Exordium

The Phoenix in Flight

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PROLOGUE

We are the children of conflict. We have been shaped by struggle: against the Collective and its descendant, the Hegemony; against the Adamantines, machines turned masters; against the Shiidra, ancient and implacably hostile; and against the diluting force of interstellar distance. To the student of humanity, it often seems that what we are depends as much on what opposes us as on what sustains us.

We are the children of the Exile. No matter how far diverged by their singular histories, every human culture in the Thousand Suns resonates to its tragic echoes. How else could it be? All of us – Downside, Highdweller, even Rifter – are descended from the many and varied groups who rejected the sterile conformity of the Solar Collective and chose instead to flee in primitive starships through the Vortex.

We are the children of a mystery. We do not know what the Vortex was. Perhaps it was an artifact of the sophonts we call the Ur, or of the unknown enemy that destroyed them so long ago. The Vortex opened only twice: once, to bring humankind here from the other side of the Galaxy, scattering us through both space and time; once more, to disgorge a cybernetic horror engendered by the Hegemony. We do not know if it will ever open again. Without it, there is no return to Earth, if Earth even
still exists.

Thus we are a deeply praeterite people, fascinated by the bits of Earthly life our various ancestors carried with them through the Vortex. In the face of all the forces arrayed against us, these fragments keep us human, for they are sacraments of the deep realities that made our forebears choose Exile and remain rooted in the fertile ground of their natural cultures. Our languages, religions, social and political structures are grounded in these fragments; to the extent that an innovation departs from these roots, it is recognized as false, and fails.

We are the Phoenix, ever regenerate from the flames of conflict, which burn away the dross to reveal the gold of true humanity. Sundered from the mother of humankind by an immensity of space-time, we yet remain the children of Earth.

Magister Davidiah Jones
Gnostor of Archetype and Ritual
The Roots of Human Process
Torigan Prime, A.A. 787

What would we do without our enemies?

The Sanctus Teilhard
(Pierre Teilhard de Chardin)
The Phenomenon of Man
Lost Earth, ca. 200 B.E.
N!Kirr was out of catalepsy into second sleep before he felt his own mind again. He fled the awareness of his other lives and rose slowly toward consciousness.

Pushing his way through first sleep, the aged Guardian folded himself upright, his movements almost involuntary through habit, and locked his secondary knees against his thorax with the deliberate grace of twenty millennia.

The air tasted foul, like a moldy klopt egg, and N!Kirr flexed his mandibles irritably. The harsh clatter echoed through a thousand images of the vault, as he registered the dust-laden sunbeams lancing into the cool darkness through the Sunset Arch.

Sunset? he thought. Disbelief wrenched his eyes into focus, and their iridescent facets glinted as the Guardian peered about, hissing with vexation. Had he lost a night and a day, then? Where were his under-bearers, and his acolytes? Such a thing had never happened before!

“They shall have their shells broken for this! Sunset!” N!Kirr, confused and dizzy, spoke at last, his anger leaking away.
“Sunset,” returned the vault, its echoes blurring the chattering syllables, and N!Kirr swayed, overcome by a sudden sense of wrongness. The sunset light was the color of an offworlde’s blood; the setting Egg was entering Red Victory, one phase of the patient pulse of life that would one day hatch another demon.

A swarm of acolytes scurried toward him, the edges of their chelae pale with confusion and fear, but N!Kirr ignored them. A successor will see the hatching, thought the Guardian dispassionately, in that timeless instant before the star-born demon shall swallow him and all our race into its consuming fury.

“All the stars shall mark our passing, and the fulfillment of our vigil and our trust.” The Guardian spoke to himself, but the acolytes milling about his dais subsided into a respectful silence, except for those who started scribbling on the writing plates hanging from their necks.

Droogflies! he thought angrily, vexed by their dependence on him. He had seen too many of their generations fleeting past him, their brief lives blurring into anonymity, and he was tired.

Still confused by the apparent loss of a day, N!Kirr
looked down at the focus of the Shrine and of his people. At the base of his thorax lay the Heart of the Demon, partially sunken in the spiral-incised stone of the Guardian’s dais. Its perfectly-reflecting surface mirrored in curved distortion his anxious face as he bent over it, and the faces of his frightened attendants, waiting silently for his guidance. His age-reddened chelae stroked his throat patches in a rasping sigh, and he cautiously sank his mind into the small sphere, seeking the Pattern. The feeling of wrongness intensified and the stone-prisoned sphere assumed a numinous clarity to his eyes as he found only emptiness.

N!Kirr brought his forearms down and stabbed at the Heart of the Demon with his killing-thumbs. There was a muffled pop and the mirror-sphere vanished, leaving only its shape in the stone and a few silvery tatters. The acolytes shrieked in unison and fled in all directions, their limbs clattering in noisy terror against the inlaid stone.

The Guardian stilled as the shock overthrew the haze of ancient ritual endlessly repeated, and left him completely alert. The Heart of the Demon had been stolen, and a simulacrum placed in its stead while he slept. The offworlders!
N!Kirr closed his eyes. Twenty thousand years he’d watched, and generations of Guardians before him, and the Heart was gone. The Devourer would wake again.

The vault seemed to echo to many voices, all familiar though never heard before, multiplied by the carven wall of the Shrine to a tapestry of compulsion and demand. N!Kirr surrendered to them gratefully, yielding up the crushing knowledge of his race’s failure, so near the end of their long vigil, and the voices swelled into a cold, blinding light that took him into oblivion.

The next day, at the urging of its fellows, an acolyte crept timidly back into the Shrine. It found the Guardian still standing there, its carapace cold and lightless. Shortly after that, for the first time in ten million years, the Shrine was empty of life and movement, a hollow shell abandoned in the bloody light of a dying sun.
PART ONE
ONE

ARTHELION ORBIT

Soft music played in the Suite Royal of the glittership *Luxochronus*. The immense monocrystal viewport that made up one wall of the suite’s richly-appointed parlor displayed a spectacular view of cloud-swirled Arthelion. The planet curved away vast beneath the ship; above, the Highdwellings in synchronous orbit were a golden arc disappearing over the terminator into the planet’s shadow.

Eleris vlith-Chandreseki ignored the panorama from long habit. As a girl, born a Highdweller and raised on a vast inside-out world where the emptiness of space was unseen and underfoot, she’d found such views threatening in a way that her Downsider cousins couldn’t understand. By the time she’d returned home after her schooling and Grand Tour, she’d seen its like too many times to be impressed.

To Eleris the glory of space existed merely as a
backdrop for the slim figure standing in front of the viewport, his hands loose, his head a little to one side as he gazed out at the planet below—from which his family had ruled the Thousand Suns for nearly a millennium.

Eleris shook back her tumble of curls to lie across her naked back, and grinned as she padded barefoot across the floor of living mosses, remembering a party in this same room seven years ago, when she turned twenty. *Life is too short to waste on men who are not rich, pretty, and powerful,* she’d said to her cousin.

*You’ll never get all three,* Leda had retorted.

Brandon nyr-Arkad had proved Leda wrong... or was going to prove her wrong. He was easily the handsomest of the three royal sons, and his name brought wealth and prestige enough for the most discriminating taste. Together they could lead Douloi society, which the rest of the Panarchy emulated.

If only he had the wit to cooperate!

She closed the distance between them, her bracelets tinkling faintly as she reached up to run her fingers through the silken black waves of his hair. How could
Brandon be so beautiful and yet so oblivious?

“What,” she whispered into his ear before nipping it, “are you thinking about so passionately?”

His utter lack of any hint of passion made her statement a tease, but she might as well have saved her breath.

“That last game,” he admitted. “There was an interesting tactical tradeoff that I might have handled better, if...”

“Brandon.”

“Eleris?”

He turned, his blue-gray eyes as guileless as a child’s.

Exasperation caught in her chest, and she forced a smile. “Brandon, Phalanx is a game for children.”

“Not Level Three.” He turned out his hands, smiling ruefully. “I thought you enjoyed betting on me.”

The exasperation intensified to irritation. She breathed in slowly and consciously dismissed it. He was never haughty or tiresome about the deference due his rank,
unlike (for instance) Krysarchei Phaelia Inesset, whom he was expected to marry, and he never sneered dismissively at anyone outside of the Navy, or the Council, like his oldest brother, the Aerenarch Semion.

She leaned up to kiss Brandon. He tasted of blue-wine. *Pay attention,* she thought, but she’d learned that saying so was useless, you had to give a lover something to pay attention to.

He was always somewhat cloud-minded, but today he was worse than usual. Why? He’d only had that single glass of wine since their arrival back. Maybe he was more like the middle brother than she’d assumed. Everyone said that Galen was kind, and gentle, but all he thought about was art and music.

Eleris leaned against him. “Brandon, we need to…” Not ‘talk.’ That was too serious. Brandon was never serious, and she had no intention of lecturing him on his duty, as she had overheard the Krysarchei Phaelia (who never let anyone forget her title) and her horrible mother doing once. “What are we doing next?”

He grinned, his eyelids lifting—now he was seeing her. She wore only her body art of climbing roses, a gem
embedded in the center of each blossom, and an elegant bracelet on each wrist.

She stepped back and struck a pose, tossed her hair back again, and reveled in his appreciative gaze. “Afterward.”

But his answering grin began fading to distraction. She knew very well the effect she had on her lovers, which meant his distraction had an external cause. She dropped the pose and closed the distance between them. “Brandon, is something wrong?”

His head tipped. “We haven’t sampled all the delights of the old Luxo yet. Ship layover is only three more days. We could stay on for the next leg. What are you in the mood for? Winter or summer? Grav-skiing in the Gargantua Range on Thisselion? Delph-tag in the Bhopal Archipelago on Hanuman?”

She caught his hands, and began sliding her fingers up his arms. “Brandon, your Enkainion is only a month off, right here on Arthelion.”

He seemed genuinely surprised. “And so? We can’t get in a little more fun before the harness slips on me for
life? I can get us a last-minute courier back from anywhere.”

Eleris laughed. She’d been trained to laugh beautifully. It hid the exasperation. “Brandon, you sound as if you’d have to report to that Naval academy again, or something equally dreary. You know very well what you will be doing after your Enkainion: exactly what you do now.”

His breath hitched, so slight a break in the fremitus of his breathing that she would not have caught it had she not had her arms twined around him. She looked up, startled—there had been nothing in what she said to trigger such a reaction—but his smile was the same rueful grin. “Contrary. There will be no more asking if you like summer or winter.”

Ah. Was it the prospect of having every day scheduled that he resented? Why, when it would be nothing but parties, galas, celebrations, and maybe some formal rituals at which he’d preside as the Arkad representative, so that his older brother and his father would be free for their boring politicking?

“Is it spontaneity you wish for? Surely you cannot
resent the necessity for schedules—think of how long it takes to plan the very best parties!”

“Spontaneity?” He set his hands on her shoulders, his gaze steady, wide with question. “I thought you wanted to run away.”

Eleris stared back, trying to get past his obtuseness. Did he want to be alone with her for even longer? They’d been as good as alone for weeks. She hadn’t even known how many guards he had, they were so unobtrusive, until her staff had contacted her about all the supplies they ordered; she’d only noticed them sweeping the area when they arrived or departed ports. And once, at one of those exclusive clubs where high stakes Phalanx was played (and they were certainly not alone then) Brandon had dived into the crowd and pulled forward a huge man, insisting on him joining the game. Together they’d taken on all comers until Brandon, laughing, said he was forced to drop out, after which he’d lingered, watching his guardsman win game after game, until he, too, was defeated—by some old woman from somewhere out-octant. Some fun!

Being alone with Brandon was plenty of fun, but the
irresistible seduction was the image of herself presiding over the Mandala. With Brandon’s pretty face at her elbow, she would become the greatest social leader in at least three centuries.

“We’ve been glitter-skipping for the past...” She glanced at her boswell, its tiny face built into her bracelet. It showed Arthelion time. “Two months. And I have loved every moment,” she said quickly. “But your Enkainion...”

He shrugged. “So? It’s all planned out. There’s nothing for me to do except show up and trot through the ritual like a trained dog."

Steward Halkyn, who had charge of the Palace Major and Minor, was famous for being the most perfect of a long line of Halkyn stewards. He would see to it that the Enkainion was exactly as it should be, though why Brandon didn’t want to oversee it, she didn’t know. She’d loved overseeing every aspect of her own Enkainion, when she was twenty-five.

She had tucked herself against him. One of his hands caressed her shoulder and stroked through her hair down her back, but the gesture was more absent than insistent. She tipped her head, and yes, his gaze had wandered to
the viewport again.

Was he annoyed about the reminder of his approaching Enkainion? No, there was no anger in the curve of his lips, just absence. He didn’t seem to care at all. Maybe it was his age. The Arkads traditionally held their ‘coming of age’ ceremonials late. Historically, after the last royal child went through his or her Enkainion, the Panarch or Kyriarch usually announced which child would be heir, if there was more than one. But that would be no surprise. Everyone knew that the oldest son, Aerenarch Semion, would be heir, in spite of the fact that he’d not been in court for five years. He was effectively running the Navy already.

Politics! Eleris shrugged. She didn’t care about politics. Brandon had to make a political marriage—word was, it had been arranged by Semion himself, in order to bind the Vandraska shipyards tighter to the Arkads through the Inesset family. But Brandon would never be involved in politics, he was the center of Arthelion’s social life.

A new thought occurred: maybe he wasn’t lost in thought, but in communication. Did he have neural induction on his boswell? His throat wasn’t bobbing in
that horrible awkward way that most people subvocalized.

She shifted her stance and stood squarely in front of him. “Brandon...” She sighed his name.

“Eleris?” Brandon asked, then his forehead puckered, and finally he really seemed to see her. “Have I done something wrong?” His smile twisted, mocking, but she sensed... regret? “Or is my joke about running away together so terrifying that...”

In answer she began untabbing his tunic. Then she paused, and ventured a small gamble, since her main game hung unresolved. “It’s just that when I proposed this journey, I, well, I didn’t quite count on how lengthy it would be. And I have loved it, but...”

Brandon’s head tipped in quick concern. “Is it money?” he asked bluntly, without any insinuations whatsoever. He grimaced. “Eleris, I never think about those things. You should have brought it up.”

She couldn’t prevent a retort, but she kept her tone light, “You don’t have to think about those things.”

“I know.” He grimaced again. “Does that sound intolerable? My... someone I knew ten years ago once... but
then people who go on about a third party are usually bores.”

Eleris bit her lip. *I don’t care about anyone you knew ten years ago.* But she couldn’t say that. She forced a smile. “You know that many deem it vulgar to make any reference to resources. ‘The life of art requires art to appear effortless.’”

Brandon lifted a shoulder. “My brother Galen, whom I consider the expert on art, says that that rule is more posturing on the part of the wealthy, and for an example of resource and effort being part of art, we have only to look at the mystery of the Ur.”

Eleris fluttered her fingers, dismissing that long-dead race and their immense ‘art’ projects involving entire suns and planets. She’d won a small victory — her credit would survive this venture — and she had no intention of giving up her campaign. She’d succeeded in removing his tunic and shirt, her hands running over his smooth skin, enjoying the taut musculature, by habit avoiding the ugly pucker of the scar on his back. Why didn’t he have it removed? It would cost a fraction of what she spent on her body art.
She’d asked him once, but all he’d said was, “I don’t have to see it.”

Which really wasn’t an answer at all.

She dismissed the mysteries, and the exasperations. Time for yet another art, one in which she was especially adept and inventive, and which insured his attention would remain solely on her.

 Brandon surrendered gratefully to Eleris’s insistent fingers, aware that the respite was just that.

White heat flared, then faded to lassitude when Eleris got up to bathe and oversee the last arrangements for her imminent party.

Brandon lay back on the soft moss, breathing in the astringent scent of the crushed greenery as the lassitude faded in its turn, leaving a sense of regret, and even guilt. “Politics is boring,” Eleris had said when they met. “I live for pleasure.” It was that which had prompted him to accept her invitation for a protracted pleasure cruise, just the two of them, leaving the universe behind.
But one can’t leave the universe behind, one can only choose which aspects of it to engage with. She had been straightforward about her life of pleasure, so why shouldn’t she take an interest in his Enkainion, and the subsequent life of pleasure he was expected to lead afterward?

Bringing him right back to...

The *Luxochronus* had been realtime on the DataNet since it settled into Arthelion orbit, its cryptobanks discharging and taking on the data that every ship carried between the stars. And among the floods of data being exchanged there had been one simple message, relayed by neural induction to his inner ear, in a voice he’d not heard for ten years:

*Markham sent me. Meet?*

Just four words, and a confirming signature and timestamp in machine-neutral cadence, but coming now, only a month before his Enkainion, they were enough to blast all Brandon’s calculations, causing him to almost mention Markham vlith-L’ranja, once his closest friend.

*You know very well what you will be doing after your*
Enkainion.

Except that he didn’t. Was this an attempt at revenge, further entrapment, or an avenue of escape?

The voice and signature suggested the first.

Lenic Deralze.

Between one heartbeat and the next, memory seized Brandon, shifting him from Eleris’s scattered cushions to the cold, austere hallway outside the Academy cadets’ brig after Markham’s arrest: Brandon was again twenty-three, too shocked to speak as Deralze crossed the invisible line dividing an Arkad from those who served, shoved Brandon up against the wall, and shouted in his face.

“You’ll walk away from this like you Tetrad nicks always do, knowing that however you chatz up, the blunge always lands on someone else. Your”—He’d used a vulgar phrase from Rifter argot meaning literally “braided members” to refer to Markham. “—and you said nothing. Nothing!”

Even more searing was the memory of Deralze’s disgust and loathing as he tore off his blason and threw it at Brandon’s feet. “You can keep your worthless life, and my Oath with it.”
Why was Deralze contacting him now? The timestamp indicated the message had been waiting only hours for him. That meant Deralze was already on Arthelion.

Perhaps entrapment was a better explanation. How else would such a message have gotten through the rings and layers of security placed around him by Semion?

Brandon rolled to his feet and bent to pick up his clothes as he considered his oldest brother. It had been five years since they’d seen one another last, but Semion still monitored every aspect of Brandon’s life. “Our father ordered me to safeguard you, and so I shall,” Semion had said not long after Galen’s Enkainion.

Brandon retrieved his shoes and padded across the moss to the bath, which was designed to look like a woodland stream. *Semion has to know that any mention of Markham would get my attention.*

The question was, why? And why now? It was ten years since Markham was cashiered—and his family ruined. Ten years since Brandon’s own career had been summarily ended.

Was this message one more link in the strangling
chain that would culminate in his Enkainion? Brandon threw his clothes into the cleaner, then tabbed the control to raise the temperature of the water in the artfully decorated stream. What irony! His Enkainion, everybody agreed, was to be so brilliant that it would be broadcast throughout the reaches of the Thousand Suns, to Downsiders, Highdwellers and lawless Rifters alike.

He turned the boswell around and around in his hands, fingering the stylized band of interlocked links. Most people would give anything to be born an Arkad; to live in the Mandalic Palace on Arthelion, the central jewel of the Panarchy’s countless planets and Highdwellings; to possess his limitless wealth, his position at the peak of the Douloi social circle.

Brandon snorted in rueful amusement at the turn of his thoughts: chains, strangulation. He tossed the boswell down onto the silky blades of grass beside the stream. What if the message really was from Markham? He’d taken the Riftskip, fleeing his Douloi roots into the chaos outside Panarchic law.

Why would he contact Brandon now? It made no more sense than Semion concocting some elaborate trap, when
he already controlled nearly every aspect of Brandon’s life.

Brandon shook his head, and stepped into the hot water. He could endlessly consider all the possible implications of this message, but three were certain.

One: he couldn’t trust that the message was from Deralze. The former bodyguard might know how to get around the Palace codes, but Semion wouldn’t have to.

Two: he couldn’t trust the goal of whoever had sent the message. If it wasn’t one of Semion’s moves, the fact that it had reached him at all indicated deeply-compromised security. If Brandon responded, he could be made to disappear altogether.

Three: none of that mattered, for his disappearance was foreordained. If he went through with the Enkainion, and the plans so carefully laid for a life of social brilliance, he would symbolically disappear forever, replaced by a simulacrum engineered by Semion.

Brandon smiled bitterly, savoring the irony. Two lives removed from ultimate power, but here and now, virtually no choice.

He reached for his boswell, and began to compose his
reply.

TWO

PARADISUM

Verin Palmar, youngest invested member of the family-owned Rifter ship Bloodknife, stalked through the terminal, dodging easily through the throng of travelers. Far above her, crystal panels glinted as they shifted to follow the bloody light of Ouroboros in red eclipse of its companion star Ophis.

“... ever eating its own tail. But in fifty thousand years or so the resulting expansion will vaporize Paradisum and the Shrine Planet with its mysterious Guardian and the even more mysterious artifact known as the Heart of Kronos.” The pompous voice broke her train of thought, and Palmar glared at the Tiklipti tour group milling about in her path. Their rotund guide’s green-dyed face was a garish black in the red light flooding the Paradisum spaceport.
Like a vacuum-eaten corpse, Palmar thought in disgust as she pushed her way through the group.

Fifty thousand years. So what! She’d be long dead when the dying star swallowed Paradisum. She snorted as she neared the ParcelNet console. The red giant and the ring of fire ripped from its surface by its now-eclipsed companion, Ophis, dominated the yellow sky. Still, she thought, I’ll be glad when we skip out tonight.

Paradisum and the Shrine Planet were the only Doomed Worlds Palmar had ever visited, and if she had her way, it would be the last. What kind of race had the Ur been, to make an art form of destruction, on a scale that required a multimillion-year perspective to appreciate? And if they’d been powerful enough to remake solar systems, what could have wiped them out so completely?

She snorted in disgust. Granny would kick her through the lock into vacuum if she admitted it, but that chatzing Shrine Planet and those crazy Bugs had given her the shillies. Verin Palmar hated insects. The memory of the Guardian towering above her, frozen by the gas bomb, made her unconsciously speed her pace and lose the sense of her surroundings long enough to collide with a man in
elegant clothing, his hair and eyes dyed a muted silver, forming an elegant contrast with his dark skin. She ignored his apology, despising him for his singsong Douloi accent as he apologized. *Good-looking enough, but just another strutting highborn nick.*

Only one of the consoles in the ParcelNet bank was free, and the screen lit as it sensed her approach. “*Virtwandhi?*” The word scrolled slowly upward on the screen as the com spoke.

“Speak Uni!” Palmar snarled, jiggling with impatience to get this over with. “D’ya think I’m a stinking Paradeezer?”

“Your pardon, *genz,*” replied the singsong voice, not sounding sorry or anything else. “Your parcel’s destination?”

“Qoholeth, insured.”

“Value?”

“Contract, cash.”

“302.2 AU, please.” The port below the screen dilated and accepted the box and the sunbursts Palmar threw after
it. She was glad to get rid of it. The mirror-sphere she’d stolen from the bugs — *why do they call it a “heart,” anyway?* — was the weirdest-feeling thing she’d ever handled. Even a Downsider would notice the dissonance between the sphere’s heft and its apparent lack of inertia. Like most Rifters, Palmar had a fine-tuned sense of mass and acceleration, and handling the sphere had made her more than a little queasy.

As she waited impatiently for the machine to process the parcel, a fanfare of trumpets caught her attention, and she glanced up at one of the vast public viewscreens above the bustle of the terminal.

“... at the center of the Mandala, where only a P-month from now the youngest son of His Majesty will step into the Ranks of Service.” The novosti’s face creased in exaggerated excitement as he gestured at an image of the Hall of Ivory behind him. “Though Krysarch Brandon is the last Arkad of this generation, it is said that this Enkainion will be the most brilliant of those for all three royal sons. For not only will it be the premier social event of the year, there will be important concerns in the political realm. Genz Leseuer?”
Palmar glanced up at the female novosti grinning stupidly down at them, the weird third eye of an *ajna* imager open on her forehead. Who would see her broadcast?

“Who cares?” Palmar muttered, resisting the impulse to bang her fist on the machine, as if that would hurry it any.

“Thank you, Genz Vu,” the female novosti gushed. “For the people of Ansonia, Krysarch Brandon’s Enkainion will mark the first official participation of our republic in the political ritual of the Panarchy, as negotiations for our inclusion approach their…”

“Ha!” Palmar snorted. *First and last, most likely, if the chatter about an attack is true.*

“... and we’ll be there, to bring you all the brilliance and excitement of this historic moment.”

Palmar blew air through pursed lips in dismissive scorn. *More nick-strut blunge, yammering on as if...*

The machine blipped. On the ParcelNet screen appeared the words: “Jiji Byron, care of Martin Cheruld, Aegios Prime, Qoholeth Anachronics Hub, backup routing
to General Delivery with passphrase ‘green phalanx noiseless.’”

“Correct. Timing?”

“Estimated 30 days, 11 nodes plus or minus two, SPC variance 0.15. Confirmation required?”

“To maildrop.” Palmar fed the machine the one-time card she’d been given, then scooped her change out of the hopper and turned away as the machine singsonged its meaningless thank-you.

The yellow, cloudless glare of Paradisum’s sky oppressed her as she headed for the field tubes. Ophis was subject to vicious flares, so Paradisum had no Highdwellings or any inhabited orbital facilities. It would have made more sense for Bloodknife to take the package to another system so none of her crew would have to waste time at the bottom of a well. But that slug Barrodagh had given them no choice.

“From the Paradisum spaceport,” that pale-faced Bori had insisted. No doubt the one-time card had sent the timing confirmation to his local agent, although what good that would do them she couldn’t figure out. Even
Downsiders knew that data and packages moved at the same speed.

Palmar shrugged. There was a lot about this mission that didn’t make sense, starting with why Barrodagh hadn’t mentioned the weirdness of the sphere. She got it that he was running some kind of attack against the nicks somewhere, and that if the Bloodknife family completed their mission, they would get to be a part of it. But why send this thing by ParcelNet? *Barrodagh orders us clear across the Thousand Suns to steal this sphere from the Bugs, complete with passcode for the Shrine Planet Quarantine Monitor, no less, and then he has us entrust it to his enemies for shipment!* 

Palmar had asked her mother about it after they got the assignment, while Granny was busy. Mother was always reading chips, or noderunning after dirt that others didn’t want dug up. Until their recruitment by Barrodagh, Mother had made a tidy sum on the RiftNet databourse. “I don’t know,” Mother had said, and Palmar had forgotten about her question until Mother yanked her awake this morning, looking thoroughly spooked.

Palmar grimaced. Even that enormous bug hadn’t
been as disturbing as the sight of Mother spooked. “This is way more crazy-bad than I’d thought,” Mother’d whispered, shaking her head.

“But the Syndics are backing us,” Palmar had protested. “I thumbprinted the orders from the Second myself. Full Rift Sodality Assurance.”

“But we thought that little slug Barrodagh was just some rich collector with a grudge against the nicks somewhere.”

“It is for some collector,” Palmar argued. “The Syndic Second said that Barrodagh is the collector, and if we do well, we’ll be in on his raid. So?”

Mother spat over her shoulder, and made the sign of warding, “Yeah. But you know who’s behind Barrodagh? He’s only a front. He’s run by those crazy Dol’jharians. In fact, he’s no less than the front for their king, or chief, or whatever ‘Avatar’ means – Jerrode Eusabian. And it’s for one of their revenge customs.”

“Revenge?” Palmar had asked, wondering how in the Five Hells you got revenge by stealing a ball from a bunch of bugs.

“What we’re doing, right now, this is what the Dol’jharians
call a paliach,” Mother had gone on to say. “It’s a formal vengeance, where the enemy has to symbolically take part in his own destruction. Using the ParcelNet is probably part of it, too, since the nicks run that, so it’s sort of like having the Panarch deliver it himself.” Mother cackled. “Not that this Avatar is really taking much of a chance. Even the Spider and her Invisibles can’t intercept something on the ParcelNet.”

“You’re talking like somebody in a chatzing wiredream,” Palmar had interrupted, really queasy by her mother’s uncharacteristic furtiveness.

Instead of slapping her for talking back—which disturbed Palmar even more—Mother had looked around, as if wondering about telltales in the middle of their own ship, then whispered even lower, “We’re gonna wish it was if we chatz it up, or vary from instructions by a finger.” Mother held up her own finger. “Those Dol’jharian lords don’t like being crossed even a tiny bit, and they have a thing called a mindripper that can take weeks to kill you. And that’s why I don’t like this revenge thing. Because everyone in the way of their vengeance gets...” She drew her finger across her neck. “And that’s if you’re lucky.”

“Well, we won’t chatz it up,” Palmar had snarled.
And she hadn’t.

Palmar glanced back at the ParcelNet console, ready to make an obscene sign at any lurking spies or however Barrodagh—or those Dol’jharians, if Mother was right—kept watch. She had followed the instructions exactly. *I’ve done what they wanted. Now we get the new gear Barrodagh promised—whatever it is, the Syndics guarantee it’s gonna get us more sunbursts than we ever seen before, and better yet, it’s bad news for the nicks. And afterward?*

*Rifthaven, here we come,* she thought happily, and the doors closed behind her.

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Suomo ban-Lennikani stepped out of the ParcelNet line and watched the young Rifter woman stride off from a console a few positions away. He’d felt the strength of her body when she collided with him—he’d always been drawn to muscular women, an unfashionable taste among the Douloi of his far-away Highdwelling—and the ferocity of her expression had fascinated him even more. Her raiment was a jarring combination of expensive material and a flagrant lack of taste typical of Rifters, adding to her
allure, which was why he’d decided to follow her and watch, daydreaming pleasantly. He’d never had a Rifter lover—although under present circumstances it might not be very politic…

As if summoned by the thought, Eduor’s voice sounded in his inner ear. (Sumi, where are you?) Without waiting for a reply, he rattled on. (You'll never guess who I found in the High Concourse, waiting oh so impatiently for us. Tani says she’s been here most of a day…)

Suomo gritted his teeth, glad he’d set his boswell’s sensitivity too low to transmit the sensation, and let Eduor’s chatter flow past without attention, a talent he’d been developing more and more lately. Tani again, he thought, after flexing his wrist to cut off his boswell’s subvocal pickup. Flaunting the speed of her new yacht as the two of them danced attendance on Eduor vlith-Fregomec from system to system across the Thousand Suns. You come back with the Fregomec family alliance, his mother had said, and his father had added, Or don’t come back at all.

With a regretful glance at the Rifter woman, Suomo continued on his interrupted walk back to the High
Concourse, chuckling as he caught up with the sense of Eduor’s words.

(...but I said I like it slow, and she said...)

Just like that, an idea flowered. Speed was one thing, but knowing one’s way around—whether a lover’s body or interstellar space—that was better. He would bet his pilot’s navigation against Tani’s any day—she was over-proud of her nav training and tended to meddle with her pilot, which was why she couldn’t keep them—and he’d overheard where the Rifter woman was sending her package. Qoholeth!

He’d had lots of time to study his yachting charts on the way to Paradism. *There’s an excursion of the Rift between here and there.* A difficult jaunt like that, through the chaotic conditions of the Rift, would give him the advantage he needed, and the ParcelNet next-skip algorithms would now be scanning outbound ship routes for the first-destination closest to Qoholeth. If he filed a flight plan to Qoholeth, requesting the first possible departure, the ParcelNet would automatically jump his liftoff to the top if he was willing to take cargo. *Good thing I kept my ParcelNet bond current!*
Suomo flexed his wrist to bring his boswell back on. He filed the flight plan, and started for the docks, flexing up his lover. *(Eduor, I have the most diverting idea...)*

A few hours later, Suomo was even more delighted when his pilot confirmed that the DataNet upload to the ship’s cryptobanks after he’d filed their destination had been tagged with a request from the ParcelNet dispatch system to carry a pallet to Qoholeth. The briefly renewed connection with the attractive Rifter stirred his groin to life momentarily — *She’ll never know that I got her package there a lot faster than she expected* — but even more satisfying was the fact that his gambit had paid off: accepting would now give him priority liftoff from Paradisum. At Qoholeth, he and Eduor would be waiting impatiently for Tani. He might even win not just the race but the alliance that would make his future secure.

Life was so good for the quick-witted!

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**DOL’JHAR**

Morrighon shuffled with care into the half-circle inlaid
in the corridor outside the door to the Commons and braced himself with his hands on either side of the doorframe. The floor seemed to drop out beneath him as the gravitors cancelled a portion of Dol’jhar’s brutal gravity and a quarter of his weight leaked away. The door slid open and he stepped through. His breath eased along with the ache of his twisted frame; for that one moment he could imagine he was again on distant Bori, the planet of his birth.

His spirits lightened, too, despite the fact that he was less safe here among his fellow Catennach bureaucrats than among the vengeful Dol’jharians they served. He’d learned early that safety was a relative thing, and the Commons satisfied the Bori preference for crowded, noisy spaces that even the merciless Catennach training and more than twenty years of exile could not fully expunge. He allowed himself to enjoy the emotion without relaxing the foolish, placatory grin he wore as armor, and made his way toward the food dispensers in the far wall.

Here, deep within Hroth D’Ocha, the tower fortress of Jerrode Eusabian, Lord of Vengeance, there was little to remind one of Dol’jhar; the shuddering smash of the growing storm outside was barely discernible. The low-
ceilinged room, its walls and ceiling a riot of colorful murals, was a hive of activity, awash in human noise and tantalizing aromas—the Catennach did not stint themselves for food, sharing in the largesse of the lords’ kitchens, albeit without servants.

The tables were crowded with Bori in service gray, eating and talking and gesturing with careful animation, intensely aware of each other’s personal space. At the far side of the room, oblivious to the noise around them, individuals hunched tensely over consoles that laved their faces with the changing colors of the unending game, Vox Populi, fingers occasionally stabbing at inset keypads. Here and there conversation pods held small groups of Bori—these were all high-status Catennach, relaxing into comfortable chairs and deceptively desultory conversations.

Morrighon lingered over his selections so he could sort the conversations that he would not be invited to join. Heard most frequently were the names Barrodagh and Thuriol.

Morrighon suppressed a shudder. Not far from here, Thuriol was enduring a very different conversation, from
which only death would release him, and then far too late. He’d made the mistake of underestimating the unique mastery of both vision and detail that had made Barrodagh supreme among the Catennach, and so far, indispensable to the Lord of Vengeance.

Morrighon showed no sign of the spark of satisfaction burning deep in his belly. *Underestimation can cut two ways.*

Morrighon loaded his tray with dishes chosen to display a lack of imagination and an abhorrence of variety, and made his way toward a half-empty table where other low-status bureaucrats like himself were seated.

“Morrighon! A moment of your valuable time!”

More awkwardly than necessary, making the dinnerware clatter on his tray, Morrighon turned and approached the conversation pod from which Almanor, a senior Catennach, had addressed him. Surrounded by her cronies, who all wore the same uniform as Morrighon’s wrinkled tunic, but flawlessly tailored, the senior Catennach lazily waved him closer, her malicious amusement mirrored by the others.

*Time for sport,* Morrighon thought.
“We’ve been discussing the lamentable misstep of our former colleague.” Almanor gestured at the multiple communicators weighing down Morrighon’s belt. “I thought that someone so well in touch as you might have some insights to share.” She paused expectantly.

Morrighon adopted an expression of vapid cogitation that he knew was intensified by his wall-eyed gaze, which made it impossible for others to tell where his attention lay. The tray’s weight was already paining his shoulders, which had never recovered from the long-ago fall in Dol’jharian gravity; the resultant lumpy, misshapen body often made him the butt of jokes.

As now. There was no place for a food tray in the conversation pod, and his status would forbid him to put it down among the senior Catennach, anyway. So, as Almanor intended, he had to stand there in increasing discomfort.

“I haven’t heard very much, senz-lo Almanor,” he replied, using the Dol’jharian inferior-to-superior title as was appropriate and expected. He tightened his throat as he spoke, knowing that would accentuate the whine that others heard even in his most relaxed speech.
“Oh, I’m sure you hear quite a lot,” said another, his tone implying the unlikelihood of any understanding arising from whatever information might come to Morrighon.

“But?” said Almanor.

Morrighon was saved from further mockery by a soft tone from one of his coms. The devices were designed to force vulnerable acoustic communications on lower-status Catennach, so in public Morrighon, like others in his position, used them mostly to signal alerts from his work console. He found it useful to carry several tuned to different channels, both because it tended to confuse eavesdroppers and also because it made him look ridiculous.

“Your pardon, senz-lo Almanor. I am summoned by senx-lo Barroldagh.” In actuality, the alert was from the Paradisum channel he’d set up, but he judged that important enough to mandate an in-person report to Barroldagh, a costly gesture that would reinforce the persona he was building.

Almanor sat back, her eyes narrowing slightly. “Ahh, Morrighon, scurry, scurry, scurry, eh?” She waved a hand
negligently. “I’m sure you’ll have occasion to visit me soon, and we can continue our discussion then, yes? Off with you then.”

Status determined who went to whom among the Catennach. Morrighon knew that Almanor enjoyed forcing him to traverse the high-gee corridors of the fortress on meaningless errands. Morrighon also knew, but never, ever let it show, that this was a sign of insecurity, of someone who had forgotten that among the Catennach there was no room for indulgence of any kind. He was sure that Barrodagh had never indulged in petty cruelties on his long climb to supremacy—they were a waste of time and a distraction from the quest for power.

Morrighon bowed wordlessly and took his tray over to the disposer, where he shoved it through the hatch. His stomach griped with hunger, but having, by dint of long and subtle effort, brought himself to Barrodagh’s attention, he dared not vary from the rigid adherence to routine that Barrodagh had come to expect from him.

His future depended on it.

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Barrodagh leaned back in his chair and inhaled the warm scents of jumari and arrissa that filled the room, trying in vain to ignore the shrill whine of the storm outside the triple-dyplast window. The incessant sound felt like a merciless grip on his neck, and a blinding point of pain was slowly growing behind his eyes. A change in the wind caught savagely at Hroth D’ocha, and the Bori’s stomach clenched again as the gravitors gracelessly damped the swaying of the tower. They easily kept the gravity in Barrodagh’s office at Bori’s gentler pull, but they were too crude to compensate well for sideways acceleration.

He pressed his fingers into his neck and stretched, trying to savor the soft air of a summer night on distant Bori, barely remembered from his childhood, but the chill of a Dol’jharian spring trickled through the window as the stink of ozone slowly grew.

_The conditioners are overloading again._ Barrodagh swiveled himself away from his desk to face the opaqued window. He glared at the large deep-set pane, now counterfeiting the phosphorescent beach at Aluwor on Bori. Its frame vibrated under another blow from the wind, and he slapped the window switch. Why couldn’t
the Dol’jharians pour or print their buildings like everyone else, instead of fitting them loosely together out of wood and stone, like an Ur-bedamned puzzle, just because it had always been done that way?

The window cleared slowly, becoming a deep sill backed by a featureless gray that nevertheless gave an impression of rapid movement and intense cold. Barrodagh’s reflection stared back at him, colorless and ghostlike. Dark hair, pale eyes, pale skin; the Bori ignored these, hating the wind, the cold, and the planet that spawned them.

The gray shroud outside thinned and whipped away, and the window flared savagely bright as glaring blue-white sunlight broke through the storm. Barrodagh gasped and squeezed his tear-flooded eyes shut, groping for the window control. The pane dimmed too slowly — *The damned window must be all of five hundred years old, he thought angrily — but finally he could see again and looked out over the white, thaw-splotched expanse of the Demmoth Ghyri, the high plateau of the Kingdom of Vengeance.

He was the second most powerful man on Dol’jhar,
more powerful than any of the so-called Pure Blood save the Lord of Vengeance himself, whom he had served for nearly twenty years; but the view of Dol’jhar’s bleak landscape was a constant reminder that the least of those arrogant Dol’jharians could withstand conditions that would kill him quickly.

Barrodagh opaqued the window and turned his back on it. Power was his, for through him went out the commands of Jerrode Eusabian, Avatar of Dol, Lord of Vengeance and the Kingdoms of Dol’jhar. The Pure Blood may disdain me, but they obey, for who is to know which commands are Eusabian’s and which are mine?

A soft tone sounded from his desk, rather than the modern console to one side that he used for all Catennach communications, and Barrodagh seated himself hastily before he touched the ruby point glowing in its dark, glassy surface. Only Dol’jharian nobles used the old comm system, disdaining the Bori system as beneath their dignity.

Barrodagh tapped his knuckles on the desk as it slowly extruded the vidplate from a slot at the back. The screen flickered with a nauseating swirl of greenish-gray
light as the electronics struggled to resolve an image. 

_Damned antique,_ thought Barrodagh, thoroughly irritated by the almost continuous queasiness induced by the grav-damped swaying of the tower. _And damned Dol’jharians, too: if it suited their ancestors, it suited them, unless, of course, it was good for killing people or inflicting pain – then only the best and newest would do._

The vidplate finally came to life and Barrodagh recognized the angular, arrogant features of Evodh, Lord Eusabian’s personal _pesz mas’hadni._

_“Serach Barrodagh.”_ Evodh’s voice was coldly formal, with no trace of the obsequiousness Barrodagh was used to hearing. The claws and eyes of the karra-patterns lacquered on his skull gleamed dully as the Dol’jharian physician looked at him with a trace of disdain. He had used the “presumed equal” mode of address, an exquisitely-shaded insult that was as close to civility as a Dol’jharian noble ever came in speaking to a Bori.

Barrodagh inclined his head and did not speak, as was fitting, but his mind was awash with pleasurable surmise. Observing Thuriol’s first session in the mindripper had been an intensely satisfying, albeit vicarious, revenge on
his long-time rival, even though he had not been permitted to remain after the first time Thuriol lost consciousness. It had been enough that his rival had known he was there, had seen him watching... while he still had attention to spare for anything but Evodh’s expert torment.

“I received your request to attend my next session with the Catennach Thuriol,” said Evodh. “There is not to be a next one.”

Barrodagh heard the faint emphases on each occurrence of the word “next” and knew them to a subtle warning that his request, even as carefully phrased as it had been, had come perilously close to offending the Dol’jharian noble’s pride. He lowered his eyes as Evodh continued.

“I extracted everything that might bear on the Avatar’s paliach and, as the subject’s transfiguration was for information, not for honor, I have terminated it.”

Evodh smiled thinly and Barrodagh realized that he was failing to conceal his disappointment that Thuriol had met death so soon. He schooled his face back into the noncommittal mask that had kept him alive for so long.
and said nothing.

The physician continued after a brief pause. “Do you want the head for your *paliachee*?” His sneering emphasis on the Dol’jharian word for the formal trophy nobles took from fallen rivals brought Barrodagh’s head up in a quickly controlled motion of protest at the insult.

Acid rage clawed Barrodagh at the physician’s pleasure in thwarting him. But Evodh was powerful, and Dol’jharian nobles were not to be trifled with, especially one whose title indicated his mastery of pain in all its intensities and forms.

*A child’s paliach,* he thought. *That’s how he sees my vengeance.* Well, he would lose no more face in this particular encounter. He inclined his head again briefly, and forced his voice to a quiet monotone. “No, *pesz-ko* Evodh.” He used the term that indicated the least possible difference in rank between them, which was the closest to insult that any Bori dared come when speaking to a noble of Dol’jhar. “You may do with it as you please.”

Evodh blanked the connection.

Barrodagh slammed his fists down on the desk and
shot to his feet. *Damn him! Damn them all!*

The vidplate chose that moment to jam in its slot, and the ancient mechanism emitted a jeering squeal as it struggled to retract the screen. Barrodagh lunged savagely across the desk and grabbed the vidplate, wanting desperately to break something, but it jerked from his grasp and sucked his fingers into the slot with bruising force, leaving him sprawled across the desk in a welter of flimsies and record chips.

Barrodagh yanked his fingers out of the slot and levered himself back to his feet, quivering with rage. Another fierce blast of wind caught at the tower so savagely that the blanked-out window flickered. His stomach lurched, a bubble of acid burning the back of his throat.

He took a deep breath, then another, forcing himself to relax. His momentary loss of control was a warning that the extra work he’d taken on when Thuriol fell was taxing his endurance. He could not afford such a display, not even here in the privacy of his office. *Thuriol is dead.* His last real rival. *I should take the time to enjoy that.*

The door tone sounded, and a window popped up on
his console, revealing the ugly face of Morrighon, the factotum he’d assigned to track the Heart of Kronos. Barrodagh swiftly tidied the desk, then touched the door control on his desk.

The door slid open. Morrighon bobbed in a partial bow, smiling foolishly as the communicators hanging from his belt clattered together. Then he limped crabwise across the suite to stand before the desk, where he bowed again, clatter-clatter, and stood waiting expectantly, ugly and misshapen. Barrodagh supposed Morrighon’s eyes were carefully averted as appropriate, but the man’s wall-eyed gaze made it impossible to tell where he was looking.

Morrighon bowed yet again when Barrodagh nodded for him to speak. “Senz-lo Barrodagh,” he whined, “our observer at the Paradisum Terminal reports that the Heart of Kronos has been dispatched via ParcelNet. Approximately 30 days to the Qoholeth Anachronics Hub.” He touched one of the communicators at his belt. “As instructed, I have relayed the full communication to your queue. There are no en clair copies elsewhere.”

Barrodagh eyed his subordinate, whose personal delivery of this news again confirmed his judgment. A safe
tool—careful, predictable, not too ambitious, and utterly unacceptable to a Dol’jharian lord. A Dol’jharian so deformed would have been exposed at birth. Morrighon’s twisted body was due to imperfectly-healed shattered bones, but he would nonetheless be despised by the Lords. Morrighon had no future save through Barrodagh. Perhaps he should be assigned some of Thuriol’s work.

“Very well. Your diligence is noted. You may dispense with further in-person reports unless otherwise instructed.”

Morrighon’s ugly mouth gaped with gratitude, reminding Barrodagh of a fish; he bowed again, more deeply than before, and departed.

Morrighon’s pathetic gratitude banished the last traces of Barrodagh’s anger, and even his nausea at the swaying of the tower was now merely a minor distraction. The last movement of his lord’s paliach—the formal vengeance that would wipe away the stain of his defeat at Panarchist hands twenty years ago—was beginning, timed with an exquisite precision denied to his enemy by the rigors of space-time. But not to us.

Within a day of the Heart reaching the carefully-
cultivated traitor at the Qoholeth Anachronics Hub—whose usefulness would then be at an end—it would be in Dol’jharian hands. Around the same time—a few days before or after didn’t matter, given the spacetime delays of Panarchist communications—Eusabian’s forces would strike simultaneously throughout the Thousand Suns, killing the Panarch’s three sons, capturing the Panarch and his Privy Council, and unleashing their Rifter allies throughout Panarchic space.

"It will take them weeks just to understand what happened. Trammeled by the unyielding stubbornness of space-time, limited to the ship-borne communications of the DataNet, their Panarchist foes would crumble before the onslaught of Dol’jhhar and its Rifter allies, armed with the instantaneous hyperwave communicators and power relays left by the Ur when they vanished ten million years before. Our ships are already more powerful than anything the Panarchy has, and the generator’s only on standby. With the Heart installed on the Urian station, there will be no limits to our power."

Barrodagh suspected that the hyperwaves alone would have been enough to conquer the Panarchy in time, although such a bloodless victory would hardly have
satisfied the Lord of Vengeance. The real-time stock and commodities arbitrage they made possible against slower Panarchist communications had enabled him to game the Panstellar Bourse for years in a series of transactions each too small to alert the Panarchist authorities. Eusabian’s enemies had, in effect, financed their own destruction. Foolish Thuriol, to try the same game using hyperwave ciphers assigned to managing the conspiracy against the Panarch’s sons! Where had he expected to spend the money?

Barrodagh leaned back into the soft embrace of the chair, happily anticipating the day—not too far off now—when he, speaking for the Lord of Vengeance, would rule the Thousand Suns. And someday, it was to be hoped, Eusabian would fall victim to his last remaining child, Anaris. Therefore cultivation of Anaris might circumvent the fate that too many short-sighted Catennach suffered when their lord died. With care and far-sighted planning, Barrodagh would continue to be the power behind the throne. Perhaps, he thought, it was time to leak a little more information to the Avatar’s only remaining heir, to keep his gratitude alive until he grew powerful enough to cultivate more openly.
There was time, he decided. Plenty of time.

THREE

ARTHELION

Lenic Deralze breathed deeply. His hands were clammy on his knees as he waited in a bar in the spaceport complex frequented mostly by traders and their logistical and support services. He did not know if he’d see the Krysarch Brandon nyr-Arkad or a company of Marines.

Or nothing.

For ten years the ex-bodyguard had borne the righteous anger of the honest man betrayed, his charge revealed as a typical Douloi hypocrite. Disgrace hadn’t touched Brandon. Of course not. He was an Arkad, a Krysarch of the Phoenix House. He was untouchable. But Markham—worth five of Brandon nyr-Arkad or anyone else—had been ruined while Brandon just stood there and let it happen.
So when a smooth-voiced agent had encountered Deralze on Rifthaven four years ago, offering him a place in a plot against Semion, he had joined willingly. And, although his strongest wish had been to go to Narbon, to strike directly against the Aerenarch, he’d accepted that his logical role involved his old station in the Mandalic Palace on Arthelion, where Brandon nyr-Arkad was to make his Enkainion. He knew it better than anyone.

The conspirators who called themselves the Poets intended that the Panarch’s successor should be Galen ban-Arkad, the visionary second son, whom everyone loved. That required the death of both Semion and his willing tool, Brandon. Deralze had eagerly joined—but while he was there on Rifthaven, he ran into Markham.

The Enkainion was now less than a month off, and the time had come to decide between old loyalties and new.

Someone entered the bar. Deralze looked up, but it was only a dog trainer in a low-brimmed hat, wearing a yellow training vest over his clothes. At his side trotted a dog also clad in a yellow vest.

Deralze began to look away, but a sense of familiarity—something about the line of shoulder, the way
the young man’s slim form moved—caused him to lean forward. The man paused at his table, the hat brim lifted, and Deralze stared into familiar blue eyes as Brandon nyr-Arkad slid into the seat opposite.

Ten years hadn’t changed Brandon, as you’d expect of someone with no responsibilities, who could spend his time gaming, partying, and bunnying with an endless array of willing partners. Deralze gathered that much as Brandon looked around with mild interest, as if sizing up the opportunities for socializing the dog. Nobody appeared to take any notice of him, apparently accepting him as the dog’s trainer. Or they’re carefully not watching him, waiting for the signal to jump me.

The dog sat down next to the seat, alert, his steady brown eyes taking in Deralze with a regard accented by the breed’s characteristic black-on-tan facial mask. The animal looked like the dog that had accompanied Brandon everywhere years ago—the krysarch’s second shadow. Very similar markings, sable over tan, but this dog was reserved, not welcoming: he did not recognize Deralze.

Brandon reached out and scratched the underside of the long, blunt muzzle, earning a brief lick from a pink
tongue before he placed his hand on the dog’s neck. “Jaspar died two years ago,” he said. “This is Nemo. Nemo, Deralze.”

The ex-Marine noted the position of Brandon’s hand and tried to relax as he stretched out his hand for Nemo to sniff. It was said the Arkads didn’t need tempaths because their dogs were better at sensing human emotions than any psi—was his fate to be decided here and now by this animal?

But Nemo apparently found nothing exceptional about him, or at least Brandon sensed nothing in the dog’s muscles. Brandon withdrew his hand, a small signal of trust that reassured Deralze, for the moment, that the Krysarch had no immediate betrayal in mind.

The dog settled into a down, and Brandon glanced at it pensively. Deralze shifted his gaze to Brandon. Up close he still seemed unchanged—just over medium height, but where at twenty-two Standard he’d still been gangling, his proportions had hardened to manhood, and the boyish smooth cheeks had planed, highlighting the famous Arkad bone structure beneath.

Brandon smiled. “Is Markham with you?”
The dog’s ears flicked forward slightly as Deralze tightened his control on the old anger. “No,” he said. “Last I heard, Rifters are still unwelcome on Arthelion.”

Brandon’s expression of disappointment spiked the anger. What could he possibly expect, Deralze wondered as Brandon ran his fingers over the table console, as if considering what to order. But the gesture was absent. “I imagine Markham is doing well on the Riftskip,” Brandon said finally.

The comment was inane. What could Brandon know of a Rifter’s life? *Markham would have done far better as a Navy Captain, Deralze wanted to say. Probably better than you.*

Brandon looked up, his eyes more blue than Deralze remembered as they narrowed appraisingly. “The last time we saw one another, you had a lot to say, but nothing that would lead me to believe you’d come all this way to wish me well at my Enkainion.”

Deralze thought back to that day, his last glimpse of Brandon’s pale, shocky young face before Deralze took off. He had barely kept one step ahead of Semion’s coverts, who were intent on making a clean sweep of the
inconvenient aspects of Markham’s disgrace. No one knew better how to skip Marine traps than another Marine.

That was ten years ago. He could demand the truth, but there was no proving a negative. He could not believe that Markham had cheated on the Academy tests, but he had believed that Brandon wouldn’t, either.

One of them had to have cheated. The only thing that made sense was that Markham had taken the blame with the willing collusion of the government, who then quietly withdrew Brandon in order to protect Arkad prestige.

What Deralze really wanted was justice, and now the jac was in his hands.

“I came across Markham a couple of years ago,” Deralze said. “On Rifthaven.”

He paused, the memory vivid – Markham lounging in a club so expensive it was said you had to hock your ship just to get in the door. He was dressed like a wiredream swashbuckler, the center of a laughing, roistering group.

“He included me in a party. Then he asked me to... make contact.”
Check on Brandy, will you? Markham had muttered privately, taking Deralze by surprise. I’ve heard nothing, and I’m afraid Semion still has his teeth in Brandon’s neck.

Why would you care? Deralze had retorted.

Markham had leaned close, saying, Because I was collateral damage. Brandy was Semion’s target.

Collateral damage? Deralze had barely repeated the words when they found themselves surrounded by Markham’s crew. A handsome young man pressed up insistently, obviously ready to compete with all comers for Markham’s attention, so Deralze had been forced to hold his questions. When Markham and his crew left, Markham had looked back, mouthing the words, Will you check on Brandy?

Those words had been puzzling Deralze ever since. Collateral damage? How could Markham possibly be collateral damage? His naval career, indeed, his life as the adopted heir of a leading Douloi family, had been utterly ruined, and that family removed from power. Brandon had gone back to a life of luxury and debauchery.

“Took some time for me to work my way to this end of
the Thousand Suns,” Deralze said. *Me and the rest of the Poets assigned here.* “But here I am.”

Brandon leaned forward, his gaze direct. “The last time I saw you, you had a lot to say about my treachery. Moral cowardice. My lack of worth.”

Deralze’s hand slid toward his tunic, sensing the dog’s increased alertness. This was Semion’s kind of setup for betrayal—the trap should be closing now. Yet Brandon didn’t shift his gaze, or appear to heed the dog’s reaction. “And so?” Deralze replied.

Brandon leaned closer. “You’re the only one I can be sure Semion has never suborned—other than my brother Galen, but we’ve had little contact of late. Will you execute a commission for me?”

Deralze blinked. He had been ready for anything but that. “What sort of commission?”

A faint sound chirped, and Brandon touched his sleeve. “Damn. My keepers,” he said quickly. “Look, Deralze. I want a private vessel, booster-ready. Nothing connected to my family, or to—” A flurry of noise at the bar’s entrance brought the dog to its feet, poised and
Brandon’s fingers produced—not a chip—but a rumpled piece of paper that he pushed across the table. He slid out of his seat and moved swiftly to the front of the bar, Nemo trotting at his side. Deralze lost sight of them, but Brandon’s Douloi drawl echoed slightly as he said to someone, “Oh, there you are! We got lost—took a wrong turning—this part of the port is so confusing. . .” Deralze could not make out the reply and he relaxed. Apparently Brandon had succeeded in diverting them.

He smoothed out the paper on the table. On it was written the specs of a ship and two numbers, one an account and the other a sum of money that would take care of him for life, even after buying the ship.

He could take the money and vanish. Brandon had to know that. The level of trust this implied... on the other hand, money meant nothing to an Arkad, who commanded seemingly infinite wealth.

Deralze carefully folded the paper and put it inside his jacket. Of all the possible outcomes of this meeting, the total freedom he’d just been handed was the last he’d expected. Now he was no longer dependent on the Poets
to escape after he assassinated Brandon...

Or didn’t assassinate Brandon.

*Collateral damage?*

o0o

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