous warrior. The resulting performances were predictably unedifying.

Jay hung back as far as he could without appearing not to participate, searching with his senses rather than his eyes for Dazil as Carral slapped forward one of the older and more garrulous of the warriors into the centre of the circle. After dinner, she had moved away from him rather deliberately. He spotted her out of the corner of his eye, settled in one of the oversized wooden chairs near the fire, draped sideways over the arm with her chin in her hand. She was deep in the company, surrounded by others. There was no way at the moment that they could make contact with each other and slip out unnoticed, though the storytelling might have provided an opportunity.

Impatiently, he looked around behind him and caught a flash of movement which registered somehow as important. He had not seen who it was who had flitted out at the back of the hall, but there was something about the motion itself that he recognised. With one more glance back at Dazil, who this time caught his eye briefly, he broke away from the ring of spectators and went to investigate.

The back of the great hall was in darkness now and snow was drifting against the huge, black windows. He narrowed his eyes against the contrasting light, peering into the gloom. There was a scuffling sound, and then a slight moan.

Hand on the hilt of his sword, he stepped swiftly into the corner and pulled aside one edge of the heavy wall drape.

Paril raised his head from Mareil's neck and blinked at him, dazed. One hand was clutched round her exposed breast; her armour plate was abandoned on the floor, her tunic was unfastened nearly to her waist.

Jay took hold of him by the collar and hauled him off her. Paril struggled. Jay struck him neatly on the side of the jaw and he tumbled backwards, off balance, thudding onto the floor.

"Come on, Captain," said Jay briskly. "Pull yourself together."

Paril rolled over into a half-sitting position, rubbing his jaw. "Mareil," he murmured, with a slight edge of panic in his voice.

She was lying where she had fallen from under him, motionless on the floor. Jay knelt over her and checked her breathing, which sounded low and shallow against his ear. He patted her cheek gently, but her head lolled loosely sideways. When he lifted an eyelid, he saw only white.

It was clear that she was unconscious, and it was almost certainly an adverse effect of the glyn juice, but he knew nothing about treating people in this condition. Her symptoms seemed identical to those he would expect from a blow to the head. "What have I done to her?" said Paril, in a slurred groan.

"Nothing as yet, fortunately. Now we don't want to draw too much attention to this, Paril. Who is the healer here?"

"Na – Naghal."

Jay straightened up and looked over at the roaring crowd of swordbearers at the far end of the room. Mass attention was focussed on whoever was making a fool of themselves in the circle. He fastened Mareil's tunic up as quickly as he could, rolled her carefully onto her side with one arm propped under her body, and went in search of Naghal.

He found the healer stretched out full length on the floor near the fire, dribbling juice into his open mouth from a goblet held at arms' length. It did not look promising. Jay was hesitating, wondering whether it was worth even attempting to speak to him, when he became aware that Dazil had appeared suddenly at his side.

"Is there a problem, Commander?"

"Yes, there is. Mareil is unwell and that, I'm told, is the healer."

"Where is she?"

Jay led her to where Paril was now sitting against the wall, his head slumped in his hands. Mareil had not stirred. Dazil felt the pulse in her neck, pulled up her eyelid, then shook her shoulders and said her name in a low, firm voice. There was no response.

"It's alcohol poisoning," she said.

"She's been poisoned?"

"When fruit juice is left to ferment there's a chemical reaction which creates a poison called alcohol. It affects the brain in unpredictable ways. In most people it depresses motor functions, some people hallucinate, and a fair number of people become disinhibited, dangerous and temporarily psychotic. That's why it's illegal."

"I'll call the hospital."

"It's not necessary. There's nothing medics can do anyway. She'll recover on her own, when the poison works its way out of her body. We just have to take her somewhere quiet, and get one of the servants to watch over her to make sure she doesn't choke. Help me lift her."

"I think we should call for a proper doctor."

"Carral won't have them in the castle, and anyway – it would cause problems. My mother trained me as a healer, I know how to deal with this."

There was enough competence and authority in her manner to encourage Jay to believe her. Instead of helping her to lift Mareil he scooped the girl up in his arms – she was twice as heavy as he had expected, a sagging weight – and, leaving Paril where he was to look after himself, followed Dazil as she led the way from the hall.

She took him up two flights of stairs and along into the upper corridor where the sickrooms were, a part of the castle relatively unfamiliar to Jay. He had twice help others bring an injured man here for attention and rest, but had not lingered. There was a treatment room at the far end of the passage, and small bedrooms leading off. Dazil opened the nearest door and Jay was thankful to deposit Mareil, as carefully as he could, onto the bed. Dazil arranged Mareil's limbs in what Jay recognised as a recovery position, then pressed the call panel by the bed.

"Nan was probably asleep," she said, "but she's the most experienced of the healer servants. She'll make sure no harm comes to her."

They had not spoken since leaving the hall. After the clamour of the feast, the silence up here was profound and her voice, in contrast, startling. He turned to look at her properly, and found her gazing at him steadily with something like determination in her eyes.

His mind weighed the circumstance of the soon to be arriving servant against the ripeness of the moment, and then took the extra step that moved him into to danger. If it were ever to go wrong, it would be in that second he came close enough to smell a woman's skin.

She was still, her eyes open wide.

Slowly, with the greatest care, he pressed his mouth against her cheek. The skin was smooth and cool. His fingers found a soft point at the back of her neck just where hair met skin, and stroked there gently. She shivered and now she closed her eyes, and he felt a warm rush of breath which he covered with a kiss.

There was no resistance at all, not even the hesitation of inexperience. What had been stone and crystal flowed around his arms like water. He tasted her mouth, he found what softness he could under the hard leather, then he let go all at once. Subliminally, he had registered the approaching footsteps. When an elderly servant stumped into the room, dressed in a nightshift with a shawl thrown round it, they were three feet apart and outwardly composed.

“This lady is not used to glyn juice and needs to rest,” said Dazil. “You will watch over her and let me know immediately if there is any problem.”

The servant bowed deeply and took her place at the head of the bed. There was a chair there but Jay had the feeling that she was not going to sit down until they had left. Dazil had already turned to go, so he said, “Sorry about waking you up.”

She bowed even lower and looked terrified. Realising that he was disconcerting her, Jay followed Dazil back out into the quiet coolness of the hospital wing corridor.

They walked distinctly apart, slowly, in silence.

“You’re sure she’ll be all right?” said Jay eventually.

“She will feel extremely ill tomorrow, but as long as the servant watches her carefully, she won’t suffer any lasting damage. The one great danger is choking. The poison acts as an irritant on the stomach, often causes vomiting, and in someone who is unconscious – as you probably know – that can be fatal.”

“Not a particularly glorious death. Perhaps I should stay with her instead.”

“No. Nan knows what to do.” She paused and then said, “You’re curious.”

“Am I?”

“Talking to the servant like that, as if it mattered that we had woken her, as if it wasn’t her duty and privilege to be there.”

“I’m sure it is her duty and privilege, but courtesy and respect never go amiss. The serving castes are sentient beings, they have feelings like we do.”

“Did your mother teach you that?”

“Yes. She did.” He stopped and turned to face her, searching for another signal.

“We have to go back to the hall,” she said, her tone suddenly low and direct. “Someone will remember us leaving together, if we don’t return. Later...”

“Yes?”

“Carral will sleep soundly tonight.”

Jay was hesitating deliciously on the point of risking another kiss – out here in the corridor where anyone might theoretically come along – when distant shouts with an urgent tone, and one piercing women’s scream, made him draw back sharply. He hurried down the stairs towards the hall and burst into a scene of chaos.

Saghat was standing on a table, his sword drawn, stabbing viciously at anyone who tried to approach him. Carral was roaring at him to disarm and come down, but keeping well back. As Jay came closer, he saw one of the servants face down and unmoving on the floor with a puddle of blood spreading from under his arm.

He heard Dazil’s intake of breath as she arrived behind him and saw the injured servant. She started to hurry towards him, but Saghat swung his sword wildly in her direction. “Keep back! All of you!”

“Get away from her!” yelled Carral, and there was another scream as a white bolt of light seared a groove in table top, far wide of its target.

Swiftly, Jay made his way round to Carral and wrestled the gun from his hand. “Sorry, sir. You’ll kill someone. Leave him to me.”

Carral tottered backwards.

Jay turned the gun directly on Saghat and said, "Come on now. Drop the sword."

"Is that an order, Commander?"

"If you like. Drop the sword in front of you."

"Where do you get your courage from, Commander – a gun? Is that a swordbearer's weapon?"

"In that it's effective, yes. Drop the sword, Saghat. You don't know what you're doing."

"I don't know what I'm doing? The brave, the great, the handsome Commander Jhaval knows what he's doing, though. Do you think I don't see into your soul, Jhaval? You say one thing, you mean another, you say one thing, you do another – you're no true swordbearer."

Jay could feel a tight coldness closing round his chest, the closest sensation to fear he ever experienced. It was vitally important that he stopped this fool talking right now – in the name of the Empress, he could even be a latent prophet - but he could not risk firing the gun and killing him. Decisive and ostentatious action was needed to distract Saghat and keep him quiet. He flung aside the gun, drew his own sword, and leapt onto the table.

Saghat took an immediate and remarkably co-ordinated swing at him. Jay countered the move by striking the sword away, intending primarily to disarm him as quickly as possible without either of them losing their balance on the table. Saghat's grip on his weapon appeared firm, however, and he took another lightening plunge forward. The ferocity of the attack, which really meant to wound or kill, was unlike anything Jay had encountered before. He had been so sure of his advantage – sober against drunk – that he failed to defend himself by the split second that mattered, and he felt a clean slice of pain as the edge of Saghat's sword caught his body. Suddenly less concerned about keeping him intact, Jay slammed his fist into Saghat's mouth, kicked his shin from under him, and sent his sword clattering onto the floor.

He pinned him to the table top with one foot on his chest, pressing the point of the sword to his throat. Saghat's head had lolled sideways, his eyes half-closed.

Carefully, just in case Saghat was feigning unconsciousness, Jay took his sword away and used it to gesture to the nearest group of swordbearers who were standing upright. "You men. Help me to secure him. Take him to the cells, and make sure he's guarded all night."

Saghat was hauled off the table and stumbled away by four men, his arms secured behind his back. Jay retrieved Carral's gun from where he had tossed it, and returned it to its owner with a deep bow.

"Good work, Commander," said Carral, gruffly. He was uncoordinated, but still mentally perceptive. "You're bleeding. Get it seen to. Dazil, patch him up."

Jay glanced down at where Saghat's sword had cut a neat slash in the fabric of his tunic, just below his arm where the leather shielding did not protect him. He could feel blood trickling down underneath the breastplate.

"You had better accompany us to the sickrooms, Commander," said Dazil quietly. She was kneeling by the injured servant, who was stirring.

It was good to be acting under orders.

Alone in the curiously bright artificial light of the treatment room once the servant had been treated for what had fortunately turned out to be a superficial slash on the upper arm – it was a blow to the head which had knocked him out - Dazil would not allow him to remove his own breastplate or tunic. With her eyes downcast and modest, she unfastened the catches. "You mustn't move your arm unnecessarily in case there's muscle damage."

“It’s just a nick.”

“Which one of us is healer?”

“You, apparently. This isn’t how I’d imagined it would be.”

“Keep still.” She had opened up the tunic now, and was cleaning the blood away with a pad of something extraordinarily cold. “It’s just a shallow flesh wound. A bandage should knit it together in twenty-four hours. Hold still while I put on some of this.”

Some of this was a vicious antiseptic which made him wince, followed by a bandage tape which imparted an immediate buzzing, burning sensation as whatever it had in it started work on bonding the flesh together. Her fingers were light and cool on his bare skin. He waited until she had finished securing the bandage then, before she took her hands away, caught one and pressed it firmly against his chest.

For the first time since they had been alone again, she raised her eyes to his. “Commander,” she said, evenly. “You’ve been injured. I would recommend that you go to bed immediately and rest, to help the wound heal. I should make sure that my husband also gets safely to bed. It is my duty, however, to check on your progress later.”

She turned away and tidied the medical instruments and materials as he pulled on his tunic and breastplate, and left her with a full sweeping bow.

The door hummed. It was a tiny noise, but Jay rolled over immediately as if it were a fire alarm and stared at the silhouette in the open crack.

He had been lying awake in a trance of anticipation, holding rational thought carefully just out of reach. He did not want to think about the danger, or dwell on the fact that of all the women on Car’a’vil, this was the one he should leave alone.

As the door slid shut, she became a shadow in the moonlight.

He sat up and passed his hand over the bedside light, casting a very faint glow over the room. She was still fully dressed, though it was the deepest quarter of the night, and she appeared to be hesitating as she stood against the door. He swung off the bed and went close to her. She was ice, not crystal, and he could melt her.

“As I promised, Commander – I’ve come to see how you are.” Her voice was low and steady.

“I think I’ll survive the night. But perhaps you’d better take a closer look.” He stood absolutely still, close enough for her to feel his heat but not reaching out to her. Since she was here under her own volition, at a time of her choosing, he was suddenly determined to make her touch him first, and he could feel his heart thudding with excitement at the novelty. It was a very long time indeed since a woman had come to him.

After a few moments of immobile silence, she unfastened the catch on the shoulder of his nightshift and pulled it gently open to expose the site of the wound. She stopped, she let her hand fall away, and her eyes flicked up to meet his. He saw fear in her expression, mingled – again – with determination.

It was no longer a good idea to allow her time to think, or to talk. Abandoning all delicacy, he grabbed hold of her and kissed every patch of bare skin he could find. Soon, it was all of her.

“You’ve done this before, haven’t you?”

“Yes. Of course.” How could she think otherwise?

“How often?”

“I don’t remember.”

She exhaled slightly, not quite a sigh. “How have you managed it?”

“I’m careful.”

“The other women... who were they?”

“I can’t tell you that.”

“I don’t mean their names. I mean – what kind of women were they? Were they servants?”

“Some, yes. Not all.”

She was gazing at the ceiling, detached from him.

Women were inclined to be interrogative and he had noticed that they got petulant when he resisted their probing. There was only one really effective way to deflect the problem, even though he was now sleepy and irritated.

There was no sensation to compare with the silken warmth of a woman’s body; just to hold it all against him was worth the danger, even with the hungry fire doused. As he kissed her to stop her talking, desire stirred again almost painfully. He recognised the beginning of that glorious state of intoxication, when senses were sharpened and nothing more than a look or a brush of her fingers would set the air ablaze. It certainly did not always happen, but while it lasted it was exhilarating.

And she would almost certainly feel it too, if not now then soon. In the white heat of his own passion he could not accurately remember whether she had enjoyed the first time. Now, he held back and made sure that she did. It was a particular kind of satisfaction to make the cool and dignified Lady of Car’a’vil cry and thrash, helpless against a relentless assault.

Afterwards, there were no more questions. He fell into a heavy sleep with her curled up in his arms and when he awoke, in bright daylight, she had gone.

He dealt with Saghat first.

The cells were down in the deepest part of the castle, buried into the hillside. They were more commonly used to incarcerate wrongdoers from the town and its environs while they were awaiting trial, and there was a detachment of the army dedicated to guarding and handling prisoners.

The captain of the guard led him down to the holding cell where Saghat was slumped on a wooden bench, his arm over his eyes. He reacted to Jay’s arrival by rolling over and turning his face to the wall.

“Lord Carral has instructed me to release you,” said Jay, stonily. “I have to say I’m reluctant to do that.”

The captain bowed and left them alone.

Saghat did not respond.

“Since it was an order, I’m bound to obey. However, listen to this, Saghat. If you drink glyn juice once more while I’m Commander of Car’a’vil, I will lodge an official report with General Neveth. Do you understand?”

To Jay’s intense annoyance, Saghat still said nothing. He decided not to force a response, but said to the captain – who was lurking respectfully in the corridor just outside, “Set him free, and tell him he’s due to take the cadet class in half an hour.”

Next, he sought out Paril.

Paril had not appeared at breakfast but was in the armoury alone, polishing weapons. It was a servant’s job, unnecessary. When he became aware of Jay’s presence he clattered the sword aside and stood to attention, his head bowed and his expression stricken.

“In Lonn’s name, Captain. At ease.”

Paril slumped, though anyone less at ease would be harder to imagine. There was a noticeable bruise along the line of his jaw where Jay's blow had landed.

Deliberately, Jay sat on the bench opposite.

"Sir," Paril stammered, "I want you to know how deeply sorry I am for the shameful way I behaved last night – and for failing to protect Mareil. I was coming to see you – I meant to – I feel ashamed that you had to find me first. I've already spoken to Mareil, we're going to break off our betrothal."

"Come on now, that's entirely unnecessary."

"I behaved with gross dishonour –"

"Did she put up a fight?"

"No... but she'd drunk so much glyn juice, she didn't know what she was doing. But I did. It's never – had very much of an effect on me, sir. You notice that - some people fall over, some go almost mad, some - don't change much. I could still think straight and I knew what I was doing was wrong, I just couldn't help myself. She deserves so much better than that. What if it happened again – what if you hadn't been there? How can I risk bringing that kind of shame onto her? If we dissolve the engagement, she can find someone else, someone worthy of her."

"Captain, I'm going to give you an order and I expect you to obey immediately and without question."

"Yes, sir."

"Go back to wherever you left Mareil and tell her that the wedding will be on the day of the spring solstice, by order of Commander Jhaval. Get all the preparations done between now and then however much time you have to spend on them. Go on, now."

Paril, who had not sat down during this interview, looked for a moment as if he was going to disobey and question the order. Instead, he bowed briskly and half-ran on his way out of the armoury.

Jay leaned back and closed his eyes for a moment, disoriented. It was one of those occasional moments of acute awareness, when he knew he was standing outside the world and could feel how cold it was.

Seven

There was still a thin cold wind blowing, though the sun was now shining, as Paril and Mareil crossed their swords together. The priest raised his hand to pronounce the union final, and all the months of preparation – all the trials of temptation – were brought to a safe conclusion.

The wedding was held in the castle foreground, which was chilly but necessary because it meant that the priests did not have to enter the grounds of the castle itself. As soon as the ceremony was over the priests filed away silently, without acknowledging anyone, and began their descent down the hill to the village in a cloaked line. The swordbearers ignored their departure and crowded round the happy couple, lifting them bodily down from the raised platform.

Jay was the only one who watched the priests go. Caste warfare, the ancient bugbear of civilisation, was not as far in the past as those in the Court and the Capital imagined. His experience of living as three different castes had given him an insight that was probably unique, though it was one of no use whatsoever on Car'a'vil.

Paril was married now. That gave him an authentic patina of manhood which would harden, no doubt, over the coming year. It would not be too long before Carral realised that his boy cousin was getting old enough to take over command, and it might be a good idea to encourage this conclusion. Jay did not know if he was prepared to face another winter on the edge of the world.

The face of General Neveth on the viewscreen was broken with static. Car'a'vil must be the last place in the Empire, he thought, to rely on an old-fashioned satellite connection for all its communication links.

“All the reports I've had of your work have been excellent, Jhaval,” said the general. “I get the impression that Carral would be very reluctant to let you go.”

“I'm honoured that he holds me in high esteem, sir, but when it comes down to it I'm an outsider, and on Car'a'vil they prefer clansfolk. Captain Paril has come on well. He should be given preference.”

“Have you discussed this with Carral?”

“Not yet. I wanted to find out first whether I could serve elsewhere.”

“Essentially you're requesting a transfer,” said Neveth bluntly.

“Essentially, yes.”

“I'll keep my ear to the ground for you, but I don't know of anything going at the moment that would make best use of your talents. Have you any space training?”

“Unfortunately, no.” He felt a clear dart of excitement go through him.

“Selier of Ari has just been assigned to crew three new ships. I'm not sure whether she intends to recruit experienced spacefarers or cross train. I do know that she feels there's a shortage of spacetrained swordbearers at the right command level, so she might be planning to train up officers. If you would be interested, I could find out.”

“I would be extremely interested, sir.”

“You've got command of an entire army on Car'a'vil, even though it's a small one. Do you really want that kind of sideways move, end up as one of three other commanders stuck on board a ship for months at a time?”

“I've always felt called to serve amongst the stars, sir.”

“Have you? I’ve hardly ever been off Antra myself. Very well, Jhaval, I’ll see what I can do.”

It was only when he terminated the connection and turned to gaze out the window – which gave a view over the sweep of heath beyond the north walls of the castle – that he realised how desperately, in fact, he wanted to escape. To go amongst the stars was indeed a yearning of his soul; partly, perhaps, because so few people of any caste ever did leave their own world and it amused him to think that the youngest son of a blacksmith should be commander on a starship, and partly because he had an idea that extremes of physical distance would take him far away from the danger of discovery that haunted him.

But he could find danger, of course, anywhere he happened to be.

All through the long dark months of winter, he had taken his chance with Dazil wherever and whenever he could. Though the risks were never completely reckless, he had got bolder and more careless as time went on and it became clear to him that Carral’s intimate interest in Dazil was close to non-existent. They had been married for nine years, she told him, and it had been a long time since he had touched her anything other than occasionally.

They met in the abandoned temple, in his own quarters when Carral was asleep, even – once – in the guard tower when Jay had taken over night watch from a sick lieutenant. And although during other times they maintained a perfect distance, when they were in the same room he was afraid that the connection between them was a tangible thing that surely must be visible to others. Too often, he felt Saghat watching him, and he had never been able to dismiss the suspicion that he harboured underdeveloped psychic perception. It was not unknown for people to hide such tendencies, since recognised prophets were always taken from their caste to a life of monastic service at Court.

He had to end it, and he did not know how.

He did not know how. All his previous experiences had been self-limiting, somehow – mostly single, daring encounters, or liaisons in a transitory situation – and his skill was in recognising and creating the opportunity, not extricating himself afterwards. He had never been trapped for the foreseeable future in the same place as his lover.

It wasn’t as if he got much chance to talk to her. When they were together in public they ignored each other, and when they were alone he could never bring himself to waste the time.

It was only a week after the wedding, however, that circumstances fell in his favour. Carral called him into his office and informed him that he was going to visit his clansman Sahil, whom he had met up with for the first time in a while at Paril’s wedding. Sahil lived on the far coast of Car’a’vil’s single landmass, beyond easy travelling distance on foot or quantback, and since he would have to take the hoverspeed he would be gone some days. It was the first time that Carral had left his post in all the time Jay had been there. He did not ever seem to go much beyond the castle and never spent the night away.

“I know I can trust you to hold the fort, Jhaval. Keep an eye on Paril, don’t let him get distracted too much. Eh?”

This was Carral’s idea of coarse humour, and Jay smiled obligingly. As for holding the fort, since there was little likelihood of the enemies of Clan Vil swarming through the sea-beyond-the-sky in the next week, he felt confident that he could cope in the general’s absence. He saw Carral off in the hoverspeed with a party of guards and servants the hour before dinner, in the advancing twilight.

Darkness was only just falling when Jay returned to his quarters to get rid of his sword before going down to the dining hall. Something stepped out of the shadows at him and he had drawn his gun before he realised it was Dazil.

He swore, put the weapon away, and turned on the light. "What are you doing here? Are you mad? There are people out there. What if one of the servants comes in?"

She was still standing behind the door, unmoving. Her face, now he looked at it, was pale with tension and her eyes were deep. "No-one would think to look for me here," she said, in a very low voice.

He threw his sword on the bed. "Who would be looking for you?"

"Saghat," she said, breathing the name in a terrified underbreath.

Jay stared at her. "What?"

"Lock the door."

"No. I have to go down to dinner. They'll notice if I'm delayed."

"Please. Lock it. I want to talk to you."

"Talk then, but be quick. You shouldn't be here."

"That's why I asked you to lock the door."

Irritated, Jay pressed the lock panel, which was programmed to respond only to him. Dazil let out a great breath and rushed at him; against his immediate inclination, he held her. In his arms he could feel that she was shaking. She clung to him for a moment then pulled back. "You must help me," she said. "I'm in great danger."

"We're both in great danger – that's the way it goes."

"No – no. It's nothing to do with what we've done. It's me. Saghat – I've got to tell you but I'm afraid you won't believe me."

"Try me."

"I think he's going to kill me."

He sat her down on the bed and continued to stare at her, while she continued to grip his arms.

"You don't believe me. Why should you? These things don't happen today. But they do, you know. You must have realised that I'm younger than Carral. I'm his second wife. His first wife died after they were married fifteen years. She fell from the north battlements and smashed her head open. She was supposed to have slipped. But it was a dry night, and it was only a few months after Saghat came here." She leaned closer. "I've asked, as discreetly as I can. He was sent here in disgrace, originally. If you're suspected of a crime you're often sent far away, somewhere remote from your home, where they think you won't do any more harm. His superiors knew he was a killer, and they exiled him here."

"Why would Saghat have killed Carral's first wife?"

"Because Carral wanted her dead," she said intensely. "They had no children. Nothing matters more to a warlord than heirs. Fifteen years - nothing. What else could he do, but start again with a young wife? How could he do that, unless she died? Listen! Just before she died, Carral came to stay with my family. He stayed with us three weeks. He wooed me in all but name. Sahil has a daughter, she's twenty-one. He's going to try again."

"This is nonsense."

"I knew you wouldn't believe me!" She drew back into herself and stared down. "He killed Naril too. I don't know why, but Carral and Naril had some huge falling out. Saghat is loyal to Carral, you know. He did it – under orders or on his own initiative I don't know, but I know he did it."

Jay stood up, uneasy. This accusation, paranoid and fanciful as it seemed, struck a chord with his own half-formed suspicions about Saghat; but he did not want to let Dazil know that.

“Why do you think Carral didn’t report him when he ran amok at the Feast?” she added, persistently. “If he doesn’t try something now, while Carral’s away, then he will, soon – especially if Carral’s meeting with Sahil’s daughter goes well. You must help me.”

He sat down by her again, wondering desperately how to reassure her in a hurry and get her out of here. She had withdrawn from him, but a touch on her hand and her cheek brought her face up to his. Her eyes were almost black.

He said nothing, but kissed her fingertips and caressed the back of her neck.

She snatched her hand away and left him.

There followed some days of silence, while Dazil avoided him in private as well as in public. This was intended to provoke a response from him, he knew that. While he was untroubled by such tactics, she had nonetheless disturbed him; he tried to discount what she had said, but his instincts were firing. He had never been able to give the suspicion a focus, but he had known from the first that there was something unusual, if not wrong, about Saghat. And what alarmed him even more was that Saghat knew there was something wrong with him.

On the day before Carral was expected to return, the news arrived that he had decided to extend his stay a while longer. A servant brought Jay the message at dinner, and then repeated it to Dazil at the other end of the table. Jay did not move his head, but he was aware of her rising and leaving her place immediately. He took his time over finishing his meal, had some of the baked fruits on offer afterwards, then excused himself on the grounds of firestaff practice.

She was where he expected to find her, in the outer chamber of the suite of rooms she shared with Carral. When he knocked, there was a pause from within as she deactivated the lock. On the window seat was a small silver gun.

“Bad mistake,” he said, snatching it up and pointing it at her for a moment, before twirling it in his hand and tossing it to her. “Always keep your weapon on you.”

She fumbled to catch it, missed, and half-sank onto the floor, sobbing.

He had to deal with this now, before she got them both into trouble. He lifted her bodily off the floor, set her on her feet, and held her upright by force. “Stop crying,” he said firmly.

She gasped for breath.

“I said stop. Be quiet.” He gave her one small shake, and her shoulders subsided. Her face, eyes downcast, set. “All right. Now listen to me, Dazil. If Saghat was going to kill you, he wouldn’t shoot you. Nor would he attack you face to face. So locking yourself in your room, arming yourself, that achieves nothing. People are going to start noticing that you’re behaving oddly. He might notice, Carral might notice. That could be dangerous.”

“You – you believe me?”

“I know there’s something odd about Saghat. What I find hard to believe is that Carral would think it worthwhile looking for another wife, when he’s had no children with you, either. The problem’s likely to be his.”

“Do you think he would ever admit that, even to himself?”

That was a fair point. Carefully, Jay let go of her and was relieved to find that she stayed up on her own. “Possibly I could get Saghat removed somehow. He would be no great loss as a swordbearer.”

“That will never happen. I am absolutely certain Carral colluded with him over the first murder – possible the second too. Don’t you understand, they’re in each other’s power. Saghat is supposed not to have Carral’s favour, but he’s bloodsworn to him – did you know that?”

He did not and if it were true, the fact that such an important allegiance had been kept secret was significant in itself. Jay was mortified by the realisation that much more had been happening on Car’a’vil – and right in front of him - than he had even begun to suspect.

“All right,” he said. “Then you need to get out of here. Leave him, go and discover a calling to the temple or something.”

“How would that keep me safe? Carral still wouldn’t be free to marry again. I would be pursued.”

“You could disappear.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, you could leave in secret, and take on a new identity that Carral or Saghat would never know. You could put on a servant’s cloak and walk out of here, nobody would notice. Get off Car’a’vil, I could arrange it somehow. Change your name, turn up in a camp on the other side of the world, say commander so-and-so sent you. I’ll give you some basic combat training so that you seem convincing. But say that you’re a healer, nobody asks too many questions of healers, they’re always needed, they’ll probably never even ask you to swing a sword.”

Even as he finished speaking, he knew that he had made a deadly mistake. She was too damned clever, and he had known that perfectly well. Her face changed to an expression of astonished understanding. “As you did,” she said, crisply and clearly. Suddenly, the hysteria was gone.

He did not even attempt to bluff or backtrack. He did not want to appear to have lost control. Let her think that he had given himself away quite deliberately. But ice was freezing in his chest, and he could feel the ground of his life cracking under his feet.

“Who are you? What did you do?”

“I am whoever I say I am. I am whoever you think I am. And I did nothing.”

“No. No. You must have done something. It was a woman, wasn’t it.”

“In a way.”

“No. Because you said you’d always been careful.” She drew in her breath sharply. “You’re not a swordbearer at all. Saghat said so. You’re not a priest or a scholar or a noble either. You’re a servant. A servant, masquerading as Commander in Chief of Car’a’vil. By the Empress – if only Carral knew.”

He seized hold of her. “There are a lot of things Carral doesn’t know. Understand this, Dazil - we are criminals. We put ourselves in each other’s power the first time you came to my bed. Whatever the truth about Saghat, whatever he did or might do, this is one danger you can be sure is real.”

“I know.”

“Then think about what I suggested. I’ll help you. In the meantime, I’ll look out for Saghat and try not to let him push you over any battlements. Now, are we going to waste any more of the time we have to ourselves?”

She relaxed under his grip, and shook her head with the beginnings of a slight smile.

Her fear made it impossible for him to leave her that night, and his made it impossible for him to sleep. For the first time ever he lay awake all the long dark minutes until dawn, wondering if he would get away from here with his life intact.

Eight

Carral returned, and nothing happened to Dazil, and as the days slipped by Jay began to think that the whole thing was the dark fantasy of an unhappy wife. Dazil had paid no attention to his suggestion that it was in her best interest to continue to behave normally. She was silent and tense, pale and haunted. She appeared at every gathering, staying visible in company until the very end, and she said nothing to anyone. At her side, Carral was hearty and gruff as ever and appeared not to have noticed any change in his wife.

It was difficult to believe that he could be so blind, and Jay wondered what in the name of the Empress they said to each other when they were alone. He had tried to ask Dazil whether she thought there was any change in Carral – whether, on his return, her suspicions were reinforced or not – but she had merely shaken her head faintly and said nothing. Her lack of response, and her inertia, irritated him. If she thought her husband was plotting to murder her with the connivance of his psychopathic bloodsworn servant, she should at least take advantage of the fact that she shared his bed every night to assess the danger more accurately. Moping around, silent and scared, was not the way to self-preservation. He was keeping an eye on Saghat but Saghat had done nothing remotely suspicious. That was as much as he could do by himself.

He was in the courtyard giving Mareil a firestaff lesson when the message came that there was a call for him on the satellite link.

“Selier has asked to see you,” said General Neveth. “Star Rider headquarters, on Zahual, four days’ time. I hope you meant it when you said you wanted to serve on a ship, because if she likes you, she won’t take kindly to being turned down.”

“I meant it, sir. Thank you.”

He strode out onto the battlements and swallowed the mild evening air, looking at the bleak horizon where a few stars twinkled in the dusk, euphoric. It was the excitement of escape – the exhilaration of relief – as much as the prospect of being selected to serve on board a ship. He did not know Selier of Ali but he was sure that once in front of her he could convince her that he was the swordbearer she wanted, and at the moment he was prepared to charm for his life anyone with the power to lift him clean out of this whole nasty situation.

He sought Carral out immediately and asked permission to take leave of absence.

“Neveth’s been talking to me too,” said Carral abruptly, not looking at him. “I wish you wouldn’t do this, Jhaval. I need you here.”

“Commander Selier has only asked to see me, sir.”

“But you want to go, eh?”

“I’ve always felt a calling to serve amongst the stars.”

“Like any wet-eared green cadet. I thought you had your feet on the ground.” He sighed, though it was more like a snort. “You were never going to stick around here. I knew that. Just passing through – you might as well have it written on your forehead, eh? Talented, high-flying, full of ideas, energy – just like Naril. But you don’t owe me anything, so off you go. We’ll survive.”

Jay bowed and made his exit smartly. It was possible that he could have handled that more diplomatically but at the moment he was not concerned about leaving bruised feelings behind him on Car’a’vil, just in effecting a clean and rapid departure. The corvette would be arrive for him in the morning and he was going to pack most of his few possessions with a view not to returning at all, if possible. He could spend a day or two on Antra renewing contacts before travelling on to Zahual.

When he returned to his quarters to pack, he found Dazil waiting for him in the corridor outside. She might have been emerging from her own room at the end of the passage, but she had an air of lurking in the shadows.

Jay gave her a formal, silent bow and carried on into his room without looking back; she followed him in anyway.

"I hope you looked to make sure that there was nobody out there," said Jay coldly, locking the door and getting his case out from the bottom of the store cupboard. He did not want to encourage another hysterical conversation.

"Of course I did. I had to talk to you."

"Well?"

"What do you mean, well? How can you say that? Stop that!" She interposed between him and the case. "Are you really leaving?"

"I'm going to Zahual to see a Star Rider commander in charge of manning a new ship. She might call me to serve on it and if she does then yes, I will probably go."

"But why?"

"Why? Why should I stay here? There's not much prospect for anyone not of Clan Vil and anyway, I was only ever supposed to be a stop-gap until Paril could take over."

"What about me?"

"I've told you what you could do, if you really believe your life is in danger. I offered to help – you don't seem to have shown any interest in taking me up on that. It's up to you, Dazil. There's only so much I can do."

She was silent for a long moment. "All right," she said firmly. "I'll go with you."

"What? Go where?"

"Wherever you're going. I'll do what you said, I'll dress up as a servant. I'll pretend to be your servant. Then, when we get there, I could pretend to be your wife."

"Don't be ridiculous."

"Why? Who would know? How would they be able to tell if I'm your wife or not, these people that we've never met?"

"Because – for a start, you couldn't escape from Car'a'vil pretending to be my servant because everyone here knows I don't have one. Secondly, it would look mightily suspicious, even to a fool like Carral, if you disappeared at exactly the same time as me. The only way to do this kind of thing is alone, unnoticed, not attached to someone whose identity is known. You would get us both caught within a day."

"So... you're just going to leave me?"

"There's nothing more I can do. The best thing I can do for both of our safety is to get off Car'a'vil and far away."

"But I love you."

The shock of this non-sequitur threw him off balance and he stared at her, trying hard to contain his anger. He was doing his best to help her in circumstances which were not easy for him, and she was talking half-witted nonsense. "What has that got to do with it?"

"I want to go with you. Not just to escape from Carral and Saghat. I want to be with you."

"That's impossible. Come on, use your intelligence. What the hell did you think this was going to lead to? You're married to Carral and there's nothing you can do about it, and even if there were, I wouldn't take you with me. I'm safer alone."

It was easy after all to end an affair. Her eyes grew wider, and filled with pain, and she gathered herself together and left without another word. Jay finished packing with a euphoric sense of relief.

There was a pounding in his head.

He sat upright and realised that the hammering sound was filling the darkness, that someone was banging on the door. His first thought in the disorientation of sudden waking was that it was Dazil, panicking and making a racket in the middle of the night; his second, an instant later, was that she had been found dead and this was a terrified guard come to rouse him with the news. When he flung open the door, he was confronted instead by three armed swordbearers whom he did not know and Zamual, a senior commander from Antra.

They did not bow.

“What is this, Zamual? It’s the middle of the night.”

“You’ve to come with us immediately,” said Zamual.

Two of the three warriors stepped forward and actually started to lay hands on him. Jay shrugged them sharply off with all the authority his rank could muster, and they deferred.

“Why?”

“There have been charges made against you, serious charges. You’re under arrest pending investigation.”

“What charges?”

“Fraud, deceit, impersonation and injuring the dignity of the Swordbearer Caste. You’ll be charged before the council of your clan. I’ve to take you to Antra now. Come on.”

He had no chance even to pick up his packed bag, and this time he could not without undignified violence stop the warriors seizing an arm each and marching him, as he was, down the darkened corridor. Zamual walked in front, the other warrior behind.

At the head of the main stairway stood Carral, Saghat and Dazil, with some others. Zamual stopped and bowed to Carral, without an exchange of words. Jay barely registered that Carral looked dazed. His eyes instead had locked with Dazil’s. She was standing a little apart from the others, tall and straight and completely composed, and her expression – blazing out from a white, sculpted face – was cold fire.

Nine

She had done it. She had betrayed him.

It was an act of treachery that he had not foreseen because it did not make sense. Unless everything she had said about Carral and Saghat had been a lie, how could she imagine that she was better off or safer now? How was she to know that he would not retaliate by denouncing her adultery to the caste elders? He had nothing left to lose.

Or had she forestalled this by confessing to Carral, and buying her safety with her knowledge of the two murders? Dazil, Carral and Saghat – a triangle of silence and dark secrets, festering away at the heart of that God-forsaken moon. It seemed appropriate.

No, it was incomprehensible. Whatever the truth about the deaths on Car'a'vil, Dazil's fear had been real and she must surely have put herself in far greater danger now.

He had plenty time to wonder, because he had been thrown without ceremony into a featureless cell and left there. For three days a silent servant had brought him a tray of food and drink, but nobody had come to interrogate him and he was obviously not even being accorded the honour of a swordbearer guard. He had no clothes other than the nightshift he had been wearing when he had been arrested, and no possessions that he ever hoped to see again. He had become a negative entity, stripped of everything physical, and for the moment everything mental except rage against her. Without any clue about what was going to happen to him now – other than Zamual's claim that he would be hauled before a council of his clan – he had nothing else to think about.

When he had first arrived he had demanded to speak to General Neveth, and any of the commanders on Antra whose names he could remember. The servant guards ignored him, and the door was slammed shut. Exposed, he had lost every vestige of power and personal authority. He was invisible and inaudible.

On the third day the guard opened the door earlier than the usual time, and let in the last person that Jay had expected to see here. He rose from the bench where he had been gazing at the wall, and stared at Saghat.

"This man is a dangerous criminal," said Saghat to the guard, keeping his eyes fixed on Jay. "I need to talk to him alone. Restrain him."

Jay stood absolutely still and unresisting while the guard bound his hands behind his back and his ankles together with restraining bonds, and then allowed himself to be pushed into a sitting position on the bench. The murderous intent in Saghat's eyes was unmasked, shining and unmistakable.

"Now leave us alone," he growled.

There was a long silence after the door slammed shut behind the guard.

"Are you going to kill me like this, Saghat?" said Jay eventually. "Is this your idea of honourable swordbearer conduct?"

He was cut short by a blow to his diaphragm that doubled him over and took all his breath in one explosion of pain. The next knocked him sideways off the bench and he slid helplessly onto the floor as Saghat's boot slammed into his ribs.

"I'm not going you kill you today, you filthy worm. I wouldn't dirty my sword with your servant blood. I'm here to pay you back for shaming Lord Carral - and to tell you that if what you did on Car'a'vil ever becomes known, I will track you down and finish the job, I swear."

He punctuated this speech with vicious kicks and punches, landing them at random. Jay tried to roll over against the wall for protection but he was too much at a disadvantage to have any

chance even of twisting away from one blow before another fell. He heard a sharp crack as a rib shattered, then saw a shower of bright lights – descending into hazy red darkness – when a boot smashed into his face.

He never quite lost consciousness completely. For a long time after the boot came towards his eyes he was aware of intense, jolting pain, and an ever-tightening suffocation. Fighting for breath when he managed to open his eyes, he saw the floor, and a pool of blood spreading out slowly from his mouth, and the bottom of the door closing.

He knew he had to stay awake to stay alive. He could not move and he could not make a sound. He could just about draw breath. For what might have been hours he lay still, watching and feeling his own blood congealing around him, until at last the servant came with his evening meal – dropped the tray on the floor with a clang which jolted his fading senses – and ran.

Only when someone stooped over him and touched him did he let go.

“How was this allowed to happen? No – don’t tell me. It was a rhetorical question. It’s painfully obvious. This camp is a shambles.”

One voice was very strong, much stronger than the rest, and penetrated above a hazy babble of others surrounding it.

“... Yes sir...”

“Well, I haven’t come halfway across the Empire to have him die on me. Make sure he lives. And do something about his face. Don’t leave it to heal like that. I want no visible scars – you understand.”

“.. Sir...”

“Bring him to me when he’s on his feet. I’m not going anywhere in the meantime.”

Ten

There was a window in this room, at any rate. He had no idea whether he was still in the detention complex, or whether he had been removed to the camp hospital; he was alone in a small medical room of unbroken whiteness, with a view of the clouds, and for days he had seen no-one but an orderly, and the doctor himself.

He was vaguely troubled by the doctor, who certainly did not belong to the order which ministered to the swordbearers on Antra. His robes were of a different colour and quality, he had a clipped cosmopolitan manner of speech, and he wore a strange crest on a wide linked chain around his neck.

For some time he could not speak even if he had wanted to ask questions, because his jaw had been set into some kind of restraining cast, and he lay still – heavy and muffled, with pain staved off somewhere in the distance - with no power to move any part of his body. It felt impossible that he should ever get up and walk across the room again, let alone swing a firestaff; but then, he supposed that a hammer was the only thing he would be allowed to swing in future.

The doctor appeared in and out of pain-spiked unconsciousness, often administering oblivion with the click of a silver stick. Once, Jay tried to open his eyes and could not. He thrashed against the darkness and fought to lift his hands to claw at his eyes, but he could feel nothing in his arms and he panicked.

A moment later there was a brief spot of coldness against his neck, and when he emerged again he could see the window once more, framing the stars of a night sky. When drew in air and swallowed, he realised he could also open his mouth and move his head. The restraints had gone.

“Where am I?” he demanded of the doctor, as soon as he put in his morning appearance.

“In the swordbearer camp on Antra, where you were before,” said the doctor, calmly, preparing his instruments.

“Why haven’t I been taken to the civilian hospital? I was being held in the civilian cells.”

The doctor did not reply.

“And you’re not one of the Healers of the Crystal Sea. I don’t recognise your crest at all. What are you doing here?”

“I have no orders to answer questions,” said the doctor, after another pause. “Only to make you well. Now please hold still and don’t talk, I need to check that the bones in your face have knit properly.”

Jay submitted in silence to a detailed and uncomfortable probing, lacking the energy to argue but now convinced that the doctor’s aloof, precise manner belonged to someone who considered himself above this provincial outpost. And he had a medical case of his own, full of instruments which he used in preference to those clearly visible in a cupboard on the wall.

“That seems satisfactory. Now, I would like you to stand.”

What had seemed impossible was only very unpleasant, and when he managed to get up from the bed and walk he found that he was still in one piece and working. Though he lay exhausted afterwards, and ached desperately, he had a sense of relief that was at odds with the reality of the situation.

The next day, he was given a set of clothes by the servant and instructed to dress. The doctor led him out of the ward, and Jay found that there was a guard of two smart-looking swordbearers

stationed outside the door who flanked them as they walked, slowly, along a corridor and out through a courtyard.

“How long have they been there?” he asked, glancing back at the warriors then wincing – it hurt to turn his neck.

“For the past six weeks,” said the doctor. “Ever since you were brought here.”

“You must have a comically exaggerated idea of how dangerous I am.”

He caught the doctor giving a dry smile.

It was as much as he could manage to keep moving and walk without limping as they made their way to what Jay suddenly recognised as the command headquarters of the camp. It seemed that he was being taken to General Neveth’s private quarters, which overlooked a courtyard garden.

But it was not Neveth who was standing by the window in his office, looking out at the zalia trees.

The two guards and the doctor saluted, bowed and departed, leaving Jay alone to stare unsteadily at an unfamiliar swordbearer dressed in full traditional robes. His bearing of authority was physically present in the room between them, imperial and forbidding.

“Sit,” said the swordbearer. “Before you fall down.”

Jay sank into the chair indicated.

The swordbearer approached the desk and leaned forward, scrutinising him. “Jhaval. Jhannon. Anything else?”

“Does it matter?”

“It matters, because unless you tell me everything – unless you convince me that you’re worth taking into my service – I will throw you back to your clan and the caste elders here. And the Priest Caste elders at the Temple of Rual, who have also asked to deal with you. Now tell me your real name!”

“Jhal. Or Jay.”

“And where did you start out?”

“As a blacksmith’s apprentice in on an outerworld called Anhual. When I was sixteen I ran away and pretended to be a temple novice called Jhannon. I didn’t like the priest caste so I became a swordbearer instead.”

“All right. Now tell me this – how did you get away with it? For so long?”

“Because nobody expects you to be anything other than what you say you are. If you put on a murai’s robes, you become a murai. Dress as a swordbearer, talk like a swordbearer, you’re a swordbearer. It’s easy.”

“For you, evidently. Shall I tell you what you are, Jhal or Jay? Clinically, you’re described as a sociopath - lacking normal inhibitions and prone to deviant behaviour. The condition is untreatable. Fortunately, I’m not interested in treating it. I need people like you for a very particular type of service.” He moved back to the window and looked out. “We have been able to please ourselves in the galaxy for thousands of years. Within living memory there was scarcely an alien race out there which could get beyond its own solar system. Now, we know that we are only the smallest of three empires across the sea-beyond-the-sky. Our way of life has hardly changed since the time of Lonn, but those alien civilisations have changed, rapidly, in that time, and their technology is developing to the point where they are a real threat to the Empire. This is not widely understood, even amongst the swordbearer elders – and many at Court, including the nobles, do not take that threat seriously. They think that Daros is too far away to be a problem,

and that Earth and its many worlds pose no danger. They assume the peace signed by the old Empress Methalia will last forever.”

“And you think it won’t?”

The swordbearer frowned, and carried on as if he had not been interrupted. “What is also not fully understood is that we are at a disadvantage when it comes to dealing with these aliens. Humans and Darrians are far less spiritually evolved than us. They lie, they cheat, they swindle, they kill each other without compunction – we are not well equipped to understand them. I need agents who can go amongst aliens and gather information, and undertake operations of any sort, when the security of the Empire is at stake – people who are able to lie and deceive as easily as they do. Unfortunately, these recruits must also be capable and loyal, and preferably not actually insane. The reports I’ve had of your work here on Antra and on Car’a’vil sound promising, and I’m prepared to give you a trial.”

“You want me to work for you as a swordbearer?”

“No. As nothing. You will have no status in society, not even that of your own caste. And you will probably die, sooner rather than later. This is not an easy or honourable way of life. You are free to consider the alternative of imprisonment.”

This last was said with such grinding sarcasm that Jay realised he meant it seriously. He felt a compression in his breathing again.

“You are not however free to consider anything else. Fail me, Jhal or Jay, and I’ll throw you back to the wolves. Once you’re fit to do more than hobble you will come back with me to Taysar, and begin your training. You will have no contact with anyone you knew previously – I won’t have the dignity of my caste injured any further.”

“Then you should do something about Saghat on Car’a’vil - Carral’s wife could be his next victim.”

“Saghat has already been dealt with. As for General Carral, he has more pleasant matters to think about now. Apparently he suffered the indignity of being thought barren for many years – now at last he is to have a child. Remarkable how these things happen sometimes.” He leaned across the desk again, closer. “I repeat – you will have no further contact with anyone you have ever known. You will disappear. Do you understand?”

“Yes, sir.”

“And I suggest you learn to control yourself. If anything like this happens once you’re working for me, I will not overlook it.”

He was escorted back to the hospital, but he was no longer locked in his room and nor was the door guarded; he was free to find his way out into the sheltered garden, where he sat for a long time, alone, breathing slowly and feeling the warmth of the sun on his bruises. Everything hurt – the painkillers had seeped away - but at least his mind was clear now, and he understood. Dazil had secured her own position, had put herself beyond harm even if Saghat had remained in Carral’s service, and it was possible that she had intended this from the first. He remembered her expression that night, both fearful and resolute. She had used him, and she had destroyed him.

He needed no admonishment from this mysterious swordbearer elder, someone of such importance that General Neveth’s personal quarters had been cleared for his use. Whatever happened to him now, and he had only a dim idea of what the hell he had just signed up for, there would be no more women.

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DEADLINE

He considered the risks, and then he went back anyway.

The entrance to the tavern was at the end of an alley in a part of the city built from ancient grey metal and stone, a tangle of overhung streets and narrow walkways. This was a long way from the crystal towers and shining avenues of Zenazor Quarter. The alley seemed to burrow right underneath a huge foundry, its last few yards sloping down undercover to the door with three coins embossed on its surface.

He had found the place a few weeks ago on one of his occasional random expeditions into the industrial districts of the city. It was important that he never visited the same place twice, and avoided drawing attention to himself.

Four times was folly.

The tavern was full of metalworkers who had come off from a shift at the foundry about half an hour ago; long enough to have settled to their drinks and conversation so that the room was comfortably full, but not with people clamoring to be served all at once. Jay fitted himself at a table against the wall in the far corner from the bar, where he could watch the room and the servitors.

She did not notice him for some time. He did not draw attention to himself, since he was content to watch her as she moved amongst the customers, dipping forward over the tables to deposit their drinks and food, dispensing smiles with the berry juice and yasha.

Eventually, she caught his eye, and her smile became direct.

She was called back to the serving table and caught up in a flurry of orders for a few minutes longer. Jay let his gaze drift away from her and around the bar. The clientele was made up almost wholly of workers from the foundry above, and the majority of them seemed to belong to the same clan. Thought their clothing was heavy and simple, many of them wore an emerald green cloth tied around their waist or neck.

To blend in, he was wearing a plain, old, nondescript servant's tunic, a cloak of rough, worn fabric, and a leather apron to give the impression that he had just come from some nearby forge. It would not be a good idea to adopt the clan insignia, however. He had received some incurious glances when he had first walked in here, but on his subsequent visits nobody had appeared to notice him at all. The regulars of the Three Chakra didn't seem completely unaccustomed to strangers.

"Rall. Back again?"

Jay looked round, casually. "Of course. How could I stay away?"

"You've managed to stay away perfectly well for the past three weeks."

"You've been counting, then."

"No." She glanced back over at the serving table, where her mother – a stout, stern, watchful woman – was filling tankards in a row. "What can I get you?"

"What I had last time."

"You expect me to remember?"

"Yes. I do."

This got a smile, and he watched her go back to the serving table with an intoxicating sense of danger and desire. He had no doubt, she was the kind of woman who would yield.

His mind raced over the logistics of the operation. There was her mother at the serving table, watching the interaction while attempting to appear unobservant. The girl was likely to live under her parents' roof, being unmarried, and the house of a Servant Caste innkeeping family would be modest – impossible to find a secure place there. Equally, it was impossible to take her back to his own apartment, since it was almost certainly under surveillance and anyway, he liked to keep some things simple. Perhaps there was a storeroom in the cellars underneath the inn where they could go after closing time, and she could invent some reason for staying behind.

Even thinking through the possibilities was almost enough to overwhelm his reason with longing. Usually, it wasn't worth working out how long it had been, but he knew anyway - thirteen years without a real woman, a Taysan woman. It was so close now that he could just reach out and take it, if he could create the opportunity somehow.

When she brought back the drink – apple juice, cloudy – he asked, “Does your mother serve all evening?”

“Yes, all evening, every evening.”

“How about you?”

“I'm her apprentice, so I serve when she serves.”

“I get the feeling the duties of your apprenticeship don't include lingering too long over any particular customer.”

She looked conscious, and then she smiled. “Perhaps not, but after we close for the night, I'm off duty.”

Jay leaned forward and held her gaze, and was about to reply when he spotted his personal servant Rall ducking through the entrance to the tavern. In a quick moment, he assessed whether it was worth trying to effect an escape. There was little chance of success. As soon as he moved he might draw attention to himself, and Rall was standing by the only public entrance to the room. He put his tankard down and sat back, waiting to be found.

Rall drew more than one glance as he made his way deliberately through the crowd. In his fineweave tunic, he was dressed too much unlike the tavern's usual customers to be anything other than conspicuous.

Jay could do nothing but suffer under the feeling of exposure as Rall approached him.

“Excuse me, sir. You're wanted urgently and apparently, you forgot your communicator.”

“I forgot my communicator because I don't always want to be found.”

Rall bowed, and glanced at the girl and bowed again. She hesitated, her glance flicking between them, then returned Rall's greeting formally and moved away.

Jay took one defiant swig of the glass of apple juice. “All right, Rall. Don't worry. I know you've got orders.”

Rall inclined his head, an abbreviated bow.

Jay left the tavern without looking back to catch her eye. There was no point. He would never see her again.

There was never any decent sense of time in Tay'shak headquarters. Artificial light blazed day and night in rooms and corridors that mostly had no crystal walls or windows to the outside world, and even in the deadest hours people bustled purposefully about. However, Jay sensed a difference in the atmosphere as soon as he stepped out of the lift on the uppermost floor. Late as it was, there was a subliminal tension and alertness in the air.

There was nothing subliminal about the two Star Rider guards flanking General Salthar's door, decked out in full regalia and wielding extended firestaffs. As Jay approached they snapped to attention and crossed staffs across the doorway.

"Oh come on," said Jay, using a swordbearer intonation. "Whoever your superior is, he's waiting for me in there. Do you really think the Tay'shak would let just anyone wander onto the premises?"

They ignored him.

He was well aware that he was dressed like a metalworker, and suddenly it mattered. In the eyes of these two pompous young idiots, he could be actively ignored. Jay crossed his arms and leaned against the wall opposite, only vaguely and theoretically calculating the practicality of taking them both out, unarmed as he was. It would make too much noise and would embarrass Salthar, which could of course be seen as a bonus, and they probably had guns hidden somewhere in all that metalwork, which would make the exercise unnecessarily dangerous.

"Well then," he said. "We could be here all night."

The impasse lasted about two minutes, then one of the guards looked uneasy and muttered into his communicator. He frowned and stood aside as the door was opened from within.

Jay flicked back the guard's staff lightly with his fingers as he passed.

The outer chamber of Salthar's suite of offices was one of the few rooms in the building which did have natural light, a crystal wall overlooking the Yeda. By day it offered an impressive enough view and at night, the city below twinkled like stars. The noble standing by the wall admiring it was known to Jay only by reputation, which was unsurprising considering that he would spend nearly all his time at Court.

He had been prepared for grandeur, but not quite this. Salthar looked stressed. Jay felt a coldly disapproving glare boring into him. He bowed with proper humility to the noble, and waited to be abused.

"This is your man?" said the noble. "I don't think so. I need someone to go in there and get close to Corusval. Close on a level that will allow him access to his work. This menial is unsuitable."

"This menial," said Salthar, "is my best operative. External and internal. His ability to impersonate other castes is unrivalled and utterly convincing. He can also ingratiate himself with practically anyone and deceive them without a qualm. There's no-one else. These are my agents, my lord. I know them."

Though his voice sounded controlled, Jay could hear the strain of a long and difficult conversation in his tone. Jay met the noble's eyes, deliberately flouting protocol.

"And you trust him?" said the noble, staring directly at Jay but still addressing Salthar.

"I trust him to do his job."

"Very well. Brief him. Keep me informed by personal messenger. You know how important this is, Salthar."

The noble strode out, and Jay bowed again as he swept by him.

Once the door was closed, Salthar let out a breath and lowered himself deliberately into his desk chair.

"Thanks for the character reference," said Jay.

"In the name of the Empress, Jhal, what are you dressed like that for? The one occasion I need you to appear respectable, and you look like a country blacksmith."

"I am a country blacksmith – sir."

Salthar glared. “Screw this one up and you will be.” He gestured to the other chair, and handed over a photoslate.

Jay flicked through the images, all of which showed a middle-aged swordbearer of venerable, stately appearance.

“Retired General Corusval, ostensibly of Caro,” said Salthar. “In fact, he took his wife’s clan – originally, he was a Blade of Vengeance. Caro is the principle swordbearer clan on Parmua.”

“Excellent, I could do with some sun.”

“Review this biography and come up with a reason for an extended visit to the former General, preferably as a scribe. You’re to get close to him and find out what you can.”

“About what?”

“About his former and possibly his present connections and activities. I can’t tell you more than that.”

“Because you don’t know any more, or because of Court squeamishness about internal affairs?”

“That’s enough, Jhal. Whatever it may have been necessary to say to Lord Eldo, I am not at all sure you’re right for this or any other internal mission.”

“Then why are you sending me? Why not Mizal? She’d have the old man eating out of her hand. Is she busy elsewhere?”

“No. She’s dead.”

Salthar stood up abruptly, scraping the chair sharply on the floor. Jay stared at the pyramid shaped paperweight on the desk, noticing that it cast a rainbow prism of light.

“This investigation is being driven from the highest quarters – you saw that yourself. There can be no delay, and for the sake of everyone’s honour there can be no mistakes. Afterwards, Jay, I want you to go after her killer.” He turned from the window wall. “Report to me in an hour with a convincing cover story and I’ll get some credentials set up for you. You’re to leave for Parmua as soon as practicable Take your servant. And Jhal - investigating Corusval does not involve seducing his wife, his daughter or any other female member of his household. Do I make myself perfectly clear?”

Not yet inclined to speak, Jay nodded.

“It’s best you don’t know everything, but I can tell you that from the suspicions that attach to Corusval, anyone close to him could be implicated, and any one of them could be dangerous if your cover is blown. Now go and use your imagination.”

The briefest overview of Corusval’s file was enough to suggest to Jay that he could represent himself as a Scribe Caste scholar needing to use the famous ancient library attached to the Caro ancestral home. For the rest of the allotted hour his imagination worked against him, suggesting in detail all the many ways a young combat trained woman could die.

TO BE CONTINUED!

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