Honor Among Thieves

by Bracketyjack

Summary

An Alternative Honorverse Novel.

I know the extended story-arc is one of the great glories of the Honorverse, but haven't you ever, ploughing through the latest best-selling doorstop, wanted radically to short-circuit the whole thing, and see those morally defective, small-souled Manticoran aristocrats taken down hard? And all Detweilers and Kolokoltsos whatsoever fed to a vengeful passel of treecats, with BBQ sauce? I know I have ...

Notes

The Prologue has previously appeared here as 'Five Scenes in the Life of Elizabeth III', but was never meant as a stand-alone, and here appears in its rightful place.

And yes, I know I'm pushing the boundaries of credibility a bit, but so is canon in the other direction. Fair's fair.

See the end of the work for more notes.
“The Prime Minister has commed to ask if he might see you presently, Ma’am. He’s *en route* and wishes to brief you.”

“Does he? Did he say about what?”

“No, Ma’am. Only that he had some interesting news.”

Queen Elizabeth III of the Star Kingdom of Manticore frowned with foreboding and absently reached up to stroke the head of her treecat Ariel, perched on her chair back. When the Duke of Cromarty said something was interesting it usually spelled trouble of one kind or another, and late nights, and probably hair-tearing as well. Last time, if she remembered correctly, it had been the remarkable behaviour of one Commander Honor Harrington as the very junior Acting SO at Basilisk Station, and a political opportunity Cromarty had seen in her gutsy actions finally to get the Kingdom’s administration of Basilisk and its wormhole terminus on a proper footing. Come to think of it, the time before that it had also been Commander Harrington’s behaviour the Prime Minister had found interesting, when on a routine anti-piracy deployment to Silesia she unilaterally struck a deal with local members of the entirely proscribed Audubon Ballroom to raid a Manpower slave depot at Casimir, freeing nearly a thousand people and starting an interstellar diplomatic row that rumbled for weeks in cabinet-level notes before Cromarty managed to settle things down. Elizabeth had been mildly surprised Harrington’s career had survived, and suspected Cromarty — or someone else who loathed the slave trade — of having pulled strings pretty hard; but then a lot of people (not least the Beowulfans) had been as delighted with the outcome of Harrington’s raid as the Silesians were apoplectic at its means, while Cathy Montaigne had given a blisteringly memorable speech in Harrington’s defence. Elizabeth had made her own contribution, come to that, by rather pointedly failing to be anything like as outraged about the Ballroom’s involvement as most people thought she should be. And now, Elizabeth knew, Captain Harrington was in Yeltsin with the remnants of the diplomatic mission to Grayson, facing Masadans who had been given a Havenite battlecruiser; if she was still alive. Perhaps Cromarty had received despatches from the relieving force that had been sent a fortnight back under Admiral White Haven, when Commander Truman’s battered HMS *Apollo* had staggered in-system with news of the Battle of Yeltsin and the death in action of the mission’s leader, Admiral Courvosier. Ariel butted her hand gently as her thoughts darkened, and she stroked him again before straightening in her chair.

“I’m nearly done with these files, Jenny, and there’s nothing else today, is there?” Lady Chawleigh, as Her Majesty’s PA and Social Secretary, would know if anything had been slipped into her schedule while she’d been ploughing through her latest economics briefs.

“No, Ma’am. You’re clear until the opening of the Landing Gardening Society Show tomorrow at 0900.”
“Then show His Grace straight in when he gets here, will you? Thank you, Jenny.”

* * * * *

Elizabeth was genuinely fond of Allen Summervale, and had watched with growing concern as the responsibilities of the premiership and the strain of long-feared war with Haven grizzled him with premature age despite his first-generation Prolong. Now she saw him seated opposite her in her private study in King Michael’s Tower and considered his abstracted look.

“So what is it, Allen? Do you have news of Captain Harrington?”

Cromarty’s eyebrows lifted. “I do, Ma’am, as it happens. There have been developments at Yeltsin’s Star.”

“Ha. I had a bet with myself. Do you know, the last two times you’ve said you had something ‘interesting’ to tell me it’s been news of Harrington?”


“Right on both counts. In any case, I’m glad to know the Captain is still alive. What’s she been up to now?”

“She is alive, Ma’am, but only just. And a lot of Manticoran personnel aren’t, I’m afraid.”

Elizabeth’s face, as animated in private as it was regal in public, stilled with her sorrow. “Tell me.”

“It’s a long story, Ma’am, and what has really happened on Grayson is going to take some serious analysis. There are also several immediate complications, which is where most of the interesting bits are, so if you’ll forgive me I think I’d better lay it out chronologically.”

“Very well.”

“Thank you. You’ll remember, Ma’am, Commander Truman’s report indicated that Captain Harrington proposed to do her best to defend the system if the Masadans attacked with this battlecruiser they were given by Haven? It turns out things were slightly more complicated. I’m reading between the lines of several reports here, which do not, um, altogether agree, but it seems that when Captain Harrington got back to Grayson three things happened.

“The first was that Mr Houseman, that Liberal economist New Kiev pestered us into putting on Admiral Courvosier’s mission staff, attended a meeting between Harrington, Ambassador Langtry, and a GSN liaison, a Commander Brentworth. When Houseman realised that Harrington intended to take on a battlecruiser with her heavy cruiser he decided Admiral Courvosier’s death made him the ranking officer and ordered her to evacuate all Manticorans immediately, including himself, and leave Grayson to its fate.”

Elizabeth came bolt upright, eyes burning, while Ariel bristled and hissed behind her, echoing her rage. “He did what? In front of a Grayson officer?”

“Quite so, Ma’am, but you need not fear for Your honour. Only Your diplomats’ health. Harrington slapped Houseman down. Literally. Actually, according to Langtry, she slapped him
across the room and went after him so fast Langtry was genuinely afraid for a moment she’d kill the gutless fool. But she contented herself with naming him a mewling, honourless coward and leaving him sobbing on the floor while she returned to considering the best defence of the Yeltsin system.”

“Good God.” Elizabeth rarely blasphemed, even in her famous rages, and it was a sure sign of surprise that she did so now. Grateful for Cromarty’s keen sense of how her mind worked, she sat back to consider for a moment, knowing he would give her time and be untroubled by silence. Ariel flowed down into her lap, radiating comfort and support as her emotions whirled. And from her own point-of-view, without doubt, the most important thing was that, thanks to Harrington, she had not been traduced as a poltroon and backstabber to a people she hoped to make her Kingdom’s allies against Haven. But there would be hell to pay when New Kiev’s Liberals and the rest of the Houserman clan found out what had happened to their yellow scion. “All right. Just between you and me, Allen, thank God for an officer with some guts and sense, even if she did lose her temper. There’ll have to be a formal letter of reprimand, or the Foreign Office will start having treekittens; but no more.” She thought briefly of what Harrington had done at Basilisk. “And if anyone protests Houserman’s rights too loudly you can let them know I’ll be happy to discuss those, with his shortcomings, very frankly.”

Cromarty nodded, acknowledging the directive. “I agree, and I’ll tell Jim Webster so. But that was only the beginning. You’ll recall also, Ma’am, that the Graysons are, um, somewhat antique in their social constructions of gender? Well, it seems their High Admiral Garret wasn’t going to trust a female officer to defend his world, so when he grasped that Harrington really was staying to fight he assumed his rank put him in charge and issued some, ah, suboptimal orders concerning the deployment of her ships. He didn’t know about our FTL capacity, of course, nor does he have any experience with modern warships in general, and so completely misunderstood what was and wasn’t possible.”

Elizabeth stared at him, trying (not for the first time) to process what kind of a world Grayson really was, and wondering how their isolated, patriarchal bigotry would affect an alliance with a kingdom ruled by a queen.

“Why do I feel that that probably didn’t sit too well with Captain Harrington? What did she do?”

Cromarty grinned. “She informed their hitherto ruling Council that unless she could meet with Protector Benjamin to organise the defence of the planet properly she’d have no choice but to withdraw her ship.” Still grinning, he nodded at Elizabeth’s startled look. “Yes, Ma’am. She blackmailed them with a heavy cruiser to the head. And duly received an invitation from the Protector to dine with him and his wives, while the Council dithered. Also reading between the lines, Ma’am, it’s pretty clear Protector Benjamin has responded to this whole crisis very strongly, and in the process reasserted the power of the Protectorship over the Council, which may be very good news for us in the longer term.” Cromarty’s good humour faded. “But when Harrington went to dinner, something quite else happened. Commander Truman’s report did mention an attack on the Protector, but I hadn’t really understood the circumstances. Admiral White Haven’s report is rather clearer, and includes some imagery from the Protector’s Palace security system.” He proffered Elizabeth a data chip. “You should see it, Ma’am.”

Elizabeth took it and turned to slip it into her secure comconsole. An oddly grainy image appeared in the viewer, of Harrington seated at a well-laden dinner table with a man she recognised as Protector Benjamin IX and two women in elaborate Grayson dresses who must be his wives. Harrington’s treecat Nimitz was seated in a high chair beside the captain, and from his soft bleek she thought Ariel approved. Security personnel in maroon-and-grey uniforms were dotted around the walls, and a further group who had just entered were approaching the table when she and Ariel were
jerked upright by Nimitz’s snarling war-cry and all hell broke loose. The treecat catapulted from his chair onto the head of an approaching security man, true hands raking at eyes and hand-feet at neck in desperate haste, then leaped towards another as Harrington exploded from her own chair to smash down one guard, and a second. A metal platter hurtled across the room to split the skull of another maroon-clad figure and the ugly whine–thunk of sonic disrupters blatted on the soundtrack amid cries. The ginger-haired man who must have been Benjamin’s personal bodyguard was down but the Protector had thrust his wives under the table and was crawling to reach a fallen disrupter. And across the room Harrington and Nimitz were leaving a trail of dead and blinded men, spinning like dervishes and striking with unbelievable speed and, despite the confusion of uniforms, complete certainty. So too, Elizabeth saw, was the one remaining security man who’d been there throughout, braced against the wall picking off combatants with an old-fashioned and loud chemical-propellant gun, but she saw him fall even as his own shot took down the last intruder and Benjamin rose with the disrupter in hand, running forward as Harrington and Nimitz vanished through the doorway. The image cut to the corridor, with yet more security men bunching around Harrington and seeming to explode bonelessly away from her whirling, lethal hands and feet. But no-one could fight such odds for very long and Elizabeth felt Nimitz’s awful wail as Harrington went down at last, and a shaking security man pointed a disrupter straight at her, then found herself slamming a fist onto her desk in time with Ariel’s ringing bleek as Benjamin appeared in the doorway and shot the man down before he could fire. The recording ended, as abruptly as the violence it showed had begun, and a shaking Elizabeth slowly expelled a breath she had not known she was holding.

“Explain, please, Allen.”

“It appears that Protector Benjamin’s cousin, one Jared Mayhew, was a long-standing Masadan sympathiser, and organised an assassination attempt using people dressed as Palace Security, to whom he supplied all necessary passwords and security codes. It also appears — and you would know better than I, Ma’am — that this disguise did not for one second fool Harrington’s treecat, and she became aware as soon as the ‘cat of, well, ‘fell and evil intent’ is what Hamish Alexander called it in his despatch. So they acted, as you saw.” Cromarty hesitated, uncharacteristically. “Does that, ah, make sense to you, Ma’am?”

Elizabeth turned to look at Ariel, feeling anew their absolute love and the frustration of not truly being able to communicate, but also an appalled wonder at the deadly reaction Nimitz had shown.

“I don’t know, Allen. I’m sure Ariel would have known, and I suppose he would react the same way … but whether I’d have grasped it that fast …. For damn sure I couldn’t have reacted as Captain Harrington did.” The second expletive in so short a time was testimony to the effects of the Grayson imagery; not only the sight of a score of human deaths and mutilations in as many seconds, but the knowledge of what the slaughter of his personal guards must have meant to Benjamin; of what it would mean to her. And the nature of that slaughter. “Have you ever seen a treecat in a killing rage before, Allen?”

“No, Ma’am, I have not.”

“Nor I. Oh, I knew intellectually what a ’cat can do, and I’ve seen the Carson images, of course, but nothing like that.”

More than a T-century before, a newly immigrated family’s outing to the Copperwalls had ended disastrously in an encounter with a peak-bear that had gravely injured the father when his panicked shots missed, and would have killed him and doubtless his wife and children had it not been for the abrupt appearance of a treecat. The ‘cat’s rippling snarl had brought the bear to an anxious halt, massive head snapping around, and when the ’cat was joined by four equally vocal
companions it had turned tail — a moment recorded, despite everything, by one of the shaking children. The proof that even one of Sphinx’s apex predators fled massed ’cats confirmed anecdotal evidence that had accumulated over the years, but no-one had ever seen anything resembling what Nimitz had done on Grayson, and a part of Elizabeth shuddered as she began to think through what those terrifying images might mean. Ariel bleeked worry on her lap as he felt the darkness of her thoughts, and her hands stroked him in mutual reassurance.

“Can we suppress this record, Allen?”

“No, Ma’am, I’m afraid not. As soon as the Graysons realised what had happened — within minutes of Harrington’s injury, in fact — they slapped the whole thing onto their planetary comnet by way of proving Benjamin was still alive and that Harrington had been his defender, not an assailant.”

Elizabeth nodded, the political calculus that must have underlain that decision unfolding in her mind. But as she processed what she’d seen the thought occurred that Honor Harrington and Nimitz must have a closer bond than any she’d ever heard of, and that wasn’t something Elizabeth — or, she’d bet, Harrington — wanted to become a focus of newsy gossip amid the fuss there was bound to be when people saw a ’cat killing and maiming humans. “So we can’t stop it here.”

“Just so.”

“Alright. But no-one from government will discuss Nimitz’s role in events. No-one at all, Allen. Not one word. All treecat matters will be referred without comment to the Sphinx Forestry Service and I’ll make sure myself that they say the right things, not that they’ll need telling. Our line is that Captain Harrington saw the sonic disrupters and reacted to a perceived threat, period. And … do I remember rightly that she was on the Academy coup de vitesse team? That was certainly the style she used.”

Cromarty raised his eyebrows. “I believe you do, Ma’am. And that will make a good official line to stonewall the newsies, who are going to go into shivering fits of ecstasy. But what matters is the effect that experience had on Protector Benjamin, and subsequently on most of Grayson, so far as I can tell.”

“Which was?”

“On Manticore I’d call it stunned hero-worship. On Grayson Hamish Alexander says the only fitting word is ‘revelation’; and yes, as in.” Elizabeth blinked. “You know about their doctrine of the Test? Well, Harrington simultaneously passed her own Test with flying colours and became Grayson’s Test, in all Christian political seriousness — and that was before prisoners taken in breaking the coup attempt revealed the Masadans’ secret base in the outer system. You’ll recall that Harrington and some Grayson forces promptly went and punched it out. And Ma’am, they also recovered some surviving Manticoran personnel from Courvosier’s ships who’d been captured at what we must now call First Yeltsin. I say surviving because a significant number of our PoWs were murdered by the Masadans. Female PoWs, especially, who seem to have been raped to death. Most of those responsible were killed when the base was taken, but some were captured and have been remitted to Grayson custody for trial on capital charges.” Elizabeth’s face was stony and Cromarty hurried on. “Harrington also took out a destroyer the Havenites had given the Masadans, and I note, Ma’am, that her captain, a Thomas Theisman, has agreed to give evidence against the Masadans. I understand it goes against the grain, Ma’am, but he seems to be an honourable man, and from what Hamish Alexander says there’s very little doubt that those who tortured and killed Your personnel will after due process face a Grayson hangman. The entire planet is apparently possessed of a seething rage in which the gross maltreatment of Manticoran women fighting on their behalf and the
actions of and injury to Captain Harrington are having, um, mutually reinforcing effects.”

Elizabeth’s face was still stony, though Ariel’s bare-fanged hiss was eloquent on her behalf. “Good. So they should be. What were Captain Harrington’s injuries, exactly?”

“She lost her left eye, Ma’am, and the disrupter blast has smashed up that side of her face. She’ll need a lot of surgery, and unfortunately she doesn’t regenerate, but she was up and about again within hours.”

Elizabeth winced internally, but even to Cromarty it didn’t show. “As she would be. Continue, please.”

Cromarty nodded. “A few days after the Masadan base was captured the battlecruiser showed up. By this point Captain Harrington was openly in charge of defending the planet, and she took her ships out against it. Fortunately, a very inexperienced Masadan was in command, and he mishandled things badly, allowing Harrington to stall him for hours while inflicting far more damage than she took. But it was still a heavy cruiser and a damaged destroyer against a battlecruiser. *Troubadour* was lost in action, Ma’am, with more than half her crew, and *Fearless* took terrible damage, with more than 900 fatalities.”

He hadn’t thought Elizabeth’s face could get stonier, but it did, and once more he found himself hurrying on.

“Then Admiral White Haven arrived but was too far away to engage the Masadan ship directly. He signalled *Fearless* to break off action, but after a while realised Captain Harrington couldn’t hear him and had committed herself to engaging at energy range.” Again Cromarty hesitated. “Admiral White Haven’s despatch included some bridge tape from *Fearless* I believe you should see, Ma’am. It’s on the same chip.”

Wordlessly Elizabeth turned to hit the ‘play’ key again, and the bridge of HMS *Fearless* popped brightly onto her display. Though never trained as an officer, like her cousin Mike Henke, who had been Harrington’s roommate at the Academy and was still a close friend, twenty years on the throne and hundreds of military inspections had taught her to read tac displays, and her lips tightened as she saw both the sullen red glare of warning lights and damage icons and the ruin of Harrington’s face, her lost eye covered by a black patch. But she also heard, to her complete surprise, the strains of Hammerwell’s *Salute to Spring* pouring from the ship’s internal com, and there was a strange calmness visible in the faces of Harrington and her bridge crew.

Cromarty spoke softly. “Their gravitics, com, and half their sensors were out, so the only data they had was local — their own position and the Masadan’s.” He pointed to *Fearless*’s plot where two small icons were on converging courses. “Harrington had them play the whole of Hammerwell’s Seventh as they went in.”

There was wonder and pain in Elizabeth’s heart. “They were on a death ride.”

“Yes. The Graysons requested this recording from White Haven, and it has also been seen by most of the planet. That serene determination from an injured woman — from that injured woman, with those injuries, suffered as they were — and from all the men and women in her crew, has gone straight to the Grayson soul, according to White Haven, who says he uses that word advisedly. His task force was a hundred million klicks away, hopelessly out of effective range, but as the Masadans didn’t seem to be able to see him either he assumed their gravitics were also out, and sent several salvoes in on ballistic courses in the hope that it might at least distract them and give Harrington some kind of chance. Which it did.”
On the display the music had ended and activity on *Fearless’s* bridge abruptly increased as she entered missile range of the Masadan ship. Without gravitics, Elizabeth realised, there was no effective way to use counter-missiles, so Harrington was taking most of the fire on her ship’s impenetrable belly wedge while the defence crews did all they could using point-defence laser clusters to pick off missiles with better shots at sidewalls, throat, and kilt. They were getting many of them but not all, and too often the bridge juddered as bomb-pumped lasers gouged at *Fearless* and more red icons flared on displays. Damage reports flowed to Harrington, who acknowledged them calmly, though her good eye closed from time to time in obvious pain. The tac display showed the range had fallen to only a few hundred thousand kilometres and the ships’ courses would intersect in less than four minutes when one of the officers at weapons’ control shouted, astonishment in his voice.

“He’s turning!”

“Roll port! All batteries, *engage!*” Harrington’s response was instantaneous as she came bolt upright in her chair. *Fearless* shuddered as more missiles sent lasers stabbing into her, but then her weapons came to bear, firing-lights blazed on the tac boards, and the Masadan ship abruptly vanished from the plot; a second later the one surviving external visual feed whited out with the glare of a failing fusion-bottle. For a moment there was complete silence before Harrington spoke, slurring in her voice from her facial damage suddenly audible. “Well, people, *that* was unexpected.” The imagery ended.

Emotions churning within her — pride and sorrow, rage, awe and humility — the Queen turned back to Cromarty. “Tell me, Allen, how do I reward courage and loyalty like that?”

“I don’t know, Elizabeth.” Cromarty shook his head slowly. “I really don’t. But the Graysons are clear the reward for a job well done is a harder job, and the reward for saving a planet’s ruler and his planet is … well, it’s the reason I’m here.” He sat upright, speaking more formally. “Your Majesty, Protector Benjamin has made three requests of You concerning Captain Harrington. First, he accepts without reservation our proposal of alliance, and asks that Captain Harrington sign the treaty in Your name.”

Elizabeth’s eyes widened and she nodded. “Of course. That’s fitting, and very good news. I’ll sign the authorisation as soon as you can get it to me.”

“Thank you, Ma’am. Second, he asks Your leave for Captain Harrington to accept an award called the Star of Grayson.” Cromarty settled back a bit. “It’s their equivalent of our PMV, only more so, in that only 22 have ever been awarded, and the last of those was more than three T-centuries ago. Most were won during the crises of the Founding and their horrendous civil war of the 1350s, including the only double award, to a Steadholder Isaiah Mackenzie, who was Benjamin the Great’s formal Champion. There’s actually a constitutional provision that makes any Steadholder who has won the Star the reigning Protector’s Champion — and that isn’t as irrelevant as it ought to be, because Benjamin’s third request is that You permit Captain Harrington to accept the rank, honours, and duties of a Grayson Steadholder.”

“He asks *what*? Is he serious?”

“White Haven says so. And Benjamin has sent you a personal message.”

Cromarty produced another chip, and Elizabeth turned back to her comconsole with a slightly dazed expression. If she remembered rightly there were only about 80 Steadholders, and they were not placeholders or figureheads but ruling, hereditary autocrats who counted as heads of state. Had any Manticoran monarch ever had an officer — a mere Captain at that — who was also an allied head of state? She doubted it, and what the House of Lords would have to say … was a lot of fun to
anticipate, actually.

She looked back at Cromarty with a sudden grin. “It would rather offset that letter of reprimand, you know. I’m tempted to agree just to see some of my more conservative Lords receive the news.” The grin faded. “But let’s hear Protector Benjamin first.” She hit ‘play’ again and Benjamin appeared, looking rather less wild-eyed than she had last seen him but with new lines of care and sorrow etching his pleasant features, and tiredness bagging his eyes.

“Your Majesty. I understand you will have been briefed on what has happened here, on the astonishing heroism of Captain Harrington and her people, and on the price they paid in saving us.” He rubbed his eyes. “The Tester was with her and with us, that day. And we know it. You will also know about my requests, and that’s what this is about — the formal paperwork will follow, but this is a personal message, and a plea. You probably think I’ve gone mad, or at best that my gratitude to Captain Harrington for the lives of my family and myself has gone to my head. And I also understand, in some measure, the domestic political difficulties making Captain Harrington a Steadholder is likely to cause you and your Lords of Admiralty. But I tell you straight out, Your Majesty, Protector to Queen, Grayson needs Steadholder Harrington. And I will do everything in my power to ensure that we get her.”

A spark of humour lit his face. “Actually, even assuming Your permission, that will probably mean blackmailing her to accept the award. It’ll be payback for her blackmailing a dinner out of me. Not that I’m repining, Tester knows.” The humour faded. “But it’s more than that. I don’t know how much of our neobarbarian history you’ve been briefed on, Your Majesty, but when Admiral White Haven leaves tomorrow for Endicott to sort out the Masadans once and for all, he’s going to end a civil war that’s been going on for nearly six T-centuries. And while it is his — Your — forces that will do the job, it is Captain Harrington who has made it possible for them to do so. Who saved us after we had spurned and injured her. Who serenely faced certain death on our behalf, bound only by her own honour, and her belief in Yours; not by oath or treaty or even friendship. Father Church teaches that the Tester tests hardest those whom He loves best, and we know, every one of us, in our hearts and souls, that in Captain Harrington we behold a daughter of God such as no living Grayson has ever seen. And so we ask, I ask, that You share her with us.”

He shrugged. “The bottom line, Your Majesty, is that I don’t have the slightest idea how You will react to events here, nor do I know how anything will work out. But I swear to You, by my oath as Protector, that with Steadholder Harrington Grayson can become a better friend and ally for Your Star Kingdom than would be possible without her. And if we ever doubted what Havenite ambitions mean for our fate, we doubt no longer. Count it a price of alliance, if You will, or a joy of friendship. But grant us this, please, by Your grace and the Tester’s.”

The display blanked and Elizabeth looked at her Prime Minister with a wild surmise. “Well … coo. Steadholder Harrington, eh? We’ll have to ennoble her as well, I suppose. Whatever will she do next?”

2. News from Hancock Station

March 1905 PD

Queen Elizabeth had always met her senior cabinet members weekly but, with escalating clashes along the Alliance’s frontiers with Havenite space, daily meetings were becoming the norm. And now the clashes had turned into battles, at Hancock Station, where Admiral Parks had defeated two
full-blown attacks, making multiple captures, and seized the Havenite base at Seaford Nine; and at Grayson, again, where Admiral White Haven had won the Third Battle of Yeltsin, drawing the Havenite CNO Admiral Parnell into a strategic trap and handing him a heavy defeat. It was a brave and good start but neither Elizabeth nor any of the men and women seated around the conference table had any doubt that their star nation had entered into a war that would last for years, perhaps decades, and only end when one of the belligerents was not simply defeated but economically and politically destroyed.

She reached behind her with one strong, slim hand to scratch Ariel’s head as the 'cat shifted on the back of her chair. “So is that it for today, Allen?”

Cromarty shook his head. “Not quite, Your Majesty. There are two further matters arising. First, Admiral White Haven proposes to give the 11 serviceable Havenite superdreadnoughts he captured to the GSN. Do you have any reservations about that?”

“Not in the least. It’s an excellent move, and Hamish knows as well as anyone how important it is for us to build up the GSN as rapidly as possible.” Elizabeth grinned. “Though he is doing his officers and crews out of a perfectly astonishing amount of prize money.”

“Indeed. Even paying only three percent of hull value the award would cost us about 11 billion, Manticoran. As it is, the superdreadnoughts captured at Hancock will cost us about three. I can see Willie going pale from here merely at the thought.”

Across the table William Alexander, White Haven’s younger brother and Cromarty’s Chancellor of the Exchequer, smiled politely back. “Don’t get me started on prize awards today, Allen — though if the war goes on as we fear we will have to address that question, however unpopular it’ll make us with the Navy.”

“And with service families, Willie.” Elizabeth’s voice held a note of caution and Alexander nodded. “You leave well alone until and unless you think we have to change it. King Michael instituted that system for very good reasons that still apply. More than ever, in fact.” Her fingers drummed briefly on the table top. “What’s the other thing, Allen?”

“Something rather less pleasant, I’m afraid. Jim Webster has now received fuller reports from Yancie Parks about events at Hancock Station. The gross situation doesn’t change, and it’s plain the Havenites took two real beatings as well as losing Seaford Nine, but praise and blame are going to need some reapportioning.”

“How so?”

“First, it’s clear Parks got it badly wrong. Admiral Sarnow was alone and understrength at Hancock when the first Havenite force showed up because Parks had left him there that way, against Sarnow’s strong advice. And against Captain Harrington’s, I might add — a point not lost on the Graysons. But as you know, Ma’am, she and Sarnow managed to pull the fat out of the fire by defeating Admiral Chin’s force in detail, while Admiral Danislav arrived to scare off Admiral Rollins’ fleet just in time. And during that action, Ma’am, which given Admiral Coatsworth’s arrival and action a week later is now First Hancock, something else happened which is going to have a lot of fallout.”

“Oh? What sort of something.”

“Another Houseman, of sorts, I’m afraid.” Elizabeth sucked in breath and Ariel hissed behind her, echoing the rage she could still feel at the economist’s cowardice before allies in Yeltsin. “Do you recall Captain Lord Pavel Young, North Hollow’s son, who abandoned then Commander
Harrington as acting SO on Basilisk? Well, he’s been on Silesian patrol ever since for his sins, but with the war starting he got called back in and wound up at Hancock. His heavy cruiser, *Warlock*, was in Sarnow’s Task Force, and during the final stages when they were under heavy fire, seeking to entrap Chin for Danislav, he … deserted his post, taking *Warlock* with him.” Cromarty shook his head as Elizabeth glared in horrified disbelief and Ariel hissed again. “There are bridge recordings you should see, Ma’am; Jim’s sending them over. But the long and short of it is that after the battle Parks convened a Board of Enquiry, and on its recommendation is sending Captain Lord Young home under close arrest on charges of disobedience under Articles 23 and 26, and further charges of cowardice and treason under Articles 14, 15, and 19.”

The room was silent, though Ariel’s tail-tip was now twitching steadily.

“The JAG has seen the bridge recordings and says there’s no doubt whatever the Board of Enquiry acted correctly. The charges of cowardice and treason are of course capital, and as Sarnow was so seriously injured that he is still sedated, the chief witness for the prosecution will of necessity be Captain Harrington.” Several people visibly winced. “Exactly so. When North Hollow discovers that his eldest son is very probably going to be shot by a firing squad he will stop at nothing to save him. Captain Harrington will be salt in the wound. And I think we can all imagine what that is going to mean politically while we are trying to get the Lords to vote out a formal declaration of war.”

“Yes.” Elizabeth’s face was grave; then her fist abruptly banged hard on the table and Ariel leaped from her chairback, hissing and scoring the expensive wood with scalpel claws. “Damn and blast the North Hollows, father and son alike.”

Everyone recoiled from her rage, even Cromarty; he didn’t believe he’d ever heard the Queen speak like that in Cabinet, but she was, thank God, visibly reigning her anger in and pulling Ariel back onto her lap. After several fulminating minutes while she stroked the ‘cat she sighed.

“I’m sorry, people. And about the table. But when I think of the kind of contempt North Hollow has for those who actually do our fighting for us … Still, interfering’s not our business in this one, Allen. Let the wheels of military justice roll. Natal rank and privilege cannot excuse cowardice, be the political fallout what it may. We owe it to the people Young’s cowardice will have needlessly killed to do what justice we can. And we all owe Captain Harrington for Basilisk *and* for Second Yeltsin, as well as First Hancock, so she’ll have whatever discreet support we can provide. I’ll see her personally with Francine Morncreek when she gets back.”

She smiled at her Prime Minister, though there was no humour in her voice.

“More interesting times, eh, Allen? It does seem the good Captain has the knack of generating them.”

3. News from Landing

*June 1906 PD*

“It’s nearly time, Ma’am.”

“Thank you, Jenny. Do you want to watch?”

“If you don’t mind, Ma’am.”
“Not at all. Have a pew.”

Elizabeth was not in the habit of watching duels any more than Manticoran HD was in the habit of broadcasting them, but on this particular morning very few people, in Landing at least, were going to be doing anything else. The court martial of Captain Lord Pavel Young had not gone as it ought, for despite clear evidence of his cowardice and desertion under fire the political polarisation the case had created — had been wilfully spun to create, if truth were told — had affected the judging panel as much as everyone else, and they had been hung on the capital charges. With someone switching votes they had convicted Young, by a bare majority, on all the non-capital charges, and on that basis had cashiered him — at which news his father, attending the court martial, had dropped dead of a stroke: in Elizabeth’s opinion good riddance to bad rubbish, and just about the only worthwhile thing to come out of the whole stinking mess.

So the new eleventh Earl of North Hollow had got away with his gutless life, while Captain Lady Honor Harrington, Steadholder and Countess Harrington, who had been scrutinised, championed, mauled, and pawed at by the newsies in a truly disgusting display, carried on overseeing repairs to the battle damage her ship had suffered at First Hancock and visiting the families of her dead. After a while she had gone to Grayson for her formal investment as a Steadholder, but while she was away her lover, Paul Tankersley, a distant cousin of Mike Henke’s on her mother’s side, was killed in a duel by one Denver Summervale, a former marine officer cashiered for fraud who was himself a distant cousin of the Duke of Cromarty. Elizabeth didn’t much care to remember how Harrington had looked when she returned from Grayson accompanied by her new Armsmen — a bleached automaton whose empty gaze through whoever was in front of her had frozen even newsies into silence. And less than ten days after her return Harrington had faced Summervale on the Landing City Duelling Grounds herself.

Denver Summervale was a crack shot and professional duellist who had killed a score of men as well as two women, and there were very few people who had expected Harrington to survive, though many had hoped against hope she might. And as it turned out hopes and fears were alike misplaced, for Harrington, still utterly expressionless, had fired from the hip and marched four bullets up Summervale’s torso before putting a fifth between his eyes. After which, ignoring the corpse lying ten metres away, she had summoned stunned newsies from their vulture-perches around the field and in less than 50 words stated her satisfaction at Summervale’s death and the irretrievability of her own loss before formally accusing North Hollow of paying Summervale to murder both Tankersley and herself.

Which, Elizabeth was coldly sure, he had, as she was equally sure Harrington had proof of some kind that would not be legally admissible unless North Hollow sued her for slander; which he notably didn’t. The Lords and the political landscape in general had been convulsed, and just as with the court martial the simple, central fact of a criminal vendetta waged exclusively by North Hollow had been overwhelmed by spin and counterspin. It had come down to a bizarre game of cat-and-mouse, with a gibbering North Hollow physically avoiding Harrington so she could not issue her challenge, Harrington trying to catch him somewhere in the open, and the Lords of Admiralty moving heaven and earth to get the repairs to Harrington’s ship finished so she could be posted out-system and the threat of having a serving naval officer gun down a peer of the realm obviated, or at least kicked into limbo. There had also been an attempted assassination of Harrington by five hired gunmen in Reggiano’s restaurant, that had ended surprisingly satisfactorily, despite injuries to several members of Harrington’s party, when her Grayson Armsmen killed four of the five without hitting a single bystander. Elizabeth’s personal bodyguard, Colonel Ellen Shemais, had been eloquent in her professional praise. Neither police nor public doubted that North Hollow had commissioned the attempt, but hard evidence was lacking. And eventually even that didn’t matter, for Harrington had used her unscheduled maiden speech as a Countess, her Manticoran title bestowed to match her Steadholdership, to catch North Hollow in the heart of Parliament itself and make good her promise
to challenge him.

And so things had dragged to this bitter June morning, when Elizabeth fully expected to see North Hollow die and knew that killing him would end Harrington’s naval career anyway — a necessary sacrifice by her Lords of the Admiralty to the false gods of political expedience, to which, absurdly, neither North Hollow’s rank cowardice, corruption, and criminality nor Harrington’s evident innocence and loyalty made the slightest difference. Pavel Young might soon be gone, but his title and wealth would pass to his equally poisonous younger brother Stefan, and the Conservative Association’s hostility to Harrington — an article of faith with its arrogantly traditionalist leader Baron High Ridge that had started with Casimir, flared with Basilisk, and become set in stone with her assault on Houseman — would be undiminished. To High Ridge and his cronies it simply didn’t matter what North Hollow had or hadn’t done to Harrington; he was entitled, and she a yeoman’s daughter of no account.

By the time Elizabeth had seated herself next to Lady Chawleigh and focused on the HD image from the Duelling Grounds the principals were already being handed their weapons and told to load by the Landing PD lieutenant acting as Master of the Field. North Hollow looked dreadful, a horridly pasty yellow-white blotched with evident terror, and Harrington’s face was as coldly expressionless as it had been when she killed Summervale. They turned to walk to their marks, Harrington firmly, North Hollow with a stumbling shuffle, and Elizabeth began to brace herself for what was soon to come when North Hollow stopped after only three paces, turned, and raised his gun to point it at Harrington’s back. Lady Chawleigh’s gasp beside her and Elizabeth’s own cry were drowned out as a stentorian voice on the HD shouted “Down!” and North Hollow’s gun roared once, twice — but Harrington had reacted instantly to the shout, diving right, and the bullets meant for her spine had only hit her shoulder. The Master of the Field was drawing his pulser, shock and rage plain on his face, but Harrington despite her bloody shoulder and limp arm had rolled and risen to her knees, her other arm flashing up, and before the Master could take aim three shots so close their sounds merged had passed though North Hollow’s lying heart. The pulser darts that followed as the Master pulled his own trigger only flensed the corpse.

“My God.” Elizabeth’s mahogany face couldn’t really go white, but the colour had drained from it all the same, as it had from Jenny Chawleigh’s. They watched in silence as Harrington was borne away by her Armsmen to the waiting air-ambulance, North Hollow’s corpse was contemptuously turned over to his brother, now the twelfth Earl, and the crimson-faced Master announced that North Hollow would be recorded not as the loser of the duel but as having been shot down for gross cowardice and attempted murder on the Field of Honour. Which was only right, Elizabeth thought, but was not going to help politically, at all. Lady Chawleigh rose, sighing, and went to make them both fresh coffee, but Elizabeth muted the sound and sat for a while, not really seeing the HD images as the newies began to gabble their rehashings and vicarious excitement, but turning in her brain the permutations that might follow from this astonishing finale to the saga. Even High Ridge, surely, would find it hard to defend a man who had before an audience of millions done his poor best to shoot his lawful opponent in the back.

“Speak of the devil . . .”

The horse face of Michael Janvier, ninth Baron High Ridge, outside what was clearly his town house in the exclusive north-central quarter of Landing, filled the HD while respectful newies from his tame media pack gathered round him, and despite her distaste Elizabeth demuted the sound as he began to speak.

“… cannot answer for what the hopelessly inept Master of the Field had to say, but what I saw was a peer of the realm shot down in cold blood, by three bullets, when the Dreyfuss Protocol under which he had reluctantly accepted an absurd and murderous challenge from a deranged and
delusional officer clearly specifies that only one may be fired at a time. The so-called Master can rant as he will, but anyone with a gram of sense or decency knows Harrington should hang for what she’s done today. That she won’t is only another sign of how lax we have become under this expansionist government. And now I have the obsequies of a Peer of the Realm to attend. Good day.”

Lady Chawleigh, returning with the coffee tray, was surprised and alarmed to find the Queen standing bolt upright with a red face, clenched fists, and a wild look in her eye. Momently she gave thanks that Ariel was away on one of his rare visits to his Sphinxian homeworld and relatives.

“Can you believe the unmitigated gall of that loathsome shit? I wish to God she could kill him too!”

4. News from Yeltsin’s Star (2)

August 1907 PD

“The Prime Minister has commed to ask if he might see you presently, Ma’am. He’s en route and wishes to brief you.” Lady Chawleigh paused briefly. “He says it’s interesting news from Grayson, Ma’am.”

“He does?”

“Yes, Ma’am. And I have to say he looked a little odd, as if he’s still taking something in.”

“Well at least he didn’t say it’s bad news. Show His Grace straight in when he gets here, will you please, Jenny?”

“Of course, Ma’am.”

While she waited for Cromarty Elizabeth continued to scroll through briefing papers, but her mind wasn’t on them, and eventually she sat back, allowing Ariel onto her lap so she could bury hands in his silky fur. The recent news from Grayson, where Steadholder Harrington had accepted a commission as a full admiral in the GSN and was by all accounts helping her adopted planet and navy to develop at an astonishing rate, had been disturbing — a horrific account of the collapse of one of the environmental domes Harrington’s new company was building, killing more than thirty children and fifty adults. The founding of Grayson Sky Domes had delighted Elizabeth because it was a pure fruit of the prize money Harrington had won at Hancock, and evidence of just how potent the prize system could be was useful ammunition in her fight to defend it against Willie Alexander’s financial horror at its workings; but reports had mentioned a groundswell of bitter condemnation of Harrington as evidence seemed to indicate faulty materials and careless construction were to blame — a bitterness all the worse for previous hero-worship. That Harrington would be mercenary in such a matter was to Elizabeth fundamentally incredible, but as she knew all too well, what was true and what newsies said or the public decided to be true were not necessarily the same at all. There had also been the bizarre Peep raids of conquest on Candor and Minette, astrographically close to Yeltsin but puzzling, low-value targets that induced real doubt about Peep strategy in that sector, and would have to be retaken anyway, at distracting cost. GSN forces were already in hyperspace.

Still, if Cromarty’s further news was ‘interesting’ it suggested there might have been improvements, presumably in Steadholder Harrington’s situation. And Elizabeth dearly hoped so:
Harrington might still be a mere half-pay Captain in Manticoran law, and formally excluded from the Lords, but she remained a politically very hot button for all sides: to the Queen’s Navy a hero-victim of painful proportions and to Graysons—unless this ghastly accident really had tarnished her—something far more. According to one of Elizabeth’s briefs she had even become an icon of sorts for the Peeps, whose post-revolutionary wartime press ought to have hated an enemy as successful in beating them as Harrington, and did, but equally found itself mesmerised by the tale of a yeoman officer persecuted by a corrupt aristocrat, and excluded from her earned dignities for having the guts to avenge her lover’s commissioned murder. Truth to tell, she was often in the Queen’s mind too, the kernel of a nagging, unanswerable shame—an officer of astonishing skill and courage who had defended her Queen’s honor as well as Protector Benjamin’s life with bare hands; who had thrashed every Peep commander who’d come up against her, often at long odds; who bore as many stripes indicating wounds in action and awards of the Monarch’s Thanks as anyone in the service, not to mention the Manticore Cross, Saganami Cross, and CGM with cluster: but whom her nation’s élite had cursed, persecuted, sought to murder, and eventually driven into exile. Ariel bleeked a worried scold as Elizabeth’s thoughts turned into the dully familiar track of impotent rage.

“I know, I know. Spilt milk and all that. But you’d think that Tester of theirs might cut her a break, eh?”

* * * * *

Once Cromarty had been shown in and taken a seat, Elizabeth quirked a worried eyebrow. “Can I stand more interesting news from Grayson, Allen?”

“Oh I believe so, Ma’am. Some is rather distressing, I’m afraid, and distinctly embarrassing for Manticore as well as, um, heartstopping, I think, is the word. But the problem has been definitively resolved, and for good.”

Embarrassing was a curious choice of word, as was heartstopping, and Elizabeth braced herself, hands cupping Ariel on her lap. “Tell me.”

“It transpires, Ma’am, that the collapse of the Mueller Middle School Dome was not an accident at all. It was sabotage, by people whose sole intention was to discredit Steadholder Harrington and by inference the Mayhew Restoration, and so protect Grayson’s patriarchy and proper intolerance of heathens.”

“What?”

“Just so, Ma’am. Grayson has its own North Hollows, it turns out. One William Fitz Clarence, Steadholder Burdette, appears to have been the prime mover. Sky Domes passed technical evidence they found to Protector Benjamin last week, and he began a confidential investigation that confirmed sabotage; but under their constitution he had to inform the Conclave of Steadholders before going further, so he summoned an extraordinary session. And when Steadholder Harrington came down from her fleet command to attend that session, Burdette sought to pre-empt matters by trying to assassinate her.”

“Again? My God. What happened?”

“Two men disguised as Harrington Steading Guards got into the grounds of her spaceport, and fired a missile at her pinnace. Her pilot somehow managed to get the craft almost on the ground
before it was clipped by the impeller wedge, and it was, thankfully, an armoured navy pinnace; but the hydrogen tanks jettisoned and blew, and there were scores of fatalities on the ground. The Steadholder, remarkably, survived with only minor injuries, as did Reverend Hanks, who had been visiting her command, but the crew and many of her party were killed. There was then a follow-up attack on the ground, in which Nimitz killed one of the assassins but the other accidentally killed Reverend Hanks.” Elizabeth’s face could have been carved from stone, but Ariel hissed approval at the mention of Nimitz’s role. “That assassin was taken alive, so traumatised by realising whom he had killed he made full confession. And the extraordinary session became something else altogether.”

Cromarty proffered a chip and as Ariel eased from her lap Elizabeth leaned forward to take it.

“It’s quite long, Your Majesty, and it’s a laser-head, I’m afraid. And as it went out live on Grayson it’s already in the newsies’ hands here. By tomorrow I imagine they’ll have worked up the courage to broadcast it, and you need to see it and have a chance to digest what happened before the story breaks.”

“Very well.”

Elizabeth turned to her comconsole and slipped the disk into the read-slot. The display lit with a now familiar scene, the Grayson Conclave of Steadholders in its semi-circular chamber, small by Manticoran standards but even in these expansionist days with far fewer nobles to seat. The Protector’s dais was untenanted, the assembled steadholders silent, uneasily shifting in their seats. Then the doors rumbled open, and against all usual protocol Protector Benjamin strode in alone, unannounced and unprecedented, took his elevated throne at the centre of the horseshoe of seats, and began to speak. Never losing control but with rising passion, he laid out the tale Cromarty had summarised and indicted Grayson’s shame. When he explained the absence of the Reverend Julius Hanks, who as First Elder of Father Church should have been present at such a session, there was a dreadful silence for at least ten seconds, then the strangest sound Elizabeth had ever heard from human beings, a low, grating moan that stood hair on end. As it diminished Benjamin stood, and began to flay the Conclave with its own horrified shame and anger; moved and caught up as she was, a part of Elizabeth’s brain also deeply appreciated the autocratic performance, and she almost clapped when he ended with the revelation of how exactly Hanks had died, literally throwing himself between Steadholder Harrington and the pulser darts meant to kill her, and right on cue the doors rumbled open again to admit the Steadholder herself.

But Harrington looked terrible, in every sense, and Elizabeth’s breath caught. The Steadholder’s forehead was cut, her living cheek savagely bruised, and the ribbon of her Star of Grayson stained with blood; Nimitz rode her shoulder, fur singed and scorched — but he stood tall, as she walked proudly, and as she strode directly to a place before Benjamin, ignoring her fellow Steadholders, Elizabeth suddenly realised what this ritual truly was, and why Cromarty had said this news was embarrassing to Manticore.

Harrington’s soprano voice was cold and clear. “Your Grace, I come before you for justice. By my oath to you, I call upon yours to me. As I swore to protect and guard my people, so I now require your aid to that end, for he who has killed and maimed my steaders carries the key of a steadholder, and I may not touch him while he shelters behind its protection.”

“By my oath to you, I honor your demand for justice, my Lady. If any man in this Chamber has offended against you or yours, name him, and if you bear proof of his crimes, then steadholder or no, he shall answer for them as the laws of God and man decree.”*

*This was what the oaths of feudal monarchy should mean, and what should have happened in Manticore when one of her aristocrats contracted the murder of one of her sworn subjects and
commissioned officers. But it hadn’t, and if everything happened again today it still wouldn’t. As she heard Harrington name Burdette her enemy and depose proof Elizabeth felt her own shame, and a glance at Cromarty told her he felt it also, and had named his own embarrassment as much as hers, and her Kingdom’s. Ariel was too engrossed in the unfolding images to chide her bleak thoughts as he usually would, but the ‘cat’s sudden tension snapped her mind back to the display.

Burdette was on his feet, proclaiming defiance and his religious fanaticism, then crying challenge to the Protector’s decree and demanding his Champion uphold it. With growing horror Elizabeth realised he meant it literally, and Benjamin’s Champion was Honor Harrington, who could not possibly be in a fit state to take on anyone in personal combat. But she clearly thought otherwise, because as Benjamin began to speak she raised a hand, stopping him in midsentence.

“Your Grace, I have only one question. Do you wish this man crippled, or dead?”

Benjamin twitched and the assembled steadholders gasped their surprise.

“My Lady, I do not wish him to leave this Chamber alive.”

“As You will it, Your Grace.” She moved to her own, Champion’s desk beside Benjamin’s, setting Nimitz down and taking up the Grayson sword of state from its brackets. Then she stepped down to the floor of the Chamber and faced Burdette. “My Lord, send for your sword — and may God preserve the righteous.”

Elizabeth sucked in air, feeing her heart begin to hammer. “Dear God, Allen — is she really going to fight him with that thing?”

Cromarty nodded. “Oh yes. It takes about twenty minutes for his sword to be fetched and she never moves except to take off her shoes and go to a position directly before Benjamin’s throne.”

“I’m not waiting that long.” Elizabeth reached a hand to jump the recording until Burdette could be seen limbering-up and taking in hand a sword like the one Harrington held, a long, slightly curved, and wickedly sheened blade unlike anything Elizabeth had ever seen on Manticore. Traitor and Champion moved to stand opposite one another, within slashing reach, Burdette holding his sword high in a classic attack stance, Harrington hers in a low, cross-guard stance, and then they both seemed to freeze. The screen split briefly to show both faces, and Elizabeth felt a stab of wonder as she saw Harrington full on — for her eyes, though as calm as they had been on the Duelling Grounds of Landing, were not empty in the same way, but serene, as they had been when she took HMS Fearless on its death ride. She looked, and was, noble, by purpose and not by birth. How it could be so Elizabeth only half-understood, but Harrington radiated both an utter serenity and a dreadful menace, and one answer pulsed in Elizabeth’s mind.

“God is with her, you know, Allen.”

“Yes, I think so too. It’s very soon, now.”

It didn’t seem soon as endless seconds dragged by but just as Elizabeth thought she might scream with the tension Harrington’s arm blurred into motion, the state sword slicing upwards across Burdette’s torso in a killing diagonal and snapping back to decapitate him. The head leaped and fell, rolling across the floor to pitch up against the Champion’s desk ; the torso stood for a few seconds, spouting from its stump, before crumpling into a messily leaking heap. Whether anyone had shouted, whether she had herself shouted, or Cromarty, Elizabeth didn’t know ; the silence seemed unbreakable while Honor Harrington stood, sword still held high then slowly lowered to rest ; and unbreakable in a different way when Nimitz, peering approvingly over the edge of the desk at Burdette’s head, suddenly leaped down, fastidiously picked the head up in his true hands, and set it
squarely on the dais at Benjamin’s feet with a ringing bleek of approval. Then he loped to Harrington, who put her sword down on her desk and gathered him up, returning him to his rightful place on her shoulder.

“God’s will, and yours, is done, Your Grace. Your decree is upheld and my appeal to You justly answered.” Her gaze swept the assembled steadholders for the first time. “Does any other challenge the Protector’s justice?”

Benjamin stood, whitefaced Steadholders rising with him, and they bowed to her as one.

“None does, my Champion. The Tester be praised.”

The display blanked.

“Too bloody right.” Beside Elizabeth Ariel hissed agreement, but otherwise silence lingered. Cromarty said nothing.

At last Elizabeth pulled a thought together, even though most of her brain was still jittering with what she had seen. “You’re perfectly right about the embarrassment, Allen.” A defensive whimsy overlaid the strain in her voice. “But on the bright side, even our boneheaded Burdettes might finally grasp the notion that it’s a very bad idea indeed for aristocrats anywhere to try to kill Honor Harrington. Counting your black-sheep cousin she’s three for three, you know, and nothing up to and including missiles appears to be able to stop her.”

“Four for four if you count Jared Mayhew, Elizabeth. And far more than that if you count the false guards he used. Or those thugs at Reggiano’s, I suppose, though that was her Armsmen.”

“Yes. At least she does it to the Peeps, as well.”

“Ah, indeed. And that’s the other thing, Ma’am, because less than eight hours after Burdette’s, um, demise, a large Peep task force came over the Yeltsin hyperwall.” Elizabeth stiffened, but Cromarty was clearly unalarmed. “Which explains Minette and Candor, of course, their purpose being solely to drag forces away from Grayson; which, as you know, they did, thanks to the foresight of High Admiral Matthews. It’s galling, but they seem to have read us far too well, and we’re going to have to think about that hard, soon. Still, when the Peeps were half-way in, and thought they had good sensor readings of what the GSN had left in-system, their task force split up, some heading out again for Endicott and most coming on for the Grayson orbital factories and yards. The Peep admiral must have been congratulating himself heartily, and not wrongly, except that the CO of Home Fleet was Steadholder Harrington, and along the rest of their way in he managed to run his battleships and cruisers into energy range of Harrington’s five superdreadnoughts.”

“Energy range?”

“Yes. The forces actually interpenetrated, which hasn’t happened on this scale for several T-centuries at least. How she did it I don’t begin to understand, though I imagine Jim Webster or Hamish Alexander can explain it to us. But however she did it, it created hell in space. She lost one superdreadnought and a dozen lighter units completely, with about twenty thousand personnel, all told, which I’m afraid is bound to include a fair number of our loaners to the GSN; she also destroyed 23 Peep battleships, eight heavy cruisers, and almost all their light stuff — well over a hundred million tons of warshipping. The Graysons’ best guess at the moment for the Peeps’ personnel loss is something close to two hundred thousand.” Elizabeth stared. “And their other force fled, without going anywhere near Endicott. The Graysons have named it Fourth Yeltsin, Ma’am, a famous victory; and it hasn’t escaped their notice that Steadholder Harrington has once again saved their planet from devastation.”
“So she has.” Despite the fierce elation that filled her with any news of Peep defeats and losses, Elizabeth was too numb still, too locked down against the image of Burdette’s spouting neck, to do more than contemplate this new statistic about Honor Harrington. Few ever saved a world at all; to save the same world twice was … absurd, really. Or a miracle. “What have they given her this time?”

“There isn’t very much more they can give her, I don’t think, Ma’am. Protector Benjamin’s toy box is rather smaller than yours, and I imagine the Steadholders are still feeling rather chastened, for all their relief. So they seem to have contented themselves with some fulsome speeches and awarding her another Star of Grayson, which makes her the second person in history to receive its cluster.” Suddenly Cromarty grinned. “Though I understand there’s also been a huge and politic rush led by Mueller himself to place new orders with Sky Domes, so she’ll get a deal of money too, for whatever that’s worth; and I do note her corporation will soon have a value that will put it well into the top layer of our Fortune 500. Harrington’s probably already the richest individual, certainly the richest woman, in Grayson’s history, and she’s beginning to understand how to use that kind of money. But you know, for us, Ma’am, the real point may actually be the embarrassment we both feel, because a lot of other people are going to feel it also. We deserve to feel it, frankly, and they’ll know that too. For the first time I believe Harrington could come back here; even be seated again in the Lords. It’ll take time, but I have real hope.”

Elizabeth nodded, her eyes lighting up. “Yes. And we need her, Allen. Not as badly, perhaps, as the Graysons once did, but badly enough. We need her pointed at the Peeps, so she can do to them exactly what she did to North Hollow and Burdette. But we also need her for our souls.” She waved her hand towards the display. “I know we can’t go back to anything quite as feudal as that, and I can’t say I regret it. That decapitation is going to feature in my dreams for some time to come, I’m sure. But we need an equivalent, Allen, or sure as God made us men and women we’re going to find our honour soiled and our fate in jeopardy. Present company excepted, there are times I think my Lords are little better than thieves in ermine; and it’s painfully obvious ideals of duty and sacrifice mean nothing whatever to most of them. What we can do I have no idea, but we both need to think hard about that, too.” She smiled, rather grimly. “And if we can between us get Harrington back, at least she might give us some tips!”

5. News from Trevor’s Star

*December 1913 PD*

Elizabeth found it hard to sleep these days, and God knew there was precious little comfort in any news of the war, for all that Caparelli was promising the new construction would be available soon. Since the Peeps’ ugly, triumphant announcement 22 months earlier of Commodore Harrington’s execution on trumped-up charges going back to her tenure as acting SO at Basilisk, the Alliance’s luck had seemed to run out. Advances had stalled and attrition risen, and then back in May the Peeps had launched their Operation Icarus, retaking Seaford Nine and trashing the orbital industries of Zanzibar, Alizon, and worst of all Basilisk; against which their solitary defeat at Third Hancock was, if a great deal better than nothing, cold comfort all the same. Justin and her children worried about her, but she wasn’t prepared to use chemicals to sleep so there wasn’t much to be done, and it wasn’t as if there wasn’t always work she should be doing. So despite the hour she was propped up in bed, reading classified ONI reports with Ariel, Justin, and his ‘cat Monroe sleeping beside her, when her personal com chimed softly. Consort and ‘cats all stirred, opening sleepy eyes, as she leaned to hit the accept.
For anyone except Cromarty to come her in the small hours was unheard of, but the face that appeared on her display was that of Admiral Sir Thomas Caparelli, jacketless and looking not only as if he’d been quite recently awoken himself but … dazed. Her heart sank, but Caparelli’s eyes weren’t haunted as they had been when news of the disaster at Basilisk had arrived, so perhaps it wasn’t anything too bad.

“Sir Thomas, what is it?”

“Your Majesty, I’m sorry to disturb you at this hour, but some quite astonishing news has come in, from Admiral White Haven at Trevor’s Star. He’s sent it under the highest security classification, meaning no transmission whatever, so if I may I’ll come straight to Mount Royal.”

“Very well, Admiral.”

“Thank you, Ma’am. Oh, and forgive me, but I believe Prince Justin should attend. It’s … a very emotional matter, Ma’am. And I assure you a good one.”

Elizabeth stared, as did Justin, who propped himself up on one elbow. “I’m game.”

“Alright, Admiral. We’ll see you in King Michael’s Tower as soon as may be.”

* * * * *

By the time Caparelli arrived and was shown in he was as neatly uniformed as ever, but still had a slightly wild air. Elizabeth and Justin received him in her private rooms in the Tower, Ariel and Monroe looking interestedly on.

“Your Majesty, Prince Justin. Truth to tell, I barely comprehend this news myself, for all I’ve had an hour or so to begin digesting it, so it seems best simply to play you Admiral White Haven’s despatch.” He proffered a chip. “I believe you’ll wish to be sitting down, Ma’am.”

Elizabeth raised her eyebrows. “Really? Perhaps you’ll do the honours then. It’s a secure unit.” She gestured towards the comconsole against one wall, moving with Justin to the sofa where Ariel and Monroe immediately climbed into their laps as Caparelli went across to slip the chip into the read-slot. “Have a pew yourself, Admiral.”

“Thank you, Ma’am. This is just as I received it.”

The display lit with Admiral White Haven’s face, grinning almost dementedly, and Elizabeth blinked in surprise. She’d never seen Hamish Alexander looking so … stunned, actually, beneath the elation sparking from him.

“Tom. I’m not going to apologise for telling them to wake you because you’re going to want to take this one straight to Her Majesty. I have the most incredible news for you, and it’s good, it’s all amazingly good. The Peeps’ biggest black eye in history and pure bloody tonic for us.” He actually laughed as he swore, which Elizabeth didn’t believe she’d ever seen anyone do in an official despatch. “I’m sorry to be so irregular, but the whole thing’s irregular, in every way.” He took a deep breath, visibly pulling himself together. “Thing is, Tom, about 18 hours ago we detected a little group of hyperfootprints just outside the perimeter, 12 of ‘em to be precise, which CIC identified as Peeps — five Mars-class battlecruisers, four heavy cruisers, a light cruiser, and two Roughneck-class assault transports. All of which just sat there, dropped their wedges and sidewalls, and sent us this
message.”

The screen image changed and Elizabeth sat bolt upright, Ariel bleeking in surprise on her lap as her emotions churned. It could not be — this woman was dead, lost beyond hope, and for her to turn up alive at Trevor’s Star with a force of Peep warships and transports was simply ludicrous. Justin too was gaping disbelief while Monroe bleeked, and Elizabeth saw with a stab of pity that the woman on screen was missing an arm, her voice was again slurred by facial injury, and the treecat on the desk before her also injured and unable to sit properly.

“Trevor System Command, this is Admiral Honor Harrington. I’m sure no-one in the Alliance expected to see me again, but I assure you that the rumours of my recent death have been exaggerated. I am accompanied by approximately one hundred and six thousand liberated inmates of the prison planet Hades, and I expect the arrival of another quarter-million or so within the next eleven days — our transports have military hyper-generators and we made a faster passage than they will. I regret any confusion or alarm we may have caused by turning up in Peep ships, but they were the only ones we could … appropriate for the voyage. We will remain where we are, with our drives, sidewalls, weapons, and active sensors down until you’ve had a chance to check us out and establish our bona fides, but I’d appreciate it if you could expedite. We were forced to pack these ships to the deckheads to get all our people aboard, and our life support could be in better shape. We … we’re home, System Command. It took us a while, but we’re home.”*

Harrington’s image vanished and White Haven’s returned, his grin almost splitting his face.

“So what d’you think about that, Tom? Honor Harrington is back from the dead! And as you heard, she’s not alone either, not by a long shot. The repercussions are going to rock everywhere from Nouveau Paris to Old Chicago.” He sobered with evident difficulty. “I barely have a handle on them, and God knows we’re going to be analysing this for years, but I’ll try to lay it out cleanly. And knowing Her Majesty, let me deal with first things first.

“As you saw, Harrington’s lost her left arm, and her prosthetic eye and facial nerves are shot again.” His voice darkened. “Which has to have been deliberate abuse by the Peeps. Otherwise she seems to be physically OK, though what her mental state really is I’d hate to guess. Nimitz is also injured, but it’s apparently nothing proper surgery can’t fix. And the rest of her escapees from Hades are also more or less OK, though a great deal of medical and psychiatric care is going to be needed, and the San Martinos need welfare backup pronto, especially with another quarter-million escapees on the way.”

He paused, looking as bemused as Elizabeth felt.

“Did I really just say that? Oh well, it’s all absurd, really. What happened, so far as I can grasp, is that when Harrington and the crew of Prince Adrian were captured in Adler, she and her officers were taken from military into StateSec custody, then handed over to Cordelia Ransom herself aboard a StateSec battlecruiser called the Tepes. Ransom took them to Hades personally, promising executions all round, and it’s at that stage the StateSec abuse happened, both to Harrington and Nimitz. She’s not saying much about it — partly, I think, because of how Grayson will react — but it was clearly bad, and their situation was hopeless. Or rather not, because one of her people, a CPO Harkness, took it on himself to pretend to defect, spinning poor-man sob stories the Peeps swallowed, and became a sort of trusty — a freedom he used to lay hands on a minicomp and hack their systems wide open.”

This time White Haven’s grin was feral.

“In consequence, when Tepes arrived at Hades announcing a jolly hang-fest for the morrow they found that almost everything electronic except their isolated battlenet suddenly crashed, and four
of their boat bays blew up while the fifth was secured against them. Harkness managed to break out everyone except Harrington, who was being held separately, and they sent a party to get her. Oh, and I think it was at this point they picked up a Peep who was also due for the chop — one Commander Warner Caslet, who was Theisman’s Ops officer at Barnett, served as Harrington’s XO on the journey back here, and is requesting political asylum.” He shook his head as if to clear it. “He was the one who greeted me when I went aboard Harrington’s ship, and you could have knocked me down with a feather when I found myself met by a Peep! Anyway, they managed to free Harrington, though it cost a lot of lives, and only with her arm chewed up by a tribarrel. And then — you’ll like this bit, Tom — they took three of the four assault pinnaces from the boat bay they controlled, loaded themselves into two, sent the third off on auto as a decoy, and when it was taken out by Hades Ground Control with orbital mines caused the fourth to bring up its impeller wedge, while it was still in Tepes’s boat bay.” His smile was grim. “Yes, you did hear me right. Tepes just … came apart. And that’s how Ransom actually died, with about 2,000 of her StateSec friends, which served them right and will to say the least make interesting viewing for the Peeps who have been told other tales — and yes, we have Ground Control’s recordings of the event. In any case, Harrington used the sensor window created by the combined EMP from the mines and the destruction of Tepes to get down to the surface of Hades undetected, took stock, and started tapping the Peep comnet to see what was what.”

He paused again, frowning. “This is where strands start multiplying, I’m afraid. I’ll do my best, but to make sense of this for you I’m going to have to fill in some bits, and it’s not going to be quick.” Another flashing grin crossed his face. “You might want a refill of coffee now. Or better, to break out the champagne.”

Elizabeth (who found she could not stop smiling as the news began to sink in, and was clutching Justin’s hand) cocked an enquiring eyebrow at Caparelli. “The night staff have laid on coffee, Sir Thomas, but I believe you’ll find some champagne in the fridge through there.”

He rose, grinning, and went to fetch it while White Haven continued.

“We’ve never known where the Cerberus system was, of course, any more than most Peeps do, but it turns out it’s about 100 LY to galnorth of Haven — and the planet’s called Hades because it’s hellish hot, close to a G3 primary, and a death-trap. Atmosphere and water are OK, but the biota is screwy and completely inedible. The Peeps have been using it as a prison planet since their conquests started in the 1840s, so there are — were — hundreds of thousands of inmates; and the reason the set-up worked is because no-one had to be guarded at all. In fact, the prisoners were spread out in unguarded penny packets over most of the continental masses — but they were locked out of the only place on the whole planet that can supply edible food, a big terraformed island smack in the middle of the largest ocean. Any resistance from anyone in a camp, and everyone went hungry for a month. Or two.” He grimaced in distaste, patrician features twisting. “They seem to have been perfectly prepared to let hundreds starve to death if that’s what it took. Bastards. Short of that, they also had a special camp for real hardcases, right on the equator with night-lows well above forty degrees C — and that meant the kind of people Harrington needed were all conveniently in one place.”

White Haven grinned again, almost as ferally as before, as Elizabeth and Justin accepted brimming champagne flutes from Caparelli. He’d also bought celery for Ariel and Monroe, who bleeked enthusiastic thanks in chorus and began to crunch blissfully with eyes and ears still fixed on White Haven.

“So she went and said hello. The senior PoW turned out to be Commodore Ramirez, the San Martino CNO the Peeps said they’d killed in action, so he’s back from the dead too, and once the San Martinos realise that politics here are going to get very interesting, I fancy. Anyway, Harrington
had several hundred suits of battle-armour in her assault pinnaces, so they trained up a couple of companies, waited for the next food shuttle to arrive, took its place for the return leg, and blew hell out of the Peep HQ while capturing Ground Control intact. And, of course, the entire Peep database, which is where things really start to get interesting. Harrington had the time and personnel to vacuum it completely, Tom, and she’s brought the whole lot back for ONI to play with, which they’ll be doing for years. But I’ll give you the headlines and highlights.

“First up, besides a hundred and some thousand Peep politicals who were afraid to go anywhere, poor sods, she’s brought everyone out with her, which means about 386,000 people all told — 30-odd thousand Peep politicals who do want asylum, 140-odd thousand Alliance personnel, including 78,000 Manticorans, and just over 200,000 prisoners from pre-war Peep conquests. That’s a miracle for a lot of Alliance service families right there, and the biggest prison-break in history by an order of magnitude, as well as a huge boost for BuPers.”

Abruptly White Haven scowled ferociously. “There is one fly in the ointment. There’s no good place for this, and it’s nothing to the big picture, but among those Manticorans was Harold Styles, that idiot who got his whole squadron captured with cold impellers at Yalta, back in ’05. Fortunately Harrington had the foresight to assume her Grayson persona as a full Admiral, or he’d have been the ranking officer, and none of this would have happened. As it was, he apparently didn’t really believe she was an admiral at all, nor that the GSN had any Alliance standing, and even though she tried to manage him he wouldn’t play. So eventually she put him under close arrest and filed charges of insubordination, cowardice, and incitement to mutiny the JAG will have to deal with. I’ve seen the critical recording, and it’s clear-cut, but forcing his resignation might be enough. Anyway, that’s your problem.”

He paused briefly to check scribbled notes and scowled again. “The next thing nearly gave me a heart attack when I first heard it, but actually it’s another triumphant Harrington special. The Peep garrison was about 1,500 strong, of whom about a third were killed in the assault and its immediate aftermath. Most of the rest were captured, and those who escaped into the farmlands almost all turned up messily dead at the hands of former prisoners. Thing is, to head off disciplinary problems with the ex-PoWs, a lot of whom had had a very bad time of it, Harrington empanelled courts martial and tried the worst of the StateSec sadists. And Tom, she did it under the Peep Uniform Code of Conduct, which supposedly bound every one of the StateSec goons. She had hard evidence from the Peeps’ own records as well as prisoner testimony, she had a Peep Vice Admiral from among their politicals sitting voluntarily on the panel, and she recorded everything in proper form. They passed 58 capital sentences for multiple torture-murders and rapes, all of which were carried out with due process, and more than a hundred long custodial sentences on people they’ve bought out with them. There were also more than 40 acquittals for lack of evidence, and anyone not convicted was left unharmed on Hades, so despite the irregularities there’s nothing for her, or us, or anyone except StateSec to be ashamed of.”

The grim smile returned.

“And then we have our star exhibit, Tom, who is going to stir things up very nicely. Faking people’s deaths seems to be something of a Peep hobby, and not just where PoWs are concerned. Those undead people were stashed on Hades, and now they’re here — including, wait for it, Admiral Amos Parnell, who does not want political asylum despite having been officially executed by his own side for alleged treason. Instead he politely asks for transport to the Solarian League, where he proposes to seek to clear his name and that of the navy he commanded by proving the Harris assassination was organised by Pierre, Saint-Just, and Ransom. And his evidence includes crystal-clear official recordings of the former commandant of Hades proudly proclaiming exactly that while torturing Parnell with a hammer and murdering his XO.”
“My God! Parnell!” Elizabeth could barely process what she was hearing. She had always suspected something of that kind underlay the coup that within months of the war starting had transformed the People’s Republic of Haven into a Dolist rather than a Legislaturist regime — a distinction without much difference, so far as Elizabeth was concerned — but allegations without proof were worthless currency. With undisputable hard evidence and Parnell risen from the dead to confront his accusers, however, anything was possible; and still White Haven continued.

“So that’s the scope of the thing, Tom, leaving the rest of the how. Harrington seized the StateSec HQ late last year, but for months only a dispatch boat came by, which was sent on its way, apparently all unsuspecting, but must have tripped an alarm somewhere. Then in July a Mars-class cruiser came calling with prisoners from Zanzibar and Alizon, and they welcomed her in among the orbital mines and captured her intact — which meant that while they now had a means of escape for a few thousand, Harrington also learned about Operation Icarus and the scale of losses we’d suffered. And decided calling for help wasn’t on, which was the point at which Styles got himself arrested.” He frowned slightly. “Actually, I’m not at all sure of her thinking there, Tom — the Graysons would have moved heaven and earth to get her out if they’d had the slightest hint she was alive. It’s almost as if she felt embarrassed to escape herself while leaving anyone behind. But it doesn’t matter, because in October a nice little convoy turned up, comprising the warships she came back in with another light cruiser and five Longstop-class troop transports, and though they had to destroy one cruiser, which also took out a destroyer, they captured the rest, dumped their crews on Hades, and by way of a joke commissioned them into the, ah, Elysian Space Navy. The odd cruiser is escorting the Longstops back here, and that’s the extra quarter-million people we’re now expecting in the next ten days.”

White Haven suddenly laughed.

“Yes, Admiral Caparelli, I’m reporting to you, let me see, the return from the dead of Commodore, or Admiral, or quite possibly War Goddess Harrington, of Commodore Jesus Ramirez, and of Admiral Amos Parnell; the escape of nearly 400,000 PoWs from Hades, a third of whom are Alliance personnel; the location and effective destruction of that hellhole; our possession of its entire database, including pretty much absolute proof that the current Peep leadership assassinated their predecessors; and … five victorious engagements resulting in the destruction or capture of, um, one prison planet, 28 warships and four transports, and a Peep butcher’s bill that has
to be well in six figures. They thought they’d play games with Honor Harrington, and she by God took out everything they had in sight before coming home to us.”

Elizabeth saw tears in White Haven’s eyes but wasn’t surprised as there were tears in her own. He drew a deep breath and a different kind of grin came onto his face.

“Which doesn’t, of course, even begin to consider the domestic fallout, for Manticore, surely, but above all for Grayson. And the Sollies, by God! I’m sending Harrington and her close staff from the survivors of Prince Adrian direct to Yeltsin aboard, ha, GSNS Honor Harrington — her parents are there, anyway, and Nimitz’s Samantha, and I think you’ll agree the Graysons have first dibs. It’ll be some party — but of course there’s real complications as well where her hereditary titles and fortune are concerned. For us, too, not to mention the question of what we’re going to do formally to welcome her back, and how exactly we can reward her for what’s she’s achieved, militarily and politically. But that’s your problem, I’m delighted to say, and Her Majesty’s, of course. Oh, and while I imagine the Queen may want to take care of it herself, could you make sure someone tells Mike Henke as soon as possible? And perhaps Mark Sarnow. I’d be grateful. White Haven, clear.”

* * * * *

Some time later a slightly drunk Elizabeth was sitting with Justin, Monroe, and Ariel on her private terrace, still sipping champagne and watching the sun rise over Jason Bay. On her other side sat an emotional Mike Henke, who had been only an hour or so away with Home Fleet and found herself rudely summoned to see White Haven’s despatch; one good crying jag later, in which Elizabeth had shamelessly joined, she was doing her best to catch up on champagne with Ariel curled happily in her lap, purring and doing whatever it was treecats did with the excessive emotions of those they cared about.

“A dollar for your thoughts, Mike.”

“I’d give them for free if I knew what they were, Beth. A joy I’m only just beginning to admit, for sure, but … Honor looked dreadful as well as amazingly alive. She was hellish thin, besides the arm and having her eye and face smashed again. And poor Nimitz.” Ariel bleeked comfort and Mike’s hands moved blindly in his fur. “I just can’t imagine it, Beth. I’ve seen combat, and I’ve seen Honor survive stuff you’d swear would kill anyone. You’ve seen those recordings from Grayson, both when she saved Benjamin and when her pinnace was shot down. I’ve seen her survive mentally, too, when I don’t think I could have done. But losing Paul almost killed her inside, and when I saw her not long before she was captured at Adler I remember thinking she wasn’t really all the way back, even then — mind and body, yes, but heart and soul? I thought she was still bleeding, emotionally, and what state she must be in now … well, God may know but I don’t. And I’m frightened to try to imagine it.”

Elizabeth squeezed Mike’s shoulder. “Yes, I know what you mean. I send people out to die in my name, and sometimes I see the sensor recordings of them doing it. But I’ve never seen anything like Honor Harrington on Fearless, at Second Yeltsin. Nor at First Hancock. She’s like Edward Saganami was, on that recording they show every year at the Academy.”

“Mmm. Yes. But she’s more than that, actually, Beth. If she’d been in Saganami’s command chair she’d have won, somehow. Even at Adler she saved the whole convoy, against atrocious odds; sacrificing herself, just like Second Yeltsin, but ending as a PoW — a victory in almost every way that mattered. And they couldn’t hold her! Couldn’t kill her, couldn’t hold her, couldn’t stop her
smashing them wide open from the inside.” Henke drank from her glass. “God knows I love her, Beth, and have done ever since Nimitz and I persuaded her to buzz old Hartley’s boat at the Academy Regatta back in ’79. But I don’t think I know who she is any more, and I don’t have the slightest idea what she could or will go on to do.”

“Just so.” Elizabeth smiled crookedly. “Perhaps I should try pointing her at Manpower. Or the thrice-damned Sollies.” Then she sobered, frowning as she remembered what else she’d once said to Cromarty about Honor Harrington. “Or at us.”

Part I -- Tribulations -- Chapter One

Part One: Tribulations

Chapter One

Harrington City & Austin City, December 1916 PD

Her Grace Admiral Lady Honor Harrington, Steadholder and Duchess Harrington, looked steadily at Nimitz, who had no titles at all and looked back at her as a treecat may. His true hands flashed in the sign language he and his mate Samantha (and so, in short order, all telepathic treecats) had learned to compensate for the mental muteness inflicted by a Peep rifle-butt, that surgery could not yet cure.

< I know you don’t like it. But we tried it your way last time. And the time before. Now the same enemies are back again. Enough is enough, even with silly two-leg rules. Golden Voice agrees. This time we try it the People’s way.>

Beside him Sam nodded emphatically, and Honor sighed. “You have a point, Stinker. And God knows I don’t really disagree. But getting caught at the sort of things that would be necessary would be a disaster.”

< So is getting caught by a death fang when you’re hunting a chipmunk. You make sure you’re not.> He went on as she made to speak. < No, listen. I know two-leg rules are serious, but I also know you. When we go to war you are a great hunter — careful, patient, strong. You make sure you know what you’re doing, then do it. But at home, with this ‘politics’ and kitten-hissing all the time, you are different. The two-leg rules don’t stop you in space, but they stop you at home, because you let them. Stop letting them.> He shushed her again. < Yes, I know it’s hard for you. But that’s because you think you must do it all alone. The People know better. When an elder is threatened, the whole clan acts. And your clan must act. You cannot do it alone but you don’t need to. You have hands of hands of friends — all you have saved, all you have taught. All who love you as a leader. You have Soul of Steel and Strong Mind, and Walks Wildly and Tree Thrower. You have the kin of Laugh Dancer on Beowulf, and you have the friendship of the fighters with numbers on their tongues. You have all your people here, and your own fleet of warships. You have lots of money. And you have me and Golden Voice, and any aid the People can give. Think what our signing means. We can check instructions carefully, and report exactly what we know.>

He paused, looking intently at her, as Sam was, but she said nothing, brow creased in thought.

< These are your forces. And you face a battle. Use them. Find a way with the two-leg rules you can accept, and use them.>

“Alright, Stinker. That makes sense, at any rate. And you and Sam are right, I am paralysed by politics. I understand why the rules are there, and mind-blind two-legs do need them, as the People don’t, but they can paralyse everything, even when it’s safety-critical. And that can’t be right.”

< So change the rules. Or turn them to your advantage. I’ve seen you do it in space, and when you practice fighting with your own body. Your enemy’s attack becomes your advantage.>
“Throw the assailant with her own speed and weight,” Honor quoted. “Yes.” Then she went still for a moment and Nimitz’s eyes gleamed. “Yes. And that actually might be possible, Stinker. It certainly bears some thinking on.”

<So think. Then act.> He flirted his tail, before wrapping it around Samantha at his side. <And eat more cluster stalk. It will be good for you.>

* * * * *

Three days later Honor looked around the conference table, fixing her eyes on Andrew LaFollet before taking a slim recorder from her pocket, deactivating it, and putting it in front of her. A silence stretched before LaFollet, grimacing, reached into his sidepocket. When Honor continued to look steadily at him he grimaced again and reached into an inside pocket. Opposite him, Howard Clinkscales and Miranda LaFollet grinned and reached into their own pockets, as did Willard Neufsteiler; on Miranda’s lap Farragut bleeked amusement. Only Alfredo Yu remained motionless, though he was smiling as he rested empty hands on the table before him. Satisfied, Honor reached out to tap a button and they all felt the slight pressure of an active damping field.

Clinkscales’s eyebrows went up. “No recorders and a damping field, my Lady? Are we planning treason?”

“No, not quite, Howard, but let’s say this meeting is not officially taking place, and I believe in keeping things clean. And as it happens, Nimitz also has something to say he doesn’t want on record.”

No-one blinked. After knowing Nimitz for more than a decade it had come as no surprise to learn, with the advent of sign, that his treecat name was Laughs Brightly and the brain behind those grass-green eyes as scalpel-sharp as his claws.

“The fact is, people, I have a problem, and until a few days ago no idea what to do about it. But Stinker gave me a good talking-to and set thoughts stirring.” Beside her Nimitz radiated satisfaction and everyone grinned. “It’s High Ridge, of course, and that sorry excuse for an administration that currently passes as Her Majesty’s Government. But it’s also me, or rather, what seems to happen to me when I’m forced to play the kind of political games High Ridge and all his kind are for ever trading on.”

She waved a hand in frustration, and Nimitz neatly ducked.

“Domestically, High Ridge is living on a log-jam, and you could say it’s mostly the fault of the San Martinos for requesting annexation by the Star Kingdom. I don’t blame President Ramirez for a moment, and Queen Elizabeth would never have agreed if she didn’t think it was in Manticore’s best interests. Besides, the facts that it is going through, and that High Ridge can’t stop it, are testimony to the very wide support Ramirez has on Manticore.” She didn’t add that that popularity, though based on his savage defence of San Martin against Haven back in 1880, was owed largely to Ramirez’s role in the great escape from Hades; everyone knew it. “But the Lords are terrified of what will happen when the San Martino peers accede and destroy the conservative majority — rightly, in a way, because they will lose the power of the purse they’ve come to rely on as a veto. And with Cromarty gone, High Ridge is the only person the swing votes will trust to protect their privileges, so even though they know his administration is already a disaster, and its main business peculation, they’re behind him like rabbits in lockstep.”
Several people snorted, and Nimitz and Farragut bleeked amused agreement with the image.

“Galactically, of course, it’s worse than that. Despite unilaterally accepting Saint-Just’s last-gasp offer of a ceasefire and aborting Operation Buttercup when we could have secured victory, High Ridge hasn’t signed a peace treaty with Haven, because the state of war allows him to continue postponing an election, and he’s so convinced of Manticore’s innate superiority he neither understands nor cares that running down the Navy without securing peace is as stupid as it gets. Since the news of Theisman’s coup and the death of Saint-Just he’s been saying nothing can happen until the Havenites elect a new administration, and that it’s only a formality anyway. Neither statement is true, but Haven’s apparent falsification of our diplomatic correspondence, whatever that mess is really about, has given him a lot of leeway. He’s also been told over and over that he’s endangering the basics of the Alliance — even with us and certainly with Erehwon, as well as Zanzibar and Alizion — but he has such contempt for anyone other than his fellow Manticoran aristocrats, and most of them, that he doesn’t think that matters either; certainly not by comparison with his own next wallow in the trough. He hasn’t a clue just how hard it was to create the tech-edge that gave us Operation Buttercup, nor how quickly it can all be squandered, especially if the Allies with whom we’ve shared that tech are insulted and spurned.” Her voice became much colder. “He’s already effectively squandered our dead — everything 12 years of war and sacrifice had gained, and more than three million Alliance dead tossed aside in a heartbeat, without thought or care, for what amounts to no more than personal gain. And I will not let it stand.”

Her fingers drummed on the table for a moment as she banked down rage and Nimitz fought the echoing hiss he wanted to voice. No one spoke: they knew what she said was true and were themselves enraged by it, but even Andrew LaFollet, who saw and heard more of Honor in private than anyone, was surprised to hear her put the thought so bluntly into words and wondered where she might be going with this.

“Unfortunately, High Ridge isn’t going to put himself within legal reach of a bullet or blade, and that wouldn’t answer anyway. Nor can I fire a missile salvo to break up that log-jam. But all the same, that’s what we need — something that will, frankly, take them all out, for good: and that something has to be unimpeachably legal. Not simply strong enough to bear media scrutiny, but undeniable because it’s true and there’s hard evidence. And as it happens I think there will be an opportunity to get that kind of evidence, because I know what High Ridge will do, or rather, arrange to have done through his little kitchen cabinet with Descroix and North Hollow. So does Stinker.”

Nimitz’s arms signed briefly. <He will tell a lie.>

“Yes, he will.” She reached out to ruffle Nimitz’s fur. “Treecats have a hard time understanding lying because it means imagining being mind-blind, but Stinker’s pretty much worked it out. And he’s exactly right. High Ridge’s greatest vulnerability is what he’s doing to the Navy, about which many of his own members are dimly uneasy, and Hamish Alexander and I will be able to go right on hammering him about that in committee, in the House, and in the media. Putting Hamish on half-pay while letting me teach at the Academy and stay on Manticore was stupid, politically as well as militarily, but he has no way out of it now so he has to face us in opposition. Between us we’ve already forced Draskovic’s resignation by repeatedly catching her lies about staffing levels to the Naval Affairs Committee, and the first time there’s a disaster somewhere Jurgensen will go as well. Maybe sooner; he’s as dim as they come, and even High Ridge and Janacek must know it. From our point of view it’s nothing like enough, nor will it happen soon enough, but from High Ridge’s it’s the only cloud black enough and close enough to start making him wet — so I’m betting that inside a year he’s going to feel sufficiently frustrated that he’ll turn to dirty tricks, as his kind always do. And that means he’ll have to try smearing Hamish or me. Or most likely both of us, because for all White Haven is a much older and more senior title High Ridge thinks Hamish a traitor to his class, and he’d like to hurt him almost as much as he’d like to hurt me.”
She glanced at Clinkscales, whose face was expressionless though his eyes darkened and she could sense his contempt and fury.

“It’s what Burdette tried, of course. Discredit to destroy. And what High Ridge won’t think about, any more than Burdette, is the way lies can boomerang when they’re exposed.” She stared into space for a moment. “In this case, I suspect he’ll do what he thinks the obvious thing, given how fundamentally he misunderstands and despises Grayson, and try some sexual slander. Hamish and I have been thrown together a lot, we’ve become good friends, and there’s always been that nasty edge in newsy stuff about him because his wife’s been paralysed for so long and they’re constantly hoping to catch him having an affair they can harp on with sorrow. What neater solution for High Ridge than to cast me as the scarlet woman? He’ll think of it in the end; or North Hollow’s wife will.”

Her voice was bitter and she visibly pulled herself up.

“Anyway, the exact lie he’ll tell doesn’t matter. It won’t actually be him, anyway — probably one of the newsy outlets he’s pally with, or can plant something on. What does matter is that very soon after whoever it is tells that lie I have in my hands hard evidence that it is a lie; and as you can’t prove a negative that means evidence the slander was made to order, and of who gave that order.” She sat back. “Now, my position on things like bugging is simple. It’s illegal and unethical, and I can’t afford the risk of being caught at it any more than Elizabeth and Benjamin can. But speaking as a tactician that timidity drives me crazy because it means fighting blind. I don’t go into action without having deployed drones and swept every kind of sensor I have through the volume I’m in. But I realise — or rather, Stinker points out — I haven’t been taking that analogy anything like seriously enough. And that stops right now.”

She looked at Andrew LaFollet. “One thing that means, Andrew, is significantly increasing our intelligence capacity. I’ve put security for the Bay House on the agenda for Friday’s cabinet, and while some of that is defence systems to bring it up to proper VIP standard, I’m also going to want a full and permanent Harrington Guard presence there, including an intel and analysis unit whose formal brief will include what I have to do as Duchess Harrington.”

LaFollet nodded, carefully not smiling though his Steadholder would know full well what he felt. The extent to which Her Grace’s Manticoran identities had to be distinguished from Grayson ones was an old bone of contention, and this was an unexpected but very welcome acceptance of advice he’d pressed on her for years. To be fair, which LaFollet habitually was, the issue had only become urgent since the concatenation of her second Manticoran ennoblement, enforced shift from military command to political opposition, and clever decision to make the Jason Bay mansion an official embassy of Harrington Steading to Elizabeth’s court. His gaze sharpened as Nimitz began signing while Her Grace casually looked away.

<Dances on Clouds will say all must be done by two-leg rules. I say all must be done that has to be done to win.>

Honor’s gaze came back to LaFollet. “I will also want them to focus on finance, so include forensic accountants, please. What all of High Ridge’s lot want at base is personal profit, and they’ll scam it wherever they can. Money from the Navy build-down is being diverted into social programmes, but I’ll bet you anything a fair amount is being skimmed — quite cleverly and discreetly, no doubt, but hidden money on that scale can always be tracked. It’s likely, of course, that the smarter ones will try to squirrel some of it away outside Manticore and rely on some kind of off-planet banking secrecy, but they might find that’s not as good as they believe. So far as Beowulf is concerned, for example, where my mother’s family has a lot of influence. Or even Silesia, given how hard the Andermani can lean on the Sillies, if someone like the Herzog von Rabenstrange is moved
to do so.” She looked around the table. “Nimitz said something else the other day as well I’ve been thinking about — that I have a lot of friends. And of course he’s right. You’ve all been with me long enough to know most of them, but I’ve realised that because my life is so compartmentalised between Grayson and Manticore, civilian and military, there are gaps there shouldn’t be.”

She hesitated and Nimitz held up a true-hand, momentarily unsheathing his claws in mock-threat with a long-suffering glance at Farragut before signing. <Say it. You promised.>

“Yes, I did, Stinker.” She sighed. “This plain embarrasses me, but I can’t go on being stupid about it. Tester knows I’ve done what I’ve done because it was my duty and I believed it right, but that also means there are a lot of people who are grateful and would help if they can.” She looked hard at LaFollet. “What they might do is more than I can say, but I cannot ignore resources available to me. Not with what is at stake now.”

She gestured in turn around the table.

“Howard, of course, was Head of Planetary Security before becoming my regent, and I dare say has connections still with the intelligence community that might turn up some people the new unit could recruit. And those people would have good access to some of that interesting Grayson old tech that isn’t at all what people used to galtech expect.” Everyone started looking thoughtful.

“Alfredo, as permanent Deputy CO of the Protector’s Own, has all sorts of stuff in inventory, including new naval tech not available to civilians anywhere. And Willard, naturally, is up to speed on the new joint ventures between Sky Domes and the Hauptman Cartel, and as he knows, while the Blackbird Yards here will be expanding enormously, quite a lot of the new work will be done on Manticore — so there’ll be an awful lot of Sky Domes people based in Landing for several years. We’ll be buying or subsidising purchase of a great deal of property, one way or another, and while all my accounts will of course be entirely above board, it is so regrettably tricky to keep track of everything in such a complex budget.”

Andrew LaFollet smiled as Honor turned to his sister.

“Miranda, you’ll find I’ve updated my address files. Klaus and Stacy Hauptman have new contact codes, as do Anton Zilwicki and Cathy Montaigne. There’s a military file, too, with home details for people on half-pay like Alistair McKeon, Alice Truman, and Chief Harkness, who does have a way with electronics. Tomas Ramirez is in there too, with some other Marines, and some yard dogs Paul knew.” Her voice was level. “There’s even a private code for Herzog von Rabenstrange, should you ever find yourself in New Berlin, and for my Uncle Jacques on Beowulf. And … well, all sorts of people, really. I’m still in touch, for example, with quite a few of the slaves liberated at Casimir, including as it happens Isaac Douglass, who is now Cathy Montaigne’s butler; incidentally, though he goes by Douglass, his real name is Isaac X.”

The addition was in a whimsical tone but sharp breaths were heard and she could taste the shock in their mind-glow. Although they all knew she must have had contact with the Audubon Ballroom back at Casimir, it was still a terrorist organisation, albeit one with very focused aims, and thoroughly illegal everywhere.

“You do know an awful lot of people, don’t you, my Lady?”

“I do, Andrew. And when it comes to this, I’ll take any help I’m freely offered.” He nodded carefully. “Now, I have a mother to speak to, for my sins, but Nimitz thinks he might stay for a bit, to keep you all company. I’ll collect Arthur from outside as I go, Andrew.”

Ignoring startled looks and LaFollet’s half-protest, Honor rose, pocketing her recorder, and went to the door.
“Think as far outside the box as you like, people. Just get the job done. And don’t get caught.”

And she was gone. As the door closed behind her, everyone blew out breaths and five human gazes came to rest on an unperturbed Nimitz, who cheerfully held up a true hand.

<Two things. First, this is a hunt, and the People understand hunting, with what is needed to hunt well. We are also very good at getting into places two legs would swear were safe from predators. And second, while the People can be caught and killed by an enemy, they cannot be made to g-i-v-e e-v-i-d-e-n-c-e.> He spelled out the last two words letter by letter, watching carefully to see that they understood. <Dances on Clouds tells me always that two-leg rules forbid this or that. The People don’t forbid anything you have to do to survive.>

“Forgive me, Nimitz, but you are, um, very recognisable. And you’ve been on Manticoran HD almost as often as Her Grace.” LaFollet shook his head. “I don’t think it’s as big an advantage as you think, though I do appreciate your offer.”

<I said the People, not just me. The depth of my bond with Dances on Clouds is unique, but by teaching Golden Voice and me to sign so we can talk despite my injury she has made it possible for all the People, everywhere, to talk to the Guardians of the Trees. Before, even with People bonded to two legs, communication was hard, and broken up. No one could be sure. Now, if the snows or loss of a food cache leaves any clan starving, they can ask a Guardian to bring food. If one is sick or injured, their kin can sign to the glass screen the Memory Singers of each clan have, and help will be sent. This is already saving lives, especially of younglings, and the People know who has done this for us. I can bring you a hand of hands of the strongest hunters no two legs will know.>

“That’s … very interesting. Even so, a group of unbonded treecats is going to stand out in Landing.”

“Actually, Andrew, that’s not true.” Miranda LaFollet didn’t often contradict her brother and he listened when she did. “I’ve been doing most of the liaison with Dr Arif’s Commission, and one thing they’ve decided is that as there are clearly going to be unbonded ’cats who come to work in security and psychiatry, there ought to be the equivalent of a ’cat embassy, so protocols can be settled and disputes judged fairly. When we left Manticore the plan was for each full clan that was willing to nominate a Memory Singer, with a guard group, and for the, um, ambassadorial duties to rotate until more ’cats have experience of living with humans in full communication. So there might well be a lot of strange ’cats in Landing.”

On her lap Farragut sat straighter, true-hands flashing. <There will be hands of hands of hands. And when they are there, the first elders of the Landing clan will be Laughs Brightly and Golden Voice.>

Nimitz bleeked satisfaction at the general laughter, then began to sign much more slowly and deliberately.

<Despite the turnings I have been with Dances on Clouds, I know my understanding of two-leg rules is incomplete. But I know when she is hurt and sorrowing, and I have seen a pattern I do not like.> He paused, twitching his whiskers for a moment. <I understand there are things two legs do not like admitting they know, although this is very strange to the People. And I am sorry to have to talk about these things, but I must. It started when Dances on Clouds was still a youngling, being taught to fight, and the two leg attacked her. She was closed inside for weeks after, and I didn’t understand what had happened. Later, when she was a fighter, he attacked her again, and again, and it seemed she wouldn’t protect herself, and no-one helped her. Eventually he killed her mate, and she killed him. But the same thing happened here. When she cut off the two leg’s head, they all
bowed to her, but a hand of them had nothing but hate in their minds. And later, one of those who hated tried to kill Soul of Steel and Strong Mind, and nearly killed her also.

“You knew about Mueller?” Clinkscales and LaFollet spoke in unison, the pain and shame of the late steadholder’s assassination attempt on Elizabeth and Benjamin still sharp in their minds.

<Only that he hated my two leg. There was no e-v-i-d-e-n-c-e. But if he had been asked what he knew about the dome that collapsed, and I had been there, I could have told Dances on Clouds if he was lying.>

“Tester help us, we’ve been fools!” Clinkscales shook his head. “I knew full well you can do that but it never occurred to me to push for that sort of enquiry into Mueller. And now all ’cats can sign. Will unbonded ’cats come to Grayson, if we ask the embassy?”

<Yes. It is already talked about among the clans. They know of Dances on Clouds’s Far World, and of my kittens who grow up here. But listen. I am saying Dances on Clouds still cannot fight these two-leg enemies, as she does enemy ships in space. She freezes. To get her here today has taken me a long time. Now you must act for her, and do what she cannot or will not. I will help in any way I can, but I do not understand your machines well enough, nor your strange rules, to plan the hunt.>

The assembled two legs looked at one another for a while before Clinkscales spoke. “I do take your point, Nimitz, but I’m not sure if it’s possible to do what Her Grace seems to want. Even if —”

Nimitz’s fierce signing interrupted him. <Make it possible! In space you have machines that tell you what is happening further away than all the People together could count on their hands. You have other machines that show in space a picture of a death fang walking on the world beneath, so clearly you can see the strands of its fur. The ship-warriors fool their enemies at great distances. You have the machines, the weapons — you just need to use them properly, to give Dances on Clouds the weapon she needs, the weapon she can fight these enemies with. And destroy them.> His whiskers twitched. <It has gone on far too long — more than a hand of hands of turnings since the two leg hurt her at as a youngling. Always these same enemies are protected by your silly two-leg rules, and she is not. Always she faces more pain, more loss, and they walk away, until they come back to try again. Now Golden Voice and I have had enough, and all the People agree. It is time we did it the People’s way. And the People have only two kinds of enemy — dead ones, and ones we haven’t yet dealt with.> Suddenly he bleeked laughter, flirting his tail, and letter-signed a phrase they were all very familiar with. <S-o l-e-t-s b-e a-b-o-u-t i-t, p-e-o-p-l-e.>

As the door closed behind Nimitz five humans and a treecat looked after him and at one another with apprehension as well as amusement clear on their faces. After a moment Clinkscales, as Lord Regent of the steadings the most senior, spoke carefully.

“It’s not that I mind being told off by a treecat. Tester knows the little devils are smart enough — oh, I’m sorry, Farragut, but you know it’s true — and Nimitz made a lot of sense. It warms my heart to know how he cares for her. And for all this business makes me very uneasy it’s not that I don’t know what Her Grace is, ah, not asking for, nor that I disapprove. She needs better political intelligence on Manticore, and Grayson can function as a cut-out well enough. We owe her that. But however much of an idiot High Ridge may be the Manties know their electronic security, and bugging the Prime Minister of Manticore is probably not possible.” He snorted. “And whatever Nimitz thinks, it’s not as if we can just deploy a stealthed drone in Landing!”

“Actually, my Lord, I’m not so sure about that.” Alfredo Yu’s brown eyes were hooded in thought. “When Nimitz said that my reaction was the same as yours. But it occurs to me that if you
asked me what a Ghost Rider drone *could* detect at very short ranges dirtside, I’d have to tell you I haven’t a clue. And so far as I’m aware nor has anyone else, because it’s never been done.” He grinned. “After all, most people wanting to bug other people don’t have any Ghost Rider technology to play with. And it’s not as if one would need the drives, FTL com, self-destructs, or gravitic arrays — just the main sensor heads and the AI.”

Clinkscales frowned. “Maybe. But it’s still not going to be something you can plant on someone.”

“But you wouldn’t need to, my Lord.” LaFollet’s forehead was also creased in thought. “Those arrays would be a receiving station. In one of those houses we’ll be buying for Sky Domes personnel, say, if I followed Her Grace’s thinking. The question is what the arrays would be able to pick up — and what we might be able to provide for them to pick up, which makes me wonder about our old tech. Her Grace was right it’s often unpredictable by galtech standards, as we saw with the new compensator designs and fission plants for LACs.” He looked at Clinkscales. “You’d know better than me, my Lord, but the kind of surveillance kit I was trained to use before the Alliance upgraded everything was based on analogue recordings that had to be physically recovered. But the standard Manticoran counter-surveillance gear we now have is almost entirely based on detecting power sources and the epiphenomena of directional UHF burst transmissions, because that’s what modern surveillance designs use. I remember something else too, which is what Her Grace did at Marsh with that butcher Warnecke, when she figured his security checks would *not* detect a chemical propellant weapon because he was looking for the signature of pulser power-packs. And she was right.”

He turned to Yu.

“Alfredo, if we get you some of that older Grayson tech, can you do some quiet experiments with your drones and find out if I’m talking rot or if there’s something here that might actually work?”

“Certainly. There’s a Hades escapee in my own crew who can do that and would be happy to help Her Grace in any way he can. His loyalty is very fierce.”

“Good. That’s a start.” Clinkscales nodded sharply. “Now, Andrew, how do you want the new Guard unit for the Bay House set up? We’d better have a plan ready for Friday’s cabinet and unless I miscount we’re already at our constitutional limit for overall Guard numbers.”

“We are, my Lord, but I think there’s several ways round that. I’m sure the Protector would grant us an exemption — we are the only steadying to have an offplanet embassy, and given its perimeter and sea as well as land and air access we’re going to need a company at least to run full security there; maybe two. Which means a substantial support staff would be expected. On the other hand those constitutional provisions are there for good reason, and I’d as soon not give other steadholders ideas. So I wondered if we should rather apply to the Protector for the loan of an oversize Marine company and intel unit. The Bay House will, after all, be a primary residence of the permanent CO of the Protector’s Own, so all that would have to happen is to increase the Marines assigned to Alfredo, who could deploy them to Landing as a diplomatic detail.”

Clinkscales nodded appreciatively. “Which would make it easy to include people seconded from Sword Intelligence. And I rather think, Willard, some further, very quiet seconding to Sky Domes’s management team for the new project might be in order. It’s shipbuilding primarily, isn’t it?”

“Yes.” Neufsteiler steepled his fingers. “Officially, what we’re doing is bringing Grayson construction techniques using dispersed yards and slips into Manticoran use, with an initial order of
three merchantmen and a new luxury liner for the Hauptman Cartel. Unofficially, those slips and yards will be set up so they can be used for military construction, specifically Saganami-Cs, and part of the purpose is to counterweight High Ridge’s idiotic build-down of Manticoran yard facilities.”

Everyone nodded. Little as most of them cared for Klaus Hauptman, they knew the magnate was deeply concerned about the policies of the current administration.

“The Hauptman cartel still has some orders for naval construction, doesn’t it?”

Neufsteiler nodded. “Yes. High Ridge and Janacek wanted to give all orders to their own industrial pets, but the level of tech classification blocked them, and the very limited orders for new hulls they have placed had to go to existing, security-cleared builders.”

“Would it be possible to get at least one naval construction project transferred to the new Grayson-style yards. As a trial?”

Neufsteiler frowned, then shrugged. “Some ships haven’t been started yet, so I’d think so. And actually a trial like that wouldn’t be a bad thing at all. Why do you ask, my Lord?”

“Because then we’d have a reason to have some GONI people officially seconded as security. And thus an opportunity to add ringers whose real job would be to serve as the left hand of the Bay House intel unit. You look dubious, Miranda?”

“Her Grace said the proof she needs has to be completely legal. But what you’re talking about is anything but, my Lord.”

Andrew LaFollet’s smile was predatory. “There’ll be cut-outs, Miranda. And when the team have what they need they simply send the whole package to Her Grace anonymously. What matters isn’t that the intel is obtained legally — and you’re right, it can’t be — but that it’s genuine, and absolutely solid. Because if it is, and we manage to find the kind of thing Her Grace suggested we ought to be looking for, then when it breaks High Ridge can shout it must have been illegally obtained as loud as he likes. The steadholder’s hands will be squeaky clean, whatever people think must have happened, and as soon as the data checks out High Ridge will be finished.”

“Are you sure of that, Andrew? He managed to deflect most of that Manpower scandal despite the evidence Lady Montaigne obtained from Terra.”

“That’s true but none of it named him, and it was mostly financial documentation. No, Miranda, if he’s caught fair and square in a conspiracy to slander Her Grace for purely political reasons he’ll be finished. And if Her Grace is right about the slander he chooses, and he implicitly attacks Earl White Haven and Lady Emily as well, he’ll be lucky to avoid a lynching.” LaFollet’s smile went beyond predatory to savage. “Or perhaps he won’t be lucky enough.”

* * * * *

Senior Chief Sensor Tech Jonathan Hawkwing was 38 and had come into the universe in the slave vats of Manpower Unlimited, designed as an expendable catamite-cum-body-servant. He had been shipped for sale when he was 11 and already well broken in by Manpower’s ‘phenotype technicians’, sold on at 14, and again at 19, but his fortunes had changed when he had been stored in transit for ten days at Manpower’s Casimir depot — just in time to be liberated by then Commander Honor Harrington and the destroyer Hawkwing, with help from the Audubon Ballroom. More than a
quarter of the liberated Casimir slaves had stayed on Beowulf, where they had first been taken, but most had moved on to Manticore, drawn by gratitude to their rescuers.

Jonathan’s twenties had been equally filled with psychotherapy he’d desperately needed and the formal education he’d been denied as a child, eventually leading him to a degree in electronic and molycirc engineering. When he was 27 war with Haven had started, and he’d joined the RMN the day news of Captain Harrington’s and Admiral Sarnow’s desperate victory at Hancock Station broke; but his respect for Manticore had been sorely tested by the political vilification of Harrington during the North Hollow saga and her effective exile after she killed her tormentor. Resigning the service in wartime was neither an option nor in Jonathan’s nature, but his war had ended prematurely three years later when the heavy cruiser on which he was serving was caught inside a hyperlimit and battered into surrender by a pair of Peep battleships. It had seemed an especially bitter irony after surviving that shambles that Haven’s strong record in enforcing the Cherwell Convention meant StateSec well understood the kind of loyalties the freed had to the nations who rescued them, and were deeply suspicious of PoWs who were also ex-slaves. With StateSec ascendant over the regular navy the number on Jonathan’s tongue had been enough in itself to get him sent to Hades, where just over two miserably hot and hungry years later he had been profoundly astonished to find himself once again liberated by Honor Harrington.

All the Manticoran Hades escapees were welcomed home with very open arms, and though Jonathan’s request to transfer to Grayson service was regretted it was granted without demur; as was his request in Grayson to serve with other escapees in the newly formed Protector’s Own. Although his RMN training was sadly out-of-date thanks to the new generation of sensor drones Admiral Hemphill’s people had brought into service during his captivity, it was nothing like as antique as that of many of those volunteering for the Own, who might have spent anything up to 60 years twiddling thumbs in Peep captivity — so he was promptly assigned for retraining in the new tech and fell in professional love with the astonishing achievements of the Ghost Rider programme. The sheer intelligence of the designs — the elegant efficiency of miniaturisation and re-engineered grav-pulse systems, radical improvements in passive sensors, and the onboard AI’s refined analytic capacity — made the drones for him things of beauty, and he found a real flair for their programming as well as contributing a small design improvement in one aspect of the molycircs controlling data-storage. Grayson’s BuWeaps had been impressed, swiftly incorporating the improvement into construction, and Jonathan had found himself promoted to Senior Chief and strongly encouraged to report any further ideas he might have.

His posting to the Own’s flagship had to his surprise brought him into personal contact with Admiral Yu, who liked to understand exactly what his remote sensor platforms could and could not do. Initially alarmed by the former Havenite’s accent, which woke ugly memories of blackleg guards he’d hated and feared on Hades, Jonathan had slowly been won over not only by Yu’s patent professionalism and command skill but by the man’s evident respect and admiration for Admiral Harrington. Yu had invited him, with other escapees in his flagship’s crew, to address their Grayson fellows, who were endlessly interested in every detail of the escape and every order Steadholder Harrington had given during it. The way in which some of them seemed almost to envy him his captivity for its association with their heroine was absurd, but in general he found much to admire in the Graysons and settled happily into his duties.

This morning, however, there was an irksome problem in the shape of a classified BuWeaps advisory to Senior Chiefs and EWO officers raising concern about a possible software failure in a batch of older Ghost Rider drones, including, as Jonathan immediately realised, two in his own inventory. Checking that particular set of molycircs meant substantial disassembly, including removal of the AI and passive sensor arrays, and he was contemplating the task with a degree of resignation when his com lit with a summons to attend the Admiral in his day-cabin. Yu must have seen the advisory, and would want a schedule for the necessary testing and any repairs.
As he reached the door to the Admiral’s quarters he was mildly surprised to see Yu standing in the outer office with his flag-lieutenant.

“So we need to bring leaves forward, Joshua. Captain Anston’s expecting you.” The lieutenant departed at a trot. “Ah, Senior Chief, do come in, please. I wanted a word about this BuWeaps advisory.”

“I’ve just seen it myself, sir, and we do have a couple of that batch in inventory. It’ll be a messy job, I’m afraid.” Entering the office Jonathan was surprised to be directed beyond it to the Admiral’s day-cabin, where a marine major rose from an easy chair as he entered. Yu followed him in and shut the door.

“Probably, Senior Chief, but perhaps not in the way you think. This is Major Applegarth, whose electronic interests overlap with yours. Major, this is Senior Chief Sensor Tech Hawkwing. Do please have a seat, Senior Chief.”


Yu looked at him gravely. “Before we go any further, Mr Hawkwing, I’m going to tell you three things to which you should listen very carefully, and if you don’t like what you hear we need go no further. First, this project is as classified as it’s possible to be, meaning no records of any kind. Second, everything involved is perfectly legal … on Grayson. And third, it is entirely in Her Grace’s service.” He waited a moment. “Should I continue?”

Jonathan had not missed Yu’s careful hesitation before adding “on Grayson”, but so far as he was concerned the Admiral’s third point ended all dispute. He nodded at once. “Please do, sir.”

“Good man. I thought you’d feel that way. Now, that BuWeaps advisory is just a cover to enable you to disassemble those drones. Oh, and don’t worry — those two are the only ones from that batch still in service, so no-one’s time will be wasted. And what it’s a cover for is that the Major here needs to know what exactly the passive arrays can pick up at very short ranges, dirtside.” Yu grinned at the startlement Jonathan couldn’t help showing. “Yes, I know — absurd, isn’t it? But that’s what we need. Major?”

Applegarth leaned forward. “Sir. I realise, of course, Mr Hawkwing, that the arrays are designed to detect ships and other large objects in space at a range measured in millions of klicks. But is it possible to refocus that capacity and power to work in far greater detail at ranges measured in tens or hundreds of metres? And if so, what penetration is there of obstacles like ceramcrete, metal, and glass?”

Jonathan considered. “Well, sir, the sensors could certainly be recalibrated, but some design parameters would have to be overwritten, and the AI would need substantial reprogramming. Without trying it I have no idea about penetration, though.”

Applegarth nodded. “Mmm. That’s pretty much what I thought. And don’t worry, I have the necessary AI programming : it’s bound to need tweaking but the basics are there.” He picked up a fat document case from beside his chair and opened it, taking out an oblong metal box about two centimetres thick which he set before Jonathan with a slight thud suggesting weight. A quick press of clever-looking fingers popped one side of the box loose, revealing dense circuitry, and Jonathan leaned forward to peer at it with interest. “What do you think this does?”

“I’m not sure, sir. It’s not like anything I’ve seen before.”

“I imagine not. It’s old Grayson surveillance tech, but quite late, developed only a few years
before we joined the Alliance. By then the designers had optical fibre, so they could do audio-visual pickup easily enough, and they had some outstanding materials tech we still keep to ourselves, but what they didn’t have was any of the miniaturisation of galtech, nor anything capable of milliburst UHF transmission, so this was designed as a store for data that had to be physically retrieved.” He shrugged. “You planted it somewhere you knew something might happen, and went back to see if it had. But with the advent of galactic security tech and DNA readers, gaining access to plant and retrieve became next to impossible, so our surveillance and counter-surveillance R&D went in a different direction.” He pointed to a large, curved but otherwise featureless component filling one side of the box. “That’s the memory, and the bit that’s interesting now, because it’s a tightly scrolled sheet of plastic coated with an EM sensitive film that can hold almost eight hours of data. You can leave it at that or programme it to loop, so when it’s full it overwrites from the beginning.”

He looked up and met Jonathan’s eyes.

“This is where we go speculative. The thing is, Mr Hawkwing, that tightly scrolled as it is, that film, while it lasts, contains a clear magnetic record of whatever data has been fed into it. And in theory, that data ought with the right eyes to be detectable as a dense plane of magnetic anomalies. Mind you, the sensitivity needed is … extreme. But isn’t that what Ghost Rider drones are designed to be?”

“So it is, Major.” Yu looked at Jonathan. “And that’s the task, Senior Chief. It’s urgent, I’m afraid.”

Jonathan nodded. “Very good, sir. I’ll get on it straight away.” He hesitated. “The work’s going to look quite odd, though, sir, and not very like the kind of disassembly needed to check molycircs. Pretty much anyone who sees it is going to know something unusual is being done.”

“Indeed. But as the drones’ self-destructs are going to have to be deactivated, a security- and safety-conscious man such as yourself, Senior Chief, will be closing your work area to all superfluous personnel. And as it happens we’ve received orders for a somewhat unexpected deployment, escorting the Steadholder on her return to Manticore next week and transporting a company of Marines assigned to the Harrington Steading embassy. Then we’ll be going on to pay courtesy calls on San Martin, Beowulf, and Potsdam, which means we’ll miss our scheduled leave period next month, so pre-departure liberty dirtside has been granted to as many officers and ratings as possible, and an awful lot of them will be away over the next week — including your own usual tech crew. Major Applegarth has a small squad with him, marines who can supply necessary hands for the work. I’m sorry you’ll miss your own due leave but this is something that might matter a very great deal.”

“Of course, sir.” Jonathan didn’t have to fake willingness, and while he had some good friends among the Hades escapees, and Grayson colleagues who were becoming friends, he had no kin here; or anywhere. “I owe Her Grace my life twice over, and it’s not a debt I can hope to repay.”

Yu looked at him gravely. “It’s not a debt Her Grace expects you to repay, Senior Chief.”

“I know, sir — that’s how she is. But it’s a debt I acknowledge every day I’m alive and free, and it’s … actually, it’s almost a relief to be asked to do something towards it.”

Applegarth gave him a thoughtful look, but Yu simply nodded.

“I can understand that, Mr Hawkwing. It’s how I feel about Grayson. But I will note in your service record that you are owed leave.” Yu rose, and they both stood with him. “Very well. Carry on, gentlemen.”
Comfortably seated in Benjamin’s private study, Nimitz on her lap, Steadholder Harrington looked at her liege lord and Protector with familiar exasperation, tasting his amusement with the determination and worry that underlay it, and took a deep breath.

“Benjamin, I do appreciate the idea, but a company of Grayson Orbit Dogs barely 20 klicks from the centre of Landing — and a wildly oversize company at that — is going to give High Ridge and Janacek seizures! Not to mention half my fellow steadholders.”

Benjamin was entirely unrepentant. “If it gives that pair seizures, so much the better. And you’re wrong about the other steadholders, Honor. Even the reactionaries understand why you needed to designate the Bay House as an embassy, and they have no problem with an official offworld embassy having proper security. They even appreciate that you are willing for that security to be provided by the Sword, rather than arguing what would be an unimpeachable case for my and their permission to expand the HSG beyond the constitutional limit.” His lips compressed briefly. “They’re not so keen, of course, on doing it through the Own but that’s my problem.” He gave her a smile without much humour in it. “And I also have a letter from Elizabeth telling me I can and should deploy whatever hardware and Grayson forces are necessary to ensure the security of the embassy and its residents and staff. So you’re doubly overruled.”

“Wonderful. Monarchs ganging up on me.” Nimitz bleeked amusement and Honor curled her lip at him. “Benjamin, it’s bad enough on Manticore having Andrew and the others in constant attendance, and you know Janacek has already tried to revoke the writ permitting my Armsmen on Saganami Island. Do you have any idea how embarrassing it’s going to be to have three hundred — count them — crack Grayson troops encamped round my home? The newsies and cartoonists will have a field day.”

“Let ’em. As you discovered with the GSNS Honor Harrington and that statue you make such a fuss about you can’t actually die of embarrassment. But you can die of assassination attempts, and of bad intelligence.” Benjamin’s voice became very sober. “In all seriousness, Honor, I am delighted and very relieved you’ve finally taken Colonel LaFollet’s advice about security for the Bay House and a proper intel unit. With the ceasefire as an excuse for having you teaching at the Academy rather than exercising fleet command it took me a while to realise just how difficult a position you’ve been in since High Ridge took office, and I’m sorry because I should have seen it sooner. As an admiral and as a steadholder you have the appropriate staffs, but as a senior opposition politician in the Manticoran Lords you haven’t had anything approaching what you needed. And while what Duchess Harrington does is not, strictly speaking, any of my business, any insult to which Steadholder Harrington may be exposed most certainly is. And actually there’s something else as well.”

“Oh? More bad news?” Benjamin’s mind-glow was threaded with worry and Honor’s heart sank a little more.

“I’m afraid so. I haven’t said anything before because I didn’t want to give you a seizure, and because you knew in general terms that Janacek was scaling back and downgrading the close cooperation between the GSN and RMN. It’s stupid, but nothing can be done about it while High Ridge remains in power. But it’s becoming dangerous, because intelligence sharing has also been cut off — and GONI is beginning to think Jurgensen has so crippled his own assets outside the Star Kingdom he no longer even knows what he’s ignoring.”
Honor winced. She’d known from Admiral Pat Givens, the long-serving head of Manticore’s ONI until Janacek, citing irreconcilable political differences, had dismissed her to idle on half-pay, that Jurgensen had a dismissive attitude to all unofficial and clandestine sources, but this was the first indication she’d had from outside the Star Kingdom that ONI’s basic capabilities had become suspect.

“How bad is it?”

“Perhaps very.” Benjamin leaned back in his chair. “You know as well as I do that Jurgensen’s and Janacek’s assumptions about Peep capacity and potential speed of rearming are plain dumb, and we’ve been increasing our own assets within the Republic as a matter of urgency and running a lot of analyses. I’ll give you the summaries, but the bottom line is that GONI is now pretty sure not only that they do have SD(P)s and CLACs, but that they’ve been able to build them at that Bolthole base of theirs in substantially greater numbers than anyone has been imagining.”

“How much greater?”

“The upper end of the estimates is for 400 SD(P)s launched by mid-1918, and perhaps 50 CLACs.” Honor’s eyes widened in horror. “Exactly. They may have BC(P)s too, but we think those are still in the design stages. But while our naval intelligence is quite strong, getting anyone into higher government circles in Nouveau Paris has been a great deal harder since the Theisman coup. Neither he nor Eloise Pritchard is any kind of fool, but how they’re thinking — what their political calculus about High Ridge’s farcical negotiations now is, and how soon they’ll announce what they have — we can’t even sensibly guess. And that’s not all. GONI’s also been picking up hints from New Berlin that the Andermani have SD(P)s in the pipeline too. Given their political structure, financial and economic planning is far more secretive than it can be for any of the more democratic Alliance polities, but we have managed to turn up quite good circumstantial evidence that the Andermani naval construction budget was very discreetly increased, several years ago now. Fourfold.”

“Fourfold?”

“Yes. It was surprisingly low to begin with, but it certainly isn’t any more, so I think we have an answer to that question we were debating the other week about what advantage Gustav might take of High Ridge’s stupidity. GONI formally advised me yesterday that it now believes the Andermani have decided to press their claim in Silesia, and that GSN personnel deployed there with the RMN may find themselves in conflict, even full combat, with the IAN.” He held up a hand as Honor opened her mouth. “Yes, of course we’re relaying it to Jurgenson, but the chance of him taking notice of anything we say is nil — so all else aside, I want you to make sure Elizabeth knows. And it won’t only be this data-set, so I’ve also directed that all GONI reports be couriered to you weekly at the Bay House, and the reason you’ve got 300 Marines in that company is because Wesley has at my request seconded a full GONI unit that will handle the traffic for you and flag up anything we want to be sure reaches Mount Royal as well as the Admiralty.”

Honor looked her dismay. Conjoining her Manticoran and Grayson responsibilities had never been easy, but with the governments and admiralties of her two nations at increasing odds the planetary straddle demanded of her was increasingly painful. In this instance, though, her duty was plain. “All right, Benjamin. That makes sense, though what Elizabeth will be able to do besides worry I haven’t a clue.” She frowned. “Unless you want me to use any of the GONI data publicly?”

Benjamin shrugged. “Outside operational security that’s your call entirely. You can certainly use it when the Lords’ Naval Affairs Committee is in closed session, and if you can generate some genuine alarm there at what that idiot Jurgensen is doing — or rather, isn’t — we might at least be
able to get the professionals left in ONI looking with more open minds.” His tone and emotions were so scathing that Honor winced again, but both suddenly became more thoughtful. “Actually, Honor, I had another thought about that, which is that you have a lot of contacts outside Manticore, and I’d like you to tap them, if you can. Some of our Silesian reports, for instance, come from someone I understand you’ll remember — a half-pay RMN officer called Thomas Backfisch who owns a small merchant fleet.”

“Captain Backfisch! Of course I remember him — you don’t forget your first captain. But I lost touch with him years ago.”

“So regain it — his details are in the GONI files. You also know the Herzog von Rabenstrange, and while he’s hardly likely to tell you what ship classes the Andies are building that personal contact might prove very important. So I’m going to do something else I should have done sooner.” Benjamin opened a handsome wooden box on the table before him and took out an elaborately sealed scroll. “For constitutional reasons this is very carefully worded but what it does is to grant you, if circumstances warrant and time to consult me is not available, plenipotentiary powers with regard to Grayson’s position within the Alliance, our foreign relations with the Andermani Empire, and the deployment of the Protector’s Own.” Ignoring Honor’s shock and instinctive protest he pressed on. “No, listen. High Ridge or no, Grayson is tied to Manticore by blood and sweat, as well as shared interests, but at the same time we have no quarrel with the Andermani, and as Protector I cannot allow High Ridge’s gross incompetence to land the GSN in a shooting war with the IAN. And if that means you using the leverage I’m giving you to force a Manticoran climbdown at some point, so be it.”

Despite her shock Honor’s mind was racing. “So that’s why you’re sending the Own on those courtesy visits.”

“Yes. Beowulf and Trevor’s Star are political camouflage, really, though visiting San Martin will annoy High Ridge and Janacek, which is a bonus. The real business is New Berlin. Alfredo will be making contacts and we’re expanding our embassy there as well, so by the time he’s done the Andies will understand that we are sworn to Manticore’s defence, not preserving High Ridge and Janacek from embarrassment. I’ll let you have a private note to Elizabeth explaining all that, and I’ve already warned her something of the kind would be coming.”

Honor stared at him. “How did she react?”

Benjamin’s lips quirked. “She wasn’t happy but understood clearly what I was saying and wouldn’t expect me to spend Grayson blood in a needless war over what boils down to Manticoran commercial interests in Silesia. She was also very relieved — delighted, even — that the person in Landing able to make that call if it’s needed is going to be you.” He nodded approval as Nimitz bleeked a scold at Honor’s blush and fizzing unease with what she was being told. “Quite right, Nimitz. There is literally no-one else I could ask to carry this responsibility, Honor, but you are made for it. And I know you will defend my people, as your own, from needless war and bloodshed. I won’t direct you to avoid a shooting war with the IAN at all costs, because who knows what Gustav will do when it comes to it, and you’ll need your hands free. But I do formally direct you that if peace can be secured by threatening to withdraw, or actually withdrawing, all Grayson units and personnel from RMN units being committed to a Silesian war with the Andermani, then you have authority to command that withdrawal.” His smile was savage. “You can also, in that event, make an offer for the GSN to take over the security of either Trevor’s Star or the Manticore Home System to release RMN units for Silesia.”

Honor choked. “Benjamin!”
“Yes, I know. But forget Janacek’s infarct — think of the effects on the Crown Loyalists and the Liberals if that offer was made in public, at the same time as declaring a Grayson withdrawal from an imminent war. And the effect on the public, here as well in the Star Kingdom, when both bombshells came from you, who have twice saved this planet. Oh, bother your blushes — that’s the PR realpolitik, and you know it as well as I do. Besides, if it does come to that kind of showdown the diplomatic gloves will be well and truly off, which will mean you could — and should — explain very clearly indeed to everyone exactly why Grayson is unwilling to see an unelected government of Manticore waste any more of our sacrificed sons — and daughters, as Abigail Hearns may well have graduated by then.”

Protector and Steadholder–Champion looked at one another for a long moment, both thinking of the path the young Miss Owens was blazing as the first GSN midshipwoman in history, and the other Graysons proceeding through Saganami Island and the GSN’s own much younger naval academy; then Honor bowed her head, formally acknowledging Benjamin’s directives and the overwhelming argument he’d made.

“Yes, Your Grace.” She willed herself to relax, closing her eyes briefly, and felt Nimitz rub his cheek along her living one, buzzing love and confidence. “And I must confess I’ve dreamed the words of a speech like that, several times now, if not under quite those circumstances. But I don’t think it will come to that. Either High Ridge will overreach himself domestically, and with any luck come tumbling down over something much less important, or the situation with Haven will blow up in his face. And in that case, there’s going to be a lot more lives lost on all sides.”

“I know, Honor. But we do what we can. All that we can. Now, Howard said you wanted to ask something about that extraction programme of yours for metal pollutants?”

“Yes. It’s just storage, Benjamin. The whole thing’s working better than anyone expected and where to put it all is becoming a problem.”

One of the perennial burdens of life on Grayson was changing the filters that ensured air and water were as free of heavy metals as they could be. The centuries of isolation had produced fiercely effective physical, chemical, and magnetic filtration that worked extremely well — with the result that considerable quantities of arsenic, cadmium, mercury, lead, and other toxic metals collected in them. Everyone who ran a house — which usually meant the women — spent at least several hours each week in a mask siphoning off reservoirs and changing physical filters. But for Sky Domes the sheer size of dome air- and water-intakes made the issue a serious engineering problem, and one of the bright people looking at it — a GSN veteran who’d been injured badly enough at the Battle of the Basilisk Terminus to be discharged — had come to her privately and asked if it might be possible to experiment with the grav-pulse tech FTL communication used. Metals were after all much more massive than gasses, and gravity inexorable, however it was produced. Given the purpose, and that it was Sky Domes asking, the GSN had been very willing, and it had worked.

“You know what we really wanted was to cut down on changing filters, because the dome ones are so big, and we can, dramatically. But what we hadn’t foreseen was how much metal we’d be collecting from the grav filters, and all pure, not the mixed sludge we’re used to — the grav gradient sorts everything out, fluctuations break up the compounds, and it’s set up to build ingots. So given the lie of the land around Harrington City, we wondered if we could reduce what got to the Dome filters by grav-filtering upstream, as it were.”

“I remember something about that. Where those hills channel the winds, wasn’t it?”

“Yes. And in less than three months one filter there has pulled more than four million tons out of the air.”
“Tester! That’s as much as the big mines!”

“Much more. It’s metal, not ore. But the thing is, Benjamin, there’s no reason this can’t be scaled up — way up. I’ve given them the go-ahead to work on a version for water as well. So we either need a very big planetary storage facility, which makes no sense, or somewhere in local space we can stash ever so many ten-ton blocks of the stuff. And we need to think about the macroeconomics as well. One reason everyone likes domes is that they don’t have to change their own house filters anything like as often, if at all, and that’s already been hitting that manufacturing sector hard. This will hurt them worse. And we can’t spread the tech — it’s still very classified, and Sky Domes will have to come to an agreement with the GSN to lease cleared techs and make sure there’s very tight security on all installations. But if we’re booting all the metal into space there will be a substantial new freight sector that needn’t be classified at all — it’s just hauling metal.”

“Just hauling metal.” Benjamin shook his head. “I hadn’t been expecting to redesign the economy, Honor. And I’m going to have to think about the politics, as well.”

“You are. But you haven’t heard the best bit yet. We can’t clean the planet, as such, even if we thought we should. But there are some very happy engineers and weather people playing with more computing power than several SD(P)s to calculate the effects of putting in big grav-filter arrays at specific places. And while they’ve a way to go, they are already confident that with about 40 arrays they could reduce pollutant levels reaching most domes and the larger undomed cities by at least 60 or 70 percent, with all sorts of medical and other benefits.”

Benjamin stared. “60 or 70 percent?”

“And rising with each model they try. It’s not a magic bullet, Benjamin, but it’s a real step. My mother is especially pleased — you know how bad the mercury problem can be — and is gleefully doing the medical side for them. She’ll liaise with you, but Howard has point for everything involving the grav tech.”

After a moment Benjamin rose and reached to take Honor’s hand, bending to kiss it before regarding her surprised look.

“Thank you Honor. Harringtons strike again, most wonderfully. I’ll talk to Katherine and Elaine, and we’ll call Allison tonight or tomorrow. But I’m out of time now, and I must talk to Nimitz for a moment about the treecat embassy.” A smile of genuine enjoyment came to his face, matched by a brightening sense of anticipation in his mind-glow that had Nimitz bleeking approval. “And I confess I’m really looking forward to presenting Her Excellency the Ambassador to the Keys!”

Before the Alliance brought galactic technology and communications to Grayson, Miranda LaFollet had known nothing about Manpower Unlimited, Mesa, or genetic slavery in general; nor, of course, about such epiphenomena as the significant percentages of freed slaves who expressed loyalty to their new nations through military service, and the interesting ways in which a fair few of those soldiers, marines, and sailors served for a term or two and then somehow drifted off the books into the open arms of the Audubon Ballroom, taking with them their training and in some cases a surprising amount of equipment. Appointment as Honor’s Maid, however, had demanded as well as provided an education in all sorts of things a well-brought up Grayson woman knew nothing about,
and Her Grace’s violent, Beowulfan feelings about Manpower and the evils of slavery would have put those topics high on Miranda’s agenda even if she hadn’t found she shared them entirely. After a decade in the job she knew more than enough to realise she had barely skimmed the surface of an evil as galactic in scope as it was clandestine in practice; but in the course of dealing with the considerable number of freed slaves who immigrated to Harrington Steading she had understood a number of things about their communities, relations, and politics that few people ever grasped at all.

Of all the people in Honor’s clandestine kitchen cabinet Miranda had been least surprised when Her Grace had named Isaac X, or Douglass, as a member of the Audubon Ballroom, and she was privately rather amused by her brother’s mild shock at the revelation. He knew as well as she that given the nature and virulence of genetic slavery the Ballroom and its vengeful excesses were inevitable, and while she could not approve the methods they sometimes embraced, nor could she summon much pity for their victims. More importantly, she also understood that every freed slave was by some measure in touch with the Ballroom; not all, of course, were prepared to pass on information they knew might result in atrocities, but many non-members were, if chance arose, and all knew how to do so — or someone who did. There might be as great a spectrum of political views among the freed as among any group of human beings, and those in the ASL were especially vocal in their condemnations of the Ballroom’s terrorism — but no ex-slave would ever rat out another to anyone, and if the Ballroom was an entirely elusive bogeyman to most humans, within their own communities it was simply a quiet presence and shared knowledge.

It was therefore easy for Miranda, in the course of seeing to some necessary arrangements for a small group who’d recently immigrated after being freed by an Andermani cruiser, to drop by the offices Her Grace provided to the local community association for a quiet word with one of the older men who staffed it. Sandor T. Washington had been 40, with a lifetime of heavy labour for the Jessyk Combine on marginal planets in the Verge behind him, before an RMN ship had pounced on the slave carrying him from one hellhole to another — and so far too old for Prolong. It was that, Miranda thought, more than anything that had made Manticore intolerable to Washington, its often absurdly youthful-looking men and women a daily reminder of what he had been denied, and the Steadholder’s presence had brought him to Grayson, where the effects of Prolong were only just beginning to be visible. Now he respectfully bent to kiss her hand, Grayson-style, and carefully shook Farragut’s extended true hand before seeing her seated with Farragut in her lap, sitting himself, and peering at them both with bright, birdlike eyes that often seemed to Miranda at odds with his physical size and rough features.

“Miss LaFollet, Farragut, it’s good to see you both, and see you well. What can I do for you today?”

“It’s a complicated matter, Mr Washington, and there’s a great deal I’m not at liberty to discuss with anyone, I’m afraid. But I imagine you’ll know already that Her Grace is facing a rather … awkward problem in undertaking her Manticoran duties.”

“On account of that damnable parasite High Ridge, you mean?”

Miranda frowned, not at the adjective but at the epithet. Parasites was the usual term among ex-slaves (in polite conversation, at least) for those who were not full-blown enemies — slavers, slave-owners, or open advocates of slavery — but nevertheless participated in its profits and protection.

“Just so. But tell me, Mr Washington, do you know the Baron to be a parasite? I realise it seems very likely, given the way he’s suppressed charges arising from the information Captain Zilwicki and the then Lady Montaigne obtained on Terra, but what he did was greatly to his domestic advantage, and Tester knows the man seems moved by very little besides self-interest. Is his
parasitism documented?"

It was Sandor Washington’s turn to pause, eyebrows drawing down, for documentation was one of the other things the Audubon Ballroom did. When someone wealthy or socially respectable was found flayed or otherwise butchered, one of the Ballroom’s calling cards was solid evidence that their targeting was as accurate as it was final, in the form of documentary proofs of involvement in slaving both left at the scene and anonymously transmitted to the local police authorities and multiple media organisations. Over the years their meticulously garnered evidence had never been proven wrong, nor to have been falsified in any way, so while most of the galaxy loudly condemned the Ballroom’s terrorism, pretty much everyone also assumed without question that those the Ballroom killed had in fact done exactly what they had been killed for doing — which helped to explain why, for all their harsh words about terrorism, quite a few star nations did not feel obliged to do much by way of suppressing it where the Ballroom was concerned.

“Ah, I can’t say that, exactly, Miss LaFollet. I was speaking only as one who watches the news here in Grayson. What might be documented on Manticore is beyond my stars.”

“Mmm. Then one way of putting my question, Mr Washington, would be to ask if you might let someone on Manticore know that I would be very interested in any such documentation, whether concerning Baron High Ridge himself or any of his inner circle or senior appointees. I think I could promise that if such things were to come into Her Grace’s hands they would be acted on in a manner to afford that someone, um, satisfaction, shall we say.”

“I see.”

“And I might wish to meet that someone on Manticore.”

“To meet them?”

“If it can be done secretly and safely. And the thing is, Mr Washington, it would be … useful if that someone were as senior as possible.”

Washington’s eyes widened thoughtfully. “How senior?”

“Command level. It would, I promise, be worth that someone’s while.” Miranda hesitated, feeling for the words. “The Bay House, where I shall be living, is, um, not very approachable, of course, but its coms are military grade, and I do have a secure contact number there.” She passed him a plain card. “That line is scrambled, so it’s best. But a message left at the Grayson Embassy would also reach me. And my social duties for Her Grace will from time to time include contact with Ms Montaigne, and so with her butler, Mr Douglass.”

“Ah yes. I know Mr Douglass quite well. He was most helpful to me while I lived on Manticore, so do please give him my regards. And to the Countess, of course, though she has no reason to remember me.” That might all be true, but Miranda knew it was also flannel giving Washington time to think. “Well, Miss LaFollet, all this is sadly over my head, but I can certainly make an enquiry of someone on your behalf. I take it the matter is urgent?”

“Pretty much, Mr Washington. Her Grace leaves for Manticore in eight days, and the first week or ten days after transit will be even more hectic than usual, while all the new Marine guards settle in. There’s quite a lot of construction being finished as well, so I’m expecting everything to be rather topsy-turvy on that account. But if I might expect a message as soon as possible after that …?”

Washington nodded slowly. “In three weeks or so, then? Mmm. That might be possible, Miss LaFollet, and Her Grace has a long line of credit, of course. A very long line. So I’ll certainly see
what I can do.”

* * * * *

Six days after they had started the drone disassembly, it was a weary but pleased pair of experimenters who reported to Admiral Yu’s quarters, and after a brief wait while he finished a conference call were shown into his day-cabin. They were again invited to sit around a low table, and Jonathan wondered if for the Admiral this unusual and unmilitary informality was a way of mentally distinguishing what had to be a very black ops project from more regular business.

“Major, Senior Chief. What can you tell me?”

Applegarth spoke first. “Well, sir, there’s good news and less good news. The important thing is that it does work.”

He passed Yu a chip, which the Admiral slipped into the read slot of his com. An oddly grainy but adequately clear image appeared in the display, showing Applegarth standing in a small store room reading aloud from the Book of the New Way. The quality of the sound was as subtly odd as that of the image, but the voice was identifiable and every word perfectly audible.

“That’s from the drone, sir, reading off the datastore, which was more than 300 metres from the arrays on the other side of four bulkheads. It took some remarkable work from Mr Hawkwing, and we had to cannibalise several minicomps to boost the AIs’ analytical capacity, but it works. There are, however, some serious limits. Senior Chief?”

“The main thing, sir, is that we had to use both drone arrays, set with distinct parameters and using sequential frequencies, then persuade the AIs to integrate the data. That’s what took the extra computing power and without Major Applegarth’s reprogramming I don’t think we could have done it at all. There’s a silver lining of sorts in that if you had a more capable unit than the onboard AIs in the first place some of the difficulties we had could probably be avoided. But I’m afraid you also have to know exactly how far away the memory-scroll is from the zero-point of the sensor arrays.”

“How exactly?”

“To within five microns, sir. It’s not the distance between the scrolls of film — it’s the actual plane of the chemical film itself. Once you have a position, the rest can be automatically calibrated from the specs of the memory-store; but getting that first position takes some weary trial-and-error, sir — in the end I had to use an IR whisker laser calibrated in angstroms to measure the distances.”

Jonathan hesitated. “Obviously I don’t know what you intend, sir, but I’m afraid that may be very bad news.”

Yu frowned but didn’t look especially perturbed. “It’s a problem right enough, Senior Chief, but the more important thing is that it can be made to work. You disagree, Major?”

“No sir, but I think it might be truer to say that the Senior Chief can make it work. I have to confess that I couldn’t manage the fine tuning, even when he’d shown me exactly what he was doing. And I’m not at all sure I could learn — it’s a matter of a very delicate touch.”

Yu gave the major a crooked grin. “Would you be wanting to borrow the Senior Chief, then? Mmm.” He switched a mild gaze to Jonathan. “And is Mr Hawkwing willing to be borrowed?”
Jonathan managed to brace as he sat. “I certainly don’t wish to leave your command, sir, or
the Own, but I’m very willing to do whatever the Steadholder needs done.”

“Well, now.” Yu sat thinking for a moment. “There is that leave you’re owed, Senior Chief. And of course, your long residence in the Star Kingdom does mean there are people you might wish to see. Given that one of those courtesy visits I mentioned is to New Berlin, it’ll be six or eight weeks at least before we’re headed back to Grayson. Would you be willing to take your leave on Manticore during that time, officially speaking, while actually temporarily seconded to Major Applegarth’s command?”

“Of course, sir. I’ve no problem with that.”

“Good man. Now, report to BuWeaps that you think there are indeed problems with those drones’ molycircs, and they’ll tell you that as we’re about to deploy you should just decommission them, discard the molycircs, and put the other components into storage as spares. Which you will of course do, sending in all the proper security paperwork. And while we’re in transit to Manticore some of those spares will find their way into the copious supplies Major Applegarth’s company of Orbit Dogs will be bringing with them.”

“Very good, sir. That will leave us two drones light, by establishment.”

“True, Senior Chief, and I shall try to get replacements sent along in time, but I’m perfectly willing to sail two or even four light if I must.” He smiled in a way that made Jonathan glad he wasn’t on the Admiral’s hit list. “After all, we wouldn’t regret drones used up scouting an enemy position — and that’s exactly what these ones will be doing!”
As her armored pinnace with its escorting stingships from the Palace Guard curved in over Jason Bay towards the new hangar and barracks complex at the rear of the Bay House, Honor was surprised to see a counter-grav crane apparently in the process of replacing one end of the East-Wing roof. To judge from the swarming workmen, it had previously done something to the West-Wing roof too, where a bubble of what looked very like armorplast now adorned the traditionally patterned tiling. A similar bubble projected from a point high in the cliffs on which the house stood, where she seemed to remember a natural cave. And in the seat behind her she could feel the deep satisfaction of Andrew LaFollet’s mind-glow, leavened with a familiar mixture of mild apprehension and engrained stubbornness.

The pinnace landed, but instead of parking on the apron continued to taxi, passing into the hangar complex through armoured doors that immediately began to close behind it. Knowing full well protest would get her precisely nowhere and feeling Nimitz’s amusement that she was going to try anyway, she turned as she stood, Nimitz scrambling up to her shoulder, and raised an eyebrow at LaFollet.

“New procedures, Andrew?”

“Indeed, Your Grace.”

Such immediate ‘your gracing’ in private was always a bad sign and Honor’s lips firmed as she felt Nimitz appreciate the blandness of LaFollet’s tone. Still, she could hardly complain about disembarking inside the hangar when she knew there was now access to the house from the rear of the complex, and that they would have come this way wherever they had disembarked.

“Hmm. Well, I suppose a porte-cochère is sensible, even if they’re hardly traditional for aircraft. We do seem to have had an awful lot of building work done in a remarkably short time, though.”

“As it happened, Your Grace, the plans we needed were on file, and money does command priority service.”

She just bet there’d been plans on file. There were probably plans on file for equipping the place as a junction fortress. Nimitz buzzed amusement in her ear. “Mmm. But it shouldn’t command building permits. Did no-one object?”

“It’s Harrington Steading land, Your Grace. No-one’s business but ours.”

Honor had honestly forgotten that implication of making her home an embassy, but rallied gamely. “I see. But what in the world did we need a crane for? Are there problems with the roof I don’t know about?”

“No, Your Grace. The crane helped situate some of the air defences.”

“A crane that size for air defences? What are they? Mark 23 missiles?”
“No, Your Grace.” LaFollet ducked neatly through the hatch and stepped down to the plascrete hangar floor, eyes scanning everywhere before moving aside for her to follow him. “I did look into that possibility, of course, but Mark 23s aren’t really right for the job. Counter-missiles would be better, and we do have some as back-up, but impeller drives mean they can only be situated away from the house and I wanted something closer to hand.” His face was expressionless as they began to head for the passageway leading up to the house, Simon Mattingly and Jeremiah Tennant falling in behind them and suppressing smiles of their own. From their mind-glow Honor knew they profoundly agreed with LaFollet and now he’d got his way were rather enjoying her ritual protests.

“I see. An astonishing outbreak of moderation. So what, pray, did you decide is ‘right for the job’?”

“*Invictus*-class SD(P) point-defence laser clusters, Your Grace. One in each wing, and one on the cliffs with an angle on anything in their lee.”

“What?” Honor came to a stunned halt. “Laser clusters? Sweet Tester, Andrew, are you expecting someone to fire Mark 23s at us?”

He faced her, entirely unrepentant and utterly serious. “Your Grace, I seem to recall when someone *did* fire a missile at you.” Honor’s indignation deflated as she remembered with familiar pain how many other people had died in that attempted assassination. LaFollet saw the flicker of sorrow and his expression softened. “I’m sorry to remind you, Ma’am, and truth to tell, I really don’t expect anyone to try a missile here. But I intend to be ready for *anything* it’s even remotely possible to try. And laser clusters can deal with other things than missiles.”

*That* was true, Honor had to concede as she started towards the house again, and unlike counter-missiles, which relied on their wedges to sweep a large volume for targets, point-defence lasers were precision weapons, designed to pick off with bursts measured in milliseconds targets still tens or hundreds of thousands of klicks away and travelling at significant fractions of light-speed; but even so. “And where did we manage to obtain these classified, latest-model laser clusters?”

“As it happens, Your Grace, BuShips found itself with more weapons in inventory than *Invictuses* to put them in.” Which, as they both knew, was because of the drastic scaling-back of construction Janacek had carried through to release funds for the social boondoggles that had bought New Kiev’s support for High Ridge. And LaFollet’s mind-glow made it clear he had a trump card of some kind still to play. “Actually, I think Vice-Admiral Toscarelli was pleased to find a good home for them, and they come with the compliments of the RMN.”

Honor almost stopped again in her surprise but managed to keep walking. “*Toscarelli* signed off on this?”

“He did, Your Grace. With something of a flourish, I’m given to understand.”

“I see.” And she did. Toscarelli at BuShips had been the only wartime space lord to survive Janacek’s ruthless political purge of the Admiralty, despite the embarrassment of summarily firing the people who had — or would have, had Operation Buttercup been completed — won the war for the Star Kingdom. And everyone knew he had only been spared because with the build-down determined in advance, irrespective of its strategic advisability, the post of Third Space Lord, traditionally OC BuShips, was not a plum any of Janacek’s cronies wanted. As a minority vote of one Toscarelli had no influence on policy, and she’d heard on the Navy grapevine that he’d retired into his shrinking kingdom, and did what he could by subterfuge — as with the new CAs he’d managed to keep on the building schedule by insisting they were merely a modification, the *Saganami-C*, rather than the new class as which they had been designed. And now, it seemed, he’d
decided that obliging Duchess Harrington in ways Janacek would never have approved was an acceptable part of that subterfuge. Honor tucked that away to think about. “Out of interest, Andrew, given to understand by whom?”

“Captain Zilwicki, Your Grace. He was kind enough to accept Your commission to upgrade the defences, as well as impressed by Your budget, and still has contacts in BuShips from his yard-dog days.”

“Captain Zilwicki designed the defences?”

“He did, Your Grace. He has, after all, the most recent experience of foiling outright attack here in Landing, so he was a natural choice as consultant.” Zilwicki’s fixed defences and security teams had turned into fine hamburger flechette every last member of the assassination squad Manpower had sent after Cathy Montaigne following her release on Manticore of the massive volume of data stolen by the Ballroom from the slavers’ Terran headquarters. “He’s giving a hand with cybersecurity as well, so you may see him around, while Major Applegarth’s unit gets up to speed. And his commission includes continuing consultancy about any new threats he may become aware of.”

As de facto head of security for both Cathy Montaigne and the Anti-Slavery League on Manticore, as well as a galactic-class hacker in his own right, Zilwicki would have other and better ears in the world of counter-surveillance than even official agencies could manage. Honor had met him at social occasions and fundraisers the ASL staged, and very much liked what she sensed about the man, but as she followed LaFollet through a security door into a new atrium within the house proper she realised Zilwicki must be involved in whatever chicanery Andrew was setting up on her behalf. Since the transformation of her Manticoran position after her return from Hades she had consistently restrained her senior Armsman from taking proactive steps against the tabloid newsies and CA toadies who had done everything they could to belittle and insult her, and despite the orders she had herself given (or rather, carefully not given) she was finding it extremely hard to maintain a blind eye — despite actually having one, after a fashion, if one discounted her prosthesis with its telescopic functions. The mordant thought restored her good humour, reminding her of a favourite story about the old wet-navy admiral Nelson, and she felt Nimitz pat her head softly in approval as her mood lightened.

“I see.” She held LaFollet’s gaze momentarily, to be sure he understood that she did see. “That sounds an excellent arrangement. Am I likely to see anyone else ‘around’? Besides several hundred Orbit Dogs and a GONI unit in disguise, that is.”

“I don’t believe so, my Lady.” LaFollet’s reversion to the simpler vocative signalled a move away from dangerous ground. “Miranda has arranged for Major Applegarth and his officers to dine with you this evening, and made sure you’ll have time tomorrow to visit the new barracks. Oh, and there’s a Senior Chief Sensor Tech from the Own who’s temporarily attached to the Major’s command to do some set-up work for house defences, and whom you might remember from Hades — Jonathan Hawkwing.”

Honor smiled with real pleasure. “Mr Hawkwing! Yes, I certainly remember him, from Hades; though not from Casimir, I’m afraid.”

Jeremiah Tennant spoke from behind her. “He was a Casimir rescuee as well as a Hades escapee, my Lady?”

She turned her head to see wonder on his face. “He was, Jeremiah. The only person with that unhappy distinction, I believe. You have to wonder at the poor man’s luck, to go from Manpower’s dungeons to the Peeps’.” Tennant’s expression became slightly bemused and she tasted a flare of
baffled admiration in his mind-glow.

“I’d rather call it his grace in being rescued from destruction twice, my Lady, and by the same woman each time. As a Grayson, that’s something I well understand!”

* * * * *

Anton Zilwicki was not at that moment consulting anyone about the security of the Harrington Steading Embassy, but losing a growling match with the galaxy’s most wanted terrorist. Neither in principle nor in practice did the Audubon Ballroom’s revenges cause him to lose even a second’s sleep, but though Anton had sought out Cathy Montaigne on Terra explicitly because he’d known she could get a message to the Ballroom leader, Jeremy X’s presence in her mansion on Manticore was another kettle of fish altogether, and with the best will and security in the world the political risk to Cathy and the ASL was significant. True, he’d come while she was out, and the persona he was using, a Beowulfan businessman with biotech interests in Manticore’s pharmaceuticals sector, was solid enough — as a swift series of encrypted cybersearches had demonstrated — but Anton was still deeply uneasy and disinclined to conceal it.

When a grinning Isaac had shown Jeremy in he’d still been in disguise, and though he’d promptly removed his salt-and-pepper wig and elevated shoes, and pulled out cheek-pads that rounded his face, he still wore the improbably luxuriant moustache Ser Harold Oberlin of BeoTech BioPharm chose to sport. Genetically lacking facial hair, courtesy of Manpower’s researches on client preference, Jeremy delighted in using beards and moustaches in his disguises, and was with irritating panache twirling this one as he spoke.

“Honestly, Anton, anyone would think I was a novice at this game. Oberlin has been to Manticore many times, as your hack into customs records told you. Nice job, by the way.” He twirled the damn moustache again. “And he’s always behaved himself perfectly. He also has an entirely legitimate reason for being here now, as you know very well, because BeoTech have just signed a deal with the Beowulfan Resettlement Board to develop a new range of anti-depressants and other psychotropics to help treat the newly freed.” Twirl, twirl. “I’m seeing several of Manticore’s leading consultant psychiatrists over the next few days, and someone from Dr Arif’s treecat commission to ask for their help too.” Twirl. “You gotta love those furry, six-limbed troublemakers. So what’s the problem?”

“You’re going to twist that moustache right off, Jeremy.” Anton’s voice was always a basso growl and his Gryphon highlander’s burr was at its broadest, but Jeremy just grinned. Twirl. “The political situation here is beginning to become … interesting, and Cathy really cannot afford another investigation for consorting with terrorists just now.”

“Why not? She’s beaten four of ’em already.” Twirl, twirl. “And I believe I might know something about your ‘interesting’ situation. Would it by chance have anything to do with Duchess Harrington?”

Anton’s brows drew down sharply. “It’s leaking already? Damn. What do you know, Jeremy?”

“What’s ‘it’ that ‘it’ might leak, eh? Oh don’t worry, Anton.” Twirl. “I’m just guessing. But Isaac did receive through very secure channels a rather unusual message last week, from Sandor Washington on Grayson, saying Miranda LaFollet wanted to meet someone in authority. And as I
was only a jump away, here I am.” Twirl. “Isaac tells me you’ll probably be seeing Miss LaFollet tomorrow, in the course of your security consultancy for the Duchess.”

“Huh.” Anton was still less than amused but intrigue pulled at him. “Do you know what Miss LaFollet wants with the Ballroom? It’s not as if the Duchess is lacking troops.”

Jeremy cackled and twirled. “No indeed. Not with her influx of Grayson friends.” He sobered a little. “As to the other, Sandor mentioned documentation of parasitism among High Ridge’s crowd, so I imagine Miss LaFollet is seeking political ammunition for her mistress wherever she fancies it may be found.”

Anton grunted again. “Well, that makes sense, I suppose, though it’s another risk.” His brain was reprocessing a number of things he knew at very high speed, and he wondered briefly what documentation the Ballroom might have on anyone in the present Manticoran administration that hadn’t already been used in conjunction with the Terran data, but banked the thought as a firmer conclusion formed. He hesitated a moment before speaking but it was almost always better to have Jeremy inside your tent than out, and besides, the Ballroom had a very positive attitude indeed towards Harrington, so if she was asking he probably did genuinely want to help. “And I rather think the Duchess has taken the gloves off, though as yet very privately. But it may be Protector Benjamin who’s taken them off. Those marines are Orbit Dogs, crack Sword troops, not HSG. The oversize company is actually a reasonable establishment, given that they intend to run three full watches with a fourth in reserve and rotation, and have a perimeter of more than eight klicks to secure as well as command and heavy-weapons stations to man.”

“All that space for one woman.” Jeremy shook his head sadly. Twirl. “Shocking, isn’t it?”

Anton ignored the little man’s banter. “Then again, for my money about a fifth of those Graysons are intel people — a full GON1 unit, probably — and I’m pretty sure there are more among the influx of Sky Domes people working on the new-style yards with the Hauptman cartel. My guess is that Andrew LaFollet’s using the embassy security deal and Sky Domes to establish a covert intel unit, and he wouldn’t do that without his Steadholder’s approval. But I’m not sure she’d give that approval unless Benjamin had signed off on it. Frankly, I’m slightly surprised she has anyway, if she has — she hates black ops of all kinds.”

“Not quite all, Anton. Remember Casimir. She did a deal with the Ballroom then.”

Anton snorted. “Jeremy, she also sent a report to the Space Lords telling them about that deal before she left for Casimir. And even by your standards using an RMN destroyer and 1,200 Ballroom Dancers to start an interstellar row can hardly be called black!”

“You have a point.” Twirl, twirl. “So why is she doing it now, then, oh master of the art?”

Zilwicki was amused despite himself. “I’m not sure. But at a guess — she thinks or knows something about the galactic situation that means High Ridge isn’t just a personal nightmare any more but the man steering her star nations and navies towards a bloodbath. It could be Haven, it could be the Andermani. Or Erewhon, whom High Ridge’s ignorant insults have damn near pushed out of the Alliance altogether. Something more than personal, though.”

Jeremy had become intent beneath his habitually jovial mask. “Why do you say that?”

Anton blew out a breath. “If High Ridge came after her personally in some way, as Pavel Young did, and Burdette, and she had proof of it, she’d take him down in a heartbeat. She may be anticipating he will, and is preparing against it — LaFollet has really tightened up her personal security, which wasn’t exactly loose to begin with, as well as turning the Bay House into a fortress.
But when it’s just politics as usual, she’s … not like that.” He grimaced. “When she speaks in the Lords she gives cold facts, every time, and she’s exactly right that what High Ridge and Janacek are doing is complete lunacy, assuming you actually care about the Star Kingdom. But as a basic element of the political calculus High Ridge is riding is that facts don’t matter a damn next to prejudice and peculation, they aren’t enough, and Harrington has no answer to the spin and sniping and innuendo she gets smothered in. She hates it, that’s plain, but she’s such a straight arrow herself she won’t stoop to answer in kind, and she doesn’t have any strategic response.” He fell silent for a moment, and Jeremy unusually held his peace. “Actually, that’s what may have changed. This isn’t tactics we’re seeing from her now, but it might be strategy. In which case, High Ridge had better look out — once she does decide to do something the Lady doesn’t deal in halves.”

“Except where Steadholder Burdette was concerned.” Jeremy cackled glee. “Now that was a splendid moment, and the poor man still looking so surprised as his head came to rest.”

Anton made a moue of distaste but his heart wasn’t in it. The film of that abrupt decapitation did not for him have the fascination he knew it exerted on many, but the father in him, knowing of Burdette’s willingness to sacrifice children merely in hope of discrediting, was very content to see the man dead, in however many pieces. Which Jeremy knew perfectly well, damn him. Twirl, twirl.

“So — strategy, eh? All right then.” Abruptly Jeremy was entirely serious and Anton straightened. Whatever the little man had really come for, this was close to it. “As it happens, Anton, I may have something in the way of documentation to gladden Miss LaFollet’s heart, but I’m not at all sure of the best way to use it.” His gaze became very flat. “And a lot of people feel strongly that using it as anything other than a calling card is altogether too kindly. Tell me, what do you know about Georgia Young?”

“North Hollow’s wife?” Anton’s distaste was much stronger, and it showed. “Pure poison. Before her marriage she was Georgia Sakristos, who ran security and black ops for Pavel Young, as well as warming his bed. She almost certainly commissioned Summervale to kill Tankersley, though I’ve never been able to prove it. What I could prove is that before she was Georgia Sakristos she was Elaine Komandorski, well known to the Landing PD in connection with certain high-class bordellos and a great deal of suspected blackmail, fraud, and extortion — skills she has certainly kept up. Unfortunately, Ms Komandorski was never formally questioned, because there was never anything resembling hard evidence.” He frowned. “Parasitism I’d well believe, but what’s she done to the Ballroom that you’re even considering leaving a calling card?”

“Patience, Anton, patience.” Twirl. Anton gritted his teeth. “And what was this enterprising and many-named lady doing before she was Elaine Komandorski?”

“That I don’t know, Jeremy, though I have looked quite hard. She materialised in Landing at the turn of the century, with a lot of money and ambition. But where from, and whose money, I’ve no idea.”

“And what was her ambition, do you imagine?”

Anton frowned again. The little man was, as so often, asking very good questions. “I’m not sure. As Komandorski it seemed merely to be criminal wealth and stature, but if the Landing PD dossiers are even half-way right her blackmail had a political edge even then, and her path since she hooked up with Pavel Young has been straight into the heart of the CA. She regularly attends High Ridge’s kitchen cabinet with her husband, and is certainly running intel and security for High Ridge himself, and the CA, not just North Hollow. But if she has more than a personal agenda I haven’t been able to see a pattern.” His voice returned to its bassest growl. “If you have, spill.”

Jeremy’s gaze was still flat. “I might have, Anton. And I don’t like the look of it at all.” He
relaxed a little, humour returning to his eyes. “Now, there’s two stories, both fairly bristling with implications, so do listen carefully. We’ll be playing twenty questions afterwards.”

He leaped up from his chair and struck a pose. “First story. A few months back I was over in the League’s Maya sector, shutting down a very wild and woolly plan some dancers on Smoking Frog were touting, and I had to be a little more public than usual. So — security conscious, as ever” — twirl, twirl — “I went to ground for a while before moving on, which meant I was still there when a little package addressed to me arrived.” He threw up his hands dramatically. “I do love presents! And who do you think sent me this one?”

When Anton merely glowered he sighed in disapproval, and sat again.

“Really, you Gryphon highlanders make a dreadful audience. Oh well, perhaps the name Oravil Barregos will make you break your unkind silence.”

“Barregos?”

“Ha! Success! Yes, Barregos. Or at least, Barregos’s office. The dancers to whom the package was given said it came via a staffer for one Captain Luis Roszak of the SLN, and he’s a pure Barregos man.”

“Yes, he is.” Anton’s brain was whizzing again, a dozen straws in the wind about what might be happening in the Maya sector with its wildly popular and ambitious governor weaving themselves into a picture that spelt bad news for the Solarian League’s ruling bureaucrats on Terra. “So what was in the package? And was there a message with it?”

Jeremy cackled. “Oh there was a message alright. ‘Against future favours needed.’ And I must concede, the package earns him one. Or even two, if I’m in the mood.” His eyes went flat again and their colour seemed to leach away into darkness. “Story two. Sixteen years ago, just after Casimir and using data from station records there, some dancers in the Shell who had an old Beowulfan LAC managed to seize a slaver. There were more than 500 on board, and off they set for Beowulf, leaving the LAC to hunt up more prey. But they never made it, and a while later the slaves were back on Mesa, where the Dancers were very messily executed. Discovering what had happened was a priority, and eventually we did. Which was that one of our own had sold us out, and from the records the LAC had kept we could work out who it had to have been. C–15a/43–2/5. Why she did it is a mystery still, but the C-lines are so messed up it could be anything.”

Anton nodded, suppressing rage as Jeremy continued. The C-lines were pleasure slaves, and the profound, vicious rape trauma they all suffered on top of everything else that went with Mesan enslavement could make them among the most unpredictable of the freed until they could be psychiatrically treated. If any rescued slave was going to come down with Stockholm Syndrome, however horrifyingly to common sense and compassion, be a C-line.

“We also discovered that instead of being returned to Mesa she wound up being released, on Smoking Frog of all places, with a tidy sum of money, some of which she spent on a very discreet biosculpt technician who amputated her tongue and grafted her a new one, and some more of which she spent disappearing without trace.”

Anton felt his stomach tighten but kept his face expressionless and voice patient. “Until now, I assume. What was in the package, Jeremy?”

“Lots of first-rate documentation. The police on Maya picked up the biosculptor on a capital charge of accessory to multiple murders after he did some work for the wrong man, and he bargained for his life with everything he had, including the number he’d removed from a certain tongue some
years before and the name of the ID specialist he was then working with. Someone on Barregos’s staff managed to catch that little detail and knew what it meant, whereupon they expended some effort on tracking down the ID woman and making her cough. All of which means I can prove that C–15a/43–2/5 left Smoking Frog as Nicola French and arrived on Manticore as Elaine Komandorski. Where, as you were just telling me, she’s done very well for herself.”

Anton’s mind was back to whizzing as he tried to assimilate what this bombshell might do to political calculi here on Manticore and what kind of future favour Barregos thought he’d be needing from the Ballroom, but caution tugged. Several somethings didn’t add up at all and he looked Jeremy in the eye.

“So why isn’t she dead already?”

The familiar jocularity returned to Jeremy’s voice. “Such instant bloodthirstiness, Anton! I’m shocked, I tell you, shocked! Not that there weren’t voices in favour of that, of course. Lots of them! And I’m certainly tempted. But I’m also in the habit of maximising my assets, not throwing them away, and I do wonder what it might be worth to someone — you, maybe, or Duchess Harrington — to have the wife of a Manticoran cabinet minister under their thumbs.” He smiled beatifically. “And then there’s that nice Miss LaFollet, whom Sandor and Isaac tell me is very well thought of among our brethren and sistren in Harrington Steading, and I do like to please a polite woman. But there’s something else too, Anton, that I like far less.”

“Do tell.”

“I shall, and you won’t like it either. In the first place — and don’t tell me you didn’t ask yourself this just now — why should that C-line have sold us out if she wanted out herself? Just for money? And how did she know she could get such money? How did she sell us out, come to that? It doesn’t make sense, unless she wasn’t what she seemed at all. And in second place, how often have you heard me bemoan the war between Manticore and Haven?” He didn’t wait for an answer. “A hundred times, because they’re the two strongest enforcers of the Cherwell Convention, and if they’d only stop shooting at one another and put their energies into that we could chase Manpower right back into the Core. But here they both are, drifting back into yet another damn war, and lo and behold, who’s pulling strings for the man almost single-handedly responsible for that drift but someone who has sold herself to Manpower at least once and managed to get where she is with Manpower’s money. I don’t like coincidences, Anton, and I really don’t like this one.”

Anton stared. “You think Georgia Young’s a Manpower agent?”

“Knowing this, don’t you? For them it would be a very small investment with a potentially huge return, that looks like it’s paying off handsomely. But now it’s also, thanks to that little present from Barregos, a huge opportunity for us. Because you have to wonder what the reaction on Manticore would be — what the Queen’s reaction would be — to learning that at least one person in High Ridge’s cabinet has been taking Mesan money.”

Anton’s brain had caught up with itself, though he felt as if there ought to be smoke coming from his ears. “Point, Jeremy, definitely a point. But there’s a very great deal that might be done first.” His gaze became speculative as he looked at the dapper little terrorist who had come bearing such gifts. “Will you let her buy her life?”

Jeremy didn’t hesitate. “Life, yes ; freedom, no. A plain and closely supervised existence with her skin still on is the best deal she gets. And she spills everything she knows about Manpower.”

Anton let surprise show. “Since when does the Ballroom do custodial sentences?”
“Since now!” Jeremy leaped up and capered. “I’m just following Duchess Harrington’s splendid example with those StateSec goons on Hades. Such exemplary justice! And as it happens I have from BeoTech some delightful nanite handcuffs tailor-made for this very situation. So decide quickly, Anton, in consultation with the charming Miss LaFollet, what you would like C–15a/43–2/5 to do, and, droll fellow that I am, I’ll whisper a little message in her ear.”

“And trust me to make the most of it?”

“Oh yes. You Gryphon highlanders so rarely disappoint, and I shall be moving on swiftly, I fear. To Nouveau Paris, as it happens. I believe I want a word with Kevin Usher, now he’s risen to such intimidating heights.”

Anton’s jaw dropped a fraction before he could catch it and Jeremy gave a delighted cackle, capering anew.

“Gotcha!” Twirl, twirl, twirl. “I win five dollars from Isaac, who sadly overestimates your stone face. Because it’s as plain as a pikestaff, Anton — whatever one of those might be ; I’ve always wondered — if Manticore is being manipulated to fight the Republic, what are the odds the Republic is being manipulated to fight Manticore? What was all that falsification of diplomatic correspondence about, eh? And who better to find out than the director of their intelligence service, especially as he’s married to a C-line, hates Manpower very properly, and is an old friend of mine from happy times in Chicago?” He paused dramatically, rubbing his hands. “And if Kevin does find something, which I think he will, what effect might that have on their attitude to another war?” Twirl, twirl. “Really, fancy my becoming an interstellar diplomat, at my age, when I’m supposed to be a feared terrorist! Who would have thought it? Tell me that, oh master!”

Anton wisely held his peace.

* * * * *

After ten very long days Major Jebediah Applegarth was cautiously pleased. His abrupt transfer to command a marine unit — Orbit Dogs at that — had come as a complete surprise that left him worrying hard, but his real marine officers and men had settled into new, very well-equipped barracks, a watch rota was established, and a routine just about in place. The sheer size of the Bay House’s perimeter worried him, but the automated heavy defences Colonel LaFollet had managed to have installed would have done a fortress proud, while the enfilade and cybersecurity systems Captain Zilwicki had created were each the best he’d ever seen. Both overt and covert intel units were bedding down, with databases filling up nicely, the first batch of GONI data couriered in from Austen City being digested, contact made with the senior agent among the Sky Domes people, and a useful preliminary report on the locations they needed to surveil waiting on his secure comconsole.

And then there was the Steadholder. Applegarth had been born to a sept allied with the Clinkscales that was dedicated to Sword security, and an impressionable teen when Captain Harrington first saved Grayson, so he’d always admired her, and through his family heard some astonishing and very impressive stories about the kind of woman she really was. Since the day she’d exposed the former Steadholder Burdette as a murderer of his own as well as her steaders before decapitating him on system-wide HD, he had also believed in the heart of his faith that although she remained outside Father Church she was not only a daughter of God but beloved of the Tester — a confidence he did not have in all or even most current steadholders, so his admiration was compounded with very sincere respect.
None of which, he found, had prepared him in the least for working with her. From the crisp morning briefings to which he and the DO had been expected from the first day to contribute, through a daily schedule that was even by Grayson’s hardworking standards insanely full, to evening dinners to which she’d already invited all his officers and senior non-coms and was regularly inviting scores of cadets she was teaching at the Naval Academy, the Steadholder showed an unflagging energy that increasingly astonished him. She also had a presence that was almost a physical impact, and made him understand in an entirely visceral way why scuttlebutt said lying to her wasn’t simply a bad idea but flatly impossible. At first he’d supposed that was to do with her treecat, whose grass-green gaze was as coolly assessing as that of any senior officer he’d ever encountered, but he’d rapidly realised that while Nimitz surely didn’t hurt the Steadholder herself appeared to be able to see straight through human skulls and know exactly what was going on inside them. Yet her kindness and concern were equally unflagging, and he also understood why that same scuttlebutt named her the best CO any fighting man could have, and why those she did command — though as different as Lord Clinkscales, Admiral Yu, and Jonathan Hawkwing — all felt such intense loyalty. Beloved of the Tester indeed — and when disappointed in someone probably almost as terrible.

Pushing his musings away he concentrated on the report before him, which featured a topographic map of Landing with a number of interesting places highlighted and circled with concentric rings indicating distances. How it might be possible to get at the Earl of North Hollow’s townhouse he wasn’t at all sure, for no property was available in that exclusive area and its extensive grounds with the lie of the land made any line-of-sight access impossible; but the Conservative Association’s HQ backed onto open land beyond which Sky Domes was in the process of acquiring housing appropriate for senior managers. Then there was Government House, containing the PM’s tenth-storey office, and he noted with interest that the 300-metre circle included a group of elegant old townhouses perched on the brow of a hill with what must be splendid views of Jason Bay before them — and of Government House below. If he remembered correctly —

His thoughts were interrupted by a buzz from the marine guard on his door, on whose constant presence Colonel LaFollet had insisted by way of starting with good habits, as you meant to go on. Interestingly, the men assigned the dull duty had taken it in good part, joking approvingly about the Colonel being a stickler, though Applegarth was reasonably sure that what LaFollet had actually been doing was ensuring that even the Steadholder — especially the Steadholder — could not walk into his office unannounced.

“Miss LaFollet is here to see you, sir.” There was a loud bleek and the guard hastily went on. “With Farragut, of course, sir, and Nimitz, and another treecat whose name I don’t know.”

“Send them right in.” Suppressing a smile and blanking his display, Applegarth rose to greet his visitors, shutting the door behind them before ushering them to chairs and politely enquiring if he should send for coffee and celery. Nimitz’s true hands semaphored briefly before the ‘cat bleeked and turned to Miranda LaFollet, signing again. She laughed, and looked at Applegarth.

“He says no, thank you, Major, as this is a business meeting. And adds that you really must learn to read Sign.” Sitting on her lap, Farragut added something involving a circular swish of one finger with claw extended, and she nodded. “Farragut thinks all your men should learn, which is right. Dr Arif has some guides and dictionaries I’ll get for you, but you’ll need to schedule formal sessions to get your people started. And there are lots of ‘cats here now, with their embassy, all very keen to practice Sign, so we could work something out there.”

“Ah, thank you, Miss LaFollet. I confess I’d not got that far.”

“No problem, Major. The Steadholder had to delegate a lot of the work on Sign to her mother and me, so if anything Treecat comes up I’m the person to ask. And I am your liaison, you know, for
all unusual things.”

Applegarth blinked. Colonel LaFollet had said his sister could at need speak with his own voice, but did that really mean …? Miss LaFollet smiled demurely.

“Is this office surveilled, Major?”

“Ah, no, Miss LaFollet. The Colonel insisted it not be, and the internal system has been disconnected.”

“Good, because there are several things you need to know. I’ll translate for Nimitz, shall I?”

The Steadholder’s ’cat didn’t wait for his agreement, but gestured to the strange ’cat, who had been watching and listening with interest, and began to sign, Miss LaFollet promptly beginning simultaneous translation.

<This Person is Works in Metal. He learned to work with two-leg tools many turns ago, and is interested in the work you call e-n-g-i-n-e-e-r-i-n-g. He came here with the first group of People to form our embassy, and is working with the two legs who guard Soul of Steel.>

“That’s the Palace Guard, Major,” Miss LaFollet added, while Nimitz paused helpfully. “Soul of Steel is the ’cats’ name for Queen Elizabeth.”

<These two legs also guard the elders who now rule. Even though they are bad elders, and the enemies of Dances on Clouds> — “that’s the Steadholder” — <which makes no sense at all. Two-leg ways often don’t. But it is our opportunity to hunt.>

Applegarth, whose head was spinning slightly, respectfully held up a hand, and Nimitz stopped, twitching whiskers invitingly. “Just to make sure I’m understanding this correctly, um, Mr Nimitz, you’re saying that the Palace Guard has responsibility for government buildings?” Nimitz nodded. “Including Government House, where the Prime Minister has his office?”

Another nod, and true hands began signing again, Miss LaFollet barely a beat behind.<Yes, and I have arranged for Works in Metal to become part of a group of two legs who look after the air in that building. He can easily go where a two leg must crawl and get stuck, and will be able to check it is all working properly. They are very pleased to have him.> Cat laughter bleeked around the office. <I thought he could help you.>

Applegarth nodded in turn, processing this unexpected and fascinating offer. He looked at Works in Metal with interest.

“Excuse me, ah, Mr Works in Metal, but I’ve only known for a short time that treecats are tool-users. May I ask what, um, two-leg tools you can use?”

The ’cat rose slightly in his chair. <I can use screwdrivers, spanners, soldering-guns, and cutters when these will not do.> A set of scalpel claws flicked out from one true hand. <Since I came here I have been learning to join the wires that carry force, to one another and to other devices. But if you can show me what needs to be done, and it is possible with these hands and fingers, I can learn. I do not need to understand everything I do. How the picture-machines work is a mystery, but I learned to use them when the two-legs who guard the People and trees gave us one, with the force-stones to make it work.> After a slight pause he added, <It is making my clan very happy during the long cold, and ’kittens find it fun, although much of what we see makes no sense.>

The notion of treecats watching HD en famille plucked at Applegarth’s sense of humour, and he saw Miss LaFollet’s mouth quirk as she finished translating, but the implications of what he was
being told were too compelling to ignore.

“I see. Thank you. That’s very helpful.” He thought for a moment. “May I ask how much weight you can carry?”

<The People are strong, although we are small, and everything weighs less here than on the People’s world. But if it is something light enough for me to lift but too large to hold in true hands, or something smaller I have to carry a long way, I will need a harness it can be fitted in. I began my work as a maker of carry sacks for People who gather plants, and if I know what I must carry I can knot a harness if one is needed.>

“Mmm.” Applegarth rose, went to his desk, coded open a drawer, and took out one of the old datastores stacked within. “Is this too heavy?”

Works in Metal leaped sinuously down from his chair and up onto the desk in one flowing motion. Carefully, using both true hands, he slid fingers under the device and hefted it. His whiskers twitched, and he turned to face Miss LaFollet.

<Not too heavy, but I will certainly need a harness if I am to carry it more than a short distance.>

“Well …” Applegarth frowned in thought. “I don’t know enough yet to think this through, and I need to find out more about Government House. Is it possible to get architectural plans of the building? And schematics of air and electrical systems?”

Miss LaFollet answered. “Not directly, no, Major. Such material does not leave PGS custody, ever. But the squad Works in Metal is attached to will have full specs of the building, and I think he could get answers to questions if he knows what to look for.” She smiled. “Previously, you know, I found it very frustrating that even Manticorans with a lot of ’cat experience find it hard to realise just how much they understand, but in this it’s something of an advantage. I feel slightly guilty, really, because the idea that the ’cats on secondment might be reporting and pooling their knowledge hasn’t occurred to anyone in the PGS yet, and they’ll be horrified when it does. But for now it’s one of our best opportunities and we need to take full advantage.”

“Yes, of course. Hmm. I could draw up a list of questions now, but if I can have a day or two I could make it a better list. Will … oh” — he turned to Works in Metal, still on the desk in front of him — “will you be available to go through such a list, the day after tomorrow, say?”

<No, I will be working, but I can come the day after that.>

“Good. Thank you.”

<You are welcome.>

“So that’s settled. Excellent. Happy now, Nimitz?” Miss LaFollet’s face was straight but there was a laugh in her voice. Nimitz flashed signs. “Oh, slower than Sphinxian chipmunks, are we? That’s because two-leg things are complicated, as you know perfectly well.” She turned back to Applegarth, face sobering. “That’s my main business today, Major, though there’s something else in the pipeline that might be very good news.” Fire flashed in her eyes. “Still, I’d rather wait until I’m sure before briefing you, if you don’t mind. But do you have anything to report? As my brother is almost always with the Steadholder, anything from the, ah, quiet side of your work should come to me.”

“Yes, of course.” Applegarth’s head spun more, though part of his mind was asking dryly
whether he’d really supposed that someone who had been Steadholder Harrington’s Maid and Mistress of Harrington House for more than ten years could have remained the sort of proper Grayson woman who did not do things like liaising with covert intel units. He remembered his thought about the map as he’d been interrupted, and flicked his comsonsole display on. “Actually, Miss LaFollet, there was something I wanted to ask.”

She cocked her head enquiringly, then sighed as Nimitz and Farragut leaped gracefully into positions before the display, and leaned forward to push them aside so she could see herself.

“Oh, Landing. And our targets, I see. The circles indicate distances?”

“Right. It was these townhouses that interested me, because the Colonel told me it might be possible to access one of them.”

“He did?” She squinted. “Oh, yes. The second, no third one in that street belongs to the Dowager Countess Gold Peak. Or come to think of it, it probably now belongs to her daughter, Countess Gold Peake — Captain Henke — who is the Steadholder’s oldest friend.” Her face grew thoughtful. “So, yes, something might be possible, but great care is needed. Involving the Queen’s aunt and former Regent in, um, underhand dealings — no offence, Major — is not a good idea. And if, ah, repeated visits were necessary, it would be hard not to draw attention, in that area.”

Applegarth swallowed. “I see that, but we need a line of sight to Government House. Distance and walls don’t seem to matter much, but we can’t, um, get what we need through solid earth, so the drone arrays need to be at a high point in Landing. But” — he tapped buttons and the map zoomed out to include the Eastern Shore and Bay House — “yes, look, there is a direct line of sight from here to that townhouse, so it could simply function as a relay. All we’d need would be a whisker-laser — and with military compressed encryption protocols a T-day of data could be burst transmitted back to here in less than a millisecond. All automated — so after the arrays were installed and tuned there would be no need for any further visits. I do understand your caution, Miss LaFollet, and I can’t judge whether the political risk is acceptable, but I can say that, as best I can tell, that townhouse is exactly what we need.”

“Alright.” Nimitz’s true hands flashed. “I know she would, Stinker, but this needs two-leg caution, truly.” She turned to Applegarth. “I’ll ask my brother, Major. All else aside, from serving with the Steadholder in space he knows Captain Henke much better than I do, and she is in system, I believe, serving with Home Fleet. Meantime, draw up questions for Works in Metal, and I’ll arrange transport for him in three days’ time.” She stood, gathering Farragut in her arms as the other ‘cats bleeked goodbyes and leaped to the floor. “Oh, you and your officers are invited to the dinner next week to commemorate the Feast of St Austin. The Sword’s Embassy staff are invited, with His Excellency, and some Sky Domes people, and Graysons at the Academy, including Cadet Hearns — Miss Owens, of course — so it should be an interesting as well as pleasant evening. Farewell for now, Major.”

She swept out as Applegarth held the door, nodding to the sentry with Nimitz and Works in Metal trotting behind. Closing the door Applegarth drew a deep breath. Life under the Steadholder’s command was certainly an education — or a Test, and one he found he was happy to face, despite a certain dizziness that seemed to be involved. He was smiling as he bent again to the report.
“It’s a damned insult, that’s what!” Sir Edward Janacek’s face was purple and he appeared actually to be frothing at the mouth. Baron High Ridge contemplated his First Lord of the Admiralty with barely concealed distaste. “More than three hundred armed neobarbs camped out on the East Shore! It’s ridiculous! Those blasted Armsmen of hers are bad enough, prancing about Saganami Island in their stupid uniforms, but this is calculated insult. They don’t need anything like that for security.”

Janacek was repeating himself for the third time, and High Ridge was becoming bored. He caught Georgia Young’s knowing eye and she leaned forward, cutting Janacek off.

“Actually, Edward, they do. The Bay House has a perimeter of nearly nine kilometres, including two of shoreline, they’re running three full watches, and there are internal security points as well as a command centre. I know 300 sounds a lot, and there are probably some extra backroom staff in that number, but it isn’t unreasonable.” To High Ridge’s pleasure she cut Janacek off as he began to splutter some reply. “Yes, I know you don’t like it, and if you hadn’t made a fool of yourself, and us, by trying unilaterally to rescind the Queen’s Bench writ authorising Harrington’s Armsmen we might be able to make some protest. Not that it would be worth it, even then. And what does it signify? I’ve never been able to get anyone into her staff anyway — all her inner circle are fanatically loyal, and LaFollet’s security has always been first-rate — so what do we care if she forts up the Bay House?”

High Ridge leaned forward. “So you think it’s actually a rather powerless gesture?”

“Mostly, yes. And home comfort in a politically hostile world. But” — Georgia nodded to Lady Elaine Descroix, the Foreign Secretary — “they’re Grayson Marines, not HSG troops. Now, that may just be because Grayson’s constitution limits the size of Steadholders’ guards, but I think it’s also a warning of sorts from Protector Benjamin.”

“Another damned neobarb with delusions of grandeur.” Janacek was still a nasty shade of purple and High Ridge’s temper was frayed by distaste for the man’s comportment.

“A neobarb, Edward, whose ancestors were ruling Grayson when yours were shovelling muck, whose navy is now more than half the size of ours, and whom we do not need rocking the boat, especially with these reports from Silesia. You concentrate on keeping the lid on that mess, and leave Benjamin to me and Elaine.” Janacek subsided, fuming. “What sort of warning, Georgia?”

“Mostly, I think, just not to mess with his people. But I’m not entirely sure. Harrington seems to have had a formal meeting with the Queen last week, during what I had thought was only a welcome-back visit, but I don’t know what it was about. Do you?”

“No.” Which was a far more serious insult, in High Ridge’s mind. “There’s been no formal notification from Mount Royal.”

“Well, it could have been anything, but there is one possibility worth bearing in mind. That detachment of the Protector’s Own that escorted Harrington back and brought the Marines didn’t go home to Grayson, but through the Junction to Trevor’s Star, where they are making a courtesy call on the San Martinos. In itself that wouldn’t worry me — half the Own’s personnel are ex-Hades and so is Ramirez, of course — but I’ve just learned they will also be making courtesy calls on the Beowulfans and Andermani.” High Ridge stiffened. “Exactly. So I think the warning may be a reminder that while the Graysons have no more liking for the Peeps than we do, they have no quarrel with the Andermani; and no reason to back us if we wind up in such a quarrel.”

The other two people present, Stefan Young, twelfth Earl of North Hollow and Minister for Trade, and Marisa Turner, fifth Countess of New Kiev and Chancellor of the Exchequer, both frowned, with Descroix, while Janacek lost his purple colour and went a pasty shade of pink.
“The neobarbs would cut and run?” His voice was almost plaintive.

“No, Edward, that isn’t what I said, and if you’ll forgive me, calling the Graysons neobarbs is a bad habit of yours, if only because belittling and so underestimating one’s opponents is stupid. Our delay in negotiating a formal peace with the Peeps is necessary, of course, but it does keep our ‘loaners’ in Grayson and their personnel serving with us here, which has to be producing domestic pressure on Benjamin. And we can hardly argue it’s necessary when we’re building-down so drastically ourselves.”

“They’re welcome to have their men back, if they want them.”

“Are they, Edward? Last I heard, after your cuts and purges of all the Manticoran officers you didn’t trust or wanted to lord it over, and taking into account the number of half-pay officers who have cross-enlisted with the GSN, Alliance loaners to us now account for four percent of our total personnel, and far more than that in junior and mid-level officers. They’re also, of course, mostly a great deal more experienced in combat than the captains and admirals you’ve brought in or promoted. If Silesia blew up tomorrow, could you respond without them?” Georgia could be splendidly cutting, High Ridge thought, though he didn’t like what she was saying. “No, I thought not. But if it is Silesia that blows up, I think you’ll have to, because neither Benjamin nor the Grayson public will agree to fight the Andermani.”

“But that would take them out of the Alliance.” Descroix tapped her fingers together. “Can they afford that?”

“What Alliance, Elaine? The one against Haven? That’s safe. But I think Benjamin is telling us there isn’t an Alliance against the Andermani, who aren’t a threat to anyone’s home system, merely a commercial irritant in Silesia. And frankly, I’d say the same in his shoes.”

High Ridge leaned forward, asserting authority. “Thank you, Georgia — that is unpalatable but does make sense, I suppose. And makes it essential nothing untoward happen in Silesia before we can complete our domestic programme and get into a position where we can risk signing a treaty with the Peeps and holding the election. So I ask you again, Edward — are you sure Silesia is not going to blow up into a shooting war with the Andermani?”

“Yes.” Janacek was sullen but definite. “It’s a bit more than the usual sabre-rattling they’ve always gone in for over their so-called Silesian interests, but they can’t want any serious conflict. They know they’re outclassed so badly they couldn’t hope to win, and the defeat would leave them in a much worse position.”

“You put no credence in reports suggesting they’re building new classes, then?”

“None whatever. That’s just scaremongering by freeloaders Givens had on payroll who suddenly found they needed to justify being there, and couldn’t.”

“Very well. It’s your department. Just make sure you’re prepared to deal with the questions Harrington and White Haven are bound to ask in the Naval Committee. Losing Draskovic — who was, I remind you, Edward, your appointment — was embarrassing enough. I don’t want any more fiascos like that.” High Ridge paused, thinking. “I will try to find out what Harrington’s formal meeting with Elizabeth was about, but don’t hold your breath.” Resentment crept into his voice. “She’s more unforthcoming than ever, and we all know Harrington is her special pet, but if the meeting had any substance she’ll have to pass it on at my next weekly briefing. Now, Marisa, you had something, I believe?”

New Kiev nodded unhappily. “Yes, and it’s not good news, I’m afraid. Party finances.”
“Ah. And what is the problem?”

“To be frank, we’re bankrupt. Since we managed to contain the Manpower scandal contributions from the Hauptman cartel to the Liberals — and so far as I’m aware to the CA — have dried up completely. The navy build-down has alienated several other big cartels, who have followed suit. And public donations are at an all-time low, partly because most people benefiting from our social programmes don’t have much wealth or any tradition of making political contributions, but mostly because our maintenance of wartime taxation rates is annoying our base. Bases, I should say, because the CA can’t be in much better shape.”

Janacek stirred from his sulk. “Can’t you just transfer some money from somewhere? It’s not as if we’re short of it.”

New Kiev visibly controlled impatience. “No, Edward, I can’t. Private accounts are one thing, party accounts quite another, and they are fiercely scrutinised annually, both in committee and by the Independent Auditor. The constitution flatly bans governmental donations or loans to parties, and while ministers can donate as individuals to their own parties, all such donations must be declared. And that audit is due in less than two T-months. As things stand, if the Liberal Party were a company, it would be declared insolvent. I’m not saying that will happen, and I obviously can’t speak for the CA, though I’d be surprised if the same weren’t true, but it’s going to be very sticky. And as for fighting an election … well, when we’ve decided to pull the trigger we can certainly get donations up a bit, but it’ll be far too late to do us any real good.”

High Ridge grimaced. He’d known suppressing the scandal those idiots on Terra had managed to create would annoy Klaus Hauptman, but he hadn’t anticipated quite so potent a response from the magnate; nor that matters might become as serious as New Kiev was suggesting. In the usual course of things the Liberals’ problems would be a matter of indifference, but he needed their votes in both Lords and Commons, and if they imploded in the lower house New Kiev would never be able to maintain her whip-hand in the upper. She was right about the CA, too, and while his own party didn’t have to worry about the expense of fighting for seats in the Commons, where they had virtually no direct representation anyway, it did have sufficient other expenses — notably the party HQ, whose staffing and catering costs were not covered by membership fees — that it had been sinking steadily into the red for years. Thanks to the war with Haven there hadn’t been an election to galvanise any party for more than a decade, and the deal that had brought his coalition of the self-interested to power had been concocted entirely over private dinners. Besides, the real costs of maintaining power were borne privately by North Hollow — obtaining materials to blackmail allies and surveil opponents not, after all, being expenses that could be legitimately declared.

“I see. I do take your point about audit, Marisa, but Edward’s right all the same — we need to transfer something from somewhere, just not directly from government funds.”

“Then it’ll have to be a loan.”

“Unacceptable. That would be public domain and the opposition newsies would have a field day.”

“Then what do you suggest, Michael? I can’t produce money from thin air.”

High Ridge bit off a retort, smiling sourly. The woman could certainly make money disappear efficiently enough. “Of course not, Marisa, but in the medium term, once the audit is past, you’ll have time to, ah, create the necessary diversion safely. I’m sure contractors in our social programmes have enough right-minded employees for appropriate funds to be channelled back as needed. But we do seem to need something to tidy us over meanwhile. With appropriate cut-outs, would you be able to help, Stefan?”
“No I wouldn’t. For God’s sake, Michael, you can’t expect me to fund the CA single-handed for God knows how long. Let alone Marisa’s bleeding-heart Liberals in the Commons!”

“I might be able to arrange something.” Georgia Young’s voice was as cool as her husband’s was choleric, and High Ridge smiled with what for him passed as gratitude. “How much are we talking about, Marisa?”

New Kiev, having bridled at North Hollow’s tone, smiled maliciously at his offended look as she answered his wife. “Well, for the Liberals … not less than five million, to avoid closer scrutiny. Eight would see us in the black. What about the CA, Michael?”

“About three, I believe.”

“So, ten million, then — the Auditor will be suspicious if your party is not running a deficit, Marisa, under all the circumstances. Yes, I might manage that. But do you realise there will be a cost?”

“Of course. What will be needed?”

Georgia Young thought for a moment while her husband glowered and High Ridge hoped the price-tag for Georgia’s black magic would not cause some further problem. “I’m honestly not sure, Michael. It depends whom I can tap. IOUs will be enough, so long as you understand those are your IOUs, not mine, and the people you’ll owe will not be understanding of any problem when they call in markers.” She looked High Ridge and New Kiev directly in the eyes. “To be blunt, very dangerous people.”

New Kiev tittered and Janacek, intent on paying Georgia back for her earlier slap at him, spoke with obvious venom. “How ever do you come to know such people, Georgia?”

Her gaze switched to him and he paled. “I know dangerous people because I am one, Edward. I live in the real world, and unlike you, do not suppose myself invulnerable. And you had best listen closely, because I would guess some of those IOUs will concern you.” Janacek swallowed audibly, and Georgia’s gaze went back to High Ridge. “Michael, obviously some will concern Home and Justice ministries, so make sure you have close control over both. Selden at Justice is safe enough, and come the next reshuffle I’m sure Stefan could stand promotion to the Home Office. But those are intangibles, and the make-weight will almost certainly be demanded in navy tech.” She switched attention back to Janacek. “You understand, Edward, that there are businesses that are very interested in our improved inertial compensators, grav-pinch micro-fusion plants, and stealth systems. Not real cutting-edge stuff, of course, but older systems that are only still classified because it’s wartime. All that would be needed would be for Reg Houseman to make sure an appropriately equipped ship headed for the breakers was parked somewhere quietly for a while, which shouldn’t be beyond him.”

She straightened, waving an elegant hand, and glanced round. “All this is speculation, of course, but I imagine it will prove accurate. Michael, Marisa, courier me genuine statements of account, and check your figures again in … two weeks. You should find them pleasantly adjusted.”

High Ridge nodded. God knew where the boorish and (save for the manner of his passing) entirely un lamented Pavel Young had found her, or why she put up with Stefan, but Georgia really was very useful. “Thank you, Georgia, that’s a splendid solution. If you have any problems with Reg Houseman, Edward, I’m sure Marisa can explain matters. And I’d like a report as soon as possible about commercial licensing of all that navy tech as soon as we decide to sign the peace treaty — there’s a goldmine there we can wrap up nicely between signing and election.” He tapped his teeth. “It occurs to me research for that might very properly see a ship sequestered somewhere to be
dismantled and considered bit by bit by someone with proper commercial credentials. Hmm? Good. That’s settled. And now I fear I must ask you all to excuse me, as I have a dinner to attend.”

* * * * *

Captain Lady Michelle Henke, Countess Gold Peak, thought the only good thing about being stuck on routine duty with Home Fleet — besides, of course, the genuine pleasures of command and career, making HMS Edward Saganami a ship worthy of her name and herself a captain worthy of that ship — was that she could regularly visit her mother. Duchess and Dowager Countess Caitrin Winton-Henke had stepped firmly back from political and court life more than 30 T-years ago, when she’d resigned as Elizabeth’s Regent on her niece’s majority, and though she remained a keen observer had consciously developed her own interests and circle to sustain her. But if she had shown the world an unfailingly brave face, the murders of her husband and only son two T-years ago, in the assassination attempt on Elizabeth and Protector Benjamin, had to Mike’s worried, loving eyes left her almost physically diminished. Certainly her mother had not yet emerged from shocked grief, as naval command had forced Mike to do, and often seemed to have retired into herself more than any daughter cared to see, especially in a parent whose first-generation Prolong meant she could expect at least another century of life.

Even at this time of year the mid-afternoon Landing sun was too hot to encourage sitting outside, and she and her mother had retreated to the cool and shady enclosed verandah the whole family had loved. An old-fashioned jigsaw of a storybook castle preserved somewhere snowy and mountainous on Old Earth covered a low table, but neither was applying themselves to the half-completed image, preferring to sip fresh lemonade and talk idly. Memories were a tender subject, but at least her mother now could sometimes recall happier times without being at once thrown back into the bleakness of present loss. Both women were also privately wondering about news from Nouveau Paris, and what the shuttle-wreck currently passing for Her Majesty’s Government would do now there was again — for the first time in more than a decade — a duly elected Havenite President and administration to deal with, but the whole Manticoran political situation was for each too charged with grief and horrified rage for either willingly to broach it. They were instead wandering through the careers and marriages of Mike’s school contemporaries when the butler, Charlaine Rossingham, stepped noiselessly through the doors from the dining-room.

“Excuse me, Your Grace, my Lady, but Colonel LaFollet and Nimitz are here, and ask if they might speak with you.”

She addressed the air between them, expressing delicate uncertainty between deference to the Dowager Countess she had served for half a lifetime and appreciation that these visitors were more friends of my Lady’s than members of Her Grace’s usual circle.

“Just Andrew and Nimitz?” Mike’s voice showed surprise, for if Honor was awake neither her uniformed nor furry minions could usually be parted from their places at her back and on her shoulder.

Her mother straightened, putting down her half-full glass. “I expect it’s you they’re after, dear. Shall I leave you to it?”

“No, don’t go. Nimitz is always glad to see you. Show them in please, Charlaine, and ask Mrs Bamber to make up some more lemonade and a plate of celery.”
“Of course, my Lady.”

She withdrew as silently as she had come, and Mike and her mother looked at one another with identically raised eyebrows.

“I’ve no idea, Mama, honestly. Nothing’s happened dirtside I don’t know about, has it?”

“I don’t believe so, dear. Not that could be relevant to Honor, anyway. Beth did tell me when I managed lunch last week there’d been some grumbling and pique about the Grayson marines Protector Benjamin sent as a guard unit for the Bay House, but it didn’t come to anything.”

“What was the pique about, and who was grumbling?”

“The number of marines, I believe, and the usual suspects, but as they take offence at anything Grayson I didn’t take special notice. Beth was venting, not briefing me.”

Mike grinned. “I can imagine. Well, we’ll soon know.”

They heard the dining-room door open and a moment later Nimitz flowed out on to the verandah, trailed by Charlaine who with a disapproving look for his forwardness belatedly announced him and a wary-looking Andrew LaFollet; behind whom Mrs Bamber brought up the rear with the requested lemonade and celery. Ignoring the disapproval, Nimitz leaped cheerfully onto Mike’s lap, bleeking greetings and simultaneously signing.

Mike laughed. “Yes, Stinker, of course the celery’s for you. And good to see you too.” Nimitz buzzed pleasure, but to Mike’s surprise flowed sinuously back to the floor and crossed to her mother’s chair. Reaching it he reared up on true feet, bracing himself with hand feet on the wooden arm, and extended one graceful, long-fingered true hand to gather her mother’s hand before bending his head to plant a cold nose lightly on its back and straightening with a rapid twitch of his whiskers. It was a perfect treecat version of the traditional Grayson salutation to a noblewoman and there was a moment’s silence as humans took in what the ‘cat had done. Then to her delight Mike saw her mother’s face crack into the most genuine smile she’d seen from her in ages.

“Thank you, Nimitz. That was very graceful.” True hands semaphored swiftly, and Caitrin, well-versed in Sign from dealing with Ariel and Monroe, laughed and nodded. “Yes indeed, that would do very well if formal ’cat protocol were needed, thought your nose is certainly cold. And it’s just like you, Nimitz, if I may say so, to shape a protocol around your idea of a joke.”

A bleek of satisfaction brought general laughter, and Mike waved polite dismissal to an unwillingly amused Charlaine and openly chuckling Mrs Bamber. “We can serve ourselves, thank you both. I’ll ring if we need anything.” As they bowed out, she stood and poured lemonade for LaFollet before refreshing her mother’s glass and her own. Nimitz was back by her chair, eyeing celery with cheerful greed, and she put it within his reach on the table, seating herself to the sound of enthusiastic crunching. “It’s good to see you too, Andrew, though I can’t imagine what could prise you away from Honor.”

“Her Grace is presently at the Academy, leading a three-hour seminar on stealth tactics, my Lady. Nimitz expressed the opinion that he already knew all he needed about the subject, and would rather do something useful and interesting, such as seeing you, so she was kind enough to give us both the afternoon off. And I confess, some of the junior Armsmen could stand to learn a little more on that front, so I left them to attend the Steadholder with a clear conscience.”

Mike grinned. “I’ll bet. But ‘useful and interesting’, you said? That sounds ominous, Stinker. What deviltry are you up to now?”
A mouthful of celery did not impede true hands. <No deviltry, just a hunt.>

“For what?”

<The bad elders who threaten Dances on Clouds and Soul of Steel and Strong Mind. They make all the two legs who protect us unhappy, and no-one does anything about it. Now Golden Voice and I, and all the People, have had enough. Bad elders are bad for the clan, and no sensible clan will tolerate them.>

Mike had a distinct sense Andrew LaFollet wanted to bury his face in his hands, but fascinated amusement was tempered with stirrings of real alarm. The idea of proactive treecats hunting down High Ridge was a delightful joke that as a reality didn’t bear thinking about at all; but her mother’s face showed more grim agreement than anything else.

<Guards Faithfully will say it is all very complicated, then twist himself into a knot explaining two-leg rules do not allow anything sensible to be done. But it is very simple. We want you to let some two legs who obey Guards Faithfully and Strong Mind hide some tools in the room under your roof. Then forget that they are there. That is all.>

There was a long two-leg silence during which Nimitz snagged another piece of celery, and Mike observed with some sympathy the spectacle of Andrew LaFollet blushing. What Nimitz really meant she had no real idea, though she didn’t like the sound of it at all, but her mother had the slightly absent look that meant she was thinking at top speed, and for that alone Mike could have hugged the ’cat. Then Caitrin’s eyes came sharply back into focus and she spoke with her old crispness.

“You have a very good argument, Nimitz, but that’s not quite all, I’m afraid. To begin with, there are more two legs than Mike and I living here, and two legs are not very good at forgetting things they find unusual. And they chatter. Hmm. Colonel, do I want to know what tools Nimitz means?”

LaFollet spoke very carefully. “I would not think so, Your Grace. I can assure you they are not dangerous in any physical way.”

“But intended to be dangerous in some other way?”

“To be instrumental in the defence of the Star Kingdom and Protectorate, certainly.”

“Against whom?”

LaFollet hesitated. “Those who will not defend them properly themselves.”

“You were going to say something else, Colonel. Please tell me what it was.”

“I did not wish to offend or distress, Your Grace. My first thought was, against those who are squandering our sacrifices.”

Mike held her breath, cursing inwardly, but her mother’s face was carved from stone and her voice emotionlessly level. “Yes. I know who you mean. Thank you for your delicacy. You are sanctioned to act by Protector Benjamin?”

LaFollet blinked. “Indirectly, your Ladyship. My orders come from Lord Clinkscales.”

“That will do.” To Mike’s surprise her mother’s face softened a little. “And from Nimitz, it seems. Perhaps not before time.” She looked at the ’cat. “Would I be right to assume Ariel and
Monroe also know about this, but Be — Soul of Steel does not?"

<Yes, Golden Voice spoke to Leaf Catcher. All the Elders of the new embassy know. Some others among the People here also help, with other tools in other places. Guards Faithfully and Tree Thrower watch over us, so the bad elders do not discover our plans. Each leads many more two legs. So the hunt begins, and it needs what must be done here.>

“I see. Mostly. Who is Tree Thrower, Colonel?”

“Captain Zilwicki, Your Grace.” LaFollet’s face was expressionless. “I understand that after they first met Nimtz remarked the Captain’s physique, and Her Grace dug out an HD clip of him doing something called ‘tossing the caber’ at the Gryphon Highland Games. All the ‘cats who saw it were very impressed, and his ‘cat name seems to have been settled there and then.”

“Understandably. And my niece has told me the Captain is an exceptionally capable man. As are you. Good.”

She turned to Mike, whose head was spinning. Honor had done many astonishing things, but even in returning from the dead nothing like this kind of deniable black ops had ever been among them. Her heart was soaring to see her mother coming to capable life again, and the tactical part of her brain whispered it was high time Honor took effective action, whatever it might be, but the rest of her was shocked.

“Mike, do you remember what you told me Beth said to you about Honor, the night you found out she was still alive and got drunk on champagne celebrating?”

Mike did, very clearly. “You mean about pointing Honor at us?” From the corner of her eye she saw LaFollet frown but her mother took no notice.

“Yes. That’s what’s happening here, I think.”

“But Nimtz said —

“I don’t mean directly. It’s a good version of ‘who will rid me of this turbulent priest?’, if you remember that old story, and I’m damned if I’ll lift a finger to stop it. The ‘cats are right that’s what been allowed to happen is an obscenity, and God knows we’ve all looked the other way for long enough. Going back to Paul’s murder, at least, if we speak true, and if we’d —” She broke off, and drew a breath. “But it’s your house, dear.”

“No.” The word was as involuntary. “I mean, I know it is, legally, but not while you live here.” Mike might have been able to argue with Honor, not that it would have done any good, but wasn’t going to argue with her mother in this mood and managed a weak smile. “Anyway, what do mere naval captains know? And it’s not as if I’m here often enough or for long enough to go investigating the attic when I am.”

“No.” The word was as involuntary. “I mean, I know it is, legally, but not while you live here.” Mike might have been able to argue with Honor, not that it would have done any good, but wasn’t going to argue with her mother in this mood and managed a weak smile. “Anyway, what do mere naval captains know? And it’s not as if I’m here often enough or for long enough to go investigating the attic when I am.”

“Thank you, dear.” A long look let Mike know her mother understood she was stifling doubts, and that her gratitude was real. “On the other hand, Colonel, the servants certainly are here enough to see everything. Hmm. When do you propose, um, leaving these tools? And how noticeable are they?”

“Anytime we may, and entirely, I’m afraid, Your Grace, to someone in the room, though they can certainly be covered and disguised. The, ah, process of leaving them might take some while, also. But thereafter they will require no attention, save eventual removal.”

“I see. A pretty problem.” Caitrin thought deeply for a moment and straightened. “And a cue
to do something I’ve known I should do for a while. What you would call a Test, perhaps, Colonel. We’ll have to trust Charlaine and Mrs Bamber, but they can give everyone else a week off — which I’ll explain truthfully by saying I need to move all of Edward’s and Calvin’s things to the attic, and want some privacy to do it. Whereafter they will be unsurprised if the attic is shut up for a while.” She turned to Mike, speaking faster. “I’m sorry if that seems cold, dear, I don’t mean it to be, and I have known I can’t go on keeping all their things around me, but … I don’t know, this suddenly seems right.” Pent-up grief flared in her eyes. “Their deaths were so damned useless, and even if I try to remember it was really the Peeps, not those stupid Masadans, and think of Edward and Cal as war-dead, which God knows they are, it only reminds me of how that … God-cursed shit High Ridge has thrown away everything we fought for.” She stopped abruptly, grasping at composure. “I’m sorry for my language, Colonel.”

LaFollet bowed slightly. “Please don’t be, Your Grace. I am a soldier, after all. As I think perhaps you are, also.”

Mike had probably been more surprised by the obscenity than LaFollet by the mild blasphemy — her mother never swore — and she didn’t know what to think, caught between relief at the breaking log-jam of her mother’s grief and sudden irritation that underhand politics had achieved it. The awkward moment was broken by Nimitz easing onto her mother’s lap. Caitrin’s hands automatically responded, and Nimitz’s buzzing purr must have been accompanied by one of those unpredictable, deft ‘cat mind-touches because she visibly relaxed. Mike’s shoulders slumped in relief and LaFollet sat forward with a welcome briskness.

“May I ask when would suit, Your Grace?”

“Oh … sooner rather than later, I take it? Yes. Hmm. Next week, I think. I need to give people a few days’ notice. I’ll com you tomorrow.”

“Of course. Is there perhaps a particular emporium you traditionally use for … let’s say furniture? Something bulky.”

“Furniture? Massingdale’s, usually. Why do you — oh, for a delivery van. yes, that’ll work. Will you be with the, um, unloaders, Colonel?”

“No, Your Grace. The man in charge will be Major Applegarth, who commands the Marine company the Sword sent as embassy guards. In fact, my official mission today is delivering his contact numbers, and the new security protocols for visiting the Bay House by land, air, and sea.” He handed Caitrin a sealed data-wallet. “The Senior Chief who will deal with that side of things is called Jonathan Hawkwing.”

Mike had been thinking that whoever had been complaining about the presence of the Grayson marines had better reason to worry than they knew, but found her attention arrested. “Hawkwing? After Honor’s old ship? Was he a Casimir rescuee?”

“Yes, my Lady. And ex-Hades. He’s extremely loyal to the Steadholder.”

“I’ll bet.” Mike whistled. “That’s some CV. In the meantime, Andrew, is there anything I could be doing besides becoming short-sighted?”

LaFollet considered. “I don’t think so, my Lady. To be frank, the fewer people involved, the better. But thank you.” He looked at her as intently as her mother had done, and Mike understood he was himself far from happy with what he had to do but would not be deterred from protecting his liegelady in whatever way was most effective. “I believe the Steadholder would be grateful for a visit, though she wouldn’t ask for herself. Between her teaching duties and attending the House, as
well as all the other things she does, she is working very long days.”

Mike nodded, knowing perfectly well what Honor could be like, and though the behaviour was alien to her own nature she guessed at the sort of self-punishment Honor might unconsciously inflict in supposed atonement of whatever dishonourable necessity Her Grace was about. She nodded. “That I can do.”

Nimitz sat up in her mother’s lap. <Take Dances on Clouds out on the wind boat. I think playing with all that water is silly and uncomfortable, but it always makes her happy.>

Mike laughed. “All right, Stinker. Sailing it is!”

LaFollet gave Nimitz a very old-fashioned look indeed.

* * * * *

Georgia Young kicked off expensive, uncomfortable shoes and leaned back in the seating of her private booth, relaxing into smartfoam and letting the odd but quite soothing live music from the house band wash over her. Gregor’s Place was one of the retro-themed clubs that perennially waxed and waned in fashion, specialising in what it claimed as tenth-century PD Earth styles, and the entrepreneurial young owners were very happy to provide Countess North Hollow with a booth as long as she let her patronage be known — which was fortunate, given that if she had to spend much more of her time with the Earl she might do something she regretted. Stefan remained extremely useful, and profoundly in her thrall, but since High Ridge’s unexpected ascent to power had brought her into Manticoran government in all but name — and wasn’t that an irony to savour! — and so obliged her to spend many of her working-hours with her husband, she was finding him less and less tolerable as leisure company. Sexually she didn’t really care much who her partner was, as long as they were male, powerful, wealthy, and washed — a legacy of first training for which she was cynically grateful, observing the idiocies to which sex led people — but if Stefan was adequate in that way, his conversation had always been limited and in political ascendancy was proving more repetitive than ever. Though within his limits quite cunning, and certainly sharper than Pavel, he was also a boor, narrow in understanding and automatically selfish, and he as much as Janacek was unteachably prone to confuse his own hatreds with the kind of cold-eyed exploitations of identified weakness needed to go up against people as smart as Harrington and the Queen.

He was also as blind as High Ridge and all their CA and Liberal cronies to the galactic hole into which they were collectively digging the Star Kingdom, both with Haven and the Andermani; which was fine by Georgia, as her Mesan masters ideally wanted the Kingdom at war with both polities and had as little interest or concern as she in the fate of individuals other than themselves. Her task had been wonderfully simplified by the entire cabinet’s fury with what they all saw as Haven’s crude attempt to falsify diplomatic correspondence — a trick Georgia was reasonably sure had been engineered by her masters at the Havenite end, though it was possible it had been Descroix, or managed with her help. Whether High Ridge’s Foreign Secretary was herself a Manpower agent Georgia was unsure, but someone was providing her with money, and the transfer codes she’d discovered fitted a pattern she knew very well. But she had found daily exposure to the true scope of Stefan’s stupidity fuelled her contempt so richly that the prospect of the remaining months or years before she could quietly retire to somewhere light years away became ever more aggravating. Tonight, at least, she could console herself with the thought that her masters were extremely pleased with the prospect of shortly laying their hands on a warship’s worth of classified Manticoran tech, and that the money for the Liberals and CA — which would have been forthcoming anyway, merely
for the truth of the situation — would even more shortly be on its way through the usual secure channels. With a nice bonus, by way of reward for good opportunist thinking; so all was, despite Stefan’s immaturity and tedium, by her standards reasonably well with her world.

She retained enough self-irony and awareness to know that those standards were both warped and astonishingly high, but if you had been designed, bred, and trained as a pleasure-slave, control of others was the only metrestick that mattered. Manpower’s vaunted genetic shaping was physically effective but psychologically a lottery, and Georgia had been born with exceptional wits as well as the codes for a body at once lush and lithe. Some slave children were given to older slaves to raise, as an economy; others began much more forceful shaping earlier, and more than a year before Georgia was handed to the phenotype technicians who undertook the sexual conditioning of C-lines she had realised with the force of revelation that a slave’s life consisted of being denied Prolong and consumed, or of escaping, perhaps in time for Prolong, and using those centuries either to sign up with the Ballroom for quixotic adventures (of which word penetrated back even to Manpower’s innermost domains) or to spend years in therapy and years more being fanatically grateful to whatever star nation had rescued you or taken you in. Neither life appealed, and her calm, forceful analysis of a third possibility, expressed without heat and between involuntary whimpers to her first technician while he was raping her, had eventually led to an interview with a nameless man before whom everyone in power over her had cringed. A trial sale at 15 to a client in whom Manpower had quite other than commercial interests had won her third-generation Prolong and training of several kinds that opened her eyes very wide indeed. The irony of being freed by the Ballroom on her final graduation exercise had not been lost on her, but that extra training, so unanticipated in a C-line, and a little serendipity in the shape of an incompetent Ballroom navigator, had enabled her to turn disaster into an irrefutable proof of loyalty — and here she was, a Manticoran Countess and multi-millionaire, delivering beyond her masters’ wildest hopes, while her crèche mates were (and in her innermost mind she relished the crudity of the thought) fucked corpses on a midden or fucked-up terrorists and analysands. You got to keep what you took and held, nothing more — one of the many things she knew she and Harrington both understood, and those to the manor born like Stefan and High Ridge would never grasp, even when they had lost everything.

The house-band ended their set and she sat up reluctantly, slipping shoes back on; work was a solid excuse but didn’t prevent Stefan’s paranoid jealousy and demands for reassurance if she were absent for what he felt was unreasonably long. Settling her feet she was about to call for bodyguard and chauffeur when the supposedly locked door slid open and two people came through, a dark-haired woman Georgia immediately recognised as a C-line and a dapper little man.

“Who — “

“Be silent and still.” It was the woman who spoke, and without apparently having moved held a military-grade stunner in an unwavering hand. “Hands on your head.”

Georgia didn’t think of disobeying. Not all ex-slaves were Ballroom, and while she already had a bad feeling about these two, what the Ballroom or ASL could want with Countess North Hollow was … likely to be worth learning, a currency on which she depended. She put some steel into her voice.

“I don’t know who you are but — “

The little man cut her off with a voice and gaze as flat as she had ever known. “I am your worst nightmare. I know and can prove where you started as C–15a/43–2/5, what you did in 1899 to earn your way out, and how you came to Manticore via Smoking Frog as Nicola French and Elaine Komandorski. I have full genetic and imaging data from each stage.” He watched expressionlessly what a part of her frozen mind knew must be blood draining from her face, her heart. “You have a
choice, C–15a/43–2/5. You can die very shortly and painfully, to be discovered with all appropriate
documentation in some suitable place. North Hollow’s seat in the Lords, perhaps. It will be bad, but
fairly soon over. Or you can buy your life, only — no liberty will be involved.”

It took her a moment to wet mouth and throat enough to speak, but the little man’s expression
never changed; not for a second. She found a spark of pride in maintaining a grammar of choice.

“What … what would I have to do?”

“Three things. Wear at all times a certain brooch — identical to that one you favour” — he
pointed to the brooch on her jacket-lapel where it was draped on another seat — “and ensure that
you press it in a certain way, standing in the garden of North Hollow’s house, once a day. Provide a
complete and persuasive account of your life from your first recruitment by Manpower, including
every single thing you have ever done or are doing for any and all members of the present
Manticoran administration. And, when ordered, slip quietly away, bringing the complete North
Hollow files. Those three things together will earn you a quiet, backwater life under guard, with skin
still on and bones intact.”

He paused.

“There will be measures in place to ensure any attempt at a second betrayal of the Ballroom
results in your slow and perfectly appalling death.” Abruptly the veneer cracked into a capering glee.
“I favour that option myself, C–15a/43–2/5, and so does almost everyone I’ve bothered to ask. But
even I must confess you’ve done so very well for yourself that merely documenting you would be an
indulgence.”

Understanding was intuitive and absolute. “You’re Jeremy X.”

He swept an elaborate bow but his smile didn’t reach his eyes. “At your service, C–15a/43–
2/5. And I will kill you now — well, by the day after tomorrow, perhaps — if you let me.”

“What … what measures?”

“Nanites that will dissolve your bones, then your skin, very slowly.” His expression and
voice became terribly earnest. “I had to bargain, C–15a/43–2/5, for the chance to turn you. To plead,
on bended knee, and pluck arpeggios on hardened heart-strings, for anything but documenting you
right now. Very slowly. And I was pleading with the siblings and children of the dancers executed
on Mesa on 17 November 1999.” A wider smile still didn’t reach his eyes. “Do please prove me a
sentimental fool and yourself a turncoat of honour by saying no.”

Understanding his psychology did not enable her to resist, any more than she’d been able to
resist applied versions of her own psychology the nameless Mesan exec had reflected back at her.
She struggled to keep her voice level as she turned her head, exposing her neck.

“For that kind of programmed nanites I believe the jugular is recommended.”

She couldn’t see his face but for the first time his voice acknowledged her as a feeling person.

“Bravery I can admire, Georgia. And success.” She felt the soft bite and heard the hiss of a
pressure syringe. “There are control nodes among the effectors, held in check by a daily signal
triggered by sending the upload from the brooch.” What felt like a replica of her own was pressed
into her hand. “The trigger button for the upload is underneath the right side, and must be pressed
twice within three T-seconds, at least one second apart. The control nodes will detect any sudden
decrease in effector numbers and activate all.”
The little man stepped back, and Georgia let her gaze meet his squarely as she straightened her head. “I will fight you as I can.”

“You cannot. And be sure you leave nothing out of your summaries of your life to date. If a nasty surprise should affect any of my friends that you knew about, or should have known about …”

“Yes. I understand.”

“Then understand this also, C–15a/43–2/5.” Jeremy X’s eyes were unfathomably flat and dark. “You have no heart or soul to win. But you have a loyalty to buy, and the price is being paid with every breath you remain alive to take. You risk your former masters killing you if they find out, and the Ballroom will protect you, as it can. But to betray us, again, is not a risk, but messy suicide.” Abruptly, with hands so fast she barely saw them move, he seized her head and set ice-cold lips to her forehead, before gazing straight through her. “Mine unto death. Don’t ever think otherwise. And if you’re good I’ll let you decide what kind of planet you will be able to go on living on, beyond this turmoil.”

As swiftly as they had entered both Dancers slipped out, the silent woman turning in the doorway with a last glance of incalculable scorn in which Georgia recognised that bizarre willingness of so many young to die for ideals. Abruptly alone again, all the training and cynical spirit in the world could not stop judders that shook her as she at last allowed her body to acknowledge mortal terror, and her mind swept her back to the amalgam of bone-deep fear and utter indignation that had possessed her when the door of her slave-pen slid open and a man she’d never seen joyously proclaimed a new, useless, and impoverished liberty. Then, as before, she started marshalling thoughts, and after a moment spent swapping her old brooch for her new and donning her jacket, she called for bodyguard and chauffeur with the same cold determination to survive and prosper, whatever it took, whatever masters came and went.

* * * *

Waiting in the maintenance sub-office on the seventh floor of Government House, Works in Metal was pleased by the slight tension he felt. While his duties with the two legs who guarded Soul of Steel and other senior Elders were interesting, they lacked the excitement of a hunt, as life on this world lacked the dangers death fangs and snow hunters brought to the world of the People. A Person had to be careful of the two legs’ machinery and great speed of travel, but that was just the attention needed in moving from branch to branch, not the heart-pounding wariness of sharing space with creatures who would eat you if they could. Today was not truly dangerous but did need concentration, and the great hunt for the bad elders threatening Dances on Clouds that Laughs Brightly and Golden Voice had organised was a good reminder of his life before coming here and the skills it required. To the two leg he was working with today, however, all was routine except his own participation, and he listened patiently to the third explanation of his day’s tasks.

<Yes, I understand. My duty is the smaller metal pipes here.> One true hand marked out a swathe of the schematic diagram of the ventilation and air-conditioning systems of Government House. <I must look for anything not properly attached, or with a hole, and fix it if I can. I must also look for anywhere low plants are growing.>

“Right. And if you become lost?”

< I will not.> As if any Person could become lost in this grid of metal pipes, so much less
complicated than the tangled branches of the picketwood People moved through every day. He had memorised the entire schematic in a few moments' study the first time he had seen it, and within the pipes would always know where he was. *<But if I do, I have the signal device.>*

“Good. And that harness of yours is secure?”

*<It is.>* And another source of pleasure, a well-made, comfortable thing, using far stronger and smoother materials than the cord and rough cloth he could have worked himself, that the two leg from Dances on Clouds's Far World had given him. All his tools fitted neatly in covered pockets that held them upright on his favoured left side, while the special machine he must secretly install fitted into the other and balanced his load.

“OK. Emergency lighting is on, all other power in this sector is off, and pressure is equalised.” As the two leg spoke her finger ran down a row of green lights on a wall-pad. “We’re good to go. Good luck, Works in Metal. The accessway is here.”

The two leg pressed a button on a wall pad and a hatch in the exposed metal piping below hissed. She bent down, pulling it fully open, and with a cheerful bleek Works in Metal slipped inside, and trotted left along the pipe towards the junction he needed.

Some minutes and a score of twists and turns later he came to the area of much smaller pipes he was supposed to check and set about doing so, moving through the narrow spaces far more rapidly than any two leg could have managed. Everything seemed correctly fastened, but his nose told him where to look more carefully, and he noted several patches where water had collected and green life was spreading. He also made a discovery that momentarily distracted him down a side pipe, but the real hunt he was about this day mattered too much to forget for long, and with official business done in far less time than he was allowed for it, he headed higher into the system. The ladders two legs used to climb vertical shafts were awkward, because he had to leap straight up to grab the lowest rungs with true hands, and had to stretch for each higher rung, but they took him where he needed to go.

Coming to the right place, three floors up, he turned into a middle-sized pipe, carefully counting metal panels on his left side. A hand of hands, and two fingers more, so this panel should sound solid on one side and hollow on the other. He tapped softly. *Thunk. Clang.* Works in Metal nodded to himself. Taking a powered screwdriver from his harness he quietly undid the next panel along, lower screws first, stretching his body sideways to support it with true hand, hand foot, and tail as he laid it noiselessly down, and peered into the dark space beyond.

As his eyes adjusted he could see he was in the right place, for it looked just as he had been told it would. A dull grey floor stretched away to the right, but he followed the line of the wall on the left until it joined the outer wall of the building, then tracked back two hands and one finger of carefully even paces, before moving out parallel to the outside wall for more counted paces, until he came to the machine he was supposed to find. A wire came up through the floor and went into a small box joined with another wire to a larger one, from which a thicker wire headed off into darkness. A force-wire also rose from the floor to power it. Now he must be especially careful.

From his harness came a tiny spotlight he could set to illuminate the force-wires, and a little device to check whether they had any force in. If they did, he was to stop the mission and return, and he nodded relieved satisfaction as a tiny green light indicated all was well, and the wires safe for him to cut. He preferred to use his claws if he could, but here the angle was awkward and the cut must be very exact, so he took from his harness a set of cutters and the little metal pieces he would need to rejoin the wires. The cutters did not just sever the wire but removed a tiny section, so that when he carefully attached one metal piece to one end of the cut wire, crimping it home with another tool, and
the second metal piece to the other end, they snapped back together exactly — but now with a tiny branch sticking out from the new join. Another metal piece attached to the end of that branch, to connect it to the special machine. To remove the machine from its pocket he had to unfasten the harness and slip out of it, then slide the machine from the metal case that would keep his harness looking the same; before putting it back on, he also transferred to the now empty side some weights that had been in one of the tool-pockets, so it would still be balanced.

Harness secure again, he picked up the loose wire and with a little snick connected it to the special machine; after some blinking the correct lights stayed on, so he knew it was working properly. Now came the next difficult part, and he took out the tools he would need. After his weeks on this world his own senses told him where the sun was, but the little device he had been given was more precise, and he put it down, turning it very slowly until the numbers showing on its display were exactly what he had been told they must be, and then painstakingly aligned the special machine so that it too faced in the right direction. Finally, he picked up the little device, and with an extended claw slipped the slide on its side from one position to another. The numbers on its display changed to a longer string, some of which changed as he moved the device about in the air, as they were supposed to. With great care Works in Metal held the device exactly above each corner of the special machine, pressing a button each time. Then he repeated the procedure, double-checking the alignments and making sure that when he pressed the button the numbers blinked. The machine would remember them, and that was good because while he had no problem with spatial maps the strange squiggles the two legs used to record their mouth-noises were much harder, and for this hunt everything had to be exactly right.

Putting away all his tools except the light, he carefully examined the area to make sure all was at it should be, and that he had not forgotten anything. He spotted and picked up the fragment of wire the cutters had removed, but saw nothing else amiss. Then he could return the way he had come. Re-attaching the panel he had unscrewed was awkward to do silently, and his tail ached from the strange grip he had to use, but once the upper screws were in place the rest was easy. Descending the ladders was again awkward, and as soon as he could see the base of each shaft he simply dropped, twisting to land lightly on all six limbs to spread weight and minimise sound. After a brief detour back to his assigned work area between the seventh and eighth floors he trotted back to the accessway.

The two leg was waiting, and gave a surprised laugh as Works in Metal laid at her feet the two mice he had found in the little air pipes.

*<I caught these. You did not mention them, but I did not think they should be there. I found three places where it is wet and low plants are growing. If you show me the map, I will show you where.>*

“Mice, yet! And the inspection done in double-quick time too. Thank you, Works in Metal. You’ve been a boon today.”

The two leg leaned down to offer a scratch that he accepted, rubbing his head into her hand. Some hours later, at the end of the day, the aircar took him and two other People who had been working in the lower part of the grid of pipes back to the big house where Soul of Steel lived, and where all visiting People were staying. When they landed by the place in which flying machines were kept the two leg from Dances on Clouds’s Far World was waiting, and he trotted over.

“Hello, Works in Metal. Did everything go well?”

*<It did.>* He took the little device from one of his harness pockets and gave it to the two leg, then signed slowly, for the two leg was not yet very good at Sign. *<All was as you thought it would
be, and I connected the special machine to the wires before the box and made sure it faced the right way. Then I used that device as you told me. Are the numbers correctly stored? They blinked on and off, as you said they would.

Jeb Applegarth took the modified handnav, swallowing a continuing amazement at treecats’ capacities, and flicked through its memory. “Yes, the numbers are recorded. Thank you, Works in Metal. That’s excellent.”

<Good. I will tell Golden Voice. And you are welcome. It was a good hunt.> Works in Metal gave a satisfied bleek. <I also caught two mice who did not expect to see me there at all. They were very surprised, for a short while.>

Jeb laughed and a strange look came to his face. “I don’t suppose they did. And I think one day quite soon some other mice are going to be very surprised as well!”

* * * * *

Going through her dead husband’s and son’s belongings had been almost as painful as Caitrin had dreaded, but her senses of rightness and overdue relief had not lessened. Tallying and variously giving away or moving to the attic clothes, impedimenta, and assorted papers had renewed memories of small events, ordinary and happy fragments of shared life, and though grief remained intense it no longer seemed a clotted, paralysing misery but flowed as a part of living. She had cried repeatedly, but tears were an ease. The unusual privacy of being largely alone, the house palpably empty around her, had at first exacerbated sorrow, but during the second day of sorting came to feel soothing. Charlaine — disapproving of subterfuge but clearly relieved at her mistress’s renewed animation — had been a sterling help with packing and folding, while the marine ‘furniture men’ who had used anti-grav floats to carry several large pallets up to the attics had redeemed their cover-story by lending the two women a hand with a couple of larger items — the tatty old couch Cal had loved to stretch out on, and the heavy ferranwood dressing-table Edward had inherited and Caitrin had always privately thought too dark and gloomy for a personal apartment.

All that remained was to close up and lock the attic, once the GSN tech doing whatever the necessary tuning was had finished. She had hoped he might be done by now, so she could turn the key and get on with forgetting whatever it was that nestled beneath her roof, but as dusk drew in there was still no sign of him. Eventually she gave in to impatience well spiced with curiosity and went quietly up the uncarpeted stairs behind the access-door. Emerging in the central portion of the sizeable space she saw him a few yards away, perched on a chair and bent over the innards of something with a little tool in one hand that was connected to a meter of some kind in the other.

“Mr, ah, Hawkwing?” There was no reply. “Ah, hello? Mr Hawkwing?”

She stopped as he straightened, tapping buttons on the meter with the hand holding it. Then he turned, keeping the other hand carefully positioned, and without rising bowed slightly, smiling apologetically.

“I’m sorry to be so rude, Your Grace, but I’m at a rather tricky stage, and if I lose my place …”

“Oh, please don’t worry, Mr Hawkwing. I quite understand, and I’m sorry to disturb you. I was just wondering how much longer you might be.”
“Not long, I hope, Your Grace. The other array is tuned — I just need to synch this one.” His gaze took her in and became shrewd and kind. “Would you like to watch? I’m afraid there won’t be much to see until the synch happens. Or … to have an explanation? Colonel LaFollet said I should answer any questions, if you chose to ask them.”

“I … Actually, I would like to watch, Mr Hawkwing, if I may. But I think the fewer explanations the safer.”

“Right you are, Your Grace. I’m sorry I can’t get you a chair, but — ”

“Of course. Please carry on with your work.”

She brought a chair across and sat next to him, watching for some minutes as strong, slim fingers minutely adjusted something, paused, and adjusted again, and again, while he watched the meter intently.

“Are you able to talk while you work, Mr Hawkwing?”

He didn’t pause, nor did his eyes leave the meter. “I am, Your Grace, if you’ll forgive a slight communications lag sometimes.”

“Then tell me, if you will, why you are doing this? I know why I gave Colonel LaFollet my consent, and I understand his position very well, but I confess I am curious about my, um, other allies.”

There was a pause, and she wondered if this were just that communications lag or if she’d offended him, but when he spoke his voice was calm and it seemed he’d merely been marshalling thoughts.

“Well, Your Grace, I’m an ex-slave in process of becoming a Grayson, so I’d be minded to obey any orders I was given. And I believe you know the Steadholder has twice rescued me, from Manpower and from Hades, so if she needs me to do something that something is done.”

“Of course. But these are, hmm, not quite Her Grace’s orders, are they?”

“Point, Your Grace, but I believe I understand why that must be so. And there are other, ah, allies involved who have received no orders at all. The real answer to your question, I suppose, is that … well, people would say we love the Steadholder, and that’s right — but it’s odd. I’ve only met her three or four times, briefly on Hades and here, and only have impressions. But many who love her have never met her at all.”

“So what is it about Lady Harrington? I know she is a great military leader, but you are describing something political, not just loyalty to a commander.”

There was another long pause, ended by his reaching out to a minicomp on his other side and tapping its display alive. He peered briefly at the screen, steepled, and returned attention to the meter.

“She is a focus.”

“I’m sorry?”

“A focus, Your Grace. It’s what the newsies mean when they call her the Salamander, always headed where it’s hottest. But that’s the wrong way round, you know — it’s hottest because she’s there. And she’s … forgive me, but she’s ‘one of us’, common-born for all her titles. They’re awards, after all, not inheritances, and half the galaxy must have seen what she did to be named a
Steadholder.” His fingers steadily turned, turned. “So she’s a Champion to many more than the Protector.” This pause felt more like a hesitation. “If you’ll allow the reference, Your Grace, the Audubon Ballroom is a good example. It’s not the path I chose, you understand, but no ex-slave is ignorant of Ballroom affairs. And the thing is, so far as I know, Her Grace has only ever had the one formal contact with Dancers, at Casimir, but someone I know who’s rather more, um, closely connected than I am, told me not long ago — crowed really — that she’d finally sorted out the Hauptman Cartel.” Turn, turn. “Now, I have no idea what Her Grace may or may not have said to Mr Hauptman, but I am aware they talk, despite having once been enemies, and also know that while Mr Hauptman has always been a vocal critic of slavery and a generous donor to the ASL, of late his support has changed its nature. He’s building two anti-slaver frigates for the ASL at cost, and not long ago, in the Maya sector, one of his freighters produced a military-grade laser and stopped a slaver. More than 200 C-, J-, and K-lines were freed, those frigates will free more, and if Mr Hauptman arms only a hundredth of his fleet and gives them orders to interfere when they can, the effects might be … remarkable. And whatever I think, the Ballroom thinks that’s pretty much down to the Steadholder, one way or another. So once again she has made something happen — that seemed impossible, or no-one else had thought of at all.”

“Fascinating.” Caitrin meant it, and was wondering who else besides the Audubon Ballroom might have connected Honor Harrington’s quiet but clear reconciliation with Klaus Hauptman almost a decade ago, and more recent return from Hades, with Hauptman’s equally quiet but plainly effective shift in how he put his financial muscle behind the cause he most fervently espoused. “So a part of what matters to you is the, ah, parasitism — is that the word? — of those we … oppose?”

He spoke carefully. “I, and very many Graysons, would serve the Steadholder however she required. But yes.” A frowning pause. “Of course, the politics of the situation with the Alliance and Republic is separate — but for ex-slaves it’s connected, because one thing we all wish is that Star Kingdom and Republic would put the effort into fighting Manpower they put into fighting one another. And the people who seem to be sliding the present ceasefire towards collapse are the same people who have for whatever reason protected parasites and maybe worse.”

Caitrin’s eyebrows shot up as her brain raced, and she couldn’t keep surprise from her voice. “You think … those people want a further war with Haven to protect Manpower?”

“Not necessarily, Your Grace. But who says they’re competent enough to know what they’re doing? It may be sheer stupidity, but if so it’s a very convenient stupidity Manpower is thriving on.” As Caitrin digested that acute and unpalatable thought Hawkwing’s hand abruptly reached out to tap the minicomp display alive again, fingers still turning gently, and suddenly the display shimmered and resolved into a picture that sharpened until it was wholly focused, though oddly grainy. A high-pitched hum began to sound from the minicomp. Caitrin stared.

“That is the Prime Minister’s Private Office.”

Hawkwing glanced up at the display and then at her, grinning. “I hope so, Your Grace.” The grin faded. “But I don’t know what that hum is.”

Caitrin listened, then grinned herself as the noise characteristically faltered and resumed. “That, Mr Hawkwing, is a carpet-cleaning ’bot. But it’s pitched rather high.”

“Ah. Thank-you.” His fingers twisted slightly once more and the hum dropped in pitch to the proper burbling growl.

“That sounds about right.” A moment later her diagnosis was confirmed as the ’bot trundled into view. Curiosity burned. “I know I said no explanations, Mr Hawkwing, but how in God’s name are you doing that? And how can I ensure my niece is secure against this technique, whatever it is?”
He sat up, considering her carefully. “In brief, Your Grace, we’re tapping the official surveillance system of the office. One of the treecats working with the PGS at Government House slipped out of the air ducts he was inspecting and added a certain piece of Grayson tech to the monitoring system, which these passive sensors can pick up. And they usually come attached to highly classified RMN and GSN drones. So to the best of my knowledge, to do this you pretty much need the GSN, as well as physical access to the system you’re tapping. I can’t imagine it would or could be directed against … your niece. To protect against it, however, you need only conduct regular eyeball inspection of the concealed parts of an official surveillance system — specifically the primary audiovisual feed — to check nothing has been added.”

Caitrin stared. She had known from Nimitz the ’cats were involved in all this up to their whiskers, but that had not translated mentally into a practical appreciation of the things those ’cats might do. Nor, for all Mike and Beth had bent her ear about its formation, had she quite realised that the Protector’s Own Benjamin had established meant Honor Harrington, besides being a Head of State in her own right, in effect had a private navy that was small compared to either its parent GSN or the RMN, but equipped to identical standards. And while she’d meant every word she said about High Ridge and her endorsement of pointing Harrington at the Manticoran establishment that had betrayed and bedevilled her, she again found she hadn’t entirely thought through what that might mean. But none of those burgeoning realisations affected the fact that some serious housekeeping was long overdue, and that carpet ’bot wasn’t even a beginning. “And if the … user of the office should turn the recording system off?”

“That would suspend recording — not disable the primary sensors. Our tap should be unaffected. And actually, Your Grace, though I’m guessing, I rather think that’s something the Colonel’s hoping for.”

“I imagine he might be.” That at least made sense, and Caitrin found she could process the political calculus of High Ridge being nailed in a lie more easily than she could analyse the secret alliance of treecats, Graysons, herself, and Lord knew who else that might make that calculus possible. Yes, if the lie were big enough, ugly enough, and the Baron’s public veneer sufficiently missing that his contempt for all commoners showed — that would at least split the Liberals in the Commons. And if a criminal matter was involved — peculation most obviously, but possibilities were manifold — he’d be finished and his administration with him. “I think I shall so hope also, Mr Hawkwing.” She smiled at him. “And thank you for a most interesting conversation. Is the tuning done now?”

“It is, Your Grace.” As he spoke he was replacing a cover, then shutting down the minicomp.

“And nothing else is needed? No, um, maintenance?”

“Shouldn’t be.”

“Good.”

They descended the stairs, and Caitrin locked the door behind them with a ceremonial feeling. Then a thought struck her.

“How is the … data collected?”

“We put in a whisker-laser that will send it straight back to the Bay House once a day, Your Grace.”

“A whisker-laser.” Somehow she kept her voice level. “Naturally.”
Hawkwing grinned at her again, very charmingly. “It’s as I said, Your Grace. The Steadholder makes things happen other people don’t think of — things they don’t think possible. And I’ll drink to that.”

Caitrin nodded. She would, too.
Alfredo Yu was not given to worrying about things he couldn’t control, but as the detachment of the Protector’s Own began to drop through hyperspace bands as they approached New Berlin he found himself preoccupied with what lay ahead.

So far, the mission had gone well. The courtesy call on San Martin had been celebratory, with the most enormous open-air reception for every Hades escapee on his muster-rolls and genuine warmth on show for all things Grayson, reflecting their hosts’ present, unaccustomed disappointment with the Manticoran government, and even — saving the guardian presence of Admiral Kusak and Third Fleet — the RMN. Yu had been surprised by how often he received oblique apologies for the inadvertent part San Martin’s request for annexation had played in bringing High Ridge to power, and had a great deal of interest to report to Protector Benjamin about what Grayson might expect from its principal ally once its new San Martino parliamentarians were seated and able to vote. All things considered, he found himself rather looking forward to some of their maiden speeches.

The call on Beowulf had also been successful, if less effervescent, with the Beowulfans making it gently clear they were glad Grayson was extending its diplomatic presence, not before time. Yu had never visited the Sigma Draconis system, nor any Solarian League world, and found it absorbing. Grayson’s — and especially Harrington Steading’s — growing reputation for receiving and integrating the freed had proven a far more potent advantage than he had realised, and the intensity with which Beowulfans focused on Mesa as an active threat had left him extremely thoughtful. He had also had a useful meeting with Ser Jacques Benton-Ramirez y Chou, a member of the planetary Board of Directors, head of the ASL on Beowulf, and the Steadholder’s maternal uncle, who had publicly eulogised his niece and Grayson very satisfactorily, privately promised any assistance he could provide, and on both occasions applied to High Ridge and Descroix a variety of terms Yu had stored away with pleasure.

He had been less pleased, returning for the second time through the Junction to Manticore, to find a message from Colonel LaFollet asking him not to continue to Gregor A until they could speak securely. He spent the wait for LaFollet to arrive worrying about what might have gone wrong, but when the Colonel swung neatly out of the docking tube and requested permission to board Yu could see nothing in his face to suggest disaster, and a raised eyebrow received a fractional shake of the head. As they headed for Yu’s quarters LaFollet said nothing, but once they were seated in private let out his breath with a sigh.

“I’m sorry if I worried you, Alfredo. Nothing’s gone wrong — in fact, it’s all gone surprisingly well. Too well, even.”

“Oh? How so, Andrew?”

“A fat plum that has spattered unexpectedly. You remember Miranda was going to put out feelers to see if the Ballroom might have anything we could use?”

“Certainly.” Yu noted ironically that any reservations LaFollet might have had about dealing with such illegal allies — and using his sister as point-man, to boot — seemed to have vanished.
“Well, they did, and how. It turns out they had Georgia Young in their sights for their own reasons, and have somehow both turned her and turned her over to us. And her primary debrief opens a huge can of worms, Alfredo, because she is, and has from the first been, a Manpower agent.”

“What?”

“Exactly. It’s a jaw-dropper, isn’t it? And sweet Tester, the questions! What was her brief? And what is a transstellar doing running agents in the first place? That’s for star nations, not companies. Besides, if there’s one such agent, how many more might there be? And where?”

“Good questions. Do you have answers?”

“Some.” LaFollet rubbed his chin. “Young’s brief, according to her, was initially simply to secure influence, preferably political, however she could. But once she did so, with the High Ridge administration, her orders became more specific — maximally weakening the RMN while preventing a treaty with Haven and trying to get the ceasefire to break down.”

Yu stared in shock, but even as he did so the advantages for Manpower of having its two most vocal and active opponents at war unrolled in his mind. But if that were the case, when had Manpower started this strategy? And in any case, while black ops for the Steadholder were one thing to keep very discreet, this was information with immediate strategic value.

“Does the Protector know about this?”

“Yes. GONI made sure he knows — or rather, will know by tomorrow — but informing the Queen is … difficult. For many reasons. As was giving this directly to the Steadholder, given the need for deniability, but I felt I had no choice.”

“I imagine not. And?”

LaFollet grimaced. “Young’s still alive and in place, which took some doing. The Queen remains uninformed for now, which took more doing. And while Her Grace was eventually persuaded patience was tactically essential, more by Nimitz than me, she insists on briefing Her Majesty privately, and sooner rather than later. Additionally, there are two matters in which waiting isn’t possible, and concerning which I have new orders for you from Her Grace.”

He handed over a sealed wallet and chip.

“I still can’t quite believe it and I doubt you will, but according to Young, High Ridge, to secure a secret loan for the CA and Liberals, is via Janacek and Houseman covertly handing over a decommissioned, recent-build RMN ship with its tech intact to what he believes are Manticoran commercial reps looking for a market edge. Yes, that’s more or less what I said, if with fewer gerunds. What High Ridge doesn’t know is that among those reps will be Manpower techs. Young didn’t know where exactly, yet, but may come through with that data. Meantime you’re to detach a couple of light units, supposedly with engineering issues but actually to track on passives all RMN ships supposedly headed for the breakers and intervene as necessary. Names, classes, and transponder codes of everything officially slated for decommissioning are in there.”

“That makes life easier.”

“Yes, but your people are going to have to catch them red-handed and take everyone alive, if at all possible. At the least it’ll be a huge scandal, and it might be enough for treason charges against Houseman and Janacek. It also suggests some very unhappy conclusions about what Manpower
wants with Manticore — or Mesa? It’s hard to know who’s running who.” LaFollet shrugged eloquently. “We’re going to have to reassess our entire threat analysis, going back decades, and the message to the Protector says so as bluntly as I dared. But the other thing is even trickier for you, I’m afraid, Alfredo. Young also had orders to do whatever she could to help precipitate a shooting war with the Andies. She further believes — her word — that Manpower has other people on Manticore, perhaps including Descroix, Tester help us, as well as people in both Nouveau Paris and New Berlin with the same basic orders. And she strongly suspects the mess with the Manticore–Haven diplomatic correspondence was engineered at one or other end.” He held up a hand to forestall Yu’s increasingly startled questions. “And there’s another strand, a financial trail that leads from Young back to Silesia, and an account that is partly fed from, or via, New Berlin. Specifically, the Reichsbank, which Gustav technically owns. Exactly. But assuming Young is telling the truth as far as she knows it, which she does seem to be, it’s far more likely to be a Mesan cut-out than anything the Andermani are doing themselves, and anyway Her Grace has made the call — so you’re to seek a private interview with the Herzog von Rabenstrange, even if you have to go to their Silesian station to find him, and present what is in effect an official note from the Steadholder in her plenipotentiary capacity. It’s all on the chip.”

“All being?”

“Your orders, the note, the relevant hard evidence about Young’s allegiance and the financial trail, and a polite question or three as to what the Herr Herzog might know about Manpower’s anti-Andermani operations, or about Haven’s position in all this.”

“Which we hope he will set about answering for himself?”

“Yes. Her Grace says his personal loathing for the slave trade is a great deal stronger than the Andermani political posture, and they lag behind only the Republic and Star Kingdom as enforcers of the Cherwell Convention. She is sure he will be less than amused by any suggestion of Manpower’s involvement in their affairs, and is in a position both to investigate and, if he finds evidence, take it to Gustav directly. But we’re getting into very murky water here, Alfredo, because if Manpower really has been trying to manipulate the Andies in relation to the Manties, and vice-versa, they have also presumably been trying to manipulate the Havenites in relation to both — and though we can hardly talk to the Republic, since we are still technically at war, the Andies could. But then again, if we assume that some at least of the current anatagonism between Haven and Manticore is manufactured, what might have been going on between Haven and the Andermani? And at whose behest? It’s a nightmare. So there is one thing I’m adding to your brief, on my own authority, which is that according to Captain Zilwicki the Ballroom, having reached its own conclusions about what seems to be going on, has sent someone to Nouveau Paris to talk to someone in government there. Given the politics involved I have kept this from Her Grace, and will do so unless a higher-level dialogue becomes possible. But I think it just might. Zilwicki was very cagey about who was involved, so I suspect it’s two quite senior someones, but he did say they already knew one another, so they have some kind of basis on which to talk, though what will come of it Tester only knows. And whether it will be right or advantageous to relay that to von Rabenstrange I can’t begin to guess — I just don’t know enough about him — but it might matter if he were in a position to talk to Haven at all. So now you know.”

And about the only good thing in all of that, so far as Yu could see, was that it was always better to know than not know; otherwise it was a nest of vipers. He had discovered at Gregor B that, so far as the authorities there knew, the Herr Herzog had not yet taken up his Silesian area command and was still to be found in New Berlin. But a mission that had already called for some rather fine balancing, in letting Emperor Gustav know that Grayson would not break with Manticore but had no quarrel with His Empire, and in observing the nice disjunction of Steadholder and Duchess Harrington, had additionally become a tap-dance in a minefield. Gustav was notoriously volatile, if
not quite as unbalanced as some of his forebears, but also had a reputation for strategic shrewdness; what he would make of a former Havenite turned Grayson suggesting Manpower was fomenting the war he seemed to want on his own territorial behalf was anyone’s guess.

On the other side of the coin, if that suggestion was correct, and von Rabenstrange could add evidence of his own to that concerning Georgia Young and Manticore — and if whoever was talking to someone in the Havenite administration actually got their attention as well — then the possibilities might be stranger and brighter than anyone could have anticipated. Despite his complete commitment to Grayson and willingness to respect its faith, Yu had never joined Father Church, retaining the atheism of his republican childhood; but he had found himself willing to believe, over the years, that something beyond personal ability attended Honor Harrington. Call it the luck, call it the Tester — Yu didn’t much care; but he devoutly hoped the galactic stir of events of which he found himself part was a sign that whatever it was was with her again.

* * * * *

Since the October elections had formally instated Eloise Pritchart as President, and she in turn had confirmed Kevin Usher as head of the resurrected Federal Intelligence Agency, he had been having to behave himself. Which was what Eloise wanted, he gloomily acknowledged, and he supposed it was reasonable enough for someone of his rank to be permanently surrounded by bodyguards and flunkies. He had at least managed to snag marines he knew as bodyguards, but it was an extremely tedious business even so, and as he now lived only a few minutes’ walk from the towering offices of the agency he bossed he had drawn the line at a daily chauffeur, insisting on walking, and making a habit, when the weather encouraged it, of detouring on the way home to walk through Napoleon Park and sit for a while listening to the distant thunder of Frontenac Falls and watching the play of light on river, ocean, and encircling mountains that made Nouveau Paris such a spectacular city.

Sometimes his wife met him there to sit together, and he was always cheered to see her waiting on the bench with the best view. Ginny was a complete urbanite, even more than he most at home in a warren of narrow streets, but she did like sharing that view with him, the freedom to do so openly a reminder and affirmation of how much better things were since Tom Theisman had managed to lodge a pulser dart in Saint-Just’s head and take his StateSec regime down in flames. The reborn Republic might even manage to get properly back on its feet if that aristo cretin High Ridge didn’t land them all back in a shooting war. And, to be fair, which Kevin tried quite hard to be, that trustless rat-bastard Giancola at Haven’s own state department, an appointment Eloise had been forced to by political maths that stuck in Kevin’s gullet because he wouldn’t trust the man with a paperclip, never mind high office. He also knew as fact that Giancola had access to everything his brother saw on the Senate Naval Affairs Committee, regardless of classification, and leaked a great deal more about Bolthole and the Republic’s military recovery from Buttercup than anyone ought. So far the leaking had been limited to senior political cronies, apparently by way of flattery and ego-management, but Usher was increasingly certain it was also designed to bolster a harder anti-Manticore line, and was beginning to wonder if Giancola actually wanted a resumption of hostilities; and if so why.

Today he was surprised to see someone sitting beside Ginny, and as her own bodyguard was waiting amiably at a discreet distance, someone she had arrived with. That almost certainly meant someone from the Ballroom, with whom she maintained contact for him as well as on her own behalf, and Usher signalled his own guards to stay back as he continued towards the bench — but nearly stopped dead in surprise when an unforgettable gaze and wicked wink told him who was
concealed beneath the neat wig, trim moustache, and spade beard. Forcing himself on, he sat beside
his wife and turned an impassive face to Jeremy X.

“And what might you be doing here, Ming?”

Jeremy’s eyes glittered. “Merciless, is it, Kevin? I seem to recall it was your pet lunatic who
massacred everyone last time we met.”

Ginny batted at Jeremy’s arm. “Don’t you be beastly about Victor. He’s just misunderstood.”

Both men suppressed smiles, thinking of the improbable and deadly Victor Cachat, and
Kevin nodded more cordially. “Point, Jeremy, and it is in fact good to see you. An unexpected
pleasure. But I have a feeling that won’t last.”

“Well now, it all depends. I promise you won’t be bored. Do you know the story about the
poor slaves who escaped but never got away?”

“No.”

“Then listen carefully, and I’ll begin.”

An hour later, when Jeremy finally took his leave, Kevin had to concede that boredom was
not uppermost in his mind. A combination of rage and ferocious calculation left him almost
breathless, and though he knew Ginny must be seething herself, she simply sat and held his hand
while he thought. At the very least the proof of Georgia Young’s affiliation Jeremy had delivered
was a bombshell about which the President had to know as soon as possible, if only to grant the
necessary constitutional permission for him to investigate some of her own cabinet members a great
deal more ruthlessly than hitherto, starting with Giancola, whose possible motive for desiring a
further war was now horribly apparent. But after careful consideration he thought it would be better
to undertake some preliminary work himself, and kissing Ginny farewell reversed course back to the
FIA offices. Fortunately for him, if less so for her, he caught a Senior Special Investigator whom he
had already earmarked for rapid promotion as she was leaving for the day and dragged her back into
the building with him.

A long night of slightly (and sometimes highly) illegal cybersearching and record-crunching
later, including a long foray by SSI Abrioux into old commercial and new financial records while he
used his cabinet-level clearance to tackle the Ministry of State’s own database and security logs, rage
and dismay had congealed into a leaden ball in his stomach that stayed with him as he made
necessary calls, told Abrioux what he wanted her to do meanwhile, and set off for the President’s
private apartments in Péricard Tower. Dawn was only just breaking as he was shown in, but Eloise
had always been an early riser, at least when Javier Giscard was away on duty, and he wasn’t
surprised to find her dressed and bright-eyed in her private study.

She eyed him with a frown, as did her personal bodyguard, Sheila Thiessen. “You look
rough, Kevin. And … I don’t know. Cross and shocked. Mmm. At least have some coffee before
you rearrange my morning.”

“Happily. I’ve been up all night.” He poured himself a cup. “You’re going to want to kill the
surveillance, Eloise. Sheila’s personal recorder will be enough.”

“Oh dear. Is it that bad? Sheila?”

With evident reluctance Thiessen opened a wall-panel and flicked a switch, before taking her
own recorder from her pocket, activating its visual as well as audio function, and clipping it to her
“So what is it, Mr Director?”

“Probable treason, Madame President.”

Pritchart paled. “Hell and damn. Who? No, tell me in order.”

“I’d have to anyway, Eloise. Not that it’s going to make much sense for a while even so. But … last night I was contacted by an old friend, who gave me some extremely disturbing data. Have you heard of a woman called Georgia Young? She’s also Countess North Hollow, the wife of High Ridge’s Minister for Industry?”

“I remember her name from general briefings.” Pritchart frowned. “There’s something of a mystery about her background, which feeds suspicion she is rather more than a society hostess.”

“Near enough. She runs political black ops for North Hollow and High Ridge. But her background is a mystery no longer, because that” — he laid a data wallet before Prichart — “is irrefutable genetic proof that she was born in a slave vat, and documentary proof of a very high order that she was sent to Manticore and financially staked by Manpower — to whom she still reports.”

“She’s an agent?”

“Yes. There is also an audio file, purportedly recorded by the woman herself under God knows what duress, stating that since her accession to serious political power with the High Ridge administration, her orders have been to do everything possible to weaken the RMN and foment resumption of hostilities with Haven. I cannot verify that recording, but the voiceprint, though highly stressed, matches what we have on file.”

Pritchart’s frown had steadily deepened as he spoke, but the last sentences drained her cheeks of colour. “Manpower is pushing the Manties back to war?”

“So it seems. And actually it does make sense, up to a point. The one thing we and they have always agreed about is the Cherwell Convention, so having us preoccupied with one another is good news for Mesa, just as any proper treaty would be a blow. But there’s more to it, Eloise. A lot more.”

She held up a hand, breathing deeply. “I bet, but first, I have to know who this source of yours is. Where is this coming from?”

“The Ballroom.”

“Oh wonderful. Very neutral observers.”

“Very concerned observers, Eloise, who bear us no ill-will at all. Quite the opposite. And it wasn’t any messenger either. Jeremy X came 500 light years to tell me he knows, and has solid proof which he shared, that Manpower is running a very high-level agent within the Manticoran government whose orders are to get us back to war. He also came to ask me a very pertinent question.”

Pritchart went paler still as she followed the logic chain. “There’s one at this end, too.”

“I believe so. And have reasonable substantive grounds to suspect someone in particular, but I can’t take it further without tripping alarms.”

“Who?”
“Giancola.” Pritchart went white. “And before you blow up at me, Eloise, I was hellish suspicious of it and of my own reactions, so since I received this little laser-head I’ve done everything I should, and a bit more besides. And what I can now prove is that” — he counted on his fingers — “Giancola has very substantial wealth — millions — that he has not declared. Nothing he earns or has ever inherited or been legitimately given can begin to account for a tenth of it, and it traces back to a web of companies whose ownership is concealed but whose founding investors, way back under the Legislaturists, included a subsidiary of the Jessyk Combine. I can also prove Giancola made substantial private payments to his deputy for negotiations, Special Representative Grosclaude, which on their own raise a host of ugly questions. And I can prove from his own Ministry’s records that he’s retained an extraordinary degree of centralisation, sufficiently so that it is possible — is possible, Eloise — that he has been altering the Manties’ diplomatic correspondence, and our own replies. He would have to have had Grosclaude’s connivance, but that’s all.”

“Oh … crap. Tell me you’re joking, Kevin. How the hell could two people pull that off?”

“Either he or Grosclaude has personally received or sent everything that’s been exchanged. In private, every time. And they alone have access both to our outgoing and the Manties’ incoming authentification codes. I’m not yet saying they did it, but I am saying they could have done it. I’m also saying they’re definitely in undeclared financial cahoots, and Giancola has a great deal more money than he can legitimately explain. Bottom line, Eloise, is that on the basis of what I’ve discovered for myself in the last 12 hours I could make a solid case for Giancola and Grosclaude to be brought in for formal questioning — but it wouldn’t answer security needs, because they’d have time to destroy evidence, and it would be a political nightmare. So what I want is for you, when you’ve had a chance to look through the data yourself, to call in Tom, Denis, anyone you want except any of Giancola’s lot, and authorise a complete lockdown, search and seize at State. Today, with no warning at all. If I’m wrong, I’ll take the fall. And truth to tell, I hope I am.”

Pritchart stared at him. “But you don’t think so.”

“No. I think both we and the Manties are being pushed back into a war neither of us wants or needs. And I think Manpower are doing the pushing. I’ve felt there was something screwy for weeks, but just put it down to professional paranoia and that idiot High Ridge genuinely being an idiot. But now I have a really horrible thought, which is that if — when — Giancola is confirmed as a Manpower agent, we’re going to need to start looking a lot further back. Manpower has been around for more than five T-centuries, and if they’re running agents like this now, they didn’t adopt that strategy any time recently.”

“Dear God. How far back, Kevin?”

“That never sufficiently damned House report of 1771 that kicked off the territorial expansion programme, for starters. Manticore had been pissing Manpower off for well over a century by then, and once we opted for expansion, they were always the primary target.”

It hurt Kevin to see Eloise looking so stricken, but she’d have seen it for herself soon enough and was visibly pulling herself together.

“History must wait, but I see your case that the present really can’t.” To Kevin’s surprise she turned to Thiessen, whose face had reflected consternation and increasing horror as she had listened. “Sheila, time for you to remind me I’m mortal, like those Roman slaves in victors’ chariots. Bearing in mind that Giancola is my official deputy and most probable opponent for re-election, should I grant what Kevin asks?”

Thiessen’s dark eyes turned to him and she spoke carefully. “Can you tell me how you know Jeremy X, Mr Director?”
“From my time in Old Chicago.”

“He helped in the rescue of the Zilwicki girl?”

“Yes. Before that he also hid people from Durkheim.”

“Huh.” Thiessen had, as much as Usher and Pritchart, survived the Saint-Just years and knew what trusting someone under those circumstances meant. “And you personally trust him?”

“He has held my life in his hands, as I have held his.” Kevin considered. “I can imagine he might try to sell me a bill of goods about something, if it suited him, but he wouldn’t fake this. Not in this way, not at this time, not in person, and not to me.”

“And his data checks out, so far as you can tell?”

“Down the line. Half of the stuff he handed over on Young is official Solarian police documentation from Smoking Frog, and most of the rest is official Manticoran stuff I’m willing to bet was put together by Anton Zilwicki. The seals and codes test genuine in every way the FIA can manage, and most could be positively checked at source, given time. And it’s exactly the kind of documentation the Ballroom leaves when it kills, none of which has ever been shown to have been faked despite some very serious scrutiny. So yes, I think all of that material is genuine, and does prove that Young works for Manpower. The audio record of her debrief is the kicker, but Jeremy explained how he turned her, and the evidence of who she is is a viable lever for what he says he did.”

“Turned her?” Eloise was frowning again. “She’s now a double agent for Manpower and the Ballroom?”

“Not quite, Eloise. The Ballroom handed her over to Zilwicki and Andrew LaFollet to run or to expose as they decide best suits them.”

“LaFollet?” Eloise’s eyes went vague as her mind turned, then sharpened again. “Do you mean Harrington’s chief Armsman?”

“One and the same. Which is the other side of this thing. Stop and think a minute about just what Harrington — who has every reason to hate and loathe High Ridge’s guts, who has by all accounts become an intimate of Queen Elizabeth, and who has argued since the ceasefire began for a proper and fair treaty to be negotiated as a matter of urgency — is going to be able to do politically with hard evidence that Manpower is influencing Manticoran policy. And then about what our negotiations with the Manties might look like after that? It would not be only High Ridge who would fall.” Suddenly Kevin grinned, though a snarl lurked in his voice. “What I believe I’m doing, Colonel Thiessen, is playing for a pearl without price. If I’m wrong, and the President lets me go ahead, we’ll be no worse off save for the loss of a gullible Director of the FIA who will resign in disgrace, making public apologies to Giancola for his unworthy suspicions. But if I’m right, there are, literally, millions of lives at stake — ours and the Manties’.”

“Yes.” She regarded him coolly. “Though you leave out the political risk, if you’re wrong, of giving Giancola an enormous electoral boost as the wronged party. But even so.” She turned to Pritchart. “You have to check the data yourself, Madame President, like reading for yourself before you sign anything, but if you’re satisfied with what you see, then for my money, do it. The Director wants to abridge the law, not ignore it, he’s come to you as he ought, constitutionally, and his reasons are valid and cogent. Neither you nor the Republic can afford for him to be right and yet to let it go. Nor can we afford a political catfight with no proof and no lessening of suspicion. A clean blow, made public either way, is the right option.”
Pritchart nodded. “Thank you, Sheila.” Her eyes narrowed in curiosity. “Did you know I would grant the request anyway?”

“Yes. It’s necessary, and I’ve never known you shirk the necessary.”

“Yes, it is. Call in Tom, Wilhelm, Denis, and Tony Nesbitt for two hours’ time, please. Oh, and Linda Trenis from NavInt.”

“Ahh.” Kevin sagged into his chair. “Do you mind if I go to sleep until they get here?”

* * * * *

New Berlin was the oddest capital Alfredo Yu had ever seen. Its combination of older, sprawling buildings, built before counter-grav was available or affordable, and ringing them the towering structures counter-grav made possible, was common enough. What was not common was for those older buildings to be oversize replicas of Old Earth buildings in a style involving many stone columns and projecting, heavily carved lintels, pediments, and architraves; nor for them still to house royalty and government, while embassies, commerce, and residents filled the towers; nor for the towers to be built in a strict and uniform circle, like monoliths from the dawn of human history, saving their pagoda-like tops. Still, with the imperial palace dead centre in white marble no-one could possibly mistake where power lay, and for all the architectural weirdness of their capital the Andermani were efficient and courteous hosts, their German–Chinese culture intriguingly subtle, and its hybrid cuisine extremely attractive.

The private com code for the Herzog von Rabenstrange with which the Steadholder had supplied him had been answered by a bland-faced man in exquisitely cut plain clothes, who had said the Herr Herzog was, alas, not in residence, but would be promptly informed the Admiral requested a private meeting on behalf of Steadholder Harrington. Yu had appreciated the man’s faint stress on ‘steadholder’, but his heart had sunk at the prospect of delays. It was less than a day, however, before the same man returned his call, inviting him to attend the Herr Herzog’s house early that evening.

“In dress uniform, if you don’t mind, Admiral. There is a reception and dinner for newly appointed members of His Grace’s command staff and their spouses, to which he is happy you be invited. And he promises to find time to see you personally later in the evening. Is that acceptable?”

“Yes. Of course, mein Herr. But …” Yu thought hard for a moment, appreciating the other man’s patience. “Mein Herr, I seek this meeting to deliver and discuss a personal message from the Steadholder, and I believe His Grace would wish for time to consider its contents before speaking to me.” He stared hard at the man. “I could of course deliver the note immediately, but, without the least prejudice, mein Herr, it is extremely important it go directly and only to His Grace.”

The man nodded appreciation, hesitated fractionally, but spoke. “I do understand, Admiral. Would my personal word suffice?”

Yu didn’t blink. “Formally given, mein Herr, of course.”

“Then I, Wu-Li Weissberg, Butler to His Grace Chien-Lu Anderman, Herzog von Rabenstrange, do swear to you, Admiral Alfredo Yu, that any communication from Her Grace Honor Harrington, Steadholder Harrington, placed by you into my hands shall pass from them only into those of His Grace, and that without delay.”
So Yu had delivered the note, into Herr Weissberg’s own hands, and, after an afternoon of meetings with naval and civil industrial people interested in Grayson’s revamped fission tech, changed into his rather austere and notably comfortable Protector’s Own dress uniform, strikingly different from the elaborate GSN version, and presented himself for dinner as requested. Von Rabenstrange was smaller in the flesh than expected, a dapper figure immaculately turned out in the high-collared white dress uniform of an IAN admiral; possessed of an enormous presence that owed surprisingly little to the golden imperial sunburst marking his closeness to the throne, he was also a charming host. His assorted staff officers (several with attentive but largely mute spouses) were impressive, and even if they represented a carefully hand-picked group it was clear the IAN had not allowed its personnel to lag behind its hardware. Yu found himself interrogated, ever so politely and remorselessly, about his experiences of the old Republican Navy, RMN, and GSN, and if the dinner-bell saved him from a line of questioning that was beginning to press on security parameters he found the thinking behind it intriguing.

The dinner itself felt familiar, given the virtual requirement for GSN captains and flag officers to dine with their officers at least weekly, and von Rabenstrange broached the topic directly by remarking to Yu he had borrowed the practice from the GSN. The way was open for Yu to explain that his navy had itself taken the notion from the Steadholder, and the talk became for much of the meal a lively discussion of Her Grace’s singular remaking of the GSN as her own ideal of the RMN, ranging from live-fire training and regular intra-squadron as well as fleet competitions back to the intimacy of companionable dining. There were also comparisons of uniform styles that made Yu smile wryly.

“I am less than glittery, aren’t I? It’s a new style for Grayson, of course, and it’s Her Grace I’ve to thank, again. When she first took up her commission in the GSN I’m not sure she muttered more often or more darkly about anything than she did about neckties and peaked caps, and while I know from experience an unfamiliar uniform can make one feel surprisingly awkward, Her Grace’s views were, um, severe. Of course, she was also then having to accustom herself to Grayson female dress, which she somehow managed to do by adjusting planetary fashion in her favour. She also changed the uniforms of her Harrington Steading Guards to make them far less elaborate and much more comfortable than the traditional design Lord Clinkscales had initially approved, which won her much gratitude in their ranks.” There were murmurs of amused understanding. “But even she couldn’t unilaterally change the GSN’s existing uniform and remained quite grumpy about it — until the Protector’s Own was formed after her return from Hades. Then she got a certain gleam in her eye, mostly, I think, because as the Own’s permanent CO she can always opt for its uniform when in Grayson service — and you see the result!”

He gestured to the crushproof beret tucked neatly under his lightweight and very stylised epaulette.

“Having had to deal with peaked caps in my first uniform I’d never found the GSN version a problem, but Her Grace was deeply attached to the RMN beret and I find I now feel its advantages.”

Von Rabenstrange smiled. “I envy you them, Admiral. The Andermans have of course always had something of a weakness for ceremonial pomp, and fancy uniforms are very much a part of that. Ask the poor Totenkopf Hussars, with their pelisses and Flügelmützen. At least we managed to avoid the Pickelhaube, though I believe it was quite a close-run thing. Fortunately, Gustav I was pretty consistent in his anachronism and thought Wilhelmine Germany a sorry come-down, so the earlier Prussian style prevailed.” He sipped the Potsdam wine that had been served with the meat course, so dark it was more black than red. “Her Grace seems entirely modern, though.”

His tone invited Yu’s opinion, which was that his real business of the evening was beginning a little earlier than anticipated.
“In many ways, Your Grace. The long war with Haven did force those fighting it to develop and embrace a great deal of new thinking, as I’m sure you appreciate. But Her Grace is also by birth a Sphinxian Yeoman, so her basic political instincts are more conservative than radical, and much more conservationist that commercial.”

Opposite him, von Rabenstrange’s Chief of Staff, Kapitän der Sternen Zhenting Isenhoffer, tipped his head in polite enquiry.

“More than one-third of Sphinx’s surface is undeveloped, Captain, guaranteed to Treecats in perpetuity, and Sphinxians — especially those who work with or have been adopted by ’cats — like it that way just fine.” He turned back to von Rabenstrange. “But I’ve come to believe there’s another aspect, also, Your Grace, which is the extent to which the Steadholder is also in herself something new. It sounds absurd, I know — but she is not only unlike anyone else I’ve ever come across, she is … distinctively different. It’s partly Nimitz — I don’t believe there’s been any other warrior-stateswoman with such a cross-species bond — but he has told me himself that what the ’cats call her ‘mind-glow’ is far stronger than that of any other person any ’cat has ever sensed. I say ‘stronger’, and something like volume does seem to be involved, but also something else the ’cats can’t really describe but that makes Her Grace exceptional to them. ‘Flavour’ or ‘taste’, perhaps. And while she is both an absolute tactician and an exceptional strategist, as well as one of those commanders who generates ferocious personal loyalty among the people she leads, I don’t believe either as an officer or as a military historian that those qualities alone can account for how far-reaching the effects of her victories have been, the worlds that have turned on and been turned by her actions.” He shrugged eloquently. “Most native-born Graysons would simply say the Tester loves her, while most Manticorans would say she has the luck. Whatever you call it, there’s something — and I don’t think it’s anything the galaxy yet has an accurate name for.”

“A testimonial indeed.” Von Rabenstrange’s eyes were as dark as the wine he sipped. “And your point about the Treecats’ opinion is a fascinating one. In so far as it is possible here I have been following the proceedings of Dr Arif’s Commission with great interest, and not only for the earthquakes it will certainly bring to security and psychiatry. It behoves us as human beings, I believe, to understand those with whom we share the galaxy; and it is only sensible as well as right to seek other species’ understandings of us. I understand from the most recent reports there is to be a Treecat ambassador to Austin City as well as to Landing. Do you think the ’cats might send one here?”

“Probably, Your Grace.” Yu grinned cheerfully. “They certainly would if His Imperial Majesty were to send them one.”

Von Rabenstrange laughed aloud. “What a splendid notion. Would Her Majesty not be offended, though?”

“Surprised, I imagine, but not offended, if the request were made in all seriousness and honour.”

“Then I shall suggest it to my cousin.”

“You might also advise Him to pick someone with a sense of humour who doesn’t mind feeling mildly bemused, more or less permanently, and to make sure they have an inexhaustible celery budget.”

Amid general laughter and some thoughtful looks the talk passed to other passions for particular foodstuffs and von Rabenstrange let the conversation go, but his gaze remained on Yu. Liveried servants swiftly cleared the table and supplied cups, and with the post-prandial rituals underway the Herzog stood, waving his officers to keep their places.
“I’m afraid you must excuse the Admiral and me, ladies and gentlemen, as we have some diplomatic business to tidy up. But please do not break up prematurely on our behalves. Zhenting has the chair. Admiral?”

Yu made his own polite nods to the company and followed the Herzog through a hallway to what was clearly his private office and study. A secure com unit stood on a large and well-used desk, but there was also an exquisite neo-oil portrait of a woman in blue hung on one wall, with a vivid, geometrical abstract on another, and to one side a couple of comfortable chairs. Seating himself in one, the Herzog gestured him to the other and regarded him with a cool gaze.

“I confess, Admiral, to finding Her Grace’s note most surprising, not least in that I was unaware she held plenipotentiary powers from the Protector. May I ask if the Manticoran government is aware of this?”

“It is not, Your Grace, though Her Majesty is fully informed.”

“Ah, I see. Or perhaps I don’t — the whole situation does seem extremely delicate as well as confusing. Can you clarify matters, Admiral?”

“I hope so, Your Grace, though there are genuine complexities. But what I had thought might be most awkward has become much simpler. I believe Her Grace’s note mentioned the values of frankness at this time, in whatever ways are possible?”

“It did.”

“She has also, as Steadholder Plenipotentiary, given me permission, with Your Grace’s leave, to speak directly to the issue of Grayson–Andermani relations.”

“Then please do.”

Yu took a deep breath. “I would say first that while the Steadholder’s Manticoran identity as a Duchess makes her position personally delicate, Grayson’s policies are clear. We are sworn to Manticore in mutual defence and that will not change. We fear a resumption of war with Haven, but though we believe, even now, that it can and should be avoided, we will fight it if we have to. However, we have no quarrel of any kind with His Imperial Majesty, and we do not consider Manticoran commercial interests in Silesia to be vital or integral to the Star Kingdom’s well-being, nor worth anyone’s blood. So we are prepared to offer His Majesty what is in effect a bilateral non-aggression pact, a mutual promise that neither side will fire first on the other’s ships, and we will not permit GSN units or personnel serving with other Alliance navies to be deployed against the IAN anywhere outside our own and Alliance Home Systems. And while we would wish for this pact to be initially secret, we undertake to inform the High Ridge government at an … appropriate time.”

Von Rabenstrange had nodded sharply at the offer of a pact, and now allowed himself an ironic smile.

“I think perhaps I will not ask about the proprieties involved.”

Yu smiled back. “Quite so, Your Grace. Though one of them does fall partly within your purview. The GSN is aware of your new pod-laying classes, as we are aware of the RN’s equivalent developments. But while ONI has certainly been informed, what the RMN knows I could not say.”

The smile disappeared as von Rabenstrange held up a hand. “Let me be clear, Admiral. You know that Haven has pod-layers?”

“Protector Benjamin has no doubt, and is acting accordingly.”
“Do you know how many?”

“Too many. We are projecting hundreds of hulls completed within the next two T-years.”

“Too many, indeed. Thank you. I will say frankly we had ourselves assumed something of the sort but not been able to confirm it. High Ridge continues to assume otherwise?”

“So I understand.”

“He really is a fool, then, not simply a bigot. Mmm. But you are also saying he similarly assumes or believes that we have no podlayers?”

“Again, that is my understanding.”

“Astonishing. So, hard as it is to believe, their revelation to Her Majesty’s Government might have a greater effect than any sensible analyst would expect?”

“It might well. And while this is pure impertinence, Your Grace, I would suggest that if your ambassador in Landing was empowered to decide the timing of any announcement …”

This smile was a thing of beauty. “Indeed. You do have an interestingly political mind, Admiral. I will take that under advisement.”

“Thank you, Your Grace. Finally, so far as this matter goes, Her Grace wished me to make sure you were aware that Queen Elizabeth’s thinking is, ah, quite distinct from that of her present government, and that under different circumstances she would be happy to discuss a proper, negotiated settlement between the Star Kingdom and the Empire on any terms that were mutually respectful and beneficial, so long as the ‘running sore’ of Silesia — Her Grace’s words — is properly cauterised.”

Von Rabenstrange nodded sharply again, eyes bright.

“Her Grace’s words are striking, but that is a step beyond. I believe His Imperial Majesty will wish to agree to the non-aggression pact, and I shall convey the offer to him as soon as possible. And your several interesting points concerning pod-layers. But as for the rest … well, if we are being frank, what it amounts to is that as and when there is a change in Manticoran government, we will be able peacefully to settle any matters arising with regard to Silesia. But in the meantime, alas, we are where we are. The knowledge is useful but not immediately helpful.”

“I understand, Your Grace, but this is where the other matters I believe Her Grace will have mentioned come in.”

“Indeed. But waters become extremely murky.”

“They do, Your Grace, but if you will permit me to say so, that is only partly genuine unknowns; the rest is mutual ignorance. But before I come directly to that, perhaps I may separate out one other aspect of Her Grace’s note.” A hand waved acquiescence. “Then, sticking wholly to proven facts, it is the case that Her Grace has been made aware of evidence conclusively indicating that Lady Young, Countess North Hollow, is not her own woman but an agent reporting to Manpower, whose brief is — or was — to do everything possible to weaken the RMN and restart the war with Haven.” Von Rabenstrange nodded curtly, eyes dark again. “Financial data provided by Lady Young indicates that one route taken by funds reaching her black accounts on Manticore comes through both Silesia and several accounts held at the Reichsbank. Believing strongly that neither His Imperial Majesty nor you would knowingly connive at Manpower activity within the Empire, activities that would necessarily be illegal under imperial law, Her Grace asks there be a
discreet investigation of these accounts, and that if they are indeed a part of Manpower’s arrangements, clear and legally admissible proof of this be sent to her on Manticore.”

“Which might, beyond the facts to which you have confined yourself, have some bearing on that question of when a change in Manticoran government may be expected?”

“Just so, Your Grace.”

“Mmm. But I see why you wish to separate this matter, and again, while it is a delicate issue in some ways, I do not believe His Imperial Majesty will hesitate in agreeing to Her Grace’s request. We have no love whatever for Manpower, and no wish to turn a blind eye to their perversions. But it is the implications of Her Grace’s … remarkable discovery that are problematical.”

“Indeed, but they are so for everyone, Your Grace. If I may again stick to proven facts, Lady Young has stated that her brief included the fomentation in any way possible of hostilities between Kingdom and Empire. She has also stated her belief that Manpower has other agents with similar briefs both here and in Nouveau Paris. This of course seems incredible, but so does Lady Young’s true identity and that is proven. Moreover, the curious — even bizarre — difficulties that have attended diplomatic negotiations with Haven with regard to apparent alterations of correspondence do in this light strongly suggest third-party interference. So, moving beyond facts, may I posit that there are in truth such agents attempting to influence decisions here and in Nouveau Paris, and that one such has there played a role in secretly altering correspondence?”

“You may.”

“Then what would such agents be doing here? Lady Young’s role suggests quite indirect action, the compromising of diplomatic correspondence something far more direct. In either case, scrutiny might turn up evidence, but the question is where to look. And unfortunately, one obvious answer, the interface between Star Kingdom and Empire, is made doubly difficult by the galactic incompetence of the High Ridge government and the longstanding, natural tension between the polities with regard to Silesia.”

“Well put, Admiral, and quite right. To repay frankness with frankness, His Majesty feels strongly the time has come to push our claims in Silesia, and I fear no outside influence was needed to achieve that.”

“I imagine not, Your Grace. At the same time, if there are other persons who have played prominent or unexpected parts in forming that resolve, it might be worthwhile examining them closely.” Was that a slight frown on the Herzog’s face? “Still, as relations between Kingdom and Empire are so problematical in this respect, I have wondered whether relations between Empire and Republic might serve us better.”

Von Rabenstrange became very still. “Go on.”

“Well, as a strategist it strikes me plainly that if Manpower’s purpose is, as it seems, to weaken and distract all three polities with mutual aggression, they would not want any alliance between Empire and Republic to simplify matters. So while I know nothing — literally — about what contacts you may have with Haven, I find myself wondering whether they might perhaps lately have changed, or picked up in any way. And whether any such change might have involved some attractive, logical offer that might, ah, encourage one course or another.”

“Suppose it were so, Admiral? What then?”

“Any sensible person would in those circumstances think very carefully about such a proffer,
Your Grace. It is, after all, not long since the Republic was the clear threat to His Imperial Majesty’s interests and territories, and were it ever decisively to defeat the Alliance, it would become so again.”

“A point of which we are well aware, Admiral, I assure you.”

“Of course, Your Grace. But it strikes me that the people now considering any such proffer would be asking themselves if the Republic was being sincere. They would not, I think, be asking themselves whether the Republic were being misrepresented or manipulated by a third party.”

_That_ was definitely a frown. “That is … an interesting conjecture.”

“A suggestive one, certainly — but compounding speculation is rarely wise, so before I continue may I ask if there are any facts Your Grace might be able to add?”

Von Rabenstrange was silent for a moment before nodding. “I think there are, partly because I am inclined to trust Her Grace, as she to trust me, partly because the information about Lady Young is intensely disturbing, and partly because we want no conflict at all if we can avoid it. So yes, you may confidently stipulate we have reason to believe the Republic welcomes and, ah, encourages our pressure on Manticore over Silesia.”

“Thank you, Your Grace. In that case, it has further struck me that such encouragement would, in all likelihood, have been given very discreetly, perhaps through what diplomats call backchannels — which is very understandable, but does mean the opportunities for an individual to interfere are far greater.”

“That is true.”

“Yet it also means a check might be made, by asking His Imperial Majesty’s ambassador to Haven to seek discreet confirmation from someone who was _not_ involved in the hypothetical proffer, but who _is_ nevertheless in a position to know what _should_ have been proffered.”

“And whom do you suppose such a person might be?”

“Without knowing any details of who made the proffer in the first place it’s hard to speculate, Your Grace. But it seemed probable both to Her Grace and to me, first, that anything diplomatic is likely to have come through their department of state, and hence through one of Secretary Giancola’s people, and second, that anything concerning what the Republican Navy would or would not do under various circumstances would need to have been approved by Admiral Theisman and President Pritchard. You may recall Her Grace has twice met the Admiral, once as his captor and again as his prisoner, and though he is formally an enemy she remembers and thinks of him as a man of honour. He would, of course, be entirely willing to fool the Alliance, if he could, but she does not believe he would agree to any deliberate deception practised against the Empire while it and the Republic are at peace; certainly not under the guise of seeking warmer relations. His former Ops officer at Barnett, Commodore Caslet, whom I believe you once met as a prisoner and now serves under me, agrees. And there is of course the evidence of Theisman’s struggle to restore the old Havenite constitution, which does imply he overwhelmingly values the rule of law for government as well as governed.”

“Mmm. So you think we should ask Admiral Theisman if Secretary Giancola has been … less than truthful with us?” Yu did not miss the confirmation of Giancola’s role, but von Rabenstrange’s voice held a dangerous note of amusement. “It seems a little quixotic, Admiral, not to mention rude.”

“Perhaps so, Your Grace. But not so quixotic as tilting at a windmill only to find it truly is a giant. And not so rude as such a surprise.” Yu let a little of his uneasy frustration show. “The truth is,
Your Grace, I cannot do more than speculate, but neither can you. The thrust of what Manpower is doing depends on mutual distrust and confusion and to counter it requires trusting and clarifying. Her Grace has sent you the data we have, which came as a complete shock, I assure you, and has us all re-evaluating almost everything we thought we knew. We can only ask you do what you can to investigate the horrifying possibilities knowledge of Lady Young raises — though I do have one other, incomplete fact I can offer you.”

“Yes?”

“It must be clear to you, Your Grace, that the data concerning Lady Young’s background comes indirectly from the Ballroom.”

“I had assumed so, remembering Her Grace’s former association with them regarding Casimir. And I will add that I have no qualms about that. The Ballroom has always been careful of our sensibilities in the Empire, and the data itself is multiply attested, in legitimate and verifiable ways. Indeed, the data’s provenance as Ballroom documentation is in many ways a point strongly in favour of its accuracy.”

“Well and good. The incomplete fact, then, is that we were also told, by the same source, that the Ballroom has sent someone senior to talk to a member of the Havenite government whom they know personally.”

Von Rabenstrange became intent. “You don’t have a name for either person?”

“I do not, Your Grace.” Yu hesitated, but could see no risk in adding speculation. “If I had to guess, I would say I believe with some reason that Jeremy X is personally involved. These matters would certainly command his closest attention. And reading between the lines regarding that bizarre business in Old Chicago three years ago, I suspect he was involved in that — as was Colonel of Marines Kevin Usher, now Director of Haven’s FIA and so a member of President Pritchart’s cabinet.”

“Mmm. Yes, that is an interesting link. And a very interesting fact, however incomplete.” Von Rabenstrange was silent for a moment before smiling wryly. “So the situation is that you are warning us and the Manticoran crown, yet bypassing Her Majesty’s present administration, while the Ballroom is warning the Republic. How droll. But I find I agree with you that Her Grace has a most uncommon — even uncanny — knack of being at the fulcrum of events at the right time, and who shall say this most peculiar situation is not another such moment? Still, you must understand, Admiral, I can make no response now, as I could with Her Grace’s other requests, though I can and do assure you the matter will be considered very swiftly at the highest level, and that I shall urge His Imperial Majesty to make all the enquiries you suggested.”

He stood, and as Yu rose himself offered a hand. “I thank you for your frankness — it cannot have been easy, but is appreciated as it was intended to be. You still have some days before you are scheduled to return to Grayson, yes? I will be in touch.”

* * * * *

The cabinet members gathered to hear Kevin Usher’s formal report were all but catatonic by the time he was done, so far as Eloise Pritchart could tell — which was, she supposed, reassuring. Even Tom Theisman, Denis LePic, and Tony Nesbitt, who had known in outline what was up for longer than
any of the others, had slightly dazed looks, and the rest were openly gaping. No-one had been happy three days ago, when the abrupt descent of scores of FIA agents on the Ministry of State and the arrests of Arnold Giancola and Yves Grosclaude had triggered a media frenzy and parliamentary convulsions; they had got unhappier with every passing hour, even when — especially when — a curt holding message from Kevin had said only that he already had sufficient evidence and confessions to justify the FIA’s actions and would report as soon as possible. Now, with the hard facts they had demanded before them, everyone seemed to have lost their volubility.

Giancola himself was equally saying nothing from his cell but Grosclaude had volubly turned State’s Evidence in return for the promise of his life. Giancola had bribed him, handsomely, and had doctored the diplomatic correspondence, damn him for ever, and had done it at Manpower’s behest, with a promise of relaxing Haven’s attitude to the Cherwell Convention when he came to power and in return for enough money to explain a great deal about his superbly oiled political machine. How — and how long ago — he had been recruited remained alarming puzzles, but his intent had clearly been to use Haven’s successful rearmament as political capital when war restarted while blaming Pritchart as much as High Ridge for the failure of negotiations. Kevin had the original notes the Manties had sent and the sabotaged versions of their own replies that had actually been sent back to Manticore, with recovered comconsole logs recording the alterations; and if High Ridge’s arrogance remained crystal clear, almost every one of the substantive disagreements and refusals that had stymied any progress was Giancola’s work. The Manties weren’t insisting on keeping every system ‘liberated’, any more than Haven was demanding the return of Trevor’s Star. And while they did want reparations — which wasn’t, Pritchard knew, unreasonable of them — Giancola had inflated their demands by an order of magnitude, taking them from painfully punitive to economically disastrous.

She gathered everyone by eye. “So there we have it, people. And appalling as it is, at least we now know. So what do we do about it?” There was silence and Pritchart smiled grimly. “Alright, then it’s question time. Denis, as Attorney-General, where does this leave us legally with regard to the negotiations?”

LePic’s face shifted from misery into a scowl. “I’ll need to take formal advice, but plainly, though everyone here has acted in good faith, we have been betrayed into collective bad faith. Last time we discussed the negotiations I said we had solid and reasonable grounds to conclude the Manties had no serious intention of signing a treaty, and would be legally justified in resuming active operations if we decided we had to do that. But that is no longer true, and I’m reasonably sure that, knowing what we now know, we are obligated under galactic law to inform the Manties of Giancola’s actions and arrest, and try to restart negotiations on a new basis. How we do that I have no idea, and no hope High Ridge will be more reasonable second time round, but I’m afraid we have to try.”

Pritchard nodded bleakly. “Yes, we do, however much making those admissions is going to stick in our craw. In my craw. Damn Arnold.” Giancola’s former allies winced but said nothing. “Still, I’ll chew and swallow, because we do have to, and it’s my job. Does anyone disagree?” No-one seemed to, but Nesbitt stirred unhappily in his seat. “Tony?”

“I can’t disagree, but before we go galactic can we be clear about what we’re going to do here, please?” Like Henrietta Barloi at Technology and Sandra Staunton at Biosciences, Nesbitt had been a political ally of Giancola’s, but was also innately principled and had (as Pritchard had hoped) risen stiffly to the challenge of Usher’s suspicions and original request. Certain that Usher would be the one resigning his confidence had held up to the last, but faced with the hard evidence of comlogs and Grosclaude’s confessions he had crumpled. Now he had an ugly look in his eye as he took in the extent to which he had been used by Giancola but his acceptance of what had happened was keeping Giancola’s other partisans quiet. “I can’t pretend to be thinking straight about this yet, but whatever
its galactic effects may be, the domestic repercussions are going to be enormous. Are we really proposing to hold a treason trial?"

“Oh yes.” Pritchart, Theisman, and Rachel Hanriot, the Treasury Secretary, spoke in unison, and Pritchart gestured Theisman to continue.

“We must, Tony. In public, all evidence on show. Whatever the domestic costs. Everyone knows Giancola and Grosclaude have been arrested. So they must be exonerated or charged, and the evidence Kevin has found tells us which. It’s also the only basis on which we can hope to re-start negotiations with any credibility at all.”

Nesbitt stared unhappily. “But it will look like a political trial.”

Hanriot’s voice was scathing. “So we should sacrifice justice for spin? Again? Come on, Tony, treason is political. It can’t not be. If Giancola had succeeded in getting us back to needless war with the Manties tens, hundreds of thousands would have been killed — murdered, really — to protect Manpower, for fuck’s sake. And if we cannot make him pay for that then Tom put Saint-Just in his grave for nothing, and we should not hold our offices.”

That produced winces all round and Pritchart held up a placating hand. “I do understand your concerns, Tony, and it’s certainly going to be rough on us all for a while, but actually what happens to Giancola and Grosclaude is not our decision. Treason is not only political, it’s also criminal. And the law will take its proper course. I imagine it already is. Kevin?”

Usher’s eyes were bloodshot, and Pritchart wondered if he’d had any sleep at all since he’d kicked over this can of worms, but she knew from his abstracted look that his brain was still working fiercely.

“Yes. Charges of capital treason will be filed before the end of the day. I instructed them to wait until late afternoon to give me time to brief you all, and the President time to inform Parliament, but Giancola has the same rights as any citizen and we cannot delay beyond today. He and Grosclaude will be arraigned in the High Court tomorrow morning.” He smiled without humour. “With the President’s consent I told Chief Justice Tullingham bluntly that given his history with Giancola he is expected to recuse himself, which he is hastening to do. As it happens, I don’t think it will be as bad as you all seem to fear, because pretty much everyone is going to be as confused as we are when they see the evidence, then they’re going to be just as enraged as we are with Giancola and Grosclaude. In the longer term, I think we’ll come out stronger and stabler for a trial that includes genuine and clear evidence. But with all respect to Tony, the real point right now is galactic, not domestic, because it’s foreign policy Giancola suborned, and once the news breaks here, it’s on its way to Manticore. And I don’t think we want the Manties — specifically Queen Elizabeth — to find this out from the newsies before we ‘fess up directly.”

Amid pained looks Walter Sanderson, the Secretary of the Interior, frowned. “I take your point, Kevin, but how can we prevent that? We can hardly send off a dispatch boat to High Ridge today.”

“Why not? The note only has to be an outline at this stage. And who said anything about sending it to High Ridge?” When Sanderson and others stared Usher gestured impatiently. “I told you all that the Ballroom also gave the data on Young to Harrington — one of whose ancestors actually signed the Cherwell Convention and whom High Ridge has vilified and persecuted for years. For all we know, she’s already grasered the whole High Ridge administration into orbital debris, and if she hasn’t it’s only because she’s waiting to take her best shot. And if the Queen knows, which I think we have to assume she does, Harrington won’t be able to wait for very long.”
As this was digested Pritchart saw a few fugitive gleams of better cheer at the thought of their wartime nemesis doing to High Ridge what she had so often done to them. She would admit to a rather warm feeling about it herself.

“But if we can’t send a note to High Ridge, who do we send it to?” Sanderson sounded almost plaintive. “The Queen?”

“Yes.” Kevin’s eyes were on Theisman. “But not directly. She hates our guts, and as the Legislaturists were responsible for the assassination of her father, while Saint-Just subcontracted those of her uncle and cousin, as well as Cromarty and Prestwick, she’s not going to be happy about believing anything we say.” His fingers drummed briefly on the table. “In some ways the best intermediary would actually be Harrington, who seems to have become a personal friend — a very rare commodity for a ruler — and who has always shown herself as scrupulously fair when no-one’s shooting at her as she is deadly when anyone is. But I think we’d do better to get to Elizabeth via Grayson. And Tom has actually met Protector Benjamin.”

Theisman raised his eyebrows, old pain on his face. “Giving evidence against people to whom I’d handed over Grayson and Manticoran PoWs to be murdered didn’t exactly serve to recommend me, Kevin.”

“Oh yes it did, Tom. You gave that evidence willingly, and the Graysons know both you and Alfredo Yu had protested yourselves blue in the face about the Masadans’ treatment of prisoners, because it was on record in the consular database the Manties seized on Endicott and White Haven certainly shared it with them. Harrington also went out of her way when she returned from the dead to say that you and everyone under your command had treated her and her people impeccably after Adler, before Ransom seized them from you. And remember it’s Grayson, not Manticore, that’s given Caslet and Yu commissions — under Harrington. You know both personally as well, and Yu is now pretty senior in the GSN.”

Around the table surprised frowns were turning thoughtful, and Hanriot leaned forward.

“You mean for Tom to go personally to Grayson?”

“Yes. And that’s my formal advice, Madam President, not a sudden brainstorm.” Kevin’s voice went very flat in a way Pritchart hadn’t heard from him in years — not since her Aprillist days before the Revolution. “People, everything in this whole sector is in flux. We know we’ve been messed with. The Manties know, or soon will, they’ve been messed with. And the people who have messed with us both are the only people in the galaxy we both hate even more than we hate one another. It’s an astonishing opportunity. But our communications loop is too long, and if we’re to wring any advantage from this we simply cannot afford ten-week delays between question and answer. So yes, I think Tom should go to Grayson himself, and after that Manticore, with any luck. And not just as Secretary of War and CNO but as Acting Secretary of State as well, with plenipotentiary powers to end this fucking war in any way we can all survive, up to and including a military alliance with the Manties to go and invade the living shit out of Mesa and bring the whole Manpower board back in chains. Which is not a brainstorm either, and not only because any alliance would do a great deal to take any issue of reparations off the treaty table. We’re going to have to do something about them, and so are the Manties.”

Pritchart doubted anyone except Kevin had yet managed to think of Giancola’s treason and exposure as a form of opportunity, but she didn’t disagree, and his combination of logic, vigorous crudity, and a way of taking positive action appealed to them all. The coupled point about reparations and revenge also pushed everyone’s buttons. And Tom Theisman was the only person in the galaxy she would trust with plenipotentiary powers — as they all would, in this, because his fighting record
against the Manties was superb and they knew that without him there would be no reborn Constitutional powers to delegate in the first place. So. She kept her voice soft.

“Will you do it if I ask, Tom?”

He sat thinking for several minutes before he reluctantly nodded. “Yes, if you ask it, Eloise. Kevin is right there is a real opportunity in the revelations of Young and Giancola to win through to a treaty, at least if High Ridge and Janacek are gone. And I think he’s right they will be, if they aren’t already. But I’m not certain you should ask. And if you do, what is my position about Bolthole and our podlayers supposed to be? I cannot negotiate with anyone in good faith, nor hope to win reasonable terms — let alone forge any alliance — if I’m concealing our current naval strength. But informing the Graysons and Manties that while it may all have been a Manpower plot against both of us, we’ve nevertheless taken the opportunity to regain military parity … well, it’s not exactly going to get things off to a flying start, is it?”

“No, it isn’t.” Pritchart tapped the table, thoughtfully. “Then again, if it isn’t High Ridge and his bunch, who would you be talking to? Whoever becomes Prime Minister, the kind of scandal we’re talking about will have to mean, in naval terms, that White Haven and Harrington, maybe Caparelli, will be back in charge. And you’ve always insisted that whatever High Ridge and Janacek said or thought, those three knew perfectly well what we had to be doing. So Queen Elizabeth must also know, and it won’t come as a shock to any of them, however much they dislike the consequences.”

She thought deeply for several moments. “Alright, people, we have a plan. First, does anyone formally object to Tom being granted plenipotentiary powers to negotiate for us? Or to him going to Grayson?” Barloi and Staunton still looked extremely unhappy, but said nothing. “Very well. Second, is everyone agreed we have to announce our naval strength and the new classes?”

“Relieved, actually, Madam President.” Hanriot grimaced. “You know I’ve never been happy with the black accounting Bolthole required, and while I accept it was necessary that cover was getting very thin.”

“Point. I think we all feel something of that. And while we’re never going to regret building those ships, if we can finally get a treaty, some of the revenues funding Bolthole can be restored to their proper purposes.” Even Barloi and Staunton brightened at that thought. “And I think we can relieve some of your burden, Tom, and provide you with some sweeteners. You’re going to need the plenipotentiary powers to persuade them we’re serious and to agree to an agenda, but you’re hardly going to be able to negotiate a text on your own, so your real job is to get Queen Elizabeth and Protector Benjamin to commit the Manties and Graysons to new formal negotiations with everything on the table — including joint action against Manpower.”

She looked around her cabinet.

“I know none of you like the idea of reparations, and it’s not as if I like it myself, but I’ve said before I don’t believe we can avoid them altogether. The Legislaturists did start the shooting, and we inherit their crimes whether we like it or not. Saint-Just was the one who asked for the present ceasefire, and we inherit his sins, too. And as we accepted and endorsed the verdicts of Harrington’s courts martial on Hades, we’re obliged to offer compensation to surviving PoW victims of the SS, there and elsewhere, including Harrington herself. But that said, it’s clear the only upside for us of High Ridge’s incompetence is that the Manties are going to have to admit his failings, and that strengthens our hand. The facts about Young, and that we’ve both been used by Manpower, should also help. But if we’re reaching out to them, we have to do it handsomely. So one thing you can tell them, Tom, is that we’ll go to them for the formal negotiations — in Landing, if that’s what
they want. You, me, Denis, Kevin, and whoever replaces Giancola, with a small staff — please ask if we can keep things concentrated, and stress we want as swift and comprehensive a resolution as possible. And unless anyone really objects I think you should privately hand over to Elizabeth the archive data we have on the assassination of King Roger, as well as giving both her and Benjamin our full report on Saint-Just’s Masadan plot, with a formal apology for our late and very un lamented predecessors. It should at least clear the slate and show willing. Does anyone have other suggestions?"

After a moment Sanderson spoke. “There are our citizens Harrington rescued from Hades. With very few exceptions they weren’t guilty of anything except falling foul of Pierre, Saint-Just, or Ransom, so there’s no reason they shouldn’t return if they wish. They’re certainly covered by our compensation programmes and most will have property claims. We could offer to fast track their cases, and facilitate returns or claims.”

“Yes, that’s good. Can you get a formal promissory letter to Tom by this evening, please.”

“Of course.”

To Pritchart’s surprise Staunton also raised a finger. “Sandra?”

“I’ve been reading everything I can get on the Treecat commission that’s running in Landing, and the evidence the creatures really are telepaths and telempaths is overwhelming. Specifically, while they can’t apparently read thoughts as such, they can tell if someone is lying. Unerringly. As both Queen Elizabeth and Harrington have treecats we’re going to have to deal with that anyway — so why don’t we ask for the Queen’s Ariel and Harrington’s Nimitz and Samantha to be part of their negotiating team?”

Pritchart nodded at once. “Yes. That’s excellent thinking, Sandra. I’ve been reading some of the commission’s releases myself, but you’ve obviously digested them far better. Is there anything else we should be doing about the Treecats? It’s obvious they’re both a lot smarter and much more important than we’ve ever thought.”

“And how!” A kind of enthusiasm entered Staunton’s voice. “Did you see they’ve admitted they’d been blowing off tests deliberately to keep seeming all furry and harmless? And while how bonding works remains anyone’s guess, it looks as if making sure Manticoran monarchs were adopted young really was a conscious strategy to ensure protection of themselves and their habitat on Sphinx.” She shook her head wonderingly. “It’s amazing. Anyway, it’s just been confirmed that the Clans of Sphinx are sending an ambassador to Austin City. Protector Benjamin — whose daughter has been adopted — will reciprocate by appointing his ambassador in Landing as also ambassador to the Clans of Sphinx. And while it was clearly impossible, I’m thinking that if we ever get to the point of exchanging ambassadors with the Manties ourselves, we should try something similar. So maybe Tom could mention that we would welcome a Treecat here, for itself and as a kind of guarantee for any Manty ambassador that we’re being straight.”

“Mmm.” Pritchart considered. “It’s a nice idea, Sandra, and I think it’d play well with both the Queen and Harrington. You could certainly put it in your arsenal, Tom.”

Theisman laughed, with genuine humour. “I’d rather exchange Treecats than missiles, for sure. And those are decent sweeteners. Still, I can’t say I’m happy about any of this. I believe in planning, not reacting, if at all possible — especially where the Manties are concerned. But I do understand striking while the iron is hot, and agree we can’t squander any opportunity this big, so I’d best go pack, I suppose. Not that there’s room for much on a dispatch boat.”

“The sacrifices we make. And we’ll help putting that bag together. I’ll draw up the letters of
empowerment and apology, and a formal brief for you. Kevin will get you the assassination data and report. Walter, your promissory letter about Hades Havenites who sought asylum in Manticore or Grayson. Sandra, copies of those Treecat commission reports and as good a summary of your thinking as you can manage in three hours. And Rachel, can you dig out the stuff we roughed out when we were considering what reparations we could actually afford, and what we couldn’t, so Tom has at least a sense of what’s possible. Meantime, Tony, I’m sorry to land you with it, but if I make the formal submission to Parliament, can you, Henrietta, and Stan attend Denis’s simultaneous announcement of charges, and make Kevin’s and my excuses until tomorrow?” Nesbitt nodded reluctantly. “Then get to it, everyone. Sandra, Tom, hang on a moment, please.”

Staunton looked surprised but waited while people filed out, leaving Pritchart with only her and Theisman — and Kevin Usher, who hadn’t stirred at all but now sat forward.

“Sandra, there’s something else you and Tom need to know. In Giancola’s home-safe there was an aerosol package of nanites, labelled with a genetic code. Being a nasty-minded sort I checked it against Grosclaude’s genome, and bingo.”

Staunton looked blank but Theisman grunted. “For cleaning up behind himself, you think?”

“Yes. He had to intend to dispose of Grosclaude — who knows it, which is partly why he’s singing so loudly and fast. He’d already got seriously cold feet, I think. But my in-house people who took a first pass at the nanites tell me they’ve never seen anything like them and that they’re as complex as all hell. And the probable supplier, of course, is Manpower, who may be vile but are certainly on the cutting edge of bioscience. Which I’m sorry, Sandra, but we aren’t.”

Staunton nodded. “That’s true enough.”

“Who else is? Your take.”

“Beowulf. And though I hate to say it, the Manties are pretty good.”

“What I thought. I’ll send a sample across for your best people to look at, very carefully, but keep it as quiet as possible for now, please. And given the situation and my strong suspicion that we’re looking at a new biotech means of killing people, presumably tracelessly, I also want to send samples and a warning to Grayson and Manticore with Tom, and another sample to Beowulf via their ambassador here, requesting urgent analysis and advice.”

Staunton considered briefly, then shrugged. “Given what else is happening I have no problems with that. It’s not our tech you’re giving away. But if the Beowulfans agree I’d be glad if you could make sure I’m kept in the loop. If it is new bioscience, my people will have to deal with it sooner or later.”

“Fair enough. I’ll do that. And thanks.”

Staunton smiled briefly and made her way out. Theisman just sat and looked at Usher considerably.

“So what’s the other shoe, Kevin? The Andies?”

Usher smiled tiredly. “I thought you’d see it. Eloise did. And yes, according to Grosclaude, Giancola’s — or Manpower’s — plans also included trying to get the Andies involved in the war, one way or another. Grosclaude doesn’t know any details, but does know Giancola had several meetings with Ambassador Kaiserfest and seemed to think they’d gone well. God knows what Giancola actually said, but the obvious thing would be for him to have encouraged the Andies to
press the Manties in Silesia — which they’d be doing anyway, but perhaps not so strongly. Either way, if you succeed with Benjamin and Elizabeth, Gustav’s going to be left high and dry.”

“Huh.” Thiesman rested his chin on his hands, turning the news in his mind. “Our only real interest there is the RMN base at Sidemore, and Giancola knew months ago from Cabinet that we have plans to take it out as part of any resumption of hostilities. He was supposed to be making sure the Andies didn’t take that wrongly, if it happened, so there’s scope enough for him to have made mischief.”

Pritchart sighed. “Isn’t there just? Still, Kaiserfest will know Giancola’s been arrested, and I’ll call him in as soon as I can to find out what really was said. Or wasn’t. The main thing, though, is for you to make sure Elizabeth knows there may have been Manpower interference regarding Silesia as well.”

“It may not be too bad, Tom,” Usher added. “When he first contacted me Jeremy X said he thought Harrington had probably sent the Andies a warning, in case any of their people are Manpower plants.” He rubbed his eyes. “Yu and the Protector’s Own were due to make a courtesy call on New Berlin anyway, and Harrington knows von Rabenstrange personally, so it makes sense of a kind that she’d reach out to him. And if she did, it’s doubly important we don’t delay in informing them ourselves, so you’d better see Kaiserfest no later than tomorrow, Eloise. But for you, Tom, all that matters is honourably pointing out the possibility as soon as you can.”

Thiesman shook his head as if to clear it, then grinned crookedly. “Does Mr X have ambitions as a diplomat once we’ve all annihilated Manpower for him? He seems to be doing a hell of a job already.”

Usher’s grin was mirthless. “He made the same joke himself, about turning diplomat at his age and with his credentials. And I grant he’s managed to jerk everyone’s chain very nicely. But he couldn’t have done it if the evidence hadn’t been there to be found, and now it has … well, if Jeremy wants to be our ambassador to Mesa that’s just fine by me.”

Pritchart hadn’t expected to laugh today at all, but that was an idea she could second just now. Tom had sobered, though, and had the slight frown he wore when thinking hard.

“Actually, Kevin, that might not be only a joke. Is he still here?”

“Probably. Ginny will know. Why?”

“Because if I do get as far as Manticore the nature of our warning is going to come up. And the source of their data. After which there will be a lot of questions being asked. So as we’re all way outside the box anyway, I’m thinking it might be a good thing if Mr X were himself on Manticore at that time.”

Pritchart quirked an eyebrow. “I don’t think Elizabeth’s reception of your pitch, assuming to get to make one, would extend to meeting a very wanted man, Tom.”

“Maybe not. But Harrington’s might — and her Nimitz’s opinion of his truthfulness could count for a lot, if I understood what Sandra and you were saying about Treecats.”

“Point.”

“And beyond that … well, if we are seriously proposing taking military action against Mesa, we’re going to need all the data we can get on the place. Which as both Manticorans and Havenites have been pretty much barred from going there for T-centuries is almost certainly going to mean
asking the Ballroom for help anyway.”

“Also a point. Mmm. Kevin, is there any harm in asking Ginny to pass along Tom’s request?”

“Not that I can see. And I’d bet Jeremy’s going back to Manticore anyway, if only to watch all the fun he’s started play out. But if he has already left for somewhere else, any message will take a while to catch him up.”

Theisman shrugged. “Nothing I can do about that. But I’d be glad to know the suggestion has been made. And in all seriousness you might ask Ginny to make the point about real data on Mesa too — the kind of thing military planners need, even though it’s a soft target.” His fingers tapped the table softly. “I assume there’s an underground of some kind even there?”

Kevin nodded. “Oh yes. And the Ballroom sometimes send freed slaves who are willing back in. So do the Autentico Jews, which is partly why they’re so popular with the freed.”

“Brave people.”

“And then some, yes.” Kevin paused, then grinned. “You know, Tom, if you do get Harrington and Jeremy X together, it’s going to be a hell of a meeting. You know he’s one of their acrobat–entertainer lines? Well, he is, and retains appropriate senses of both drama and humour. Puckish is the word, I think. So part of him at least will think this whole thing is the best joke he’s come across since Harrington’s escape.”

Pritchart grinned herself. “Interesting. And as it turns out from those commission documents that Nimitz’s apparently well deserved ‘treecat name’ is Laughs Brightly, perhaps you can all laugh us to peace.”

* * * * *

More than a T-week had passed since Alfredo Yu’s meeting with the Herzog von Rabenstrange, and though he had not hurried through any of his diplomatic Grayson meet-and-greet business he couldn’t extend the Own’s visit beyond tonight’s farewell reception thrown by the Andermani Admiralty. Von Rabenstrange was said to be attending, so perhaps there would be a chance for some privy communication amid wine and canapés — but hardly the kind of feedback Yu knew Her Grace had been hoping for. That had always been a reach: even if genuinely spooked by the news he had brought, which he thought they were, it would take the Andermani a while to think things through and longer yet to get any answers from Haven, assuming they did ask the questions. Still, he had hoped for some response about the financial data on Young, at least, and that could have happened in the time they’d had, if they’d wanted it to.

Yu had felt encouraged a few days back, when news had broken of the arrest of a junior minister for naval procurement, but HD coverage had dismissively indicated that the charges concerned minor peculation and the story had disappeared from subsequent news cycles. None of the Andermani senior officers and civilians he’d been meeting had mentioned it, and good manners forbade raising the subject uninvited. There had also been an obviously contrived encounter with the Havenite ambassador as she was leaving the Ministry of Trade just as he was arriving. He and his party had stood courteously if slightly stiffly aside, but to his surprise she had stopped to introduce herself, offer careful greetings, and say she hoped he knew that as soon as a peace treaty was actually
signed he, like other Havenites who had fled Legislaturist or Committee of Public Safety reprisals, would be welcome to visit or return to the Republic. The strategic part of his mind assessed this as a means of pushing him (and so Grayson) away from the Manticoran position under High Ridge — but as Grayson was already more distanced than Haven could know, he couldn’t really object; he also thought the ambassador’s words another sign that the new republic Tom Theisman had midwived was a different animal from its predecessors. Perhaps the leopard really had changed its spots as Her Grace contended, and he hoped; there were certainly friends and relatives he would be glad to see again, if they were still alive. So he had replied with courteous thanks, expressed his genuine hope a treaty would soon be signed, and asked her to convey his warm personal respects to Secretary Theisman.

But satisfactory as all that may have been, it did not answer to Her Grace’s or Grayson’s needs and Yu was not happy at the thought of being able to report only that the explosive data he’d relayed had disappeared into a vacuum. In the hope of encountering von Rabenstrange he and the other invited officers were prompt in arriving at the Admiralty — or rather, what he supposed you’d have to call Admiralty HQ, an extravagant stone pile so beset with columns, pediments, corner-turrets, and finials it looked more like a fancy chef’s display-piece than a building, and so unsuited to the demands of running a modern navy that the great bulk of the actual work was done in one of the modern towers ringing the antique heart of the city. The old, central building served mostly ceremonial purposes, such as tonight’s affair — but entering its huge and crowded reception hall Yu had to admit it did that job splendidly. Chandeliers glittered above a marble floor, old Kaiserlichen Sternenmarine banners and striking Chinese-influenced battle-scenes were arrayed on walls, a small orchestra in spotless dress whites played tastefully in one corner, and there was more of the black wine as well as superior finger food. What there was not was any sign of von Rabenstrange, and after some fruitless surveying Yu ventured to ask the Konteradmiral with whom he was amiably discussing the ongoing tactical revolution prompted by new LACs if the Herr Herzog were expected.

“Alas, he was, but I understand he has been detained elsewhere, Herr Vizeadmiral. An imperial duty, I believe.”

“Ah.” Yu concealed the intensity of his disappointment. “I had hoped to see him again, if only to thank him for his hospitality last week.”

“That’s right — he invited you to one of his dinners, didn’t he?”

The man was clearly curious, and Yu thought it wise to offer some explanation. “He did, of his kindness — but only, I think, because he wished me to convey his personal regards to Her Grace, Steadholder Harrington. They met back in ’08, after Her Grace caught up with that butcher Warnecke in the Marsh system.”

“Yes, of course. I was only a Kapitän der Sternen then, but I remember that report. You weren’t there yourself, were you? I’ve always wondered about the story that Her Grace used a chemical propellant hand weapon.”

“I wasn’t, Herr Konteradmiral — Her Grace was on RMN service at that time — but I can assure you the story is true. Her Grace’s uncle is a keen student of history and taught her to use such a weapon in childhood; the gun itself was a present from High Admiral Matthews, and she still practices with it every week.”

“Remarkable. And the point really was that, lacking any internal power source, it was undetectable?”

“Indeed so. Colonel LaFollet, Her Grace’s senior Armsman, who was there, tells me Mr Warnecke was most surprised.”
“I imagine he was. A very satisfactory outcome, of course, but it seems a rather extreme chance to take, with so much at stake.”

Yu smiled. “Say rather a very calculated and personal chance, to avert the holocaust of the innocent Warnecke was threatening to buy his escape. Her Grace is extremely painstaking and runs a very tight ship, but she is also one of those commanders who knows when it will pay to throw away the rule-book and do something unexpected.”

“As she also showed at Hades. Mmm. But how does one tell the wise risk from the foolish? Do you think — Herr Kommodore Pflanzer?”

Their conversation was interrupted by a heel-clicking officer with the tabs of the Imperial Staff.

“My apologies for interrupting you, Herr Konteradmiral, but I am ordered to escort the Herr Vizeadmiral to receive the respects of Großadmiral Hattendorf.”

“Of course. I did not know the Herr Großadmiral was present.”

“He arranged to come when the Herr Herzog was unable to attend.”

With an apologetic smile and a glimmer of renewed hope — for Hattendorf was in effect a Lord of Admiralty, though the Andermani system was distinct from both Manticore’s and Grayson’s — Yu let himself be led away through the crowd to the far side of the lobby and into a long corridor. Half-way down they turned into a cross-corridor where Yu found himself facing two tall and lethally armed hussars in elaborately frogged black uniforms, and a similarly attired captain with a sidearm who also had a fur pelisse and a tall, tapering shako with a silver death’s head on the front — the Flügelmütze of the Totenkopf Hussars. Two further hussars guarded a door beyond what was plainly a checkpoint, and Yu found his mouth dry. His guide turned to him with a small smile.

“My apologies, Herr Vizeadmiral, but I must ask you to submit to a security screening. It is a required protocol, you understand.”

“Of course.” He worked his tongue to generate saliva as the Totenkopf captain carefully ran a hand-scanner over him from head to toe, pausing at one of his pockets.

“A memopad, Herr Vizeadmiral?”

“Yes.”

“May I see, please?”

“Of course.” Yu took it out and handed it over for a swift but thorough inspection.

“Thank you. You should not activate the recording function at any time. This way, please.”

His guide clicked heels and stayed in place. Yu nodded thanks to him, then brief acknowledgements to the hussars, and followed the captain, who knocked sharply on the door, waited a second, then opened it.

“Vizeadmiral Alfredo Yu, Eure Kaiserlichen Majestät.”

“Danke, Herr Kapitän. Please come in, Herr Vizeadmiral.”

Pictures of Emperor Gustav XI Anderman were almost exclusively lifted from HD footage of
ceremonial occasions but the shock of recognition was immediate. A first-generation Prolong recipient, Gustav was in his 80s but looked no more than 40, and though not a tall man, his face, dominated by piercing grey eyes beneath strong brows, and an aquiline nose, had a fierceness boosted by his physical presence. He wore a black uniform without the Hussars’ frogging but with heavy bullion epaulettes and a deep red collar, and on his left breast the tremendous golden sunburst of the Imperial Sigil. Coming just far enough into the room for the Hussar captain to shut the door behind him, Yu bowed deeply.

“So.” The Emperor’s voice was a nasal tenor, higher than one might have expected but not unpleasant. “Please be seated, Herr Vizeadmiral.” He indicated a chair opposite the one in which he sat himself. “My apologies for the mild deception and lack of warning. My cousin Chien-lu asks that I convey his apologies also, as he is standing in for me tonight, elsewhere.”

Yu smiled acceptance, heart thudding. “Of course, Your Imperial Majesty.”

“Good. My time here is limited, and Chien-lu tells me you appreciate plain-speaking, so let me first say I welcome and accept the proposal for a mutual non-aggression pact between the Imperium and Grayson, and ask you to inform Protector Benjamin that I shall shortly send a small delegation to Grayson to establish a text. But I believe the immediate purpose of such a pact may soon become moot, as I — We — must also offer you and Her Grace Steadholder Harrington Our sincere thanks for two warnings that have proven as valid as they were unexpected.”

Yu, still struggling with astonishment that no-one else was present save two silent bodyguards and an equally silent steward or major-domo against the far wall, found himself deeply uncertain what tone to strike until memory of Her Grace’s open briskness came to mind.

“I am glad the pact finds favour, and to have been of service, Your Imperial Majesty. May I ask which two warnings?”

Gustav gave a wintry smile. “Those concerning certain accounts held at the Reichsbank and some others to which they led my investigators. Incidentally, in this venue you needn’t be quite so vocative, Herr Vizeadmiral, though your courtesy is appreciated. ‘Sir’ will do or we shall be here all night.” Yu murmured thanks. “But before we come to those further accounts let me substantiate my thanks a little.” He took a data-wallet from a side-table and gave it to Yu. “On the chip you will find legally attested details of the accounts through which Lady Young’s treasonable practices are in part financed, that Her Grace asked to be investigated. It transpires they are fed through a certain Silesian bank of which We had thought better, and of which full details are also given, attested under oath by the senior director and owners. Obtaining that Silesian data explains Chien-lu’s delay in recontacting you, and the monies in question do indeed originate on Mesa. The codes appear to be those of a central Manpower account.”

That was more like it, and Yu smiled satisfaction. “Thank you, sir. That is most helpful, and I believe You may anticipate the appointment of a new Manticoran administration in the near future.”

“I would think so.” Gustav’s voice was very dry. “As I have no wish to tip Her Grace’s hand, the accounts have been left open, though they are monitored and any significant activity will be promptly reported to Her Grace on Manticore. But I want them closed down as soon as possible, and would appreciate it if Her Grace could inform me as soon as it is right to do so.”

“Of course, sir. Obviously I cannot speak for Her Grace, and my own information is now somewhat out of date, but I don’t believe it should be long — a few months at most.”

“Good. The sooner those accursed Sklavenhändlere are rooted out the better.” The Emperor’s angry contempt for Manpower seemed genuine but there were other tones in his voice.
“Which brings me to those other accounts I mentioned, fed though the same Silesian bank from the same source. I will tell you frankly, Herr Vizeadmiral, that when Chien-lu first conveyed to me Her Grace’s suspicions I was incredulous, even though — as you pointed out to him, and he to me — the evidence of Lady Young’s treason gave them considerable ballast. We have never tolerated slavery here, but Manpower are an inescapable presence in Silesia, and while We act if they flaunt themselves the passive protection afforded Mesa by the Solarian League has meant We do not seriously search for them outside our own borders, so what could they gain by suborning people here? Besides, it is not the business of transstellars to be running deep penetration agents — that is for star nations, not overblown Hökeren. But I was wrong.”

He fell silent, frowning, and after a moment Yu decided a response was called for.

“The junior minister who was arrested, sir?”

“Eh? Oh, no, not at all — that really was peculation. The fool ran up gambling debts and thought he could dip into Our navy’s pocket to pay them. No, the person using the accounts to which those specified by Her Grace led Us was a man called Artur Solecki — an economist, originally a Silesian but long naturalised.” He gave Yu a penetrating glance from under heavy brows. “As I believe Chien-lu hinted to you, We are in any case minded to press our claims in Silesia just now. For longer-term strategic reasons We would not risk conflict with the RMN while Manticore was at war with Haven, as you will understand, but with that constraint seemingly lifted, and in light of other considerations, the time seems right. But this discovery is extremely disturbing. Solecki has made himself quite a popular figure by arguing the economic advantages to the Imperium of incrementally annexing Silesian territory, backed by claims of general benefit to the great majority of Silesian citizens. His background enhanced his credibility in that regard, you understand, and while he has by no means influenced policy directly he is a figurehead for what one might call the war faction. His books are well written and fairly argued, while he is also a favourite of several HD shows, often commenting on Silesian news.”

“But he is definitely a Manpower stooge, sir?” Gustav frowned a query and Yu racked his memory. “Ein Stichwortgeber. Or Handlanger.”

“Ha. Yes, he is. Bought and paid for. And although he is still talking and Our investigators still listening and cross-checking, it is clear some at least of his popularity was dishonestly arranged. People were bribed, data manipulated. What We do not understand at all, Herr Vizeadmiral, is what return Manpower expected for its money. We can believe they would try to foment trouble between the Republic and Star Kingdom, but what are they up to here?” Indignant concern was audible in Gustav’s voice with continuing anger. “You have had longer to think about this than me, and I would appreciate your opinion, please.”

Yu noted the shift in pronoun and spoke briskly. “Of course, sir. The first thing, I think, is to recognise that the position Lady Young now holds is either fortuitous, or the result of some very long-term planning. One would say the sudden ascent of Baron High Ridge to power could not have been foreseen, and in that case Lady Young’s position would be more like that of Herr Solecki — a voice, a slight influence, but in no sense a power-broker. But it is equally true that the Baron’s ascent happened entirely because of the assassination attempt on Her Majesty and His Grace that killed the Duke of Cromarty. And while Saint-Just could certainly have come up with such a plan for an assassination on his own, it is possible someone suggested or facilitated it.”

“Mmm.” Gustav frowned. “What of it?”

“Well, sir, in one case we have long-term, well-funded but fairly marginal agents, while in the other we still have that but also the arrangement of distant events in their support — a nudge here
and there, so that when something did happen, maximal advantage could be taken. In either case, the inescapable conclusion is that whatever Manpower is doing encompasses multiple polities and is playing out on a timescale measured in T-decades, if not centuries. And in either case, sir, as you said yourself, we are looking at behaviour appropriate for a star nation, not a transstellar corporation whose only prime directive should be legal profit. Then again, what is the true relationship between Manpower and Mesa? On paper they are one company and its host state, albeit a very large company with strong links to others, including the Jessyk Combine. In looking for a pattern I have been wondering if those links are greater and deeper than has been realised — if, for example, Manpower actually own Jessyk and perhaps other Mesan transstellars who co-operate with them. Mesa’s constitution, such as it is, is based entirely on a commercial paradigm, with a board of directors rather than a cabinet — and such boards can be wholly controlled by majority shareholders.”

“So you suggest we should not think of Manpower agents but of Mesan agents?”

“I suggest there may be no difference — that what Manpower wants, Mesa does. Or rather, what whoever owns Manpower wants, Mesa does.”

Gustav inclined his head. “I follow the logic. Where does it take you?”

“First, sir, that you — and we — are indeed facing a star nation, however it presents itself to us and the galaxy. Second, that whatever its intents may be, they are plainly hostile to both of us, and to the Star Kingdom and Republic. And third, that it has found it expedient, or necessary, to conceal not only its purposes but its very existence from everyone, over a long period.” Yu took a deep breath. “Clearly, sir, I cannot divine what those intents are, though I note, first, that they must be congruent with a belief in slavery, and so with the denial of Prolong and all legal or natural human rights to an enslaved workforce, and second, that the natural corollary of genetically determined oppression is genetically determined privilege. I was reminded in my researches that Manpower was founded by Beowulfan renegades who refused to accept the Code, who had been involved in the notorious super-soldier programmes on Earth and advocated unrestricted genetic intervention to ‘improve’ the baseline genome. Who knows what they have been doing to themselves ever since?”

He shrugged carefully. “The idea of a cabal of self-supposed genetic supermen seems like utter fantasy, I know, but I have begun to believe, sir, we must overcome our incredulity enough to credit it at least in thought. And it does lead me to one further and perhaps more useful conclusion.”

Gustav gestured invitingly. “Which is, Herr Vizeadmiral?”

“That whoever they may be, the best explanation for their behaviour is the simplest — that they conceal themselves so effectively and act indirectly behind smoke-screens and in the very long term because they must, being as yet too few and too weak to do otherwise. They shun scrutiny, sir, because they have no navy able to defend them against the Imperium, Star Kingdom, or Republic, should it come to that. The best counter to their plans, therefore, is in the first place maximal exposure, and in the second, swift and direct action against them.”

Gustav had been looking thoughtful but now frowned again. “I grant your logic, and appreciate it, but despite a strong desire to answer this outrage We do not care either to announce their success or to risk conflict with the Solarian League.”

“Of course, sir. No-one would, standing alone. But I recall also Prince von Bismarck’s definition of politics as die Lehre vom Möglichen, the art of the possible, and I believe that in this sector we are entering a period of astonishing possibilities.”

The frown faded. “Go on.”

“Consider, sir — we know Manpower placed agents here and on Manticore; suppose it were
confirmed they also placed agents in the Republic, and further confirmed that those agents have collectively been at least partly responsible for the late hostilities and present tensions. That news would inevitably become public in both polities — and what might happen then is … worth thinking on.”

Those heavy brows drew down. “You think I should make Solecki’s treason public?”

Yu spoke very carefully. “I am ignorant of far too much to offer you any advice on that point, sir, but I would most seriously urge you fully to inform both any new administration in the Star Kingdom and President Pritchart about your discoveries here.”

“Ha! Yes, indeed — that I can and will do.” Gustav’s gaze was shrewd. “And you think the reactions in both polities will make it more advantageous galactically than disadvantageous domestically to become in public another victim of the same malign agency?”

“I believe it possible, sir.” He hesitated. “And Her Grace may be obliged to reveal Solecki’s existence in dealing with High Ridge.”

“Mmm. Yes, I can see that might be the case, especially if others are found in Haven. And what do you think Grayson will do if Manticore and Haven do patch up their quarrel and go after Mesa together?”

“Go with them,” Yu answered simply.

“Just like that?”

“Yes, sir. At the very least Her Grace would wish to commit the Protector’s Own, and I cannot see Protector Benjamin forbidding her to do so.” He smiled slightly. “Nor would most Graysons wish it to be forbidden. It is possible, also, that a Manpower agent or agents will be discovered in Austin City too, and if that proves — or has proven — to be the case there will be strong public feeling in favour of a military response. Father Church regards slavery as anathema — it was partly that issue with regard to wives as chattels that led to the Masadan schism — and it is no secret that for Grayson any peace dividend would include stepping up GSN action against Manpower. And if it becomes clear Manpower really did play a part in fomenting conflict throughout the sector, the feeling would be intense. It is, after all, the Havenite wars that have brought space battle to Yeltsin’s Star four times in 15 years, and in which we have sacrificed many tens of thousands of our sons.”

Gustav nodded sharply. “Yes, indeed — that I understand. And I imagine Her Grace the Steadholder’s personal commitment would strengthen that feeling.”

“It would, Sir. The constant vilification of Her Grace by High Ridge’s tame newsies has been a prime factor in alienating ordinary Graysons from Manticore as our major benefactor and trade partner; and when it becomes known High Ridge’s administration has been taking — or at least, benefiting from — Manpower finance in the meantime, and who yet knows what else, well, there will be real rage and concomitant demands for action. If Mesa were a member of the Solarian League, caution would probably prevail where military responses are concerned; but it isn’t, and people will doubt whether even the SLN would be willing to defend it against a concerted military attack from Star Kingdom and Republic. I also believe that if the Sollies did send forces against the RMN and RN they would find the SLN horribly badly outclassed.”

“Really?”

Yu gave the Emperor a straight look. “Really, sir. Have you seen anything whatever to
suggest the SLN yet has MDMs? Or anything resembling the RMN’s current missile range? I
certainly haven’t, and of the two SLN ships I’ve most recently seen, a BC and CA in the Sigma
Draconis system a few weeks back, the CA still had auto-cannon point defences, not laser clusters.”
He shook his head, recalling his disbelief at the drone imagery that had come in; not to mention
the inability of the Sollies to realise they were being scanned at a range of less than 10,000 klicks.
“Frankly, sir, in any engagement with the RMN, GSN, or RN, I think the SLN would need a force
ratio of not less than ten-to-one — and even that might not be enough.”

“The SLN does have that kind of numerical strength.”

“In total, that’s true, sir, but how long would it take them to realise what they needed? To
activate sufficient ships from the reserve, mobilise, retrofit, and deploy? Assuming, that is, Solly
public opinion proved willing to absorb enormous naval and infrastructural losses in order to defend
an transstellar based outside the League, caught red-handed interfering in the politics of at least two
star nations, that specialises in a trade the League itself has outlawed for T-centuries.”

“Those are good points, Herr Vizeadmiral.” Gustav gave Yu a straight look himself. “You
really think events are headed in that direction? Action against Mesa, I mean?”

“I am beginning to, sir. If anyone had suggested it three months ago I’d have been
incredulous, I admit, but now … well, to be frank, I have a feeling in my water that events are
tipping. How they will turn out is beyond me, but it is a feeling I have learned the hard way not to
ignore.”

“Mmm. I can respect such a feeling in a man of your experience, Herr Vizeadmiral.” Gustav
seemed to hesitate but went on as curiosity won out. “Is it connected with your belief that Her Grace
is a fulcrum in affairs, as you suggested to Chien-lu?”

“It is, sir, though on the first occasion, in the Endicott system back in ’03, I had no idea who
Her Grace was. I only knew everything was unravelling around me.” He grimaced at the memory.
“Of course the Masadans had enough idiocy to mess up on their own, and had they not seized my
ship and put their own fool in command, things might have worked out very differently. But that
cannot account for the way Her Grace, as a mere Captain, commanded Grayson’s loyalty and
imagination. And if you asked almost any Grayson — which I did when I first arrived there — you
would be told the Tester’s hand was at work in the Endicott system as much as at Yeltsin’s Star.”

“And subsequently?”

“I have had that same feeling twice more, before today. Once at Fourth Yeltsin, when Her
Grace killed Steadholder Burdette and then took us out against the Peep task force.” He looked the
Emperor in the eye. “I tell you, sir, I have never seen anyone so exhausted still functioning. Her
Grace had been without sleep for more than two days, had survived a missile strike on her pinnace
and being struck by a pulser dart, and had several broken ribs, but she seized on the evidence the
failed assassination revealed and used it to clear her name and that of Harrington Steading and Sky
Domes, before invoking a ceremonial not seen in generations and taking out Burdette with a single
strike. And then she had to face a space battle against stacked odds but still saw the critical
opportunity before anyone else. I am not a religious man, sir, but I find I cannot argue with Graysons
who say flatly that the Tester was with her that day.”

“I am a theist, as it happens, Herr Vizeadmiral, and having seen the imagery of those events I
will not argue with it either. What was the third occasion?”

Yu smiled. “When I learned from High Admiral Matthews that Her Grace had returned from
the dead, and I felt the balance that had been turning against the Alliance tip back in our favour. Tom
Theisman may have struck the actual blow, but it was Her Grace who slew the People’s Republic. And I would add, sir, as you may not know, that Her Grace is as responsible as anyone for the revolution in weapons, fleet mix, and tactics, for it was she who first commanded a pod-laying vessel, a Q-ship in Silesia in ’10, and she who wrote the Manticoran WDB report that resulted in the RMN commissioning its first SD(P)s and CLACs.”

Gustav nodded. “Thank you. The Q-ship I well remember, but the authorship of the WDB report is news. It is a most formidable record, I agree. And you have the same feeling now?”

“I do, sir.” Wiggling his fingers in the universal sign, Yu quoted from an old play he admired. “‘There is a tide in the affairs of men which, taken at the flood, leads on to fortune: omitted, all the voyage of their life is bound in shallows and in miseries. On such a full sea we are now afloat, and we must take the current when it serves, or lose our ventures.’ That has always struck me as accurate, and I know of no-one living or dead more able than her Grace to take events at their flood.”

“Huh.” Gustav smiled crookedly. “I am not sure the murderer of a Caesar is a suitable authority, Herr Vizeadmiral, but I too have some warm feelings for his analysis, as did Gustav I, of course.” He fell silent for a moment, then seemed to come to some resolution. “In any case, We thank you again for your time and the information you relayed. At the least you have exposed a traitor We had not suspected, and set in train an agreement that may save more than Grayson and Andermani lives. As for the rest, you have impressed Us and We assure you whatever may unfold in Star Kingdom and Republic will command Our deepest attention and strongest thought. Kapitän der Husaren Bäcker will show you out.”

Yu had seen no signal but heard the door open behind him, and swiftly stood and bowed.

“Thank you, Your Imperial Majesty, for myself and on behalf of Her Grace. If it is not improper, may I ask You convey my thanks also to the Herr Herzog?”

“Of course, Herr Vizeadmiral. Go now with God and Our blessing.”

Yu was unsure if the last phrase was genuine or aimed at the Hussar captain, but if the latter it seemed to work. Bäcker had been courteous before but was now attentive, and in the absence of the commodore who had brought Yu from the reception hall personally accompanied him back to the main event, delivering him to a group of Andermani officers who had not previously been present and included Großadmiral Ri Feng Hattendorf. As Bäcker still wore his pelisse and Flügelmütze he was extremely noticeable, and as Andermani eyes swivelled in their direction and surprise, even mild shock, showed on faces, Yu realised that by so publicly escorting him the Herr Kapitän was in effect telling those with eyes to see that he enjoyed Imperial favour. Well pleased with events he set himself with good heart to enjoy the conversation of the Herr Großadmiral, a wily tactician, and the remaining civilities of the evening.

* * * * *

Eloise Pritchart stood with Kevin and Ginny Usher and Denis LePic at the spaceport window for some minutes after the shuttle taking Theisman to a despatch boat had faded from view in the stratosphere. She knew her tendency to brood after the event, but could not stop wondering if they sent Tom sensibly to triumph or insanely to disaster. But her morbid ruminations were interrupted by a swat to her shoulder from Ginny Usher, and she looked round into the shorter woman’s eyes.
“Cheer up, Eloise. Benjamin’s a good sort, from all I hear, and Jeremy’s gone capering back to Manticore in high glee to stir them up some more. It’ll all work out, you’ll see.”

Pritchart looked down at Ginny with affection. Her own early life had been hard enough to make her an unashamed Aprillist back in the day, but what Ginny had endured as a child she could barely imagine.

“I hope so, Ginny. It just seems so … madcap, I suppose. One day we’re all slogging along, and the next my Secretary of State is under arrest and I’m sending my Secretary of War off in a dispatch boat to see if he can’t get our mortal enemies to agree to an alliance against an transstellar. It’s the right thing to do but that doesn’t stop my head spinning.”

“So?” Ginny’s grin was a mile wide. “What do you think Benjamin’s head will be doing when Tom turns up? Or Queen Elizabeth’s, come to that? ‘Excuse me, Your Majesty, but Admiral Theisman has popped in from Nouveau Paris to see you. Are you free?’” Her exaggerated Manticoran aristo accent ended in a gust of laughter. Kevin rolled his eyes but Eloise couldn’t help grinning back. “I’d love to be a fly on that wall. Come on, Eloise, Javier should be back tomorrow, and meantime let’s go raise a glass to Tom’s mission and the Audubon Ballroom.”
Neither Steadholder nor Duchess Harrington had been remotely happy about allowing themselves to be persuaded by Andrew LaFollet that Georgia Young had to be left in place until more evidence could be assembled. In the end, though, it was Admiral Harrington’s judgement that had been decisively swayed by cold tactical analysis; exposing Young would squander a resource, and doing so without being able to prove where her funding originated might allow High Ridge’s administration to survive — as it had survived the scandal Cathy Montaigne had started. Nimitz’s pointed observation about what happened to treekittens who pounced on tails before finding out what they were attached to had also brought Honor up short: he didn’t often lecture her on tactics, and even in her white rage at the revelation of Young’s true allegiances she’d known perfectly well he was right.

There was also the awkward consideration that this windfall information had to be owed to the Audubon Ballroom. Andrew’s people had not had time to collect police material from Smoking Frog, even if they’d known it was there, and the whole thing reeked of documentation. That didn’t invalidate the facts or even undermine their credibility — quite the opposite, in many ways — but did make their public use tricky, and as much additional, independent data as possible was necessary. Honor’s own arrangements meant she’d had to stifle her curiosity about how Andrew had managed to obtain it, with a growing suspicion that Miranda was liaising for him with — she presumed — Captain Zilwicki and Isaac Douglass, but both LaFollets’ serene confidence that beyond whatever Young herself secretly reported further anonymous tip-offs would be forthcoming encouraged patience.

Besides, as even Steadholder and Duchess Harrington had agreed, there was the little matter of to whom, exactly, either of them should report what they knew. Properly speaking, it had been primarily a police matter — Young’s debrief included a catalogue of confessions to crimes on Manticore — but, despite Honor’s basic faith in the Landing PD, what they might do with Ballroom documentation implicating the wife of a cabinet minister in transstellar espionage was far from clear. Dealings with Manpower, like all collusion with the slave trade, were sufficiently illegal under Manticoran law that existing evidence would warrant Young’s arrest on half-a-dozen charges — but no police investigation could delve into the working of a sitting government, nor ferret out treason among senior CA and Liberal Party members who could claim, in many cases perhaps honestly, that they had themselves been duped. All in all, as Andrew had argued, it seemed most probable the LPD would take the path of least resistance by falling back on the activities of the quondam Elaine Komandorski — and to Duchess, Steadholder, and Admiral alike that was worse than useless, a diversion and not a solution.

So Honor had held her peace, with difficulty, especially as she’d been meeting Elizabeth regularly in kitchen-cabinet sessions. The Queen’s anxiety about — and fury with — what Her Government was doing had been growing steadily over the two years High Ridge had held power, and Honor’s sense of disloyalty in keeping to herself information that might bring him down had become acute, but the tactical arguments held whatever she felt. And if she was having a hard time...
controlling herself, Elizabeth would have a harder one, so in a way keeping it from her was the
kinder thing to do — or so Honor told herself, often. And her patience had been richly rewarded, for
additional material had shown up, just as LaFollet had thought it would.

Comparing the High Ridge Administration to a den of thieves in ermine turned out to be
exactly accurate. At least five cabinet members were skimming from official budgets, including
North Hollow, and while Honor really didn’t want to know how it had been done Andrew had
produced complete account records of a kind to make state prosecutors very happy indeed. Whether
Descroix was another Manpower agent remained moot but she was beyond question a peculator on a
staggering scale, and apparently one who knew it would come out one day and intended to cut and
run. At least 40 million Manticoran dollars had been siphoned and skimmed from the embassy
budgets she controlled, and unlike her fellow cabinet thieves Descroix had taken it off Manticore, to
three accounts on Beowulf that she had set up personally. Quite how Andrew or even Anton
Zilwicki had arranged surveillance good enough to identify a disguised cabinet minister, officially on
vacation for a week, taking a day-trip through the Junction and setting up those accounts under three
false identities Honor couldn’t begin to imagine — but the Beowulfans required biometric data for
account security, and copies of that data as well as Descroix’s official Manticoran biometrics had
been included in the anonymous package, not to mention visual records of Descroix’s trip and
transactions within the banks — which suggested very high-level Beowulfan co-operation; as high
as Uncle Jacques, perhaps.

The other laser-head to turn up, only a fortnight back, had come from Young herself,
confirming what she’d said in her initial debrief — records showing substantial, very black transfers
of money to both the CA and Liberals, adjusting books to allow both to pass the recent annual audit
of party funds. That had had Honor rubbing her hands, and would be enough on its own to bring
the government down — but she’d decided she’d wait a little longer in hope that Alfredo would bring
back from New Berlin confirmation of Manpower as the source. Anticipating another fight to restrain
her, Andrew had been surprised — but her coiling impatience had transformed into a faint but
growing form of the hollow, singing tension she felt in action, a taut readiness Nimitz approved and
said was the whole fun of a hunt. Emotionally that was right, she thought, but intellectually she
recognised that her prey had changed; that her sights were now set not just on stopping High Ridge
but on the whole aspect of Manticoran aristocracy and politics he represented — and she didn’t want
it bruised, she wanted it dead and gone, in so far as that was possible. And it was going to be a lot
more possible than she’d hoped when she took Nimitz’s advice back on Grayson. As to the galactic
implications … they were also going to have to await Alfredo Yu’s return, which hadn’t stopped her
thinking about them hard and taking some preparatory measures, just in case.

But what that Manpower money had bought from the CA and Liberals was another matter
altogether. The data about the decommissioned — or not so decommissioned — RMN warship that
was to be mislaid where certain ‘industrialists’ would know where to find it had properly passed, as
‘information received from an anonymous source’, from LaFollet’s remit to her own as CO of the
Protector’s Own. Admiral Harrington had an unambiguous duty to investigate such a warning with
all diligence, wherever it came from, and the destroyers Yu had detached before he took the Own
through to Gregor A had been keeping a close eye on things. Their job had been made vastly easier
by Andrew somehow contriving to ensure that every ship entering the RMN decommissioning yard
had a passive locator beacon snugged into its outer hull. How he’d done it Honor didn’t know,
though she’d bet yard dogs who’d known Paul or knew Zilwicki were involved, and probably
Graysons or Hauptman Cartel people involved in removing classified equipment from hulls. Until
last week every ship being tracked had gone where and as it ought, but she had noted with sharp
anticipation the addition of a heavy cruiser less than five years old to the decommissioning list,
supposedly on account of persistent, untraceable enviro-system problems following minor battle
damage during Operation Buttercup — problems her last bosun, an old acquaintance of Sir Horace
Harkness, had been very surprised to learn about. Equally surprising, from any law-abiding point-of-view, was the little trip HMS **Reveille** had taken three days ago, after being officially logged in at the decommissioning yard and before anything had actually been removed — a trip under full stealth that had ended, in a remote and inactive sector of the asteroid belt, in a rendezvous with a small, privately registered yacht and a rather different rendezvous, shortly thereafter, with the destroyers; who now had both ships and 22 civilians as well as the cruiser’s skeleton crew in custody. All of which made things at once grotesquely complicated and in one way simple.

The simple bit was that Honor no longer had any possible leeway in reporting. The fact that people without appropriate security clearance had been allowed to examine a ship with classified tech still on board breached a variety of statutes — certainly the Official Secrets and Wartime Security Acts, and potentially others, up to and including Manticore’s tightly framed laws on treason; being aware of such a crime Honor was duty bound, as a Manticoran noble and an officer of the RMN, to report it immediately to the appropriate authorities. Well and good — but there was again an interesting question as to which authorities those might be. Military crimes under the Wartime Security Act went to court martial, and the naval personnel involved — which delightfully included Houseman, since his appointment as a Space Lord — would in the first place be subject to naval arrest; assuming the RMN under its present management would carry out its legal obligations. To be fair, arresting one of the Space Lords would be a nightmare even for a well-intentioned Admiralty, and one desperate to suppress the charges, backed by an equally desperate administration, could find a dozen ways of doing so.

Given the involvement of GSN ships Honor also had an obligation to report the matter to her superior in the GSN — all one of him — and High Admiral Matthews could, under certain provisions of the Alliance treaties that remained in force while there was a state of war, convene the necessary courts martial even though RMN personnel were involved. It might even — if one read one or two clauses very literally — be legal for Honor to enter the Admiralty with a force of GSN marines and arrest Houseman herself, but pleasing as that fantasy was, and vengefully delighted as most Graysons would be, the furore would grant Houseman and Janacek far too much cover and distraction.

Then again, breach of the Official Secrets Act and treason statutes were not only military crimes but within the purview of civilian courts, which also had presumptive jurisdiction over the civilians involved. Most were Manticoran subjects, employees of shipbuilding cartels to which High Ridge and Janacek had wanted — and been unable for security reasons — to grant contracts, but five were not Manticoran subjects, and who they were was officially unknown. Honor had no doubt they were Manpower agents, and probably Mesans, but while their documentation was certainly forged they weren’t saying anything at all and what could be proven about them was moot. That didn’t affect the Official Secrets and Wartime Security charges — the unknowns no more had proper clearance than the Manticorans — but it made treason charges much less clear-cut.

The bottom line was that while she still had to wait for Alfredo’s return before using the other data, Honor needed to make this matter sufficiently public that Janacek couldn’t sweep it under a rug. But as things stood it wouldn’t be possible to tie High Ridge to anything without exposing Georgia Young, and with nothing but her initial debrief to use she’d have to give evidence in person; even then it would be only her word. It would be foolish in every way to squander Young, and there would be a fair chance of failing anyway. Keeping it more limited — for now — was still the better bet; Houseman would be finished, and Janacek might have to go, but whether even that would be enough to turn the Lords against the government was uncertain, especially if no Mesan connection could be proven and the whole thing was spun — as it surely would be — as commercial policy that had regrettably strayed over strict bounds of laws that only applied because of the technical state of war.
Procedurally it all made for a problem so thorny that anyone without a fierce sense of principle might find themselves eyeing any rugs and brooms they happened across with a deep sense of longing, so Honor also needed to involve people who understood what the old tag *ruat coelum* meant and had both the power to invoke it and the guts to abide by it. That meant someone from the Queen’s Bench, but there was nothing like starting at the top, which was why she was walking towards St Michael’s Tower on a Sunday afternoon in full Grayson uniform. Nimitz rode her shoulder, radiating satisfaction that action was about to begin, and Andrew trailed her: he too had a certain pleasure at being able to do something positive, but it was mixed with a distinct wariness about the Queen’s probable reactions Honor might even call trepidation and didn’t blame him for at all — though she herself felt more like Nimitz.

Even after all the visits she’d made here the PGS officer who escorted them up in the lift had the usual disapproval of Andrew’s sidearm, but also a sharp curiosity. Teaching at Saganami Island Honor wore RMN uniform, as was proper, and despite a deep distaste for the calculation involved had been known to wear it in the House and for media interviews where it — and the rows of medal ribbons and wound stripes — served a necessary purpose, but at Mount Royal she *always* wore a Grayson dress and tabard, and all else aside the PGS officer had never seen her dressed like this. Nor, come to that, had anyone else on Manticore, as the only time she’d ever worn this uniform previously was at naval dinners on Grayson or aboard ships of the Protector’s Own. After her changes to the sumptuary regulations of the Own — which had given her more pleasure than anything else in the last two years — what she was wearing was in effect a Manticoran uniform in Grayson blues, one shoulder flash combining the Own’s flame-enshrouded salamander with the four nine-pointed stars of her Grayson rank while the other carried the three six-pointed stars of her Manticoran rank — which was enough to confuse anyone. She felt Elizabeth too swallow surprise at the blue tunic when they were shown into the private study, and once greetings had been exchanged — not least between Nimitz and Ariel — the Queen allowed that surprise to show.

“Well, well. I was expecting Honor, not Fleet Admiral Harrington of the GSN.”

“Oh Honor’s here too, Your Majesty, but I’m afraid Admiral Harrington has a report to make first. And I know you don’t usually surveil in here but you’re going to want the Admiral’s report on record.”

“I am? That doesn’t sound good.”

Honor waggled a hand. “No, it isn’t — in most ways it’s entirely appalling and it’s going to go off like a bomb. But while I can’t promise you no harm’s been done, the harm that’s going to be done will leave you with some nice warm feelings.”

“That sounds better, if still alarming. But if this is official, Honor, why did you want to see me alone?”

“Because I’m serious that Honor and Steadholder Plenipotentiary Admiral Harrington are both here, Your Majesty. The Admiral is reporting to the Commander-in-Chief of the RMN, and when that’s done Honor has some things to tell Beth.”

Elizabeth shook her head. “Curiouser and curiouser. All right.” She rose and went to a concealed wall panel. “We’re now on record, Admiral Harrington.”

“Thank you, Your Majesty. In the first place I believe it’s best if I simply tell you what has happened chronologically.”

“Please do.”
“You may recall that two destroyers of the Protector’s Own had engineering problems after returning from Beowulf — minor but affecting their stealth capacity, so Admiral Yu left them here to resolve the matter while he went to New Berlin. Having fixed the problems they were filling time by exercising, and four days ago that took them to one of the fallow sectors of the asteroid belt for a real stealth test.”

Honor knew Elizabeth well enough to hear the dryness in her voice at this opening, as well as feeling her emotions more directly. “Most commendable.”

“And as it turned out fortunate, Your Majesty, because three days ago they were very surprised to observe an RMN ship — the heavy cruiser HMS Reveille — approaching under stealth and making rendezvous with a yacht that appeared to be a private vessel but had no transponder code. And surprise turned to dismay when Captain Pearson, the senior officer, checked the Official List and discovered Reveille was supposedly at the decommissioning yard for removal of classified equipment. The stealth capacity she had shown indicated that some of those systems at least were still in place, so when she parked herself in an asteroid shadow and welcomed aboard a tender from the yacht Captain Pearson decided safe and embarrassed was better than sorry and derelict, and locked both ships up with his fire control before sending a party of GSN marines aboard to see what was what.”

The dryness was gone from Elizabeth’s voice, which had become dangerously flat, and Honor could feel her anger pulsing. Ariel was alert too, but Nimitz was making sure he modulated rather than echoed and reinforced the Queen’s anger. “And what was what, Admiral?”

“Reveille had a skeleton crew aboard headed by a Captain (JG) Roberts, an admiralty staffer who claimed to be acting under orders from Your Second Space Lord, Your Majesty. He was most wrathful with Captain Pearson, making a number of very improper threats and assertions. But Captain Pearson found himself unmoved, because the yacht turned out to be the MY Valentine, owned by George Becker, who as I imagine you know is a non-executive director of the Gordham Cartel, and besides its captain and crew of four it had brought 17 civilians, all of whom had transferred to Reveille and begun to examine her classified equipment. And none had clearance to do any such thing.”

Elizabeth’s skin wasn’t dark enough to hide the red fury rising in her cheeks and a slight hiss escaped Ariel. “Who were they?”

“12 were senior techs employed by the Gordham, Fennelly, and Brigstow cartels. The other five are also presumably techs, but what documentation they had was forged and biometrics indicate that they are not Your Majesty’s subjects. Their identity remains unknown.”

“Peeps?”

Honor shook her head, in exasperation as much as negation, and looked Elizabeth squarely in the eye. “Not necessarily, Your Majesty. And while the investigations that have so far been possible are limited, they don’t suggest the forged documents are of Peep origin. I’ve had my GONI people examine them, and they’re too good, frankly — if I hadn’t been able to use Duchess Harrington’s access, as Chief Magistrate of her Duchy, to civilian databases they’d probably have stood up to purely military enquiry.”

Elizabeth blinked. “But if they’re not Peeps who are they? Andermani?”

“I can’t say yet, Your Majesty,” Honor saw Elizabeth catch her phrasing. “In any case, Captain Pearson decided, rightly, that” — she counted on her fingers — “the lack of security clearance for the civilians he could identify meant higher authorities were required; that discretion
would be sensible; and that the proper course was to arrest everyone on suspicion of breaching the Wartime Security Act, on his own authority as senior serving Alliance officer present, stay right where he was, and send a pinnace to report to his nearest available superior. Which was me as CO of the Protector’s Own.”

Calculation had begun to join rage in Elizabeth’s eyes, though her cheeks were still flushed and she was holding on to her temper by a thread. “I see.” She took a deep breath. “And what has led you to report this to me directly, Admiral?”

“Several considerations, Your Majesty. Assuming Captain Roberts to be telling the truth when he states he was acting under orders from Mr Houseman, which Nimitz says he is, there is a prima facie case that one at least of Your Space Lords has committed a crime carrying at best a long prison term.” Elizabeth nodded jerkily. “There is also a reasonable presumption that other courts martial will be necessary, and given the involvement of such senior RMN personnel a clear requirement that an independent investigative agency be involved.”

That brought a sharp look followed by a smoother, more appreciative nod. Saying flat out that Janacek was so corrupt he couldn’t be trusted to investigate anything wasn’t politically possible on record — yet — but natural presumption of a need for external scrutiny was a strong card. Had any other body or agency been in the equivalent position it would have been an automatic procedure; with the RMN still officially on a wartime footing things became complicated — but as C-in-C the Queen could certainly decide it was warranted for the RMN too, however unprecedented at such a level.

“There are also the 12 civilians already under arrest who are Your subjects, and very probably other civilian subjects — perhaps wealthy ones — whose arrest may be necessary, as well as the five presumed civilians whose identity cannot be established.”

Elizabeth nodded again, more slowly, beginning to think through the legal complexities that arose from crossing service and civilian as well as subject and alien lines.

“And two more things, Your Majesty. First, besides the clear breaches of the Wartime Security and Official Secrets Acts, HMS Reveille carried equipment that remains critical to our — now very thin — edge over the Havenite Navy, including Ghost Rider drones. Moreover, her computers had not been purged of deployment and other highly classified information that was current only a few months ago, and by the time Captain Pearson intervened one of the unknown civilians was vacuuming them. Obviously I’m not a lawyer, Your Majesty, but I believe it possible charges of capital treason may be appropriate, including Aiding and Abetting the Enemy in Wartime. It may depend on whether those five unknown civilians can be identified, or it may be sufficient that they are not Your subjects.”

Watching and feeling Elizabeth bank her rage and force herself to think was impressive. Honor could almost judge her progress down the logic chains she’d followed herself.

“I see. My God but I see. And the second thing?”

Honor sat straighter yet and saw Elizabeth brace herself. “Properly speaking, Your Majesty, while I have a current Manticoran security classification as a member of the House Naval Affairs Committee, I have no authority as a half-pay RMN admiral over serving RMN personnel, and no clearance for live deployment information. But as a Grayson I am on active duty as Fleet Admiral and CO of the Protector’s Own — a fact the present Space Lords tend to forget — and in that capacity I do have presumptive authority over serving Alliance personnel and anyone on board any Alliance vessel, which I have used to place under formal military arrest all those Captain Pearson detained. The captain and crew of the Valentine are anomalous, but covered. I also have as a
Grayson clearance for deployment information, obviating that difficulty, and in any Grayson persona I am inalienably a Steadholder, and at present, as you, though not Your Government, are aware, Steadholder Plenipotentiary. All of which means I can make a formal request to you, in the name of His Grace Protector Benjamin, under Articles 1 and 9 of the Alliance Treaty, for a full and proper enquiry under Clause 127 of the Manticoran Constitution into actions by one at least of Your Space Lords that would seem wilfully and recklessly to endanger the security of Grayson and the lives of GSN personnel, specifically including but not limited to those serving with the RMN.” She took the data wallet from her pocket and laid it on the table between them. “Which I hereby do, Your Majesty.”

Elizabeth’s eyes had gone wide. Constitutional Clause 127 embodied the monarch’s unilateral authority to appoint a Judge of the Queen’s Bench to conduct enquiries into any branch of government, and Honor knew she’d been sorely tempted to exercise it at several points in the last two years but had never had adequate hard evidence to warrant such a decision — and her attention had been on the executive branch, not the Navy. Article 1 of the treaty committed signatories to mutual defence while Article 9 provided for inter-navy loans of personnel — and the Manticoran signature on all Alliance treaties was Elizabeth’s, not her government’s.

“All the relevant evidence is on there, Your Majesty, including the testimony of Captain Pearson and marines of his boarding party, recordings of assorted statements made by Captain Roberts, full sensor data from both GSN ships and HMS Reveille, and what it has so far been possible to establish about the civilians involved.” Full but not quite complete sensor data, the locator beacon records having been suppressed and the beacon itself removed from Reveille’s hull. “Oh, and a summary list of classified equipment and data aboard Reveille.”

Elizabeth took a deep breath. “I see. Thank you, Admiral. I think I must ask you to excuse me while I read this chip.”

“Of course, Your Majesty.”

They both stood, and Elizabeth crossed again to the wall panel, then whirled, emotions surging and a dangerous light in her eye.

“Record off. My God, Honor! This is straight up? Houseman gave classified data to his industrial cronies and the Peeps infiltrated his plot?”

“Not the Peeps, Beth. I meant what I said about those unknowns’ documents. Now, as it happens, Honor knows who they are. But that needs to wait a moment, until we’ve dealt with immediate practicalities. And if you’re willing, I’ve a suggestion as to how we might proceed.”

Elizabeth took another deep breath and sat again. Ariel flowed into her lap, and she buried hands in his fur. “Suggest away.”

“As it happens, Houseman and Jurgenson are due to appear before the Lords’ Naval Affairs Committee this Thursday, to be questioned about ONI’s current appreciation of what’s happening in Silesia and the Navy’s ability to deal with the problems threatening there. I was in any case planning to take Jurgenson apart, because ONI still thinks the Andermani don’t have MDMs, podlayers, or improved compensators. Their entire appreciation of Silesia and the IAN is worthless, and I have good evidence through GONI of just how much they’ve missed — but with HMS Reveille to follow that will be just the start. What’s going to matter, though, is to get to Houseman’s computers before they can be purged, and that means an external force going into the Admiralty.”

Honor nodded sympathetically at Elizabeth’s horrified look.
“I know. But there’s no way round it — and it’s not as if you’ll be interrupting any competent work. With a little finesse it can also be made to work for us. Hence the official request for an enquiry, which you’re treaty bound to answer. Why don’t you ask Lord Justice Berham to head an enquiry into this matter, and given the legal complexities request him to draw his strength from both the LPD and Marine Police? He can have all data and prisoners today, he’ll have constitutionally and legally appropriate jailers for both, and he can keep it all deathly quiet at your request until he’s had a chance to evaluate the evidence.”

“How? Honor, we’re talking about a huge force.”

“You’re thinking ground, not space. The prisoners are aboard the destroyers. A pinnace can take him and a hundred people up.” Elizabeth nodded, again, rather jerkily. “So. That would reasonably take him until Thursday, when he can invite himself to the Committee session — the Chair will play ball with Berham — and either hear Houseman confess or perjure himself. Then Berham can order his arrest and simultaneously send in a search and seize squad to lock down his office and restrict the authority of the other lords to current data.”

There was silence for a full 30 seconds and Elizabeth’s eyes were unfocused as she thought it through. Then her right hand fist and punched into her left and Ariel bleeked.

“Deal. Berham’s perfect and so is using joint LPD and Marines personnel. If I get him here this afternoon can you be available?”

“Of course.”

“Right.” Elizabeth frowned. “Is whatever Honor wants to say something I need to know before I set any of this in motion?”

“Yes, and it’ll take a while, but you could summon Berham for, say, three hours’ time.”

“Three hours?”

“One to tell you, two for you to absorb it and calm down again.”

“As bad as that? Alright, give me a moment.” She rose and went to her secure comconsole, While the crisp orders were given Honor stood, unbuttoned her tunic, and shrugged it off, hanging it on the chairback before sitting again to wait patiently, amusing herself with the mingled appreciation of strategy and disapproval of informality in Andrew’s mind. Elizabeth too was surprised when she returned, and Honor smiled.

“Honor here, and Honor only. Duchess, Steadholder, Plenipotentiary and otherwise, and Admiral have all left. It’s complicated, Beth, 16 ways to Christmas complicated, which is why I’m dancing between personas. The number of things I’m not telling myself is staggering, and I owe you an apology for not telling you some of them sooner — but tactically speaking I have clear sight of a hexapuma’s tail, and as Nimitz reminded me it really doesn’t do to pounce on those.” She sat forward, her eyes locked on Elizabeth’s. “And that’s why despite the fact that I’m about to set off several more laserheads you’re not going to do anything — yet.”

“I’m not?”

Even close friends could run foul of the Queen’s amour propre and there was frost in Elizabeth’s voice, but there was battlesteel in Honor’s.

“No, you’re not. That hexapuma is the High Ridge administration, and I promise you I am going to use what I know to take it down — spectacularly and finally, in killing flames — but I have
to line up the shot. Don’t jog my elbow, Beth, even it takes another few months.”

Elizabeth took yet another deep breath. “All right, Honor, provisionally. Now tell me.”

“It really is complicated, Beth, and the ramifications are as much galactic as domestic. I can’t just tell you chronologically either, not least because I’ve made good and sure there are things even Honor doesn’t know, though Andrew might. Or Captain Zilwicki, say.” She saw Elizabeth’s understanding. “But I can work backwards, so the first thing is that the unknown civilians are employees of Manpower.”

“What?”

“You heard right. I know my judgement in that area can be considered suspect because of my mother’s family, and because I did deal with the Ballroom over Casimir, but I know they’re Manpower’s, and probably Mesan. I’m not guessing, Beth, or even deducing — I have a recording of the person who set it up for Manpower explaining exactly what she was doing and how. So forget the Peeps for a moment.”

Unwillingly Elizabeth nodded. “Alright. But what the hell is Manpower doing coming after our war technology?”

“Patience, and brace yourself. The second thing is that the person who set is up is Lady North Hollow. I can prove by her confession and a considerable weight of solid evidence, genetic, legal, and financial, that Georgia Young, though born a slave herself, is and has since before her arrival on Manticore been a Manpower agent, with a general brief to seek whatever influence she could, which is why she headed for the North Hollow files, and that since High Ridge came to power her orders have been to weaken the RMN as much as possible and get us back to war with the Peeps and at war with the Andies.”

Honor had never seen Elizabeth shocked into silence and took full advantage.

“I know exactly what you’re feeling and I felt it myself. It makes no sense at all — a transstellar running deep-cover agents against star nations? But in the first place, is Manpower only a transstellar? With the Jessyk Combine it’s the lynchpin of the whole murderous Protectorate system that OFS runs throughout the Verge and Shell; that cartel is dominant on Mesa; and Mesa has a sufficient lock on Old Chicago to have ensured for better than five T-centuries that the Solarian League has done nothing effective to combat slavery, and has in fact enormously extended it by the way it’s allowed OFS and the Protectorate system to develop. Just think about that for a moment, Beth — we’ve always known that Mesa successfully paralyses the League, but how exactly have they done that quite so thoroughly, so blindingly successfully, for so long? Are you willing to exclude the possibility of deep-cover agents as well as the obvious corruption? I’m not. They have to have huge influence in the SLN, both Battle and Frontier Fleets, and the OFS as well as the Old Chicago bureaucracies, and with that level of success over that length of time it can’t all be external. And once you grant deep-cover agents as a possible practice, consider just how richly Manpower and Mesa profit from our being at war with the Peeps. Yes, it’s a standard Ballroom complaint — if only the two strongest enforcers of the Cherwell convention would stop distracting one another from doing so. But it’s standard because it’s valid, and try turning the question round — if you were running Manpower wouldn’t you be prepared to invest a considerable amount in anything that might help make sure we and the Peeps do keep distracting one another? You asked what Manpower would want with our classified tech. Most obviously, giving it to the Peeps. And maybe the Andermani — not to mention the profit they could turn in the League just with our compensators. Given how they operate, our stealth tech would be a massive windfall for them as well.”

Elizabeth was looking sick, and her hands were working in Ariel’s fur. “My God. My God,
Honor. You really know this? Personas be damned — I have to know how you obtained this information.”

“In the first place from the Ballroom, as a gift to someone who passed it on to me because they saw the implications. And yes, it suits the Ballroom that it’s true, but it is true. I’ve heard the recording of Young’s confession, I’ve checked all the documentation I can, every scrap of which has proved solid, and it’s because of one part of it that those GSN destroyers were waiting for HMS Reveille. And there’s one more thing I know that doesn’t have any Ballroom taint at all, Beth, because — and I apologise again — while I didn’t tell you I did tell Benjamin, and following the financial codes Young provided Sword Security has discovered three Manpower agents planted on Grayson — in much more minor roles than Young’s, but nevertheless. They’re more recent, because Manpower had no reason to care a hoot about Grayson until 14 years ago, but they were there — apparent immigrants from Manticore, supposedly drawn to Father Church, who had got themselves sensitive jobs and were reporting all they could. One was in the Sword Treasury, two in journalism. Junior, as I say — but all have confessed their brief was to foment whatever tension and unhappiness in the Alliance they could, and the newsies have been prominent in denouncing High Ridge and Manticore with him. Now, do the political math — agents on Manticore, agents on Grayson … if you were doing that, with those briefs, where else would you send them?”

Elizabeth was clearly in shock but her brain was still working. “New Berlin and Nouveau Paris for starters. Erewhon, maybe.”

“Yes, and this is where the stakes go from catastrophic to cataclysmic, Beth. With the Andermani I can be reasonably direct, as Steadholder Plenipotentiary, and I sent word of Young to Chien-lu Anderman via Alfredo Yu a month and some back. He’s due to return within a fortnight, and I hope he’ll have confirmation both of more data on Young and if we’re lucky of a Manpower agent there — as well as agreement to a non-aggression pact between Grayson and the Empire. He’ll also have passed on your position, and as soon as High Ridge is gone the whole Silesian question can be permanently and peacefully settled by conceding legitimate Andermani interests. So there’s the first real plum — you know Benjamin told me that if I could save GSN and RMN lives in Silesia I had to do so, even if meant a climb-down for Manticore. And it won’t even be that — it’ll be a spectacular reassertion of honour and common sense, as well as proper and responsible government.”

Elizabeth’s face had become very still beneath her shock and rage and Honor could feel her furious thinking,

“Yes, alright — I knew that was coming sometime, and if we can do it without a naval catastrophe first I can’t complain. The mercantile interest is going to scream, though.”

“No necessarily, Beth, but that has to wait, because the other shoe is Nouveau Paris. And no, I didn’t send them a message, but someone did. It was actually Andrew who received the data on Young, and there was one little tidbit he didn’t pass on to me for some weeks and then only after I twisted his arm right out of its socket. Andrew?”

LaFollet stifled a grimace as the Queen’s gaze swung to him with unpleasant intensity. The Steadholder has not been pleased with his discretion, but had forgiven him — mostly — when she discovered he had told Alfredo before the Own went to New Berlin.

“Your Majesty, the data on Lady North Hollow came from the Ballroom, and it is my understanding — no more — that they undertook on their own behalf to deliver the same data to the Peeps, and specifically to someone in President Pritchard’s cabinet, with an urgent request to search for any Manpower agents in their own set-up.”

“When?”
“Mid-February, Your Majesty, so it would have arrived some weeks ago. What success the messenger may have had I cannot say, but Admiral Yu reminded me that Kevin Usher, director of the FIA — their domestic intelligence bureau — and so a member of President Pritchart’s cabinet, was stationed at their Terran embassy when Captain Zilwicki’s daughter was kidnapped. Usher is married to a former C-line slave, and Jeremy X was personally involved in what happened in Old Chicago — so I have fair reason to believe that the message could have been delivered to ears that would hear.”

Honor leant forward before Elizabeth could speak again. “And that’s the real kicker, Beth. I know your head’s exploding because mine is too, but think about a new administration here that knows about Young, and a Havenite administration that has found an equivalent in Nouveau Paris. And about having Benjamin on board — he’s none too happy either — as well as, just maybe, Gustav. Think about what the public are going to feel when all this hits the newsies — here and in Haven. Even a change of administration and a settlement with the Andermani won’t get us out of the military hole High Ridge had dumped us in. By GONI’s calculations the RMN has lost most of its tech advantage over the Peeps already, and it’ll be far worse if Erewhon switches sides, which wouldn’t be unjustified given how we’ve treated them. It’ll take us a year, minimum, to get things even remotely shipshape again, longer to rebuild basic strength in hull numbers, and you saw the GONI projections for RN podnaught hulls. If they wanted to they could hurt us very badly indeed. Even beat us. But with this hitting both of us into shock? And while half the problem’s been High Ridge, the other half’s been the falsified correspondence, which we’ve had to conclude has been falsified at their end. But falsified by whom? And answering to what master?”

She saw it hit Elizabeth.

“I don’t know any of that, Beth, and there’s a thousand permutations, but I will tell you that the last time I felt like this was commanding the Elysian Space Navy on a ballistic burn out of the sun at Cerberus. There are huge risks and a million unknowns — but there’s a solid tactical chance of a miracle result. If I get it right I can put High Ridge and several of his cabinet in the dock or even in front of a firing squad, scour out the CA and Liberals as well as the worst elements of the aristocracy and RMN, end the Silesian problem, and secure a proper, negotiated treaty with the Peeps. At the very least — the very least, Beth — you’ll be permanently shot of High Ridge and all his godless crew, none of your subjects will be dying in Silesia, and I can buy us some time, maybe enough time, to climb out of the military hole we’re in against the RN.”

Elizabeth was very still for a long moment. “Or at us.” The words were almost inaudible and as Honor leaned forward she waved a hand slightly. “Never mind. When you can, ask Mike about a conversation she and I had the night we learned of your escape from Hades. For now, tell me exactly what you’re proposing to do on Thursday and then I’m going to take your advice and lie down, if only to rest my aching head.”

* * * * *

As on many evenings, Admiral Theodosia Kuzak was engaged in gloomy and politically improper, not to say scathing, conversation with her Flag Captain, Sinead Everett, about the difficulties Third Fleet faced. The vocal pressure of San Martinos, with the political calculus surrounding what their peers might do when they were finally allowed to accede to the Lords, had so far ensured her command had not yet suffered the swingeing cuts that never-sufficiently-damned idiot Houseman had made elsewhere, but the only possible reinforcements now, if Haven did re-open hostilities by
seeking to seize back Trevor’s Star, were Home Fleet or the GSN. And if the GONI numbers for Havenite building Honor Harrington had sent her months back were even remotely accurate, the Manticore or Grayson home systems could well find themselves facing more than enough Havenite strength to tie both down while Third Fleet faced seriously bad odds with a very limited tech edge. There wasn’t a great deal she could do about any of it, though Grayson-style dispersed yards were enabling the San Martinos to add to their own strength in light craft faster than she’d have credited, but she could, and had, set about making sure the local volume would be as inimical to unexpected callers as possible. She and Sinead were arguing about where the latest batch of mines might best be laid when her secure console chimed.

“Kuzak.”

A wide-eyed officer of the watch stared at her. “Admiral, a despatch boat with Havenite diplomatic identifiers has just made transition, and the pilot asks to speak to you, ultra-securely and alone. She says it’s extremely urgent.”

Her eyebrows rose. “She does?” Her mind spun. “Ultra-securely, by all means, but not alone. Captain Everett is with me, and given all that’s happened about diplomatic correspondence I’m not speaking to any Peep without a witness. They can take it or leave it. Oh, and get a Hermes Buoy headed in their direction.”

“Already done, sir.” His eyes shifted left as he tapped his screen and she heard him speak to the Havenite pilot, who obviously agreed to her terms, though clearly expecting a delay and stifling surprise when the reply came so swiftly; the Hermes Buoy must already be close to the RN vessel. “Putting her through, sir, under encryption protocol Alpha.”

She hit the appropriate commands on her own screen and an older face than she’d expected appeared. The woman’s voice had the accents of poor Nouveau Paris.

“Admiral Kuzak, sir. Pilot Captain Jeanne Calorde, Republican Navy. Thank you for agreeing to speak to me.”

“Pilot Captain Calorde. What can I do for you?”

“Forgive me, Admiral, but this FTL relay is wholly secure? And only Flag Captain Everett observes? I cannot stress too much, sir, how vital this is.”

Curiosity rising at the edge in that accented voice, Kuzak nodded. “It is, and she is, Pilot Captain. My word. What is so vital?”

“The person who wishes to speak to you, sir.”

Calorde rose, moving aside, and the uniformed figure who dropped into her seat made Kuzak’s face go very still indeed. Even over a relay the force of Thomas Theisman’s gaze hit her, and she could sense Sinead stiffening beside her.

“Admiral Kuzak, we have never met but I imagine you recognise me. For the record, however, I am Admiral Thomas Theisman, CNO of the Republican Navy, and Minister of War in President Pritchard’s cabinet. And” — he gave a very strange smile — “at present also saddled with the peculiar role and title of Acting Secretary of State Plenipotentiary.”

Kuzak’s mind went in a dozen directions at once, chief among them what the hell had happened to that slimeball Giancola, and why the hell whatever Theisman was up to needed plenipotentiary powers. Sudden hope warred with caution.
“I certainly recognise your appearance, sir, but many forms of deception are possible. Can you prove you are indeed Admiral Theisman?”

“You should have my voiceprint and biometrics on file from Grayson, Admiral Kuzak, and I am transmitting a full palm print. If we can come to agreement I will happily provide a genetic sample.”

Sinead’s hands were flying over her minicomp and after a moment she nodded. “Voice and print both match file records, Admiral.”

“Very well. Then let me say first, sir, that while we have never met I have spoken of you with Her Grace Admiral Harrington as well as Admiral Yu and Commodore Caslet. And I will take this chance to express to you on my own behalf and that of the Royal Manticoran Navy our gratitude for what you did and tried to do for Her Grace while she was in your custody.”

He offered her an austere smile and a slight bow. “It was no more than my duty, Admiral. I only regret I could not stop Saint-Just sooner.”

“It was testimony to your honour, sir, as Her Grace insisted. So what can I do for you, Mr Acting Secretary Plenipotentiary.”

“Thank you, Admiral. It does sound absurd, doesn’t it? My position is absurd also, yet deadly serious. There is a great deal I cannot say, but I can certainly begin by telling you what is public knowledge in Haven — first, that my predecessor as Secretary of State, Arnold Giancola, is under close arrest, charged with capital treason as well as many other offences; and second, that the capital treason in question was wilful and unauthorised alteration of the diplomatic correspondence between our nations. Much as it is painful for me to admit it, we have discovered that he both falsified your statements and unilaterally altered our replies. I am now transmitting to you a record of his arraignment.”

As she and Sinead watched with open mouths an astonishing and noisy courtroom scene intercut with shots of an enormous, baying crowd filling the streets outside, she realised Theisman was deliberately giving her time to assimilate what he was saying. The Peeps admitting that the diplomatic correspondence had been falsified, and at their end, was in itself a laserhead, but the idea that it had not been their administration doing it but a traitor skewed everything. The scenes she was viewing looked real, and though God knew Haven had a record of faking everything in sight, if this was genuine the Solarian news feeds would bring it to her not more than a few days behind the despatch boat; so what advantage could there be in faking it? And nothing in the galaxy would make her believe Giancola was a willing patsy, so either he had done what Theisman said or it was a monumental convulsion of some kind within Pritchart’s government. And none of that began to explain why Theisman was here. The scene ended and his lined, wise, and sad face regarded her.

“May we assume, Admiral, that that record is accurate and not a nefarious forgery for some purpose neither of us can imagine?”

She waved a hand. “Of course, sir. Go ahead.”

“Then you can see that President Pritchart has a very serious problem. Under interstellar law she is obliged to present the information as soon as possible to Her Majesty’s Government. Meaning, of course, Her Majesty’s present administration.”

Kuzak blinked, parsing his words, and made a decision she could not have done if anyone other than Sinead were observing. Damn, but Theisman was smart.
“I see very clearly, sir. And we may stipulate that I understand the difficulties of dealing with Her Majesty’s present administration.”

“Ah. That is helpful. Thank you.” He hesitated. “Forgive me, but the time-loop between Manticore and Haven is a serious impediment. Allow me to ask if you have had news of any … serious revelations in Landing?”

She blinked and met Sinead’s startled look. “Serious revelations, sir? No, there has been nothing of that kind, either in news or more privately communicated.”

“Mmm. Then I am sorry but I can say only that you may anticipate some such thing. In any case, you will understand if we have decided we would in the first place rather speak to Her Majesty directly than to Prime Minister High Ridge or Foreign Minister Descroix.”

Kuzak felt as if smoke should be coming from her ears. Cutting the lawful but honourless and grossly incompetent government out of the loop was … exactly what she’d want to do too, if she had serious business to conduct. And whatever any diplomats ever negotiated, a treaty with the Republic would be signed if and only if Queen Elizabeth personally accepted every last word of it. But laws and regulations were very clear indeed. And look where the hell that had got them. Which didn’t mean diddly, because there was no way a Havenite despatch boat with diplomatic credentials could use the Junction and not have to talk to High Ridge.

“I can understand the desire, sir.”

“Which leaves the practice, yes. But there may be a way.”

A thought blossomed in her mind. “I believe you might need to talk to Her Grace Steadholder Harrington, sir. Although she is very careful never to say anything of it in public she is very close to Her Majesty.”

“So I understand, Admiral. And I will say at once I have no problem whatever with your passing a record of this conversation to the Steadholder, and the Steadholder only. In fact, I would welcome it. But for various reasons the person I really want to talk to is Steadholder Harrington’s liege lord. So what I am asking of you is passage to Grayson via the Junction, in a vessel that will arouse no official curiosity.”

More smoke. Theisman had met Benjamin after that obscene business with the Masadans and the RMN PoWs who’d been murdered, and Harrington had made sure his name was in very good odour on Grayson. And though no despatch boat could command direct access to Mount Royal if not previously authorised, the Protector of Grayson certainly could. So it made a kind of sense, however explosive. And if Harrington knew what was coming …. Well, could she square her conscience and duty with informing a half-pay admiral and not her proper superior? Who was Janacek, not only dim, malicious, and corrupt, but a pure tool of High Ridge, and it was plain to any fool that neither of them gave a single, flying shit about the safety of her people, or Manticore as a whole, if it interfered with their own equally plainly derelict and selfish agendas. Besides, what was command authority for anyway? What would Harrington do under like circumstances? — a question Kuzak often tried to ask herself, though rarely with such a clear answer. The circles of her conscience made rather interesting and perfect squares.

“Conditional upon that genetic sample, that’s a deal, Admiral Theisman. I will send a record of this to Her Grace, and no-one else. And if you care to park your boat next to me, you may transship to an RMN despatch boat that will take you to Grayson. How many staff?”

He blinked and she felt in some degree of control for the first time in the bizarre conversation.
“I have one aide, Admiral, but Pilot Captain Calorde and her crew believe they should also accompany me, while I am persuaded that they will necessarily invite fewer questions if they are with me than if they are aboard your flagship. So five in all, including myself.”

She thought hard for a moment. “That rules out any of my usual despatch boats. But if we’re scaling up … Admiral Theisman, will you give me your word as CNO that Haven intends no assault on Trevor’s Star?”

He didn’t hesitate. “Certainly. You have it.” He grimaced. “We have just announced substantial new naval construction, Admiral, including SD(P)s, CLACs, and BC(P)s in numbers, but that cannot come as any real surprise to you, whatever High Ridge actually supposes. But renewed hostilities is the last thing we want, and among Giancola’s lies was that we demand the return of Trevor’s Star. We do not. We do want all other polities captured or liberated from us to have free and fair referenda on what they want, but in the case of San Martin the vote for annexation makes that moot. And while there are of course detailed plans on file — I would be derelict otherwise — I swear that no attack of any kind is planned or imminent.”

She believed him, as she had long believed Haven was building new ships as fast as it could, and that they would be podlayers and CLACs.

“Then I will detach the GSNS Honor Harrington, which is in any case soon due leave on Grayson. It’s an SD(P) named while she was believed dead, and the ship on which she returned from Trevor’s Star after her escape from Hades.”

His smile was wide and infectious, and she grinned back.

“Perfect, Admiral Kuzak. Thank you, most sincerely.”

When she and Sinead met him on the skeleton-crewed GSN pinnace making the transfer she waited until the GSN tech agreed the saliva sample was a perfect match, and dismissed her to the pilot’s cabin before offering a hand.

“I meant what I said about my gratitude, sir, and the RMN’s. The GSN’s too, you’ll find, though I cannot speak for them. But is there anything else you can tell me, here where there are no records of any kind? On my word.”

He was silent for a long moment, before shrugging. “It will become public on Haven soon enough, if it has not already. Giancola was an agent, Admiral Kuzak — an agent whose paymaster was Manpower Unlimited. And the revelations from Landing I wondered about were of his equivalent at your end.”

She knew her face must be as blank with shock as Sinead’s, and Theisman nodded.

“I know. It seems absurd, doesn’t it? But consider how Manpower has benefited from our protracted wars, and how they would suffer if we achieved peace.” He hesitated, then leaned forward slightly, lowering his voice. “There is one other thing. My hope is to be able to speak to Her Majesty before this news breaks on Manticore. Astrography is against us, but the Solarian newsies experienced some delays in getting underway, and will have been instructed to stay below the Zeta Band on account of turbulence, so they’ll be further behind me than you expect. Perhaps they might
experience some delays in using the Junction when they do get here.” He straightened. “I will also
tell you that my brief is, simply, to end this war now and make very sure we do not go back to
fighting because Manpower has been suborning our diplomacy. So wish me luck, Admiral. It is not
only my own peoples’ lives I hope to save.”

“My God.” Her thoughts churned. “I’ll do what I can, sir. And I’ll certainly wish you luck.”

She offered him a salute, as did Sinead, and he acknowledged both before they withdrew to
let the pinnace go on its way. Back in her day cabin she looked at Sinead.

“A dollar for them?”

“Too much. I’m reeling. Manpower running agents? And he didn’t sound as if he thought
there was one on Manticore. He sounded as if he knew there was.”

“Yes, he did. And we know from what happened with Cathy Montaigne’s data that High
Ridge is at least what the Ballroom calls a parasite. It’s more unthinkable than impossible, Sinead.
And I must get this off to Harrington with a covering note.”

“Yes. Are you really going to delay any Solarian news boats?”

“Maybe. We could pull a check on one of the Junction minefields, and eat a day or two.”

Sinead grinned, though her shock still showed. “I knew there was a better use for those new
mines than either of us was suggesting.”

* * * * *

Honor sat quietly, enjoying the weight of Nimitz’s head on her shoulder as he lay along the
chairback, while the Chair welcomed Jurgenson, looking bored until he noticed Lord Justice
Berham, and a very twitchy Houseman. The Earl of Glentormin was a Gryphon noble about whom
Captain Zilwicki would have had nothing even remotely polite to say, and a paid-up member of the
CA, which is why he’d been given this post by High Ridge, but Honor had more time for him. He’d
served in the RMN years ago, before resigning his commission on the death of his father, and though
he’d not risen above Commander his Saganami scores and service record showed he hadn’t been a
complete loss. As Honor’s duchy was on Gryphon she’d also had dealings with him over various
planetary matters, and had found him both better informed and more reasonable than she’d expected
— so long as they stuck to the matter in hand. More importantly, he was increasingly unhappy with
the Janacek admiralty, not because he disagreed with downsizing the RMN in peacetime but because
it wasn’t peacetime, and he had deeper reservations than anyone in government about how much
rearming the Peeps might manage in the time they were being given. The nominal topic today,
however, was Silesia and escalating tensions with the Andermani, and though Glentormin couldn’t
until a few hours ago have been expecting anything except the usual disagreements Honor had seen
his surprise at her uniform turn into a speculative look. Now he concluded his stage-setting and
glanced at Hamish, sitting next to her.

“You will notice, my Lords and Ladies, that Lord Justice Berham is present, at his own
request, for reasons which will, I trust, become apparent. My Lord of White Haven, you filed
questions for this session. Would you care to begin?”

“Thank you, my Lord.” Hamish nodded to Glentormin and turned to Jurgenson. “Sir Francis,
you reaffirmed to us last November that ONI had no credible reason to believe the IAN has made any significant advances in hardware. Does that remain the case?”

Jurgenson sat up smoothly. “It does, my Lord. There continue to be rumours, but none have been substantiated and ONI has nothing to suggest they will be.”

“You are confident, therefore, that the IAN does not have either improved inertial compensators or MDMs?”

“I have seen no evidence to show that they do, my Lord.”

“That isn’t what I asked, Sir Francis. Is it or is it not ONI’s position that the IAN do not have MDMs?”

Jurgenson didn’t like being pinned — which was ridiculous, Honor thought: what did he suppose Naval Intelligence was for? — but kept his smoothness and nodded.

“As I say, my Lord, I have seen nothing to indicate that they do, so it would appear they don’t.”

“Or improved inertial compensators?”

“The same applies, my Lord.”

“I asked you in November if you had yourself looked closely at the reports from Silesia, and you replied that you had but agreed to look again. Have you done so?”

“I have, my Lord.”

“And your opinions about their reliability are unchanged?”

“They are, my Lord.”

“Could you expand, please. Why do you find them unreliable?”

“As I believe I explained before, my Lord” — his tone was oily with patience — “they were reports from merchant skippers who believed they had observed marginal increases in the acceleration of IAN ships and suchlike, but there were in every case very wide margins of doubt, including at what level the IAN ships were running their compensators.”

“You believe the IAN ships may have been redlining?”

“Military ships have been known to do so, my Lord.”

“Not often or for long.”

“Nevertheless, my Lord. And there were other considerations, such as the accuracy of sensor equipment available to those skippers. It is of course possible the Andermani may have made some marginal gains in compensator efficiency — you’ll remember, I’m sure, that before our own breakthrough it had increased by one or two percent over three decades — but there is nothing to indicate the IAN has anything like the levels we routinely manage, and nothing to warrant any serious concern.”

“Very well.” Hamish turned to Glentormin. “With your permission, my Lord, I’ll turn the rest of my time over to Her Grace of Harrington.”
Glentormin frowned, but nodded. Such exchanges of time were less usual in the Naval Affairs Committee than in some, but nevertheless routine procedure. Nimitz withdrew his head, sitting up on her chair back, and Honor sat forward, keeping her tone light.

“Forgive me, Sir Francis, if I begin with what may seem an irrelevant and impertinent question. Why do you suppose I have appeared today in my GSN rather than my RMN uniform?”

Jurgenson’s eyes glittered with contempt for neobars that Honor could sense but his voice was smooth. “I can’t imagine, Your Grace. Is it some Grayson festival or saint’s day, perhaps?”

“No, Sir Francis. Would you care to try again?”

He let a trace of impatience show. “I would not, Your Grace. You are entitled to that uniform, and however … unusual your decision to wear it here, that is a matter for you.”

“Really, Sir Francis? There is no other inference you care to draw?”

“With all due respect, Your Grace, I don’t have time for guessing games.”

“Well now, that’s an interesting statement from the Director of ONI, or any intelligence agency.” Jurgenson’s face darkened and Honor felt Nimitz’s amused satisfaction. “But be that as it may, the point, Sir Francis, is that as an Admiral in the RMN I am, though seconded to Saganami Island, like Admiral White Haven on half-pay, not on active service. And as such, neither he nor I, of course, are cleared to examine raw intelligence take, to assess for ourselves how reliable or otherwise it might be.” She saw shocked understanding begin to show in his eyes. “But as an Admiral in the GSN and permanent CO of the Protector’s Own I am on active service, and have full access to all GONI material — which in many cases, Sir Francis, is the same raw intelligence take ONI has. In the particular case of Silesia I have seen at least six reports that also went to ONI, and I had wondered if you would care to qualify your description of them — but given what you’ve just said to Admiral White Haven that clearly isn’t the case. So I must ask you directly why you choose to characterise the reports by Captains Lescroart and Backfisch as coming merely from merchant skippers?”

He frowned puzzlement. “Because that’s what they are, Your Grace.”

“Wrong, Sir Francis. To begin with, both men are owner-captains, not hired skippers, and both have multiple vessels. I’ve prepared a listing.” She tapped a button and the committee’s viewing screens lit with the document. “People who run 14 ships between them and make the kind of profits these men are filing — especially in Silesia — are not ‘merchant skippers’, Sir Francis. And then” — she tapped again — “there is the consideration that Captain Lescroart was formerly a Silesian Navy officer — a senior-grade captain, whose last posting was command of a BC. The public portion of his service record indicates superior competence, and he left the service only for political reasons, having fallen foul of a sector-governor by swatting his personal pirates.” Honor looked around the committee, seeing frowns. “My Lords and Ladies, the relevant public domain records are appended to the documents I’ve submitted, with a declassified 1892 ONI report on Captain Lescroart’s political difficulties and founding of Lescroart Lines. I have also appended the sensor record in question — which GONI declassified at my request, and which is, after all, in the possession of Captain Lescroart — and as you can see” — tap — “it shows an IAN battlecruiser pulling a consistent 19% more acceleration than it could if it were running its compensator at 80% — assuming that compensator to be of the kind we are invited to suppose. Sir Francis might of course be correct that the IAN ship was redlining its compensator. The record lasts for some nine minutes, and the speed does not alter. Would you care to comment, Sir Francis?”

She didn’t need to be an empath to know that Jurgenson was livid at her ambush, but he was
managing to keep his temper, just. His voice wasn’t so smooth, though.

“The IAN ship was on a least-time course between the Gregor and Durandel termini, Your Grace. There are reasons to suppose it was indeed in a hurry.”

“Are there, Sir Francis? Do they also explain why in that case it should have stopped off at Sanderman for more than 30 hours, allowing local leave? Still, we should move on to your concern about the equipment available to Captain Lescroart. Do you note the range at which this recording was made?”

His voice was developing a snarl. “That is one reason I doubt its accuracy, Your Grace.”

“Really, Sir Francis? ONI’s 1892 report indicates that the Silesian Navy was less than happy about Captain Lescroart’s politically forced resignation and that his new civilian ships were being fitted with a surprising amount of naval equipment. GONI’s analysis is that this recording was made on such equipment — there are naval codes in the metadata and the tagging system that identified the IAN ship certainly has a naval architecture. In any case, such problems do not attend the report submitted by Admiral Backfisch.”

Glentormin had been looking increasingly grim, and if as a supporter of High Ridge he was unhappy with the way things were shaping he was even unhappier with Jurgenson. “Admiral Backfisch, Your Grace?”

“Yes, my Lord — Rear-Admiral Thomas Backfisch, RMN. I must declare an interest, because I made my midshipwoman cruise under then Captain Backfisch, in the old War Maiden, and on that cruise we encountered a Silesian heavy cruiser in the hands of one of their local liberation movements. Captain Backfisch was mildly censured by court martial — the records are appended — and as it was then peacetime he was grounded. But before that he had served for more than 30 years, including nine deployments to Silesia.” Tap. “As you can see, my Lords and Ladies, he was also repeatedly decorated, and” — tap — “since founding his shipping line has accounted for more than a dozen pirate vessels. More to the point, as the appended report by Admiral Givens — which was copied to GONI — indicates, seven years ago Admiral Backfisch was supplied with a then-one-generation-back RMN sensor suite and two pre-Ghost Rider surveillance drones, which is how he obtained the imagery he reported.”

Tap.

“As you can also see, Sir Francis was correct to say the image Admiral Backfisch managed to capture was distant. He omitted to inform us that it was so because the IAN ship in question was extremely careful about allowing its stern aspect to be seen, and it was only by deploying a stealthed drone as he departed the system and returning — at his own considerable expense — to collect it that any image was obtained at all. And Sir Francis was not correct to say that nothing at all may be concluded.”

Tap.

“We are of course ourselves in possession of exactly that model of drone. The upper image you see is its take, at the same range, of the stern of an SD. The lower image is its take of the stern of one of our first-generation SD(P)s.” Breaths were drawn in. “And as you can see” — tap — “there is a 94% match with the latter, and only a 12% match with the former.” She let the display run, straightening and taking a deep breath while feeling a nudge from Nimitz and deciding he wasn’t wrong. “All of which means, Sir Francis, that the assessment of the IAN you have repeatedly offered this committee and Her Majesty’s Government is plain wrong. They very probably have improved compensators, and plainly have SD(P)s, so they must also have MDMs as even you cannot suppose
anyone would build podlayers to fire SDMs. Whether you have deliberately perjured yourself for some reason or are only incompetent beyond belief remains to be seen, but does not matter to what must follow. Because the other reason I am wearing GSN uniform, Sir Francis, is that I appear here not only as an admiral on active service but as Steadholder Plenipotentiary with specific powers of oversight concerning GSN ships and personnel in Manticoran service.”

Jurgenson’s face showed only fury, but Glentormin and the rest of the committee straightened in shock. Honor gave them a few seconds to digest it.

“As I have previously informed you all, my Lords and Ladies, and the Admiralty, His Grace Protector Benjamin has grave concerns about the risk to GSN personnel serving on GSN or RMN ships that are or may be deployed to Silesia to face the IAN. Grayson has no quarrel with the Andermani, and is not willing to sacrifice its sons and daughters to protect purely commercial Manticoran interests. GONI has for nearly two years been confidently reporting that the IAN does have improved compensators, MDMs, and podlayers, and further states as a certainty that four years ago the Empire’s naval construction budget was quadrupled, a matter about which Sir Francis has said nothing whatever. They are far more formidable opponents than anyone in the present government is willing to believe, and they have, like so many star nations, been recklessly provoked and insulted by the manner in which the Prime Minister has chosen to conduct foreign policy. And my brief as Steadholder Plenipotentiary is to avoid the needless deaths of any GSN personnel in a conflict with the IAN in Silesia arising in large part from ONI’s staggering incompetence.”

She turned to Glentormin. “My lord, you should be aware that what I am about to say has been previously communicated to Her Majesty, and will be simultaneously transmitted to the offices of the Prime Minister and First Lord of the Admiralty.” He nodded, jerkily. “Sir Francis, and Mr Houseman, I am now officially informing you, and so the RMN, in my capacity as Steadholder Plenipotentiary, that His Grace Protector Benjamin IX, under Article 9 of the Alliance treaty, hereby withdraws consent for the deployment to Silesia of any and all GSN personnel serving with the RMN. GSN ships are hereby immediately recalled, with all GSN personnel serving on RMN ships deployed to Silesia — a decision you are required by treaty to respect with all possible expedition, such that no more than two T-months shall elapse before all affected individuals have begun redeployment.”

“You cannot do that!”

“I just have, Sir Francis. It seems you should read the articles of Alliance more carefully.” She let the jangling silence stretch, enjoying the shock on their faces, before breaking it herself. “I understand, of course, that this is likely to occasion BuPers some difficulty, particularly after its proven and mendacious mismanagement by Admiral Draskovitch, and to allay any such problems I am further specifically empowered to say that if the RMN finds itself in conflict with the IAN — as seems inevitable, sooner rather than later, unless policy changes drastically — the GSN will willingly take on the defence of either Trevor’s Star or Basilisk or the Manticore Home System.” She held up a swift hand as eyes popped. “It is GONI’s calculation, and mine, that at the force level to which the policy decisions of the High Ridge administration have currently reduced the RMN, it cannot without its loaned GSN personnel and squadrons simultaneously defend all three home systems, maintain defence against putative Havenite resumption of offensive operations, and pursue a war against the IAN in Silesia. It is also GONI’s assessment, and mine, that under its present direction ONI has become so fundamentally incompetent that its threat assessments of the RN are as erroneous as those of the IAN, not merely worthless but dangerously false. And as the withdrawal of GSN personnel from joint service in Silesia, but not from Alliance against Haven, neither can nor should be concealed, and must be properly explained to both the Grayson and Manticoran publics, I shall be releasing a statement with as much detail and as full an analysis as security permits.”
“When?” Jurgenson’s fury was now blended with fright, his voice hoarse. She considered him coolly.

“As soon as this meeting concludes, Sir Francis. But oddly, it will not dominate the evening news as much as you suppose, because I must now turn to a more recent event that is still more serious than the proven incompetence of ONI.” Her gaze swung, and Houseman almost jumped as it hit him. He had been sweaty and fidgeting throughout, as well he might be, wondering where his staffer and HMS *Reveille* had got to, and as she’d taken Jurgenson apart he’d gone even paler and twitchier. “Tell me, Mr Houseman, why was a heavy cruiser only five years old sent for decommissioning? I refer to HMS *Reveille*, of course.”

He blanched and licked his lips. “It … it had persistent enviro-system problems.”

“Did it? And these problems were reported on its log, I take it?”

“Of course.”

Glentormin was getting over his first shock at what had happened, and frowned. “You will observe courtesy, Mr Houseman.”

“I … what?”

“You will address Her Grace properly.”

“Thank you, my lord. Now, Mr Houseman, you say that these enviro-system problems were logged. And indeed, the copy of the log filed with BuShips shows them.”

“You have no right to access a log!” Jurgenson had reverted to fury.

“For the second time, Sir Francis, as a GSN Admiral and CO of the Protector’s Own, I am on active duty. The Admiralty may, and does, deny me clearance for live RMN data, but it cannot by treaty deny me access to the filed log of any ship on which GSN personnel are serving or have ever served. Now, Mr Houseman, when did you become aware of these enviro-system problems?”

He consulted a diary, hands visibly shaking. “In March. Your Grace.”

“And when was the decision taken that they were so serious as to warrant decommissioning?”

“April.”

“Fast work, Mr Houseman. My Lord?”

One of New Kiev’s appointees had raised a hand. “What is the purpose of all this, Your Grace? The ship was decommissioned for good reason. Why single it out?”

“The point, my Lord, is that I once boarded that ship, visiting its GSN crew, while she was serving with Home Fleet, and was unaware of any such problems. I have contacted several of HMS *Reveille*’s former crew, including her last Bosun, XO, and Captain, who all deny flatly that there were ever any enviro-system problems. Moreover, Captain Neill, like many officers, keeps a copy of his former ships’ logs — properly purged, of course, of any restricted data — and as he is presently serving with Home Fleet, he was kind enough to show it to me.”

Tap.
“Copies of the relevant portions are appended to your files, and as you can see, in every case the report of an enviro-system problem is a later insertion. To be blunt, a forgery. When I discovered this, I asked Admiral Toscarelli to access and analyse the metadata and history of the log filed with BuShips, and his report, completed two days ago and also appended, shows clearly that the false entries were made from an Admiralty terminal, using authority restricted to the Space Lords. So the question becomes, Mr Houseman, why you authorised — or yourself made — false log entries providing a supposed reason to decommission a new ship?”

He stared at her, blinking, and she knew cowardice paralysed him, as it had all those years ago on Grayson. But Jurgenson had jumped to Toscarelli’s report as it became available to him, and was snarling again.

“Toscarelli has no right whatever to give you such a document. He hasn’t reported it to any of us, and he’s in clear breach of security.”

Honor almost laughed at the irony but only shook her head. “Sir Francis, your incompetence seems matched by your ignorance. Legally speaking, once I drew the anomaly to Admiral Toscarelli’s attention as one affecting a ship on which GSN personnel had served, and requested he investigate, he was duty-bound by treaty to report the outcome as soon as possible. And under the circumstances — about which you will learn if you stop interrupting me with false statements — he also had a clear duty to tell no-one else, especially any fellow Space Lord.”

“What?”

She ignored his bewilderment. “Rather more importantly, Mr Houseman, where is HMS Reveille now?”

His voice was a thready whisper. “At … at the decommissioning yard.”

“No, she isn’t, Mr Houseman. Try again.”

He licked his lips and swallowed. “That’s where she ought to be.”

“Yes it is. But it isn’t where you sent her last Thursday, is it?” Silence. “What were your orders to Captain Roberts, by the way?”

“He was … he was just …” Huge rabbit eyes stared at her and she let the silence stretch then turned to a white-faced Glentormin.

“My lord, it is apparent Mr Houseman is unable to answer, so as I know exactly where HMS Reveille now is, let me enlighten you all.”

Methodically she laid the story out, using images from a marine’s helmet system to show Roberts’s furious, foul-mouthed, and wildly insubordinate replies to Pearson’s cool questions, and the round up of the techs as well as the skeleton crew. Tap. A grid of the techs’ faces appeared, 12 with their Manticoran IDs, current employers, and lack of any clearance to examine the classified equipment still on HMS Reveille. Tap. The other five were highlighted in a glaring red.

“And this is where matters become extremely serious indeed, my Lords and Ladies. A carefully laid plot by a Space Lord to give away highly classified technology to uncleared civilian industrial techs is in and of itself a clear breach of both the Official Secrets and Wartime Security Acts, and a betrayal of the highest order. But those five men are another matter altogether, for while I cannot tell you who any of them are, I can say with certainty that all their Manticoran documentation is false, and that they are not subjects of Her Majesty or His Grace. It necessarily follows, given what
they were apprehended doing, that they are agents of a foreign power.”

Jurgenson was also white. “They’re Peeps?”

“I have already told you I do not know, Sir Francis. But it is certainly possible.”

“No, they can’t be! It was just indus—”

“Shut up, you fool!” Jurgenson’s arm clamped on Houseman’s.

“Rather too late for that, Sir Francis.”

And very stupid of Jurgenson again, she thought, seeing Lord Berham’s face. She went on to spell out, in precise detail, what she had done, under what authority, once Captain Pearson’s pinnacle had arrived at the Bay House, ending with her decision that the only proper recourse was to report to Her Majesty directly, and what request she had made under Articles 1 and 9 of the Alliance treaty.

Lord Berham rose as she sat back.

“My Lords and Ladies. After receiving the formal request from Her Grace as Steadholder Plenipotentiary, Her Majesty requested and required me to undertake a full investigation under Clause 127 of the Constitution. Given the nature of the crimes already evident my authority covers both the RMN and executive branch, and is specifically extended to meetings of the Naval Affairs Committees of both Houses.”

He drew out a bound scroll and passed it to a still white-faced Glentormin, who read it carefully and nodded.

“Your authority is acknowledged, my Lord Justice.”

“Thank you, my Lord. Clearly, my enquiries have barely begun, but I can confirm everything Her Grace has said. I have taken into joint Royal Marine and Landing PD custody 17 Manticoran civilians, including the captain and crew of MY Valentine, 56 officers and ratings of the RMN, including Captain Roberts, and five unidentified aliens. Many additional arrests are being made as I speak, including the entire boards of the Gordham, Fennelly, and Brigstow cartels.” There was a ghastly silence as Berham took out a communicator and tapped a button, bringing in a Colonel of Marine Police and four burly subordinates. “Additionally, General MacIntyre, commanding a company of Royal Marine Police, has entered the Admiralty and will lock down and seize Mr Houseman’s computers and records, as well as arresting those of his immediate staff implicated by testimony Captain Roberts has already given. And finally, please do your duty, Colonel.”

Honor did not need Nimitz’s abilities or her own to hear the satisfaction in the Colonel’s voice as he arrested Houseman on suspicion of capital treason. The economist was shaking so much she wondered if he’d faint, and the gibbering confusion in his mind was more trial than triumph, but she and Nimitz had a degree of vengeful enjoyment in the glazed look on Jurgenson’s face and the hammering panic that rose in him when he too was arrested, on suspicion of complicity in capital treason. The staffers both had brought to the meeting to hold bags were also detained pending investigation, though not arrested, and with a brief word of thanks to Glentormin as he recovered his scroll, and a briefer apology for necessarily interrupting their proceedings and removing their witnesses, Berham led the cavalcade out.

As the door closed behind him everyone drew breath, heads swinging towards Honor with a babble of questions that Glentormin overrode.

“What do you believe those agents are Havenites, Your Grace?”
Honor hesitated, tempted, but it wasn’t worth it and phrased her reply very carefully. “I do not, my Lord, though I have no evidence I can lay before you. The changes in the Republic since the ceasefire make much uncertain, but the false documents those men were carrying are a great deal better than anything it used to produce. And their genomes show none of the markers characteristic of the Republic’s populace.”

“Is there any positive match?”

“Not yet.”

He sat back, grimacing. “Dear God, what a mess. What happens now?”

“Lord Justice Berham’s enquiry takes its course, my Lord, and I explain to the Manticoran public as fully as I may why the GSN is withdrawing all units and cross-enlisted personnel from Silesia until further notice.”

“Yes.” His voice was tired. “And I shall submit my resignation to the Prime Minister, telling him I can no longer accept his naval policies.” He looked round slowly, meeting eyes. “If any of you wish to join me in signing that letter, you are welcome.”

Not herself surprised, Honor took a moment to savour the sense of duty that had risen in him before speaking gently.

“Actually, my Lord, while I honour your feelings, I would ask you not to resign, though a public statement of concern would be welcome.”

“Why?” His puzzlement was genuine. “We’ve screwed up. I’ve screwed up. You’ve been telling us, and ONI, for two years that the IAN was far stronger than we’ve allowed, and I for one knew you were and are right about the danger from the Republic as well.”

“Even so. But the RMN is not only gravely weakened — it’s down to five Space Lords and about to go into some considerable turmoil. Whether the government will fall remains to be seen, but you know as well as I do they won’t jump — they’ll have to be pushed. And they must be, my Lord.” She met his eyes steadily. “All political considerations aside, we are in a deep military hole, and the defence of the realm requires a more competent administration.”

After a moment he nodded painfully. “I can’t disagree.”

“Then as Lord Justice Berham’s enquiry is properly none of our business until concluded, and will undoubtedly swamp the serious problem the RMN will probably soon be facing in Silesia, I suggest we draft an open letter to the Prime Minister requiring him to act on that matter immediately, stopping all cuts and beginning to rebuild naval strength as fast as possible, while urgently seeking to resolve the purely commercial dispute with the Empire before it comes to war.”

“Require? We don’t have that power, Your Grace.”

“But we have that duty, my Lord, to those officers and ratings of the RMN whom I cannot withdraw from Silesia.”

He thought about it, then nodded again. “Yes, we do.” He took a deep breath. “If anyone wishes to dissociate themselves from such a letter, that is of course their privilege. But Her Grace is correct.”

Honor had to leave them to it to hold her scheduled Press Conference at the Bay House, but the letter they eventually drafted and promptly released was sufficiently blunt for the by then
hysterical newsies to fall on it with alacrity. She was watching to judge the effects of her own statement about the GSN, and admire the performance by the Grayson ambassador, when Andrew’s communicator lit up and he listened for a moment with a look of surprise.

“Your Grace, a private despatch has arrived for you from Admiral Kuzak, and the courier — her Flag Lieutenant, no less — says he has instructions to give it into your hands only.”

Their eyes met with rising speculation.

“Haven?”

“If they reacted very fast, and found something, the timing might be about right, Ma’am.”

“Mmm. Let’s have the Flag Lieutenant in, then.”

* * * * *

Between the House, the blasted newsies, and a scorching interview with Her Majesty, the ninth Baron High Ridge had not been having a good week, and was less than pleased to find only Descroix and North Hollow waiting in his office for the special Sunday kitchen cabinet.

“Where are the others?”

“Georgia is trying to find out which cartel was infiltrated and by whom. She is also implementing certain cut-outs to ensure the money for the party books cannot possibly be traced. And I have implemented another cut-out, which is why Edward will shortly be found to have blown his brains out.”

High Ridge and Descroix stared, and North Hollow glared back.

“You knew plans were in place — he was always going to be a liability — and it’s too late for anything else. Houseman is in military custody, Michael, so we can’t even get to him through lawyers. And he will talk, if he hasn’t already, which will implicate Edward. Who now cannot answer any questions at all and so can take the fall, with Houseman and Jurgenson. Corruption in the Navy — appalling and now rooted out.”

High Ridge’s political mind caught up with his mild shock. “Yes, alright. I wish you’d checked with me, but I grant the need. So long as it doesn’t lead them to your … contractor, Stefan.”

“It won’t. He’s very experienced at suicides.”

“Then that’s the first good news I’ve had since all this shit began.”

The last three days had been an unending nightmare, starting with the bitingly cold and utterly precise communication from Harrington, out of the blue declaring plenipotentiary power and withdrawing the godfreak neobarbs from Silesia, and erupting with a screaming call from Janacek that Royal Marine Police had invaded the Admiralty. Barely minutes later the HD started breathless flash reports of that and other raids arresting dozens of people, explained when the ghastly spectre of Berham had walked unannounced into his office and informed him that the Navy and the control of it vested in the executive branch were the subject of an enquiry mandated by Her Majesty under Clause 127 of the Constitution. For a few moments High Ridge had thought the Queen had grossly
overreached her powers and laid herself open to a blow it would give him the greatest pleasure to deliver, but when he had demanded to know on what evidence such an unprecedented step had been taken Berham had begun a litany that did something very unpleasant to his stomach. It had been a long, long time since he’d felt physical fear, but it had gripped him then. And still the body blows had gone on, culminating in Houseman and Jurgenson already being in custody and the likelihood, in Houseman’s case anyway, of a charge of capital treason.

And no sooner had Berham left than Harrington was giving a press conference making most of what mattered public, with a scalpel-sharp and comprehensive demolition of ONI and the naval policies that had allowed the whole coalition to function — her ghastly treecat perched on her shoulder, grinning. And that had been followed by the open letter from the Lords’ NAC, exactly the sort of thing that fool Glentormin was supposed to keep firmly in check. He and the others had been scrambling to control damage ever since, but even the North Hollow files had their limits, and those he and Stefan had been leaning on hardest knew all too well that further scandals were the last thing anyone needed just now. Nor could even the tamest, most spineless and indebted newsies do much to spin things when Berham had confirmed ‘the facts given by Steadholder Plenipotentiary Harrington’ and stated outright that his brief was to investigate a clear and gross breach of national and military security that on the face of it included both peculation involving unauthorised distribution of classified equipment and infiltration by agents of a foreign power.

Since then there had been nothing new, but once the public had got over its initial shock and outrage at such heavy-handed authority, anger at the Admiralty had exploded and the newsies were going with it. The discussion shows had been vengeful, more lynching than talking heads, and he had had to echo it all himself, proclaiming shock and dismay as well as steel determination to get to the bottom of it all. Of course he and all ministers were co-operating fully with the Lord Justice. He had at least been able to take refuge in official secrecy in refusing to discuss any of the classified aspects, but that hadn’t worked with the Queen, who had from Harrington or Berham a list of classified equipment aboard HMS Reveille, as well as details of data that had still been in her computers, and had ended by demanding within three days a statement of national defence and military capacity in the light of the necessary reassessment of the IAN, and a further statement of what he proposed to do about the conflict with the Andermani Empire in Silesia. And that was going to be a stone bitch. But with Janacek gone — and really, North Hollow was very useful, though he’d bet it had been Georgia who’d made the call — thoughts suddenly clicked.

“So I need a new First Lord of Admiralty, and that’s rather useful, actually, Stefan. And as all this was Edward’s fault anyway, it’s only just he pay as well as wise he be silenced.”

“That’s cold even for you, Michael.” North Hollow’s laugh was mirthless. “But I’m not complaining. Why useful, though? I acted from necessity, not strategy.”

“Because Edward would never have agreed with what must be done.”

“Which is?”

“In the first place to get Harrington back on active RMN service and dump Silesia firmly in her lap. She’s hammered the newsies with concern for GSN and RMN personnel. So whoever we pick eats a lot of crow — terrible business, Janacek and Jurgenson fucked up completely, which God knows they did, and oh pretty please, mighty Salamander, help us out.” The loathing in his voice was raw but he didn’t care and with these two there was no point pretending.

North Hollow was frowning. “Why?”

“And would she accept?” Descroix shrugged. “She has no reason to help us out.”
“Not us, Elaine. The poor sailors Janacek has left out on a limb. Duty to nation, service, and proles. She really believes in that sort of crap. And the mob will lap it up. So yes, I think she could be begged, vile as it will be to do it. And as to why, Stefan, there are several reasons, not least that it would get her out of our hair in the Lords for a while.”

“Mmm. Actually, Michael, if we don’t mind dumping some of the mercantile interests that are why we’re in Silesia, we could go a step further.” Descroix frowned, thinking. “Harrington knows that Andermani admiral quite well, I believe, so if we asked her to go as a diplomat as well as Sidemore SO she might be able to negotiate a settlement we could accept. And then we could blame her for the mercantile effects.”

“Well, that’s a thought, Elaine. Given the scale of Edward’s and Jurgenson’s fuck-ups we’ll probably have to make concessions anyway. But frankly, I don’t mind if there’s some limited shooting. And I would far rather Harrington never came back.” He shrugged. “War is after all dangerous. And we could certainly do what we can to make it more so for her. She’s pointed out strongly enough that we’re understrength, so her forces will of course have to be smaller than we’d like. We can’t possibly weaken Home Fleet, so it would have to be older ships. No podnaughts or CLACs, and as few of the new missiles as possible.”

“She’d use the Protector’s Own.”

“She can’t, Stefan. Graysons won’t go to Silesia.”

“Oh. Oh, that’s a good one. It’s all very chaney, though. Can we do anything about that? Compensators do fail.”

High Ridge waggled a hand. “True, but there’s no-one I can appoint as First Lord who’d accept a thing like that. Even Edward might have balked, fussing about the crew or such like. But we can certainly make sure there are people with her who could take advantage of any chance that came up — Novaya Tyumen, for one. Unless that contractor of yours can save us the trouble and take her out directly?”

“No. A chance, Michael. Clerks and gofers are one thing, and we’d set up Edward long ago.” North Hollow grinned. “He actually asked Georgia to check his home security, so putting in a bypass was easy. But Harrington has very serious security. If she could be knocked off like that I’d have done it years ago.”

“I imagine you would. But you’re right we want to do all we can. Which is why, Elaine, I’d rather keep her brief military and hardline, defending our interests as strongly as possible, and try to push her into a corner where she has to fight the Sillies as well as the Andies. She leads from the front, after all, and one of these days her cursed luck has to run out. We might be able to leak something to the Andies too, so they know where to look and who to shoot at. But at worst she’ll survive an engagement or two and strike a deal we can blame on her. And meantime we can prepare things for when and if she does come back.”

“Meaning?”

“Meaning anything and everything, Elaine. Having her in the Lords at all is bad enough, and she’s obviously got to that fool Glentormin, so that’s another problem. But as Miss Neobarb Plenipotentiary, she has just humiliated Manticore as well as us, and she has to go. Has Georgia found out any more about how she did it?”

North Hollow shook his head. “No. With the Admiralty in such turmoil she’s had to tread very carefully. But so far as she can tell, it’s just very bad luck and Houseman being witless in
carrying out instructions. I’ve seen how Georgia had it wrapped at our end and nothing went wrong there. That rendezvous-point was Houseman’s choice, and he gave it directly to Becker. The request from those fucking Grayson destroyers to exercise in that part of the asteroid belt was genuine, too, and had been approved by Astro Control — a notice of its closure to civilian ships for four days was posted last week. But no-one took any notice because it was a fallow area anyway, and Houseman must not have checked when he chose it. And that staffer he had in charge, Roberts, might have bluffed through it except that these unknowns turned up, whoever the hell they are, so Pearson took it straight to Harrington, who took it straight to the Queen, and here we all are in the shit.”

“Huh.” High Ridge was a man of much narrower intelligence than he had ever realised, but his political and fighting instincts had been honed by years of backstabbing while avoiding being stabbed himself, and he shook his head. “I don’t believe it, Stefan. It’s all far too convenient. Something leaked, somewhere. That happens. But how did whatever it was get to her? And in time to set up an ambush like that?”

North Hollow shrugged. “Georgia considered that. The obvious possibility is that one of the cartels leaked data to Sky Domes, or had it ripped. Another is that those unknowns are Peeps, and she was tracking them in some way. That’s what Georgia’s trying to check on, because if we can find a Peep connection and expose it ourselves we can get some leverage back, and if it’s someone else playing games with us we need to know who. But as yet there’s no evidence available and with so many of the cartel directors already arrested no way of checking what they know except through Berham’s people. And they are very hardline, especially the Marine Police, who are running security for him.”

High Ridge stared, then shrugged. “Either way, we’ve been underestimating Harrington’s resources. And she’s behaving differently, Stefan. We’ve always been able to stifle and block her in the Lords because she was so understaffed, plays it all so straight, and doesn’t cope well with the newsies. But she’s not understaffed any more, and this whole thing is her doing. I know it. The Queen as good as said Harrington asked her to use Clause 127, and set the whole fucking thing up as an ambush. She gave me the same crap as Berham about the need to send an outside force into the Admiralty, but the purpose was to maximise political damage.” His rage rose again, bitter with the fear in his belly. “Doing her duty be damned. Harrington’s coming after us, Stefan, just as she went after your idiot brother and that neobarb she decapitated. She has to be destroyed. Dead would be preferable, but disgraced will do.”

“And how do you propose to manage that, Michael? It’s not as if we haven’t looked for dirt. There’s nothing. She drinks beer very moderately, works all the time, and so far as we know hasn’t fucked anyone since Tankersley.”

“So we fake it. Frame someone in Sky Domes for theft or security breach. Problems at her parents’ clinics. Lawsuits. If she’s in Silesia we can build up low-level dirt for a bit, then deliver a real scandal while she’s not here to defend herself. Her and that shit White Haven screwing behind his wife’s back would be perfect. Get someone to make the accusation with whatever evidence, have the newsies run it for all its worth, then have them disappear suspiciously with something pointing to her people.”

Descroix’s eyes glittered. “Or to the Audubon Ballroom? Casimir still makes people uneasy. Or both — one of her staff asking among those ex-slaves she cossets for something to be done. We’ve never been able to nail that bitch Montaigne, and people don’t care about her and the Ballroom anymore — it’s old news. But Harrington and the Ballroom and murder? That would have some legs.”

“Yes, it would. That sounds good. Then if we didn’t get lucky in Silesia she’d come back
into a personal shitstorm and having made unpopular concessions. The sex would work well with those puritan godfreaks on Grayson, and the Ballroom crazies would give us the high ground here.”

“Alright, Michael. I can go with that.”

“Me too. What about the Peeps, though?”

High Ridge almost exploded. “What the fuck have they to do with anything?”

Descroix raised her eyebrows. “Apart from those agents, Michael, who but for Harrington would have pretty much wiped out our tech edge over the Peep Navy, has it not occurred to you that if Jurgenson and Edward were flat wrong about the Andies they might be wrong about the Peeps as well? I pulled FO business on Berham this afternoon, which his remit does not cover, and got in to see Chakravarti, who is temporarily overseeing ONI. Everything’s at sixes and sevens, as you’d expect, but he did say when I pressed him that he’d looked for himself at the data Harrington used, and that she was a far better analyst than Jurgenson, about whom he had some much harder words than usual. He also said he can find no clear evidence about what the Peeps might or might not be doing, only a lot of assumptions.”

“You’re joking!”

“Of course I’m not, Michael. To be fair, we wanted those conclusions to justify naval reductions and free up the money. And they were badly smashed, as well as distracted by their latest revolution. But we’re more than two years on, and whatever’s been happening politically, Theisman’s been CNO throughout. And we have very little access, seeing as we’re still at war, ceasefire or no. Evidence or lack of it aside, I can’t see any reason he wouldn’t have been able to do a lot of rearming in that time. It was ships they lost, not building infrastructure.”

“But they haven’t announced anything of the sort.”

“Well of course they haven’t, Michael. Would you, in their position?”

“But surely we’d know?”

“Why? Haven covers a massive volume. We had no idea where Hades was until Harrington told us. And Chakravarti also said there were hints of something Jurgenson seems to have ignored — he mentioned a codename for a secret base, and a notion that some of their senior WDB people hadn’t been seen for a long time, as well as economic analyses that suggested a lot of revenue that isn’t accounted for.”

“Well for God’s sake, if we have sufficient assets to tell us who has and hasn’t been seen, and do the economic analysis, surely we can do better than hints.”

“Yes, you’d think so, wouldn’t you? But none of it came from our assets, Michael. It all came from Grayson’s, in successive packages marked urgent in bigger and bigger letters, about which Edward never told us anything and which Chakravarti wasn’t sure Jurgenson even looked at. He was beginning to go through them, and wasn’t at all happy.”

“So what are you saying, Elaine? The Peeps have a bit more than we supposed. So fucking what? We cannot deal with this now.”

“I’m not sure we have a choice, Michael. And I’d be willing to bet the Peeps and Andies have been talking. Which is why I think you’re wrong about Silesia, attractive as the idea of Harrington blown into pieces may be. We can’t afford to send anything more out there because the cupboard’s bare and if the Peeps turn up here or at Basilisk or San Martin we’re going to need all
we’ve got. So we also need to think about striking first. They’ve used that crap with the official correspondence to drag their feet, as we all know, and we’ve let them because it suited us to maintain a state of war. But it’s given them time as well as us, and if they have rearmed, we either need to toughen up a lot or get that treaty signed.”

“We can’t, Elaine. You know a treaty means an election. And reversing naval policy would screw up everything.”

“So would being defeated, Michael. And we’re going to have to reverse naval policy in any case. Announcing the further decommissioning we’ve planned would be political suicide now, as you know very well. Besides, some limited new building would get a lot of people off our backs — Hauptman, for one. It would mollify the Queen too. So I agree sending Harrington to Silesia is a good idea, but it should be diplomatic, not military. It will still give us time to get the slanders going. And then we can pull ships back from Silesia, instead of having to send more. Believe me, Michael, the maths is a lot better.”

“I’ll think about it. And for God’s sake get a proper report out of Chakravarti no later than tomorrow.”

North Hollow shrugged. “I think you’re overreacting, Elaine. They’re only Peeps, and they were smashed. That at least is something the Navy can do right. But whichever way we go, there’s one other thing I think we might do to hurt Harrington.” His voice was poisonous. “I’ve always wanted to kill that wretched ’cat of hers, but the security problem has always been the same as in getting to her. They’re almost never apart. But with all these other ’cats in Landing there are suddenly more targets. And that other ’cat she has, her ’cat’s mate with the big sob story, has been out and about a lot.” He smiled. “While there are quite a few people who hate seeing the bloody things, and feel very strongly about all that land on Sphinx wasted on animals. I’d been wondering if it might be possible to get one of them to attack someone, so we can remind everyone how fucking dangerous they are, but a lone nutcase with a nice big bomb somewhere — lots of ’cat casualties. Oh dear. And if her ’cat’s upset so will she be.”

“Now that’s a nice thought, Stefan. Be very careful indeed, though — if ’cats are killed the Queen will be all over it, and the PGS and SFS.”

“And the ’cats, who do detect lies very well.”

“So? A big enough and hot enough bomb leaves very little to interrogate, Elaine, and Edward let me have some naval stuff a while back that makes one hell of a bang. We might not even need the nutcase, though a patsy is usually a good idea. I’ll thrash it out with Georgia and let you know so we can have spin in place.”

“Well enough. Now, we need to — ” High Ridge was interrupted by the buzzer on his console. “Hell, what now?” Nothing was supposed to disturb kitchen cabinet except dire emergencies. He flicked a switch. “The record’s now on.” They nodded, and he tapped accept. “What is it?”

His secretary looked flustered. “The Commissioner of the LPD, my Lord. He says it’s urgent.”

“Then put him through.” The screen shifted. “Commissioner. What is it?”

“Good evening, my Lord. I’m sorry to have to tell you, but Sir Edward Janacek has been found dead at his home.”

“He would appear to have shot himself, my Lord, using his service weapon. But forensic examination has barely started.”

“Suicide? Edward wasn’t the sort of man to — unless, my God. Have you informed Lord Justice Berham?”

“Not yet, my Lord, though he is next on my list.”

“Then do so at once, Commissioner. And keep me fully updated.”

As the screen blanked High Ridge flicked off the official record of his shock and perfect co-operation with Berham, and shared a welcome laugh with North Hollow and Descroix.

* * * * *

His Grace Protector Benjamin had long been used to associating Honor Harrington with surprises, often if not always violent. His first meeting with her had set the precedent, and they had come along regularly ever since, ranging from Sky Domes and the more recent metal extraction project, to his daughter’s adoption by Hipper. He was even used to those surprises changing Grayson’s and even galactic political realities, most dramatically with Burdette and Fourth Yeltsin, then her unbelievable return from the dead with all its cascading consequences for many star nations and effective destruction of the PRH. The metal extraction project was also proving dramatic, and promised to multiply the already enormous value of Sky Domes several times at least, absorbing the whole of the metals export sector and deeply reshaping a chunk of Grayson’s economy as well as transforming lives. But the string of reports that had come in since Nimitz had taken it on himself to force her into action against High Ridge and his unholy crew had had him spinning for months now.

Revelation of Young had been a thunderbolt, and of the Manpower agents who’d been uncovered in Austin City a sickening blow, junior as they had been. And the implications were unending. There had to be someone in Nouveau Paris as well, and probably New Berlin, and if the courier Colonel LaFollet had sent hadn’t made it clear that Admiral Yu and someone else, carefully unnamed and probably from the Audubon Ballroom, were saving him the trouble, he’d have sent copies of the material to Emperor Gustav and President Pritchart himself. He had sent one to his ambassador on Erewhon to present privately to their triumvirs with a request to look very carefully at whether they too were unwitting hosts. But as the newness of the agents on Grayson showed, it was not the place to seek more evidence, and save for very thorough interrogations with ’cats from the new embassy present (and proving exceptionally useful), he’d simply had to wait to see what would happen as GONI went into convulsions trying to process what it’d been given.

Benjamin had guessed the Ballroom would be one resource Honor might tap, and had no qualms about it. Slavery was anathema, utterly accursed, and he knew enough about the hundreds of rescued settled in Harrington Steading to have realised long since that there had to be a Ballroom presence among them — which he was happy to ignore unless and until something warranted attention. But even he had been staggered when the GONI take from Honor’s special unit began to include recordings of High Ridge’s office and private meetings in a backroom of the Conservative Association’s lavish HQ, images that had the look of old Grayson tech. How that was being done he couldn’t begin to imagine, and in a strange way, though often political dynamite, the recordings hadn’t revealed much that mattered that he didn’t already know — but actually hearing how narrow,
greedy, vain, and purely, stupidly ignorant the Baron and his close cronies were went beyond fury to nausea. So did the scale of peculation Young had revealed, and the astonishing data from Beowulf about Descroix showed another resource Honor had drawn on. A part of him really wanted her to use it now, hard and fast, to bring High Ridge down and get proper treaty negotiations under way before the Erewhonese broke with the Manties and gave away most of the remaining tech edge over Haven, which he thought they were very close to doing. His ambassador had reported their profound thanks for the Young material and a promise of careful thought and immediate enquiry, but he’d heard nothing since, and they were certainly being given every reason to abandon the Alliance by the idiot High Ridge had appointed as Manticoran ambassador. But despite his worried impatience Benjamin understood very well that Honor was in the habit of waiting to make her first shot devastating, as she had with such spectacular results at Fourth Yeltsin and Cerberus; and in a different way with Burdette. She was, after all, a killer, not a slugger, by deep instinct as well as conscious duty of care for all whom she commanded, and both Katherine and Elaine had told him fiercely not to interfere.

The ugly, astounding material about the gift of classified RMN tech to private industrialists with Manpower’s intended piggybacking to get it for themselves was in any case a timebomb that would force Honor’s hand, and he’d been reassured by the subterfuge with GSN destroyers. In creating the Protector’s Own he’d been trying to maximise the benefit to Grayson of Honor’s return with so many former prisoners who were profoundly loyal to her, not intending to give her what was in effect, if she wanted it to be, a private navy of what had become considerable proportions. But it was proving a very good thing he had, and the entirely official and very much on record report that had arrived five days back informing him of what Captain Pearson had done, what he’d found, and what Honor was proposing to do about it had led to the most interesting meeting of the Council since revelation of the Manpower agents and his command that their allegiance not be made public; yet. All the Councillors were hoping Admiral Yu would bring back the non-aggression pact with the Andermani, and knowledge that GSN ships and personnel were to be formally withdrawn from Silesia, and that Steadholder Plenipotentiary Harrington had already sent a destroyer through the Junction to Gregor A, en route to New Berlin with the news, was a huge relief. The Peeps remained, but at least the GSN wouldn’t have to fight on two fronts, whatever mess High Ridge landed the Alliance in. And the whole thing raised the issue of what exactly Honor might really be aiming for, with the delightful prospect of High Ridge and his whole mob going down in flames a good deal sooner than later, though Wesley had gloomily pointed out that unless she could tie High Ridge in personally he might be able to keep it a Navy scandal, the Tester knowing he had Manticoran newsies doing and saying largely what he wanted and that Manticoran justice was next to useless where their political élite were concerned. But even he had been cheered by the thought of the supercilious Jurgenson being comprehensively humiliated, and of the spineless Houseman — very clearly remembered on Grayson — finding himself under arrest for capital treason.

Wesley was often gloomy these days, and Benjamin knew very well how much reason he had. The whole Manpower thing offered some wild hopes, but the facts remained that the huge advantage the Alliance had had only two years ago had been eroded unbelievably swiftly. Grayson’s continuing construction had not been able to offset the reckless scale of decommissioning High Ridge had instigated, and RMN ships were being scrapped, not mothballed, with crews laid off. If Erewhon went, and, Tester forfend, the Republic struck a deal with the Empire, the picture would be very bleak indeed. So while doing his best to cheer his High Admiral however he could, Benjamin accepted the doomness that increasingly possessed him professionally. In the middle of dinner with Katherine, Elaine, Hipper, and the four older girls, he was therefore really not expecting the arrival of a High Admiral wearing a poker face that could not conceal the excitement in his eyes. As the door was closed behind him he surveyed the children.

“Strictest Sword rules.” They nodded. “Your Grace, you need to come and meet someone.”
“Do I, Wesley? Who?”

“Someone very unexpected. And it would be helpful if Miss Mayhew and Hipper came too. We will need the reassurances — or otherwise — that Hipper can offer.”

Katherine straightened despite her third trimester bulk. “Benjamin can read Sign, Wesley. Why do you need Rachel?”

“I thought she and Hipper came only as a fused package.”

His eyes were twinkling and Benjamin knew as well as Katherine and Elaine that while it was true Rachel and Hipper were still extremely hard to separate, this was also a move in his campaign to get them to agree to Rachel’s desire to serve in the GSN — a campaign she and Hipper pursued relentlessly. One look at her face was enough to know it was double or quits, and he saw the resignation in Katherine’s eyes. And Wesley was in a sufficient hurry to have notified security and put stingship escorts on standby, so it was less than half-an-hour before they — meaning himself, Wesley, Rachel and Hipper, and a quintet of poker-faced but very curious Armsmen as well as Wesley’s marine guards — were pulling out of the atmosphere, with Rachel taut as a drum with suppressed excitement and Hipper’s tail-tip steadily twitching as he sat on her lap. For most of the way Wesley was resolutely uninformative, and after a while Benjamin realised why.

“This is revenge for not telling you when Honor came back, isn’t it?”

“Revenge, Your Grace? What an unworthy thought.”

“Doesn’t stop it being true, Wesley.”

“Of course it doesn’t. And I confess it crossed my mind when I realised it was my solemn duty to ensure that you are just as surprised as I was. Besides, the individual who has arrived insists he will speak to no-one save you, in person, and that his message is of vital importance.”

“Which precludes me from knowing who it is?”

“Surprises should be pristine, Your Grace.”

“Especially when I didn’t tell you about Honor until she walked out of that pinnace, eh?”

They were interrupted by Hipper’s bleek of laughter, and Rachel’s eyes glinted at him.

“You were impossible for nearly a month, Da. You didn’t even tell us.”

“Of course I didn’t. The Sword knows when to be silent.”

“And when to take refuge in being portentous. And pompous.”

“Ha. Necessities of state. You wait and see.”

Driven from portentousness, he took refuge in haughty silence made difficult by Hipper’s continuing amusement and Rachel’s rolling as well as Wesley’s fish eye. But it was Rachel who rescued him, looking up from the astrodisplay she’d been scrutinising with a frown.

“Uncle Wesley, this suggests we’re headed for the GSNS Honor Harrington, but I didn’t think she was due back from Trevor’s Star for another six weeks.”

“And how do you know about SD(P) schedules, Rachel Mayhew?”
“Her leave period was posted last week.”

“And you watch leave postings?”

“Most of them. It’s about all I can get. And her XO’s fourth daughter is in my hydroponics class.”

“Hmph. Well, she came back early, serving as a courier.”

“An SD(P) courier?”

“Any ship can serve as a courier at need.”

“What need, though?”

“Wait and see.”

“No fair.”

“You think officers petrified out of their wits by having the Protector’s eldest child serving under them are going to be fair?”

“Point. How about this, then? You know the security laws as well as anyone can. How come an unknown stranger gets within personal distance of the Sword, however vital they say their message is?”

“Mmm. Much better. It is someone the Sword has met before. I can’t say he has security clearance, exactly, but he was, um, legally deemed an honest person. And he has passed complete biometric tests to prove he is who he says and seems.”

“Huh. Curiouser and curiouser. When did he meet the Sword?”

“You think officers petrified dot dot dot are going to volunteer information they needn’t?”

The friendly bickering — training — carried them to a docking approach, while Benjamin racked his brains. Someone he’d met who did and didn’t have clearance? And whose biometrics were on record? It was exquisitely calculated to suggest he should be able to make a list, but it proved impossibly long; there were, however, enough possibilities near the top to raise hopes and instil caution. He didn’t regret tweaking Wesley’s tail a little over Honor’s return, and there had been sound reasons to keep the secret as he had, but the revenge was precise, and very irritating.

His curiosity ratcheted up when they docked without formalities, being met only by Captain Greentree himself. Being spared the band was welcome, but it was rare for Wesley to dispense with his beloved traditions, and after granting them permission to come aboard Greentree apologised, saying it was a security decision the High Admiral had suggested and he had endorsed. It was Rachel’s first visit to an SD(P) and as they made their way towards the vacant Admiral’s suite, where ‘the guest’ was sequestered, she and Hipper distracted him by the intensity with which they scrutinised everything — not that there was much to see except corridor, the route having plainly been cleared. But as his and Rachel’s primary Armsmen stepped through the door ahead of him he saw the momentary, shocked freeze from both, and braced himself. His mental list of possibles dropped to a handful.

Yes! As the door closed behind them, two Armsmen joining the Marine guard, Wesley took a breath.
“Your Grace — ”

He held up a hand before offering it.

“Admiral Theisman.” The Havenite’s grasp was firm, his gaze direct — as clear as he remembered but more potent — and the impact of his presence considerable. “Or is it more properly Mr Secretary Theisman?”

“Both, Your Grace. And Secretaries, I suppose, as in addition to being Secretary of War I am Acting Secretary of State Plenipotentiary, and a direct representative of President Pritchart and her cabinet.”

Yes! Yes! And may the Tester bless Honor Harrington every day of her life. “Indeed? This is my daughter Rachel, by the way, who is young to be sitting in on something like this, but as you see has the great fortune to have been adopted by a treecat. Rachel, this is Admiral Thomas Theisman.”

Theisman clearly didn’t expect the salute that preceded Rachel’s offer of her hand, but gravely returned it before shaking, eyes flicking to an interested Hipper, perched slightly precariously on her shoulder.

“And this, Admiral, is Hipper, of the Bright Water Clan of Sphinx.”

Benjamin could see the fascination in Theisman’s eyes as he shook the true hand Hipper had — very reassuringly — not hesitated to extend. And unlike most people he immediately spoke directly to the ’cat.

“A pleasure to meet you, Hipper. I remember Nimitz very clearly, and I am deeply sorry I could no more protect him from our criminal StateSec people than I could Her Grace the Steadholder.” His sincerity was evident but an unexpected smile lit his face. “Did Her Grace give you your two-leg name, or is it coincidence you are also named for an old wet-navy admiral?”

Hipper bleeked a laugh and rose to sign. Rachel was at an awkward angle to see so Benjamin translated himself.

<Not chance. Dances on Clouds> — that’s Her Grace — <called all the People who came to this world to help with Golden Voice’s kittens after fighters she admires. And Laughs Brightly> — that’s Nimitz — <thinks well of you.>

“He does? That’s good to know.” He clearly meant it too. “And actually, Your Grace, I specifically asked High Admiral Matthews to secure the attendance of a treecat, knowing your daughter had been adopted. Much of what I have to tell you is going to seem, well, absurd and fantastic, and we have been following the news of Dr Arif’s Commission with great interest.”

Better and better. “A very interesting and wise move, Admiral, which I welcome. Assuming this is heading where I think we both hope, the ’cats will be vital. But let us sit.” A circle of chairs was ready. “You have no aides?”

“Only one, Your Grace, who cannot help me in this moment. The Pilot Captain and crew of the despatch boat that took me to Trevor’s Star are also with me, but have no clearance for the materials I carry. However, many people are awaiting a message, should it prove possible to send it.”

“Mmm. You said you were Acting Secretary of State Plenipotentiary? A curious title.”

Theisman took a deep breath. “Yes, it is, Your Grace, and explaining why I bear it is complicated.”
“Then perhaps I can simplify things. You received a message from someone — the Audubon Ballroom, perhaps — about one Georgia Young, and when you looked yourselves you found, I assume, former Secretary of State Giancola.”

“Ahhh.” Theisman made no effort to conceal relief. “You do know. Yes to all particulars, Your Grace. Special Representative Grosclaude too, though via Giancola as far as we knew when I left. And here?”

“Oh yes. Three. Much more junior, though. It seems we only became of interest to Manpower — or maybe it’s Mesa — when we allied with Manticore.” Theisman nodded, and Benjamin could almost hear his brain working. “The diplomatic correspondence?”

“Giancola. So we admit freely it was faked, and at our end, but not with the knowledge of anyone but Giancola and Grosclaude. I have the hard evidence.”

Yes! “So you got the message, found Giancola, and … came here?”

Another deep breath. “Your Grace, knowing what we now know, we are bound by galactic law to inform the Star Kingdom as soon as possible, and we will. But even without Giancola’s sabotage of the correspondence, dealing with High Ridge and Descroix has been extremely difficult.”

“I would imagine it has. Insulting also, I’d think.”

A brisk, further relieved nod. “That too, Your Grace. Very much so, in fact. But there is in the original notes from Manticore at least the outline of a position we can agree to. So I am here to ask for your assistance in two things — getting me in to speak with Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth, tied up and with treecats all round, if that’s what it takes, but to speak to her directly. And then, in helping both of us to set up proper formal negotiations to end this stupid war now. There’s a mess of detail, of course, but the bottom line is that a small team, led by President Pritchard, will come to Landing to join me, if allowed.”

Yes! Yes! and Yes again. But … “And are you making any announcement of your new construction?”

Theisman grimaced. “Yes. It’s a complication, but what did you expect us to do? I wouldn’t unbuild them if I could, but my first requirement when this was dropped on me was being open about what we have. They will have announced it in Nouveau Paris by now, and it will be on its way to Manticore. I would very much like to beat it there. And our fervent hope is that those ships can spend a lot of time enforcing the Cherwell Convention and none fighting anyone’s navy, except perhaps Mesa’s.”

It was Benjamin’s turn to nod. “Alright. I share that hope where our own construction is concerned. And I expected that news sooner or later, as does Her Majesty. Her Grace — let’s simplify this — Honor has made sure of that. Incidentally, why didn’t you go to her? She’d welcome you with open arms.”

“We thought about it, Your Grace. But we couldn’t be sure Admiral Kuzak would play ball, given her duty, and you’d be needed for any negotiations anyway. Admiral Harrington should be aware I’m here, though. Admiral Kuzak sent a personal courier.”

“Ah. Good. Though for various reasons Honor is likely to be extremely busy. We’ll need to talk about that. But as you must be aware, Admiral, Elizabeth has a well-founded and extreme distrust of anything and everything Havenite. And events of two years ago are still very raw for her,
as for me. So tell me, in outline, what you are empowered to offer.”

It took him a while, and Captain Greentree served a round of coffee (and tea for Wesley and Rachel) while points were laid out, but Benjamin found himself silently both approving and rejoicing. They accepted San Martin was part of the Star Kingdom, reasonably wanted referenda for other planets that had been conquered and reconquered, and were willing to pay reparations if they had to — which might matter a great deal, as Elizabeth would be far more flexible about numbers than principle. Theisman was being frank about their new building, and if confirmation was every bit as bad as he’d expected, Haven was clear about the tech edge Manticore still had. They were as serious as Theisman had shown himself about wanting treecats all over everything, which would allow Ariel to work on Elizabeth directly, and just as incoherently angry with Manpower as she must be, and he was himself. The package of sweeteners to show good faith they’d obviously hurled together at lightning speed was juicy enough to bring a spark to Honor’s eye, as it did to his own, and they might be surprised at the number of, admittedly newish, Graysons who would take advantage of the property and compensations claims on offer. And even after all that Theisman surprised him, thrice.

The first thing was the nanonic package found in Giancola’s home safe, and what it was believed to be, with provision of a sample and a request for any analysis and advice that could be shared. The second was the careful production from an inside pocket of a data-wallet stated to contain the full internal Havenite report on the Masadan plot Saint-Just had orchestrated, offered as an outright gift whatever the outcome of any negotiations. And the third was the open statement that their informer had been Jeremy X in altogether unholy person. Theisman had looked him, and then everyone, squarely in the eye.

“You must understand several things. Our contact with the Ballroom is Kevin Usher’s wife, Ginny, who was born in a Manpower vat. And she is a C-line. Eloise, Kevin, and I, and some other members of the cabinet, know what a poor Dolist childhood in Nouveau Paris is, or was, and it was enough to drive all of us, in our different ways, to what some would call terrorism. But none of us begin to know what Ginny survived, and she is among the sanest human beings I have ever met. Second, Kevin has fought alongside Jeremy X, with Manticore’s Captain Zilwicki, during that very odd business in Old Chicago when Captain Zilwicki’s daughter was kidnapped by Scrags. So they have a mutual warriors’ trust. And third, while we publicly condemn the Ballroom, for the same reasons you and Manticore and the Andermani do, we all privately wish it well. Ballroom provenance was to us a recommendation, not a worry, and the involvement of Jeremy X in person doubly so.”

Benjamin waved a hand. “Agreed. I sympathise with precisely two so-called terrorist organisations in the galaxy — the Sisterhood of Barbara, and the Audubon Ballroom. Elizabeth has the same public problems as both of us, but doesn’t personally disagree. Honor too, in spades. More, in my opinion and my analysts’ — the few I’ve let at this — her involvement is critical to how the Ballroom’s behaving. They like the Star Kingdom, Republic, Empire, and us well enough, for enforcing the Convention as we can. But they really like Honor, for Casimir, for Hades, for the way she’s opened her steading to ex-slaves, and for other things it’s not my place to mention.”

He hesitated, conscious of Wesley and Rachel, then shrugged.

“To be frank, if it was anyone else I’d be having convulsions. Honor is a Steadholder, which makes her a Head of State. She is also a Manticoran Duchess, seated in their Lords as in the Conclave of Steadholders. And a full Admiral of both the GSN and RMN, a well as permanent CO of the Protector’s Own, which amounts to a private navy. Through Sky Domes she is exceptionally wealthy, with enormous industrial as well as financial resources. And she commands the fierce allegiance not only of many RMN and almost all GSN personnel, but of the Ballroom and several
Treecat Clans as well. The list of people she counts as friends is also staggering.”

Theisman was frowning. “I hadn’t quite put it together like that, Your Grace. But I’m not sure of the relevance.”

“Put it like this, Admiral. What we’ve all stumbled into is a nest of Manpower vipers, and Tester knows we’re going to have to do something about it. But what’s happening is that Honor found herself forced for the safety of her star nations and navies to take action against High Ridge, to prevent in any way possible the renewed war we and you were headed for, so she mobilised her forces. All her forces, so far as I can tell. The Ballroom having the data on Young was serendipity, unless it was the Tester, but they gave it to Honor rather than just killing Young because they knew she would use it.”

Hipper rose on Rachel’s lap to sign and Benjamin blinked, too surprised to translate.

“You’re serious, Hipper?” A laugh rose in his chest. “Oh splendid. I should have guessed. I’m sorry, Admiral, but he said it was actually Nimitz who gave Honor her marching orders, because the ’cats were sick of the — bad elders, I think — upsetting her.”

Theisman’s face was a picture, and Rachel had shifted so she could see Hipper’s true hands, and seemed entirely unsurprised by what she was saying on his behalf.

<The People do not understand why two legs allow bad elders. It is stupid. They are a danger to all, and all must fight them. Laughs Brightly does not want his kittens to suffer from them as he and Dances on Clouds have, so we are making sure they will not.>

“So now we know.” Benjamin smiled at a staring Theisman. “But we can talk as we go. Wesley, Captain Greentree, let’s get cracking. I want to be on my way to Manticore in no more than four hours.”

There was a lot of fuss, of course, and it was true no serving Protector had ever left Grayson. But a state visit to Manticore was being planned anyway, if not quite in this fashion, and as news of what Honor was doing in Landing — not least with plenipotentiary powers — had built up he and Floyd Kellerman had made quiet contingency plans in case his presence was needed. He’d been thinking about Erewhonese defection or a Peep announcement of their new strength, and though it was infinitely better than feared the second condition had been met, and between them he and Floyd overrode objections. The only one he couldn’t browbeat was Rachel, or rather Hipper, who said he had messages for Laughs Brightly and in any case wished to see what happened; even Katherine had been unable to persuade him that Rachel couldn’t just go gallivanting off, so they were both still on board. As was Wesley, to his considerable surprise and Benjamin’s satisfaction.

Hyperspace had never seemed so slow, but it wasn’t as if he didn’t have things to do. The report on the Masadan plot made painful reading, but had useful information about their underground that Sword Security, with whom he’d left a copy, would already be acting on. And the rest of the data Theisman made available to him and Wesley was fascinating and deeply disturbing, especially the implications about just how long Manpower seemed to have been playing their game, not merely targeting star nations but the whole sector. In turn he gave Theisman Honor’s scathing analysis of the control Manpower demonstrably had throughout the Verge and OFS Protectorates with the implied
control in Old Chicago, which left everyone very thoughtful. And though he wasn’t prepared to give away any of Honor’s surveillance material until he knew what she was going to do with it, the data about HMS Reveille would by now have become public on Manticore and Theisman needed to know what he was stepping into. Nor was it giving anything away to add the positive identification of the agents as Manpower’s, though explaining why that might not be known on Manticore, yet, was trickier. Theisman just nodded.

“I understand something of how Manticoran politics work, Your Grace. The story of then Captain Harrington and that vile aristocrat who had her lover murdered was widely reported in Haven, and you don’t have to be a Dolist to see accountability has failed there, very badly. And I always thought from what she said, and the way she said it, that she had evidence of his guilt that was for some reason inadmissible."

“She had Summervale’s confession, beaten out of him by some marines. On their own initiative.”

“Ah. Interesting — I’ve seen first-hand the loyalty she inspires. And tricky, I can see. But truth is truth, and justice should be concerned with it before everything. And where were Captain Tankersley’s rights? In any case, I can see why a very high burden of proof would be needed for such a political ambush to work on Manticore. But you think it might yet be possible?”

Benjamin waggled a hand. “I hope. We were sending the Own to New Berlin anyway, for various reasons, and she asked Admiral Yu to deliver a personal message to the Herzog von Rabenstrange. If he can track the money Young was getting we might be in business. And she sent the same warning the Ballroom gave you, so it’s possible the Andermani have found Manpower agents too. I’m hoping Yu will have returned by now.”

“It would be good to see Alfredo again. And we have our own suspicions about what Giancola did or didn’t do to some private conversations we were having with the Empire. If they were confirmed by their ambassador, I imagine another envoy will have been sent, though it’s a very long way if you can’t use the Junction.”

So the plot thickened, and contingencies became ever more mind-boggling. But as days passed Benjamin found himself increasingly glad Rachel and Hipper were there. She had been given a substantial chunk of the classwork she was missing, and had torn through it at a rate, before (after a formal request to Captain Greentree) making a thorough tour of the ship. The reactions of officers and crew to the presence of Miss Mayhew, her amused though never less than wary armsmen, and Hipper were very interesting, even more so when she showed her engineering knowledge and that she was all too willing to get her hands dirty. In a display of some subtlety she said nothing about her ambition while both making her enthusiasm and admiration for the GSN very clear and making sure he knew she was most honourably refraining from trying to jog his hand. Wesley watched it all with a poker face and pleased eyes.

But it was at meals and in relaxed evening conversations with Theisman, Wesley, and Captain Greentree, and sometimes the other Havenites, that she and Hipper really helped. Rachel genuinely wanted to understand what Haven was like, and drew from Theisman accounts of several things, including the mind and nature of Saint-Just, whom he freely admitted killing, and in outline the struggle the RN had had to track down and deal with the StateSec ships that had turned pirate as the grotesquely overblown security apparatus was dismantled. He respected Rachel’s maturity without forgetting her age and inexperience, and was careful but memorably clear about the proper uses of violence and why he had pulled the trigger rather than making an arrest.

“I was CO Home Fleet, and had an absolute duty to protect my officers and crew from the
purge that was coming. And we upheld the law in the end.” He grinned. “After Eloise was installed I
turned myself in, you know, but Kevin wouldn’t arrest me, Denis wouldn’t prosecute me, and Eloise
rolled her eyes and issued a Presidential Pardon for executing Saint-Just. I said she should call it
murder, as it was, but she refused.”

Benjamin would have liked to have been a fly on that wall, but what mattered was the man
Theisman revealed himself to be beyond his ferocious competence and potent personality. Honor’s
acceptance that Haven had fundamentally changed in its nature had always rested most strongly on
Theisman’s rise to CNO, and Benjamin, though doubtful, had remembered clearly the strained,
ashamed Commander who had freely given cold and unflinching evidence against the Masadans
who had abused and murdered what should have been his prisoners. Now he saw how right she had
been, and began to understand how this man could both strike ruthlessly at Saint-Just and all his
works, and as a patriot use the navy he had seized to reinstate the rule of law over government as
well as governed. The light he cast on Eloise Pritchart and other members of her cabinet also showed
something of how they had fitted in, and their collective reaction to the revelation of Giancola’s
treason and allegiances was by any possible standard extremely impressive — not only very rapid
and decisive, but cleaving utterly to law and honour.

The morning before they were due to arrive Rachel came to breakfast looking very
thoughtful indeed, and told him Hipper had something to say. Benjamin watched the cats flickering
hands for a moment and a sense of wonder grew in his heart as much as his mind.

“Dreams of Peace?”

Hipper nodded firmly, and as Benjamin thought it through, running what he knew of
Theisman’s childhood and career in his mind, his sense of the man’s rectitude and principle was
joined by a vivid imagination of what had come to drive him. Given Haven’s steady expansion he
had been fighting for his entire career, decades longer than the current war, whose 12 years had
taken a toll Benjamin knew all too well. And the irony was intense, for he thought Theisman the
second finest warrior-statesman he had ever met, after Honor, and knew that in the long and bitterly
lonely course she had charted since Paul Tankersley’s murder she too had come to dream of peace.

At Captain Greentree’s invitation they were all on the bridge as the GSNS Honor Harrington
and its escorts came over the hyperwall into Manticoran space. There was surprise from Astro
Control at their swift return that Greentree’s TO, holding the watch, passed off with a joke about
having to play messenger at their size, but Wesley’s eyes were on the plot as it updated from the
Hermes Buoy that provided all naval arrivals with an FTL current map of system traffic.

“Good. Alfredo’s back from New Berlin. And in orbit so he’ll know what’s going on
dirtside. Get him on an Alpha-scrambled channel, please, Jonas.”

Theisman was watching with professional envy and shook his head softly. “Seeing the way
you take FTL communication for granted is a shock. I have been imagining it for years. And still.”

“It must be. I still remember my incredulity when Honor told us what the Manties could do,
back in ’03.”

He grinned at the nickname, but FTL was doing its stuff and Wesley was already leaning
over Greentree’s shoulder at a comconsole. He led Theisman over, Rachel and Hipper following, but
stayed out of range of the pickup. Yu’s familiar features appeared, evidently at his desk, and his
eyebrows snapped up.

“High Admiral. An unexpected pleasure. Is …?”
“Oh yes, Alfredo. And some other unexpected people as well. You’re alone?”

“Yes, sir.”

Wesley expanded the pickup and Yu’s eyes widened as he gave a seated bow.

“Your Grace. Miss Mayhew. Hipper.” His gaze swung. “Tom. It’s been a long, long time. Did they ever let you have my message?”

“Alfredo. It’s very good to see you. Too long. And yes, they did, though I wasn’t permitted to reply.”

Yu’s gaze came back to Benjamin. “Have you orders, Your Grace?”

“Not yet, Admiral. But I very much want to know what the situation is, politically.”

Yu’s smile was beatific. “As it happens, Your Grace, your timing is perfect. If I may offer advice, bring yourself into a parking orbit next to us and tune in to the Landing news HD, no later than local noon.”

“And what will I see, Admiral?”

“Her Grace is giving a statement to the press and others, which will be lengthy and for almost everyone quite exceptionally surprising. After which, as best I understand it, the Manticoran government will be arrested.”

* * * * *

It had, Honor reflected, been in all ways a very unusual fortnight. Five days after she had convulsed Manticoran politics a rigidly controlled, blazingly angry Andrew LaFollet had told her the missile she needed had been found, but he could not give it to her for another week because people owed loyalty had to be protected before it was set off, and would she please keep as low a profile as possible for that time. She had thought hard, and obeyed. Political crises didn’t mean teaching at Saganami Island stopped, so she threw herself into making sure students didn’t suffer from the classes and lectures she’d had to cancel; dinners had also fallen victim, and were now restored, with the bonus of being able to see more of Abigail Hearns, who was proving a very good tactician indeed as well as a level-headed, wise, and altogether delightful person. It also meant she could keep a wary eye on the situation Grayson cadets faced in the wake of her announcement about Silesia, but while they reported some snide remarks and one aristocratic cadet who had found herself on a charge of conduct unbecoming for denouncing ‘neobarb cowardice’, they also said most Manticoran and other Alliance nation cadets could see clearly that commitment against Haven was not commitment against the Andermani, and were in any case more preoccupied with what was happening to the RMN.

That Honor could well understand, as High Ridge, thanks to Janacek’s very convenient suicide, had managed, just, to confine the Reveille affair to the Navy. Jurgenson had evidently known nothing until a sweating Houseman had told him about it shortly before the NAC meeting, and Berham had not yet decided if a charge of accessory after the fact to capital treason applied. Houseman had spilled everything he knew, which included direct orders from Janacek, and had been utterly horrified to realise he would face a court martial rather than a civilian trial, a process already underway both for him and for the staffers and crew he had suborned into treason. And the unidentified five remained, so far as almost everyone knew, the great mystery, with a strong CA
gloss wherever High Ridge’s influence ran implying that internal Manticoran industrial rivalry — in itself entirely commendable — using outsiders was a much more likely explanation than wild theories of foreign agency; and really, one had to admire their loyalty in remaining silent. So the way had been clear for the Prime Minister to give a national address, seemingly more in sorrow than anger, that with offended dignity blamed Janacek and those he had appointed while disclaiming any and all responsibility. His supporters, and New Kiev’s, had rallied in Parliament and press, while the RMN and many others seethed.

And underneath it all, Theodosia Kuzak’s message and what Theisman had said had been constantly spinning in Honor’s mind. She had also had to bite her tongue hard when she had very unexpectedly been invited by Chakravarti, in charge at the Admiralty until High Ridge could decide whom he dared appoint to succeed Janacek, to visit him there. He had been painfully polite, and surprisingly frank.

“I never cared for Francis much, but I did trust him to do his job. He was always a decent combat tactician, and what he said made sense. But I had not understood the depth of his prejudice against Grayson, nor did I have any inkling of the GONI material he was ignoring, and I have told Lord Justice Berham that whatever he may decide I wish to press for a court martial for gross dereliction. So the first thing, Your Grace, is that I want to ask for your help in re-establishing proper contact and exchange between ONI and GONI. It should never have been broken as it was, and it’s painfully clear we need it back.”

That was not a request she could refuse, and said so at once. “But you must understand, Admiral, that all Alliance relations have been very badly strained by the Prime Minister’s … manner, shall we say, and that of many of his appointees. You will need to be handsome in your dealings if you wish to undo that.”

He grimaced. “I understand, and have already couriered High Admiral Matthews to ask if I may send an ONI reintegration team to see him. And it may help that I have ordered your reinstatement, and that of Admirals Caparelli, White Haven, Givens, Cortez, and Hemphill, to full clearance for ONI and deployment data. I never agreed with nor quite understood Edward’s vendetta against you all, and besides the gross discourtesy it was very stupid to cut ourselves off from your professional skill.”

“I appreciate the thought, Admiral, but I doubt the Prime Minister will consent.”

“Actually, he suggested it.” Her eyebrows had risen and Nimitz had come to even sharper alert, probing for truth. “He’s extremely upset about what he sees as Edward’s betrayal, and deeply concerned about the situation now revealed in Silesia. And if I may be frank …?” She spread her hands. “He said openly he couldn’t stand your politics and felt strongly that you had disgraced the House of Lords, but wasn’t so stupid as not to realise your superior tactical competence. He also mentioned both what he called your friendship with the Herzog von Rabenstrange, and your special relations with Marsh. And he wants me to appoint you as SO Sidemore, with a combined military and diplomatic brief to sort out our relations with the Andies, peacefully if you can and otherwise if you must.” He had held up a hand. “I agree, as do Toscarelli and the others — about the first unity I remember here. The Prime Minister realises concessions may be necessary, though he feels our rights and dignities in Silesia deeply, and said his offer had received full support in cabinet.”

Honor had in the end promised to consider it. She and Nimitz both believed Chakravarti sincere, but neither believed High Ridge for a second. Getting her off-planet was an obvious advantage, and she could see various twists in sending her to Sidemore when she was ordering the withdrawal of GSN ships and personnel, but it still didn’t add up. Nor was Andrew — in any case amazingly absent on several occasions, while doubling the duty Armsmen and instituting a still
stricter security routine — much help when she tried to discuss it with him, concealing his still fierce rage with a bland observation that it was moot anyway, as Alfredo would doubtless soon confirm.

Which he duly did, when the Own came through the Junction from Gregor, and told her, smiling widely, that the Andermanani had agreed to the non-aggression pact, provided all necessary financial data on Young’s black accounts, tying them solidly to Manpower, and found a Manpower agent of their own. Emperor Gustav himself, no less, sent his warmest personal thanks and promised all co-operation, while the Herr Herzog would be making discreet enquiries of Nouveau Paris about exchanges the Empire and Republic had indeed been having. His tale was generally fascinating, and his account of Emperor Gustav XI Anderman’s mixture of caution, self-assurance, offended amour-propre, disgust, and strategic thinking exceptionally so. With the Manpower data locked down Honor had immediately sent word to Benjamin, wondering what he would be making of Theisman, and set about constructing the presentation she’d need to give while unsure of how and to whom she should give it; but her thinking had been brought to a screeching halt by an HD news flash that the Countess of North Hollow was missing, feared dead, contact with her lightflyer having been lost in a squall over the Western Ocean. Searches were under way but hope was slight.

Andrew, clearly unsurprised, had said with a very austere face that she had been a prisoner of the Ballroom since being turned, however seemingly at liberty, and had now been taken into their custody, as agreed. He added that he had received a final report from her, believed that if further specific testimony about anything were needed it could probably be obtained, and (a truly savage smile appeared) was confident that a complete set of the North Hollow files would very shortly land on the desk of the LPD Commissioner. That was enough to send Honor’s mind spinning along a further set of possibilities, and though she had been thinking in terms of Young being taken into Manticoran custody she could hardly complain about the Ballroom taking back what they had lent to such devastating effect. And the following day a weary but satisfied-looking Andrew had sat her down with both ’cats attending, told her everyone was now in the clear and all evidence cleaned up, oddly stressed that he had spoken at length to Nimitz and Samantha more than a week ago, and taking a very deep breath played her one of the familiar, grainy recordings of High Ridge and his kitchen cabinet.

When it had finished she had risen without a word, for once pushing away even Nimitz’s contact, and walked straight to the pool room. When she started to strip a trailing Andrew had hustled himself and the duty Armsmen out at a rapid clip, and two hundred hard, fast lengths later, with muscles burning and an incandescent rage at last banked down in her mind, only Miranda and the ‘cats had been waiting, with a robe — though as soon as she was decent Mac had hustled in with large plates of exactly the high-calorie stoking she needed, as well as much celery. With some sort of equilibrium restored she’d watched the recording again, established that Andrew had spoken fully to Nimitz and Samantha, sharply curtailing the latter’s public schedule, and made sure, leaning on her name, that the PGS and LPD were intensely alert at every venue where a treecat might be, and blew out a long, long breath.

“I expected the slander campaign, Andrew, and Tester knows Janacek’s suicide seemed very convenient. But to hope ships will be destroyed on the offchance I might be aboard one, and to bomb treecats purely in the hope of distressing me?” Though she spoke quietly she knew rage burned in her voice and could see how rigidly Andrew and the other Armsmen were standing. “For behold, you have sold yourselves to iniquity, and for your transgressions you shall be as chaff before the flail.”

“Amen, Your Grace.”

“I would have settled for disgraced and out of office in prison, but now? God help me, I’ll see them shot. And we need to go to Mount Royal.”
It had taken a day to work through, and with Berham’s Inquiry serving scores of indictments against cartel directors who’d been eager to snap up places at the vast trough of naval tech, as well as issuing instructions for a swathe of courts martial, Elizabeth had in any case been extremely busy. But two days back Honor had again walked into St Michael’s Tower, this time in full RMN uniform with one Salamander–Grayson flash and her Manticoran one cut with the Treecat Rampant of her honorary colonelcy in the SFS, producing another long stare and wash of intense puzzlement from her PGS escort. Three ‘cats’ efforts had allowed Elizabeth to contain her own rage sufficiently to focus on Honor’s plans; and after pretty much the whole membership of the Queen’s Bench had been summoned, given a summary but nevertheless lengthy briefing by Honor, including High Ridge’s kitchen-cabinet session, subjected to bitingly precise questions from Her Majesty, and given a swingeing royal remit, the result was that Honor was now waiting to address a gathering in the great cliff-view ballroom of the Bay House that would be shown live on every news channel with relays to Sphinx and Gryphon.

The monitors showed her the room was already packed, and she scanned rows of newsies, picking out three faces she wanted. Some guests and a sizeable diplomatic contingent were also present, including the ambassadors from Grayson, all other Alliance nations, Beowulf, and the Anderman Empire; Klaus and Stacey Hauptman; and a considerable number of ‘cats besides those on security duty. It was a bright summer day, filling the room with golden light, and GONI techs were making final checks to ensure the display screen behind the podium was clearly visible and adjusting filters built into the huge armorplast windows. The hollow, singing tension inside her was in perfect accord with Nimitz’s on her shoulder, and she could feel the steady twitching of the tip of his tail where it rested on her back. She and Miranda had pondered how she should dress, and both her uniforms had strong claims, but in the end she’d decided she would be speaking as Duchess and Steadholder, and so wore another departure — a Grayson dress and tabard that combined Steading and Duchy arms and colours. At one minute to noon she nodded to Andrew and at noon precisely, as Nimitz settled on the high stool provided, straightened behind the podium and surveyed expectant faces, noting the LIVE light shining red on the podium monitor.

“Good afternoon Your Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen. Some ground rules. What I have to say is lengthy, detailed, and has extreme consequences. This is a statement, not a press conference, and for reasons that will become clear I will not be taking questions at the end. Nor will I tolerate interruptions. And in your surprise remember please that we are live.”

From the looks she knew her banked and focused rage was still audible in her voice.

“I must begin by correcting a misapprehension I have allowed to circulate, though Lord Justice Berham and Her Majesty were aware of the truth. It has been purported that it was chance that GSNS Micah Pennington and GSNS Noah Mantell were in a position to observe the meeting of HMS Reveille with MY Valentine, but that is not so. Some months ago I received an anonymous data package that claimed many things of great consequence, including allegations that classified RMN tech was to be privily and wholly illegally given by the High Ridge administration to certain industrialists, and that this criminal enterprise was being infiltrated by agents of a foreign power. At the time I had no rapid or secure way of independently checking such allegations, but as an Admiral of the RMN and GSN a clear duty to act on such a warning, however wild it seemed, and at the same time a grave difficulty, in that one at least of the Space Lords to whom I should properly report it was allegedly complicit. I therefore acted on my own authority as CO of the Protector’s Own to detach those GSN ships with a surveillance brief. And as we have all seen, it was fortunate I did so.”

She could see some surprise but also little nods from the cannier among the newsies as they waited for the other shoe to drop.

“Events now serve to validate the warning, but the data package as a whole presented a
further grave difficulty, for its other allegations were also extremely consequential, involving a great deal of criminal activity by senior members of the government.” The whole crowd stiffened. “But were they true? I felt I had to make all efforts to verify as much data as I could before acting, and the problems expanded with several subsequent data packages that arrived. I have now done so, and with the events surrounding HMS *Reveille* I believe a sufficient burden of proof has been met to place the material received in the public domain.”

The silence was absolute.

“Before I do so I will go through the nature of the proofs I have obtained. The data packages have been backtracked through multiple bounces to various public terminals located at Landing Central Transit Hub. All were sent during peak hours, and in every case the standard Transit Police surveillance was briefly locally disrupted at some point during the previous hour by powerful jamming. So that is a dead end. But the data itself contained much that could be checked. A great deal of it was financial, involving specific accounts and transfers, and using my authority as Chief Magistrate of my Duchy I have ascertained, using limited warrants of confirmation, that all accounts exist as described and that the largest 50 transfers, involving more than 190 million Manticoran dollars, took place as specified.” The figure produced some indrawn breaths. “Some data related to accounts held elsewhere, on Grayson, Beowulf, and Potsdam, and by direct requests to His Grace Protector Benjamin, the Beowulf Board of Directors, and His Imperial Majesty Gustav XI Anderman, I have also been able to verify that all such data is accurate.”

Eyes swivelled to the ambassadors.

“Another large part of the data comprised records of meetings between various people at specified places and times. I have used any and all sources I could command, from public surveillance and transport records obtained by magisterial subpoena to satellite surveillance obtained from RMN and GSN ships to confirm that those shown in the data to be in place A at time B on date C were indeed present, though the data remains the only record available to me of what was said. But as technical and voiceprint analysis has served in every way to confirm that all imagery received is genuine, I have accepted that they are as true and accurate as the financial data. Which brings me to the first and least important business of this statement.”

She picked out her targets and touched the stud on the console that warned the techs controlling the broadcast.

“Among those records were a number showing meetings held in a backroom of the Conservative Association’s HQ between various friends and associates of the Prime Minister or the Earl of North Hollow and three people present here now. Mr Barker” — the newsy’s face went white as he found her gaze and the camera on him — “you have always maintained you had an anonymous source for the many untrue stories you have written about me in recent years, including the claims you made three months ago about what you so alliteratively called a sex scandal at Sky Domes. But as among the data I received was a record of you and the Honourable Alastair Egremont concocting the entire fabrication, including the disgruntled former employee you have cited as your source, you will before you leave here today be served by Ms Childers with a writ for libel, slander, and conspiracy to defame.” The cameras would be showing Clarise, sitting with Klaus and Stacey Hauptman, as well as the hapless Barker. “Ms Davidson and Mr Radley will also be served with such writs, as will Mr Egremont and others, including the Earl of North Hollow. Nor do I rule out further legal action on my own behalf, or formal complaints to the Landing PD and Press Council when Ms Childers has had a chance to review the meetings involving other journalists and commentators whose opinions, always to me foolish, have also proven to be wilful and paid lies.”

A shudder went through the yellower section of the press contingent.
“But as I say, that aspect of things, however personally satisfying, is of little importance given the full range of the data. There are many aspects, and I will work through them, beginning with evidence of peculation, embezzlement, false accounting, and theft by ministers of the High Ridge cabinet, amounting to gross malfeasance in office.”

In the end there had been 12 pigs at the trough who could be pinned down, seven junior ministers and five senior, including New Kiev, Descroix, North Hollow, and High Ridge himself. Methodically she laid out the sums stolen and where they had gone, including Descroix’s 42 million dollars on Beowulf, with the screen behind her showing account numbers, the transfers themselves, and the running total as it swept up into nine figures and kept right on going. The financial and heavyweight political sections of the press, whom she had made sure were present in strength, had hands flying over minicomps and as she came to the end of the litany, with the 16 million dollars High Ridge had siphoned from deliberately bloated redecoration and maintenance accounts for Government House and — unbelievably stupidly — immediately transferred into listed personal accounts, she gave them a brief moment to catch up.

“All this financial data was given to Her Majesty on Wednesday, and all the accounts I have mentioned, on Manticore and elsewhere, were frozen at noon today, by order of the Queen’s Bench or relevant planetary authorities. And there is a formal legal point I must make, for while on the face of it such gross malfeasance in office is despite its scale and the high offices of the perpetrators simply a criminal matter, that is not so. We remain, ladies and gentlemen, at war with the Republic of Haven, and as Lord Justice Berham’s enquiry has made abundantly plain, wartime rules and regulations continue to apply to all Her Majesty’s subjects. And the theft of hundreds of millions of dollars of tax and other revenues is not, in time of war, merely theft. It is also treasonable, and I remitted this data to Her Majesty directly, rather than the Landing PD, expressly because the police investigation that has already begun cannot in itself be adequate to the issues involved.”

She hadn’t believed the silence could deepen, nor the many faces go whiter.

“I turn now to a second matter. The first data package, including the warning about treasonous tech transfer, asserted that it had been arranged in return for substantial sums paid to the Liberal Party and Conservative Association to allow them to pass the annual audit required of all political parties with sitting members in either House. A subsequent package included details.”

She went briskly through the headline figures of true and false accounts, tracking the money to a point just short of Georgia Young.

“The falsification of party accounts submitted to the Independent Auditor under statutory obligation is legally defined as perjury as well as a variety of financial crimes, and of course carries official sanctions against the party involved as well as automatic lifetime bans on holding public office where individuals are concerned. This material, as well as being given to Her Majesty, has been remitted to the Independent Auditor, whose own enquiry is underway. As all the financial data has already been verified, I have no doubt that a finding of perjury against the accountants and leaders of the Liberal Party and Conservative Association, and consequent suspensions from any and all public offices, will shortly be issued. Whether the parties themselves will be dissolved I cannot of course say.”

There was a strange, collective sound, somewhere between growl and groan, and the monitor on the podium showed minicomp traffic surging as they tried to find out what Constitution, statute, and Parliamentary regulations said. She put a command edge into her voice and saw the traffic drop away again as heads came up.

“This leads to the third matter, which is where that money came from. One would think it
would have been the industrial cartels involved, but that is not so.”

The financial track resumed, leading to Young’s primary black accounts and outwards to Potsdam, then to Silesia, and at last to Mesa and Manpower’s wholly owned financial services subsidiary. As she’d named Young the atmosphere crackled, but the course of the money, backed by official Andermani data, produced frowns that turned to expressions of real surprise as Manpower made its appearance. Klaus and Stacey were rigid with shock though she’d warned them Manpower was involved.

“And there we have what has proven the heart of something distinct, that other data expands very considerably. Why did and how could Manpower Unlimited, nominally no more than an exceptionally unpleasant transstellar whose activities are all serious criminal offences under Manticoran law, reach into the heart of our government? Many questions arise, and will have to be pursued. But the immediate answer was made entirely clear in the first data package. And for the first time in this statement, ladies and gentlemen, some data is redacted. It involves the classified tech that was aboard HMS Reveille, but you have my formal word as Duchess and Steadholder Plenipotentiary that while cuts have been made, nothing you will see or hear has been altered.”

Georgia Young’s tired, scared, and bitter face brought a collective gasp, but her methodical statement of who she truly was, why she had come to Manticore, her brief, and (after a one-second gap) how she had set up the Manpower agents arrested on board HMS Reveille with the identities she supplied to them rolled into a deathly silence.

“Where Lady Young is now I have no more idea than you, but I take leave to doubt her death despite the discovery of wreckage from her lightflyer. And while she will have very many questions to answer if she is ever apprehended, she is herself unimportant beside the facts of her identity and instructions. You all heard them — maximal damage to the RMN, renewed war with the Republic of Haven, and war with the Anderman Empire over Silesia. Wars we might very well lose, given the damage already done to the RMN and Alliance by naval policies I have from the first described as wildly reckless of national security, and by foreign policy decisions and attitudes that have without exception been as grossly bigoted as they are profoundly stupid. What it amounts to, ladies and gentlemen, is the attempted destruction of the Star Kingdom, from within and without. And not only the Star Kingdom — if those wars happen, as they still may, a death toll in the millions will be as certain for the Republic, and the Empire, as for us.”

A deep breath.

“Plainly, at this point the consequences of the data go from a purely domestic Manticoran matter, however explosive, to involve other star nations who are our allies and neighbours. For the most part these will have to wait on events, and may yet be every bit as dire as the fears I have repeatedly expressed in the House of Lords and elsewhere. But there is also an abrupt moment of hope that we need to understand. My primary analysis is of course strategic, and my immediate question was where else Manpower had agents. And I can confirm as fact that by following the financial data involved in Lady Young’s black accounts, such agents have, thus far, been found on Grayson and Potsdam. Which raises above all else a single, burning question — whether there are such agents on Haven. Unfortunately, given the state of war, it would be entirely illegal and improper for me to make any direct enquiry of Nouveau Paris, but the first data package included an assurance that the facts of Lady Young’s identity and instructions were being conveyed to President Pritchard and her cabinet.” Even if Andrew hadn’t told her about it for weeks. “What will happen I cannot know, but I can and do say that, however incredible it all seems, there is not merely a prima facie case but hard and clear evidence that the politics of this entire sector have for an unknown period been quietly but perhaps devastatingly subject to assault and manipulation by Manpower Unlimited of Mesa.”
She held up a hand.

“And before any of you rush to say it, yes, I am a confirmed and extreme opponent of Manpower and slavery, and yes, not being stupid I strongly suspect the involvement of the Audubon Ballroom in the provision of some at least of the data I have received. So what? I remind you all of what I have said about verifying that data, and that agents of Manpower have already been discovered, arrested, and interrogated on Grayson and Potsdam. The concerted efforts of Manpower to instigate war between Star Kingdom, Protectorate, Republic, and Empire are already a matter of legal and imperial record in two star nations, as is its attempt to obtain our most classified naval tech through the agency of Lady Young. And it does not take my kind of commitment to strict enforcement of the Cherwell Convention to wonder what part she played in the Prime Minister’s assiduous attempts to minimise the scandal started by Ms Montaigne concerning the influence of Manpower on our government and wider culture.”

Georgia Young appeared again, detailing exactly what she had helped High Ridge, Descroix, and her husband do, using the North Hollow files, by way of suppressing scandal. Widespread blackmail and intimidation escalated to theft, threats of violence against family members, and two murders arranged to look like an accident and a natural death, with a flat statement that High Ridge had known of and approved both. And though Montaigne’s arrival from Terra with the data and the whole, bizarre story of the Zilwicki kidnap had taken Young by surprise as much as anyone, she had known what her masters would want, had exerted herself to keep High Ridge in office and pursuing his policy of gutting the RMN for social programmes and money to pilfer, and had received a very handsome bonus for doing so when her report had reached Mesa. Financial details followed, and the silence became fraught.

“You will notice that in what Lady Young says there is no indication that anyone other than herself was consciously acting on Manpower’s orders, however they were knowingly acting on its behalf. Indeed, throughout her appearances in the data, including redacted material, she speaks of Baron High Ridge and her husband as fools, boors, and patsies, not fellow agents. She did, however, suspect Lady Descroix of knowing rather more, and provided evidence of additional payments received by her that appear to trace back towards Mesa, though I cannot affirm they did in fact originate there. But besides ancient and constitutionally enshrined legal principles that neither ignorance of the law nor lack of intent are defences, those holding high office are — or should be — rightly held to a higher standard, and in their oaths of office are sworn to all due care and diligence; a standard specifically heightened in wartime in relation to dealings with any foreign power. And Baron High Ridge was certainly wholly aware that in acting as he did to preserve and enrich himself he aided and abetted Manpower, whether or not he knew they were certainly running one and perhaps two agents in his kitchen cabinet. Still, the issue of his treason and its degree is, on the evidence I have shown you thus far, legally complex.”

She saw Clarise give a fascinated nod, brain obviously whirling though the sorts of arguments that could be made.

“But three days ago I received a further large data package, which this time proved to originate from a public terminal at the Milesham Transport Hub and comprised what appeared to be recordings taken from the official surveillance system of the Prime Minister’s office.”

At least half the audience were by now in a state of glazed shock, bludgeoned by revelations, but that sat them sharply upright again.

“Clearly, a new set of extremely serious security issues is raised, but given the content of the most recent record, which was less than two weeks old, I directed my analysts to tell me as rapidly as possible if it could conceivably be a fake, and their answer was that they could see no way in which
it could be. When I presented it to Her Majesty on Wednesday certain further analysis became possible, and has been carried out, confirming that this is a genuine record from the official system, which it is clear the Prime Minister believed to be turned off and which may in fact have been turned off. There are complex issues involved, and no doubt they will be thrashed out in the fullness of time, but the content itself demands much more immediate action.”

It was fascinating to watch faces as the ghastly conversation between High Ridge, North Hollow, and Descroix played out yet again. She’d heard it so often by now she was quite detached, despite the rage she still held banked, but Klaus and Stacey were watching with glittering eyes and stone faces that concealed sparking anger and astonished satisfaction over deeper shock. The Grayson ambassador, knowing more, was also gleefully satisfied if apprehensive of the political convulsions that would follow. And the newsies were mostly just jangling shock, though currents of anger, fear, and alarm were whipping around the room, growing enough as one grotesquerie succeeded another on the screen that she tuned them out. North Hollow’s crude assessment of her and mention of Paul had glances flicking her way, but though her sorrow had never left her, embarrassment had burned out long ago, and she waited patiently for High Ridge’s little performance for the LPD Commissioner and the laughter that followed. The screen blanked and her voice was a sword in the silence.

“Accessory to murder, before and after the fact. Conspiracy to murder. Conspiracy to mass murder. Conspiracy to commit an act of terrorism. Conspiracy to defame. Plain evidence of the views Baron High Ridge conceals in public but truly holds, in which duty, honour, obligation to one’s nation and laws, and the sacrifices of those who have died that we may all remain free are utterly without value. And absolute evidence of capital treason. Had I died in Silesia as the Baron repeatedly hopes — and I have already at his instigation been offered the command of Sidemore Station — I would not have died alone. The crew of an SD is numbered in thousands, and in the kind of losing engagement against multiple forces the Baron expressly wishes and seeks to plan for, by means up to and including providing enemy forces with classified data, Alliance casualties, most but by no means all Manticoran, would inevitably number in tens of thousands. We are and have since 1905 been in a state of war, dependent on the RMN and the navies of Allies for survival. And were such a battle to take place, it would by definition be in full and active war. All three people in that recording — the serving Prime Minister, Foreign Secretary, and Minister of Industry of the Manticoran government — have committed capital treason.”

She let the silence stretch for a few seconds.

“As I have said, on Wednesday I laid this recording, with all the data I have discussed, before Her Majesty, and she will shortly address the nation to inform us of what she has decided to do to rectify matters and deal with the constitutional crisis into which we are plunged. But before that Laughs Brightly, whom you know as Nimitz, has something to say, in his capacities as a First Elder of the Bright Water and Landing Clans, and as the mate of Golden Voice. For those of you still unfamiliar with Sign, Ms LaFollet will translate.”

Nimitz waited for Miranda to join him and signed slowly and deliberately.

<The two leg in the picture said he wishes to kill me, to kill Golden Voice as my mate, and to kill as many others of the People as he can. He also says he wishes all two legs to be reminded how dangerous a Person can be if she or he must defend themselves. We are very willing to give such a reminder.>

The rippling, discordant snarl of his war cry was echoed by every ’cat in the room and the scalpels claws of true hands sprang out as fangs were bared. Even those who had known what was coming flinched, and most started in their seats; besides herself, only Andrew and Miranda remained
stock still so far as Honor could see. The room’s acoustics had been carefully designed, and it took a while for the sound to die away.

The People have only two kinds of enemies, dead and not yet dead. We wish to harm no two leg, but will not permit harm to be done to us. And while we know you have your two-leg rules you say are so important, we also know they can fail you. They did so when the brother of that two leg sought to kill Dances on Clouds, and did kill her mate. They did so again when the attempt was made to kill Soul of Steel and Strong Mind. We cannot allow them to fail now, in this. So I tell you all, speaking for all People of all Clans, that if two-leg rules ensure those ones we have just heard speak can never threaten us with such harm again, we will abide by it. But if any Person sees any of those two legs walking alive and free to act as they will, we will hunt and kill them, as we would any animal that threatened our lives and kittens, even a Death Fang or Snow Hunter. Golden Voice has been in the presence of each of those three in the meeting place of your elders, and has given every Person the image and knowledge to recognise them immediately. It is not what we want, but it is what we will do if we must. That is all.

Honor wasn’t at all sure it was a wise course, but Nimitz and Sam had been adamant, as had Ariel and Monroe, while a still incandescent Elizabeth had shrugged, saying the ’cats had every right to make such a declaration as intended victims, and the courts could chew on their rights to proactive self-defence as and when. And though Honor still had apprehensions it did feel right to her as well, in itself and because of the echoes for her alone of the way Nimitz had started this whole, twisted but desperately necessary hunt. Campaign, rather. She almost laughed at her slip but instead stepped forward again to the podium.

“So, we are informed. The People are not Her Majesty’s subjects but the native sapient race of one of the worlds we call ours, and our allies as well as our fellows. And what you have just heard is in effect Treecat law, a judgement of duly chosen elders. The Prime Minister, Foreign Secretary, and Minister for Industry have transgressed against them, and the ’cats have seen proof and passed sentence, regardless of what we two legs may choose to do. And to that I must now turn, for — ”

A raucous bleep shrilled in the room. “Air defence active. Shields up. Unidentified threat.”

Long before the computer tones stopped she had whirled to Andrew who had for a second the abstracted look that meant his earbug was commanding his attention. His eyes sharpened on her.

“Large lightflyer with no ID headed in 12 klicks out and accelerating.”

“Put the pilot on screen.”

She saw him murmur to his throatbug and a few seconds later the screen lit with a grey fuzz and cleared to show North Hollow, face contorted. His eyes locked on what must be her image in his com and his mouth worked below eyes gone far past crazy. From his voice he was also deeply drunk.

“Can’t get that bitch who betrayed us and stole the files but I can fucking well take you with me, you whoreshit.” One arm slapped the box on the passenger seat. “Gonna deal with you, bitch, right now.”

The control system’s voice warning him that if he continued on his present course he would be shot down was audible beneath his harsh, whooping breaths but Honor was slapping commands at Andrew while her own hands worked podium controls, maximising filtering in the windows, not that it would begin to cope.

“That’s NHE26. The blast could be huge. Full power to shields and let him as close as
possible — the shock wave will reach Landing. And there are boats in the bay. House System — Zulu Nine, Zulu Nine. Everyone, scramble for first response to marine disaster.” There would be the light front as well. “Everyone in this room, you’re safe but do not look. Close and cover your eyes. HD people, filters on.” She saw the warning light that meant one laser cluster was at firing readiness. “All ’cats, cover your eyes now.” She could hear the faint subliminal whine as forcefield generators maxed and closed her eyes, dialling down her artificial one and automatically turning away to cover Nimitz with her body.

In the cliff laser-cluster station the targeting computer considered the legitimate commands it had received seven seconds previously, and the size and speed of the approaching object. More massive than a missile it was slower by orders of magnitude, but there was atmospheric attenuation to allow for. As North Hollow’s lightflyer hit the one kilometer mark it issued a final instruction and less than two microseconds later a single laser tube emitted a fourteen millisecond burst of intensely coherent light. Still 954 metres short of the force shields, the front end of the lightflyer was sliced open and began to break apart as ruptured hydrogen tanks ignited, engulfing everything in blue fire. Then the NHE26 detonated.

Even dialled down through a closed lid Honor’s artificial eye registered the blue flash of the hydrogen tank exploding, and both eyes could see the much brighter, actinic glare as the NHE26 went off. Tens of kilos at least, her brain calculated as glare was joined by the blazing orange of air burning into plasma and a smashing roar of thunder that went on and on. The fireball slapped against the forcefield, generators screamed, and she could hear the armorplast windows creak as they absorbed the attenuated and largely deflected pressure wave. Further crashing sounds and huge splashes told her part of the cliff face had given way and she doubted the laser cluster had survived, but rock and water had absorbed the worst of it. Downtown Landing would have been some 18 klicks from the blast, and while there shouldn’t be fatalities there would be minor casualties from both pressure-wave and lightfront. The boats would be goners, but their crews might not be. As the glare at last faded she was turning again and rising, her artificial eye with all filters on max cautiously opening to pierce the wash of light and see the fishing trawler torn open and capsized, the yachts a pair of shattered, burning hulks being tossed about in the wake of the expanding circular wave.

“House System, Zulu Ten, Zulu Ten. People, this is the Steadholder. Rescue mode. Three boats on fire and sinking in the Bay. Scramble first response. Go. Landing Docks and Marina, that wave will hit the harbour. Scramble now.” She opened her natural eye and let what it saw connect with the shrieks she could hear. “Second response, eye damage to many guests here. Scramble a pinnace and warn Landing General they have multiple incoming with blast, fire, and ocular damage.”

She saw the LIVE light still burning on the podium. No time for that but Landing General would presumably already know. The ’cats had all obeyed her, though they were blinking as their eyes watered, and so had the ambassadors, the Hauptmans, and all her own people. But between 30 and 40 of the newsies had been stupid enough to try to look and were wailing as they clutched at
their eyes. Her voice was the one that had sliced through the chaos and carnage of missile-shattered bridges.

“Silence.” Whimpers and even wails were cut off. “If you were looking and are now blind, you will recover in time but need medical attention. Keep your eyes closed and put on dark glasses. Do not rub them. Let tears flow. Help is coming. Anybody able next to a victim, hold and comfort them. Make them stand. Head for the main door. Andrew, escorts to the pinnace. Communications, contact Landing Royal Animal and Bird Rescue — a lot of creatures will have suffered in that blast. Get them clearance to enter the zone and assist. Forensics, mark all you can for the LPD. Engineering, check the cliffs — is any more rock going to come down? Catering, coffee and brandy here, now, and anything sweet.” She eyed the LIVE light. “And whoever’s running this broadcast at the Landing HD stations, get me a report on damage there soonest, please.”

It was less than 20 seconds, while shaken people began organising themselves and first casualties were started towards the doors, arms looped around still sighted colleagues, before her first HSG responders streaked out towards the stricken ships. A moment later she saw Andrew tap a button and her earbug came to life with a shaky voice.

“Your Grace. Paul Mersham at LNHD. We have reports of hundreds of eye casualties and some physical damage from the blast front, mostly at the harbour. The swell about to hit will do more damage there but as it stands the ships are the worst of it.” He drew an equally shaky breath. “What was that?”

“A military explosive, Mr Mersham.” Even to her own ears her voice was very dry and she eyed the LIVE light again, wondering if she really was still being broadcast. “Very useful in battle and breaching charges but with no civilian uses whatever. I would assume it was the material the late Earl of North Hollow obtained from the late Admiral Sir Edward Janacek, and intended to use against Golden Voice and other Treecats. In a public place in Landing.”

There was a silence and his voice was much harder when it resumed.

“Yes. And what blew him out of the air?”

“A laser cluster, Mr Mersham. As Colonel LaFollet would tell you, you defend against the possible, not only the probable.”

Her artificial eye saw the HSG flyers locking tractor beams onto the sinking ships while armoured figures sank on counter-grav towards the water and flames. For long moments she watched at maximal magnification casualties being rescued, or dead recovered — burn, blast, and crushing injuries, and immersion with anoxia and inhalation of fire and water thrown in. North Hollow had died as he had lived, contemptuous of all others. But her people were doing all they could, and doing it well; she could also see air ambulances scrambled from Landing closing in, with Coast Guard, Harbour Authority, and LPD flyers and vessels also on their way. She blinked, bringing magnification down, and looked around the room, where the last of the blinded were being shuffled through the door on colleagues’ arms, and those who remained looked as battered and dazed as they were in truth.

Catering had arrived in force, with celery for cats as well as coffee, brandy, and sweet stuff for those in shock. The ’cats were circulating, checking on people and spreading calm. It looked as if Barker had been among the casualties but Radley and Davidson were still here, standing together, and she saw with a spark of amusement that Clarise was upholding the reputation of lawyers by taking the opportunity to present both with writs. She went to the ambassadors, receiving reassurances, with shaken thanks and a fierce hug from Stacey as well as an emotional handclasp from Klaus, and blessed Andrew when he presented her with a steaming mug of chocolate. Nimitz
came back to her, one true hand clutching a celery stalk, but set it down, cocking his head to look up at her, before sending her a mental image of North Hollow, Descroix, and High Ridge with a large red X through North Hollow. His hands moved.

<Many are hurt, but at least he is dead now and can hurt no-one else.>

That was true and she knelt, caressing his head as he reclaimed the celery, before straightening as Andrew gestured.

“Her Majesty asks if you wish to say anything further before she begins her broadcast, Ma’am.”

Honor grimaced. “Not really, but I suppose I’d better. This has all stayed live?”

“It has, Ma’am, without internal sound and cut with coverage of the rescue. Mersham gave what you said to on-air commentators, though.”

“Right. Nimitz?”

He swallowed the last celery, fastidiously washed his mouth and hand, and leaped to her shoulder, settling himself with a buzzing purr. She returned to the podium and saw Andrew’s nod.

“Well, that was unexpected.” Heads turned as chatter stopped. “People have died and are dying out there, but everything that can be done to help them is being done, and beyond all personal distress Manticore is in crisis greater even than an insane suicide bombing. And Her Majesty is waiting on us, so I will add only that besides putting the Earl of North Hollow — the murdering, traitorous, utterly despicable, and now late Earl — beyond the reach of any justice save that of God, before whom he will not fare well, what has just happened constitutes further proof that the recording you saw last is genuine. What exploded, ladies and gentlemen, was classified naval explosive — kilos of it — and there is no lawful way it could have been in his possession. But you will recall his reference to being given naval explosives by Admiral Janacek.”

She gave it a full minute while those standing found seats again, clutching mugs and glasses, and turned to the pickup.

“Your Majesty.”

There was a delay of several seconds before her screen came alight with Elizabeth’s image, flushed with renewed rage as well as shock in her eyes, but level-voiced while the LIVE light at last winked out.

“Your Grace, let me first offer you sincere thanks for the speed, clarity, and concern for all my subjects of your deeply admirable response to that appalling attack. And once again Manticore must give heartfelt thanks for your farsighted professionalism and diligence in our defence, and more thanks for your escape from yet another assassination attempt.” The Queen’s blazing eyes looked out at everyone, Ariel upright in her lap, and the pronoun shifted. “But now We must address the exceptionally serious data Her Grace has provided. We had intended this to be a longer and different speech, but events dictate otherwise. So, to be brief, when We received Duchess Harrington’s report on Tuesday, We faced what came down to two problems — the needs to arrest Our present administration, including Baron High Ridge and his cabinet, and to maintain competent government and defence while Our navy, and much else, are in flux. So We called in every member of the Queen’s Bench not seconded to Lord Justice Berham’s enquiry, and took advice.”

Elizabeth took a deep breath that Honor and everyone echoed.
“With regard to Our present administration, warrants of arrest on suspicion of multiple crimes including capital treason have on Our authority been issued and within the last two hours executed for every member of the current cabinet and various others, including senior members of the Civil Service and Foreign Office. The Earl — the late and for ever accursed Earl of North Hollow, who was supposedly resting at home on compassionate leave from governmental duty following the presumed death of his wife, regrettably escaped the sweep. No other cabinet minister did so, although Lady Descroix was apprehended only on a yacht about to pass through the Junction to Beowulf. Which leaves Us without an administration at a time when Our navy is in crisis and galactic affairs are of the most pressing urgency.”

Another echoed breath.

“The Queen’s Bench unanimously inform Us there is neither constitutional guidance nor statutory legislation covering Our present circumstances other than the declaration in Our Oath of Accession that We will at all times reign and render decisions in the best lawful interests of all Our subjects. Which is to say We step into the unknown, and in the absence of formal guidance and established precedents We must do as We judge fit and proper.”

A third breath.

“We therefore declare, considering all circumstances, that the administration headed by Baron High Ridge is by Our royal fiat hereby suspended, in all persons and powers, pending the results of the many judicial, naval, and police enquiries now in process. We further declare that a bench of five Lords Justice, headed by Lord Justice Ingledezw, shall have ultimate authority over all such enquiries, and are hereby charged to investigate and assess all matters connected with the warrants for arrest We have today signed. In the meantime, Our Realm must be governed and We have therefore, first, asked Lord William Alexander, whom we will ask the House of Commons to create Baron Grantville, to assume the post of Prime Minister, and to appoint a cabinet as he sees fit, and second, ordered that a general election be held within 120 days from today, regardless of the legal circumstances then obtaining. We hope thereby both to answer all immediate needs of governance and defence in time of war, respect the demands of Our Constitution concerning the rule of law, and meet all demands upon Our justice, both of the living and the dead.”

It was all purely autocratic but what else was Elizabeth supposed to do? And the election was going to be interesting to say the least. Even if the trials hadn’t happened by then some courts martial at least would have, and the Independent Auditor would have reported. And while Honor had revealed no details, she had made sure Anton Zilwicki — who knew a great deal on his own account, besides whatever the Ballroom might have told him — had given Cathy Montaigne a heads-up about the massive damage the Liberals were about to sustain; their current leadership, anyway.

“And yet we all have more to face. The revelation of Lady Young’s real identity and purpose, and of other Manpower agents at work on Grayson and Potsdam, is frankly terrifying, and that we have been manipulated towards war to serve the perversions of the slave trade an injury and insult that cannot and will not be forgiven. It also plainly raises the most urgent and immediate questions about the blighted and stalled negotiations with the Republic of Haven and the severe, escalating tensions with the Anderman Empire in Silesia. We have therefore also directed Lord William immediately to send official envoys to President Pritchart and His Imperial Majesty, to seek and give reassurances, and request urgent establishment of bilateral negotiations to deal with the existing situations as well as multilateral negotiations to assess what would seem to be Acts of War against us all by a criminal Mesan transstellar.”

A final breath.
“Clearly, we face a period of prolonged turmoil in all branches of government and sectors of society. It is going to be a very difficult time, and We ask for your strength, patience, and endurance. But it is also positive. Where we have had seeming propriety that covered a scale of wrongdoing and treason beyond imagining, Her Grace of Harrington has lifted the stone and let in light. The enquiries headed by Lords Justice Berham and Ingledew will do whatever they must to root out what has been poisoning and betraying us all. There will be many other enquiries, by the police and security agencies, which will follow evidence wherever and to whomever it may lead. And those who have brought Manticore to this sorry pass will be duly arraigned and prosecuted to the fullest extent of the law.”

The Queen’s gaze left no-one in any doubt of it.

“There will be no further statements today, save from emergency services dealing with the damage inflicted by the late Earl. When Lord William has assembled his cabinet he will make a statement. May God be with him, and with us all.”

The screen at last blanked and Honor eyed the frozen audience. “That ends this statement too. Your Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen, thank you for coming.” She was turning away when she saw one of the better financial and political talking heads used by the HD shows rise, and paused. “Ms Lovic?”

“I just wanted to add my thanks to Her Majesty’s, Your Grace. For everything. I can’t take it all in, but I know as surely as I breathe that were it not for your security here I would now be dead. And I think you have saved Manticore as well as all here today.”

There were still scores of people in the audience she cheerfully and not so cheerfully despised, but they all clapped her and Nimitz off, and she could feel it was heartfelt. Once she was though the door she just stood for a minute, feeling adrenalin fade and the shock of North Hollow’s assault run through her. Thank God for Andrew, who had vanished somewhere, leaving Spenser with her. Then there were ambassadors to farewell, though she invited the Hauptmans to stay if they wished while the heavy departing air traffic was slowly routed around the exclusion zone of blast damage and rescue operations.

Klaus nodded. “If we may, Honor. It’s a circus out there. And while I imagine you’re neck-deep in classified stuff, if there’s anything you can tell us about how in hell you did all that, I’d dearly love to know.”

“It wasn’t me, Klaus. The Ballroom started it. The original stuff on Young has to have been theirs, and it snowballed.”

“Then God bless Jeremy X, wherever he may be. And God bless you too, Honor. That was a fantasy come true.”

“It had its moments.” Andrew returned, an odd look in his grey eyes and excitement reverberating in his mind. “What is it, Andrew?”

“The GSNS Honor Harrington has returned, Your Grace. There is a call from Captain Greentree you need to take in private.”

* * * * *
By Saturday noon, to Elizabeth’s great relief, Manticore once again had a legal and competent government in office. William Alexander had taken the simple route of recalling all who had held office at the time of the Duke of Cromarty’s death, save that with himself as Prime Minister he had given the Exchequer to Baroness Morncreek, asked Sir Anthony Langtry to take the Foreign Office, and twisted his brother’s arm hard enough to get Hamish to accept First Lord of the Admiralty; where he in turn had promptly recalled all the Space Lords Janacek had dismissed. New ministers were having to work alongside Lord Justice Ingleedew’s teams as computers were vacuumed and records seized, the Civil Service was scrambling with a flurry of acting appointments replacing those under arrest or assisting enquiries, but it was all functioning, more or less.

So was the badly stretched Landing PD, augmented by Marine Police squads who had with some relish made available their holding cells. There had been far, far more data in Honor’s gift than she had revealed in her statement, and with so much already validated the various Lords Justice had agreed to Elizabeth’s formal request, on grounds of national security, that it all be presumed accurate unless and until proven otherwise. So there were already newsies, talking heads, publishers and media owners whom High Ridge and North Hollow had controlled or suborned among the detained, as well as assorted members of the Commons and Lords with other members of the Liberals and CA, and some of Descroix’s Progressive colleagues. There was also another, much more scattered array of names that began to build up in frenetic HD reports, and during the day a stone-faced Commissioner of the LPD gave a statement to the effect that a full copy of the notorious North Hollow files had come to him some days before, in much the way Her Grace Duchess Harrington described receiving the data she had revealed, with detailed records of how they had been used over recent years. In consequence, though some of the blackmail material was in itself merely embarrassing, a further raft of concealed crimes had been exposed, reaching back many years and comprising crimes used to blackmail, the blackmail itself, and further offences committed under duress by victims, including many instances of perjury, the whole wrapped layers deep in failure to report and conspiracy to pervert the course of justice. All would be investigated with the utmost rigour, and many cold or closed cases had been reopened. A further large body of data concerning naval officers had been remitted to the new First Lord of the Admiralty. And by mid-afternoon the first of what Elizabeth was grimly sure would be many suicides ahead of arrest had been discovered.

The public mood was hard to gauge. There had been ugly scenes outside town-houses owned by High Ridge, North Hollow, Descroix, and New Kiev, with stones thrown and public order arrests, but the sight of large police teams entering the properties and the obvious seizure of material seemed to have calmed the crowds. The same was true of those outside Liberal and CA headquarters, though police protection had been needed to evacuate staffs; the Progressives seemed to have escaped the general wrath, however, largely because Earl Gray Hill, for once rising to an occasion, had stood four-square on the steps of party HQ, ridden out jeers, and delivered a blistering, shaken, and clearly genuinely ashamed denunciation of Descroix. Elsewhere, newsies who had been prominent in attacking Honor or supporting the savage naval cuts had had windows broken and vehicles dented by stones, and there was widespread, seething anger about the gross peculation tempered by growing fear about the galactic situation. But about Manpower there was mostly a deeply stunned incomprehension, though the ASL had issued a savage statement and Cathy Montaigne had with hawk-eyed relish promised one of her own as soon as she had assimilated what had been revealed.

There was also a strange, sparking current of vengeful pleasure at High Ridge’s fall, where it might be expected and in more surprising quarters. The Baron’s manner had made many enemies even among his political supporters, and some newsies who’d fed on leaked tidbits were trying to cover themselves by proclaiming good faith in ‘briefings’ given ‘off the record’ that now seemed to have been fabricated. And as North Hollow’s spectacular public death had for most served emphatically to confirm the recording of the kitchen-cabinet session, the open contempt for the Navy,
military casualties, and civilian lives it revealed had generated a wave of genuinely appalled and dignified protest from veterans’ groups, senior officers of every service, the Mothers’ Union, the Mayor of Landing, and more or less anyone interviewed about anything.

And when people couldn’t bear any more thinking — or at any rate, spouting opinions — about the many villains of the piece, they sang praises of Honor. The recording of her and Nimitz taking down Benjamin’s would-be assassins 14 years before had never been forgotten, nor the boggled shock at the tactics that had freed her and nearly 400,000 others from Hades, but seeing her in command mode was something else. Elizabeth’s heart had been hammering as her preparations to speak had been cut off by the shrill alarm, and the string of crystal-clear soprano orders before and after the massive explosion had been mesmerising — and so everyone had found. Among the HD jabber were graphics showing what had happened, and what could have happened if Honor hadn’t given the order to let North Hollow’s lightflyer get so close to the Bay House, and so far from Landing — not only windows blown out rather than rattled, but far more serious eye-injury to far more people and a wave that would have arrived minutes sooner, before the frantic preparations that had limited damage along the waterfront and to moored boats in docks and marina could have been made. The Mayor had already said to immediate acclaim that he would be proposing Honorary Citizenship of Landing, an honour beyond even Elizabeth’s toybox. And twined through admiring, awe-struck gratitude was a renewed consciousness of the vendetta successive Earls of North Hollow had pursued against Honor, and a spinning, bewildered appreciation of the escalation from killing one in a duel to killing the other with a laser-cluster, with Jared Mayhew’s assassination team, Denver Summervale, and Steadholder Burdette thrown in for good measure — a matter summed-up by the Grayson ambassador, who cheerfully agreed it was self-evidently a very stupid idea ever to take aggressive action against Her Grace the Steadholder Plenipotentiary, as he had known very well since 1903, and had they only just noticed?

Elizabeth spent the later afternoon and early evening receiving a preliminary report from Lord Justice Ingledew, already coldly certain that every charge of peculation and theft would stick fast, and with little doubt charges of accessory and conspiracy to murder could also be proven. Where military law applied, as with Houseman, there would almost certainly be capital sentences. But about the charges of capital treason against High Ridge and Descroix, and similar charges being considered against New Kiev, he was deeply uneasy.

“God knows the case can be made, Your Majesty, but it can also be argued, by no means foolishly. Baron High Ridge is apoplectically insistent he had no knowledge whatever of Lady Young’s definite or Lady Descroix’s possible affiliation with Manpower, and points out it is a company, not a nation. And it is true the major elements constituting the alleged treason are more of conspiracy to commit than the completed act.” He blew out a breath. “And then there is the fact that he and others under arrest have the right to be tried by the House of Lords.”

Elizabeth had been waiting for that. “Has he asserted that right?”

“Not yet, Ma’am. I do not think he has even accepted there will be a trial, and appears genuinely to believe himself, as what he calls the legitimate Prime Minister, above the law. But he did mention that right amid a lengthy tirade.”

“Well, the second he or New Kiev does assert it, accept. There hasn’t been such a trial for more than two centuries, but I’ve been looking at the exact constitutional and statutory wording, and the jury would not be a selected 12 but all his peers — or rather, all who will be eligible. And that makes for an interesting list, given how many noble cronies he’s appointed as ambassadors, or will either be in the dock beside him or necessarily recused because they face other charges themselves. Anyone the Independent Auditor suspends from all public office will also be ineligible. Moreover, if the election has happened, the San Martino peers will be seated. And there are some very interesting
procedural consequences as well. A peer demanding such a trial is expected to defend him- or herself and matters of law and admissability as well as guilt are subject to simple majority votes, though a two-thirds majority is required to convict on capital charges. And there is of course no possible appeal.” Elizabeth’s fingers moved in Ariel’s fur. “And one more thing, which is that while only a full peer can demand a trial in the Lords, the Lords have the right to assume jurisdiction in any criminal case. They’ve never done so, and I’m wary of the precedent, but I want them to do so for Descroix, so the three surviving senior ministers stand trial together. And I want North Hollow charged posthumously with everything, including yesterday — not just as a gesture, though that matters, but because it’ll cut through the unbelievable legal mess arising from the deaths, injuries, and damage that explosion caused.”

Ingledew’s eyebrows were high, and his look thoughtful. “I hadn’t got further than thinking of it as a complete circus, Ma’am. You anticipated this, clearly.”

“Her Grace of Harrington did, my Lord. She has a most complete knowledge of House procedure, acquired prior to her first maiden speech, I believe.”

“Ah. Yes indeed.” He hesitated. “I must confess, Ma’am, I find myself both greatly admiring of and deeply disturbed by Her Grace. I had not altogether understood her powers as a Steadholder.”

“She’s a Head of State, my Lord, with her own navy.”

“Just so, Ma’am. And while she has been meticulous in distinguishing the various authorities under which she has acted, her scope as Steadholder and a serving GSN admiral in time of war has allowed her to step around Manticoran law in various ways.”

“Is that a problem, my Lord?”

“Not legally. She has been extremely careful. But at the same time, Ma’am, I have no doubt she knows a good deal more than she is telling us about how this astonishing body of information came into her possession, and equally no doubt that any number of Manticoran laws were broken in obtaining it.”

Elizabeth nodded. “Smashed to smithereens, I should think. And I don’t suppose, my Lord, you have any more doubt than I do that both the Audubon Ballroom and a number of Graysons resident on Manticore were involved. How she did it I can’t begin to imagine, but to be frank I really don’t care. If you did manage to identify anyone involved and procure sufficient evidence to charge them, she would doubtless assert Steadholder’s Protection and that would be that, except that we’d have a nasty situation with our closest and strongest ally. What you do is entirely your affair, my Lord Justice. I cannot tell you ruat coelum and then go imposing conditions. But I would ask you to think extremely carefully about any pursuit of this aspect of things. I don’t believe we need any further complications.”

“Indeed not. And I hear what you say, Ma’am. Whoever was involved has shown far greater loyalty to Manticore and the rule of law than those they have exposed. But the security aspects remain deeply troubling. How the CA building was tapped is … low on my list of priorities, shall we say, though police inspection has revealed evidence of a bugging system recently removed, as we found in Government House. But that is very high on the list of priorities, not least because the PGS is torn between nearly universal delight at the arrests and deep chagrin and fury at the evident failure of security. Moreover, every PGS member with any possible access to the surveillance system has already passed assisted polygraphy tests, with ’cats present, so there is real hair-tearing going on.”

“If the investigation is stymied, it is stymied, my Lord.”
He frowned, looking at her speculatively. “You seem very calm about it, Ma’am. This technique, whatever it is, could be used against other targets.”

“Maybe so. And nevertheless.”

She hadn’t chosen him for nothing. “I think I must ask you, Ma’am, if you know how it was done.”

“I do not know, my Lord. I do however have a guess as to how site security was compromised, which I have no intention of sharing with you or anyone. And should the PGS come to the same guess, I would instruct them to take no action whatever.”

Her hands were resting on Ariel, in her lap, and though she gave no glance she saw understanding flare in his eyes.

“I see, Ma’am.” His slow smile was unexpected. “Her Grace does command formidable resources. And so many of them are quite outside my authority, despite the sweeping remit you gave me, Ma’am. Thank you for your time. I will report further in three days, if I may.”

“Oh of course.” She saw him out and returned to look at an unperturbed Ariel, shaking her head.

But she was at last free to retire to her private apartments, where she found Justin drinking champagne on the terrace with Mike Henke.

“What are you doing here?”

“Joining your private celebration of events. Everybody’s having one.”

“They are?”

“You bet they are, Beth. Pretty much everyone not on duty in Home Fleet is toasting Honor and trying to work out how she did it, amid many jokes about the Earl and the laser-cluster. Except for Janacek stooges, of course, who are sweating cobs and saying very little to anyone except each other. Stacey Hauptman is apparently hosting an impromptu bash on a grand scale for the ASL, and Cathy Montaigne has the half of the Liberals that’s going to survive at her house. Even Mama’s having one, sloshing champagne and chomping delicacies with a selection of cronies amid much shocked cackling and wonderment. I tried to see Honor so I could tease her about it all and see how she is, really, but Miranda says she’s up on her namesake. Do you know why she’s here?”

“She’s where? And why who’s here?”

“The GSNS Honor Harrington. She came back from Trevor’s Star ten days ago, headed for Grayson, and returned yesterday morning, so it looks as if she was playing courier for some reason. But she hasn’t gone back to Third Fleet, just parked herself next to Alfredo Yu’s flagship.”

“No idea, Mike. Nothing I’ve been told. But there’s a lot of that about these days. How are you?”

“Thoroughly delighted and greatly relieved, while still feeling rather sick. And very angry.”

“I bet. Did Honor ever ask you about that conversation we had the night we learned she was still alive?”

“No. Were you expecting her to?”

“When she gave me the Reveille data — which feels like years ago, not less than three weeks
— she told me, ordered me really, not to jog her elbow and promised me she was going to bring High Ridge down in flames. And scour us clean. Staring at her in shock I said, ‘Or at us’, and told her to ask you. Because that’s what’s happened, isn’t it? And my God, Mike, I think I know what the Peeps felt like when that news hit them.”

Mike nodded. “I thought the same. So did Mama. And we get to shoot our own Saint-Justs and Pierres. It’s going to be very ugly but it is sorely needed. And when I think about what Manticore might be like once it’s done, I get some very warm and tingly feelings.” She drank champagne. “It’s a purge, but all legitimate, with evidence galore, and it’s going to be fascinating to watch, even if some bits will be very queasy.”

“Tell me. And those damned North Hollow files being exposed is, well, not icing on the cake — suicides have started already, did you see? — but another real blessing in the long run. The Commissioner sent me a summary of ways they’ve been used and it’s far worse than I’d believed. But I don’t want to talk about any of that now.” Not least because it meant thinking about the one thing in those files she had in some shock ordered the Commissioner strictly to suppress, at least for now, which was the evidence of Howell’s and Gwinner’s involvement in Haven’s assassination of her father. “Tell me what my Navy made of Nimitz’s speech.”

Mike laughed. “Pop-eyed shock, mostly, largely followed by enthusiastic approval.” She waggled a hand. “On general principle, in the first place, North Hollow’s plan having been unspeakably vile. But there was a more interesting element, that Ariel and Monroe will like, because it turns out Nimitz and Samantha count in pretty much everyone’s mind as RMN veterans, who’d have wound stripes and in Nimitz’s case medals if we gave them to ‘cats, so North Hollow was threatening one of our own, however furry. They’d cheerfully kill him themselves if Honor hadn’t already.”

Both ’cats bleeked interest and talk continued over dinner, often circling Honor but for a while steered firmly by Justin to some of the scientific stuff he watched for her, then to Roger’s increasingly serious relationship with young Rivka Rosenfeld, of whom the ‘cats rather approved. Mike left to return to her ship late, and with Sunday clear Elizabeth looked forward to a lie-in, which she got, and a day blessedly free of official meetings, which she didn’t. Returning from Mass at King Michael’s Cathedral, where Archbishop Telmachi, naming not one name, had given a very thought-provoking sermon on the betrayals of God and self involved in betraying the trust of others, she was summoned by Jenny Chawleigh to her secure comconsole to find Honor looking ... excited? Cheerful, certainly, and charged with appalling energy.

“Honor. What now?”

“Further developments, Beth. And how. All good news, I promise.”

“Good news? Huh. I’m not sure how much more news of any kind I can stand. Should I expect you, then?”

“No. You should come here, Beth. To lunch, in the first place, with Justin. There’s some old friends who need to see you. You too, Ariel. And you both need to meet a new one. I’ve dragooned Willie and Hamish, which took some doing.”

Elizabeth stared. She bet it had, and if both Alexanders had agreed that what Honor was about was the most important thing they could be doing right now she really had better go. And as she found the Queen’s Flight expecting her call it wasn’t long before she and Justin were on their way across Jason Bay. Recovery barges were still lifting the wreck of the sunken trawler, with pollution control and police teams, and a group of what looked like military engineers was at work on the cliffs with a large antigrav crane hovering — the laser cluster, she realised. The vast, scorched
circle from the explosion and the rockfalls it had caused were horribly clear, and displaced lizard-
gulls clustered and trilled beyond them, drawing scornful looks from Ariel and Monroe.

She hadn’t been to the Bay House since Honor had made her latest upgrades to security, and
was impressed by the new set-up, as were Ellen Shemais and her other PGS guards. Andrew
LaFollet was waiting with Armsmen in the hangar, and led them to a small — for the Bay House —
dining-room where Willie and Hamish Alexander came to their feet. But Elizabeth’s eyes were on
the other figures who rose.

“Benjamin? Good God.” After the assassinations on Grayson, leaving her and Justin, and
Benjamin and his wives, equally grieving and shocked, they had become close, and Grayson mores
or no she didn’t hesitate to embrace him, feeling the strength of his return clasp. “And Rachel and
Hipper? What are you all doing here?”

He held her at arm’s length. “Long story, Elizabeth. And you look as tired as I’d expected.
You must have been running non-stop for days.”

“Pretty much. You’re up to speed on what’s been happening here?”

“Oh yes. Come and eat, though — you’re going to be busy afterwards and you need it.”

Her sense of being managed was strong, but Ariel and Monroe were cheerfully catching up
with Hipper, Nimitz, and Samantha, as well as investigating bowls of what must be some of
MacGuiness’s magical cookery, and the smells were very good. She caught up a little with Rachel
herself, contrasting the deeply upset thirteen-year-old she had met with the abruptly adult fifteen-
year-old who with a fish-eye at her father was telling her and Justin about her desire to serve in the
GSN and asking whether Her Majesty had any objection in principle to the idea of Miss Mayhew
following Miss Owens to Saganami Island.

“Don’t answer that, Elizabeth. It’s among my last cards.”

Benjamin received a daughterly glower. “Not any more it isn’t, Da.” “I’ll answer it if
someone will tell me why I’m here. And more importantly, Benjamin, why you’re here. Delightful as
it is to see you, my head’s beginning to hurt with wondering.”

“All right, but don’t stop eating. I’m here because I’ve brought someone to meet you under full
protection of the Sword. Rachel’s here because I needed Hipper to meet that person when he turned
up on Grayson, and he decided he wanted to see it through. Oh, and Wesley’s here too, though he’s
babysitting our guest now, because I was rather hoping there’d be a new First Lord of your
Admiralty for him to talk to.”

“You were? How long have you been here, Benjamin?”

“On planet since late last night. In orbit since Friday morning.”

“Huh. So that’s what the GSNS Honor Harrington was doing. Mike Henke was wondering.
Friday morning. So you saw Honor’s salvo of MDMs? And what happened?”

“I did. As did every Grayson in orbit. And while I wouldn’t have believed it was possible for
Honor to become any more popular with the GSN, she has undoubtedly managed it. When she came
up to collect us there was something of a ... well, riot wouldn’t be fair, as Captain Greentree’s crew is
very disciplined, but a cacophony for sure. And there was considerable competition among Admiral
Yu’s people for the assignment of carrying that record to Grayson, where there will certainly be
another cacophony. Tempered, however, by the Manpower revelations.”
“Yes. Those. I’ve no idea when it will be possible, Benjamin, but I shall be going after them somehow, Solarian League or no.”

Honor leaned forward. “We all will, Beth. But that’s for tomorrow. What’s for now is that news of Georgia Young did reach President Pritchart, and she tore the place apart looking for the agent or agents at their end. And found them.”

The silence sang.

“Who?”

“Giancola and his deputy.” Honor took a sheaf of papers from a case and handed them over, giving a second set to Justin. “What you have there is the disputed diplomatic correspondence, with alterations Giancola unilaterally made to incoming and authorised outgoing statements highlighted.”

Elizabeth and Justin started flicking pages, then slowed, went back, and paged forward again. Most alterations were single words — usually not added or deleted — but there were also places where tone was hardened, made confrontational and insulting, and reparations figures had had strings of noughts added. The cumulative effect was devastating. Then it hit her.

“Honor, the Peeps are admitting this? And reaffirming the originals?”

“Yes they are, Beth. And you want to think about that very carefully, and about the timing. By treecat-confirmed testimony, less than 48 hours after Kevin Usher’s presentation to cabinet Pritchart despatched a cabinet-member with plenipotentiary powers to ask Benjamin to get him in to see you. And with a little help from Admiral Kuzak and me they have prevented Solarian newsies from reaching Manticore with news of this upheaval before you could hear it from them directly.”

Her mind spun. “There’s a Peep here?”

“There is. Empowered to agree to direct negotiations to end the war now. Negotiations between Willie and President Pritchart, who is willing to come here, to Landing, with a small cabinet team, and presents via her envoy a sworn declaration that despite having rearmed just as badly as we’d feared Haven will not recommence hostilities unless and until those negotiations have failed or been refused.”

“Who have they sent?”

It seemed to be Hamish’s turn. “Thomas Theisman, their CNO, Secretary of War, and now acting Secretary of State Plenipotentiary, replacing Giancola. A man both Honor and His Grace have met before, and swear to be honest. The man who willingly testified against those Masadan lunatics, personally shot Saint-Just, and unilaterally repatriated our PoWs well before High Ridge bothered to reciprocate. A man who has at every stage specifically requested that treecats be present to catch him in the least lie. And frankly, Your Majesty, a man who could very shortly be kicking us when we’re down, but is instead offering us exactly what we most desperately need. Willie?”

Her new Prime Minister took a deep breath. “Your Majesty, Hamish tells me the Admiralty is in a worse state that even he had dared imagine. In addition to all we knew about, the few ships we managed to insist were mothballed rather than scrapped have had equipment removed and their computers have not been maintained. I am formally advised that as things stand I cannot guarantee security of either Trevor’s Star or Basilisk Station or Gregor Defence Command while guaranteeing the Manticore System.”

Elizabeth paled and as Justin’s hand found hers squeezed its lifeline. “That bad?”
“At least that bad, Your Majesty. Given what Honor tells me about the Andermani, I believe we can concede our way out of the Silesian mess, though there will be commercial howling and a permanent loss of revenue. But with the Peeps, well, GONI’s numbers were accurate, and there’s going to be a period of at least two years while we are seriously vulnerable. So even if I thought Theisman was lying through his teeth I’d advise you to listen and spin everything out for as long as you possibly could. And he isn’t lying, which makes him a godsend. He is mostly trying to save his own peoples’ lives, but is very happy to save Your subjects’ lives as well.”

“He’s a Peep.” She knew it was plaintive, even childish, but even though she’d ordered Willie to send an envoy to them, and knew all too well that renewed war could not be risked and would have horrendous costs, the ideas of meeting one, now; of extending courtesy, hoping for agreement; and of having to announce she’d done so was … paralysing.

“Yes he is, Beth.” Honor’s voice was somehow both gentle and steely. “And I understand what you’re feeling. But High Ridge and North Hollow are Manticoran through and through, and that does not mean you or I or Hamish or Willie are cast in the same mould. Nor is Thomas Theisman.”

“Truly, Elizabeth.” Benjamin’s gaze was intense. “I’ve heard and thought through what he’s offering and I promise you it’s something all of us can live with, a genuine way forward. And there’s one more testimony you should hear. Hipper?”

Her eyes moved to the ’cat as he rose.

<i>Part of her was blazingly angry, shocked at the ambush and filled with all her lifelong, burning hatred of the Peeps and what they’d done, not just to Manticore but to her personally; to her father, father-figure, and uncle; to so many of her subjects. But the array of faces looking at her, human and ’cat, demanded a different analysis, of just how careful Honor had been, of the stakes she was really playing for, encompassing far more than the destruction of High Ridge, of the reassurance Elizabeth was being offered that Theisman really was the straight arrow Honor — and Benjamin — had always said he was. And though God knew she’d heard what Honor had said about word of Young having been sent to Haven, her own focus had inevitably been domestic, absorbed by the complexities of the political earthquake the Reveille affair had started. But now the galactic earthquake — and that made no sense at all — was here as well, and though Willie and Hamish were almost as shocked as she and Justin, Benjamin had absorbed it, and Honor — Honor had expected it, anticipated and planned for it, and was by God using it to do everything she’d said, and more.

If I get it right I can put High Ridge and several of his cabinet in the dock or even in front of a firing squad, scour out the CA and Liberals as well as the worst elements of the aristocracy and RMN, end the Silesian problem, and secure a proper, negotiated treaty with the Peeps. At the very least — the very least, Beth — you’ll be permanently shot of High Ridge and all his godless crew, none of your subjects will be dying in Silesia, and I can buy us some time, maybe enough time, to climb out of the military hole we’re in against the RN.

Her world spun and settled again. Confirmation that Haven had rearmed would provoke desperate alarm, but the presence of Theisman and an announcement of new, direct negotiations in Landing … well, no wonder Willie and Hamish had found it their most urgent duty to be here. She knew it was hers too, however her stomach roiled. And Hipper or no, Rachel’s presence was Benjamin’s silent, impassioned argument for his daughter to serve in a GSN at peace, not at war, and
God knew how much she owed him, and all Grayson. Ariel landed in her lap with a soft bleek, and her hands automatically settled in his fur, feeling his love and comfort. Soul of Steel. Dances on Clouds. Dreams of Peace. She took a deep breath and blew it out slowly, trying to let anger and fear go and banking what remained.

“Alright. I'll listen.”

Honor’s smile was luminous. “Then let’s be about it.”

*

Four hours later Elizabeth was standing on one of the Bay House’s secluded terraces, alone save for the watchful, silent presences of Ariel and Ellen Shemais, looking through the slight sparkle of the force field at the light on the waters of Jason Bay but not really seeing anything. Theisman was hugely impressive, and she no longer doubted his sincerity, nor the acceptability of what he and President Pritchart were offering. Reparations would be a sticking-point, especially now they had not only their new building but the injuries and insults given them by High Ridge and Descroix to argue with, but the political settlement was very close to what she had always wanted, and Theisman had indicated Haven’s internal compensation programmes for victims of StateSec and other PRH brutalities would be extended to San Martin and other once conquered worlds irrespective of the reparations issue.

Well and good, astonishing as it was to think that. And Pritchart was offering a very substantial concession she needn’t in pledging to come to Landing in person. Wild horses wouldn’t get Elizabeth to Nouveau Paris, and with the rest of the deal Theisman had outlined she would have accepted any neutral venue that could have been agreed. There was also the warning about and sample of putatively Mesan nanotech that had been found, with news that Honor had already sent a second sample to Beowulf requesting urgent analysis. But Theisman had spoken directly to the core of her anger, grief, and fear when he had presented the Peeps’ internal reports on the assassinations of her father and uncle, with so many others. His unease and shame had been evident, as well as surprised appreciation of a political difficulty he hadn’t foreseen.

“Her Grace told me yesterday very few people here know your father was assassinated, Ma’am, but we have been so intent on cleaning our own house we had not thought you might not wish our culpability to become public.”

“I will have to think about that one. Do please go on, Admiral.”

“Yet what can I say, Ma’am? Those responsible helped butcher my own nation as well, and have either faced justice or are beyond it. Their acts were criminal, evil, and utterly stupid, and I can and do, for whatever it is worth, offer you our most sincere apologies for the crimes we inherit. President Pritchart is fully prepared to make that apology formally in public, and we shall certainly acknowledge the Masadan Plot, as it’s public knowledge already. But for the earlier plot — well, we will do as you ask, either way.”

His eyes had been haunted and his next words had shaken her.

“To kill the parent in hope of controlling the child — though it was the Legislaturists who organised it, that reeks of Saint-Just’s thinking. I had been used to believing them distinct, especially after the revelations from Hades, thanks to Her Grace, of Pierre’s and Saint-Just’s parts in the mass
assassination of the Harris government. But in my hours travelling here, thinking of this thing, and talking to His Grace the Protector, I have come to see more clearly why you find it so hard to believe that the Republic of Haven I represent, that we are trying to build, is truly different. To me, you see, it is chalk and cheese. The PRH was a nightmare from within as much as without, Ma’am, where anyone might vanish or be summarily executed at any time and every word had to be weighed against one’s life and family. Pierre and Saint-Just were our High Ridge and North Hollow, if you will, but with no need to conceal their deeds, nor any restraint of law, legislature, or public to limit them. But since we finally brought our madmen and madwomen down, we have been able to breathe and speak freely again. We have a long way to go, but we have the rule of law, and a government that is the servant of those who elect it, not an arbitrary tyranny draped in egalitarianism but rabid with fear and hatred of the people it purported to guard. And while it is true that nations and peoples are hard to change, it does happen.”

Sitting back, he had looked at her carefully, then at Honor, an odd expression on his face.

“I confess, Ma’am, I have sometimes thought of myself and Her Grace as having shared something, for though it was I who killed Saint-Just, I agree with Alfredo Yu it was she who killed the PRH, with the database she took from Hades. Yet as I watched her entirely astonishing performance on Friday, one of my stronger emotions was envy — for she had only to say it all aloud, backed by evidence, and you acted, decisively. Law ruled. Tell me, if you will, Ma’am, do you expect your nation and people to change as a result?”

She saw the trap, but it was a fair one. “Yes, in some measure. At the very least some malign influences will be well scotched for a while. But much remains to be seen.”

“Yes, of course, Ma’am. But while such analogies are always inexact, consider, please, how it would be if High Ridge’s known crimes in office over more than ten years included the murder of at least four million people, culminating in use of a nuclear weapon against his own Admiralty, and Her Grace’s response had of necessity been to send marine assault pinnaces to crash into Government House, murder him, and use the RMN to supervise an election. Bluntly, Ma’am, you cannot go through what we have and not change. And as part of that change we are desperate to end this war and normalise relations with the Star Kingdom. Please do not hold the crimes of the man I murdered that my nation and I might live against it now, when peace is within our grasp.”

And put like that, what could she say? Before that moment Theisman had mentioned High Ridge only factually, in regard to diplomatic correspondence and their decision to bypass him in the hope of what had indeed happened; and he had been very careful not to use against her the leverage of shame at what her administration had done in her name, though she was sure he knew she did feel ashamed of it. It had brought back vividly her conversation with Allen when he’d shown her her amazing recording of Honor executing justice on Burdette, and a new understanding had blossomed in her mind, of the course Honor had followed from her forced transition into a Head of State through the crucibles of Hades and galactic fame to this moment, when the star nations of a whole sector moved under her hand and the impossible sprang into being, wholesale from the hand of God. She had no more doubt of His hand than Benjamin of the Tester’s, but it was Honor through whom He had moved. And perhaps, though he was no believer, through Thomas Theisman.

She turned to find the woman herself sitting quietly in one of the easy chairs with Nimitz and Samantha beside her in evidently serious conversation with Ariel, whiskers twitching, and Andrew LaFollet beside Ellen Shemais. A tray with glasses of chilled lemonade was on a stone rest between chairs, and she took a glass gratefully, sitting and considering her host, true peer and friend.

“A dollar for them?”
Honor grinned. “That’s my line. But since you ask, right now, huge relief. Mainly about Haven. But also just that it’s mostly done. I hate cloak-and-dagger and not telling myself things. It never feels clean, even when there’s no choice at all.” There was a ruminative pause. “I think that’s why Theisman says so flatly he murdered Saint-Just. Benjamin told me a story about him trying to turn himself in for it, only no-one would arrest him and Pritchard eventually rolled her eyes and gave him a Presidential Pardon for — her insistence, over his preference — executing Saint-Just. I can see both arguments, and agree with both.” Another pause. “Do you want me to turn myself in too, Beth? I didn’t murder anyone but I broke more laws than I can count.”

Elizabeth blinked. “That’s a complication we could do without, and I have no jurisdiction or concern over a Steadholder or what happens in an embassy. And I don’t care in the least what you did anyway, Honor, because I am far too happy with the results. I don’t even want to know how you tapped High Ridge’s office, though curiosity is eating me and Ellen alive and ‘cats with the PGS must have been in it up to their whiskers. Yes, you lot, bleek as you may. But I do need to know when the news from Haven is going to break. And, if it’s going to cause any problems, how you and Admiral Kuzak have managed to delay it.”

“Soon. And it shouldn’t. The news services were 9 days behind Theisman anyway, I’m told, because his despatch boat rode the Theta Band and they’d been warned to stay below the Zeta Band for days out of Haven, there being unexplained turbulence with several warships feared lost. And when they reached Trevor’s Star they found Admiral Kuzak conducting an emergency inspection of a minefield that closed the Junction to all but urgent military traffic for a day and found some mines with degraded electronics that needed controlled detonation and replacement, limiting transits. And strangely, merchies given priority were bound elsewhere. But San Martino vessels discharging crew or civilians here will be coming through by tomorrow latest, and Solarian newsies soon after.”

“The San Martinos didn’t object?”

“Who wants to be blown up by a faulty mine? And I gather those San Martino merchant skippers who twigged to the wilful delay of Sollies thought it a splendid game. I suspect Third Fleet thinks so too, given how happy they’ve always been to blacken us and give Haven a free pass.”

“True. But how did you get Kuzak to play ball?”

“I didn’t, Beth. Theisman asked her and she agreed and couriered me. All I did was tell her yes, what he’d said about Manpower agents on Manticore was true, I’d already acted and would be acting further on it, and would be grateful if he could be given time to get to Grayson and back before the news from Haven broke. Oh, and I added copies of Berham’s statement and mine about HMS Reveille, which were on the same day her courier came.”

“All you did.” Elizabeth shook her head. “I can’t begin to put together all you’ve done, Honor. Nor imagine how I can thank you.”

“You don’t need to thank me, Beth. Truly. And your toybox is one of the few things I dread. I owe you loyalty, I’m proud to do so, and I was protecting my own people first and foremost. I just had to take down High Ridge to do it, and he was always going to lay himself open to truth if I could get it. The rest was a windfall I was offered when someone gave me the Ballroom material about Young, and that’s given us an even bigger headache than High Ridge.”

“Yes and no. It’s a huge shock and a serious problem, but Theisman was right when he said hating Manpower even more than each other had to be something we could agree on. And that guarded remark about being willing within a treaty framework to consider a joint response to Manpower’s actions is a possibility to ponder. It should give even the Sollies pause.”
“Maybe so. Gustav might be tempted, too — Alfredo pitched it to him — and Benjamin certainly is. But all that has to wait.”

“Yes. Tell me, is Young likely to turn up anytime?”

“No.” Honor’s face was still, enunciation sharpening in a very Sphinxian way. “As I understand it, when the Ballroom turned her they promised her life, not liberty. So I imagine she is already well on her way to somewhere bleak and plain, where she will stay until she dies.” Shimmering violence moved in Honor’s voice. “And I have to say I am very glad she is not here to face trial, because I would find it very hard not to kill her. She set up the last North Hollow’s deal with Denver Summervale, you see.”

For a second Elizabeth sensed the berserk rage Honor contained, every bit as potent as her own, far more fiercely directed, and bound to a finely honed and bitterly experienced killer instinct. Her eyes rested for a second on the artificial arm Honor had worked so hard to master, and the pulser she knew was built into it; not that Honor needed any weapon other than her hands to kill. Protecting her own people, and navies, yes, all of that, in spades, but also finding a channel, as lawful as could be, for that insane wrath at the murder of love.

“Yes. I see. And I’m so sorry, Honor. Well, shall we go in and start the ball rolling?”

Theisman and others rose at her entrance, of course, and she walked to stand before him, studying the lined face and feeling anew the sheer strength of the man; recognising how much he and Honor had in common, despite everything.

“Admiral Theisman, you are an admirable envoy. I will draft an invitation to President Pritchert to come at her earliest convenience. Will you be carrying it personally?”

She felt his profound relief, and that of Willie and Hamish.

“I think not, Ma’am. She will be waiting in hope, and I believe I can be of more use to my nation here, though I realise you are all going to be extremely busy.”

“Mmm. Then I think I must ask two opposite things of you. The first is to stay out of sight until we can announce your presence. And the other, once we do so, later this week I imagine, is to speak to my subjects of Haven and your experiences and hopes, as you have spoken to me, saving anything classified. If we are to build trust, we must understand much better than we do not only that you have changed, but how. And you can learn of how we are changing, just now.” A half-smile crept onto her face. “You would of course be free to comment on your experiences of my last administration.”

Amusement and calculation came into his eyes but he didn’t hesitate. “Of course. Her Grace has been kind enough to offer me hospitality here, which seems the wisest course.”

“Good.” She held out her hand and he took it.

*C * * * *

Caitrin Winton-Henke watched it all play out with a sense of heady terror and roaring, intense satisfaction lessened only by the desire that Edward and Cal could be here to see it happen. The startling news about HMS *Reveille* and the arrest of two Space Lords had had her wondering if the
contents of her attic had played some part in it, and Beth’s corrosive and clearly tongue-bitten commentary when Caitrin had invited herself to dinner at Mount Royal wondering even more what else Honor Harrington might have gleaned. The extremely hard constitutional line Beth had taken in appointing Berham under Clause 127 was something she might have done on her own, but Caitrin thought she could see another hand at work, particularly in the deft combination of the LPD and Royal Marine Police. But Janacek’s shocking suicide had confined the effects, and she’d been sickly afraid High Ridge would survive. Then Miranda LaFollet contacted her, and when the furniture removal men came to clear her attic she managed a quiet word with Mr Hawkwing, asking if the PM had behaved as expected.

“I genuinely know nothing, Your Grace. But I’ve seen for myself that the Colonel is both rubbing his hands and as angry as I’ve ever seen anyone, so I’m guessing that’s a yes.” He hesitated, then went on in an even lower voice, although they were quite alone. “There’s some other attics to clear, Your Grace, as it were, so I imagine there’ll be a bit of a wait. Another week, maybe. But I saw Her Grace at dinner the other night, and she was … humming’s the word, I think. Or there’s a German word I had to look up once, spannungsbogen — the tension of a drawn bow. The waiting, I suppose, like being in stealth mode with a target on the plot. So I’m expecting an arrow to go somewhere.”

“Good. Then I shall expect one too.” A sudden thought came to her. “And I daresay you’ll have things to do on the day, Mr Hawkwing, but if not, and it’s something that can be watched, like Her Grace’s statement last week, you’d be very welcome to watch it here with me.”

He looked at her, real surprise softening into pleasure. “I’d like that, Your Grace, but it’s not my decision. I will ask the Colonel, though.”

On reflection she thought LaFollet would be dismissive for security reasons, but on the evening the HD channels could speak of nothing but Her Grace Duchess — Steadholder Plenipotentiary — Admiral Harrington’s announcement that she would be making a formal statement concerning the Reveille affair and other issues arising on the morrow, Miranda LaFollet contacted her again to say that if Mr Hawkwing’s invitation stood, he would be happy to accept it. And when he arrived, smart in mufti, he brought a case of extremely good champagne he said was a gift from Nimitz, the Colonel, and his sister.

Her staff, she knew from Charlaine, were themselves watching below stairs, and as the hard, hard evidence of gross peculation unrolled she sent half-a-dozen bottles down, with her compliments, before raising her own glass to Mr Hawkwing.

“To a job very well done.”

He toasted her back, but had a slight frown. “Her Grace isn’t done yet, Your Grace, or I’m a monkey’s uncle.”

“Why do you say that? We’ve heard more than enough to ensure the High Ridge administration is not only gone, but mostly in jail.”

“Perhaps so, Your Grace. But my friend who knows about Ballroom goings-on tells me there’s a lot of excitement about something. Whispers that Manpower’s going to take a hit the way the Peeps did at Hades. And we’ve seen nothing to match that so far — just pigs at their usual trough.”

It was her turn to explain next, as data showing the Liberals and CA had been so crassingly stupid as to falsify audited accounts came on screen. The Manticoran Constitution (and in its shadow much statute law) gave Peers of the Realm a great deal more leeway in all sorts of things than any
sane polity should, but as the Founders, not least Roger Winton, had had a strong dislike of political parties *tout court*, the leeway they had was minimal to none, and Peers of the Realm who chose to join political parties lost, in certain specific areas, privileges they might otherwise enjoy. A formal finding by the Independent Auditor, which seemed certain, would potentially bar many sitting peers as well as a swathe of the Commons from any public office. Which might very interestingly play tag with the trial in the House of Lords to which High Ridge, North Hollow, and New Kiev would, if they insisted, be entitled on the gross peculation and malfeasance charges. Following her carefully, Mr Hawkwing nodded.

“Well, Your Grace, that sounds like Her Grace. She knows her service regs as well as any gunny, by all accounts. And if those who helped suppress the scandal the Countess started take a hit, the Ballroom will be pleased enough. But it still doesn’t sound quite what is expected.”

“The Countess? Oh, Ms Montaigne, you mean?”

“Yes, Your Grace. That’s what most ex-slaves call her.”

Then conversation was overtaken by Honor’s savage revelation of just how Manpower Unlimited had indeed been involved, which dried Caitrin’s mouth and brought Mr Hawkwing’s palm cracking down on the arm of his chair. But the revelations kept coming, extending across time as well as space, interspersed with bludgeoning evidence from the cold, haggard creature whose death had been presumed only days before, and the sheer scale of what was being uncovered kept them both silent, champagne forgotten, even before Honor turned directly to High Ridge’s commission of capital treason. Caitrin didn’t know Honor very well, but had met her often at official functions as well as with Mike, and had heard more than enough over the years from both Mike and Beth to recognise, beneath the controlled anger many would hear, something quite other — a judgement reached that death was warranted, and the cold, determined pursuit of those deaths by any lawful means.

No Manticoran peer had been executed for more than three T-centuries, and *he* had shot down a woman in the street, after fetching a gun and in full view of a surveillance cam. But as Honor shifted to yet another angle of attack, and a recording that had most certainly passed through her attic began, beginning with High Ridge being told Janacek had been murdered and openly calling it good news, she began to think executions really might be on the cards. And she found tears on her cheeks, because at last, in the strangest way, Edward’s and Cal’s stupid, senseless deaths had bought something after all. She knew that were it not for her grief and anger she wouldn’t have agreed to Nimitz’s outrageous request; but she had, and if Edward and Cal had been here they’d have been as shocked, as appalled, and, beneath it all, as savagely, gleefully delighted as she was. All else aside, they’d *hated* what had been done to Honor, on its merits as well as for Mike’s sake, and Edward’s commentary on the Lords had always been every bit as vitriolic as Beth’s, something she’d come to understand better in exercising Mike’s proxy. If there was a Lords’ trial, she’d be a juror, too. Mr Hawkwing saw her tears and she wasn’t able to give anything like a coherent explanation, but, astonishingly, he understood.

“Your dead mean something now?” He refreshed her forgotten glass. “Yes, that’s something the Steadholder does, isn’t it, Your Grace? My experiences meant very little until she freed me — the first time, I mean. Then they meant everything. And she was very clear indeed that the horrors of Hades had to be made to mean all they truly did.” He’d lifted his glass. “To the great and continuing value of all our dead, Your Grace. And to Her Grace the Steadholder, who honours them.”

The champagne exploded on her tongue, and in her mind Edward and Cal drank with her, raising glasses to the eternal prosperity of Manticore and damnation to the Queen’s enemies, whoever they were and wherever they might be found. Concern for Beth also coiled, for whatever
else all this might be it was a constitutional crisis of a greater order even than Roger’s assassination — but the last part of what her attic had gleaned had her painfully upright.

“My God! Bomb ’cats? He’s mad!” Mind caught up with emotions. “And that segment of official record locks it. Honor will be able to prove that’s all genuine, however obtained. My God.” It was the most consummate political ambush she’d ever seen, or could imagine — Honor had done to a government, to a whole, shameful, blinkered, and utterly selfish way of thinking, what she had done to Burdette. Jab and counterpunch, rather than one swing, but just as much a killing blow. The political landscape she’d always known heaved and buckled.

Then Nimitz, furry, delightful rascal that he was, and, my God yes, equally a killer, said his piece, with howling snarl and brandished scalpel-claws, and Honor’s gloss unrolled yet more upheaval. What *would* a Manticoran court do if a ’cat killed someone and argued Clan orders in defence? Besides have conniptions and a legal stroke, both of which were guaranteed. She was wondering if a recognised Clan elder would count as a Peer of the Realm, and if Beth had envisaged seating Treecat Peers, when the strident alarm cut across the HD broadcast and her heart leaped into her mouth. Without knowing it her hand sought Mr Hawkwing’s, clutching her fear as the lunatic and clearly drunk North Hollow screamed his hate and that amazing, heart-stopping, purely efficient string of orders sliced cleanly through frantic chaos even while Honor’s body twisted to shield Nimitz, offering herself before him. The blare of light from HD and outside left her blinking, and a staggering blast rattled the windows almost out of their frames, but Honor’s voice resumed even before the rumble faded, snapping orders of rescue, law, and comfort, before two blazing eyes — how impossible it was to remember one was artificial — smoked a glance at the pickup and requested a report on damage in Landing without the least doubt it would be hastily provided.

From her balcony she and Mr Hawkwing saw the frantic bustle all along the waterfront, the slowly closing harbour and marina gates, the inflation of rings of tethered airbags that absorbed some of the wave’s energy and dissipated the main front into a fractal mess, and the wreckage the huge swell nevertheless produced, tossing boats high enough to snap painters and crash back down into wharves and jetties — but only a few dozen, those with no crew on board nor anyone close enough to cut ropes and push them out to ride what got through. Those blistering, compelling orders had helped save tens of millions in property damage, and the swarm of HSG and GSN responders from the Bay House had beaten any official Manticoran response by long minutes, undoubtedly saving lives. She was limp with shock when the scrambling analysis on HD drew them both back inside, and shortly thereafter Mr Hawkwing muted the repetitions and turned to her, face intent.

“You once asked me, Your Grace, why we loved the Steadholder. You’ve just seen a better answer than I could ever give. Those air defences are there to protect her, but her first thought was protecting others.”

So it had been, and in her wonder it occurred to Caitrin that when the Lords next assembled — and wouldn’t that be fun — she might in Mike’s name propose a vote of thanks to Her Grace for willingly taking such greater risk on herself in killing her second North Hollow; a record to set against the shameful vote, pushed by High Ridge, to expel her for killing her first. Beth would like it. And then her niece was on, stepping far beyond the Constitution to restore honest government, urge calm, and with a terrifying look promise that what had been uncovered would be rooted out and perpetrators brought to book.

Throughout the evening and night the city seethed, with near riots in several places, every window in Government House, Admiralty, and ministries lit up with God knew what chaos inside; and Saturday saw a string of further revelations and developments, arrests spiralling out with the Commissioner’s blunt, boggling words about the North Hollow files. Hopping HD channels Caitrin sensed something else as the reality of it all began to sink in, with details of the boat crews and
passengers who’d been killed or injured, ambassadorial statements from Beowulf, Grayson, and the Andermani, and the glittering accuracy of the data Honor had released. Everyone was frantic to interview her and she was entirely unavailable, but talking heads rehashing things between updates had lost their usual polarisation, and the best were shifting to wonder what Manticore would look like when the political slaughter was over. Her com had been buzzing all day, largely ignored, but when she saw two CA peers she didn’t much like but hadn’t thought entirely stupid blusteringly try the bad-apple-in-the-barrel argument, she started taking calls, and laid on a small party.

In the nature of things her friends were Crown Loyalist and Centrist, but her contacts were, if always discreet, very wide, and she chose people for coverage rather than because they’d gel. Her message was that it wasn’t one or a few bad apples, nor even a barrellful, but many barrels; and it was high time to deal with the cooper. And yes, it was going to hurt, badly, but the answer was to get behind reforms that would be coming, as surely as God made little apples in the first place. Mike, dropping by and eyeing the assembly with surprise, inadvertently helped her case, opening a front she hadn’t even considered, when asked how the Navy had taken events of yesterday.

“With shock, fury, and prolonged applause, in that order. But things are moving on already. Did you catch what the Commissioner said about a chunk of the North Hollow files being remitted to the Admiralty? Well, if they’re what I think they must be, Hamish Alexander’s going to have a field day. We’ve always known North Hollow had a grip on a lot of officers — high-born careerists, mostly — and used blackmail as well as bribery to get what he wanted. Old Dimitri and that toad Pavel more than the lunatic Honor just blew out of the air, but still. And we all saw the truth of it when Pavel was acquitted on the capital charges after First Hancock. But if those files include the dirt Dimitri used to leverage promotions, appointments, and disciplinary issues, with records of how and when, which is what it sounded like, Hamish will at the very least be able to force resignations.”

She’d grinned widely. “And he’s got a very useful axe. I’ve been checking regs, and if any officer is shown to have received a promotion through improper influence of a board, financial or otherwise, they’re liable at minimum to be busted back to their prior rank and to repay all salary wrongly overpaid in the meantime. And Janacek’s rampant cronyism has concentrated them nicely, mostly in Admiralty and Home Fleet staff posts they treat as sinecures. So I’m hoping that we are, by God, going to have a little purge of our own. The Navy’s in a deep hole right now, but if we can rebuild it without those privileged incompetents we’ll be a hell of a lot better off.”

When Mike left for Mount Royal in hope of catching Beth, Caitrin was asked if she thought the new First Lord would really want to force a swathe of resignations at this time.

“Oh yes, if it’s as Mike suggests. Unless he opts for courts martial. I’m not sure what the regulations say, but I’d think someone corruptly agreeing to the promotion or appointment of an officer they know to be incompetent is potentially a very serious crime. And if the votes that saved Pavel Young were bought or forced, Hamish Alexander will certainly go after those involved. I’ve never seen him as angry as he was after that whole fiasco.”

She saw them off looking very thoughtful, and as soon as the Sunday talk shows got going — not that there was anything but a rolling talk show on any news channel — she thought she’d got it right. It wasn’t clear, but focus was shifting from ‘I cannot believe all this’ to ‘what do we do about all this?’, and tone was hardening. Rats were starting to jump ship, and CA peers to distance themselves from High Ridge. More than half the Liberals, including almost all their strength in the Commons, had turned against New Kiev with howls of fury, and Gray Hill, the old trimmer, sounded almost sincere in repeating his thundering denunciations of Descroix.

Having unusually missed Mass, she tried to call Beth only to be told she was lunching at the Bay House, and then by a very apologetic Miranda LaFollet that Her Majesty and Her Grace were actually in a meeting she could not interrupt for anything less than very urgent, but would of course
inform Her Majesty of the call as soon as it ended. That was puzzling, and it wasn’t until much later that she received a brief note from Beth telling her all heaven was breaking loose as well as all hell, and she should watch the HD some more over the coming week and not worry about bad news that would break first. Beth had a look on her face Caitrin had never seen and couldn’t work out — a shimmering mix of rage, shock, relief, bemusement, wonder, and more.

Some of it was explained when on Monday a PGS messenger brought her a data-wallet and a shocking note from Beth saying the North Hollow files contained material on Howell and Gwinner she had thus far suppressed, and that she had just received the report on the attached chip. Inevitably, therefore, the number of people who knew the truth had risen sharply, so should she now publicly admit Roger had been assassinated? It had never crossed Caitrin’s mind that Dimitri Young might have known, and it took her a while to master the fury and grief she still felt for her lost brother. But as soon as she accessed the report the burning question it posed overtook any answers it might contain. How in God’s name did Beth come to have an utterly classified, recent Havenite FIA report? Its preamble made clear it had been commissioned by President Pritchart as part of dealing with the ghastly legacy she’d inherited, and besides some details it was more confirmation from a different angle than any kind of revelation. She forced herself to think through Beth’s question, concluding that with the hardest possible evidence of Haven’s guilt the original reasons for suppressing charges were obviated, and the habit of 34 years not a good enough substitute. Finding Beth still unavailable, she recorded a long letter saying so, and asking how she had come to have such a report, but received no answer.

The question was violently compounded when yet another set of newsflashes sliced across continuing upheavals. The Republic of Haven announced the launch of SD(P)s, BC(P)s, and CLACs in considerable numbers, with a strong statement that while they did not seek or desire any renewal of hostilities with the Star Kingdom and its allies, nor any hostilities at all, they had felt in confronting the strange foot-dragging of the High Ridge administration that they could take no chances. In the stunned silence that followed, an Admiralty spokeswoman appeared to say that the news, however serious and unwelcome, came as no surprise to any current Space Lord, and there would be a comprehensive statement of affairs later in the week. The Grayson ambassador popped up to observe in a painfully bland voice that GONI had correctly projected the hull-numbers and new classes just announced more than a year ago, before playing a long clip that showed Honor and Hamish repeatedly warning in the House and elsewhere that the assumptions being made about Haven’s capacities were arrogantly wrong, extremely stupid, and highly dangerous, and every one of High Ridge’s senior ministers, including himself, rebutting, disdaining, belittling, dismissing, and laughing off the alarmist, erroneous, and self-serving claims Her Majesty’s Opposition would insist on repeating. It was another first-rate hatchet-job, and cursing of High Ridge had gone wildly viral when next day it transpired the Republic of Haven also announced — and how the timing of all this was being controlled Caitrin couldn’t imagine, but this sequencing was not chance — that Secretary of State Giancola and Special Deputy Grosclaude had been relieved of their posts owing to the fact that both had been charged with capital treason, to wit, falsifying diplomatic exchanges with the Star Kingdom of Manticore.

There was Solarian and Havenite news imagery of Giancola and Grosclaude being arraigned in a heaving courtroom, and of a searing speech President Pritchart had given to their Parliament. Her flat statement that, while neither courtesy nor reason were to be had from the High Ridge administration, an envoy would of legal necessity be sent to inform them, was a preamble to an impassioned argument superbly gathering the shock and rage evident in all faces and turning it not against Manticore, however inveterate a foe, but squarely against Manpower and Mesa; if there was any difference. Cathy Montaigne couldn’t have done it better, and was shortly standing in the press-room of her fortified townhouse doing it just as well.

The whole Manpower thing had so stunned people that for all it was repeatedly mentioned in
discussion there was very little understanding or working-through of consequences. The Georgia Young story of a criminal seducer and manipulator of successive North Hollows was juicier with sex and domestic scandal — especially as it allowed almost the only possible defence of High Ridge, casting him as her hapless victim. But now Montaigne coldly laid it all out, with hard facts and figures and some excellent graphics, tying Manpower and the Jessyk Combine to the Solarian OFS and its vile Protectorate system; conservatively projecting revenues involved; and showing the scale of damage that Beowulfan, RMN, IAN, and old PN ships had historically inflicted by actually bothering to enforce the Cherwell Convention; before showing the known and by comparison trivial Manpower monies that had bought Young, perhaps Descroix, and those arrested on Grayson and Haven. She also had (courtesy of Her Grace Steadholder Harrington) new film of Young discussing in a very flat voice both her personal childhood experience of Manpower, with ghastly, mind-numbing reasons for having chosen to be one of them rather than one of their sales, and her understanding of her brief and the larger plans of which it was a part. And Montaigne had been sent her own copy of the North Hollow files, ending by naming a raft of names to reopen in shattering detail the Manpower scandal High Ridge had blunted and add a whole new set of twists.

Unlike Honor, still wholly unavailable, Montaigne was very willing to talk on HD, and spent a brutal 24 hours demolishing any challenge to her analysis and being startingly blunt about the Audubon Ballroom. Of course they’d provided the original data on Young — any moron could tell that — and anyone willing to bet she wasn’t (if still alive) now in their custody needed to wake up and obtain a brain. So what? The action that mattered was giving it to Duchess Harrington, because if they hadn’t the alarming news from Haven would have reached Manticore with the incompetent, criminal, and criminally stupid High Ridge administration still in place — including Young and whoever else Manpower had bought. Just think about that, eh? (Caitrin did, and shuddered, with everyone else.) And next time you felt like denouncing the Ballroom for being willing to take action against the vilest bunch of sadists, child-rapists, and murderers in the galaxy, please remember they just saved Manticore’s bacon while very properly skewering a whole herd of its filthiest pigs.

Everyone was chewing nervously on all that when, at last, Manticore’s various new authorities began a series of statements. Lord Justice Ingledew came first, announcing financial and other charges amounting to gross malfeasance against all but two members of the previous cabinet; multiple charges of accessory to capital murder before and after the fact against High Ridge and Descroix, with North Hollow posthumously indicted; and a single, summary charge of capital treason, ditto, with New Kiev thrown in; further charges might follow. The right of Peers to trial in the House of Lords had been asserted, and arrangements were in process. The Lords would be asked to engross the trial of Descroix with those of High Ridge, New Kiev, and (posthumously) North Hollow. Special courts were being established to fast-track cases against commoners and other nobles under indictment who did not choose or have the right to trial in the Lords. He was followed by other Lords Justice of his panel, announcing very many more charges against very many more people, most turning on bribery and corruption but with a host of conspiracies to defame and pervert the course of justice thrown in, as well as a fat helping of perjury.

The five Manpower agents were charged with espionage and — though it had never before been preferred against anyone — committing an Act of War against the Star Kingdom. On whose orders they had done so remained unknown, but as Manpower and its close associates were and had for many centuries been the dominant members of what passed as a government on Mesa, it must be and was presumed that a state of war now existed between the Star Kingdom and Mesa, and while there was no Mesan ambassador to expel, nor a Manticoran one to recall, an explanation would be demanded forthwith. In the meantime, while reserving the right to any and all further actions that might be deemed appropriate, all Manticoran space and the Junction were by order of Her Majesty closed to any and all vessels registered to any and all Mesan companies, cartels, and persons, and any such vessels presently within Manticoran jurisdiction would be seized and impounded. The Grayson
ambassador popped up again to add that His Grace Protector Benjamin appended his lesser claim against Manpower slash Mesa to that of the Star Kingdom, considered a state of war to exist between all Alliance nations and Mesa, and had issued similar instructions regarding Grayson space — not that Mesans had ever been tolerated there anyway, slavery being anathema to God and man alike. The GSN would assist in seizures and enforcement of the ban within Manticoran space.

A quick search on the percentage of Junction traffic affected and the number of vessels likely to be seized left Caitrin whistling. Manpower had never been allowed to use the Junction, but a lot of other Mesan companies did, however unwelcome they were in the Star Kingdom itself. Beth was playing serious hardball with much of the galaxy, not just Manticore’s own villains and delinquents, and the Solarians would have a screaming fit. But there was no time to pursue that because the Commissioner was on, announcing yet more charges arising from the North Hollow files, ranging from murder, vehicular manslaughter, rape, statutory rape, assault, and participation in enslavement, to animal cruelty — and yet more would follow, he gave grim assurance. Various employees and associates of the late Earl were also charged with blackmail, intimidation, and conspiracy to pervert the course of justice.

Then in a dust-dry, magical 20 minutes the Independent Auditor ripped apart the voting tallies in both Houses and the existing structure of party politics. 41 members of the Liberals, including eight peers, and 23 peers belonging to the CA were found to have known at the time their most recent accounts were submitted that those accounts were fraudulent, and wherever they may have supposed the additional, unlawful monies came from was not, thankfully, his concern. All had wilfully allowed the fraudulent representation, in clear and proven breach of their Constitutional duty as well as a raft of statutory obligations, and all were hereby served with a lifetime ban on holding public office of any kind whatsoever, including jury-service; notice had been duly served to the Speaker and Lord Speaker of the Houses, taking immediate effect. He did not, he concluded, believe that under the present, most unusual circumstances it would be right for him formally to dissolve either party, and it was plain that many ordinary members, who had every right to have their views represented in Parliament, had had no knowledge of any kind of the iniquity being practised; but a very clear signal was most certainly required, and he hereby levied a fine on each party of ten million dollars. A deprecating cough. Which as he knew from their true accounts they were wholly unable to pay, he suspended for three months to allow them to take stock while conditionally referring them to the Court of Bankruptcy. Additionally, records and interrogation made clear that Lady Descroix and nine other duly appointed officials of the Progressive Party, three seated in the Lords and six in the Commons, had known of the fraudulent submissions before they were made, and were therefore also served with lifetime bans, while the party was fined five million dollars, payable within 14 days. The use of the 25 million (or such part of it as might actually be paid) being a further part of his remit, he ended by saying he had directed it be donated equally to the Royal Veterans Relief Fund and the ASL Rehabilitation Fund for the Freed.

The next day started brightly with an effervescent Cathy Montaigne donning her other hat to announce to a press corps already punch-drunk and beyond exhaustion that she’d happily pay the Liberals’ fine — she gave more than that to the ASL Rehab Fund every year anyway — if, and only if, all party members just banned from public office were promptly expelled. Otherwise, she and more than 80% of Liberal Members in the Commons, with about half those in the Lords, would be resigning to form a new party, and in either case hereby announced their support for the present administration at least until the election, and willingness to do anything lawful asked of them to assist the Prime Minister and cabinet in restoring government to what it ought to be. In particular, it was clear the grotesque social boondoggles of the High Ridge administration had to be reversed, and that money sent back to the Navy at top speed, so if any legislation were needed it would have their votes. They of course wanted peace, would press for a proper treaty with Haven and diplomatic settlement of tensions in Silesia, and remained opposed to militarism as such; but maintenance of
adequate defence for all the Home and Terminus Systems was a necessity in a dangerous galaxy, and as they entirely and most passionately supported Her Majesty’s actions against the despicable slavers of Mesa, they could hardly oppose getting the RMN shipshape again as fast as humanly possible.

Caitrin had never known quite what to make of Montaigne, who could be spectacularly foul-mouthed in a way that offended her, but she knew Beth regretted not being able to see the woman, and had long realised she was genuinely expert in her passions. Her unexpected return from Old Chicago with that explosive material had been disturbing and fascinating in equal measure, and renunciation of her title and return to Parliament via the Commons had shown the same political guile she’d just exhibited in seizing the Liberal Party by its scruff and wrenching its core policy of the last 14 years through a U-turn. No-one else stood a chance of saving them at the polls, but if she didn’t force the split she could; and if she did have to force it, the members of the new party in the Commons, whatever they called themselves, would probably increase their majorities handsomely. Grabbing her Parliamentary Lists, where she’d already noted members charged or banned, as well as those who were (inconveniently for High Ridge, but with telling justice) absent on diplomatic postings, Caitrin saw the support of Montaigne’s block also gave Willie Alexander a majority in both Houses, if wafer-thin in the Lords, and became even more admiring. She ought to suggest a Minister for Suppression of the Slave Trade — bringing Montaigne into government in any other role would still be difficult, but formal co-ordination of the enquiries she was rightly demanding, and about which she already knew everything there was to know, would serve many purposes.

Her comments about the state of the RMN were dreadfully borne out when a grim-faced Hamish began the day’s official announcements by laying out what he and the Space Lords were doing to begin setting the RMN in order. The situation wrought by blithering idiocy and malicious treason was dire, and defence of the Home and Terminus Systems the absolute priority. A majority of vessels deployed to Silesia were being recalled, including all with GSN personnel among their crews, and Her Grace the Steadholder Plenipotentiary had been kind enough to modify her order to allow such vessels to serve in the Gregor Defence Command, though most would be redeployed to Basilisk and Trevor’s Star. All decommissioning had been halted and where possible reversed; HMS Reveille would be back in service as soon as crewing was completed, and all ships still in the decommissioning yard, or mothballs, would follow. New construction would inevitably take time, but the one major project Admiral Toscarelli at BuShips (all blessings on his head) had been able to save, the Saganami-C orders, offered hope. The first were almost ready, production-lines could be rapidly expanded, and thanks to the astonishing foresight of Her Grace (on whom more blessings) it transpired that the Grayson-style yard Sky Domes and the Hauptman Cartel had recently constructed, as an experiment for civilian use, was in fact fully geared for warship production, specifically Saganami-Cs — which had, he reminded them, firepower nearly equivalent to an SD of only a few years ago, and could be built in less than half the time and for very much less than half the cost. In parallel, a large number of half-pay officers were being urgently recalled, and tens of thousands of experienced ratings, petty officers, and techs who had been discharged would be asked, if necessary begged, to re-enlist. Even so there was an unavoidable and protracted period of vulnerability, and any diplomatic settlement that could be reached with the Republic of Haven would be at a disadvantage it should not have been. In short, the position of strength gained at the time of the ceasefire unilaterally accepted by Baron High Ridge had been utterly squandered, not to say actively and maliciously destroyed from within, and he had no choice but to accept the conditions he inherited.

Hamish was clearly as deeply enraged and grim as one would expect, yet to Caitrin’s experienced eye seemed underlyingly much more relaxed than he ought to be. It might be the astonishing new gift spinning from Honor’s hand — and what did that imply about how long she’d been planning against High Ridge’s fall? — but even that didn’t seem quite enough. And as he continued, explaining that the RMN’s personnel budget would be spared certain costs, given the long
list of officers either facing courts martial or who had already resigned to avoid one, she was able in some measure to separate things. There was a real grimness about the number of capital charges — including Houseman and Roberts, Jurgenson (gross dereliction amounting in time of war to treason), the unrelated Jurgens and Lemaitre (accepting bribes to falsify a verdict in a capital case), and seven other officers from the North Hollow files, all now retired, for murder or rape committed while serving — but also an underlying confidence, despite the dire situation he’d just reported, that this severe bloodletting was not only right in principle but affordable in practice. Which suggested some extremely interesting possibilities about where Beth had got that report.

His younger brother followed, but still the other shoe did not drop. The executive branch was also being purged, for peculation by senior ministers had both involved various officials and encouraged imitation. Lists of suspensions and dismissals, as well as charges, would shortly be published, with equally long lists of new appointments. New ambassadors had been appointed and despatched in many directions, bearing letters of recall to their predecessors and in all too many cases further letters of apology to the governments involved. A score of quangos High Ridge had established were hereby summarily abolished, in many cases with staffs referred en masse to the enquiry teams dealing with peculation. With the welcome support announced by Ms Montaigne, acts concerning the Naval Finances already outlined and sharply tightening financial protocols within government would be brought forward, but with the election ordered by Her Majesty imminent he did not feel it right to seek to introduce any further legislation before its outcome was known. Besides, the Lords would have other duties, for Her Majesty had directed that the privileged trials claimed by some members of the previous cabinet should be held as soon as possible. A great part of the evidence involved was already in the public domain, and justice as well as national security required the crisis be finally resolved with expedition; proper notice was nevertheless legally stipulated, and the preparations needed complex, so he was setting a date 21 days hence. Additionally, Her Majesty would shortly address the nation to deal with one further and most important matter arising.

A uniformed Mike had come in while Willie was speaking, and as the statement ended Caitrin muted the sound and considered her daughter, who looked back out of tired but exhilarated eyes.

“It’s going to be a nine-ring circus, you know.”

“The trial? Yes, and how. Do you want to take back your proxy?”

“Not in the least, though I imagine I shall be glued to HD, wherever I am.” Mike eyed the Parliamentary Lists scattered on the table. “What does your arcane political math say about it?”

Caitlin shrugged. “Peculation charges, yes. Probably the accessory to murder charges too, if there’s forensic evidence. Accessory isn’t always capital. But the capital treason — that will depend. Is Young’s evidence admissible when she isn’t available to give it in person or be cross-examined? Are the recordings from High Ridge’s office admissible when they can only have been obtained illegally? And how wide is the gap between declared intent plus means, and outright commission?”

Mike nodded, eyes hooded. “That’s more or less what Honor says.”

“You’ve seen her?”

“All week. Beth temporarily seconded me as her personal observer at some talks that have been going on at the Bay House. She asked me to apologise for not getting back to you, by the way. She has been rather busy. But she will be taking your advice.”

“Ah. Would I be right to guess that President Pritchart’s envoy has arrived? Last Sunday,
Eyebrows quirked. “Yes again. You did that on slender clues.”

“The FIA report was a fat one, Mike. Where else could it have come from, except possibly GONI?”

“True. Even so. You could have knocked me down with a feather when Beth told me what she wanted me to do. And why.”

“Which was?”

“She’ll say it better than I can, Mama. But she’s been … I almost want to say made to grow up some more, but that wouldn’t be fair. Made to search her soul, certainly. We all have, rather. And though she’s been running ragged all week, co-ordinating all those statements and listening to my reports, she’s also taken time with Justin, and Roger. Even young Rivka, as Roger insists he’s deadly serious about her.”

“So she is accepting talks, and they’re for real. Things Roger will have to live with, as and when.”

“Oh yes. There’s no choice, given the state of the RMN. And half of her hates High Ridge more than ever for that fact, while the other half is still boggling with the rest of us at what Honor has pulled off, with a great deal of immaculate planning and either the devil’s own luck or the hand of God.”

“How have you been made to search your soul?”

“Or at us. Remember? Beth managed to repeat it to Honor. She was in shock, to be fair, but even so. And she told Honor to ask me, which as I’ve been under her nose she finally got round to doing. While Beth was there. Red faces all round, before we were done.”

“Why so?”

“Mama, dearest, you’ve seen exactly how Honor gets when she’s embarrassed. And you know how Beth feels about what the Lords did and High Ridge’s tame newsies have been doing to Honor, as well as her anger and shame at being unable to stop the disaster of the last two years. Now Honor’s ripped Manticore apart just as she did Grayson and Haven, giving Beth a dream-feast and severe indigestion. Put together, and stir.”

“Oh. My word, yes. That must have been something to see.”

“And hear. Even though they were toe-to-toe.”

“Who won?”

Mike grinned. “Nimitz. After which the irresistible force and the immovable object both retired in high dudgeon, and Beth will say whatever she says. And here she comes. Pop the sound, will you?”

Her niece looked tired, introspective, and fierce. Her colour was high, her bearing as commandingly regal as Caitrin had ever seen. Ariel sat smartly upright in her lap, tail neatly curled around true feet.

“Good evening. I speak to you tonight both as your Queen and as Elizabeth Winton, a
woman in shock, like all of us, at what has unfolded in recent days. I have had only a little lead time in dealing with the facts of the crisis we endure, and there are more facts with which I must acquaint you, the most important by far being that the envoy whom you will have heard President Pritchart say would be sent has arrived.”

The pause had the nation grasping the edge of its seats.

“And thereby hang several tales. The envoy is Admiral Thomas Theisman, CNO of the Republican Navy, the Havenite Minister of War, and, since very shortly before his departure from Nouveau Paris, Acting Secretary of State, following Mr Giancola, and for this diplomatic purpose, Secretary Plenipotentiary. He has offered on behalf of President Pritchart an unconditional extension of the present ceasefire for one year; an open admission that the diplomatic correspondence was falsified at their end, with the rider that this was a unilateral action by Mr Giancola, for which he has now been charged with capital treason; and an offer of new negotiations, to be held here in Landing, between a small team headed by President Pritchart in person and whomever I and my new Prime Minister shall be pleased to designate. He has also laid before me proffers of President Pritchart’s sincerity and good faith, including internal Havenite reports, recently compiled, about the assassination attempt on myself and His Grace Protector Benjamin, two years ago, that killed my Uncle Edward, Cousin Calvin, and the Duke of Cromarty, as well as Chancellor Prestwick and many others; and about the assassination, 34 years ago, of my father, King Roger III.”

Caitrin’s hand found Mike’s, grasping hard.

“I realise that however familiar to me, that comes as a deep shock to you. The Manticorans involved were identified at the time, but independent evidence of Haven’s involvement was then lacking, and in its absence, given the political circumstances then prevailing, I unwillingly agreed no action could be taken, and that the Star Kingdom was better served by letting the tale of an accident stand. But circumstances have changed, in many ways, and our thinking must change too.”

An image appeared of a laughing Roger with his arm slung round a teenage Beth, taken at the Indigo Salt Flats only a few weeks before his death. Beth’s voice continued.

“All my life I have hated and feared Haven, for the threat it posed to Manticore with its policy of military expansion, and as an enemy in war. Every one of our dead has added to that fear and hatred. But in my heart I hated Haven above all for the murder of my father.”

The image changed to a shot of Edward and Cal laughing together with Allen, and Caitrin’s heart thudded. There were tears on Mike’s cheeks as well as her own.

“And 28 months ago a further Havenite plot instigated by their late tyrant, Oscar Saint-Just, killed my uncle and cousin, and one of my closest friends and advisers. Grief piled on grief, and injury upon injury.” Beth’s face reappeared, sorrowing and austere. “But I was wrong to focus my fear and hatred solely on Haven. It was Masadan terrorists who organised the attack at Yeltsin’s Star, while those who conspired to kill my father were Manticoran, however suborned. And now I am presented, in sincere apology, with comprehensive reports commissioned by the present government of Haven into what they openly call the crimes of their predecessors — reports attesting that the few participants in either plot still alive to face justice have done so in full measure. Those as yet unprosecuted are Manticoran. And that failure is mine. Ours.”

A silent-footed Charlaine offered Caitrin a glass of brandy she was happy to accept with a nod of thanks.

“A further truth I must acknowledge and consider is that while the situation exposed by Her Grace Steadholder and Duchess Harrington has clearly worsened severely in recent years, it is not,
saving knowledge of Manpower’s malign involvement, in essence new. The North Hollow files confirm that the murder of Paul Tankersley was commissioned by Pavel Young, as was the attempted assassination of Her Grace in Reggiano’s after she lawfully killed Denver Summervale in a duel. And we all knew that to be true at the time, however evidence was then lacking, but neither that, nor the further attempt by Pavel Young to murder then Countess Harrington, during the duel in which he died, stopped the House of Lords from voting to expel her — a decision I would before recent revelations have called the single most stupid, shameful, and morally corrupt public act of my reign. And we all knew that too, if not at the time then certainly two years later, when Her Grace and Grayson’s Chamber of Steadholders showed us what justice should be for all, peer or common, steadier or steadholder. But once again we did not learn, and now Her Grace has repeated the lesson.”

Beth’s face was very still, though her eyes glittered. Ariel had not moved at all.

“And so has the Republic of Haven. One of the better questions asked this week was what would have happened if the announcements by the Republic had reached Manticore while my previous, unutterably disgraceful administration was in office, especially given the continuing presence of the perhaps late Lady Young. What decisive, legal, and moral action would Baron High Ridge and his cabinet have taken? Would they, do you suppose, learning of Mr Giancola’s arrest and the reasons for it, immediately have torn into themselves, and uncovered Lady Young within a day of receiving the news? Have publicly arraigned and charged her with capital treason within four, and more privately despatched an envoy with plenipotentiary powers to Haven within five?”

The mind boggled.

“I take leave to doubt it. But that is what the Republic of Haven did, and I cannot but call it deeply admirable — lawful, moral, swift, and generous. Moreover, Acting Secretary Plenipotentiary Theisman has at every stage proactively requested the presence of treecats, fully aware of their abilities, and all who have met him assure me of his sincerity.”

Now Ariel did move, rising to sign. A translation appeared in surtitle.

<We have tasted his mindglow very carefully, and he is honest. He knows much, so he is very careful in what he says, but he does not lie. He truly wants peace between his two legs and Soul of Steel’s. And the ships he says his two legs have built exist.>

Had anyone doubted it? How many agendas was Beth addressing here?

“So We must and do accept that the offer made by Acting Secretary Plenipotentiary Theisman on behalf of President Pritchart is genuine and sincere. At the same time We must consider, first, that the assurances repeatedly given Us by Baron High Ridge that Our Navy was adequately funded and maintained to enable it to defend us, and if necessary to prosecute the war against Haven, have proven utterly false; second, that Our government, like all of us, is going to remain severely distracted and busy for some while; and third, that a general election is long overdue, and that you, Our subjects, who have most wrongly been denied your right to vote, have yet to speak.”

Having shifted pronouns, Beth took a deep breath, and Caitrin heard Mike’s murmur of ‘Here it comes’.

“Considering all the circumstances, We have therefore made several related decisions, believing them to be in the best interests of all. First and foremost, We have accepted President Pritchart’s offer to come to Landing at the head of a negotiating team; and We have asked her to come prepared to discuss not one but two treaties — one to end the war between us, permanently
and finally, and to normalise full diplomatic and trade relations, the other to agree a joint diplomatic
and if necessary military response to Acts of War perpetrated against both our star nations by agents
of Manpower Unlimited. To the latter talks We have also invited His Grace Protector Benjamin IX,
His Imperial Majesty Gustav XI Anderman, and the Chairman of Beowulf’s Board of Directors. It
necessarily follows that We reaffirm the existing ceasefire, and declare that the Star Kingdom of
Manticore will take no military action of any kind against the Republic of Haven unless and until
negotiations are mutually agreed to have failed. And as a gesture of goodwill, matching those of
President Pritchart, We have instructed the Prime Minister to open the Junction to all merchant
shipping registered to the Republic of Haven, and all their diplomatic traffic, with immediate effect.”

Handsomely matching, too, besides offsetting loss of revenue from closing the Junction to
Mesan interstellars. And the whole business of alliance against Mesa was a game-changer, even
without the prospect of simultaneous additional state visits to push negotiations along.

“It will of course be at least eight T-weeks before President Pritchart can be here, but that is
one reason We are insisting on the utmost expedition in trials arising from the present crisis. The
special courts will operate in continuous session, and while the House of Lords is, as always, a law
unto itself, the Prime Minister has been strictly charged to promote as rapid a process and resolution
as possible, consistent with justice. It will clearly be years before all the ramifications can be worked
through, but the major issues that have arisen must and will be dealt with before negotiations begin,
and We have directed Lord Alexander to hold the general election at the earliest possible time, and in
any case within 50 days. All else aside, those negotiating on our behalf must have clear and firm
instructions, as well as freedom from any uncertainty about issues presently subject to judicial
enquiry.”

“Make that a twelve-ring circus.”

Mike was right, but Caitrin could see the timing Beth wanted — Lords’ trial, election,
negotiations — and agreed entirely. Achieving it would be another matter, but she’d be able to do
her bit. And Beth wasn’t done, switching back to first-person singular.

“I have spent a measurable part of my reign presenting Her Grace Steadholder and Duchess
Harrington with awards symbolising our grateful thanks for acts of valour and heroism. Wound
stripes, CGMs, Monarch’s Thanks, DSOs, MCs, the OG, SC, and PMV, as well as successive
promotions to GCR, creation as a countess, and subsequent creation as a duchess. There was also, of
course, her state funeral at King Michael’s Cathedral. And what do I give her now, for the
immeasurable service she has once again done all of us? A service that is, to our shame, beyond our
deserving.” A different light came to Beth’s eye. “Entirely typically, she refuses any honours and
says she has done no more than her plain duty. She said the same about leading, while very seriously
injured, the escape from Hades of nearly 400,000 people. And absurd as I find them, I will for now
respect her feelings. But I do here and now offer Her Grace, on behalf of the Star Kingdom of
Manticore, my most heartfelt, sincere, and profoundly admiring thanks for everything she has done in
these matters. May God be with us all.”

Curiosity stirred within Caitrin’s own heartfelt agreement, and she looked at Mike. “So how
did Nimitz win that argument?”

Mike grinned, though she was looking very thoughtful. “Told them both off in good round
terms. Dances on Clouds knew perfectly well what Soul of Steel was feeling, and Soul of Steel
should know better than to worry about rewards before the hunt was finished. But I suspect Beth’ll
think of something, sooner or later.”

Caitrin thought so too. “Whom did she send as envoy to Haven, by the way?”
“There was some argument about that. Honor would be perfect, but we need her here, so she’s doing Beowulf. Roger thought quite strongly he should go to Haven, and I could see his case, but Beth wasn’t ready for that, so he’s doing Potsdam. She wanted an Admiral for Haven, but the good ones are rather busy just now. Then she started eyeing me and I told her that cousin or no I was much too junior. In the end she asked Theo Harper, and as it’s only formal delivery he agreed. After he’d picked himself up off the floor.”

“I imagine.” Many people would be picking themselves up from their floors just now. “But Theo’s a good choice as we’re looking to do things handsomely, thanks to High Ridge. And that’s a good choice for Roger, too. Is it likely Gustav will come?”

Mike waggled a hand. “Honor sent Alfredo Yu to New Berlin with the Young data, and he actually met Gustav privately. You should ask him about it if you get the chance — fascinating stuff. And of course there’s also the invitation to talks about Silesia, which will plainly involve conceding a lot of what they want. But who knows? Honor’s certain, though, that if he doesn’t come himself he’ll send von Rabenstrange with considerable if not plenipotentiary authority, and as he’s already a friend of hers suggests that might actually be preferable.”

“Mmm. Is there anywhere Honor doesn’t have friends?”

“Mesa. And Old Chicago.” Mike grinned. “Which reminds me, there is one other thing Beth asked me to ask you to think about. Sitting tight?”

“Oh Lord. What now?”

“The Audubon Ballroom. Doers of genuinely dastardly deeds. Most thoroughly proscribed. And the people who, finding the Young data, not only promptly gave it to Honor, but sent it to Nouveau Paris. Theisman openly confirms that the messenger was Jeremy X in person, who apparently knows their FIA director from the Zilwicki business in Old Chicago. And their only target is Manpower and its customers, who if we’re lucky will also become just about our only target. So what steps might be possible with a view to reconciling some of the discrepancies in all that? It’s a poser, but Beth wants ideas to think about.”

“Well, in the first place she should ask Willie to appoint Cathy Montaigne as Minister for the Suppression of Slavery and grant her immunity from prosecution under any of the terrorism laws. She could get away with that just now, and it would provide for proper contact, by all accounts.” Mike blinked. “Then if Haven don’t mind the identity of their messenger being made public, I think she should seriously consider doing so and inviting Mr X to the How-Do-We-Get-Manpower summit. From the things Mr Hawkwing tells me, I imagine we’ll need their help anyway.”

She didn’t often manage to shock Mike, and it was very satisfying when she did.
Settling with Nimitz into the front-row seat to which she was entitled as a Duchess, Honor surveyed the packed House. It was actually less overcrowded than it might have been, and not only because High Ridge and New Kiev would (with Descroix) be in the dock below the Speaker. Among the few actions the stupefied House had taken using the new administration’s slim majority, besides seating the new Baron Grantville and engrossing Descroix’s trial, had been to expel all those peers who, while still formally entitled to attend, were no longer entitled to speak or vote. Moreover, in matters of criminal trial, and those alone, cadet seats were entitled neither to attend nor vote, each full peer being restricted to a single vote, though proxies were allowed. Even so the benches were jammed, and though proceedings were being broadcast the public gallery was also interestingly filled.

Thomas Theisman was there, by invitation of the Lord Speaker at the request of Her Majesty, as witness for his President and government. His broadcasts from the Bay House, including a riveting discussion with Alfredo and Warner of successive Havenite regimes, and a dignified, remorseless speech about the principle of accountability and his views of its failures in Haven and Manticore, had made him if not exactly a popular then certainly a respected figure, as well as a fascinating one. And in the last of them, when Honor joined him wearing her own plenipotentiary hat to discuss formally the relations Haven sought with Grayson — and along the way outline the political settlement about re/conquered planets that would be on the negotiating table — she had been able, by arranging for Sam and Nimitz to appear, making formal enquiry about Haven’s attitude to the People before seeking his lap as well as her own, to shape another image of him in the public mind.

Grayson and Andermani ambassadors were also present, and Honor had used her carefully cultivated acquaintance with the Sergeant-at-Arms, a former Marine gunny, to secure a block of seven seats. Two were for her parents, who had decided they were missing far too much fun on Grayson, and had brought sufficient staff to let them abandon Faith and James for the day; others were for Klaus and Stacey Hauptman, Miranda, Abigail Hearns as Miss Owens, and Anton Zilwicki, who had actually blinked when she’d proposed it, observing that he should see the finish of what he’d started, before rolling massive shoulders and accepting with glee. Seats were not needed for Farragut and Sam, the latter accompanying her mother, and Honor had not had to secure a seat for Uncle Jacques as he was officially present to observe for Beowulf. President Ramirez was attending in a similar capacity, accompanied by his son, the two taking up what would be three seats for anyone other than San Martinos; and there was an Erewhonese, Walter Imbesi, whom Zilwicki said was their most senior unofficial official, whatever that meant exactly. His strong advice was to treat Imbesi carefully and most courteously, and mindful of Benjamin’s justified fears about Erewhon Honor had extended an invitation to stay at the Bay House, accepted with surprised and graceful thanks. Other notable faces included Hamish’s wife Emily in her float-chair; Michael Oversteegen, a lookalike relation of High Ridge’s and by all accounts a very competent Captain (SG) less than sympathetic to his cousin’s naval policies; and — Honor wondered how many recognised him — Cathy Montaigne’s butler, Isaac Douglass. What anyone would say if she pointed out the Audubon Ballroom had sent an observer was a line of thought that kept her amused until the defendants appeared under escort.
Striving for detachment, she thought they made an interesting study in contrasts. High Ridge, immaculate in fullest fig and at least as angry as he was afraid, bristled long-suffering indignation. Descroix was much warier, less ostentatious and with a calculating look covering sick dread. New Kiev was a wreck, haggard, confused, and deeply terrified. A fourth chair, on which the Queen had rigidly insisted, featured the North Hollow arms in mute reminder of who else would be standing trial, and for what, even if he had been blown into plasma and she’d vanished, presumed not dead. The earldom remained vacant, the youngest brother having flown himself drunkenly into a hillside some years ago and the elderly third cousin who was next in line having in a rare display of sense for a Young flatly refused to accede; whether anyone would was moot. The Queen and Royal Consort were already in the rarely used royal observatory, and the whole ludicrous yet deadly serious process got underway.

The Lord Speaker had wide procedural discretion, and as the House had, after some thought, confirmed by a large majority Willie’s nomination of the notoriously upright, brisk, and recently retired Lord Justice Farquhar, Baron Westfield, for the period of the trial, things moved at a clip. High Ridge’s angry but measured contentions that his arrest had been unconstitutional, evidence obtained via unconstitutional royal warrants was inadmissible, and evidence obtained illegally equally inadmissible, were all dismissed without being put to a vote, the last with a short, sharp lecture about precedents including a case even Honor had heard of, wherein a burglar had surprised a domestic murder in progress and, after knocking out the murderer and trying to revive the victim, had summoned police and ambulance before removing himself. Farquhar then surveyed the House.

“My Lords and Ladies, the decision is yours, but in order to expedite matters as Her Majesty requests, adducing potent arguments of national security and the most urgent diplomatic necessity, I suggest we adopt the following basic procedure. We have multiple defendants, and charges that range from gross malfeasance to capital treason. We have a great deal of evidence to consider. So let us divide things cleanly and clearly. I suggest we first hear evidence on non-capital charges of peculation and gross malfeasance, and render a verdict. Then we may proceed to charges where capital sentence is discretionary, that is, of accessory before and after the fact to capital murder by parties not here arraigned. And finally we may proceed to the explicitly capital charges of treason.”

The House thought about it, saw the underlying political logic about who would be willing to convict on what, largely regardless of evidence, and agreed such organisation made a great deal of sense. Finance was therefore first on the agenda, and Lord Justice Ingledew, prosecuting, painstakingly laid out evidence of the tens of millions of dollars that had vanished from government funds and reappeared in various accounts belonging or traceable to the defendants. Then he asked the House what testimony it wished to hear.

“Every investigator who worked on this is available, my Lords and Ladies, as are 116 Manticoran bank managers and other officials, and in the case of Lady Descroix a number of Beowulfan bankers and officials who were requested by Her Grace of Harrington, through her maternal uncle, Third Director at Large Jacques Benton-Ramirez y Chou, who is present”—a bow to the public gallery, elegantly returned—“to maintain a special watch on Manticorans seeking to establish private accounts with onward payment facilities for Stotterman. A farsighted precaution which has, I note, saved Her Majesty’s Government not less than 42 million dollars. These Beowulfans are of course beyond the jurisdiction of this House, but Director Chou has offered to command their attendance, should you so desire.”

This House interestingly showed more inclination to get on with things than tie them up, especially after some pithy observations by the Grand Duchess of Sphinx and the most senior peer of Cathy Montaigne’s new True Liberals. In an interview after her surprising and interesting inception as Minister for the Suppression of Slavery, that had had Honor, and Thomas Theisman and Mike beside her, clutching their sides, Cathy had brayingly observed that she really, really wanted to call
her new party the Illiberals, but it was too much of a hostage to fortune, so she’d settle for dubbing the rump of the old party False Liberals — a name that had stuck even with staider news channels. None of them were saying anything, and it was soon agreed ten randomly chosen investigators and financiers was plenty, and Director Benton-Ramirez y Chou’s testimony to the accuracy of Beowulfan records sufficient. Investigators, financiers, and testimony were then adduced, and Honor had the pleasure of seeing High Ridge get no change whatever either out of dryly precise bankers or Uncle Jacques, who agreed there were proper channels of intergovernmental communication but observed there were also dictates of national security, and that if one’s exceptionally capable niece requested close surveillance of any improperly disguised ministers of Her Majesty’s government who, already demonstrably Manpower parasites or worse, sought fraudulently to open accounts on Beowulf, one paid attention; if one had any sense whatever.

Listening carefully, Honor realised that in some arcane and probably illegal, certainly improper, way, the House had already decided the peculation and gross malfeasance charges were a done deal. Man — or woman — dips hand in trough was a story they understood, the penalties for being caught were traditional, and if the scale was in the present case beyond surprising, the principles involved were clear. The Eleventh Commandment might come well before the Eighth, especially where those exceptional beings who were Manticoran Peers of the Realm were concerned, but the Eleventh having been comprehensively and undeniably broken, the Eighth applied. Farquhar, accurately divining such calculus, extended the sitting, invited the defendants to make rebuttals, and endured a blanket dismissal from High Ridge of testimony by commoners and aliens; a surprising admission of guilt from Descroix, who seemed to hope to influence verdicts on other charges; and a hysterical tirade from New Kiev claiming all monies had been used for proper ends however irregular the appropriations; before asking if the House was ready to render a verdict. The House was, and resoundingly convicted all defendants on all charges. Telling a foaming High Ridge to be quiet, Farquhar then suspended proceedings for the day.

Honor’s dinner guests that evening included all she’d seated in the public gallery (Zilwicki accompanied by Cathy Montaigne and his daughter, though not his younger adopted children) and assorted house guests as well as Hamish and Emily. Surveying them, she asked what they had made of proceedings, and the saturnine Imbesi was the most interesting respondent. Conceding that Erewhon was in origin a polity of criminals, he explained the absolute importance there of one’s personal word and his sense that what he had witnessed was reluctant judgement against those acknowledged as one’s own for breaking their word. Honor responded with her theory of the Eleventh and other commandments, and he gave her a sharp look.

“Expedience rather than honour, Your Grace? But for once lined up?”

“More or less, Mr Imbesi. But I believe that vote had already been decided, or rather conceded as a lost cause. The real argument about honour and expedience is yet to come.”

He raised a glass to her, and Abigail Hearns, taking a deep breath, asked how expedience might relate to honour, defined as honesty before the Tester, starting a wider, very interesting debate in which everyone rolled up their sleeves. Honor contributed by blandly positing information of serious wrongdoing, anonymously received, that could only have been gathered by illegal means. Imbesi contended that once there were sufficient and reasonable grounds to believe a given word had been broken, all bets were off. Her mother agreed, but Abigail, backed by Miranda, valiantly fought
for a wider absolute code of honour that, while attractive, depended on the judgement of the Tester rather than the revenges of man. Cathy Montaigne cheerfully threw the Audubon Ballroom into the mix, asking what expedience might be allowable when all honourable response was demonstrably without value, and her father and Uncle Jacques ran with that until Helen Zilwicki brought everyone up short with a set of questions, clearly deriving from experience one so young should never have faced, about a personal need expediently to kill without due process. Theisman, seemingly familiar with the events she must be drawing on but had not specified, responded with grave courtesy, some delicacy, and steel judgement about the relevance of motive and circumstance.

“I appreciate Miss Hearns’s — or should I say Miss Owens’s? — view of a more absolute standard vested in a god, but cannot share it, nor condemn expedience. I did not shoot Saint-Just in revenge, greatly as I desired to, but because I judged the burden of the trial he should have faced would be too great for a transitional regime, and his living imprisonment to await trial a sapping poison. And he had placed himself far outside even the laws of the PRH, such as they were, when he nuked the Octagon and killed more than a million citizens. It was expedient to kill him, and right, however unlawful. Whether it was honourable is not for me to judge but I have no regrets. And I think you should have none, Miss Zilwicki, for as best I understand it from Kevin Usher you too had absolute knowledge of guilt and an overriding need to protect others.”

Helen nodded, face very sombre. “I don’t have any regrets, sir. But I do have nightmares.”

“That, alas, is a price we pay for doing what we must.”

Her father nodded. “Indeed, Admiral Theisman. But they will fade, you’ll find, Miss Zilwicki.”

Helen shrugged. “I’m not sure they should, sir. But watching the HD today, I was thinking about what will happen if the House does convict on capital charges. Killing in cold blood, lawfully, actually seems worse.”

Theisman sighed. “In many ways, yes. But also a necessity of state, sometimes. And if it happens it will, I understand, be public.”

Honor nodded. “It’s specified in the terms of a trial in the House. I believe the framers of the relevant Constitutional clauses felt that if a Peer of the Realm managed to get themselves sentenced to death it was their final duty to provide an example. You might call it the Byng argument.”

Theisman smiled. “Ah yes. Shot on his own quarterdeck, wasn’t he?”

“That’s right. Pour encourager les autres.” She smiled back at Theisman. “And if it happens this will be a firing squad too.” Honor recalled her disbelief when she’d first read the words all those years ago. “There really are provisions for hanging Peers with a silken rope, but that’s for capital murder. For capital treason it’s a military execution.”

“Truly? Too good for hemp? Aristocrats never cease to amaze me.”

Cathy Montaigne laughed. “Bloodsucking scum for the most part, present company excepted. It’s much nicer being a commoner.”

As laughter faded Theisman grew grave. “But to return to your point, Miss Zilwicki, it would therefore be a moment in which Manticore as a nation would have to face itself squarely. And I have to say, from all I have seen, not before time.” His gaze was shrewd. “I suspect that is what Her Grace is really after here. Her Majesty too, perhaps.”
“Oh yes. I set out to stop High Ridge squandering the sacrifices of our dead and destroying our security, Miss Zilwicki, but he’d already done it, and along the way my target suffered some mission creep, you might say. And for what I’m after now he’s incidental, really — it’s what he represents, the failure of accountability Admiral Theisman eloquently identifies. And I’ll hate it, if I can make it happen. Executions are always vile and ugly. But they are needed.” She frowned, remembering. “I’m not a great one for poetry, but Grayson has had some fine sacred writers, and there’s a line in one of them — ‘There is no bloodless myth will hold’.”*

“Oh that’s nice. Send me the reference? Web Du Havel will like that — it’s exactly what he says in *The Political Value of Sacrifice.*”

It turned out Cathy wasn’t the only one thinking of the ASL philosopher — Helen as well as Hamish, Emily, and Abigail had read the book and discussion became more general. But as those not in residence were leaving Hamish and Emily drew her aside.

“I don’t think the House will convict on capital charges, Honor, any more than Hemphill would in that fiasco of a court martial, and she wasn’t bribed like Jurgens and Lemaitre. There are too many loopholes they can offer themselves.”

“There are a lot, aren’t there? But we’ll see.”

“You seem very calm about it.”

“Not really, Hamish. But it’s the one thing I shall speak to. And Beth and I have hatched a second string to the bow, in case. But that’s her surprise to spring.”

Emily smiled her fragile smile. “Any clues, Honor?”

“Read your Constitution.”

*Matters of finance having been dealt with so expeditiously, the next day moved on to the accessory to murder charges faced only by High Ridge and Descroix, though North Hollow was posthumously indicted. New Kiev remained present, a brooding shell.*

The situation was much more complex. The kitchen-cabinet recording and those of Georgia Young were pivotal, and both High Ridge and Descroix asserted the first was a forgery and (with some blistering, bitter comments about Young) the second false accusation. Lord Justice Ingledew had to proceed carefully, and methodically showed that the murders in question had in fact occurred. Janacek’s killer had not been found, and though named in the North Hollow files and actively sought was believed to have fled to Silesia. But cued by what North Hollow had said in the kitchen-cabinet session investigators had proven that the security system that had been engaged at Janacek’s house when he was found, on the face of it evidence to support a finding of suicide, had indeed had a bypass installed, exactly as described; that it had been used; and that the system had been re-engaged, with evidence of the bypass buried, after Janacek’s estimated time of death. The coroner had ruled him a victim of murder by person or persons unknown. Of the other alleged killings, the apparent natural death could not be reinvestigated, the victim having been cremated, but the apparent accident had been urgently re-examined, and sufficient evidence found that, in conjunction with the North Hollow files, the original coroner’s verdict had been overturned and one of murder filed.
Ingledew concluded with a brisk statement of how those two deaths had prevented disclosure of information relating to three Manticorans, two Liberal and one Progressive members of the Commons, now charged with statutory rape and participation in enslavement.

There was then a lengthily precise demonstration that everything else Georgia Young said on record about the North Hollow files and their use was corroborated by the files themselves; and that everything that could be independently verified had been. It could also be shown, from logs at Government House, that despite Lady Young having no official security clearance she had been a very frequent caller, staying for long periods coinciding exactly with the then Prime Minister’s personal diary notes of kitchen-cabinet meetings of which no official records of any kind appeared to have been kept, though recordings of some were among the materials anonymously supplied to Her Grace of Harrington. The posthumous indictment of North Hollow for the two relevant murders, and four more detailed in the files as well as a raft of other charges, was also set out, with evidence of how very closely he and his possibly late wife had co-operated in undertaking very many illegal things in the service of themselves, the Conservative Association, and latterly the High Ridge administration.

After the lunch recess Ingledew turned to the kitchen-cabinet recording and called a succession of expert analysts, military and civilian. Honor knew Andrew was coldly certain nothing could be traced back to him, but had concerns about what might be said; and as she really didn’t know how he’d done it, whatever she might guess, she was genuinely interested in what data would be adduced. The first testimony was straightforward, voice analysis showing that all could be solidly matched with the speakers shown. Descroix, oddly knowledgeable, pressed the woman hard to concede computer-generated speech using recorded voices was undetectable, but she insisted otherwise.

“Compfakes will do in realtime, Lady Descroix. And they’re pretty good these days, I admit. But when you get them in the lab you can tell. The tertiary harmonics will be doing things they wouldn’t in a human voice.” Displays came up, showing exactly what she meant, followed by graphs of the voices from the recording and on record. “I’ve looked, hard, and the audio on that recording is exactly what it seems to be.”

The second expert was more interesting, a classic, slightly wild-haired Senior Analyst at Bassingford, who worked on medical imaging and spoke with rapid precision.

“My Lords and Ladies. I was asked to investigate the grainy appearance of the recording in question, which is of course a function of pixellation. On a standard HD recording pixellation is evenly distributed, so the number per given unit of area is constant. But on this recording that is not the case. The pixels are clustered in unorthodox, roughly circular distributions that overlap but leave small areas that are in fact gaps in the record — in short, they’re clumped. It looks grainy because that’s exactly what it is. I have no idea why, though I suspect some form of compression for storage, because the gaps and relative coarseness of pixellation mean there’s far less total data than for an HD recording of the same length. But it offers several means of analysis.”

A frozen scene from the recording appeared, and a dizzying zoom produced some of the clumped pixels in question.

“I draw your attention to the sheer complexity of each clump. Many millions of standard HD pixels are represented by each, and while any given HD pixel is far too tiny to be anything other than a single, pinpoint colour designation, these clumps are all multi-hued. And very subtly so. I spent more than thirty hours and a considerable amount of processing power trying to generate one my computers could not spot as a fake, and failed. Utterly. So what I am prepared to say is that those clumps could not conceivably have been manually forged, that is, created whole from nothing, in the
11 days between the alleged date of the recording and the date on which it was given to Her Majesty. Given its content, true or false, it cannot be older, so it must be an automated process that creates them, and that is only conceivable if a prior HD record — or live feed — was available.”

He actually paused, but only to bring up the moment when High Ridge had turned the official recording on, and focus on the split-second of transition.

“I was provided by the PGS with the recording from the official surveillance system in Government House. It matches the grainy version from the recording given to Her Majesty in every possible way. And I draw your attention to the fact that while the clumps prior to the start of the official recording have no independent verification, others are wholly verifiable from that official recording, and there is no discernible break of any kind. Grainy as it may be, it is seamless. So the only logical conclusion is that the whole recording is exactly what it seems to be, a capture, using unknown equipment I’d dearly love to see, of the officially unrecorded feed from pickups in the private office of the Prime Minister.”

The House shuffled as it digested that. Ignoring evidence would be harder and more embarrassing if it really could not be doubted, and the next analysis had them shuffling harder with a dry, deadly demonstration by an elderly professor of a slight, regular fluctuation in the light level of the recording that exactly matched fluctuation in a sample recording of the empty office from the official system ; and could be traced to a ceiling-light that was, in the way of artificial light-sources that received very heavy use, preparing to fail.

“Which means, my Lords and Ladies, all else aside, that to fake this recording someone would have had to know about that diode, whose fluctuations are not yet detectable to the naked eye, and have the ability to rig an identically failing diode with precisely the same periodicity. Which is not, to the best of my knowledge, technically possible.”

The complicated accommodation of Grayson and Manticoran laws that surrounded Honor meant that while Armsmen could not accompany her onto the floor of the House they could enter the Chamber, and Andrew was with Spenser and the Sergeant-at-Arms by the door — close enough for Honor to feel his rich amusement and satisfaction. She knew what he’d say as well — the Tester helps those who help themselves — and didn’t disagree. But Ingledew was winding up by calling a very stern-faced Colonel Derenton of the PGS, whose mind was filled with a lively mix of trepidation, seething uncertainty, and intense bafflement.

He had been tasked, as an aghast PGS had seen the surveillance-system recording broadcast, to investigate, and had a gravbot’s record of his initial site examination. Nothing could be told from the exterior of the panel that gave access to the space above the PM’s office, though there was marginal evidence that it might have been unfastened more recently than the last logged access. But the space itself was another matter. Even with the most modern materials and systems, such places accumulated dust, and other things being equal, dust should, like pixels, be evenly distributed. But even the first, eyeball inspection of what lay beyond the panel showed a strip of flooring, some 18 inches wide along a wall, that gleamed ; and addition of various kinds of light produced a sparkling appearance that stopped abruptly where the expected, and undisturbed, dust took over.

“I immediately ordered full forensic analysis, my Lords and Ladies, and in addition to having been very efficiently vacuum cleaned that strip of floor had been treated with several powerful chemical agents that left no identifiable traces of anything whatsoever. All I can tell you from the proportion of decay products remaining is that it was done not less than three nor more than eight days before the samples were taken, which means it was done after the date of the meeting, ah, allegedly recorded. At a time when there is most certainly no logged access. And one thing was found.”
The gravbot followed the track to a far wall, backtracked, and followed a second track at right angles to a sparkling square about a metre across; in the middle a cable rose from the floor to connect with two boxes of molycircs joined by another cable. And in the cable was a small, familiar socket.

“That, my Lords and Ladies, is an utterly standard HD feed splitter, manufactured in millions to a 23-year-old design by Scarston Industries. They’re everywhere, and this one cannot be traced back in any way. But it should most certainly not be there, and anything jacked into it — which something has been, at least once — would receive the feed from the pickups in the PM’s office regardless of whether the official recording system was on or off.” He squared his shoulders.

“Whether the recording given by Her Grace Duchess and Steadholder Plenipotentiary Harrington to Her Majesty was in fact so obtained I cannot say. But to the deep chagrin and profound concern of the PGS, it most certainly could have been.”

That was news to everyone, and there was a lot of murmuring. But it also seemed to have been news to High Ridge, though something must have been said in the summary of evidence he would have been given, and Honor had been tracking his surge of fury as he listened. The hatred in his stare was palpable, encompassing Nimitz on her lap, and they both felt the lightbulb go off in his mind as he suddenly came to his feet.

“It was those fucking ’cats!”

He took a step forward, hands working as if he could strangle Nimitz, and Honor felt the ’cat instantly shift, tensing as his saw-edged warning growl and flashed fangs brought High Ridge up short. The Lord Speaker’s gavel smashed down.

“You will mind your language, my Lord. And you will sit silently until it is time for you to speak in your own defence, or indicate properly if you wish to ask questions or make any observations.”

Still scarlet, High Ridge glared at him but obeyed, and Farquhar’s gaze swung towards her, only to stop dead as Nimitz rose in her lap, managed a creditable bow, and signed a question. There was a humming silence while Honor wondered what on earth Stinker was up to and found herself filled with anticipation.

“Ah, I’m afraid I don’t read Sign, ah, Nimitz, isn’t it.” Farquhar’s eyes met Honor’s. “Might you translate for me, Your Grace?”

“Of course, my Lord Speaker.” She rose, setting Nimitz on the bench. “Incidentally, the correct address would be Elder Nimitz of the Landing and Bright Water Clans. Or Lord Nimitz, I suppose. And he asked you if it was permitted for him to answer the allegation made by the defendant.”

“He did? My word. I don’t see why not. My Lords and Ladies, do any object to recognising Lord Nimitz?” Honor savoured the shock and curiosity holding the many objections in check, and in one corner of her mind began to work out the implications of the House recognising a Treecat peer. “No? Then by all means, Lord Nimitz, say what you will.”

True hands flashed as Nimitz looked directly at the Lord Speaker, and Honor’s voice followed.

<Thank you. I will first apologise for the threat I made. The bad elder is very angry, and his intent to harm me was clear in his mind. My threat was called out faster than thought, as a sound of pain is.>
Farquhar nodded, eyes glinting amusement and fascination. “Your apology and courtesy to the House are noted, my Lord. Given the circumstances, no censure is offered. And the, ah, bad elder had certainly offered provocation. Do please go on.”

Ignoring splutters, not least from High Ridge, Nimitz turned to face the House at large.

<The People are tool users, and those who work closely with two legs learn something of your machines. I can open doors, turn on the picture-glass, and work the cold-box where cluster-stalk is kept. And it is true some People work with those who guard the buildings of your elders. In the small pipes we can go faster than any two leg, to see if all is well, or if repairs are needed, or the low plants are growing. We also catch mice that should not be in such places. But how the bad elder thinks we could make pictures for the picture-glass I do not understand at all. Most of what has been said here today is outside my understanding, and so is why you all still argue about it when the picture shows what was said. The three bad elders said they wished to kill me and my mate. One tried to do so, and is dead, killing and injuring many with the explosive he said he had, and did have. Now another has threatened me again. And still you argue! The People do not have or understand your machines, but we are wiser. And if it is permitted, there is another thing I can tell you.>

He and Honor looked at the Lord Speaker.

“Anyone recognised by this House may say anything, provided it is said courteously. Go ahead, my Lord.”

<The People do understand mindglows. Every living thing has one, and those of two legs are very strong and clear. We cannot understand your thoughts, but your emotions are as loud to us as shouting is to you. In this place I must make myself deaf to them, but I have been examining the bad elders’ mindglows very carefully. It is confusing, because they are scared, and doing the thing many two legs do that no Person can do. Dances on Clouds can explain it better than I can.>

“What Lord Nimitz means, my Lords and Ladies, is the human ability to deny reality, to behave as if what one wishes to be true were in fact true despite clear evidence to the contrary. To Treecats, you must realise, the world is always exactly as it is. Their shared telepathic and telempathic contact means everything is experienced through multiple viewpoints, and it is simply not possible for a ‘cat to practice the kind of self-delusion of which all humans are capable.”

<This makes lying hard for us to understand, for only the mind-blind can do it. But we have studied this thing, and though most cannot understand it, we can and do recognise it. The mixture of emotions is distinctive. And I can say as certain truth that when the two bad elders here who are in the picture said they believed it to be a lie, they were both lying. So they must know it to be true.>

Nimitz moved aside and Honor sat again, welcoming his return to her lap and receiving a mental query to which she replied with approval. His buzzing purr as she rubbed his jaw was loud in the silence. Descroix was looking and feeling sicker than ever, but High Ridge was back to juddering rage and raised a hand to the Lord Speaker.

“My Lord?”

High Ridge’s voice trembled with fury and hatred. “Are we now to be judged by animals, my Lord Speaker?”

“Certainly not, my Lord. No-one recognised by this House is an animal, save in the sense that we all are. And Lord Nimitz is a great deal more observant of the rules of courtesy than you.”
“You have compromised your sworn neutrality. **How dare** you call any of us ‘bad elders’?”

“Because, my Lord, you are plainly an elder of Manticore — it isn’t even a metaphor, merely an extended usage — and you have already been convicted by this House of stealing more than 16 million dollars from Her Majesty’s Government and presiding over the theft of a great deal more. Bad elders is no more than a statement of fact, though I imagine it may shortly become a memorable headline.” High Ridge glared but the House was broadly in amused agreement. “And as there were several substantive and germane points in Lord Nimitz’s remarks, I offer him the thanks of this House, and Her Grace of Harrington thanks for facilitating our understanding. I really ought to learn Sign, I dare say. Sitting judges certainly should. Now, Lord Justice Ingledew and Colonel Derenton, where were we?”

“Pretty much done, I think, my Lord Speaker. Is there any among you, my Lords and Ladies, who wishes to pose any further question to the Colonel? Or harbours the slightest doubt that the recording in question **cannot** be forged, and **must** have been obtained by whomever sent it to Her Grace through the feed splitter, however the means remain unknown? Do any of the defendants wish to ask anything? No? Then you are excused, Colonel.”

Derenton left, with a long, assessing stare at an unruffled Nimitz, and Ingledew waited for a moment.

“So, my Lords and Ladies, we know from the findings of two coroners that murders were done, in the coldest blood. We know from the North Hollow files, and in one case the late Earl’s own lips, that he ordered and commissioned those murders. And we know Baron High Ridge and Lady Descroix were informed of the murder of Sir Edward Janacek some two hours after it had taken place; that neither then nor at any subsequent time during the 12 days before their arrests did either make any attempt to inform the Landing Police, as was their clear legal obligation; and further, that during those 12 days both made repeated public statements explicitly decrying that murder as suicide. I submit to you, therefore, that while charges of accessory before the fact to capital murder rest primarily on recorded statements by the perhaps late and certainly unavailable Lady Young, and by her late husband, charges of accessory after the fact to capital murder are proven not only beyond reasonable doubt, but beyond all doubt.”

And so they were, but while the House clearly didn’t believe repeated assertions by High Ridge and Descroix that the recording was a forgery, the feed splitter planted by a treacherous Treecat as deliberately misleading and fraudulent evidence, it wasn’t happy about the clear implication. There were plaintive, shuffling remarks about not really being able to trust a recording no-one could explain, and a spluttering set of irrelevancies from a Gryphon Baron who clearly believed with High Ridge that what a peer did or said in the privacy of their own office shouldn’t be held against them by anyone, even if someone did have the blasted impertinence to record it and it was entirely criminal. Farquhar was unimpressed.

“My Lord’s views are of course his privilege, but I will observe that his understanding of the law seems both deficient and perverse. Be that as it may, we now face another complex challenge, and I suggest we hold three votes. The first should concern the posthumous indictments of the late Earl and probably late Countess of North Hollow, requested by Her Majesty to provide legal clarity in the many claims arising against his estate. These indictments, I remind you, relate not only to the evidence we have heard today, but to the late Earl’s undoubted and unlawful possession of military explosives; attempt to crash his lightflyer, carrying those explosives, into the embassy of Harrington Steading, an act of capital treason against an ally as well as an act of terrorism; and mass murder, attempted as well as achieved. The second vote should concern the conviction or acquittal of Baron High Ridge and Lady Descroix on charges of accessory before and after the fact to capital murder. And in the event of conviction, the third should determine whether the appropriate sentence is
Willie had chosen very well, Honor thought, as she considered the political calculus beneath legal and procedural ones. Even the most bigoted, blinkered, and apoplectic High Ridge partisans would throw North Hollow to the wolves in a second, not only because he was already dead. Given the convulsions of the *Reveille* affair, almost all had been in Landing when he got that way, and *their* windows had rattled, their eyes watered with everyone else’s; not to mention that many damaged yachts in the marina were also theirs, and the many claims against his estate would include their own. But once they started down the road of conviction it would be hard to stop, as even the dimmest of them must realise, and separation of the capital element offered a halting-place before it became too slippery a slope for their likings.

And so it worked out. North Hollow was unanimously convicted of everything and roundly wished to perdition besides. High Ridge and Descroix were convicted by a small majority on accessory after the fact to capital murder, and an even smaller one on accessory before. Neither vote had the two-thirds majority required for a capital charge, so it was unsurprising when the House decided capital sentences were not warranted, and after angry exchanges agreed by the barest margin, dissenters vocal on either side, that sentences of imprisonment for 30 years were appropriate.

Lord Speaker Farquhar shook his head at the arguments and grasp of law shown, and once again suspended proceedings for the day.

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The early part of the evening was Nimitz’s, and Honor spent quite a lot of it translating. She didn’t need to when Elizabeth called to offer very straight-faced thanks to her newest recognised peer, and they managed a quick exchange about what was still to come before Honor had to take a seat at her own table. Besides the house guests only Anton Zilwicki was there from the night before, but Mike Henke had turned up to offer her own highly amused congratulations to Lord Nimitz.

Stinker, of course, was insufferably smug, signing modestly that His Excellency First Elder of Landing Clan Nimitz was acceptable, and no-one among the People really understood this lordship business anyway. Could he be Lord Nimitz of Cluster Stalk? He, Samantha, and Farragut were bleeking laughter, but Theisman, Imbresi, and other two legs were extremely thoughtful, however they might share the amusement; and Zilwicki asked one of the lurking questions, his Gryphon burr thickening with his own variant on Nimitz’s title.

“So, my Lord Elder, in learning to recognise a lie, have you also learned to tell one?”

The answer was immediate.

<No, Tree Thrower, I have not. I can sign something that is not true — ‘I am a Death Fang’, or ‘I have fewer turnings than Golden Voice’ — but they mean no more than you saying you are a Death Fang. What I have learned is what not to say. Sign is wonderful, but it is slow and thin, and not one hand among a hand of hands of hands of what I could once exchange with another person. Leaving out things I know must happen anyway. Choosing what few things I can say is necessary.>

Theisman winced. “So reports of your injury were correct? I am so sorry. Is there no surgical or other hope?”
Honor’s father answered. “There may be. Nimitz’s mid-brain was damaged, not destroyed. How exactly it lost function, neurologically or biochemically, remains uncertain. But Ally and I have some ideas and have it narrowed down to a small area that was pierced by a shard, and any one or more of three neurotransmitters whose local production was disrupted. Synthesising them is a bear, but we’re getting there. We can collect them from ‘cat donors, but there’s a genetic factor that needs tweaking. Trials in six or eight months, maybe.”

“Then I wish you every success. Haven will be seeking to appoint any ambassador here as also an ambassador to the Clans of Sphinx. Nimitz has always been a part of Her Grace’s story, and those who have been able to follow the reports of Dr Arif’s Commission have been extremely impressed by all they have heard and seen.”

Imbesi nodded sharply. “It wasn’t part of my brief but I shall strongly recommend similar action on Erewhon’s part. Any who can speak as you did today, Lord Nimitz, must command sincere respect. That was a telling intervention, the more so, if as I suspect, you were indeed leaving out a great deal.”

Nimitz preened, sending her a mental prompt, and Honor sighed.

“Flattery will get you many places with a treecat, Mr Imbesi, and celery even more, though it has consequences for digestion. But you must realise that Stinker — sorry, Lord Stinker — has some unusual advantages. ’Cats are in general very smart, but he’s racked up the same ship-hours I have and pretty much the same time in staff meetings and Steading cabinet, as well as knowing everyone I do. But he’s usually more direct. For example, he knows I am, like His Grace Protector Benjamin, deeply concerned about the way High Ridge treated our Allies, especially Erewhon. He also knows I suspect you’ve been having talks with the Republic, which God knows in your shoes I’d have been doing myself. And as you’re here, and Admiral Theisman, he thinks I should just ask you both straight out. Now usually I wouldn’t listen to him about something like that, but given what’s due tomorrow I find it compelling advice — the thing being, you see, that I warned High Ridge and others repeatedly about the damage they were doing the Alliance, and was ridiculed. But I then had no witnesses I could produce.”

Imbesi’s face was still while he and Theisman exchanged a glance and Theisman spread hands permissively. Imbesi nodded and shrugged.

“We were aware His Grace the Protector knew we were extremely unhappy with the Star Kingdom, Your Grace, and so presumed you also knew. And Her Majesty.” Mike nodded grimly. “In particular, since the Mesans found the Congo wormhole junction in our backyard we have been very conscious of the threat it represents, and repeatedly asked for assistance. But our fears were dismissed if they were answered at all, RMN ships were withdrawn, not reinforced, and as it also became clear High Ridge was doing everything he could to protect Manpower clients here our unhappiness became acute. I confess I cannot see quite what you intend, but as Haven now hopes with good reason for a full diplomatic settlement with the Star Kingdom my brief becomes assessing and if possible restoring good relations within the Alliance, and honesty seems as often the best policy. So yes, GONI was correct to believe we had some very quiet talks with the Republic concerning mutual defence. They are suspended, of course, pending the outcome here. We have also been exploring other possible alliances.”

Honor saw Zilwicki’s brow crease as it did when he was thinking very hard. She cocked an eyebrow and after a moment he nodded.

“If I may ask, Mr Imbesi, would one ally you have in mind perhaps be Smoking Frog?”

“Certainly.”
“Is Barregos on board?”

Imbesi was still for a moment, then shrugged again. “That is well beyond my brief. But Smoking Frog could hardly be a viable source of protection for us without his approval.”

“So I was thinking. The thing is, Your Grace, Mr Imbesi, that Governor Barregos’s name came up a while back, because it was someone on his staff who found and gave the Ballroom the original data on Young. The attached note said ‘Against future favours needed’. And he’s been quietly increasing his naval capacity for some years now, which is why I wondered if you might be contemplating a naval supply deal, Mr Imbesi. I can’t say he’s going rogue, but he’s certainly laying groundwork.”

Imbesi shrugged a third time. “So we have noticed. And perhaps if he did he would be willing to do something about Congo.”

Honor frowned. “Mmm. I’d wondered about him, seeing how much of the Young data was official Smoking Frog records, but of course the Ballroom’s very strong there anyway. Interesting. And one has to wonder about Congo, I do agree, Mr Imbesi, especially as Young’s brief included preventing any aid to Erewhon. And I can assure you that given the state of war presumed to exist between the Star Kingdom and Mesa, the issue has acquired considerable urgency for us. Would Erewhon in principle welcome an invitation to the second summit Her Majesty is holding?”

“Certainly.”

“Good. I also give you my word that failing any better solution the GSN will assist you.”

He didn’t hesitate for a second. “If that’s a Deal, Your Grace, it’s one I’ll happily accept.”

He held out a hand and Honor took it. “Good again. But what matters right now is that it is a fair summary, one you would be willing publicly to acknowledge, to say that High Ridge’s faithless rudeness, incompetence, and unwillingness to acknowledge legitimate concerns drove you to reassess whether your treaty of alliance with the Star Kingdom remained valid, and whether secession from the Alliance and a bilateral treaty of mutual defence with the Republic might be possible. Yes?”

“Certainly, Your Grace. The ambassador he sent us is also the single most incompetent diplomat I have ever seen, unfailingly offensive in manner and speech. I would rather not speak publicly of actual contact with the Republic, but to consider it is mere logic. And I would be entirely willing to speak to High Ridge’s breaches of the Articles of Alliance, in spirit and letter.”

“Indeed. And had you signed such a unilateral treaty, the military tech available now to the Erewhonese Navy would of course have been shared with the Republic.”

“Necessarily.”

“Which would have been an absolute disaster for us, especially if, with High Ridge still in power, the Republic had decided there were no longer any negotiations worth pursuing.”

“So we calculated, Your Grace. A disaster we wished to avoid.”

“Naturally. One thing I would suggest, though, is that Manpower may have deliberately aggravated your fears about Congo as a part of its plans to destroy the Alliance and get Star Kingdom and Republic back to mutually destructive war. Had they got their hands on HMS Reveille’s tech, we suspect it would have found its way swiftly to the Republic.”
Imbesi thought and nodded. “I can see that. We found no deep agents of the kind found elsewhere, though there were some payments to newsies — former newsies — to scaremonger about Congo. What Manpower’s really up to beyond long-term self-protection is anyone’s guess. And I am still unsure what you have in mind for tomorrow, Your Grace, and why any of this is relevant.”

“Me too, Honor. Spill.”

She grinned at Mike. “Alright. Tell me what you think of this.”

The House that reassembled next morning was discommoded and jumpy. Commentators on many HD channels had taken loud exception to the decision that a commoner who committed murder might properly be executed, but not a noble accomplice or instigator, and some of the criticism had been savage. The phrase ‘bad elders’ had been widely used, not only in relation to the four on trial, and while peers acting as jurors could not give media interviews the True Liberal, Centrist, Crown Loyalist, and Progressive peers who had voted for capital sentences had colleagues in the Commons who were free to speak, and had, at length. Blame had been laid squarely where it belonged, on False Liberal, CA, and independent peers, with Gryphon reactionaries heavily represented in all three groups.

Nor had the public been pleased, and gawkers in Parliament Square had become a serious and angry crowd determined to make its presence felt. It had started building during the small hours, alert newsies closely followed by alert vendors of hot drinks and foods had given it publicity and allure, and with a morning influx of people who had decided work could wait for a day, and a considerable number of people in naval uniforms of all ranks, it had reached a sufficiently critical mass that the LPD were there in force. So was the Mayor, alert to the shifting emotions, and work crews were hustling to set up the giant screens used at New Year and other festivals, to show the HD coverage of the trial. Someone else with a sharp eye for the moment had made hundreds of placards with an image of Nimitz snarling warning at High Ridge, sold at one dollar, and as various Peers were seen arriving demonstrators held them up. Their ability to imitate a treecat was limited, but the noise was extremely menacing. Honor, in full RMN uniform, had not addressed them, but had let herself be seen, Nimitz on her shoulder, and when they roared, shaking placards, she stopped, looking out. Nimitz swept them a bow, one true hand across his chest, before raising it until silence fell, and demonstrating once again what a proper warning snarl should sound like. The echoing answer wasn’t much of an improvement so far as Honor could tell, but he bleeked laughter and gave the crowd a double thumbs up, generating another roar.

Honor felt Andrew’s and Spenser’s startled approval and amusement despite their wariness about any crowd, let alone one as angry as this, and felt some astonishment herself. God knew she’d realised long ago that ’cats were far beyond anything most humans realised, and the revelations since they’d learned to sign had forced further very far-reaching reassessment; but the pure calculation — and, it had to be admitted, even if she didn’t know the details, disingenuity — of Nimitz’s speech yesterday had surprised her, and this further evidence of how subtle his understanding of mindblind politics had become was a thing to ponder. For him the hunt wasn’t over, enemies still being alive, and if the idea of supporting bad elders was profoundly baffling, his grasp of what was necessary to fight such mindblind stupidity was strikingly clear. And his sense of responsibility to the People as a whole, and his mate and kittens, was a stark contrast with the murky swirls of self-interest and arrogant self-regard that underlay the rump defence of High Ridge and his co-defendants, not
because they were innocent but because three were Peers of the Realm, even if one was already dead and damned.

Lord Speaker Farquhar opened the session with reminders of how treason and capital treason were legally defined and the obligation of all jurors, noble or otherwise, to vote their consciences in accordance with law, setting prejudice and assumption aside. He went further than Honor thought wise, and she could sense the outrage his dry voice concealed — mostly, she thought, at the naked display of contempt for justice and consistency alike in the previous afternoon’s votes. Whatever the reason, it did more harm than good, and Lord Justice Ingledew faced an affronted House as he began to lay out facts. His focus, understandably, was the portion of the kitchen-cabinet session eagerly contemplating Honor being killed in Silesia, and the plain facts of what destruction of one or more capital ships would mean were backed by Chakravarti, whose look at High Ridge and Descroix would have withered grass. Yes, he had been instructed by the Prime Minister to offer Her Grace the post of SO at Sidemore Station, and obeyed in good faith, though puzzled by the PM’s attitudes. Still more damningly, yes again, he had before his removal from his post and acting responsibilities at the Admiralty become deeply concerned about the PM’s and Foreign Secretary’s insistence that while Her Grace was needed in Silesia, she could not be given adequate forces, and absolute refusals to sanction transfer of any ships of the new classes to her proposed fleet. It was indeed as if they had both wished Her Grace to accept and go, and to fail.

But it wasn’t doing any good. Those who would already vote for a capital sentence were angrier, those who wouldn’t regardless of evidence unmoved, and those still undecided — or more accurately, wavering — still had too many loopholes open to their rabbit consciences. It was all might-have-beens and maybes, intentions rather than cold facts, and even if the recording were true there was the lingering taint of criminality in its origins. And Ingledew knew it. Sentencing the defendants to death merely because they’d wished an enemy dead was unconscionable, the plot had had no time to advance very far, and the precedent would have genuine dangers. Whatever the facts, a loyal opposition come to power was arguing for the execution of its predecessors; and the fact of war meant to too many Peers little more than inconvenient taxes, more domestic austerity than was pleasant, and at worst a dead relative, rarely in line of succession. Sooner than Honor had expected Ingledew stood away from his lectern, meditated, and surveyed the House.

"I sense I am not persuading you, my Lords and Ladies, for reasons that have little or nothing to do with facts or law. I was myself doubtful when charges of capital treason were first mooted, but have come to believe, strongly, that they are warranted and should be upheld. We owe it — you owe it — to the men and women who represent us in uniform, and die for us in that same uniform, to consider these charges with the utmost gravity. Yet I cannot best make that case to you, so I turn to one who can. With the permission of the Lord Speaker, I will now resign prosecution of these charges to Her Grace of Harrington."

A tremor ran through the House, and Farquhar was plainly surprised.

"If you so wish, Lord Justice, and Her Grace is willing to accept that charge."

Nimitz swiftly climbed to her shoulder, and Honor rose. "I am, my Lord Speaker."

"Then I recognise you as prosecutor, Your Grace."

"Thank you, my Lord Speaker." She paused to thank Ingledew as she walked to the lectern, and spent a long minute surveying the House, seeking eye-contact with those she needed to persuade and seeing them flinch. "My Lords and Ladies, we face a genuinely difficult decision. There are many legal and moral uncertainties involved, as well as fear of the precedent that might be set." That caused a ripple of startlement. Did they think she was stupid? "At the same time there is, for me as
for many, a compelling concern with our dead, and for those who will die if negotiations do not succeed. And, my Lords and Ladies, there is no guarantee they will. So how may we resolve the dilemma in which we find ourselves?”

The undecided, at least, were listening hard.

“I will not trouble you further with the proven plans of the defendants to secure in any way possible the deaths of myself and Clan Elders Nimitz and Samantha, though they involved mass murder of civilian and uniformed Manticoran men and women, as well as other treecats and subjects or citizens of star nations whom we are sworn by treaty to defend; nor with details and subtleties of law. We are as a House constitutionally tasked with the largest oversight of policy, as well as the safety of the Star Kingdom, and it is those duties I wish to address. To do so we need some additional evidence, which may at first seem irrelevant but I promise you is germane, and will not lack interest. So I call as witness Admiral Thomas Theisman, CNO of the Republican Navy, and Minister of War as well as Acting Secretary of State Plenipotentiary of the Republic of Haven.”

There was a stir of shock, and while Theisman rose in the public gallery and made his way through the corridors she addressed the House conversationally.

“Incidentally, my Lords and Ladies, we hereby make history. I am an eager student of admirals, and I know of no occasion when the CNO of any star nation’s navy has addressed a chamber of the parliament of an adversary while a state of war still obtained. And I believe my Lord of Glentormin, whose chairing of the House NAC I have come to appreciate, will agree with me that if Admiral Theisman’s direct testimony had been available to us — as it might perfectly well have been, and even should have been, given the ceasefire — much would have been different.”

A flattered if suspicious Glentormin couldn’t disagree, and said so before Theisman was escorted onto the floor by the Sergeant-at-Arms. Honor gave him a curtsey to which he responded with a bow before giving his oath of honour to speak honestly, reserving the right to refuse to answer in the event of any conflict with his sworn duties as CNO, Secretary of War, and Acting Secretary of State Plenipotentiary of the Republic of Haven — a reservation the Lord Speaker noted with approval.

“Admiral Theisman, I am wary of seeming to ask leading questions, so I would first request that you give us a brief account of your experience of the High Ridge administration, in whatever terms are natural to you.”

He nodded, and spoke to the House, not Honor. “Frustrating, disheartening, insulting, and ultimately bleakly enraging would cover it, your Lordships and Ladyships. We now know, of course, that former Secretary Giancola was responsible for some of that, but by no means all. The absolute refusal of the High Ridge administration to expedite negotiations in any way was baffling. The State Plenipotentiary was maintained for domestic reasons, but that cannot account for the lengthy delay in repatriating our prisoners of war after we had returned all Alliance prisoners. Nor can it account for persistent refusal to address even those aspects of the proposed treaty about which there were no fundamental differences, or equally persistent denigration of the increasingly grave concerns we expressed about the validity of the whole supposed process of negotiation. We were, in effect, told to be quiet, sit on our hands, and indefinitely await Manticore’s pleasure.”

“I see. And can you tell us, Admiral, in so far as is possible given your duty and legal obligations to the Republic of Haven, what if any decisions you reached about how to respond to the situation you describe?”

“Certainly, though to do so I must outline certain circumstances affecting our domestic political calculus, if that is permissible.”
He and Honor looked to the Lord Speaker, who nodded.

“Of course. Please continue, Admiral Theisman.”

“Thank you, Lord Speaker. First, the ceasefire came as an absolute astonishment to us. I, like many, had by then accepted that we had lost the war. We had no answer to your new classes, and Eighth Fleet under Admiral White Haven was literally unstoppable. It was clear Lovat would fall, and shortly Haven itself. And to be frank, I had reached a point where I would have welcomed that defeat, for it would have at last taken down the appallingly criminal tyranny of Oscar Saint-Just. And then, in the single grossest display of military and political stupidity I have ever seen, or read of, the High Ridge administration agreed to a ceasefire that left Saint-Just in place and free to pursue yet another hysterical and murderous purge while we raced to regroup and began to accelerate our rebuilding as much as possible to replace ships destroyed and personnel killed by Eighth Fleet. It was at that point that I managed to kill Saint-Just, take command of the Navy, and begin the process of transition to a lawful and law-abiding government.”

High Ridge flushed at Theisman’s characterisation of the ceasefire, but if he didn’t care to have it said so bluntly the House knew — now — that the CNO spoke no less than truth.

“Second, one of the greater grotesqueries of Saint-Just’s State Security apparatus was that it had its own fleets, including SDs. The revolutionaries of the Committee of Public Safety never trusted the old Republican Navy. It was used by the Legislaturists as a source of prestige and sinecure, much as those officers whose resignations have recently been forced used your RMN, and was set up to take the blame for the Harris assassination for which the CPS was solely responsible. So-called People’s Commissioners were immediately placed aboard all People’s Navy ships, but the fear and distrust never abated, and in the cancerous growth to which the security apparatus of every tyranny is prone it made sense to Pierre and Saint-Just to take the further step of, in effect, dividing the PN into regular and StateSec forces. And insane as that decision and practice was, it had in part the effect intended, for while the StateSec fleet attached to Lovat was destroyed at the time I killed Saint-Just, and other StateSec ships destroyed by Eighth Fleet, there were a large number elsewhere in Havenite space and on various missions. As a pertinent example, such a StateSec ship liaised with and supplied the Masadan terrorists who made the assassination attempt on Her Majesty and His Grace Protector Benjamin.”

How anyone could not have known all that Honor found hard to imagine, but there were clear notes of surprise in many minds.

“We were, therefore, in a position of having, as it were, killed the hydra’s body but not its many scattered heads. In their nature the crews and officers of StateSec ships were among the most thuggish, depraved, and loyal of Saint-Just’s supporters, and we anticipated, correctly, that in most cases military action by the new Republican Navy would be needed to destroy or capture them. We were also deeply concerned about what they might do in the meanwhile, for as we secured control of our member planets and facilities there was a clear chance many would turn pirate — and we are talking, I remind you, not just of cruiser classes, though they were the most numerous, but of squadrons of DNAs and SDs equipped to our highest standards, outmatching any but RMN and GSN ships. We are also talking of StateSec personnel many of whom were wanted for trial on many charges, including war crimes against RMN and other Alliance prisoners. So President Pritchart wished to talk urgently about the whole problem these renegade warships represented — to coordinate action against them so they could not escape, as quite a few have done, into Silesia and elsewhere, to survive by piracy or as exceptionally dangerous and brutal mercenaries. We were fully prepared to invite Alliance warships into our space if they would assist us against StateSec fleets, for their destruction cost us many thousands more lives, but Eighth Fleet could have destroyed them all without suffering so much as a scratch. But we were rebuffed and ignored, being told that no internal
Havenite matter was of the least concern or interest to Manticore.”

For the first time a smile came to Theisman’s austere face.

“Which, if a staggering statement under the circumstances, turned out to be true, for the text of the ceasefire Saint-Just and Baron High Ridge agreed makes no mention of many things. It does not even prohibit, let alone seek to monitor, rebuilding. And with a few months to get our design and tech people on it, without being shot at, purged, or restricted by ideological rather than practical parameters, we worked out how to build podlayers and CLACs. So faced with the profound stupidity, persistent offensiveness, and increasingly obvious insincerity of the High Ridge administration, our major decision was to begin the secret building programme we announced when it came to fruition.”

He spread his hands.

“It was inevitable, and to do otherwise would have been grossly derelict. But it meant we were committing ourselves to being able to resume hostilities should it prove necessary. I was, and am, a CNO in time of war, and while I must decline to give any detail, I have, in addition to hunting down as many of those StateSec renegades as we could find, spent much of the past two years planning against that possible resumption of hostilities and seeing it become ever more likely.”

He thought for a moment.

“Beyond that, your Lordships and Ladyships, I think I can say only that other decisions commensurate with that planning have been made. Our economy, for example, remains on a war-footing, although that has imposed great difficulties and hardships. The RN has been restored as a purely military force, and its officers re-acquainted with proper exercise of command. Our diplomats — also astonishingly unchecked by any terms of the ceasefire — have been active in seeking agreements, understandings, and tech transfer wherever they may be found. Our public, kept closely informed of correspondence concerning negotiations, and its deteriorating tone and quality, understand that renewed hostilities are — or until very recently were — increasingly likely. And at the time the astonishing message about the perhaps late Lady Young’s true identity, nature, and instructions reached us, the cabinet had received formal legal advice that under the terms of ceasefire, such as they were, and in interstellar law, we would have been justified in giving the Star Kingdom a clear warning that unless immediate progress could be made in the negotiations we would resume hostilities after a specified period.” He held up a hand. “I do not believe we would have done so — yet. It is the last thing we want, and the odds we would face were becoming better every day, as our naval strength increased, the RMN’s was bizarrely butchered from within, and the Alliance fell apart under Baron High Ridge’s malign neglect. So we would, I think, have tried at least one lesser ultimatum, coupled with an announcement of our new classes and strength, to see if that might actually command your serious attention. But we could not, and cannot, remain indefinitely on a war-footing with neither war nor peace, and if a proper treaty was not soon forthcoming, we were prepared to do it. And still are, astonished and glad as we are that events now make it seem a distant possibility.”

He smiled again, this time at Honor.

“I realise the occasion is inappropriate, Your Grace, but the irony is too good to miss. It is my strong belief that if that message had not reached us, and if you, also receiving it, had not brought about a change of administration here, the RN, RMN, and GSN at least would have been back to shooting within 18 months at most. So I would like to take the opportunity to thank you, most sincerely, for saving the lives of many of my personnel as well as your own.”

Honor nodded gravely. “God knows, Admiral Theisman, I have slain enough of them, and it
is a blessed relief not to have to seek to do so once again. No thanks are needed. But I believe some are owed, with an apology. I never had the misfortune to meet Saint-Just, but I met enough of his creatures to know exactly what a threat those StateSec ships posed, and some still pose. I cannot of course speak for this House nor Her Majesty’s administration, but as Steadholder Plenipotentiary I can and do thank you sincerely for your successful and costly efforts to ameliorate their threat; and on behalf of Grayson and the Alliance unreservedly apologise to you, and to President Pritchart and the Republic of Haven, for our failure to respond to your requests in that matter.”

They exchanged courtesies, and as the Sergeant at Arms escorted him from the floor Honor saw the open contempt on High Ridge’s face, and wondered how much control he still had. For a man who’d been sentenced to 30 years imprisonment he was strangely unconcerned about it; Descroix was desperate, though keeping a stone face, and New Kiev more of an incoherent wreck than ever, but at some level High Ridge still didn’t accept anyone’s right to do this to him. And from the mix of rank prejudice and calculation glittering in his mind he was thinking he could appeal to bigotry. But it could backfire in so many ways.

“My Lord? Was there something you wished to say?”

His sneer deepened. “Just watching the mighty Salamander bow and scrape to Manticore’s enemies.”

Breaths hissed, but discourtesy wouldn’t move the bigots she had to reach and she went on before the irritated Lord Speaker could intervene.

“A curious characterisation of simple courtesy, my Lord. But I would ask why you neither responded to the Republic’s negotiators concerning the StateSec ships, nor reported the matter in any way to this House.”

“Why should I? It’s their business what their lunatics do, not ours.”

“You do not consider the assassination of the Duke of Cromarty, Earl of Gold Peak, and Lord Calvin Henke, with the attempted assassination of Her Majesty, our business, my Lord?”

He waved a hand dismissively. “We didn’t know then StateSec had anything to do with that.”

“On the contrary, my Lord. GONI reported within a month of the event that the Masadans had PRH backing, via StateSec. That report was shared well before we had news of Saint-Just’s death.”

She saw him realise he couldn’t now dismiss GONI reports as neobarb twitching and felt the lie form with smooth habit. “I didn’t see it.”

Perfect. “I find that exceptionally hard to believe, my Lord.” She felt Nimitz shift on her shoulder, and glanced up to see him sign High Ridge’s lie, and give a thumbs down comprehensible to all. “And Lord Nimitz knows it for a lie. So you did see it and either didn’t understand or didn’t care.” She swung her attention out to a frowning House. “And that is a germane point, my Lords and Ladies. Allow me to show you.”

The holoprojector Ingledew had been using was a naval model her techs had tweaked considerably, and he hadn’t been employing more than a fraction of its capacities. She shifted it to a higher mode as she loaded the chip she’d prepared and the House jumped as a huge display appeared with nearly 200 ships, including 40 SDs and serried ranks of *Mars* and *Warlord* classes.
“StateSec’s fleet at the time that Admiral Theisman killed Saint-Just. These were the ones destroyed in the Lovat System.” 24 SDs changed colour. When at his request she’d introduced Theisman to Horace Harkness, he’d told them of Shannon Foraker’s one and only known comment on the event, and her absolute refusal then or ever to tell anyone how she’d done it; Harkness had conceded the palm, and Honor was still pondering just how much she and Nimitz owed Foraker. “So at the time of Haven’s request, it was this remainder running lose that was the problem. Baron High Ridge says it was a purely internal matter, and Admiral Theisman’s RN forces — the same ones his Lordship repeatedly characterised to this House as broken and inefficacious, posing no threat — have dealt with much of it.” Another swathe of ships changed, leaving 8 SDs and about 30 BCs and CAs. “Including the ship and crew concerned in the Masadan plot. And of those that remain, these are believed to be in Silesia — these around Elric somewhere — and most of the rest probably in the Verge.” The ships changed colours, then shrank to allow charts and graphs to unfold. “Figures for known piracy and unexplained disappearances in the various named sectors of Silesia and the Verge, my Lords and Ladies, showing as you can see a sharp uptick over the last 18 months. And lists of the ships lost to that piracy, which include no less than 19 Manticoran vessels, as well as several Silesian Navy destroyers, and at least one IAN light cruiser.”

For the first time she let an edge of her contempt into her voice. “A purely internal issue for Haven of no concern or interest to us or anyone else? I ask you, my Lords and Ladies, to consider the sheer magnitude of Baron High Ridge’s repeated misjudgements. And then there are these eight SDs, who have been hired by Manpower to guard Congo.” The displays shifted to schematic astrocartography as the House sat up. “A slave planet close to Erewhon, a senior member of the Alliance, where a wormhole terminus was recently discovered. I call as witness Mr Walter Imbesi, Erewhon’s envoy and observer at these proceedings.”

He was waiting with the Sergeant at Arms, and the ritual played out again with oath and proper reservations. Around the House real curiosity about where she was going took hold.

“Mr Imbesi, could you briefly explain to the House your role and scope here?”

“Certainly, Your Grace.” He surveyed the assembly with a glint in his eye. “Your Lordships and Ladyships, although Erewhon is formally a Republic it is often characterised as an oligarchy, and on oath I cannot say that is unfair. Control of policy _de facto_ lies with the great families, including my own, and at any given time some few family heads will be exercising that control. I have done so before and will again. Just now, however, I was at liberty to respond to the remarkable news we received from both the Star Kingdom and Republic of Haven.”

“I see. Would I therefore be correct to assume you have been fully privy to contacts between the Government of Erewhon and the High Ridge administration?”

“You would, Your Grace. Entirely privy. And my primary brief is to report on the putative resurrection of the Alliance.”

Honor felt the surprise. “Putative resurrection, Mr Imbesi? Could you explain?”

He looked at the House. “You will I am sure be aware, your Lordships and Ladyships, that on Erewhon we are less than interested in law and lawyers. What we value is one’s solemn word. If you make a Deal, you stand by it always. The Deal comprises what others might call duty, obligation, honour, and faith. When we signed Articles of Alliance the Star Kingdom and Erewhom made such a Deal. And the Star Kingdom has broken it. More specifically, the administration of Baron High Ridge broke it, and while he remained in office we had concluded the Articles were a dead letter, unfit for purpose, which is mutual defence. We were actively seeking an alternative when the news arrived, and it was felt my despatch here was prudent and necessary.”
His bluntness had shocked, and those with any military sense at all — which included at least some CA peers, Glentormin among them — felt sharp dismay. Honor kept her voice neutral.

“I am sorry to hear it, Mr Imbesi. Could you expand on the obligations the Star Kingdom has failed to meet?”

“Our navy is, as you know, the third largest in the Alliance, but we lack the resources to build and crew for ourselves sufficient capital ships to deter the threat long posed by the old Republic and People’s Republic. And the Articles of Alliance specify, which was for us the whole point, mutual defence of all allies — an obligation we have met in full and at present continue to meet. But the Star Kingdom has failed to meet its reciprocal obligation. The discovery of the Congo wormhole deeply alarms us. Manpower say they don’t know where it leads, but we do not believe them. If I may?” He went to the holoprojector, and the display of Erewhon and its nearer neighbours enlarged, merchant traffic data overlaid. “And while we did not until recently consider Manpower to represent a direct threat to us, we are very concerned about whom they might allow to use that wormhole, and by other factors. As you see, traffic to and from Congo is heavier than its known facilities can begin to account for. Some is Jessyk Combine and other Mesan transstellars with no obvious reason for being there and all sorts of unpleasant things at their disposal. And the vast bulk of the on-planet workforce is of course slave labour — a workforce that has in the last two years been substantially reinforced over and above the appalling mortality rate it appears to sustain. We do not permit Manpower to transit our space, and like Star Kingdom and Republic go after them hard if we can. But when convoys of slavers are escorted by squadrons of SDs we can do little, and Baron High Ridge would do nothing. And while those rogue StateSec ships are supposedly there merely to look after Manpower’s interests, these are our piracy and unexplained loss figures for the last ten years.”

The spike was obvious and Imbesi’s voice took on a savage edge.

“Our losses in the last 18 months include two destroyers and a light cruiser on routine anti-piracy patrols, all vanished without trace. We appealed to Manticore’s ambassador for assistance in investigating. And when we cited the Articles of Alliance we were told that if we were so careless as to lose our ships it was our job to find them, hmm? and didn’t we realise Her Majesty’s Government was busy with things vastly more important than even we neobarbs could suppose ourselves?”

Honor still kept her voice neutral though the tale had enraged her as much as anything High Ridge had done, and even dimmer peers winced.

“This ambassador was Countess Fraser, Mr Imbesi?”

“It was, Your Grace.”

“And has she been otherwise satisfactory as an ambassador?”

“She has not. To be frank, Your Grace, and with apologies to your Lordships and Ladyships for so characterising one among you, Countess Fraser is so stupid it’s a wonder she remembers how to breathe, and so offensive when she does it’s another wonder no-one has yet stopped her from doing so, permanently.”

After one ringing second of disbelief, not least because there could be little doubt from his tone that Imbesi had seriously considered it, there was a great bray of laughter from the public gallery and Honor looked up with everyone else. Michael Oversteegen was entirely unabashed.

“Sorry, m’Lord Speaker, but that’s Cousin Deborah to a T.” He looked at Imbesi. “My congratulations, sir, on a memorable turn of phrase.”
As anyone who had ever met Countess Fraser knew it for truth, including the Lord Speaker, there was a second’s pause, and attention returned to Imbesi who was looking between Oversteegen and High Ridge with a strange expression.

“Hyperion to a satyr.”

Oversteegen grinned, giving Imbesi a seated bow, and Honor felt the sharp amusement in some minds and bafflement in others. But she couldn’t afford to let tension drop, so raised her voice, giving it an edge that bought attention snapping back to her.

“So would it be a fair summary, Mr Imbesi, to say that the Star Kingdom’s treatment of Erewhon during the period of the High Ridge administration, in word and deed, misconduct and inaction, has driven the government of Erewhon, against its will, to a point at which you regard our alliance as a dead letter and are actively seeking an alternative means of guaranteeing Home System security?”

“Entirely fair and accurate, Your Grace.”

“And had you found such an alternative means, you would have declared your withdrawal from the Alliance?”

“Yes.”

“And therefore the withdrawal of the Erewhonese Navy?”

“Necessarily so.”

“And had you considered the Republic of Haven as such an alternative means?”

The House was suddenly holding its breath.

“We were actively considering it, Your Grace. It would be difficult to achieve, and awkward in many ways, but it would also, after all, be a comprehensive solution. And it was apparent to us both that the new Republic is a very different animal from the People’s Republic, in either form, and that it had to be rearming as fast as it could while the High Ridge administration was cluelessly gutting the RMN, clearly had not the least intention of honouring the Star Kingdom’s treaty obligations, and was focused entirely on its domestic agendas. Or peculations, at any rate.”

“And did the naval tech transfer you have received from the Star Kingdom and Grayson play a part in your deliberations, Mr Imbesi?”

“How could it not, Your Grace? Profound unease on that account was the single most important thing holding us back. But those tech transfers were received in good faith and are being used as intended. In the event of a proper treaty to end the war with Haven being signed, we would not be asked to return them. And Baron High Ridge and his administration had faithlessly broken the Deal. Come the day, we would have done and may yet do what we must in our own best interests.”

“And properly so. I have no further questions. Is there anything else you wish to say?”

“Only to thank you most sincerely, Your Grace, for your immediate despatch of SDs from the Protector’s Own to assist us in dealing with those rogue ships of Manpower’s, and similarly to thank Admiral Theisman for his immediate despatch of orders to send an RN squadron to assist also. Which squadron I hereby inform Her Majesty’s administration, on behalf of the government of Erewhon and in accordance with our obligations under Article 41 of the Alliance about unilateral contact with the enemy, we will allow into our own space, on our own authority.”
Despite the hour at which that immediate solution had occurred to her and Theisman, she had warned Willie, who rose while the House reeled, offering Imbesi a short bow.

“So noted, Mr Imbesi. On behalf of Her Majesty and the present government of the Star Kingdom, I offer the Republic of Erewhon unreserved apologies for our failures of obligations under treaty, and will place that in writing. You will be aware the RMN is at present seriously overextended, and as I am assured by Her Grace that the GSN and RN forces assigned are sufficient I will not direct any RMN ships to Erewhon at this time. But I assure you that any communication from your government on any matter will receive my prompt, serious, and courteous attention. And I can inform you that I have recalled Countess Fraser, who will already have drawn her last diplomatic breath.”

Imbesi gave a shark smile. “Well, that is worth something, your Lordship.” In a display of pure theatre he moved to face the Prime Minister. “And I know you to be a man of your word, while I admire Her Grace considerably, so I give you my word that the present government of the Republic of Erewhon will, while the Star Kingdom continues to meet its obligations, hold our Deal to be provisionally resurrected for one year or until the conclusion of a full treaty between the Alliance and the Republic of Haven, whichever comes sooner.”

He offered a hand and Willie took it straightforwardly.

“Thank you, sir.”

Imbesi nodded. “Thank Her Grace.” He didn’t even glance at High Ridge and the others as he was escorted out by the Sergeant at Arms, and Honor’s voice cut the silence while the House still focused on him.

“I began by reminding you, my Lords and Ladies, that we are as a House constitutionally tasked with the largest oversight of policy, as well as the safety of the Star Kingdom. And with that solemn duty must come accountability for our discharge of it.” She moved to the holoprojector and displays changed, enlarging yet again almost to the scale of a holotank; as she spoke crisp naval tagging appeared. “This represents the state of military affairs on the day the High Ridge administration, against the cogent and passionate advice of Her Majesty and every senior officer of the RMN with actual experience of combat in our Havenite war, agreed to the ceasefire. The Junction. Our Home and Second Fleets here, Third at Trevor’s Star, Eighth deep in Haven’s space, Gregor Defence Command, Basilisk Command, Sidemore, and all other fixed RMN deployments. Then the GSN, Erewhonese Navy, and other Alliance forces, with respective Home System and other deployments. Our then best estimate of IAN strength, with Silesian deployments marked. The Silesian Navy. And the PN, as we estimated it with some corrections kindly supplied by Admiral Theisman, who enabled me to distinguish regular and StateSec forces. In all cases, as you see, classes and numbers are tagged. Additionally, these icons represent our building and refit capacity, R&D capacity, and naval intelligence capacity.”

She let them study the display. Senior Sky Domes people had worked on it overnight as well as her GONI staff, and they’d done a marvellous job. Choices of symbols, shapes, and colours, and the form of the display made it a superb, crystal-clear schematic of the security there had been and the victory that was aborted.

“I trust every one of you, my Lords and Ladies, can see Admiral Theisman had good reason at this juncture to believe the war lost. And you can all therefore also see exactly what he meant by describing the Star Kingdom’s unilateral acceptance of Saint-Just’s desperation proffer as an utterly unconscionable and criminal stupidity. It was also a decision made without even a pretence of consulting other members of the Alliance, itself a comprehensive breach of our obligations under
treaty. And what was the situation on the day the Star Kingdom arrested the High Ridge cabinet? Let me update the data, beginning with those we may yet have to fight. The Silesian Navy is little changed. The IAN, though, is a different matter."

A swarm of additional icons appeared showing new strength and classes, with a greatly increased Silesian deployment extending behind the RMN and its allies.

“The IAN’s new classes and initial commissioning numbers have been confirmed in writing by His Imperial Majesty’s ambassador to the Court of Her Majesty.” Faces turned to where he sat in the gallery, and he rose, bowed silently, and sat again. “Finally, the RN — StateSec ships destroyed, and those captured and returned to regular service. And Haven’s new building and classes.”

The swarm was far greater, colours and placement menacing, and she heard breaths sucked in hard.

“And now Alliance forces. Live deployment information is of course classified, but the many reductions ordered and announced by the High Ridge administration, and their few announcements of new building, are certainly not. I’ll go class by class. The additions.” A handful of light stuff appeared, then the Saganami-Cs and another handful of capital ships that had been sufficiently near completion to make abandoning them impossible. “And deletions.”

With agonising slowness nearly half the RMN was wiped out, icons fading to nothing, and silence deepened. Every Junction defense except Home Fleet and Third Fleet at Trevor’s Star shrivelled to threadbare, and what had been Eighth Fleet was left grossly outnumbered by the RN’s new classes.

“Then our loss of more than half our building and refit capacity. The drastic downsizing of R&D. And we all know what happened to ONI.”

Even the most bigoted peers were gaping, strong, jagged, and very unfamiliar emotions beginning to enter their minds.

“Something to concern us, wouldn’t you say, my Lords and Ladies? But no surprise, surely? You voted for these cuts. You allowed them, against very strong and clear advice from many quarters. But I haven’t yet dealt with the forces of our various allies. Most of the smaller Alliance navies are largely unchanged, except that” — icons regrouped, isolating RMN remnants — “most have been withdrawn to Home System security, and so are unavailable in any emergency. Moreover, as Countess Fraser is, if worse than many, not unrepresentative of the ambassadors appointed by Baron High Ridge, it is to the best of my knowledge the case that every single one of our sworn allies is offended, upset, and deeply concerned, not least because, beginning with his failure to make any attempt to consult them about the ceasefire he unilaterally accepted, the Baron repeatedly demonstrated in office that he had no intention whatever of honouring any of our treaty obligations.”

As she spoke colours cooled with the added effect of making the hue of the remaining RMN icons look slightly sickly.

“And then there is the Erewhonese Navy, which you have been repeatedly told and now know to be very seriously disaffected, with excellent reason.”

They were mostly lighter classes but the EN was the third navy of the Alliance, and as its ships cooled in colour and drifted away from the RMN and GSN the true depth of the hole into which High Ridge had dug them all was blazingly plain. She let them stare for another moment, reaching out with Nimitz’s help to meet once again the eyes of those she most needed to persuade and feeling the widening cracks in even the most self-regarding arrogance and confidence.
“There is one further thing, my Lords and Ladies, because the GSN, not being criminally stupid, has continued to build as fast as it can.” GSN icons multiplied far more than most of them had realised, bringing it close to capital parity with the RMN; but it wasn’t enough. “And the politest possible name for the situation you can see is an utter disaster waiting to happen. In case anyone doesn’t understand, consider how we can and cannot defend any of our Junction termini. The only possible reinforcement for any of Gregor Defence Command, Basilisk Command, and Third Fleet at Trevor’s Star” — icons winked and tags flashed — “is Home Fleet, or the GSN. And much of the GSN is a week away, and has its own Home System defence priority. But the RN has more than sufficient forces to mount simultaneous attacks, at which it also has long practice. Send a small force to Yeltsin’s star, targeting the orbital farms from distance, and so pin much of the GSN. Engage Third Fleet strongly enough to draw all possible Home Fleet reinforcements through the wormhole and well away from the terminus.” Icons shifted. “Then strike hard at Basilisk Command. It would fall. It has insufficient mobile units to defend the fortresses against long-range bombardment by MDMs at $c$-fractional velocities. Comprehensively mine the exit from the terminus. Regroup and redeploy. Engage Third Fleet again, already weakened, sufficiently to inflict as much damage as possible on the Home Fleet reinforcements. And drop half the main force over our hyperwall. More long-range bombardment of junction fortresses. Home Fleet has to respond, and is drawn out of position. Drop the second half over our hyperwall with a further bombardment, until the fortresses are gone. And they would be, simply because they are fortresses, they can’t move, and we couldn’t resupply them before a force of SD(P)s and BC(P)s could saturate their defences and get sufficient laserheads and high-EMP atomics through to blind them and take out the minefields. Detonate the mines laid at Basilisk, and moments later whatever RN forces had been left there could start coming through.”

She moved forwards, snapping attention back to herself and Nimitz from the ghastly wargame she’d just sketched out.

“Yes, we still have a shrinking but significant technical edge over all our putative enemies. And yes, we would cost those enemies a great deal — many, many ships and hundreds of thousands if not millions of casualties. But if I were Admiral Theisman, still facing the High Ridge administration, and if I were coldly willing to accept probable casualties of 50%, I could on the basis of these numbers promise President Pritchart to put the Republic of Haven in a position to demand the unconditional surrender of the Star Kingdom, under valid and legal threat of annihilation, within two years at most. Probably 15 to 18 months.” She gave it a moment, and put everything she had into her voice. “That is the plain truth, my Lords and Ladies, and I do so swear. From this” — the display snapped back to the moment of ceasefire, then reverted again — “to that. This — to that. This — to that.”

Deliberately she set the holoprojector to a slow cycle, icons and colours blooming and fading with the truth that had to be faced.

“So. Is there any one of you who will now stand and explain to me why the most senior ministers of Her Majesty’s government who presided in wartime over that catastrophic set of policies are not guilty of capital treason? And not merely presided, but actively instigated and caused every single aspect of our diminution, and utterly neglected the growth of enemies with whom we were and are at war, or may soon be at war. Any — single — one of you?”

She met eyes and for once they stared back. Rabbits in lockstep reduced to single, suddenly scared men and women, appalled by realisation. Warning Nimitz, and feeling his claws tighten, she swung to the three selfish fools who had to die for what they had done to her nations, her navies, her people, and her dead.

“Baron High Ridge? Can you explain to us why we should not hold you responsible with
your life for the unmitigated disaster to which you have brought us?”

He was for once bone white rather than his usual shades of contempt and apoplexy, looking at the cycling display. Descroix straightened her shoulders.

“We didn’t know.”

“Didn’t know what, Lady Descroix?”

“That. That it was like that.”

New Kiev was shaking her head. “We didn’t. No-one did.”

Honor gentled her voice with considerable effort. The woman was close to falling apart altogether. “But that is not true, Countess. You were told, repeatedly, in this House and elsewhere. ONI was told. You did know. You chose not to believe. Just as Baron High Ridge and Lady Descroix and the late Earl of North Hollow chose not to believe, because the truth would have interfered with your domestic agenda.”

Descroix did have a spine somewhere, and nodded painfully. “Yes. We were told. But you were the Opposition.”

“And the issue was guaranteeing Home Systems’ defence, Lady Descroix, not the political boondoggle as which you regarded it. Tell me, by the way, were you taking Manpower money as long ago as Basilisk?”

And by God she had been. Eyes snapped wide in panic, darting to Nimitz as she realised a lie wouldn’t work, and as he gazed back Honor felt him reach out and something gave way in Descroix, like a string snapping. Her voice was barely above a whisper, but the pickup on her lapel relayed it.

“Yes. But they only wanted advice. And I needed … I didn’t …”

“You didn’t … know? Think? Care? You knew enough, thought enough, and cared enough about your own skin to have made careful plans to get out, with a healthy boost to the millions you’d already pocketed for helping protect the slave trade and voicing no suspicion about Secretary Giancola’s doctoring of the diplomatic correspondence with Haven.”

For the first time there was noise from the House, a sound oddly reminding her of the one she’d heard waiting outside the great, scarred doors of the Conclave of Steadholders when Benjamin had told them Julius Hanks was dead. Her voice cut through it with enough edge to gain High Ridge’s attention from the still cycling display.

“And what answer do you have, Baron High Ridge?”

He had a spine of sorts too, however made wholly of arrogance and the pure contempt with which he regarded every living thing but himself and a tiny coterie, and he actually gave her an answer that was half-true, though his voice was grating.

“I had — as all Peers of the Realm have — an absolute duty to defend our Constitution that no jumped-up yeoman’s daughter will ever understand. And that thing is slander and scaremongering.”

“Point to a single thing in it this House does not know to be true.”

“All of it. Lies, slander, and conjecture.”
Honor stared. “Your own naval reductions are all too real, Baron High Ridge. Are you saying that even now you do not believe Admiral Theisman?”

“He’s a Peep, for God’s sake. Worthless.”

“In point of fact, Baron, he’s the man who made Peep an obsolete word, and handed us a staggering opportunity to complete a satisfactory settlement despite your criminal stupidity in accepting that ceasefire. He is also in every way an infinitely finer human being than your bigotry allows you to conceive.” His genuine bemusement gave her time to draw a deep breath and bank the contempt he roused, that she loathed feeling. “By a duty to defend the Constitution you mean preventing the transfer of the Power of the Purse once the San Martino peers are seated?”

“Of course I do.” It was almost a shout, ugly in that still grating voice. “Treason? It’s that blind fool Cromarty who committed treason, with your ignorant help. And it’s letting neobarbs in that’s the disaster.”

“So you deliberately reduced the Navy to the point where it could not defend Trevor’s Star? The money was just a bonus?”

“Of course it wa—” He caught himself, mouth working.

“Was? Wasn’t?” She turned from him, feeling the blazing shock around the House. The idiots really hadn’t understood his larger purpose. “Does it matter, my Lords and Ladies? How does it defend the Constitution to seek to thwart a decision, lawfully reached and affirmed by both Houses as well as a popular vote, by exposing us to crushing military defeat and invasion?” The cycling holoprojector reached its nadir and her hand stabbed out. “He did that to us. Do any of you, absorbing its reality, much care why? What price the Constitution then? And what price his identity and status as a Peer of a vanquished Realm? What price yours?”

Another deep breath. Lock it down.

“My Lords and Ladies — fellow Peers of the Realm, of all degrees and antiquities. The Constitution provides due process for its amendment that we have used repeatedly over T-centuries. Baron High Ridge acted unilaterally to abrogate that due and wholly constitutional process, at an unthinkable cost, not to protect the Constitution but to preserve the one part of it that has allowed us — us, my Lords and Ladies, this House — to wallow in privilege, disdaining duty and accountability. And that must stop, if we are to have any hope of avoiding the utter disaster he and his cabinet have created. Do you need me to spell out why?”

To Honor’s considerable surprise the Marquess of Gravendale slowly rose — an elderly, peppery, and diehard CA Gryphon with enormous pride not only in himself but in the Star Kingdom’s power and pre-eminence. She looked at him and moved to turn off the holoprojector.

“My Lord of Gravendale?”

“Your Grace of Harrington. We have never before and probably will never again see eye to eye. But I am not as lost to reality and necessity as my Lord of High Ridge seems to have become, and while I have every sympathy with his opinions and desires, and know enough to realise how skilled your presentation has been, I do not disbelieve you. And I find I do disbelieve him and the other defendants, most thoroughly. So I would appreciate it if you would indeed spell out clearly what recovery you believe we can make by acting as you propose.”

Honor studied him, mind racing. “I have not wished, my Lord, to seem to threaten rather than inform and persuade this House. Will you — ”
“Yes, yes. Speak plain and to the point, Your Grace. You usually do.”

“Very well, my Lord. You saw and heard the crowd outside?”

“We all did.”

“Then first acknowledge the demand and power they represent. It is they whose deaths in our service have been squandered. And though I think very few desire violent change, very many desire real change, and are now bitterly determined they will have it. Where will this House stand with them if we decide that the status of a Peer is to be utterly unaccountable? Second, the San Martino peers will in any case be seated within less than two months. It is constitutionally mandated, and will happen. How would you have them think of us?” He grunted acknowledgement of that. “Third, each and every one of us has an absolute obligation to the security of the Star Kingdom, which right now means reaching a proper settlement of our fraught relations with Republic and Empire as rapidly and advantageously as is still possible. Their Envoy Plenipotentiary and Ambassador watch us in this moment, as do ambassadors of all Alliance nations. And we will not be able to do so if we cannot be believed to have a word of honour that means something. Fourth” — she pinned him — “we can only assume Manpower watches also. Whatever the exact truths of what they are about, we must know, and to do so require every assistance we can get. For that too we must be people of our word. And fifth … forgive me, my Lord, but have you read W. E. B. du Havel’s _The Political Value of Sacrifice_?”

His eyebrows rose. “Yes, I have, Your Grace. Michael Oversteegen told me to, and he talks sense, so I did. Good book. Very clear indeed, and plainly correct.”

“Then you will understand, my Lord, if I say that while we are legally and honour bound to vote our consciences, what truly matters is to demonstrate to many who with fair reason doubt it that we have consciences to vote.”

He grunted again. “Yes, point taken, Your Grace. Entirely so. Your first four, too, though God alone knows what those slavers are about. And He also knows you have indeed been telling us the core of this for two years now.”

With Nimitz’s help she knew he was thinking hard, and let the silence stretch.

“I have a confession, Your Grace. I voted for your expulsion, back when you shot down North Hollow. First time, I mean. The duel. But looking back, I find myself ashamed of that vote. And puzzled. We knew he tried to shoot you in the back. Saw it for ourselves. And what you did later on to that Burdette fellow. Then you were dead, and I forgot you until you came back. Duchess was hard to swallow, but dammit, Her Majesty was right.” He turned and gave a creaking bow Elizabeth gravely acknowledged, body rigid and eyes glittering, then swung back. “I detest much of your politics, Your Grace, and I expect I always will, But much as it galls me to admit it, you have been a better patriot than I, in word and deed. And by God never more so than this day.” Another long pause, then his tired but stern eyes met hers. “I apologise for my previous vote, Your Grace.”

His rheumy gaze widened. “I apologise to all for letting fear and personal concerns impede sworn duty.” And narrowed again. “High Ridge, if we weren’t going to shoot you I’d do it myself. Treason is right, and we surely need shot of you.”

Creakily, cane in hand, he sat, and there was a thrumming silence Honor ended by turning to the Lord Speaker and raising an eyebrow.

“My Lords and Ladies, would any other of you speak? … Your Grace, are you done? … Do any of the defendants wish to speak? No?” Honor wasn’t sure any of them could speak, between fury and fear. “Then would it be acceptable if I gave you five minutes to consider your consciences
before calling the vote?”

Gravendale spoke again without rising. “Too long, my Lord Speaker. Give us one and force us to it.”

Farquhar blinked. “Very well. One minute, my Lords and Ladies. And if those who do not believe will forgive me, may God be with us all.”

In that stunned, humming minute Honor sought Beth’s eyes, and with Nimitz’s help received a wild churn of emotions, shock, exaltation, rage, sorrow, bitter concern and incredulous gratitude. She very carefully sent a message to Nimitz and his hands flashed to Beth. <If they do it, over to you.> Ariel signed agreement, and a split-second later Honor received the acknowledgement that amounted to Ohh yes and a wash of grim determination. She had time to seek Hamish’s eyes also, gazing at her much as he’d done when she’d arrived at Trevor’s Star from Hades; then the public gallery, where her parents’ shock threaded with pride, Theisman’s and Imbesi’s complex admiration, the rage and gratitude of the Ramirezes, Zilwicki’s deep satisfaction, and Abigail’s shining worship completed her embarrassment, and she sat, easing Stinker to her lap and taking refuge in his pure and irrespective love, however it lay next to a growing sense of triumph as he sampled mindglows. Then Farquahar called the vote and the once unthinkable unfolded.

There were abstentions and a few defiant Gryphon and CA votes against conviction, each greeted by the crowd outside with a rumbling anger audible through the windows. But the two-thirds majority needed was easily passed, the result overwhelming, and for some minutes there was chaos. New Kiev fainted, sliding to the floor in a boneless heap, and had to be revived by medtechs the Sergeant at Arms sensibly had on standby, and High Ridge had to be restrained, shouting rage and abuse, his veneer of civility broken and discarded. Descroix just sat, shivering violently, pupils so dilated she couldn’t be seeing anything. After a few useless thumps of his gavel Farquhar waited until the Sergeant and his staff had restored order, and the three defendants were made to stand before him, New Kiev supported by medtechs and High Ridge held fast by the Sergeant himself. The North Hollow chair with its regalia was set beside them. Then with cold precision he took from his pocket a small black cap and put it on.

“Marisa Turner, Countess New Kiev ; Michael Janvier, Baron High Ridge ; Lady Elaine Descroix : you have all been found guilty of capital treason by a majority exceeding that needed for capital conviction, and it is the sentence of this House that you be taken from hence to the place from which you came, and from thence to a place of public execution, and that you there be executed by fusillade with your deaths confirmed by coup de grâce, and that your bodies be cremated and the ashes scattered in space, that there be neither any grave for your bodies nor memorial of your shame.” The House juddered and he took a deep breath, glancing up at the royal observatory where Elizabeth now stood alone. “Your Majesty?”

“My Lord Speaker, my Lords and Ladies.” Her voice was arctic. “Thank you for doing your painful duty. Before the condemned are taken down one further act of witness may be required of you, and I must ask you now to excuse me briefly.”

She turned and left the observatory, and the House’s shattered spirit stirred in confusion that became intent as Honor silently went to the holoprojector, using its maximal setting to show the feed it was now receiving from the House of Commons. Though not in session most Members had watched proceedings from their own Chamber, and Honor knew that during the long morning — was it still short of lunchtime? it felt as if an eternity had passed — Parliamentary Messengers had ensured all were present, amid a racket of febrile conversation. As the image appeared the House blinked in shock, and the Speaker of the Commons, seeing the transmission light on his desk brought his gavel down, the amplified crack-crack-crack bringing sudden silence.
“Will all Honourable Members please take their seats immediately and be silent.” There were startled looks as they did so, staring at the Speaker. “Honourable Members, every one of you is present save two who are ill. Her Majesty requests that we enter into special session. Do you consent? Those in favour?”

After a beat there was a roar of assent.

“Those opposed? Then I so order.” Crack. “Honourable Members, we are in special session and all usual rules of conduct and procedure apply.”

The sharp sound of a rod striking the doors of the Chamber came once, twice, and again in measured sequence.

“Who knocks at our door?”

The lower Chamber’s own Sergeant-at-Arms threw the door back to reveal Her Majesty preceded by the rod-bearer, Ariel beside her, and after bowing listened briefly before turning.

“Mr Speaker, Her Majesty asks leave to enter the Chamber and lay before it three bills.”

“Honourable Members, Her Majesty asks leave to enter and lay before us bills. Shall we grant Her leave to do so?”

This was the ritual of the creation of peerages, and Honor felt the House’s confusion turn to speculation as the Commons gave assent, rose, bowed, and sat again as Elizabeth entered and went at the Speaker’s formal invitation to the place provided by his desk, Ariel leaping up to sit on its edge and survey the House.

“Thank you, Mr Speaker, and all Honourable Members for allowing Us to enter. Honourable Members, it is Our duty and pleasure from time to time to attend you here to ask your consent for the creation of new peers. Such creation is provided for in our Constitution, in recognition of and reward for exceptional service to the nation, that it may gather to its permanent governance the talents and bloodlines of the finest individuals born among us. And though it has never before been invoked, save once by the former Countess of the Tor, the same clauses of our Constitution provide both for renunciation of peerages, should a Peer of Our Realm find themselves no longer willing or able to sustain that role and status, and for the decreation of peerages should a Peer of Our Realm so disgrace themselves that We and a supermajority of you amounting to nine of every ten Honourable Members deem such action warranted. We do now so deem, most urgently and compellingly, and We come before you to find if you are of like mind.”

Honor had felt the speculation turn to bleak shock and crackling anger, but it was not the Lords’ business any more than creation, and they could only listen as Her Majesty read out three bitingly precise bills listing the convictions and sentences of the House of Lords, sitting in special judicial session, and in recognition thereof abolishing the Earldoms of North Hollow and New Kiev and the Barony of High Ridge, cancelling all titles of nobility, honours, privileges, grants, titles to estate, and appurtenances whatsoever, and striking them utterly from the Rolls of Peerage. The bills, however precise, were inevitably wordy, while Elizabeth was reading with clear and deadly deliberation, and Honor and Nimitz spent time focusing on those peers who were angriest and meeting their eyes with an implacable stare, asking what precisely their objection could possibly be. Some looked away, anger undiminished, but others flushed and veiled their eyes, uncertainty and even nascent and unfamiliar shame dulling fury and shock. Glentormin held her gaze a moment, before nodding once, and Gravendale, interestingly, had a degree of reluctant approval amid his bottled fury, which was not with her but with High Ridge and the others. New Kiev had been mildly tranquilised and was still supported by medtechs, and Descroix was a picture of the purest misery,
but the Baron was back to an even bonier white, flesh stretched over his skull, and still a sheer disbelief at events mixed with rage at others’ presumption dominated his mind. Honor found her gaze moving to the public gallery, meeting a gaze already resting on her, and after a second Oversteegen rose, gave her a deep bow, and sat again. Genuinely surprised, she inclined her head briefly, deciding he was an acquaintance she should seek when events permitted.

Her parents were a complex churn of emotions, pride in and concern for her mingled with a loathing of capital sentences, however warranted, and a deep approval of accountability at last upheld. Uncle Jacques had the same satisfaction laced with a Beowulfan’s fascinated yet appalled curiosity at the procedures of a constitutional monarchy, and was in murmured conversation with Theisman and Imbesi. Abigail’s lips were moving silently as she watched, and Honor cranked up the magnification in her artificial eye until she could identify the text being recited, not from the Book of the New Way but Isaiah. Behold I will make you a new threshing sledge with sharp teeth; you shall thresh the mountains and beat them small, and make the hills like chaff. She could agree with that, vengeful as it was, but her own feelings were strangely empty. This was all necessary, God knew, and she couldn’t help the satisfaction she felt at a long, long battle won; but there could be no more pleasure in the state to which she’d reduced High Ridge and the others than in torn and mangled bodies aboard an enemy vessel after combat, and more than anything she just wanted them gone, with the whole wretched circus, so she could get on with the many things that needed doing.

Willie and Hamish were intent on the image, scanning Members’ faces closely as the litany of indictment and cleansing continued, clearly trying to calculate if there were enough who would shrink from such a precedent to deny the supermajority required. But Honor and Elizabeth had done that math carefully, with some delicate questions discreetly asked of Honourable Members of long standing who were the conscience of the Commons in matters put to a free vote, and she doubted there would be more than a handful of votes against or abstentions. And as with bills of creation, only one vote was required, not the multiple readings of statutory legislation. And so it proved, the three bills engrossed into a single vote and passed without objection though there were eight almost brave abstentions. The Clerk of the House appised the House’s seal, and the Speaker directed him to enter the three bills in the Record of Acts.

In deep silence Honor rose to turn off the holoprojector as Her Majesty departed after thanking the Honourable Members, and the House watched with riveted horror as the Queen’s Herald appeared at the doors, requesting permission to enter, and was followed in by three junior Heralds bearing great bound scrolls of peerage with the royal seal pendant. The Sergeant-at-Arms directed the clearing away of three of the chairs and low border that had formed the dock, leaving the one bearing the North Hollow arms, and though medtechs remained with New Kiev he formally remitted the condemned to custody of the Royal Marine Police — one, in sharp symbolism, a towering San Martino. And as they were stood in line the Queen returned, not to the observatory but to the floor, and presented the bills to her Herald, instructing him to do his duty. He bowed and in turn presented them to the Lord Speaker.

For an officer there would have been stripping of epaulettes, insignia, and medals, and breaking a sword. For this there was no protocol, and Honor thought Elizabeth probably wanted it all over as much as she did herself, for there was only a silent, thrice repeated ceremony that ignored Descroix entirely. One by one, standing before the North Hollow chair, New Kiev, and High Ridge, the Herald received the scroll of that peerage, cut away the royal seal and broke it, unbound and unrolled the vellum, and tore it into quarters, returning the pieces to his juniors. New Kiev and High Ridge — no, Turner and Janvier, now — also had signet rings removed, Turner without moving, Janvier while the San Martino effortlessly pinned upper arms and lifted him to tiptoe, and those the Herald pocketed. When he was done he thanked the Marines before they escorted — in Turner’s case all but carried — the new commoners away, reported to Her Majesty that he had done his duty, and led the Heralds out. Her Majesty surveyed the silent House.
“Thank you for your forbearance, my Lord Speaker, my Lords and Ladies. We are reminded, God knows not before time, that even inherited privilege must earn its keep, and that to be a Peer of Our Realm is no defence in law. And though We can take no pleasure in the necessities of capital justice, We are deeply aware of and thankful for honour in some measure restored to Our name and the governance of Our Realm. The most urgent tasks avail us, with the general election and delegations that will soon be arriving. To those we must all bend minds and hearts, and save for criminal and civil cases still proceeding through Our lower courts We consider this miserable and disgraceful episode concluded. Please carry on with your duties, my Lord Speaker.”

Turning, Elizabeth looked at Honor for a long moment, eyes bright with long, close-held rage, sorrow, and remembered shame, and their sudden relief; silently gave her a bow; and gathering Ariel in her arms walked out. After a moment the Lord Speaker’s gavel cracked down.

“My Lords and Ladies, this special judicial session is now concluded, and you are released to leave this House in proper order.”

That meant order of precedence, which put Honor mercifully ahead of almost everyone, and she was receiving a swift report from Andrew and Spenser about the complex mood of the crowd when the Dowager Countess Gold Peak emerged from the House, her precedence as Mike’s proxy boosted by her personal life-peerage as Duchess Winton-Henke, and came across.

“Honor, I wanted to add my thanks to Beth’s. For all the bleakness, Edward and Cal would be as satisfied as I am, and it helps, you see. More than I can say. And I know you’ll be horribly busy, but do come and see me sometime, when you can, please. There are things I’d like to talk about. And thanks to you too, Lord Nimitz. We can all laugh a little more brightly now.” She extended a hand but when he leaned down to offer his true hand with some puzzlement she turned it and touched her nose to its furry back, making him bleek laughter and confusing Honor completely.

“Oh, and do please give my regards to Mr Hawkwing. Such a nice man.”

Honor was left staring at her retreating back. How in space did Mike’s mother know Jonathan Hawkwing? And why was Andrew so amused when Spenser was as puzzled as she was herself?

* * * * *

Eloise Pritchart was usually amused by how punctilious Javier was when he had to address her as Admiral to President, and since he’d been standing in for Tom as CNO and attending cabinet there’d been more of it than usual. It didn’t stop his presentations from being as crisp and clear as any good military briefing, but did produce a gloss of formality at sharp odds with their private relationship; and as everyone knew about that they tended to be amused as well, while respecting motive. But today he was for once distracted by his topic, which was to have been the very healthy state of new construction, with a side-report on yesterday’s bizarre news out of Manticore about Space Lords being arrested, with some supposed Havenite spies, until the overnight arrival of an urgent despatch from the ambassador in New Berlin, with an urbane enclosure from the Herzog von Rabenstrange.

“We knew of course, Madam President, from Ambassador Kaiserfest, that Giancola had changed what he was supposed to be saying to the Andermani. And we must be relieved and grateful that on Kevin’s strong advice you did promptly send an envoy to explain what had happened and our real parameters and concerns, though she’ll have crossed with this despatch. But we have an even more interesting situation than we realised, because Kevin was more right than he
knew. Harrington not only sent von Rabenstrange everything we got on Young, she also asked him
to double-check anything he might have been hearing from us against the possibility that a Manpower
agent here had subverted it.”

He shook his head.

“There’s two things that intersect, and maybe a third given that weird Manticoran news. First,
you have to hand it to Harrington. Very fast and clear thinking, followed by potent unilateral action.
We stopped underestimating her militarily some years ago” — that brought wry looks — “but I have
my people starting a full-scale political reappraisal, and I’d like help, please, as a matter of urgency,
from Secretary Nesbitt’s people on Sky Domes and her mercantile and financial power, and from
Secretary Staunton’s people on the treecat side. Also, unless you object, Mr Director, from your
wife, on Harrington’s relations with the Ballroom.”

“Fine by me, Javier, and Ginny’ll talk your ears off on that subject, so I can tell you
Harrington is greatly respected, admired, loved even, by most people whose chosen surname is X.
They can all recite the names of the original signatories to the Cherwell Convention, which includes
one of her direct maternal ancestors. Then add Casimir, Hades, and a large, steadily growing
population of ex-slaves in Harrington Steading, who receive a great deal of help with a great deal of
respect. And — I’d like to see your input on this as well, Tony — there’s her relations with the
Hauptman Cartel, and its recent relations with the ASL in building frigates, which I think Hauptman
has to be doing at cost, not to mention his decision to start arming his merchant ships and
empowering them to interfere if they come across suspected slavers. Bottom line? If Jeremy X has a
dream-girl, it’s Harrington.”

Javier nodded. “About what I thought, Mr Director, though I didn’t know about the
Hauptman–ASL thing. But that strengthens my point, which is that we understandably tend to think
about her as a naval tactician, and latterly as someone who’s become a friend of Queen Elizabeth’s.
We know she’s a Grayson Steadholder, though that doesn’t really figure in our thinking although it
means she’s legally a Head of State, as well as a close friend of Protector Benjamin’s. And we know
she owns an outright majority share in Sky Domes, but don’t register her as a major industrial
tycoon, any more than we thought of her treecat as more than a clever, furry pet. But she’s all of
those, and more. One thing that’s clear is that the Ballroom had a better appraisal, and when they got
the Young data and realised what it might mean they gave it to her — even though she has no
official power in the Star Kingdom just now — and to Director Usher. He galvanised us. We know
she used it to nail Young and turn her — and I have to think that was the Ballroom on commission
— so we’ve been hoping and assuming she’s galvanised Manticore and Grayson. And now we
know she’s galvanised the Andermani, because the second thing is that von Rabenstrange, following
financial codes Harrington provided, not only confirmed Young’s money supply was Manpower but
found an agent at their end — a talking head who’d been loudly promoting a very aggressive
approach to their Silesian problem. Which is exactly what Giancola was encouraging, with implicit
promises of direct RN aid once we’d taken care of Sidemore and had what’s left of the RMN and
GSN pinned down, not only against anything they managed to send to Silesia but against the SN.
With whom, of course, whoever we’d sent would have had explicit instructions to avoid all contact.”

There were winces, including Eloise’s, and Javier nodded heavily.

“I know, Madam President. One clear conclusion is that Manpower didn’t only want us and
the Star Kingdom shooting at one another again, and the Star Kingdom and Andermani, but us and
the Andermani. It also occurs to me that those unknowns the Manties caught trying to steal their tech,
and seem to think are our agents, might be Manpower agents. But in any case, counting the GSN,
Manpower’s purpose was maximal mutual destruction of the four largest and most powerful navies
after the SLN. Maybe, just maybe, it’s extreme self-defence against star nations that actually enforce
the Cherwell Convention. But unless and until proven otherwise, we have to assume much more aggressive and far-reaching plans, and I strongly recommend, Madam President, that we assume the involvement of the OFS, and so at least the SLN’s Frontier Fleet. All else aside, if the RN, RMN, GSN, and IAN really ripped one another to pieces in a three-way war, who’d be most likely to come calling?”

In the stunned silence Javier waggled a hand.

“I’d think control of the Manticore Junction has to be their primary target, but if Manpower and the OFS had that control, and reduced the Star Kingdom to a so-called protectorate, it wouldn’t be long before they started looking at us and the Andermani. And while for various reasons I actually don’t think this is likely, it’s possible someone high enough in the SLN to act on it has realised just how enormous a tech edge all of us, especially the RMN, have over them. It’s also possible, and much more likely, that Manpower has realised that, and calculated that if we and the Star Kingdom ever really stopped shooting at one another, we’d not only be released to go after them properly again, but in a strong position to tell the Solarians to clean house throughout the Verge and enforce it. So we need to feed all that into our ongoing reappraisal of threat and response, and though I know some of you will scream, I can’t see that even a treaty with the Alliance will allow us to reduce new construction for some considerable while at least. Shannon Foraker is on planet, because I was due to report on where we’re at with construction, and I’ve set her to analysing as a matter of urgency where we’d stand if we were facing hostile SLN units.”

No-one liked any of that one bit, but Javier’s extrapolated logic chains were, as often, horribly compelling, and in a weird way offered a welcome coherence. Manpower’s true purposes and intents remained unknown, but the ways in which what was possible might make sense, however unpleasant, were expanding and becoming more grounded in known facts and realities, however disparate. And Javier wasn’t done.

“But back to Harrington, who was able to reach out at the highest level to at least three star nations. Who else might she have told? I’d like to know about Erewhon. And about the Maya sector, given that the original Young data originated on Smoking Frog and Barregos’s stance against Manpower has made him a significant player in the League. And the Beowulfans went pop-eyed when the news about Giancola broke, so what will they be when they learn it all? But whatever the answers to all that, if CNO Theisman succeeds and we do end up sending a delegation direct to Landing, we are for sure and certain going to be dealing with Harrington not merely — merely! — as a full admiral of the RMN and GSN, but as the person who has pulled almost all of the strings that will have got us there, a friend — intimate, even — of the two most important Alliance Heads of State, and a primary link with both Treecats and Ballroom. To echo Director Usher, bottom line? We knew that to make peace with the Star Kingdom we needed Queen Elizabeth on board as well as whatever her government was. But we also need Harrington. Doubly so if we really are proposing to take anything resembling an active step against Manpower.”

The discussion that followed was extremely interesting. The PRH had been deeply schizophrenic about Harrington, both following the Legislaturist cue to vilify her utterly as a condemned pirate and mass murderer using the trumped-up Basilisk charges, and allowing her suffering at the hands of North Hollow and admirable response to be trumpeted and sentimentalised as a narrative of typical Manty aristo villainy against an honest common-born officer. Her annihilation of a PRH fleet at Yeltsin’s Star had been simultaneously matched by her decapitation of another corrupt aristo on Grayson. And if her (supposed) execution by the very widely hated Ransom had left a lot of people feeling dirty, revelation that in fact she had killed Ransom, with her entire ghastly crew, by destroying a StateSec BC more or less with bare hands, and gone on to blast apart the loathed spectre of Hades, releasing a staggering amount of data nailing Pierre and Saint-Just for the Harris mass assassination and any number of crimes, had transformed that into — well, a very
complicated state of feeling indeed. Now notions of her as also an industrial tycoon (bad, if useful),
darling of the Ballroom (good, with reservations), Head of State with her own navy (Kevin’s dry
contribution, greeted with much blinking), primary human ambassador to another sapient species
(eh? except for Sandra Staunton), and all-round Space Mother Diplomatic and Military Goddess had
the cabinet twitching, moaning, groaning, wondering, looking under their seats, and eventually
declining into nostalgic reminiscence of who had been where, doing what, when they’d heard which
about Harrington’s latest rearrangement of reality. The prize went to Rachel Hanriot, who’d been in
bed with her future husband, for the first and apparently ecstatic time, when a contraband com had
erupted with the leaking Solarian report of Harrington’s escape from Hades, with consequences at
first inhibitory, then Bacchanalian — a word some had to discreetly look up — in every particular.
Eloise and Javier were eyeing one another with some reminiscences of their own when his
communicator shrilled.

After a moment punctuated only by the incredulous questions What? and How soon?, he
looked at her with wide eyes.

“Madam President, 15 minutes ago CNO Theisman’s despatch boat returned, accompanied
by a Manticoran SD. The SD’s sitting where it came out of hyper, the despatch boat is headed in-
system, and the pilot sent an encrypted message saying, I quote, To Acting CNO, RN. Mission
success. RMN SD King Roger III carries personal envoy of Queen, requests permission to
approach. CNO Theisman and aide remain by choice on Manticore. Maxencrypted message
follows, for delivery President soonest. Calorde, Pilot-Captain, RNS Mercury.”

Eloise took a deep breath, hopes churning. “Speak of the devil. So has the message followed,
Admiral Giscard?”

“It’s still processing. Two or three minutes, Madam President.”

The wait seemed interminable, but eventually the display-screen cleared and a very tired,
exhilarated, and thoughtful Tom Theisman looked out with a slight air of bemusement, sitting in a
room whose windows gave onto unfamiliar seascape and sunlight of the wrong colour.

“Madam President. First a summary. Queen Elizabeth accepts your offer of negotiations in
Landing and has responded by sending a personal envoy bearing her invitation — which is more
complicated, in a good way, than our best hopes. Get on your way here as soon as you can, but note
the augmented negotiating team that’ll be needed, and please include Shannon Foraker.” He rubbed
the bridge of his nose. “The Queen’s envoy is His Grace Theodore Harper, Grand Duke of
Manticore. He’s upright and sensible, so far as I can tell, but only pressed into service because
Mantie politics are in every bit as much turmoil as our own must be, and for similar reasons. He
knows you’ll need time to assimilate this message — which is long: cancel everything else for the
day, now, Madam President — before meeting him, but give HMS King Roger III clearance to
approach at once, and when you meet him just suck up using his aristo title. He’s not a jab at us, just
Her Majesty using someone she can trust when they’re in very short supply. But the use of the King
Roger III is just as pointed as you’re thinking. And for all His Grace is in essence a glorified
messenger, without anything resembling plenipotentiary powers, he is very well-informed and -
connected, able and empowered to give you a lot of background data while you’re en route. And
you’re going to need it, badly.”

Huge relief mixed with new concerns was jangling round the table, and at her nod Javier was
already giving orders to let the Mantie SD into a parking orbit and be very polite about it.

“So to specifics. Forgive any informality, please, because I’ve had a lot to take in, most of it
good and all of it … well, mind-expanding will do. When I reached Trevor’s Star Admiral Kuzak
was very helpful indeed, clearly loathes the High Ridge administration even more than we do, and provided me with an SD(P), no less, as onward transport. The GSNS *Honor Harrington*, as it happened. And being aboard her was enlightening because everyone from the captain to stewards assigned my party and ratings who sidled up when they could wanted to thank me for what little Shannon and I were able to do to protect Harrington and Nimitz from Ransom and StateSec. They’re all deeply religious, they seriously believe Harrington is uniquely beloved of their Tester, and what Shannon and I just call behaving with common decency and in accordance with the laws of war is to them solid evidence that He, She, It, or whatever was with her, and so us. Harrington has hammered them with good and bad people, not us and them, and they damn near *worship* her. That’s one reason I want Shannon — she’s much more famous than she knows. And the GSN is every bit as good as we’ve ever supposed, with even more speed in reserve. So we made it to Yeltsin’s Star in record time, and His Grace Protector Benjamin was also extremely helpful, not least because thanks to Harrington he was *expecting* us to have found a Manpower agent, and as soon as I told him I was Acting Secretary of State Plenipotentiary worked out the one we’d found was Giancola. We were headed back to Manticore within four hours, with Benjamin, his daughter Rachel, her treecat Hipper, and High Admiral Matthews coming along.”

A degree of chagrined surprise was added to the mix. And they thought *they’d* done well in their speed of reaction.

“Matters arising. First, Treecats. I’d met Nimitz, after a fashion, and one look at his eyes is enough to tell you he’s way smart. But Sandra was exactly right — they’re a whole lot more, and according to Hipper — whom you *must* take in all seriousness — it was Nimitz and the other Grayson treecats who told Harrington they’d had enough of what they call ‘bad elders’, meaning High Ridge and his gang, and more or less ordered her to forget ‘two-leg rules’ and do something permanent about it. And having now met Nimitz again, and his mate Samantha, and the Queen’s Ariel with her consort’s Monroe, and Hipper as well as one called Farragut who adopted Harrington’s Grayson Maid — read, high-powered female executive PA — who is also Colonel LaFollet’s sister, we need to raise our Treecat game a lot further, and fast. They won’t just be lie-detecting facilitators at the negotiations, they’ll be active participants whose immediate and longterm goodwill we need to secure.” Tom pinched his nose again. “They also give two legs names of their own choosing, as much as vice-versa. The data Sandra gave me when I left included Harrington’s name, Dances on Clouds, which made no sense until Hipper told me she spent a lot of time hang-gliding with Nimitz when she was young, and Queen Elizabeth’s, which is Soul of Steel. Benjamin’s is Strong Mind, LaFollet’s Guards Faithfully. And mine, bestowed by Hipper after some very intent scrutiny — palpably intent, because they really are full-blown telepaths and telempaths — is Dreams of Peace. To be subject to their regard is seriously unnerving and equally uplifting, and that name has already proven of real value in dealing with the Queen.”

Eloise reluctantly paused the recording. “Dreams of Peace is exactly right. We know it, but who would think it on Manticore? That’s close to an independent confirmation for us that Treecats’ abilities are genuine and accurate. Sandra, any comment?”

“Other than *urk?*” Staunton blew out a breath. “Some of me isn’t surprised. We’re talking about sapient aliens with unique mental capacities of which we’re almost wholly ignorant. One of whose, as it transpires, senior elders has seen and done *everything* Harrington’s done since she was a kid. And others of whom have for T-centuries been adopting monarchs of Manticore to make sure their home habitat and interests were protected, while blowing off tests until they decided they were good and ready to say hello. More tellingly, maybe, for us, the reports are clear that Nimitz suffered serious injury from a StateSec rifle-butt aboard *Tepes* — physically crippling him, which has been surgically fixed, and mentally leaving him, as best I can make out, dumb to other treecats though not to Harrington — which has not proven reparable. He also had what sounds a truly miserable time on Hades, while badly physically injured, because of the climate. Sphinx is *cold*, and treecats’ coats are
thick. So all else aside, you’ll be dealing with another StateSec victim, Madam President, and extreme courtesy would be in order.”

“Hell. As if we needed more reasons to hate Ransom. But that’s a good catch. Thank you, and consider yourself drafted to the negotiating party. We’ll need that kind of insight. Anyone else? Then on we go.”

Tom’s voice resumed. “Second, Protector Benjamin. Even more impressive than I remembered. Strong Mind is right, and not in a rigid way despite his faith. Fast, flexible, very sharp indeed. Frankly, I liked him and his daughter. And Matthews. Still fiercely grieving their dead from that Masadan crap Saint-Just pulled, but amazingly clear about the need to see past it. Openly scathing about High Ridge and his gang. Exasperated with Manticore. Completely committed to Queen Elizabeth personally. People we can deal straight with. And GONI’s estimates of our rebuilding were every bit as good as we suspected ONI’s had become worthless. They must have massive amounts of data, far more than is public — they’d projected uncomfortably accurate numbers based on financial analysis of revenue we weren’t accounting for.” Tom shook his head. “Our newsies didn’t catch it, nor anyone else, but GONI did, to within five percent. So Kevin and Walter need to start looking hard at how they did that, when they can, but not touching at all. Benjamin wants peace as badly as we do, and we actually need to be very grateful GONI’s take was as good as it was, and my news only confirmation. And with Harrington’s help they’ve also found Manpower agents on Grayson, junior because recent but nasty, and they have detailed confessions. Same orders, allowing for lack of seniority, to get everyone at war. When I was there that hadn’t been made public on Grayson, because Benjamin was waiting on what Harrington was going to do on Manticore.”

Tom paused, glancing at some notes. “Sidefill, here. This might have reached you already, but in case not, a week or so before I got to Trevor’s Star Harrington managed to catch one of their Space Lords, that idiot Houseman who’s been overseeing reductions, giving classified tech to some industrial cronies, and called him on it in public. Nailed Jurgenson at ONI at the same time over his estimates of the IAN. And she caught five unknowns with the cronies, all with forged IDs, whom she let the public think might be our agents but actually knows to be Manpower’s.”

Eloise gave Javier a thumbs-up, and saw his quick smile. “But both their real identity and the fact of agents on Grayson are now public in both nations because, third, we came over the hyperwall into Manticoran space — and damn, I want their FTL systems — just in time to see Harrington give a statement on system-wide HD, and it turned out Kevin’s flight of fancy about her grasering High Ridge and cronies into orbital debris was right on the money.” He cracked a wide grin. “Enjoy, Madam President. Oh, two warnings — when Harrington tells you to close your eyes, squint, though I’ve put filters on the recording. And there’s a silent bit after that where you’ll be tempted to fast forward. Don’t. Watch what the treecats do.”

Squint? Treecats? What the hell had happened? But the screen was alight with Harrington facing a packed room, windows giving onto the same seascape as in Tom’s message, and as the political ambush unfolded there was a lot to absorb. The scale of peculation was staggering, but no more so than the detail Harrington had and the clear implication that Beowulf was yet another star nation from which she could command the highest cooperation. The exact consequences of fraudulent party accounts were beyond Eloise and everyone else but couldn’t be good, and looks on Manticoran faces suggested they were catastrophic. And when Harrington squarely tied the forged accounts to Young, pulled in official Andermani documents to demonstrate the link to Manpower, and immediately asked about what agents there might be on Haven, you could have heard a pin drop. Her gaze at the HD pickup as she went after High Ridge was as implacable as anything Eloise had ever seen, and the recording that followed in every way unbelievable, except it was right there.
The conversation made her flesh crawl while her mind tried to grapple with the implications of High Ridge’s exposure, not just as a derelict fool but as … what? A murderer and traitor, at the least, and at the last a terrorist in the offing as well as a smooth liar with nothing but contempt for almost everything and everyone. Harrington’s summary afterwards was as devastating as her voice was cold, despite the rage she had to be feeling, and then she was saying the Queen would soon be on but her treecat had something to say. As his image filled the screen, grass-green eyes glittering intelligence, just as Tom had said, Eloise pulled herself together and hit the pause.

“Hell’s bells. Before we add Treecats to this mix, does anyone have anything to say? Kevin, can that recording be real?”

He had an almost sleepy, satisfied smile. “Has to be, Eloise. Harrington’s no PubIn. How she tapped the surveillance system in that unspeakable shit’s office when he thought it was turned off I haven’t a clue. But she did it, landed a fat and deeply rotten plum, and added it to all that other data, which will be rock-hard, however obtained. And then she did to the unspeakable shit and his fellow unspeakable shits pretty much what she did to Chernock and Yearman at Hades.”

Javier nodded. “Yes. Good analogy, Mr Director. And to Thurston at Fourth Yeltsin — got herself unseen into energy range. But it means the Manties won’t just have changed administration. They’ve got as big a legal and constitutional headache as Giancola’s and Grosclaude’s arrests and trials are for us. Bigger. On one hand, that’s very good news. But it means CNO Theisman was dropping his news on top of a huge political earthquake.”

“And how. I’m almost sympathetic. Denis, any take on legalities?”

“Not before I’ve heard what the Queen has to say. And I doubt even they know yet what of all that’s admissible in court, but with it all in the public domain anyway …”

“And we haven’t been told to shut our eyes yet, so there’s more.”

“Right you are, Rachel. But if we don’t piece this out as we go we’ll wind up like one of those snakes that eats something whole and goes to sleep for six months with indigestion. Javier, we thought Janacek had to be in trouble. Now it seems he’s dead. Implications?”

“Many, Madam President. We’ve always planned on having to face the RMN’s first team, not Janacek, but we have scenarios in case we could exploit all the useless careerist aristos he bought in. They must be gone now, and while the Manties are still in a deep, deep hole, they’ve stopped digging. So the odds are no longer shortening in our favour. Unless they’ve got something serious up their sleeves we’ve missed altogether — and these are the people who produced FTL, MDMs, podlayers, and CLACs out of their hats — they can’t rebuild the hulls they need any faster than we’ve been able to. But they can sort personnel much sooner and start repairing the Alliance. We can certainly forget Erewhon for now, and other smaller star nations we’ve been quietly trying to talk to. So the odds have already begun lengthening again. Not by much yet, and not for a while. But the kind of military last resort we didn’t want but were finding less and less intolerable is now a finite window we can reckon will be closed in not more than two years. 18 T-months at most to the last possible launch date, given the positioning we’d need. And if Janacek wouldn’t have known that, Harrington and White Haven will.”

“So the negotiations have a ticking clock, but they would have anyway. And we’ve no reason to suppose they’ll be foot-dragging this time. Still. Anyone else?”

“Two things.” Since accepting what Giancola had done Tony Nesbitt had thrown himself hard into work — worryingly so, as he’d always been a workaholic, and had also taken on a fierce appraisal of what Manpower might be about and a search for any earlier traces of manipulation. “I
told you all last time I reported that when it comes to it I can’t make sense of Manpower economically. None of the figures they file can begin to be true, and though their known outlays here, and now on Manticore, Grayson, and Potsdam, are small change in themselves, their total budget for all agents now known, with support, training, monitoring, who knows what, has to add up to large and long term finance. I’ve been wondering about OFS and the Jessyk Combine’s presence throughout the Verge, and after Javier’s comments I’ll be looking at what a model assuming Manpower, Jessyk, and the OFS as a cartel looks like. Much more viable, for a start. But this try at grabbing Mantie naval tech has me thinking on other lines. The report said that cruiser was only five years old, so while it’s not a new class it would have had everything else they’ve got — compensators, FTL, MDMs, and stealth tech. So one, how much could Manpower make with that commercially in the League? Billions, for sure. Trillions probably. What would we have paid for it, if we’d been offered it? But two, what would we have done if we’d been given it?”

Eloise imagined, and grimaced. “Yeuch. That’s a smart and horrible thought, Tony.”

“And if any amazing pieces of luck seem to spin in from somewhere during the negotiations …”

“Yeuch again, and also smart. I’ve wondered myself who says we or the Manties have found all their agents? Not Kevin, for one.”

“No.” Kevin shrugged, sleepy satisfaction gone. “But the trouble is all their business is covert here and in the Star Kingdom, and most is just sick bastards who want C-lines to play with, usually children. So they’re very buried anyway, and any could be more than sick bastards, but I can’t find anything like the financial tangle Young’s codes led us to.”

“Fair enough. But we keep looking hard, and we look at any apparent windfalls very hard indeed. Anyone else? Treecat time, then.”

The HD image of Nimitz had been frozen above the conversation, and now hands — true-hands, they called them — flashed while a cool Grayson-accented voice offered translation. In the wider shot that came with the hair-raising massed snarl of threat the speaker could be seen, elegant in tabard and dress, another treecat at her side. But it was the close shot of Nimitz that was riveting, staring directly into the pickup, reacting as any human might to a personal threat but with a deadly, stark simplicity only provisionally submitted to law and anything a human might recognise as due process. The sparking implications of names and memory drawn on went in every direction, a critique of ‘two-leg rules’ that applied to Grayson as much as Manticore. And beneath all was the basic, thrumming shock of being spoken to by alien intelligence, one that used your language and understood you far better than you understood it. The material from Arif’s Commission had had a taste of it, and Sandra had told them, but seeing this was something altogether else, recalling that Grayson record of Nimitz killing and blinding with blurring speed, and the unexpected force of Tom’s words about taking these beings very seriously indeed was amply justified.

The collective shock held them spellbound as Nimitz ended and Harrington’s voice resumed, spelling out implications. Following her words and wondering what a Death Fang and Snow Hunter were, besides dangers to treecats, Eloise was reaching for the pause again to give Sandra a chance to comment when the alarm sliced across the soundtrack and terror unfolded. She found herself clutching the arms of her chair, body rigid, as Harrington ripped out commands and the screen image split between her and an exterior longshot showing North Hollow’s accelerating lightflyer; she only just remembered to squint as the screen darkened and then even through filters blared a flash of blue and a longer roil of white and orange. It hadn’t faded before Harrington’s voice was back, sitting everyone watching up as if there was something they too should be leaping to do, until, after a slashing glance at the pickup and an order for damage reports, someone had come to her senses and
the sound from the room cut off, to be replaced after a moment by an HD commentator who unsurprisingly didn’t know what to say. Eloise was reaching for the pause when Sandra’s voice stopped her.

“No, watch treecats, remember. They’re acting as first responders, completely co-ordinated. And shit, look, they’re calming people down, like throwing a switch. No, slower than that, but still. Seconds only to kill panic, even among injured. And none have lightburn — they obeyed Harrington. Every one. It was those idiot newsies who didn’t. The cats checked on VIP guests first, too — ambassadors and those other two.”

“Klaus and Stacey Hauptman.” Tony’s voice was definite. “I’ve seen enough interviews.”

“Hush a minute.”

Kevin’s command let them hear the commentator say Her Grace the Steadholder confirmed that what had exploded was naval battlefield HE — which was a no-brainer — and presumably the material everyone had heard the late and unlamented Earl of North Hollow say he’d been given by Janacek and planned to use in Landing — which was Harrington already taking whatever advantage she could from yet another insane attempt to kill her. And she further confirmed that what had shot him down was a laser-cluster. Javier’s jaw dropped, and Kevin gave a wide, admiring smile, but everyone’s attention was on the swell that battered the Landing docks and waterfront, clearly doing damage, and equally clearly less than it would have if they’d had even less time to prepare. Then Harrington was back, underscoring the point about North Hollow’s explosives and introducing Her Majesty, and this time Eloise did slap the pause.

“Hellfire as well as hell’s bells. A laser-cluster on a house?”

“Laser-clusters, I’d bet.” Kevin shrugged, still smiling. “In the exterior view there were armorplast bubbles on the roof that had opened, but I think the shot came from one in the cliffs somewhere. Outside the forcefield. Which also has to be military grade with serious generators: nothing civilian could have absorbed that. Damn but LaFollet’s good. Jeremy said he was. More importantly, Eloise, we’ve just seen why people love Harrington so ferociously. Most of us have seen action. Wouldn’t you follow a commander like that? And second, think about what our public are going to say when they see all this, which they ought to as soon as we can get it out. It’s public record on Manticore already and has to be heading here, so let’s beat the Sollies to it. But that’s a bonus. Harrington kills North Hollow. Again. Blows terrorist aristo out of sky. Saves Mantie capital. They’ll love that, never mind taking out the High Ridge administration.” The smile became a chuckle. “Grasered into orbital debris! I thought I was being metaphorical.”

Laughter was a release from shock, and the staff Eloise had alerted when Tom warned of a long message had prepared food as well as cancelling appointments. Harrington had been right about giving a shocky stomach something to work on, but Eloise pressed the conversation even as they wolfed the toasted baguettes that were the cabinet standby.

“Kevin’s right about getting that out soonest. Javier was saying we need Harrington, and that’s clearly correct, so boosting her popularity — more than that, moral standing — is going to be useful as well as right. We’ve already publicly cleared her of those trumped-up legislaturist charges and apologised for the PubIn fake of her hanging. She hardly needs money, but I think we should specifically offer compensation. And have you wondered what people will make of Nimitz, Kevin? Sandra, how do we do offer to compensate him?”

Stanton blinked. “I’ve no idea. The only thing everyone agrees all treecats always want is celery, and that’s absurd. It would have to be symbolic.” Her brow furrowed. “There was something about Harrington’s parents working on a possible treatment for his ‘dumbness’, but though the basic
biology is well understood, neurochemistry of telepathic functions is a whole new field. We could offer to endow something in his name, I suppose. Research. Or an annual award for benefiting Treecats.”

“I like that. Rough something out with Rachel soonest, please.”

“I will. And assuming we get a treaty, we badly need to get some of my people, and independent researchers, to Landing to build up our basic understanding, and learn Sign so they can teach as well as use it.”

“Yes to that too. Walter, co-ordinate what we say about that recording? Hammer High Ridge and his duplicity, of course, and praise Harrington. Relieved at her survival, deeply impressed by her attitudes — Kevin’s spot on about that — and appalled at the damage to Landing. Fascinated by Nimitz. Ashamed of StateSec. The whole circus.”

Javier leaned forward. “CNO Theisman said he wants Shannon with the delegation, but I can ask her to give you a quick interview before she goes.” He grinned. “It’ll need heavy editing, but she was the one who saw what happened to Nimitz and intervened. I’m not sure it wasn’t that moment that seriously radicalised her, to the point of Oops!” Walter was making hasty notes. “And she’s a great admirer of Harrington anyway.”

“Good. Tony, any idea why the Hauptmans were there? Just friends?”

“That, certainly, but no, it’s the slave connection. Ever since Sky Domes started working with the Hauptman Cartel he’s been changing how he uses his money against Manpower. But the friendship’s always been discreet. That may be changing because of all the revelations.”

“Makes sense. Anyone else? Alright, let’s hear how the Queen capped all that.”

The mind boggled at the challenge, but as Elizabeth’s message at last ended and Tom reappeared the hope in Eloise’s mind had gone from bright to blazing.

“High times in Landing, eh? You’ll have caught the crucial thing — we’re invited to bilateral peace and what are in effect multilateral alliance negotiations, and for all the Manties are in a military hole right now, Her Majesty is, I assure you, deadly serious about going after Manpower as soon as she can. Benjamin too. I’m taking the position that I can assure them we’re willing in principle, and extremely interested in any practical opportunities talks offer, but cannot of course commit to any decision before then. But I want an RN team with you who can think outside the box, because my strong sense is that if things go well we will need to make a serious commitment. And all else aside, we can hardly be hit with crippling reparations if we’re allies, can we?”

Tom pinched his nose again, clearly dog tired.

“Sorry. It’s been quite a ride here. After I’d seen all that live aboard the GSNS Honor Harrington, with Benjamin and Matthews, and we’d all calmed down again — which wasn’t so easy for Benjamin — he called Harrington, who came up. I can’t say I’d forgotten how formidable she is in person, but it was … intense. She wanted to know exactly what we were offering, with Nimitz’s help looked right through me, and said frankly it was a problem of managing the Queen’s reactions. One thing we hadn’t thought through sufficiently was that almost no-one on Manticore except Elizabeth — and, very fortunately, Harrington — knew the Legislaturists assassinated her father. Just stop and think about that. 34 years of knowing and not saying. And not just any 34 years, the last 34, with everything that’s happened. Then Saint-Just killed her uncle and cousin, and Cromarty. A complete minefield, psychologically. But Harrington had, yet again, anticipated possible problems of our sending someone direct, and without flagging at all as far as I could see
spun it for us. Next day I went dirtside, to her Bay House, Harrington Steading’s embassy, where I am now, and she brought in White Haven.”

He frowned. “Sidefill. White Haven is now First Lord in his brother’s cabinet, which is pretty much Cromarty’s recalled, and the Space Lords are as they were then — Caparelli, Givens, and the rest. So we’ve good files. I’ll append a list. Anyway, when White Haven had picked himself up off the floor he also grilled me six ways to Sunday, then pulled in his brother. Harrington told us she’d manage the Queen, which made both brothers gawk, and gave me what proved very sound advice. Benjamin too. What matters for you is that it boils down to proving to the Queen that we have changed, that we really aren’t like the Legislaturists or the Committee. We know it. What the Queen knows is we’ve been her worst nightmare since she was a teenager. We killed her father, and she couldn’t tell anyone. And when Masadans killed Cromarty and Gold Peak, we killed his nearest substitute, and the next nearest. Plus she’s close to her aunt, whose brother, husband, and son we killed. So the small stuff we threw together as best we could turns out to matter very much indeed, and you need to bring more of it. Whatever you can. Not just gestures, but tangible sincerity. And while we have to suck up the crimes of our predecessors, as we knew we would, we also have to be not them. So I very seriously advise a negotiating posture of maximal transparency about ourselves and all Saint-Just’s horrors, the stolen revolution, everything. It’ll win us far more than any subterfuge or hole-cards.”

A tired rub of the eyes. “Anyway, it finally happened next day, and obviously, it worked. My own sense is that the crucial moment was talking to her openly about shooting Saint-Just, and why I did it. If you speak truly, treecats confirm it. And she believes it. Try to fudge even a little, even once, and that’s lost. True speech or silence. No flannel, no misdirection. When I was done she went outside to think, and after a bit Harrington and Nimitz followed. Most of an hour later they came back and the Queen went into brisk mode, very positively. Which is where things became even more interesting. His Grace knows I’ll be telling you, but on top of the double invitation, the Manticore Junction will shortly be closed to all Mesan registered traffic, pending a resolution of what she regards as a state of war between the Star Kingdom and Mesa. And will shortly be open to all Haven-registered mercantile and diplomatic traffic. His Grace has the transponder codes needed to approach Trevor’s Star.”

The shock around the table was complete, and Tom grinned.

“Yes, that’s what I said when she told me. And in other news, it’s a day later and somehow they’re controlling how Sollie newsies get through from Trevor’s Star. I think it’s underhand and they don’t much like doing it, but as you can imagine, it’s upheaval, and the plan seems to be to drop our rebuilding news, then Giancola, and after everyone has had 50 fits to start a whole series of statements about the political, constitutional, and military situation, before wheeling me on. I had to put this together now because the Queen wants His Grace on his way soonest, but, one, they have at least six or eight weeks of pure political crap to get through, including the trial of High Ridge, Descroix, New Kiev, and I think, though I don’t quite understand, North Hollow, posthumously. And possibly a general election too, which is going to be something to see. So don’t dawdle but do stay in the Zeta Band, because, two, Harrington has promised to make despatch boats available to send updates, and they’ll be looking for you in the Zeta Band on a least-time course from Haven to Trevor’s Star. Use a single SD, as they have, with the transponder code ‘Haven One’, and whatever gets sent will have the codes ‘Theisman One’, ‘Two’, and so on. I think that’s it, and I’m out of time if I’m going to append those lists, so you go be nice to His Grace, and I’m going to bed. Theisman out.”

“Well, people, that was unexpected.” The echo had them smiling, but they were still shocked, and more. “Henrietta? You look fierce.”
Barloi shrugged, slightly. “She arrested the government on her own say-so? I realise it works for us, but I’m trying to wrap my head around how she can do that now and not have been able to do anything before. And why is Harrington being so helpful to us? It’s … I don’t know, all back to front. She has to hate our guts, as we do hers for all she inadvertently helped rid us of Saint-Just and the Committee. I didn’t see what Tom was driving at about the Queen and her father either. If she knew it was the Legislaturists she must know it wasn’t us.”

“Must she?” Eloise swallowed irritation. Barloi was one of the few in her cabinet who hadn’t seen combat and, besides having been sheltered by a very PRH–Committee loyalist brother she still mourned, had the same limitations Shannon Foraker had once had, a tech-geek’s blinkers about what made people rather than molycircs tick. “Do you think someone whose father was shot by Harris and brother was shot by Saint-Just is convinced yet that we won’t ever shoot him if it seems like a good idea? And I’m not sure what your point is about the Queen, Henrietta. She couldn’t do anything before because she didn’t have reasonable cause, any more than Kevin could ask me to lock down State because Giancola made his back itch. But once there’s hard evidence, things change, and you roll with it, often enough making it up as you go along. And frankly, ordering an immediate election so everyone can be heard is more than we’ve done.”

“I suppose.”

But Barloi still wasn’t sure about anything, and Eloise settled herself to persuade and coax at least a degree of happiness about the obvious.

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The man who stepped out of the naval pinnace onto the roof of Péricard Tower was more plainly if elegantly dressed than Eloise had expected. There were no robes or ruffs, only a beautifully cut grey suit over a trim but solid form. He was, she knew from the slim file she’d been able to access, second-generation Prolong, and actually in his late 60s, but looked perhaps 30, brown skin unlined and dark hair cut short. He looked around briefly, and she wondered what courage it took to be here alone, how she would feel stepping out into the air of Landing, but he descended briskly, eyes seeking hers.

“Madam President.” He offered a short, easy bow. “Theodore Harper, Grand Duke of Manticore, serving as a personal envoy of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth III.”

“Your Grace.” She offered a hand and he took it, grip cool and firm. “Welcome to Haven. We were expecting a message from Admiral Theisman, not an envoy.”

“So I understand, but Her Majesty though it best to return courtesy for courtesy. And as I believe you know, your own envoy arrived at a rather interesting time, making for complications, so she felt you should have someone on hand to explain.”

She had to admire the calm understatement. “I do know, yes. And we have complications of our own that led us to send that envoy. We live in interesting times, Your Grace.”

His smile was open and pleasant. “So we do, Madam President.”

At her invitation he fell in beside her as they headed in, Sheila Thiessen behind her and the rigid honour guard trying not to gawk.
“If I may ask, Madam President, how have your complications been coming along?”

“Mr Giancola and Mr Grosclaude still await trial, Your Grace, the body of evidence involved being large and their various attempts to invalidate their arrests and indictments having had to be heard first. Which they have, and been dismissed. The trial is scheduled for next month, but will now have to be delayed until our delegation returns.”

“I see. And how awkward is that?”

“It’s not good, but the courts can hardly complain at the reason and everyone will have plenty to keep them entertained. Would I be right to think our negotiations will be playing tag with some other trials too?”

“Ah. That’s one of the things Her Majesty wants me to talk to you about. But I think it would be best if you heard her message first.”

“By all means.”

They came to her office, and before he took the offered seat he produced a data-wallet and with another easy bow handed it to her.

“And the compliments of Her Majesty, Madam President.”

Eloise stared at it. The wallet was standard; what wasn’t was the red silk ribbon that bound it shut, and the great wax seal over the flat knot, embossed with Royal Arms. She’d never seen such a thing outside a history vid and wasn’t at all sure how it should be opened. The Grand Duke appeared to realise the problem, and smiled.

“Sorry about the antique mode but we do that sort of thing, I’m afraid. Admiral Theisman warned me it might come as a surprise. If your bodyguard will allow me?”

Surprised, Sheila nodded, watching like a hawk as he carefully reached into a pocket and extracted a small folding knife. Eloise handed back the wallet, and he deftly cut the ribbon at one end and cracked the seal loose, intact, before returning the wallet and putting away the knife.

“Thank you, Your Grace.”

“My pleasure, Madam President. Would you wish me to withdraw while you watch it?”

She took a lightning decision. “Not unless you feel you should, Your Grace, or there are any surprises Admiral Theisman didn’t know about.”

“None of those, Madam President. Though everything’s being really surprising just now, I find.”

That was true enough, but as the Royal Arms cleared from her screen to show Elizabeth Winton’s strong face and piercing gaze there wasn’t at first anything unexpected, save perhaps the treecat sitting beside her. Haven’s envoy had been received, his message carefully considered, and accepted in principle. A modification was proposed, distinguishing mutual needs to end the war and respond to Acts of War committed by Manpower against both their star nations, with ramifying implications. In that light, first, a larger delegation than suggested would be welcome, though desire for streamlined expedition was wholly shared, and second, she should be aware the Manticore Junction would shortly be closed to all Mesan-registered traffic; to reciprocate her generous and welcome gestures offered in good faith it was also hereby declared open to all unarmed Haven-registered civilian and diplomatic traffic, as well as any RN warship she might care to designate as
Haven One, transporting the delegation. The ceasefire was, of course, confirmed, and the Star Kingdom would initiate no hostile action of any kind against the Republic unless and until negotiations failed; which it was to be devoutly hoped they wouldn’t.

But with the main business done the Queen sat back, the treecat padded into her lap where her hands settled into its fur, and her gaze became not less but differently intent.

“President Pritchart, Admiral and Secretary Theisman tells me you prefer plain speaking, while Her Grace of Harrington strongly advises a more open negotiating stance than might typically be thought prudent. And whatever the efforts of your Mr Giancola and Mr Grosclaude in sabotaging previous negotiations, I am well aware it was my own grossly derelict and as it transpires wholly criminal government who made sure there was in fact very little to sabotage.” A brief pause. “I can hardly expect your sympathy, but as you have had recent experience of having to arrest and charge a serving cabinet member, I ask you to consider the experience of arresting all of them. The reason I asked His Grace of Manticore to serve as a personal envoy is that while it is wholly within my power to direct my new administration to begin negotiations as soon as your delegation arrives, there is a great deal going on that I cannot command. It is, for example, possible that your arrival may coincide with any or all of a general election, a capital treason trial in the Lords with multiple defendants, acquittal or conviction of those defendants, and any consequent riots or executions. At best it will come hard on the heels of election and verdict. Or verdicts, given just how many trials there are about to be in lower courts and courts martial, a distressing number on capital charges.”

Strong brown fingers caressed the treecat, a motion of habitual self-comfort as well as affection, Eloise thought.

“So. Nothing to be done as law and Constitution take their course, but it’s going to be a circus, and both I and my ministers may be forced sometimes to delegate negotiations as we juggle duties; some civil servants also. Should that be the case, please do not suppose it to indicate bad faith or delaying tactics. His Grace of Manticore will be able to explain some of the constraints within which we’re operating, and comment on any news that may reach you in transit. I shall also make a further public statement late this week. I sincerely hope the worst will be over when you arrive, and shall do all I can to expedite matters, but whatever the course of events you’ll have as much warning as possible. And besides some business His Grace of Manticore will mention, the other thing is that His Grace Protector Benjamin and the Chairman of Beowulf’s Board of Director’s have already indicated that they will accept invitations to multilateral talks concerning Manpower and Mesa, and the Chairman promises to have the fullest report they can manage on that nanotech you found. Both also indicate willingness to enter parallel bilateral negotiations about any separate matters of mutual concern. His Imperial Majesty has had no time to reply, but His Ambassador assures me he has strongly urged my invitation be accepted, while Her Grace of Harrington believes it likely His Grace the Herzog von Rabenstrange will be sent, with some powers at least. And while it is of course not my business, Her Grace suggested I inform you that just as additional delegates to negotiate bilaterally with Grayson and Beowulf will be welcome, so will delegates to negotiate or — Her Grace’s words — clarify what might be obscure with His Imperial Majesty. Alternatively, your diplomatic boats are now free to pass through the Junction to Gregor.”

The Queen sat straight again, the treecat upright in her lap.

“Finally, President Pritchart, and more than a little against my baser inclinations, I must offer you sincere thanks for the response of yourself and your cabinet to the data about Lady Young. His Grace Protector Benjamin described it as rapid, decisive, and cleaving to law and honour, and I cannot disagree. Admiral and Secretary Theisman is also a most impressive envoy, in every way. So I find, to my surprise, that I am looking forward to meeting you. And I pray God we can together end hostilities permanently, and build a lasting peace between our star nations.”
That was clearly it but before the HD ended the treecat rose on the Queen’s lap, turning to look at her and then, shifting so she could see its true hands, made a sequence of eight gestures. Her eyebrows rose in surprise and she gave a wide, delighted smile before looking out again.

“Ariel says *A bientôt*. And so do I.”

The screen blanked, and Eloise let out a long breath, looking at the Manticoran envoy.

“Treecats speak French?”

He grinned. “Not usually, but Ariel glommed it from somewhere, probably to amuse Her Majesty, which it did. And she’s in need of that, as you’ll realise. Then again, Nimitz said he’s looking forward to meeting you too, so who knows? That the ’cats have their own agenda is something we’re rather scrambling to come to terms with ourselves.”

“I imagine.” She noted how swift he’d been to relax once she’d omitted the aristo honorific, and welcomed it. “They’re extraordinary, and we hope to establish relations with the Clans of Sphinx as well as the Star Kingdom.” His eyebrows rose but he nodded, looking thoughtful. “May I ask what a trial ‘in the Lords’ consists of?”

“Oh yes, that’s one of the things. I don’t suppose you approve, and I’m not sure I do either, but every defendant has the right to a jury of their peers, and a Peer’s peers are Peers, if you follow. So anyone who’s a sitting member of the Lords and faces a criminal charge of felony or worse has the right to be tried by the House. Hasn’t happened for several centuries, but it’s almost certainly about to, and that’s one reason Her Majesty doesn’t know what’s going to happen, nor how fast. She and Her Grace of Harrington have some plans, I believe, but whether they’ll work is another matter. It depends on how soon other enquiries conclude and can be acted on. I’m perfectly willing to explain, but the long and short is that the voting tallies of both Houses are likely to be affected by events.”

“The fraudulent party accounts?”

“Most importantly, yes. Lifetime bans from public office for doing that, which in the case of a Peer means that unless they were also expelled from the House they could still insist on their right to attend the Lords, but couldn’t speak or vote. Hasn’t happened for even longer, but it’s also probably going to. And there are other factors, notably Peers and Honourable Members of the Commons who are either elsewhere without having appointed proxies or likely to be convicted of one thing or another, and may therefore even if eligible to vote be in no position to do so.”

“Mmm. I can see all that does make for complications. Well, we are fairly warned, and it sounds as if Admiral Theisman’s updates will be interesting. What is the other business Her Majesty mentioned.”

“Tricky. Given that Admiral Theisman openly told us the messenger who brought you the Young data was Jeremy X, may I assume you have no objection to frank discussion of the Audubon Ballroom?”

“Certainly.”

“And stipulate that, as they are entirely illegal everywhere, we both of course deplore their various crimes in the appropriate fashion?”

“Of course we do.”

“Just so. But they have now been monumentally helpful to us both, in a quite new way. And
are an obvious resource for anyone who might wish to, let us hypothesise, enforce the Cherwell Convention on Mesa.”

Eloise blinked. “What a charming phrase. But yes, they have been and are. And yes, there is a legal problem.” She grinned, remembering. “Kevin Usher suggested we appoint Jeremy X as our ambassador to Mesa.”

He grinned back. “Now there’s a splendid notion. But there is that legal problem. Her Majesty has as yet no suggestion, but Her Grace of Harrington has a practical question she hopes you will consider. Under what circumstances would it, so far as Haven’s Constitution and laws are concerned, be lawful for members of your delegation openly to meet designated officials of the Audubon Ballroom? Her Majesty is considering the question with respect to our Constitution and laws, and will be asking His Imperial Majesty to do likewise with regard to His.”

“What a very interesting question. Beowulf and Grayson?”

“Beowulf has no problem making a public but temporary exception to their contact laws for a delegation in another jurisdiction. As one would expect. Grayson is more interesting, not only because His Grace Protector Benjamin is confident that under present circumstances there would be substantial majority public approval, slavery being a greater anathema even than murder so far as Father Church is concerned, and Grayson being as angry about all this as we all are, but because their available mechanism is blindingly simple. Her Grace Steadholder Harrington merely has to declare the Ballroom delegation under her protection and they acquire full diplomatic immunity both on Grayson and in the Star Kingdom that only a supermajority vote of the Grayson Conclave of Steadholders could overturn. No Manticoran authority could legally touch them.” He shrugged. “For us it would be a fudge with complications, but it’s a possibility. However, it might also be a model, if, say, all Heads of State present were to extend whatever powers of immunity they possess in a joint statement, openly stating practical necessity. And while this is of course mere star-gazing, if we do indeed wind up pursuing joint action against Mesa, with the ultimate intent of rendering the Ballroom’s cause obsolete, some such course might open the way to another set of multilateral negotiations leading towards, oh, ceasefires, amnesties, and removals from lists of terrorist organisations, say, in return for laying down arms and presenting any documentation arising to appropriate authorities who would act on it. And so the chance for retired Dancers to enjoy the same peace we hope for ourselves.”

Eloise sat back, mind spinning. Forward thinking with a vengeance, as well as about a vengeance. And the last person she’d have expected to show concern for Dancers as well as easy intelligence about this problem was a Mantie aristo — which was silly. This was no time for assumptions.

“If I may speak frankly, I’m surprised you seem so at ease with this subject. I’ve been a terrorist myself, of course, back in the day, and met Dancers — ” She stopped because he was nodding.

“Which I haven’t, knowingly. But I’ve met a lot of ex-slaves. When Her Ladyship — no, titles would make this too hard to follow. When Honor was expelled from the Lords after killing her first North Hollow I was just as angry as Elizabeth, and carried to Honor her apologies and fury about what had happened. She was still recovering from her wound, and grieving Paul Tankersley, not that she’s ever stopped doing that, and she was quite remote, understandably. But when I asked if there was anything I could do she said one disappointment of it all was that she’d hoped to use her Manticoran peerage as well as her Steadholdership to help freed slaves, especially those rescued too late for Prolong who have a hard time dealing with a culture that reminds them constantly of what’s been stolen from them. I’m sure you know, but what they need’s either a community of their own, or
relative solitude with support all round. And that can be tricky to arrange on Manticore, even for the ASL. But they use some rural Tor estates — that’s Cathy Montaigne’s holdings — and Honor asked me to consider letting them use mine. Which I did, and do. Older F-lines, mostly, who need to use their muscle and retrain as foresters, civil engineers, ecologists, and the like. A lot of my land’s mountainous, and they get days alone in peace, and company that doesn’t need explanations in the evenings. Except when it’s me and my family. So I’ve learned a lot more than newsies ever say, or most books. Humbling and enraging. I was in touch with Harrington Steading, too, with exchanges and to provide a wider community for them that was still congenial. And since Honor came back from the dead and Elizabeth gave her that chunk of Gryphon as a Duchy it’s been a three-way thing. We’ve pulled in a few more people with the right sort of estates too. Some of the freed don’t want domed life on Grayson, or won’t go to Gryphon because they were used on worlds with similarly dreadful climates, but quite a few like Sphinx, despite its long winters, and Honor sponsors them into the Forestry Service, where ‘cats can help them. In any case, that’s one reason it’s me who’s here.”

A part of Eloise marvelled. Assumptions indeed. But the implications were startling. “Would I be right to suspect all this is not only a practical issue regarding the multilateral talks but also a further aim of Her Grace … you’re right, she has too many titles, of Honor Harrington?”

He spread his hands. “That’s more than I can say. But I wouldn’t be surprised. Honor’s been thinking hard about the Ballroom since at least Casimir, and though I know no more than anyone about how she got hold of that data we both know some at least came to her from the Ballroom, with control of Young, so she has to be in touch. Montaigne and Zilwicki, I’d think. Do you want my best guess, which is no more than that?”

“Please.”

“Then she saw sooner than any of us that the plain sense, for anyone finding themselves at war with Mesa, of consulting the Ballroom offered a radical opportunity for one more huge shift along with all the others implicit in that reality. And yes, she’s leveraging it. Mindboggling, I know, but given everything else she’s just pulled out of her very many hats …”

“Yes.” And how. Javier’s words — only this morning? — had been spot on. Events had given Harrington an extraordinary concatenation of powers and she was using them as startlingly and superbly as she’d blown away more or less everything that had ever opposed her. “I can’t of course give any immediate answer to Her Grace’s question, but I assure you it will receive serious thought, with a view to a timely as well as practical answer. Was there anything else?”

“One thing, not substantive but important. Her Majesty didn’t feel able to address it directly in her message, but asked me to say she is grateful for the FIA reports you sent. Both of them. I didn’t know myself King Roger’s death wasn’t an accident, and I’m still processing it. But both she and Duchess Winton-Henke, Roger’s sister, think making it public is now right, however painful for both of them. I’ve no idea when that might happen, but I’d guess sooner than later.”

“I see. And will say directly that I am deeply ashamed of what our former regimes did, and very much appreciate the acute personal pain Her Majesty must feel in having to face the matter in this way. We felt a clean slate was our only option.”

“Which Her Majesty appreciates.” His shrug was eloquent. “To be frank, forgiveness may be a step too far, but she will not allow personal pain to stand in the way of a treaty. Admiral Theisman ensured that.”

Eloise blinked. “With Harrington’s help, he said.”

“I wasn’t there for that, but again, I wouldn’t be surprised. But I don’t think I can say more.
Not now, anyway.”

She was surprised he’d said so much. “Very well. Thank you for your candour, Your Grace. In return, I can say we accept all Her Majesty’s invitations. We were prepared to leave within a day or two of receiving confirmation from Admiral Theisman, but you’ll understand reorganising will add to that. After I’ve informed my cabinet of the salient points in Her Majesty’s message, and your elucidation, I would be grateful if you could be available to meet them.”

“Of course, Madam President.”

“And meantime I’m afraid you’re left at a loose end for a while, and again for a day or two. Is there anything I can offer to ease waiting?”

He hesitated. “I don’t suppose it’s on, but I’d be glad to see whatever I might of the city. Always liked travelling, and the setting’s very fine.”

The conditions were very different from anything on Manticore too, and there would be no harm in a senior Manticoran seeing Haven’s realities. An unholy notion bloomed in Eloise’s mind.

“Of course. And you’ve been cabined on an SD for a month. I’m sure we can manage something.”

* * * * *

Honor did her damnedest to sit out the general election entirely but it wasn’t possible. Besides the many trials, and increasingly verdicts and sentences, forming a steady drum-roll behind campaigns, the political arguments going on had precious little to do with party politics as Manticore had always known them. The shattered CA was involved in savage internal bloodletting, False Liberals were bankrupt and facing extermination by True Liberal candidates bankrolled by Cathy Montaigne, Progressives were subdued and hoping to survive, New Men were looking very threadbare indeed while frantically rowing with the tide, and the rest were in rare but strong harmony. After the Lords’ trial everyone accepted that the emergent Centrist, Crown Loyalist, and True Liberal majority would be enormous in the Commons, and while in the Lords a lot slimmer on paper, just as large in practice when it came to conducting negotiations. And while the politics of that coalition had many contradictions, the usual bones of contention were hors de combat or irrelevant. San Martin was in, the Navy Budget was going way up even if meant a tax-hike, Silesia was going to be an Andermani sphere whatever anyone wanted, and social boondoggles were out of the question for a long while. Even the Constitutional crisis had proven a paper tiger, because all party leaders and pretty much everyone else thought the Queen had got it right despite an unprecedented challenge, and said so loudly, while the few who didn’t were either Gryphon Peers dimmer than Gravendale and facing escalating troubles with furious tenants of their estates, or else under indictment.

What everyone did want to argue about was what sort of settlement with Haven would be possible, and how best to go on kicking Manpower and all things Mesan wherever it most hurt, and for both topics the guests they wanted more than anyone, besides Cathy Montaigne, were Honor and Thomas Theisman. Acutely mindful of laser-clusters, not even the brashest newsies were going to invade the Bay House’s airspace, but flocks of lightflyers gathered over Jason Bay and Communications was unremittingly besieged. Neither brief nor longer statements helped in the least, and to compound things Theisman was at something of a loose end. He and his aide were seeing Hamish regularly, but he’d already agreed to all he reasonably could, and a bit more, until the
delegation arrived. There were limits to what he could be invited to do as well: naval visits that might have been possible were made awkward by circumstance — HMS *Unconquered* and Saganami Island were one thing, but recent-build ships, Junction forts, and anywhere close to the full-bore rebuilding of R&D another, if only because the intense coverage of his every appearance made it important to give no valid grounds for criticism. The Bay House offered enough recreations, God knew, and he used pool, gym, and (with experimental interest) salle, as well as watching the ongoing Manticoran spectacle with bemused fascination, but it was time-filling.

Imbesi had been busy for a while, content to raise Erewhon’s profile in the Star Kingdom, but once he’d said what he wanted interviewers found he couldn’t be drawn into rehashing it or commenting on domestic matters. He did, in a show that included Cathy Montaigne, offer a scathing account of both Manpower and Manticore’s treatment of those found to have dealings with it, and a ghastly account of what he knew or could deduce about operations on Congo that was grimly endorsed by Cathy. He was seeing various ambassadors and talking with Sky Domes and Klaus Hauptman about establishing a Grayson-style yard at Erewhon, but he too was at the limits of what he could do before the Erewhonese delegation arrived.

Worse still (at least so far as Andrew LaFollet was concerned) was that without the grind of opposing High Ridge in the Lords Honor also had time on her hands once the Academy term ended. There was plenty crossing her desk, but habitual efficiency dealt rapidly with the two thirds that mattered and even more rapidly with the third that didn’t. Thanks to Willard Neufstiler, Howard Clinkscales, Richard Maxwell, and other appointees, Steading, Duchy, and Sky Domes ran very smoothly, and little needed her personal attention between the various scheduled cabinets, formal reports, and boards, Nor did Alfredo Yu need much supervising, although the Own remained more scattered than usual, given units detached to Erewhon and standing in for HMS *King Roger III* at Trevor’s Star, and while he and Warner Caslet had been good company for Theisman and Honor they had their own duties. The Queen and Hamish Alexander were preoccupied, not least with capital and other sentences beginning to come through from special courts and courts martial; and Mike was catching up with her command after lengthy absence on the Queen’s behalf. There was the outstanding invitation from Katie Winton-Henke, but that wasn’t for Theisman, and Honor knew from a certain reluctance in Andrew’s mind that there might be fireworks involved, or at least embarrassments, though she wasn’t sure why. Nor had Mr Hawkwing been much help, saying only he’d had occasion to meet Her Grace the Duchess on Admiral Yu’s business — read, Andrew’s business — and found her a most gracious lady. He certainly returned her greetings, and Her Grace the Steadholder was left with a calculating look in her eye, sneaking speculation, and a bland bit of mental soothing by Nimitz. Honor had known from the grainy images that the source of the anonymous data must involve old Grayson tech, and her combat brain told her as soon as she asked it that the Gold Peak town-house had line-of-sight both to Government House and the Bay House, which was suggestive, but there was no data available as to the how of it, by her own implicit command, and very irritating it was too.

All in all, sitting out the election was proving thoroughly tedious; but there had been one looming duty neither she nor anyone could ignore: the executions. Once appeal was exhausted, Manticoran capital law was expeditious, and from the House of Lords there could be no appeal; so Janvier, Descroix, and Turner had been granted 14 days only in which to make their peace with God and settle what little remained of their estates. The Queen’s Bench, in unprecedented collective session, had unanimously refused to hear any challenge, and the grim, implacable preparations under way in Parliament Square left no-one in the slightest doubt sentences would be carried out as the highest judicial authority decreed. Nor was anyone protesting much: even the solid lobby opposed to all capital punishment was half-silenced by the sheer magnitude of what High Ridge had done, and churches were either deeply troubled and self-contradictory, or content that remission to the judgement of God was in this case a reasonable temporal solution. But even upmarket HD channels
were possessed of finger-dabbling fascination, and the yellow pack, reeling from the weight of legal action falling on them and eyeing the size of likely awards for libel, had decided — not stupidly, but with all their usual finesse — that far and away their best course was to retell the tale of the Salamander’s admirable fight against the Worst of Manticore in terms of unstinting praise. Along the way High Ridge could be vilified, their horrid experience of being duped by him proclaimed, and a great deal of old and juicy material dug out by way of supposedly righting inadvertently skewed past coverage. Their sorrow and remorse did not, of course, extend to leaving Honor alone, and she had had to pull in extra squads of Grayson marines from the Own to provide her parents and guests with escorts adequate to the shouting, inchoate mobs bawling idiot questions. And with only a few days to go, after giving evidence at the trial of Barker and Egremont about the costs for Sky Domes of fighting and effects of enduring fabricated libels and defamations, she found herself confronted by a particularly determined and reckless reporter whose diving barrel-roll between HSG men on her perimeter brought him upright facing Andrew’s drawn pulser at less than six inches. The jostle of newsies froze.

Honor shook her head in sheer exasperation. “It’s alright, Andrew. Let him through. Mr Girinatunga, I believe. You have a question that warrants risking your life?”

He swallowed, looking at the pulser, but really was young and stupid.

“Your Grace, will you be attending the killings?”

She raised an eyebrow. “If you mean the lawful executions scheduled for Parliament Square in three days, yes. Any juror who votes for a capital sentence should be prepared to witness its imposition, don’t you think, Mr Girinatunga? And I have said I would stand witness as a juror and as Steadholder Plenipotentiary. Did you not bother to check statements I’ve issued before you elected to risk your life and that of others, hurling yourself at an armed security cordon?”

He didn’t bat an eyelid. “And how do you feel about it, Your Grace?”

“Ignoring your crass impertinence, how do I feel about what, exactly, Mr Girinatunga?”

Silence stretched while he tried to work it out, and to his vague credit came up with an answer of sorts.

“Winning. Again. So finally.”

Honor let genuine contempt into her voice. “Winning? How exactly do you construe our realisation of just how deep a hole we’re in as ‘winning’, Mr Girinatunga?” At her prompt Nimitz, edgy from massed paparazzi emotions, happily allowed himself unsheathed claws and bared fangs, and the newsie recoiled. “I can’t say I disagree with Clan Elder Nimitz, Mr Girinatunga. And I object to him and my Armsmen being needlessly stressed by people who cannot tell self-interest from necessity, and have neither the least courtesy nor any concern whatever for anyone but themselves. Colonel LaFollet would have been entirely justified in shooting you dead, and for what? A question already answered and an inanity.” She let her address expand to the quivering faces and pickups thicketing her. “How do I feel about having to witness executions? How do you suppose, Mr Girinatunga? Or any of you? It is a matter of record that I hate and loathe capital punishment, with good reason, as you might recall if you bothered to think at all. And yes, I nevertheless believe it sometimes necessary, or I wouldn’t have argued and voted for it on this occasion. If you’re actually interested in the imperatives involved, ask W. E. B. Du Havel why an idiot newsie inadvertently shot dead and the use of state power to enforce accountability on its dominant political class are not the same, though both end in the death of fools and serve to discourage others. Mr Girinatunga, you’re still in Colonel LaFollet’s way.”
Back in the armoured aircar she blew out a breath, rolling her shoulders, while Nimitz settled in her lap, relieved to be insulated from the roil.

“Good control, Andrew. Thank you. Actually shooting him would have made a mess.”

“It was a near thing, Ma’am. They don’t seem to learn.”

“No they don’t. Two more court appearances tomorrow, then the calendar’s clear for a bit, saving executions. And once they’re done I’m going to Sphinx for a few days, if Tom and Walter don’t mind. Or they could come. I know you hate it, but I want to ‘glide.” Nimitz bleeked agreement.

“And sail, Stinker.” He gave her a dirty look and a thumbs-down, making her laugh. “I know. Two legs are very odd.”

Andrew did hate it, ‘gliding for security reasons and sailing because he entirely agreed with Nimitz that oceans were for avoiding, not playing with, but he also knew how much it mattered to her, and how restorative clean days dealing entirely with air and water were. Theisman and Imbesi, who had seen the incident, were willing to be abandoned for a while or, if she really didn’t mind them coming, to see Sphinx. But first there were her remaining court appearances in libel and conspiracy to defame cases, and the riveting, appalling, necessary spectacle of the public executions to endure.

Public was for most going to mean by HD, for with Cabinet, Space Lords, both Houses, the Queen’s Bench, and Her Majesty attending, Parliament Square was crowded and severely cordoned off, though as space remaining became clearer some of those filling streets beyond were allowed to come through. The scaffold with four posts and forcefield backstop was raised, the square otherwise bare save for a small, central daïs for Her Majesty. Automatically heading for her place among the Lords, Nimitz on one shoulder and Samantha, at her insistence, on the other, Honor saw Elizabeth already present, Justin, Ariel, Monroe, and Roger, just back from New Berlin, beside her, with Ellen Shemais behind, and wasn’t surprised to receive an imperious summons. With that many people present there wasn’t anything that could be called silence, but no-one was talking, and shufflings and rustlings died away as they watched her mount steps to the platform and fall in beside Roger as Spenser stopped by the PGS officer at the foot of the steps and Andrew stood by Ellen Shemais.

Elizabeth’s eyes met hers for a long moment, then returned to the posts, and Honor rested a hand briefly on Roger’s shoulder, keeping her voice to a murmur.

“Good job in New Berlin, I hear.”

“Thanks. Interesting.” He swallowed. “Not so keen on this.”

“Rightly. But needs must.”

There wasn’t anything else to say, just the few minutes to wait while the last witnesses assembled and the remaining space was filled by members of the public. How it had been managed Honor didn’t know, but an ASL delegation was prominent, including Zilwicki, Isaac Douglass, the Hauptmans, and a man she recognised with interest as Du Havel. His J-line ancestry could be seen as he squared himself, hands behind his back, but his mindglow was a dazzling blaze that had treecats’ heads turning. He met her gaze, inclining his head before beginning to scan assembled branches of government. Then the condemned were led out by Marine guards and bound to the posts. All were, mercifully, sufficiently tranquilised to be docile, and though Honor doubted they’d made any peace with God or themselves there was nothing unseemly save the whole ghastly spectacle itself. Military precision was the keynote but had to accommodate the symbolic fourth post, to which the dress-uniformed Gunny commanding the guards solemnly attached inverted and cancelled arms of North Hollow. Neither Constitution nor law had ever got round to declaring any
protocol for multiple executions, and Honor knew Elizabeth had cut through truly bizarre arguments about precedence by insisting on simultaneity, not sequence; so the execution squad, drawn from the Royal Marines was 20 strong, commanded by General MacIntyre in person, on the grounds that it was not a responsibility he cared to delegate. And composed of veteran non-coms, dress uniforms heavy with seniority and wound stripes, campaign ribbons and the medals of gallantry — which was the point, however strange it looked. As they came to a precise halt and unslung pulse-rifles, MacIntyre looked outwards, face set, bowed to Her Majesty, managed not to look at Honor, and turned to bow to Lord Speaker Farquhar, at the front of the Lords nearest the scaffold.

“My Lord Speaker.”

“General MacIntyre. Do your duty, sir.”

A salute, and that was it — no more folderol or speeches, not even a statement of who the condemned were and what they had done, which would have taken far too long; just a cold, measured sequence of commands that led to a single volley as the price owed was at last paid in full. Even 20 pulse rifles made little sound, but the moment was a whip-crack in every soul present, and for billions watching on HD. No-one on the daïs moved an inch, nor, Honor noticed in one corner of her mind, did Du Havel, but as blood blossomed on plain clothing others did, flinching and turning heads away. And there was still the prescribed ritual of coups de grâce, needless as pulser-darts made it, and MacIntyre, commanding the squad to secure weapons, took from a wooden box proffered by his aide her M-1911. He’d commed her a week back, saying blandly that archaic regulations required for a coup de grâce ‘a large calibre’, a problem with pulser darts; and she hadn’t hesitated to make the loan, appreciating symbolism, but hadn’t anticipated the effect. Each shot boomed like thunder, echoes rolling round the square; massive lead slugs did much greater visible damage, rocking corpses against their ties; and the last, by chance or cunning Marine contrivance, blew out the riddled centre of the North Hollow arms and cut its binding, sending it clattering to the scaffold beneath.

As MacIntyre returned gun to box, repeated his bows, and led his squad off Honor’s gaze was resting on what had been wrought, but her mind was far in the past, considering the whole course of events. Whatever else was involved, for her the path towards this present had begun with Pavel Young stepping into that shower-room, smirking lechery and easy confidence in his right to rape; and she wondered, as often, how things might have been different if she’d had the sense and confidence to report him as well as the skill to prevent and injure him. He could not then have been in command of HMS Warlock at First Hancock, the ridiculous, bitter fiasco of his court martial would never have taken place, and his vengeful commission to Summervale to kill Paul and herself would not have followed. Her gawky, shocked, teenage stupidity had had such an exquisitely high price, and she would never stop paying it; nor had it ever been enough to kill Summervale and Young, for the grotesque egotism, cruelty, and utterly corrupt, amoral privilege they represented was untouched. The recording of High Ridge’s and yet another North Hollow’s casual enjoyment of plans to blot away ships, rating and officers, ‘cats, and innocents, so shocking a revelation to so many, had to her been as utterly familiar as the besmirching gaze raking her body years ago, seeing only a desirable toy to use and discard. And Descroix and New Kiev, if smaller fry in every way, lungers for offal in High Ridge’s wake, had had the same purity of self-interest and contempt for all but themselves. Abstractly she could pity their stunted lives of self-indulgence and utter blindness, inculcated with such crippling values and beliefs by elders as small-souled and morally defective as they had themselves in turn become; but they had had every opportunity as adults to learn better and never even dreamed of trying to do so. Nimitz’s satisfaction was richly in her mind, and in this moment she thought she could sense Samantha too, communing with him; her own relief was not, despite everything, merely at the deaths of inveterate enemies, but in inflicting, at last, a blow that did not strike at one arrogant body, one hydra-head, but at what had lain behind it. Even in the fighting seconds when she’d struck at Pavel Young’s incompetent attack, calculating damage done, she’d
known it could do no good, however necessary in the moment; but this — this at long, long last struck through its representatives at what created them.

She was half-aware of Elizabeth and others preparing to withdraw and waiting for her as she stared at slumped forms. After a moment Nimitz nudged her, and after bowing her head she turned to join them. And that was the image Manticore remembered, even more than bodies at which most could not steadily look: a sharp, beautiful face with almond eyes in which for a frozen moment there had been infinite pity and no mercy at all; a treecat’s head on either side, just as still, green eyes as unmoved by necessity of death as brown ones; about all the same serene and absolute menace Burdette saw before he died, encapsulated in acknowledgment of the God she honoured as she turned from the final carnage she more than anyone had wrought.

Sphinx was in every way a blessed relief. The season was early autumn, air crisp and fresh without winter cold, and the sun shone benignly on Copperwalls, picketwood, and Tannerman Ocean alike, its familiar attenuated shade an ease to Honor’s eye after its constant brightness in Landing. Nimitz and Sam were also delighted, and word had clearly passed because Honor had barely disembarked with her parents and guests when a wave of Bright Water Clan ’cats flowed from the forest with a cacophony of bleeking to surround Farragut, Nimitz, and Sam. Honor had come to like Walter Imbesi considerably, sensing the strong codes that chanelled and restrained ruthlessness, and admired Tom Theisman far more than he realised, so she kept her amusement from her voice despite the looks on their faces.

“There’s no problem, just a very furry welcome home, and some congratulations, I expect. The Clans have HD and coms now, and Landing ’cats report by Sign, but it’s thin data for a ’cat and they’ll be wanting Sam’s reports.” ’Cats were gathering in intent circles. “As a Memory Singer she can give them the equivalent of full-immersion holo, so they’ll be at it awhile. And most of the wild ’cats will probably stay outside, but some will have a good look round. Just nod politely, and if any start signing, crossed hands, palms down, tells them you need a translator.”

Theisman was staring, bracing himself against the heavy gravity. “I thought wild ’cats were reclusive.”

“They are, mostly, though things are changing. But the Bright Water Clan’s always been … what? a bit avant-garde, I suppose. They made first contact, and supplied the Grayson cats, except Sam, who’s an adopted member through Nimitz. And they’ve always been a bit fixated on the house, which has been shut up for a while, so there are more than usual.”

A lot more, in fact — more than she’d seen together since visiting the Clan with Nimitz as a child, and she’d bet their conversation was as much political as gossipy; but just now even their politics could wait. That wasn’t so easy, for an astonishing number did follow Sam, Nimitz, and Farragut inside, bleeking curiosity and examining new two legs with intensity. Many offered true hands, but after a bleek from Sam also took to offering Theisman a salute of sorts before doing so, and when Honor asked what was up she received a rapid barrage of sign.

“It’s exactly what it seems, Tom. They like dead enemies, but prefer no enemies, and the decision to send a colony to Grayson was explicitly because they recognised the danger of war exceeding the Eridani Edict. So they approve of your mission strongly and Sam seems to have decided that as you don’t yet read much sign a salute is the proper and easiest way of saying so.
They don’t expect it to be returned, but shaking hands amuses them.”

He looked bemused. “Has it always been like this for you?”

“Not exactly. Before we could communicate it was very different. But ’cats have always been there for me, not just Nimitz. When I was 14 I sneaked off to the Clan homegrounds, happily supposing my parents didn’t know when in fact they were having conniptions.”

She’d been speaking quietly but her father’s voice cut in from the kitchen.

“Very reasonable and elegant conniptions, I might add, considering.”

“I’m sure they were, Daddy. I was never in the least danger.”

Her mother materialised at her side, Faith over one shoulder. “You were 60 miles away playing with fire, dear, but we knew you would sooner or later and Nimitz knew perfectly well I’d have skinned him alive if he’d let anything happen to you.”

Nimitz bleeked laughter across the room, signing rapidly, and a second later all ’cats were bleeking.

“They obviously remember it too. He probably had them on their best behaviour, not that I knew, brash child that I was.”

“Not really, dear. Nor even fearless. Just determined to do whatever seemed right, however much it scared you.”

“A quality clearly retained.” Theisman shook his head. “Forgive me, it’s just so very different from anything I’ve experienced. In a Dolist childhood in Nouveau Paris, a tree was a rare thing, a world of trees an HD fantasy. And I can’t help thinking this is all a blazing clue to your extraordinary situational awareness that we sailed right past.”

Honor grinned. “Some of that.” Her grin faded. “But trees — that’s something else. No system should settle for such an experience for its children. And that at least we can put right.”

She’d already had Bay House valets serving Theisman and Imbesi report measurements, and the seriously engineered, comfort-in-the-Sphinxian-Crown-Reserve-in-autumn gear in which they appeared next morning, with surprised expressions, was everything they needed except pulse rifles, supplied, after a proper breakfast, from the substantial rack in the gunroom.

“The number of ’cats tagging along makes them superfluous. In clan numbers ’cats are a super-apex predator — even hexapumas and peak bears flee them. But it’s a basic rule of life on Sphinx that you don’t go into the Crown Reserve without adequate firepower.”

Imbesi was unfazed by the weapon but still fingering clothing. “This outfit is a substantial gift, Honor. I know serious engineering and tailoring when I see it.” His glance was acute. “A princely gift, in fact.”

“I don’t get much pleasure from being a billionaire, Walter. Allow me this, please. And if it helps to show I am one who honours the Deal, well, so would all proper behaviour. But we can talk as we go. Mornings in the picketwood aren’t for wasting.”

The SFS had without being asked (Andrew blandly informed her) closed a large area of the Crown Reserve and Copperwalls to all but very local traffic, citing Honorary Colonel Harrington’s guests and need for secure privacy — an order no-one on Sphinx was prepared to challenge just
now, whatever newsies wanted or offered. Honor was too happy with the results to do more than
quirk an eyebrow, and the complete absence of machine noise as they entered the picketwood was a
glorious pleasure. 'Cats flashed along branches at every angle, mostly gambolling, but with a serious
perimeter of which she assured Andrew and Spenser, as out of their comfort zones as Thomas and
Walter. Her father had declined, saying he had plans with Mac, but her mother had abandoned Faith
and James to their nursemaid and Armsmen and was exerting herself to charm Walter, who
understood her mode of chaste flirtation entirely, however it was beyond Honor. And Thomas was
engaged with Miranda, discussing — dear Lord — contacts they had had with Ballroom Dancers
and the practical question she’d asked Theo Harper to ask President Pritchard, so she was free to
savour walking through the world that even before Saganami Island got hold of her had shaped her
understanding of what was meant by a threat environment. The dimmest hexapuma would be miles
away, but limited visibility and dense awareness of life teeming around them, enhanced by Nimitz,
made for a thrilled alertness that had her without conscious thought treading silently ; not prey but
predator ; not one who entered the jungle in fearful flight, hoping not to die, but one who walked
there openly unless and until she might desire to kill. When they stopped where a forest brook
babbled over a small landslip to eat Mac’s luxury idea of trail-rations, Theisman remarked on it.

“You are truly at home here, Honor. Even more than in space, and far more than in
Landing.”

“Here and Grayson. The Steading’s sunk deep too. Had to. But Sphinx is my uttermost
home, yes.”

“To me it is astonishing, wholly alien and absorbing. Beautiful and frightening. Though I
could do without the gravity. We had no access to heavy-world mods, so nothing we’ve settled is
above about 1.1 standard.”

She grinned. “Oddly, Stinker agrees. He thinks counter-grav is the best thing two legs have,
besides celery. He endures it when I hike the gym to 1.3 but much prefers it at 0.5, and that does
make for fantastic games of frisbee.”

“Games of what?”

“Aerodynamic plastic disk to throw and catch. I’ll dig one out when we get back — with so
many cats around we could have an excellent game.”

“I’ll look forward to it. You work out at 1.3?”

“Every day I can. I’d be in trouble otherwise. Just as the metabolism demands food, muscles
demand use. And it gives me an edge in any lesser grav that can come in handy.”

“So I’ve seen.”

She considered him. “Grayson recordings made it to Haven, then?”

“Oh yes.”

“I thought PubIn would have suppressed them.”

“No. They tried to spin your and Nimitz’s defence of Benjamin as evidence for their
trumped-up charges, but no-one much believed them and everyone was goggling. By the time the
Burdette scene showed up they’d started the double-track of vilifying you while vilifying your
Manticoran and Grayson enemies more, so that came out too.” He considered her back. “You do
realise you were a heroine to many in Haven before Hades? Let alone after. I can’t say you’re quite
as popular as on Manticore or Grayson, but when the most recent recordings hit you won’t be far off.”

Embarrassed, she looked away. “Won’t I? How odd. Is it of any help to you and President Pritchart?”

“Quite a lot, I’d imagine, once we get over the Giancola mess and focus on negotiations and treaty. I’m sorry — I didn’t mean to embarrass you, but I meant what I said that day about your having slain the PRH. And many know it. It’s complicated, because they’re ashamed, as I am, of what the PRH did and tried to do to you, but the net result is a defiant respect that gives you a lot of authority. I mention it because if we get as far as joint planning against Mesa, your command is one my people would find easier to accept than anyone else’s.”

“Noted. However strangely. But we’ve a way to go before anything like that.”

The thought stayed with her, tucked away with other aspects of her forward planning for what might unfold, but the beauty of the forest was living utterly in the moment. She had to be mindful of the effects of higher gravity, though, and steered a circle so that by the time Tom and Walter were really beginning to feel it they were only a few hundred yards from the house. Re-emerging abruptly into its cleared zone both blinked, and Imbesi shook his head.

“I had no idea we were anywhere near. And you haven’t been using positioning equipment. How do you navigate in there? You can’t even see the sun most of the time.”

“I know the ground for some way round, Walter, and Stinker always knows where he is.”

Nimitz also knew where frisbees were, and in moments scores of ’cats were involved in a multi-sided game with four frisbees whipping through the air and being triumphantly snatched from it. Wanting a more serious work-out than the walk she played hard for half-an-hour, but against ’cats height was her only advantage, and the swerve they could impart with claw-tips made gaining any frisbee a genuine challenge. When a bleeking Nimitz used her shoulder, gained from behind, as a launching-pad to snatch one that had swerved high from her closing fingers and raced away, she conceded defeat.

“Now you know why I call him Stinker.” She mopped her face with a towel Miranda offered. “He gets plenty of practice, one-on-one in low-g, and almost always beats me. But as you see, they’re all naturals.”

Imbesi chuckled. “Fastest game of anything I’ve seen in years.”

“There’s a nascent professional league on Grayson. Benjamin frequently threatens to outlaw frisbees altogether. But I can see Daddy’s fired up the grill, so I’d best get clean and decent.”

By the time she was, her mother had put Faith and James to bed, and attractive savoury odours were rising, while a serious ’cat audience contemplated with anxiety the quantities of meat cooking and the numbers present. Her father merely looked at them with mock-sorrow, and as it transpired Mac had turned what seemed to be an entire warren into rabbit-and-celery stew, two legs were able to eat sausages, steaks, and succulent kebabs in peace, all served with fresh bread and a salad made of something the cooks swore was called cracked wheat with all manner of good things mixed in. It would have been delicious anywhere, and spiced with a sauce of genuinely earned hunger was doubly so. Honor was munching her way through a wonderful apple-flavoured sausage loaded into French bread with many trimmings, and contemplating the developing heap of sated ’cats, when her father dropped into the seat beside her, filled her wine glass, and raised his own.
“I haven’t had a chance to say a proper thank you, my dear.”

“For?”

“Many things. For being you, and for relieving 40 years of growing rage and shame at the infection that’s been passing as our upper house since before you were born. I’ve always known it, but the way they treated you made it personal. And for helping Ally and me get over our willingness to hate all Havenites for what a very few did. Tried to do.” He held up a hand bearing a kebab as she blushed. “I know it makes you squirm, but I need to say it. You know we’re very proud of you. Bursting with it. But that speech you gave in the Lords … well, it was something else, beyond pride. We didn’t call you Honor wrongly. And I know you hated it, and all you had to do to get there, as I know it was necessary.”

“Yes.” Honor was past squirming. “I was thinking, in Parliament Square, of how ultimately useless my violence in that shower-room was. I know I should have gone to law then, and if I had Paul would be alive. But it wouldn’t have changed anything else, and this did, I hope. Believe. So maybe it all won something we need, in the end.”

“Yes, it did. And he would be proud, too. As well as cross and upset that you still mourn him so.”

“I know, Daddy. But I can’t do anything about that. Come peace, maybe.”

“Let’s hope.”

The conversation left her vaguely uneasy, a sense exacerbated by a memo from Miranda she found before going to bed, informing her that a clip of her from Parliament Square had been the most watched item system-wide two days running, and the HD company that nominally owned it had sent an urgent request for talks about licensing. Aborting indignant refusal, she considered the clip for a moment, shuddered, and composed a reply to Miranda saying she’d agree if Nimitz and Sam consented, and all her profits and at least half the HD company’s were donated to the SFS. But the image chased her into dreams in which a legion of that absurd statue on Grayson gathered round her, radiating nobility she could never match and throwing vast bronze frisbees that swarming ’cats easily caught and she never could, for even to try would crush her.

Neither Imbesi nor Theisman had ever been hang-gliding, and the Copperwalls was no place for beginners, but both were curious to see what dancing on clouds consisted of, so as well as the aircar with her poor Armsmen there was a second vehicle shadowing her as she demonstrated. She had long since had a double harness made so that Sam as well as Nimitz could ride with her, presences at each ear, and this time, in the wild excitement of swooping down to skim cumulus towers before powerful updrafts plucked them skywards, her connection with Sam tightened. She could hear Nimitz, and he could hear Sam, but in this intensity the third side cracked open, and she could feel a double presence in her mind, reading and responding to minute shifts of weight as the updraft clawed at the delta wing; the connection remained as it spewed them out, a pleased and surprised Sam working to refine and lock it down, and giving Honor a few blazing moments of understanding of what it was to be a Memory Singer called Golden Voice. With a warning to Andrew over her throat-mike she used the height gained to sweep out over the Tannerman Ocean in a great, slow circle that gave her time to work at it from her own end, fixing the ‘wavelength’ in memory and receiving vivid images of Harold Tschu and growing treekittens on Grayson as they swooped over water at first basalt-grey streaked with blue and, as the sun declined, gleaming with refracted reds before glittering into fire. With dusk drawing down she headed back, and there was a glorious moment when an inquisitive condor-owl, out and about its business rather early, came to investigate the strange thing sharing its sky before the trailing aircar could intervene. At both ’cats’
rippling snarls it veered away with a look of absolute astonishment on its face, and she had to control laughter. Mac had landing lights on as she brought the ’glider down, trotting to a neat halt; both ’cats nuzzled her neck in approving thanks, and there was applause as she snapped releases and collapsed the delta wing.

“Superb, Honor. Truly.” Tom came forward as Mac and Miranda materialised, between them taking the ’glider, and the aircar came down behind her. “Learning to fly one of those is now top of my personal peace dividend. No wonder treecats call you Dances on Clouds. But you have another unexpected guest.”

“Oh?” She glanced at Mac and Miranda. “Who’s turned up now?”

“President Ramirez, Ma’am, with an escort from the Queen’s Flight.”

“Jesus? Whatever does he want?”

“He wouldn’t say, Ma’am. Your parents and Mr Imbesi are entertaining him.”

“Are they? Well, well.”

Andrew and Spenser came up, Andrew’s face a study.

“What was that thing that took a pass at you, Ma’am?”

“A very surprised condor-owl, Andrew, that is now trying to work out how it was menaced by treecats at several hundred metres.” Nimitz and Sam leaped to her shoulders, bleeking laughter. “I must download the image. The look on its face was priceless. But it seems Jesus Ramirez has turned up.”

“So I was told, Ma’am. I would have informed you but your earbug seemed to be turned off.”

“Distractions are dangerous when you’re ’gliding, Andrew, as you know perfectly well. But I’d best get changed if I’ve already kept Jesus waiting.”

The President of San Martin was no smaller than he had ever been, and after handing off a protesting Faith, much taken with the sheer expanse of his lap, to her mother, he enfolded Honor in an unexpected bearhug of stifling proportions.

“Oof! Jesus, put me down. What’s that for?”

He regarded her at arm’s length. “For once again most satisfactorily thwapping bad guys in our way into oblivion. For the defence of both our nations as they join together. For the two best and most telling political speeches I’ve ever heard in my life. Need I go on?”

“Not in the least, but I have a sinking feeling you’re going to anyway.”

“Alas, yes. I got the hug in first, Honor, because I’m afraid your chief impulse when I tell you why I’m here is going to be to shoot me. And I’m sorry to invade your retreat — God knows you need time away from Landing, which is as insane as ever — but we need you, once more.”

“You do?” She took a seat and was handed a glass of wine by Mac before he did the rounds, refilling others. “Why so?”

“Well, after the election next week San Martino members will be seated in the Commons,
and our peers in the Lords. Where they will be welcomed by a more congenial and thoughtful chamber than anyone expected, but still find themselves at an unfortunate disadvantage.”

“Oh?”

“Peculiar rules of precedence apply to the peerages of each planet.”

Honor considered him. There were very many such rules, and even with Cromarty driving the negotiations settling how a republican planet would be represented in the Lords had become byzantine. The new San Martino peerage — duque, marqués, conde, señor — comprised individuals elected for life (or until resignation) who were then ennobled by Her Majesty and the Commons, but without any grant of land or resources, and it was true that many hereditary peers did not think a Manticoran duke and a San Martino duque were remotely the same thing. And there was a raft of ancient protocols deriving from the sequential settlement of Manticore, Sphinx, and Gryphon, overlaid with additions and revisions from the annexation of Basilisk, though the Queen and Estelle Matsuko were still that system’s only peers.

“Which particular rules would those be, Jesus?”

“There are a lot, aren’t there? The ones of concern, Honor, are those that apply because San Martin is not a planetary duchy, which are being used by some to contend that a San Martinan duque comes below a Gryphonese baron.”

“Are they? Mmm.” She did some swift political maths. “I’d imagine the new administration’s majority will be able to sustain an amendment to those regs. Making then-Crown-Princess Elizabeth Grand Duchess of Basilisk left them making precious little sense anyway. It’s just that amending them hasn’t been anyone’s priority, until now.”

“So Her Majesty observed. But she cannot assure me that any such amendment will happen soon, as it would provoke resentment from a severely bruised House and distract her administration from duties which are certainly far more urgent. And there is a simpler solution.”

“Which is?”

“To make San Martin a planetary duchy.”

“I suppose. But who — ” She looked at him with dawning horror. “You’re joking?”

“Not in the least. It’s a very sensible solution, and with my legislature’s approval I asked Her Majesty if she would be willing in principle to create you as Grand Duchess of San Martin.” He beamed at her aghast stare. “I believe she said yes faster than I’ve ever had a question answered.”

Honor just bet she had. “Jesus, it’s absurd. Quite aside from the practicalities — and I couldn’t give another job the time it needs and deserves — there’s a far stronger candidate, which is you. San Martin might not have the title but it has the Ramirez family.”

He held up a hand the size of a plate. “Much as it embarrasses me to say so, that was considered, Honor. Very carefully. And it would have certain advantages. But we have decided on a different course, because it is much more advantageous for the San Martinan Presidency to remain outside the Manticoran Lords, subject directly to the Crown. If you remember, that was written into the Act of Annexation for sound reasons, and giving me Manticoran nobility would complicate it horribly. The same consideration applies to those who might reasonably hope to succeed me some day. And it must of course be someone we can all agree on, which makes for a very restricted short-list, San Martinos being as they are. A short-list of one, in fact. The practicalities need be no more
It just doesn’t feel right. It’s like, I don’t know, suddenly saying you’re an elder of the Fire Runs Fast Clan as well as the Bright Water Clan. You like them well enough, and you know Ariel and some others, but it’s not your clan.”

He shrugged. "I am an elder of the Bright Water Clan, Landing Clan, and Far World Clan. If we send People to your land on the Near World I will be an elder of that clan too. It is a new thing, but makes sense."
“You want to found a colony on Gryphon?”

<Many like the sound of its quick seasons more than the domes and bad air of the Far World. We are still talking, but it will happen soon, I think.>

“Glory.”

But the Gryphon Highland Service was not unlike the SFS in its make-up and nature, and with some cross-transfers for mutual training that could probably be managed. Glentormin would play ball, and even Gravendale might. And Stinker wasn’t wrong about San Martin either, in his way — it did make sense of a sort, if you were Jesus Ramirez. Or Queen Elizabeth. But still. Her parents found her with her feet drawn up under her skirts, contemplating the blazing progress of Manticore-B across the night sky.

“A dollar for them, dear?”

“I was wondering how long it took Beth to dream this one up.”

They exchanged a long glance.

“You don’t believe President Ramirez did?”

“Not a chance. There is a problem, but it isn’t urgent by any stretch, and this is a wildly extravagant solution that reeks of Beth diving gleefully into her wretched toybox. So does the mousetrapping. Of course Jesus couldn’t properly ask without the consents of Senate and Lower House, but now he has them it’s impossible to refuse.”

“And that’s bad?”

“Only for me. Yet another responsibility the size of a planet and its population. More tearing back and forth. And if I do anything like the duty demanded, another source of wealth and misplaced adulation.”

“Wealth?”

“Oh yes. Their population limits and being conquered when they were means lots of their very rich asteroid belt hasn’t been touched, though the old Republic made a start. One thing Jesus wants but isn’t saying is a bigger Sky Domes and Hauptman Cartel building yard. Preferably naval, and for capital ships. It would happen anyway, but building here is the priority, not starting from close to scratch there, and this will cut a chunk off their waiting-time. Another is Sky Domes tech to make expansion down their mountains by a thousand metres or so viable, with old Grayson breather tech or tunnels for contact and transit. Which would also be available anyway, and will also be accelerated considerably. It’s a shrewd move in all sorts of ways.”

Another long glance, that ended with her father speaking.

“Forgive me, my dear, but the very fact you have already thought of all those things expands our understanding of why President Ramirez is so very serious about it. And of his mood. He does know it is an unwelcome offer, however odd that seems, and has been quite apologetic, but also knows his people are best served thereby. I’d thought that emotional, which didn’t seem enough, but clearly it’s economic and political too. Naval also, from what you say. Look at me?” She did. “I know you have always felt uncomfortable with nobility, since it was thrust upon you, and that my own yeoman stock, traditions, and beliefs are a large part of that, with Ally’s Beowulfan disregard for Star Kingdom ways. But I have never seen the slightest sign that any of the honours you have earned, immense as they are, has in any way lessened or smirched what you are. Changed, yes.
Necessarily. And I have seen a great many signs that you have changed the nobilities to which you belong, on Grayson and now here, which I did not believe possible without a revolution. And one more thing. I know you wanted always, and still want, to be the best naval officer you can be, and would in some ways like to be nothing more. But you know full well high command is and must be political, whatever else it might be. What you also know but seem to hate admitting is that your skill and talent in command is also a political skill. So I would suggest you consider you have received an Admiralty letter requesting Admiral Harrington, alphabet soup, to keep a close eye on the newly commissioned HMS San Martín during her maiden voyage.”

Honor stared. “Sneaky. And not bad at all. *Et tu, Brute?”*

“Say rather, *There is a tide in — ”*

She held up a hand. “Yes, I know that one too, Daddy. Alfredo’s fond of it when he’s trying to Salamanalyse, which is a pastime in the Own. And I’m being horrible. I’m sorry. It’s just that people keep demanding I be something else, more. I’m getting very tired of it.”

There was a long silence.

“What does Nimitz say, dear?”

“That he’s already an elder of three clans, and make that four when the ’cats send a colony to the Duchy on Gryphon. And won’t *that* be fun? How long before I’m forced to duel some Gryphon dinosaur who’s shot a ’cat he claims was on his land and looked like a Kodiak Max?” Nimitz bleeked enquiry and she half-glared at him. “You’ve sensed them often enough, Stinker. And your first order as an elder of the Near Planet Clan, as and whenever, is going to be ‘Don’t cross the boundaries without a GHS Ranger right beside you.”

<So there are Death Fangs to avoid there also.>

“You bet there are. Two-leg ones. And the real Kodiak Maxes.”

<Tell me something new. Living is always a risk.>

Honor threw up her hands. “You see? Treecats rush in where angels fear to tread. And they’re not even wrong.”

There was another silence while her parents digested the idea of a treecat clan on Gryphon.

“So what are you going to do, dear?”

“Accept, of necessity, much as I really don’t want to. The folderol will be a nightmare. I’m just wondering what conditions to attach.”

“For President Ramirez?”

“No, for Beth.”

Both her parents sat bolt upright in shock.

“My dear, you *can’t* — ” “Honor, you *can’t* — ”

“Watch me, Beth needs some accountability too. If she’s going to dump coals on my head I’m dumping some back. Or at least getting a promise or two.”

Her mother frowned. “What sort of promise?”
“Keeping her toybox shut for starters. This is the third time she’s mousetrapped me with it, four counting the PMV, and enough’s enough. But it’s just a symptom, and she needs to stop letting guilt drive her thinking. Because that’s what this is more than half about, whatever other scheming got worked in, and while it might make her feel better it doesn’t help.”

Her parents knew she’d become close to the Queen over the last two years but they hadn’t been on Manticore to see it, and didn’t know quite what to think about it even without the strange strains the last few months had put on the dynamics of the friendship.

“I’m sorry, it’s not easy to explain. Beth is carrying a lot of rage and shame from as far back as Young’s court martial and what followed. And she’s right that although there was nothing she could do there should have been something. Now I’ve simultaneously given her that something, of which she’d despaired, in spades, and managed her into having to swallow a lifetime’s hatred of Peeps and shake hands with Tom. And on top of all that there’s everything she has to be carrying about her father’s death, and feels about what happened at Yeltsin’s Star, when I chose to protect her and Benjamin and as a result Cromarty and her uncle and cousin died. The net result is, well, I called it punitive generosity last time we had a row about it. ”

“A row?” Her mother’s voice was faint, and Honor found some of her temper falling away.

“Mike called it a shouting match, which is about right.” She grinned. “Nimitz won, by telling us both off. But the argument was shelved, not resolved, and I thought she’d contented herself with ostentatious public thanks and that wholly irregular bow in the Lords. But obviously not, and she really does need to work it through with someone besides Justin because acting out like this just isn’t on."

Her father stared and shook his head, an odd smile lighting his face. “Only you could think you’re being offered a Grand Duchy because Her Majesty is acting out, my dear. But I take your point. I’ve wondered about her survivor’s guilt since the assassinations, because it must be ferocious. And while the Navy would understand how to deal with it, Mount Royal might well not. Quite how one tells Her Majesty she needs counselling is beyond my stars, but if you’re really going to try you might suggest an RMN psychotherapist rather than a civilian.”

“Now that’s a thought. They’d have security clearance, too.”

“And what about you, Honor? How much rage and shame are you still carrying? Alfred told me what you said to him yesterday.”

“My share, Mama, and more. But I have seen counsellors, several over the years, besides all the post-trauma people. And I know exactly what I feel and what I do with it, which I’m not sure Beth always does.” She shrugged. “But I’m dealing with having been stupid and cowardly once, when in some ways I really didn’t know better, and combat experience changes things, for better as well as worse. Beth doesn’t have that but is dealing with multiple bereavements all the same, and the paradox of being always ultimately responsible and almost never in command, and all that’s produced down the years. Her line about my having more powers as a Steadholder than she does as Queen is part of it. I’d hoped using Clause 127 and the decreation powers would help her with that, but because they were my suggestions they’ve compounded how she feels about me. And I didn’t tell her all sorts of things until I could trap High Ridge, which also mousetrapped her. Which didn’t help one bit.”

“And how are you with that?”

“Sorry but untroubled. Once I’d decided stopping High Ridge was more important than anything, the rest was imperative tactics, including not letting my temper or Beth’s blow it by acting
too soon. So I did what I had to as legally as I could, which wasn’t very, but Andrew’s carrying most of that for me, bless him. Howard and Alfredo too, I expect. And Mr Hawkwing, seemingly, among what must be many others. Now, putting it on their consciences troubles me, quite deeply sometimes, but I said volunteers only and they will have been, humbling as that is. So I can live with it. But Beth was press-ganged at birth, and you could say I press-ganged her some more, which is why this is also a form of payback disguised as reward. Oh well. Time to face the music, I suppose.”

Unsurprisingly, Elizabeth wasn’t amused by the condition, but Honor had made sure Justin was with her and left them to an emotional conversation. Jesus Ramirez, perceiving something of just how much she didn’t want to accept, was genuinely apologetic though pleased for San Martin; and wouldn’t stay despite the hour, saying the San Martino peers already in Landing would be waiting up for him however late he got back. Dinner was subdued despite formal congratulations from Theisman and Imbesi, the pleasure and approval in Mac’s mind, and the pride others felt; but she regained some equilibrium and the joy of the day when she downloaded the image of the condor-owl, every bit as funny as she remembered, and sent it with a brief, dryly worded explanation to the SFS Bulletin. There was a swift and warmly appreciative reply from the laughing editor, who didn’t want to lavish unseemly praise on her but only say that several hang-gliders had of late had twilight encounters with condor-owls, whose numbers were rising in a natural cycle, and she’d let it be known recorded treecat snarls were a useful deterrent.

A day on water also helped. As it happened both Tom and Walter did sail, Tom having been taught at the old PN academy and Walter having a beach house somewhere on Erewhon, so she took the larger of her boats and they crewed it together. The weather was perfect, with sun, good wind, and one brisk squall that posed no danger but with trimmed sails send them leaping out of its shadow with a flying turn of speed. The return run was more sedate, though with Andrew and Spenser dropping further away in the aircar a sphinx albatross deigned to keep them company for a while, drifting in graceful circles round their course. With land in sight again and a long reach needed, Walter settled from adjusting sail and considered her.

“Tell me to mind my own business if you like, Honor, but I didn’t really understand your reaction yesterday. Do you truly not want the rewards to which you’re plainly entitled?”

“Am I, Walter? It doesn’t feel like it. Naval rank I understand, but to me noble rank is mostly pie in the sky.”

Tom grinned. “Drop the mostly and that’s a good Dolist opinion. But more seriously, Walter, I think I understand, a little, anyway. We don’t have peerages, of course, but we have a medal system that was poisoned by politics under the Legislaturists and PRH, as well as financial awards for extraordinary service that were similarly abused, and if you think naval, which Honor does, accepting them now feels very dubious. It’s not the same, and there were strange politics at play yesterday that I don’t understand but I’m guessing had the same effect.”

“More or less.” Honor shrugged, mindful of the wheel she controlled. “I can’t talk about it, and it’s not a concern for either of you. But you could say it boils down to two things, which are that beyond a certain point you don’t get awards because of what you’ve done so much as because people want to control whatever leverage it created; and that the balance sheets between Her Majesty and Her now-Grand Grace, and between Honor and Elizabeth, involve multi-D maths sufficient to make anyone tear her hair out.”

They thought about it and Walter nodded. “That I can imagine. But if you’ll both forgive me, the rule of law rather than honour that your systems promote can be very opaque. Erewhon’s only one planet of course, and one lesson I shall take away from all this is to keep it that way, whatever the temptations. For all we started as criminals, and still are in many respects, besides being no kind
of democracy, our ways seem cleaner to me. We have no titles to give. But we do recognise we owe Honor a large favour, wherever she’s Her Grace of. Call it in how and when you need.”

Though taken aback and wondering what a large Erewhonese favour might consist of, Honor also knew exactly what Walter meant. One made a promise and kept it; as one repaid one good turn with another. And honour above law, by God, yes: she’d known that since Casimir. Her acceptance of events was completed by yet another surprise, though not this time delivered in person. After their return Andrew had excused himself for a while, frowning, and returned before dinner with an odd look and matching mix of emotions, saying it wasn’t urgent but he’d appreciate a moment when she had it. Nimitz, Sam, and Farragut were all regarding him with curiosity, and with several large slices of Mac’s chocolate dessert cake a happy memory she followed him, ’cats in tow, to what had once been her father’s study and still had its own com equipment.

“We’ve had another anonymous data-package, Ma’am. A message for you, but nothing that needs acting on—just a sort of thank-you, from one of our, ah, volunteers. The thing is that it wouldn’t do for it to become public, though I can’t say how many people might already know.”

“Clear yet confusing, Andrew. A thank-you? For what?”

“Smiting the unrighteous would cover it, Ma’am.”

Her mind clicked. “Ah. A message from the Ballroom?”

“Yes, Ma’am. From Jeremy X in person, I believe, though I hasten to add that I have never met him.”

Honor raised her eyebrows. “So I should hope, Andrew, with Isaac Douglass as a perfectly good cut-out. Not to mention Miranda.” He actually blushed and she felt remorseful for the tease. “Who clearly did a wonderful job. So what is this message?”

He handed her a data-wallet. “That’s the only copy, ma’am. I’ve wiped everything at this end, and it was sent encrypted.”

And for a miracle he actually left her to watch it alone, though he was doubtless outside the door. The scene that appeared was a target-range, grav-backstop maximally extended as it would be for amateurs or newbies, or when energy weapons were being used; and the man who leaped into view was an absurdity, dressed in an outfit from one of the old cowboy movies that on Grayson remained second in popularity only to samurai movies—hat, boots, those weird fringes, and a pair of huge guns holstered at narrow hips. He had luxuriant sideburns, a long goatee, and extended moustachios which he theatrically twirled after sweeping off his hat and bowing.

“I dedicate my poor efforts today to the utmost damnation of Manpower Unlimited, though with any luck they won’t be that for much longer, and all pewling parasites; and to the glory of the one and only strictly honorary member of the Audubon Ballroom, Honor X, as unanimously voted by L’Ouverture.”

The ’cats understood enough to share her laughter, and they all found the performance that followed fascinating. The cowboy carefully resettled his hat, and began to receive from someone outside the range of the pickup a stream of juggling cubes that he sent soaring in graceful arcs whose patterns became ever more complex. In the end he had twelve cubes in the rotation and his hands were blurring even on HD. For a long and brilliant moment it was maintained, loops steadily tightening, before one cube after another was tossed wildly high and as the last left his hand, well before the first landed, the guns leaped out. They were six-shot revolvers even older than her M-1911, and every bullet found its mark, exploding a cube into tatters and a rain of whatever they’d
been packed with — some kind of grain, by the look of it. As the thundering noise faded the pickup focused in on him, and with elaborately squinting eyes he raised each gun to his lips, blew away the smoke whispering from the barrels, and spun them through a ridiculous number of twirls that landed each squarely in its holster. Moustachios were re-twirled with satisfaction but the compelling grey eyes that met hers, utterly flat, were as absolute as the performance.

“Your Grace, our thanks are heartfelt. There were people — a lot of people — who cursed me for letting C–15a/43–2/5 live, and cursed me a lot more for guaranteeing her life. I imagine you had a certain ambivalence yourself, though I can promise you her existence is now austere with simple daily toil, no comms, and very limited space. But by Malcolm himself we are all repaid a thousand fold for that mercy, and gladly shower burning kisses on your feet or whatever else those poetic P-lines can dream up. Not that there’s any clearer proof than most of them of just how fraudulent as well as intolerable most of Manpower’s claims about their products are. And besides all that, word reaches us of the most interesting practical question you have asked of who knows how many star nations? but certainly Manticore, Grayson, Beowulf, Haven, and the Anderman Empire.”

A much slower and more deliberate twirl. “None join the Ballroom because they hope for amnesty or anything but struggle. Yet I find myself its first leader ever to contemplate a genuine chance of routing Manpower at source, most comprehensively. So while I cannot and will not ever compromise a single Dancer under my command, I tell you now that if the prospects of an alliance against Mesa depend on securing detailed data we can provide to make military action feasible, tell Isaac, and I will come to you.” Another twirl, followed by a shrug. “Whatever else you are, Your Grace — and isn’t that a treat to consider? — you’re a naval CO, so you’ll appreciate that while my impulse to martyrdom is nil there are chances that demand to be taken. And I’m enough of a CO myself to know my limitations. I can document parasites from here to eternity, but have no strategy to obliterate Manpower from existence — which you, now, just might have. And if you do, with even a slim fighting chance, I would gladly die to shorten your odds, however much I’d rather not.”

He gave another elaborate bow, hat swept to his chest.

“Just so you know, Honor X. If I believed in any God it might be that Tester of your Graysons. And even if the greater opportunity cannot be realised, you have our warmest gratitude and respect for results already filed.” Those compelling eyes became even more complex. “I hope we can meet one day. And the Dancers from Casimir send fond remembrance.”

The image blanked, and amid her boiling emotions Honor thought very hard for a while before rising to invite Andrew in with a crooked finger.

“I appreciate your discretion, Andrew, but I want you to make five copies of that and send them by hand to His Grace, Her Majesty, Uncle Jacques, the Herzog von Rabenstange, and Admiral Theisman. Controlled, widening pool, yes?”

“Certainly, Ma’am.” He hesitated. “I would be inclined to assume Captain Zilwicki and Ms Montaigne are aware.”

“Me too. And if a copy of the shooting performance hasn’t gone to someone in the Steading, I’d be very surprised. But I’m less sure about the message. Opinion?”

“Mmm. I’d suspect not, Ma’am. Why provoke a certain dispute when one has decided on a course of action regardless?”

She grinned at him in complete amity as the ’cats bleeked laughter. “Indeed. But what I really want to know is what the ’cats decide to call him, if they ever get the chance.”
The last days of the election campaigns, such as they were, remained punctuated by verdicts and sentences. Houseman was shot, the court martial finding that while he had had no knowledge of the Manpower agents, he had made no attempt whatever to identify or check the people to whom he had tried to hand over critical tech; live data left on HMS Reveille’s computers also stuck in the court’s craw. Roberts also received no mercy, but Jurgenson, convicted of gross dereliction, was over some opposition deemed more idiot than traitor and received a long custodial sentence with a dishonourable discharge waiting at the end of it. Jurgens and Lemaitre were allowed their lives on the same terms: had they corruptly imposed a capital sentence on an innocent they would have died for it, but corruptly refusing to impose one was more complicated and the court settled for the lesser penalty. But the officers shown by the North Hollow files to have been corrupted by blackmail following commission of capital crimes found the civilian penalties upheld. More difficult was the skeleton crew Roberts had used, who should properly have refused his orders, but hadn’t, and after some humming and hawing, not least about the urgent need for trained personnel, the two junior officers were cashiered and with everyone else sentenced to a little more than time already served.

Of the various Cartel directors involved, those who had definitely known what was happening received five-year terms from a very unamused court, while others were convicted of negligence and banned from holding directorships, and the cartels themselves handed swingeing fines. Civil servants who had participated in or failed to report peculation also did badly, joining junior ministers, party officials, and a few financiers who could be proven to have known that deposits passing through their hands were embezzled, as long-term guests of Her Majesty’s government. And juries had a field day with the yellow press, convicting with enthusiasm and recommending maximal sentences for individuals, fines for companies, and damages for victims — which compounded an already very interesting situation.

North Hollow’s estate alone was liable for damages arising from the explosion of his lightflyer, including claims lodged by families of the dead and injured, the Docks and Marina Boards, boat owners, Royal Animal and Bird Rescue, and Honor herself — a claim she had limited to one new laser-cluster, four new generators, the old ones having been so stressed that Andrew insisted on complete replacement (and some upgrading), and the costs of the emergency response. But the estates of Janvier and Descroix were also liable in many libel, slander, and defamation suits, including Honor’s — and those claims she had cheerfully let Clarise set at an astronomical level. Turner having been aware of at least some fabrications, and used them in speeches outside the House, the New Kiev estate was also liable. The money they had variously stolen had been largely recovered, so what remained of those estates was primarily property — stocks, shares, land, and large houses with hedonistic contents in prime locations where real estate came onto the market seldom to never. The total realisable value was extremely large but how should such realisation be handled? It would have been a nice question in any case, and there was the further consideration that as in every case except Descroix it had all arisen from the original riches of grants of nobility, all now belonged to Her Majesty, having reverted in an instant to the Crown Reserve.

The lawyers were drooling and rubbing hands when Her Majesty, still in bullish constitutional mood, decided on prophylactic autocracy and, having consulted Honor, once again took to system-wide HD, observing that such a substantial financial uncertainty should not hang over her subjects when they voted on the morrow. The claims arising from bereavement and physical injury other than lightburn would be settled forthwith in full, as would those for repairs at Docks and Marina, and the RABR’s expenses. Costs of treatment for serious lightburn would also be met, but those who had suffered only temporary loss of sight without lasting damage had claims dismissed. They were of course free to challenge Her Majesty in the courts, but she took the view that the law
was not concerned with trifles; while those newsies who had actually been at the Bay House and filed claims were told with a curling lip that what happened in an embassy was no business of the Manticoran courts, and they could pursue their claims on Grayson, if they were really that foolish.

Any claim by a boat-owner found to be uninflated would be met, with due allowance for time and trouble incurred, but any found to be inflated would be dismissed and could not be resubmitted, while lawyers who had signed off on and presented inflated claims would be subject to professional inquiry. And as the laser-cluster and generators in question were manufactured for the RMN, the First Lord was hereby directed by his C-in-C to supply them to the Bay House free of charge, any crimp in his budget being deemed a fine for his predecessor’s criminal supply of explosives to a civilian.

Which left various awards for attempted murder, malicious libel and slander, conspiracy to defame, vilification, contumely, harrassment, and invasion of privacy, and here Her Majesty drew a distinction between those to Sky Domes and Her Grace of Harrington, which accounted for just over three-quarters of the liability, and everything else. Saving some artworks Her Majesty reserved to the royal collection, of which a list would be published, the goods, chattels, and effects of the former North Hollow, New Kiev, and High Ridge estates would be sold, those with scarcity value of whatever kind over time and advantageously, and the income stream generated would pay the everything else claims until one or other were exhausted; should any profits remain to the Crown, they would go to the RMN budget, but any shortfall in damages would be only partially covered — it having always been the case that what someone didn’t have they couldn’t pay, and the partially being because the Crown would not be selling the various country estates but rather reserving them as future grants whenever new peers might be created. In the case of Sky Domes and Her Grace of Harrington, however, there was no prospect of being able to pay the whole sum variously awarded, even if everything were liquidated, so Her Majesty had made Her Grace an offer Her Grace had been kind enough to accept, and title to the Landing properties of all those estates was hereby transferred to Her Grace in final settlement, with thanks for her forbearance.

Honor’s brief statement followed. She didn’t need more property, but the point was symbolic and she had had no difficulty in making dispositions. Sky Domes having an ever enlarging presence and turnover in the Star Kingdom, the former Countess New Kiev’s palatial town-house would serve it very well as a social headquarters. The ASL was also in need of more space, and as interdiction efforts against Manpower were already stepping up, a rise in the number of freed needing help and accommodation must be anticipated, so the former Baron High Ridge’s roomy residence would be administered by them as a hostel and centre for such people. It was to be hoped, and expected, that the Republic of Haven would soon be re-establishing an embassy to the Court of Her Majesty, and as their original site, locked-up for years, had been illegally but irrecoverably sold off by the late administration, the fine townhouse once belonging to Lady Descroix would save the new ambassador and the present administration ever so much time and trouble. And the staggeringly large, well-wooded, and luxurious tract of the primest city land once belonging to the former Earl North Hollow would serve a dual purpose, as the embassy and wood-garden of the Treecat Clans of Sphinx, and the site of a memorial to all who had died in the Havenite wars, in any uniform. Suggestions for the form such a memorial in that space might take were invited, and conversion work would begin immediately so the Landing Clan currently being housed and fed at Mount Royal could move in; a staff was therefore sought, and those interested should contact Dr Arif’s Commission. And if Her Grace might say so, with justice thereby poetically served she agreed with Her Majesty it was time to consider a line drawn, and move on.

Honor hadn’t intended it, but the effect of her statement was to turn the night before the election into a system-wide party. Given the basic fairness of the Queen’s deal, and clear sense of priorities, everyone was pleased and amused anyway, except boat-owners who had greedily put it wildly inflated claims, and their tame lawyers; but Honor’s sweeping and poetic justice brought real
laughter, and a lot of people couldn’t stop smiling. Cathy Montaigne half-deafened the shows she was on, and had to wipe tears from her eyes repeatedly, not least when she and the Sky Domes spokeswoman Honor had put up got into a tussle about which of their new properties should become Harrington House, the confusions that would result if both were, and (after a break for headlines during which Honor’s private com shrilled) the amicable conclusion that Sky Domes HQ would be Harrington House and the ASL centre the Honor House. Klaus and Stacey were also seen grinning fit to burst — in Klaus’s case as rare a sight as that condor-owl — and so were many others on HD. But it wasn’t about the high and mighty, even those who had fallen; it was about ordinary people who’d had their world turned upside down and tossed high into the air feeling it had at last come down right-side up, and about an overworked sense of justice recovering its sense of humour. And as the workday ended they made their way by millions to restaurants, bars, and clubs, which did a roaring trade and vastly exceeded their licenses while various PDs let them get on with it.

Even if she could have done so without causing a riot, Honor had no urge to join any of them, but after some thought did com Mike’s mother, who turned out to be watching HD alone, and soon after found herself, in simple Manticoran civvies, being shown into Katie’s private study and for once facing no opposition from Andrew about leaving him at the door. Muting the HD, Katie rose.

“Honor. How are you? And Nimitz. No Sam?”

“We took a few days on Sphinx, and Sam’s still there doing Memory Singer things.”

“So I heard, and it’s good to see you looking less tired. Do sit. Mike was very envious but is still catching up with all the shipboard things she neglected running around on Beth’s behalf. She doesn’t even have the excuse of having to vote tomorrow.”

“No.” Honor smiled, watching Nimitz sign greetings. “I still feel guilty not voting myself. It was always a solemn duty.”

“Huh. I hadn’t thought of it that way round, never having had the right myself. Still, I don’t think most of the electorate are going to be that solemn tomorrow.”

“No indeed. Hung over, more likely.”

“Oh yes. But I’ve heard several people say they have every intention of staying up all night, voting as soon as polls open, and going home to sleep it off and wake up to results. I think that might prove a popular strategy. Are there any laws about having to be sober when you vote?”

“Not as far as I know, though you have to be orderly. And even if there are they wouldn’t be enforceable.”

“I don’t suppose they would. But it’s more marvellous timing on your and Beth’s parts, Honor. Just perfect. And very healing.”

“Not intentional, Katie. Poetic justice, surely, and it amused me. Nimitz too, as you can imagine.” He bleeked agreement. “But I didn’t expect to set off this sort of, what? Street party?”

“Carnival, I think. A celebration of justice rather than its grim observance.”

“Mmm. That’s what Miranda thought. And Tom Theisman. Walter Imbesi was laughing too much to give me any sensible opinion.”

“They must be interesting house-guests.”
“Just a bit. We’ve dug into history, and common ground as well as differences between our systems. Tom and I both find Erewhon hair-raising, actually. Within his own sphere Walter has powers very close to a Steadholder’s, and the few constraints are about informal peer sanction rather than any law or right of appeal.”

Caitrin whistled softly. “They must trust him absolutely.”

“No oligarch there can even consider breaking a Deal, so far as I can tell. But it’s an odd place all round. And the analysis they’ve provided of the documents those Manpower techs had is formidable, so it would seem they really are the master forgers people say.”

“Oh my. Good thing they’re back on our side, then.”

“There’s that.” Honor took a breath. “But you said there were things you wanted to talk about?”

Caitrin sat back. “Yes, I did, though as it happens you seem to have taken care of one thing already. I’ve been telling Beth for months she ought to see the counsellor I’ve been seeing out at Bassingford, and with all I’ve been feeling about Roger — my brother, I mean — which she must be going through as well, I thought it was becoming urgent. So did Justin. And in her indignation at whatever you said to her, Beth found we really did agree, summoned the Bassingford woman in high dudgeon for what was supposed to be a brief consultation, talked to her for hours, and came out looking very thoughtful. So thank you for that.”

“Ah. Good. Survivor’s guilt is never easy, Katie. And never quite goes away. But it can be managed.”

“So it can. Beth, however, is very management-resistant indeed, and one thing I wanted to say, Honor, was that I am exceptionally impressed by and grateful for the way you’ve done it. Your friendship is the best thing that’s happened to her in years, and she knows it. So all else aside, you have my warmest thanks for that, and would have Roger’s too. And Mike’s, though she’ll be more hesitant voicing them, I suspect, because she’s still digesting seeing the two of you face off. But I mostly wanted to talk about something quite different, and before I do let’s get you a drink. I’m on wine, but I imagine you’d prefer Old Tillman?”

“If it’s on offer, I would.”

“And some food for that metabolism of yours.”

With a mug and some very morish meat and cheese nibbles to hand, as well as the inevitable celery, Honor sat back and smiled at her host.

“So what was the something quite different, Katie?”

“Or at us.”

“Ah.” Honor made herself keep her gaze level. “I’m not sure even now I quite understand what Beth meant when she first said that. I do understand I could do what I did on Grayson mostly because I was a Manticoran. And yes, to do on Manticore what I have over the last few months mostly because I could be a Grayson. But Beth had Peeps in there as well, which doesn’t make any sense at all.”

“Why not? You’ve restructured all three political systems.”

“Politely — pish, tush, and pootle, Katie. Tom Theisman and friends restructured Haven. At
most I gave them one of the weapons they used, entirely as a side-effect of saving my own life. And anything I’ve done to Manticore is peanuts compared to what he did. One was some mild reforms which consist mostly of enforcing existing laws properly. The other was bloody revolution. Or possibly counter-revolution — Tom rather enjoys playing devil’s advocate on both sides.”

“And you of course never do anything more than simple duty. Pish, tush, and whatever it was back at you, Honor. I concede Beth’s analogies involving Peeps usually shed more heat than light, but I know perfectly well what she meant, and so do you. The worst people in three star nations tried to kill you and in every case you killed them instead, making great changes possible. And you can’t tell me you didn’t intend, at least hope, to achieve politically what you have. Also in every case. I realise pointing it out embarrasses you, but don’t worry because I don’t want to go on about it. What does interest me is who you’re going to be pointing yourself at next, because I learned a lot about many things from your Mr Hawkwing, and found myself not liking what I saw in the mirror.”

Caitrin sipped her wine reflectively.

“Of course I’ve never had the least truck with slavery, but I find I haven’t been pulling my weight either. After the Regency I had every need to become reclusive, and it became habit. But with Edward and Cal gone, and Mike absorbed in professional duties, I need a proper job again. It’s not entirely logical, but one effect of the sea-change we’ve just undergone is that so long as I stay clear of open politics I needn’t be quite as shy of living in the wider world. And as your thinking about going after Manpower for real is undoubtedly light months ahead of anyone else’s and far more realistic, I’d like advice, please. What do you think is going to happen? And what sort of thing might I most usefully do to help eradicate their whole, disgusting enterprise?”

None of that was even remotely what Honor had expected, though Nimitz didn’t seem surprised, and she took refuge in Old Tillman for a moment, mind spinning. But Caitrin Winton-Henke was one person she didn’t have to mince words with.

“I’ll have to think about that one, Katie. It’s all bogglingly contingent. Has Beth shown you the message I received?”

“No. She did say she had something for me to see when I’m next at Mount Royal. A message from whom?”

“Jeremy X, no less.” Eyebrows rose. “I know. I’ll leave Beth the joke part, which is very good, but the serious bit was that he’s willing to attend talks and commit the Ballroom to providing everything they can by way of intel. Which God knows we will need. And that means a military strike against Mesa is looking more and more possible. But likely is something else, because frankly, Katie, taking Mesa isn’t the problem. I’m not saying it would be simple or cheap. But if the proposition is a serious Alliance force with an adequate budget, it can certainly take command of the orbitals, demand surrender, and interdict any major action against the slave population while putting very many boots on the ground. But, one, those slaves are very vulnerable and we would need to avoid a bloodbath, and two, we would also need to capture as much data intact as we can, because Mesa is only an incidental target. What we would actually be doing is taking on a conglomerate of transstellars and the Sollie OFS, and the real problem is the League itself.”

Caitrin nodded. “Yes. Cathy Montaigne’s been clear about that, and it’s the big blocker, isn’t it? Taking it on is a terrifying thought. But I’ve heard both Mike and Hamish say pretty scornful things about the SLN living on reputation, not ability. And Mesa’s not actually a League member, after all. So could we stand them off, if we had to?”

Honor’s smile was deadly. “Do you know, Katie, you’re the first person outside a very small
circle to come out and ask me that. And the answer’s yes, we could, but I think it’s very unlikely
they’d realise it in time or accept it. So my own working assumption is that we will do something
serious about Mesa, certainly with Grayson and at least some other Alliance members, probably
Haven, and possibly the Andermani; and will then need to respond to the League decisively.”

“By stomping on any SLN response, you mean?”

“That’ll come first, yes. But it’s what we do after that that will really matter, and how fast we
do it.” Honor sipped her beer and sat back. “Start with the obvious, Katie. First, we talk about the
Solarian League, as if it were one thing, but it isn’t. The Core worlds are highly autonomous, the
Shell and Verge a mosaic of local OFS tyrannies and poor independents they haven’t got round to
gobbling up yet. And our problem isn’t with any member states but with the utterly corrupt maze of
bureaucracy that passes for a federal government and runs their end of OFS while the transstellars
run the other. And second, while we have the military edge to defeat the SLN, what we don’t have
and never will is resources to match the population and combined R&D base of the Core, so in the
longer term, when they got over their shock, they could crush us.”

“So what can we do?”

“Make sure there isn’t a longer term. Our real aim, if we go down this road, which I think we
will, won’t be to defeat the SLN. It will be to destroy the League. It’s rotten, through and through.
Beowulf knows it, and so do a lot of other Core worlds. Everyone in the Shell and Verge knows it
absolutely, and some sensible analysts are sure Barregos has plans for the Maya Sector to secede.
The right blows could shatter the whole thing to smithereens. And that’s what we’ll need to do,
break it up into a hundred small federations big enough to defend themselves and have proper
resources, small enough to function properly as governments that will, as the price of peaceful
secession and using the Junction, agree to enforce the Cherwell Convention stringently. And to
achieve that what we have to do politically is to get that Mesan data and give it raw to everyone,
and what we have to do militarily is destroy the SLN, one way or another, and use the window to induce
major secessions.”

Caitrin had given up binking some while back. “One way or another?”

“We could destroy every ship they send against us, Katie, but forcing them to surrender and
repatriating paroled PoWs would be much more useful.” Honor waved a hand. “Everyone quails at
the headline figure that they have about 11,000 SDs. But as far as we’re concerned, every one of
them is a piece of junk. The 8,000 in mothballs are all more than a century old, and even if they
could man them there’d be no point. Against any RMN or RN capital ship it’d be Kodiak Max
versus plasma rifle. Small bits of bear steak. And the 3,000 odd in Battle and Frontier Fleets aren’t
much less obsolete. But it will take us two or three years at least to get our own new building sorted
in sufficient numbers, and the Junction ban might make for some fighting before then. What matters,
though, is that if every single Core world went into R&D and building overdrive right now we’d still
have a five-year window at least, probably longer. And they’ll be wildly overconfident, disbelieving
of the threat environment they’ll be entering, and won’t have a clue what’s hit them. But it’s still the
follow-up that will really matter, and we’ll have to be ruthless in seeing it through. No pushing and
shoving, just a political killing, as quick and clean a fatal strike as we can manage. So while I’ve no
idea what it might translate into for you, what we need is the will to do that, to use the opportunity
thrust into our hands, and whatever might promote that is the most useful thing you can do.”

“My God, Honor. You shuffle at the idea you changed Haven, then lay out how to kill the
Solarian League.” Caitrin shook her head. “But I asked, and that’s a useful parameter. Talk up our
determination and will to act. To be ruthless. Fair enough. Can you tell me why we are so dominant,
though? I mean, how do I answer people who ask?”
“There’s a lot I can’t say yet, Katie, but the key thing is range. Back to the Kodiak Max. It could eat the person with the plasma rifle alive if it could get into range, which for a Kodiak means physical contact. But it can’t, because it’s still a mile away when it gets turned into bear steak. That’s for the RMN and GSN. For the RN and IAN it’s about three-quarters of a mile. And just as it can be a teenager or an adult holding the plasma-rifle, so one of our BC(P)s is capable of taking out any Sollie capital ship. In the last ten years we’ve revolutionised space combat, and Haven’s kept up, more or less, because they had to or die. The IAN’s well on its way as well. But the Sollies have barely noticed. We’re all neobarbs, after all.”

“That’s clear. Honor, does Beth understand this?”

“In outline. We have to get the treaty sorted first. Treaties.”

“But we will?”

“I can’t see why not. Neither can Tom Theisman. It would take something calamitous.”

“And does Hamish know what you’ve just been saying?”

“Militarily, certainly. He hasn’t absorbed the politics, I don’t think, but I haven’t made the pitch to him. He’s been a bit busy.”

“I imagine he has.” Caitrin stared at her. “And you’ve got something else up your sleeve, haven’t you? That you’re going to whap him round the head with when you need to, like that Sky Domes yard being military-capable, and just happening to be optimised for ships we need most?”

Honor raised her own eyebrows but decided not to do any more shuffling. “You score another first. But I can’t talk about it.”

“Something big, though, that will have doubters recalculating?”

“Those in the know, yes. But that won’t be very many, Katie, until it gets used. No secret weapon remains secret then.”

“R&D, then. An even bigger plasma rifle.”

“More or less. Something I managed to rescue when Janacek’s idiot axe started falling, that has come along very nicely and has ever so many tactical and strategic ramifications. So yes, I think I’ll be able to get the Admiralty on board, and the Octagon. And Beth and Benjamin. Who knows about the Andermani? But the critical period for us will be going on building hard once the Haven treaty is signed. Keeping silent about the realities, we’ll seem over-confident, and taxes will be biting hard. Willie will need a lot of support to weather that.”

“Noted. And that’s something I can certainly do — priming support ahead of time. Mmm. Would you mind introducing me properly to Klaus and Stacey Hauptman? I’ve met them at events, but never privately.”

“If you want, Katie, but Klaus is hard work, I warn you, and none too keen on aristocrats, though he makes an exception for me.” She grinned. “He and Tom Theisman were quite shocked to find themselves in broad agreement. Stacey’s more urbane, and I think you’d get on. And even Klaus approves strongly of the resettlement programmes, so he’s primed to make some more exceptions for you and Theo and the others Mike and he have involved.”

“Good. Can that be publicised more, now?”
Honor waggled a hand. “I don’t mind, but I can’t speak for others. And you must have the consent of the freed. A bunch of gibbering newsies is the last thing they need.”

“Yes of course. But I imagine they might be willing to say some hard things about just how atrocious Manpower is and why doing something about it is more important than a temporary tax hike.”

“Probably. But get Theo to take you to one of his mountain dinners, Katie. And sound gently, with ’cats present, if they’re willing.” Nimitz, replete with celery and eyeing some cheese, signed lazy agreement. “They can help a lot.”

“So Mr Hawkwing said.” Caitrin shook her head. “You integrate it all so seamlessly, Honor. Talk about using your resources. What’s that thing Mike says? ‘All hands make sail’?”

Honor grinned. “Could be. It’s in some old Terran wet-navy writers we both read. Or ‘All hands to the pumps’ when things aren’t so good. That hasn’t changed, however equipment has. But forgive me, it’s driving me crazy. How do you come to know Mr Hawkwing? All my records tell me is he took some leave on Manticore in the spring, and was subsequently seconded by Alfredo Yu to the Marine staff at the Bay House.”

Caitrin blinked. “If you really insulated yourself that well, Honor, do you want to blow it now?”

Honor waggled a hand gloomily. “Probably not. But it’s still driving me crazy. And the legal proceedings where I might have been asked on oath what I know are all over.”

“Well, it’s no skin off my nose. Nimitz?”

To Honor’s bafflement he gave a thumbs-up, mouth full of cheese.

“How much do you want to know?”

Honor shrugged. “How on earth Andrew did it. Plainly, a ’cat with the PGS planted what I guess was old Grayson tech in Government House. And Mr Hawkwing is a sensor tech, so something here must have picked it up, though I’m bothered if I can see what or how.”

“Well that I can answer. Two business-ends of Ghost Rider drones stuffed in my attic read the data-store constantly, and a whisker-laser sent their take to the Bay House daily. Mr Hawkwing did the tuning on the synch, so I had plenty of time to talk to him. And I had him over to watch while you used the results to mount the single most devastating political ambush I’ve ever seen, so we got quite pally. What?”

Honor had after an incredulous second gently covered her face in her hands, and her voice was muffled.

“Just contemplating the Tester’s ironies, Katie. I nail Houseman for giving away classified tech, and meanwhile Nimitz and Alfredo are installing it in your attic. And elsewhere, I imagine.”

“Well I can’t speak for elsewhere, though knowing Colonel LaFollet I’d bet fully cleared Sky Domes or GSN personnel were involved. But there’s no illegality here on that score, Honor. I might not use it much but I still have the full clearance I had as Regent. It’s never been cancelled, and I get all the summaries Beth does, though I don’t read them all any more, not by a long chalk. So I know nothing I shouldn’t.”

Honor raised her head and stared. “Of course you don’t. Blessings on Andrew’s head.” She
gave Nimitz another piece of cheese he cheerfully accepted. “And on yours, Stinker. And Mr Hawkwing’s.”

* * * * *

The updates provided by successive ships that met them in hyperspace went from surprising to hair-raising without ever losing sight of riveting. Less than a week out from Haven there were a barrage of official Manticoran statements in which they announced scores of arrests and charges, confirmed with a vengeance they had ceased to dig the hole they were in and started filling it, and acknowledged the Havenite statements they’d received. Then the Queen announced Tom’s arrival, capping all with an address that left Eloise shaking with the raw emotional shock of hearing her lay so much of herself bare. His Grace of Manticore had transferred for the occasion to RNS Nouveau Paris (bearing the callsign Haven One), and watched the ministerial and Admiralty broadcasts with only mild surprise, though the uncompromising statement of present Manticoran vulnerability from White Haven made him wince. But the Queen’s address had him sitting up and, surprised herself, Eloise gave him only seconds to gather himself before politely asking for his opinion. The look he gave her was very dry but with a hint of amused appreciation behind it that nuded her rating of him still higher.

“There is much I might say, Madam President, and rather less I will. First, although it is slightly indiscreet, I will admit I am surprised Her Majesty went so far, and suspect the influence of Her Grace of Harrington. Second, I am less surprised at her decision to make a clean breast about the assassination of King Roger. The politically required secrecy will have galled her. And third, besides the change in Junction policy, the most consequential thing was the Independent Auditor, whose findings have immediate effects on the voting tallies in both Houses I am still trying to work out.”

“No idea, Madam President. It is clear, however, that Her Majesty and others are pushing very hard indeed. The notice given was the legal minimum, and the appointment of Lord Justice Farquhar as Lord Speaker will ensure whatever briskness the Lords may find themselves capable of.”

After he’d returned to HMS King Roger III conversation ran hot with implications, but though they’d all read detailed appreciations of Mantie politics they were only speculating; and the naval statement had bothered Eloise. Javier was having to hold the fort at the Octagon, so the RN delegation was headed by Lester Tourville, who could certainly think outside the box, with Shannon Foraker as his second. Not being used to cabinet neither was interrupting, but when Eloise asked Tourville directly what he thought his reply was crisp.

“Several things, Madam President. First, as Admiral Giscard said briefing me, the Manties have their first team back and it shows. I was surprised by how blunt White Haven was, and I’m
guessing they’re following a calculus not unlike ours 30 months back — trust in government has been broken and only plain speaking can rebuild it. But he was being gloomier than he needed, not least because if they’re recalling that many ships from Silesia they’ve cut away a serious problem. Can’t fight on two fronts? Then close one down — and they have. We’ve gamed it all ways, including this, and they’re still in a hole, but it’s now significantly smaller than we’d like. It simplifies things in that we don’t have to worry about Sidemore, but reinforcement of Basilisk and Trevor’s Star is not good. There must also be economic consequences, compounding loss of Junction revenue, but that I’m not qualified to address.”

“Tony?”

“Insufficient data. Overall they have to be taking a hit, but it depends what deal they reach with the Andies. And there’ll be a fair bit of our traffic stampeding for the Junction soon, as offset.”

“Fair enough. Lester?”

“Second, there’s this Grayson-style yard of Harrington’s that just happens to be military-capable.” He all but threw up his hands. “Admiral Giscard was on the money again. Not being stupid, she didn’t like the administration’s decision to cut building capacity; and being an industrial billionaire she countered it, silently, by building a new yard of her own, which as a GSN Admiral she could make sure was security cleared and ready to go. Astonishing, and very helpful to them. And what’s the betting she doesn’t have yet more equipment piled up against a rainy day? One of our key calculations about the depth of hole they’re in is the lag between any decision to start rebuilding and how soon they could actually do it, and that’s just been chopped into as well. Which leads to, third, the fact that it is, White Haven said, specifically geared to their Saganami-Cs, which makes my shoulders itch. Shannon?”

“With you on that, sir.” Eloise didn’t think Foraker was aware of the suppressed smiles. “From what we know, those ships are a new design, not a mod at all, but we’re not sure of details except they’re not podlayers. This is the Manties, and designs were in place under Caparelli and Hemphill, so while a CA’s a CA, we have to anticipate a bigger punch. And if White Haven wasn’t just blowing smoke when he said they have close to the firepower of an old SD, a much bigger punch. Telemetry, I’d guess.”

After a moment Eloise sighed to herself. “Telemetry, Shannon?”

“Oh, sorry, Madam President. Fire control. With podlayers and tractored pods we can all put more missiles into space faster, but a ship has only so many channels to control them, so the size of broadsides is limited. But one, every ship has backups against battle-damage, and two, as they’ve still got some range on us, it might be possible to rotate control of multiple broadsides. I’ve been trying, but it’s miniaturisation. We just can’t fit what we’d need into a hull that works. But they might have cracked that. Oh, and three, we can’t fire MDMs from a cruiser tube, but another possibility is they’ve worked that out. I’d have to think dual-drive, not triple, but that’s enough, and if they can stack broadsides too, well, SD firepower wouldn’t be an exaggeration.”

Tourville was frowning hard. “Numbers, Shannon?”

“Who knows? Say a broadside of 15, double broadside 30. Built in telemetry for a double stack, 60. Redundant channels, another 30, maybe. Use auxiliary command for real. With waves of 90 capital missiles at c-fractional speeds an SD would be in trouble. But the limit is magazine space. They’d shoot themselves dry fast.”

Eloise took a breath. “So the hole shallowed some more, and the window shrunk?”
“Yes to both, Madam President.”

“Which means, people, we have to stop thinking about just wanting this treaty, and having a bunch of hole cards, and square up to needing it as badly as the Manties do. Is there anything else, Lester? Shannon?”

“Nothing obvious, Madam President.”

“Alright. We’ve always known we need to be very cautious where Manties are concerned, which is another reason to recognise we need the treaty badly ourselves. Renewed hostilities were always going to be a crapshoot, and now they’re a stacked crapshoot. Sandra, no Treecats in any of these statements except the Queen’s Ariel. Any thoughts?”

Discussion broadened again, and continued over several days. His Grace punctiliously sent a formal tally of new nominal voting strengths in the Houses with a rider than anyone might do anything and, consulted by comm, offered some pithy accounts of the political parties involved and where they might now find themselves. Shannon Foraker discovered the Treecat materials Sandra had and buried herself in them, occasionally emerging to ask sharp questions Sandra couldn’t answer but was happy to argue about. They were all nervous and there was a certain tension at meals and in desultory arguments that went on; but in the nature of things they were shortening the distance Tom’s updates had to travel. The second had little new except further confirmation the Manties really were cleaning house thoroughly, with capital and long custodial sentences, and the intriguing appointment of Catherine Montaigne, now something called a True Liberal, as Minister for the Suppression of Slavery — data that drew interesting analysis from a surprised but delighted Grand Duke. But the third had a complete record of the Lords trial and a covering note from Tom.

“Unbelievable and heartstopping, but I won’t give spoilers. There’s 23 hours of it. Don’t fast-forward at all. And do invite His Grace to watch it. You’ll need commentary on their insane aristo rules. And you’ll want His Grace’s raw reactions. The only other thing I’ll say is that I’ve never admired Harrington more. Publn actually got that yeoman versus aristo stuff right, for a wonder, and the whole Committee couldn’t match what she feels. Let alone what she did. Oh, and tell Sandra to watch for Nimitz’s intervention. I’ve learned some sign, and Harrington’s Maid, Ms LaFollet, has been very helpful in letting me talk to him and his mate Samantha. Take everything Sandra suspects and treble it. Lord Nimitz is the least of it, as I found when I was persuaded to play a part myself. So once again, Madam President, enjoy.”

With His Grace very much present, and glued to the HD, they watched the first two days in a marathon session fuelled by too much alcohol and many baguettes. His commentary on procedures and implications occasioned blinking, staring, and head shaking, especially when it came to the row about accessory to murder convictions. That included the intervention by Lord Nimitz, which had His Grace laughing aloud and Sandra’s jaw dropping. Exhausted and mellow in the wake of it all, Eloise asked both for their thoughts, and His Grace shrugged.

“Still assimilating, Madam President. But unexpected, certainly, though it shouldn’t have been. I note Lord Nimitz” — he swallowed laughter — “and God knows treecat peers is an idea to stop all short, did not actually deny that a treecat planted whatever it was. And while this is beyond what I’m comfortable saying, people delighted to see High Ridge damned must be seriously concerned by the severe breach of security. But the notion it was ‘cats who did it will be reassuring.”

“They not being a resource available to anyone external?”

“Just so.” His face became thoughtful. “And it occurs to me that ‘cats have transgenerational memories. There may be a score being settled. An earlier High Ridge, about three centuries back, had ties to what turned out to be a Manpower front trying to get permission to experiment on ‘cats
Sandra was bug-eyed. “Your Grace, do you accept that adoption of monarchs and heirs was intentional?”

“Certainly. No doubting it.”

“Then I’d think you’re right about scores. But what struck me was the way Nimitz — Lord Nimitz? that sounds so odd — followed arcane protocols. He was playing that Lord Speaker.”

“Yes he was, like a transverse flute. His Clan doesn’t call him Laughs Brightly for nothing, and there’s a reason Honor calls him Stinker too.”

Eloise laughed. “She does?”

“Oh yes. Lord Stinker now, I imagine. But either way, that ‘cat’s got deviltry in him, and plenty of it. And he’s been riding Honor’s shoulder for about 45 T-years. Anything she knows, he could, at least.”

“So how long before he can vote in that madhouse?”

His Grace grinned widely. “Very good question, Ms Secretary. Less time than I’d have supposed 24 hours ago.”

They went on arguing, capping one another’s speculations, for a while, others joining in. Shannon Foraker had more good questions, and Denis LePic was fascinated by the legal issues ‘cats participation in public life was throwing up. But hours of watching had been tiring, and when the Ushers retired, yawning — Ginny having been included as an unofficial member of the delegation because speaking to the Ballroom themselves might be necessary — everyone followed. But they reassembled early next shipday to resume the screening, and were left completely shocked by Harrington’s extraordinary performance, with Tom’s inset, and all that followed. Eloise was trying desperately to assimilate what she’d just seen, but His Grace beat her to it, holding up a shaking hand.

“She did it to Grayson, then you. Now she’s done it to us as well. Dear God.” He swallowed. “I would not have thought it possible. But think of a tug-of-war, if you still do such a thing. We have it in the Gryphon Games — two teams pulling opposite ends of a rope. And sometimes the losers not only get jerked beyond the line but clean off their feet, and pulled far beyond it. That’s the best analogy I have for what we’ve just seen Honor do. Gravendale supported her? I’d not have believed it for any money.”

“Is there any appeal?”

“No. The Lords are a supreme court. Those sentences will have been carried out before you arrive. But that’s the least of it. There have never been decreations, and though the bar is set high the precedent is exceptionally potent. And as for that military appreciation …” He glanced at Tourville, who had caught her eye. “Given which, would you wish me to withdraw for a while?”

“Lester?”

“I don’t believe it’s necessary, Madam President, Your Grace. There was nothing in the outline of possibilities that isn’t in the open, to anyone with military sense at any rate, though I am again impressed by Her Grace’s ruthlessness as a tactician. What I wanted to say was there was another radical game-changer in there, because unless I misheard that Erewhonese envoy we will shortly have a joint RN and GSN task force hunting rogue StateSec ships. De facto, that’s an alliance
with Grayson. I assume Admiral Theisman’s deployment orders have passed us, and Admiral Giscard will follow them. But the levels of it! Harrington’s got Erewhon back on side at a stroke, while insisting on their right, and Grayson’s, to deal with us directly, and she and Tom must have planned that jointly. How was it even legal for him to give evidence?”

“The Lords are supreme, Admiral Tourville. They hear whomever they want. And Her Grace gave them no time to think of objections.” Denis LePic shook his head, whether in disbelief or envy Eloise wasn’t sure. “I also take your point about the joint task force — a model for effective alliance against Manpower and a shot across everyone’s bows.”

“And how! Not to mention the effects that speech will have on Haven. Which Tom must have anticipated also.” Tourville too shook his head. “He’s been her house-guest for most of two months, and they’ve got into joint strategising. That’s some team.”

Eloise suspected she looked as bug-eyed as most of her cabinet. “Yes it is. And the effects will be huge. It actually puts pressure on us not to disappoint Harrington.” She turned it in her mind, almost wanting to laugh. How did the woman keep remoulding reality as if it were soft clay? “Anything else military, Lester? Shannon?”

Foraker had a half-smile on her face and an abstracted look.

“Eh? Oh, sorry Madam President. I was admiring that schematic. It was superb.” Foraker became brisker. “It tells us the GSN’s a bit stronger than we’d thought — the Blackbird Yard is astonishingly productive — and the IAN were giving us even lowerball numbers on their new classes than we’d allowed. What bothers me is the Congo wormhole, because I agree Manpower have to be trying to map it, at least, and if they have cracked it, and it goes anywhere in the Core, Shell or Verge, an allied fleet couldn’t leave it in its rear. So with those awful figures for whatever’s happening on Congo, we’ve just been handed a real first ops target. Which I’d suspect is what Admirals Harrington and Theisman were primarily intending.”

Eloise nodded. “Yes. Thank you, Shannon, that makes sense. Though what they’re thinking about the Solarian League I can’t begin to imagine. You’ve been looking at that, haven’t you?”

“Yes. And in purely naval terms, ship for ship we can whack the SLN easily. Unless our data is hopelessly wrong, and I see no — ”

“It isn’t.” Kevin had that satisfied look on his face again. “I was on Terra long enough to check very carefully what they were getting on us and the RMN, and they’d barely registered we were fighting, never mind understood what we were doing between us to naval doctrine.”

“Then their ships are so obsolete they wouldn’t stand a chance.” Foraker held up a finger. “But the politics is something else altogether, and we’d wind up with a hexapuma on a string.”

“With a what?”

“Oh, treecats’ big dumb cousins. It was in the material I was reviewing.” She pulled out a reader, flicked through it, and showed Eloise a startling image. “I just meant something nasty, Madam President. We can whack the SLN all day but we can’t control the volume, or prevent a concerted R&D effort to get themselves a navy that isn’t obsolete. So what then?”

“The SLN are that bad, Admiral?” Tony Nesbitt looked incredulous. “I know we have an edge but they have thousands of capital ships.”

“All as obsolete as one another, sir. On the data we have, they’re junk. Remember what the
Man — the RMN did to us two years ago? And we had rough parity with them until MDMs and the new classes came in, which the SLN doesn’t begin to have. Anything they send at us is toast.” She frowned. “May I ask about the economics, sir? Admiral Tourville was thinking about the loss the Star Kingdom’s suffering from closing the Junction to Mesan registered shipping. But what’s the Mesan loss? And how will that impact the League economy?”

“Now that’s a good question, Admiral. I can’t begin to give accurate figures but it’s got to be devastating. Massive, immediate disruption, and a permanent rise of several hundred percent in operating time and costs of any route that used the Junction. But what percentage of their total traffic did I have no idea. It has to be significant, because it all but cuts them out of Andermani and Silesian markets, as well as ours and Manticore’s, Asgard, Midgard, and Matapan. But I suspect loss of the Beowulf–Joshua route via Hennessy and Terre Haute is even worse — it’s six days by wormhole, and at least six weeks straight for merchies. And while I don’t have figures, a serious percentage of the trade between Old League and Shell uses that route. You know, Madam President, if the Star Kingdom ever closed the Junction to all League traffic, the League would take an absolutely colossal economic hit. It’d work both ways, of course, with revenues halved or worse for the duration, but it would be far, far more serious for the Sollies.” He shrugged. “I still find it hard to believe the SLN is so completely obsolete. But I’m beginning to think the League is much more vulnerable economically and politically than any of us are used to thinking. And the Federal Government is very dependent on the revenue stream they extort from Protectorates, which means the SLN is too.”

Kevin was listening closely. “So you’re saying the whole OFS operation isn’t just pigs at the trough. It’s actually propping them up?”

“Yes. The analyses by Harrington and Montaigne Tom included with his first despatch pointed that way, and I’ve been modelling it as best I can. A fairly small number of people receive obscene profits, and I’d agree there has to be a large chunk going to Mesa, but it’s paying for the SLN and Old Chicago bureaucracies. Their entire tax structure is insane, of course, because they can’t reform anything, so it’s T-centuries out of date and unfit for purpose. Without the Protectorates they’d have gone bankrupt long ago.” Tony had an ugly light in his eyes. “And historically, it looks to me very much as if the Protectorate system was expanded as their financial position became unsustainable. It was easier to steal revenue and dress it up as noble than undertake a basic set of tax reforms any fool could see the need for.”

“Huh. Does that dovetail with anything you’ve found on Manpower’s messing with us?”

“Not really, Kevin. I agree they helped push the 1771 report, and the Technical Conservation Act. It isolated us from Beowulf and was about as sensible as shooting ourselves through both feet. But while that fits with the Star Kingdom pissing Manpower off, the Federal finances I was looking at were going sour well before that.”

“You have evidence Manpower had a hand in pushing you into expansion, Mr Secretary?”

“Some, Your Grace, but all circumstantial, inferential, and anecdotal. There are no living witnesses, of course, and large volumes of data were lost in the Harris Assassination and Leveller and Octagon bombings, while more was corrupted under the PRH. But people connected to the web of accounts and companies behind Giancola were around the fringes of the decision, at least, and the Report itself was far more tendentious than economics justified.”

“Mmm. I would ask, Madam President, that you consider making such evidence as you have public.”

Eloise thought about it. “Why in particular, Your Grace? Wouldn’t it go against the responsibility we acknowledge? And Manpower didn’t have to invent the amoral logic of expansion.
The Legislaturists weren’t much better than the League, I’m afraid.”

“That was part of my thinking, actually. That logic is there, but we do seem to have Manpower consciously using it in both cases. It speaks to pattern. Descroix’s confessions that if not exactly an agent she was taking money to brief Manpower and look the other way, and had been doing so for more than a decade, point to a longer term too — implying they may have had a hand in our persistent inability, until then-Captain Harrington came along, to protect the Basilisk Terminus properly. Is there any chance you could find evidence of Manpower pushing that particular Legislaturist plan? It came very close to starting the war.”

“It’s possible. And it would be more of the same, wouldn’t it?” Tony thought hard. “Most involved would be dead, and it’s exactly the sort of data the Harris Assassination and Octagon bombing destroyed.”

“There are some diplomats and staffers still around, Tony.” Eloise suppressed a grimace. “We dug them out when we cleared Harrington of those trumped-up charges, but we weren’t looking for Manpower.”

“Right. I can look, then, but it won’t be fast.”

“Thank you. And while I respect your not wishing to seem to pass off blame, it would deepen common cause and give Her Majesty greater flexibility in dealing with, ah, old resentments.”

In private thought or public address, Eloise wondered. “We’ll discuss it certainly, Your Grace.”

“I can do it, Eloise.” Ginny had been uncharacteristically quiet, savouring the fate of parasites, Eloise suspected, but was bright-eyed. “We don’t know, Mr Newsie, but of course we suspect the bastards. Wouldn’t you? And we do have some frightfully suggestive things our Tony and Kevin have found.” She batted eyelids outrageously. “More seriously, Eloise, there might be stuff the Ballroom has that would add in. If there were any smoking guns I’d know, but there’s a heap of intel collected on principle — all their public announcements, trips by senior execs, known or suspected contacts, orders placed, all sorts. And stuff learned during documentations. Would that be a big problem, Theo?”

Eloise’s notion of having Ginny show the Manticoran envoy Nouveau Paris while she pulled the enlarged delegation together had worked unexpectedly well. He really did know about slavery, understood he could know nothing of its horror, and had managed to charm her — no mean feat — with exquisite manners, responding to her exaggerated Your Gracing by deploring aristo protocol and inviting her to first-name terms. Now he shrugged.

“I wouldn’t advertise it, Ginny. People sympathise with spacing slavers in abstract but we don’t show them. Taken from computers rather than minds would be easier for most to deal with, and while I expect our anger’s begun maturing into determination there’s no point sticking pins in public opinion if you can avoid it.”

“True. And I don’t know what might be available. Copies of all sorts of things will be moving towards Manticore, and people will be sifting it, but the more specifics there are to look for the better.”

Eloise’s mind had been moving down a different track, involving Ginny Usher let loose on an unsuspecting Manticore.

“I’d been thinking of your role as more a private conduit than an unofficial spokeswoman,
Ginny."

“Yes I know, Eloise, but that’s because you’re being stuffy about it. Honestly, you’ll all be being frighteningly serious about negotiations, all steely eyes and furrowed brows and refusing to talk to the poor newsies out of turn because it wouldn’t be proper. You need me to do PR for you. And Theo’s promised to show me Landing and introduce me to all sorts of people besides letting me make contacts I’ll need through the ASL and the freed on his estates. Good cover, good PR, and lots of fun.”

Eloise wasn’t the only member of the cabinet wanting to rest her head in her hands. Ginny at full pelt was a thing of wonder, but not always — often — almost ever diplomatic. But His Grace was grinning.

“Don’t worry, Madam President. She’s promised not to cause any real trouble, and she’ll get on like a house on fire with Cathy Montaigne, which will be entertaining. And as that ministerial appointment will have obliged Cathy to be a little more circumspect about going on HD, they’ll be delighted to find such a splendid replacement.”

* 

The notion that Harrington could do anything more was preposterous, but the last update, reaching them a few days short of Trevor’s Star, proved otherwise. There were to begin with the public executions, watched in grim silence by His Grace until the coups de grâce. The thunder of gunshots had everyone jumping and His Grace bolt upright, eyes narrowed, and a murmured ‘Dear God’ was just audible to Eloise. Then the HD cut to a close-up of Harrington, a treecat on each shoulder, and held as she bowed her head briefly and turned away. Eloise took a deep breath, shaken despite her combat experience.

“You seemed surprised by something, Your Grace. Can you comment?”

“Oh yes, Madam President. I shouldn’t think many people realised outside Saganami Island but the chemical propellant gun General MacIntyre used belongs to Honor. It’s an antique, of course, a Colt M-1911 from old Terra she was given by High Admiral Matthews. The one she used to kill Warnecke’s men, if you know that story.”

By now Eloise knew every story they had on Harrington, and nodded.

“I do. A personal statement, then, within the public one.”

“Certainly. But by whom? I doubt Honor suggested it. MacIntyre must have asked.” His fingers snapped. “Calibre. After seeing the trial I looked up the old regs governing this business, and the coup de grâce must be given with ‘a gun of the largest suitable calibre’. If MacIntyre didn’t know about Honor’s liking for antique hand weapons, Ramirez would have told him.”

“President Ramirez?”

“His son Tomas. A Marine Major-General and a friend of Honor’s.”

“I see. A salute to her from the Marines, then?”

“Yes, that fits. She is an honorary Colonel of Marines, and for those who know, they express
their approval and gratitude."

Everyone took that under advisement, but the next items were more cheerful. A brisk statement by Her Majesty about claims arising from North Hollow’s mass murder of civilians and various libels and slanders had Denis again blinking disbelieving envy at monarchical power; and the even brisker statement by Harrington that followed had His Grace as pop-eyed as the rest of them before slapping his knee in laughter that needed no explanation and was shared. Gaining a new embassy, \textit{gratis}, was a telling gesture, as well as useful, and if poking the dead in the eye was not usually wise, well, there were dead and there were dead, and precise poetic justice combining continued, contemptuous rebuke with cheerful hope for a very different future was … splendid, really, and politically as shrewd as you could ask for. There were also Harrington’s cool, measured words about a memorial, a gesture of great grace that also declared the war over and brought Tourville and Foraker to their feet, staring. \textit{And} on the eve of an election. As Harrington’s image was repaced by edited news reports showing Manticorans had found it exactly right too, Eloise hit the pause.

“\textit{And it doesn’t stop, does it, people? Who knew we’d need to know about memorials already? Before we reach Trevor’s Star I want a clean statement from the whole delegation we can submit to Harrington as thanks and formal advice, and it \textit{must} reflect what our navy wants. Denis, co-ordinate please? And Lester, Shannon, sort out urgently a meeting of everyone you have with you, and ship’s officers and crew, and generate a list of concerns from a navy point-of-view. Specifically, are we prepared to commemorate StateSec personnel? Your Grace, Her Grace said ‘any uniform’? \textit{Could} she really mean StateSec personnel too?”

“She could, Madam President, but I can’t say if she did. I have seen her look as she did at the executions only once before, when she killed Burdette, and I believe he is commemorated on the Steadholders’ Wall with the stone upside-down. Like those cancelled arms we saw blown apart. And Honor certainly believes everyone’s soul faces God, while Nimitz couldn’t care less about enemies already dead, so it can’t be ruled out.”

If there were any other issue that could so have discombobulated the delegation Eloise didn’t know what it was, and spent some time in the next two days wondering how deliberate that was, sneaking suspicions warring with a degree of shame about entertaining them. But in the moment, the newsies’ startled coverage of the Manticorans’ spontaneous jamboree jumped to shots of huge queues at the polls, then a tabulated summary of results His Grace scanned at impressively high speed with an eagle eye and broadening smile.

“CA and False Liberals gone from the Commons. Both annihilated. Progressives and New Men halved or worse. True Liberals, Centrists, and Crown Loyalists all strengthened. Huge administration majority. And propositions got onto the ballot — that must have been fun — let me see, Commons-sponsored approval of decreations urging more frequent use, overwhelmingly passed. Ouch. SFS-sponsored proposal that treecats be formally represented in both Houses, also overwhelmingly passed. That’s going to be \textit{very} interesting. Independent Gryphon Peers’ proposal to investigate Her Grace for breach of privacy laws rejected by — damn! — 99 plus percent. Give them enough rope, the idiots. Mothers’ Union proposal that purely mercantile interests in Silesia are not worth a single Manticoran life, passed by a bit under two-thirds. Interesting. Helps the PM considerably. Yush! An Association of Retired Naval Officers’ proposal that Her Grace be promoted Fleet Admiral, less than 5,000 dissenters system-wide but only advisory. Clever. They regain ground after the scandals, and it would mean she couldn’t ever be on half-pay or excluded from live data. Hamish will be laughing himself sick, and Honor will be furious. Separate Landing referendum on granting her freedom of the city, 17 dissenters only. Wonder what they were on. 22 other cities, for no obvious reason, ditto, though with less absolute numbers. Except Yawata Crossing, announcing 100\% support — no surprise, that’s where she grew up, and beyond native pride Sky Domes and
Hauptman people working at HMS Vulcan have brought considerable prosperity there since she reorganised their domestic arrangements. A clean sweep, Madam President, with very good numbers.”

“Would you expect the Prime Minister to make any cabinet changes?”

“Not unless any of those recalled agreed to serve only until the election.”

“So good news, then. But there’s still several hours of Tom’s report. Let’s see what else he’s given us.”

The newly elected House of Commons was to assemble immediately, with a first sitting the following afternoon — an unprecedented degree of haste required, it was pointed out, by the legislative mess left by the abrupt suspension of the disgraced administration, and the expected arrival of delegations within a week or two. The House of Lords was also summoned, to seat new San Martino peers, and scenes were appended. If the House had been full for the trial it was now jammed to the rafters: additional benches had been installed, narrowing and extending the central aisle, and older, half-familiar faces had been joined by an astonishing number of younger ones, third-generation Prolong making them look like children.

“The cadet seats.” His Grace shook his head. “We really do need a new chamber or some serious building-work. That was another thing High Ridge — just Janvier now, I suppose — pointedly failed to do though it was mandated when the annexation bill passed.”

The peers were in robes, ceremonies as towering San Martinos were seated colourful and in an antique way entertaining, though the folderol involved was pernicious as well as absurd to Havenite eyes. But after a few minutes Tom appeared.

“There was plenty more of that, but meantime something more interesting was happening in the Commons. I’ve been watching this one unfold over the last few days, and I’ll have comments when you get here. For now I’ll say only, to His Grace at the request of Her Grace, that Her Majesty and President Ramirez between them mousetrapped her.”

His Grace’s eyebrows were high. “Ramirez mousetrapped her? What on … Oh. Toybox time, I expect. Let’s see.”

The image came up, with a very different-looking Commons. A lot of faces had changed, and for this inaugural session everyone was in party best, which made for a riot of colours and styles. The new San Martino Members were evident, wearing their own fashions, and had sufficient room, though all had slightly less space than before. A formal welcome was extended to all new Honourable Members, and no sooner had the Speaker concluded and gavelled them to order than that knocking at the door came, and Her Majesty was admitted for another ceremony, this time of creation. Lord Justice Ingledew, she observed, had done a critical job, handed to him out of the blue, exceptionally well, cleaving to law and hastening matters at the spanking pace demanded by political and diplomatic necessity; Her Majesty was pleased to ask Honourable Members if they would assent to his creation as Baron Black River. Moreover, though in charge of what proved a lesser enquiry, Lord Justice Berham had rendered both Realm and Navy great service, threading a minefield of overlapping jurisdictions to untangle a most serious plot endangering national security, so she was further pleased to ask Honourable Members if they would assent to his creation as Baron Morstone. And finally, at the request of President Ramirez with the enthusiastic concurrence of the Senate and Lower House of San Martin, she was pleased — delighted, in fact — to seek the assent of Honourable Members for the further creation, in addition to all her existing titles, of Her Grace Steadholder Plenipotentiary and Duchess Harrington, PMV, SG with Crossed Swords, GCR, MC with cluster, SC, OG, DSO with cluster, CGM with two clusters, CSM with two clusters, Sidemore
Presidential Medal, as Grand Duchess of San Martin.

The Honourable Members were just as exceedingly happy to give their assents, and while they were about it Eloise turned to His Grace, who wore a wide grin combined with a speculative look.

“Any comments, Your Grace?”

“Plenty, Madam President, beginning with the observation that if Her Majesty makes them reseat Honor before I’m back, I shall be very cross. Besides that … mmm, it’s a bit complicated. I’m sure your files on Her Grace are enormous. Do they include the fact that apart from military medals with clear criteria she absolutely hates being rewarded for the astonishing things she keeps doing?”

“Um … not as such. Though we did note she received no military decorations after Hades, and wondered if she refused them. And Her Majesty mentioned that in one of her addresses, I think.”

“She did, yes. Honor refused the PMV, on the ground it is for service above and beyond the call of duty, and she had, she insisted, done no more than her duty. I know, but she had chapter and verse. Admiral Theisman was referring to the same thing, I believe, when he said PubIn had got the ‘yeoman versus aristo stuff’ correct, though I’ve not seen their efforts myself, of course. But Honor is indeed a yeoman’s daughter. ‘Some are born great, some achieve greatness, and some have greatness thrust upon them.’ Well, Honor’s actually managed all three of those, in a way, if you count her father’s heritage with treecats and her mother’s Beowulfan connections as being born great — which Manticore didn’t at the time. And her upbringing was, um, sturdily provincial. The achieved greatness needs no comment. But it’s the thrusting upon we’re looking at now. His Grace Protector Benjamin started it in grand style, bless him, by making her a Steadholder. Her Majesty responded, off-balance, by creating her a Countess. Honor was deeply dazed by it all, as best I understand it — I didn’t know her then — and less than amused or impressed by the way the Lords responded. With excellent reason, of course; but she did then have to grapple with what a Steadholdership meant, and embarked on a personal transformation that incidentally made her a billionaire by trying to serve her Steading. Then Hades. I won’t bore you with details, but I don’t imagine your own system is any better equipped to deal with the return from the dead of the very wealthy and powerful after their state funerals. StateSec’s false dead not having had any funerals at all, of course.”

Denis LePic choked on his coffee, and Eloise saw Ginny and Kevin grin. She could feel her own mouth tugging up — His Grace did have a way with words when he wanted.

“In any case, it was deemed that her Star Kingdom title had passed to her cousin, so she was created Duchess Harrington. And had a fit, by all accounts, including Her Majesty’s. She was at some disadvantage, of course — her injuries had yet to be properly treated, or Nimitz’s, in so far as that’s proved possible, and she was surrounded by people in a state of delirious shock, from parents and close staff to Space Lords, who would all cheerfully have voted her what Hamish Alexander called War Goddess Harrington. Not to mention Her Majesty in very bullish mood, after losing the fight over the PMV. So Honor got gravpressed without much say in the matter. And quite right too, but once she’d recovered a bit she dug her feet in about other things people were trying to give her, and refused the lot. Politely and implacably.”

He looked round his intent audience, and gave an apologetic smile.

“I don’t mean to be gauche in mentioning unpleasantries, but after she’d used her private craft, piloted with astonishing skill and utter self-disregard, to shield the vessel carrying Her Majesty and His Grace Protector Benjamin from the Masadan missile, she found herself unable to refuse the PMV again because the Commons voted on it before she returned from Grayson, and was once more not best pleased, though I’ve never entirely understood why.”
“Courage is private, Theo.” Ginny was entirely serious. “If someone tried to give me a medal
for what I did to escape I’d gut them. Once you throw your life in the scale it’s your business before
it’s anyone else’s.”

His Grace frowned. “I see that, Ginny, but Honor wasn’t risking herself to save herself; she
was risking herself to save others.”

“So? It’s still her life. And why should entitled mean obligated? One thing Kevin’s taught me
clearly is that accepting honours means being controlled by other people. And screw that.”

“Mmm. People whose lives you save have needs too, and expressing gratitude’s one of
them.” He hesitated. “It’s a low blow, but one person Honor insisted brief me was Anton Zilwicki,
with regard to your husband. A seeing man, Captain Zilwicki. So let me ask you, if Helen Zilwicki
thanked Officer Cachat for saving her life, should he gut her?”

Ginny laughed. “Ouch. Fair point, Theo. But if Harrington wants to tell a bunch of aristos to
take a hike, she’s got my support.”

“Mine too, unless they include Her Majesty with public as well as personal desires on her
mind. And it wasn’t just aristos.” Ginny shrugged. “In any case, as you’ve heard, Honor has run true
to form in resisting being rewarded for … this entire farrago. No, no, and go tell it to the picketwood,
Your Majesty, which was not welcome to Her Majesty’s ears. Now, whether she prompted President
Ramirez or he handed her an opportunity on a platter I’ve no idea, but the platter was passed, and the
Grand Duchess’s head served up on it.”

There was a silence in which the Commons organising their vote could be heard.

Unexpectedly, Tony straightened.

“Do you know, Your Grace, I’ve never before thought of being made an aristo as an
imposition, though I think of them as a ruling class and know all too well what rule means. I suppose
it’s because I think of them as privileged without responsibility or accountability, and rule as wholly
comprising both. But Her Grace has never burked a responsibility in her life, I don’t suppose, and
never will. She’s also been held accountable, rightly and very wrongly, and come through it all.” He
frowned. “It does seem she probably broke a considerable number of laws assembling the evidence
she used to bring down High — Janvier, but I can’t say I fault her for that any more than Tom for
shooting Saint-Just.”

His Grace raised a hand. “You might then be interested to know, Mr Secretary, that Her
Majesty specifically authorised me to say, should occasion arise, and in the strictest confidence, yes?”
— he looked round, meeting eyes and receiving nods — “that Her Grace, having spoken to Admiral
Theisman about his, um, personal beliefs after that event, did something equivalent. Her Majesty
decided to accept any confession, and I would imagine rolled her eyes much as you did, Madam
President, in issuing a certain pardon for what you insisted on calling an execution, though the killer
called it murder. And there is of course the result of the Gryphon Peers’ call for an investigation into
exactly that, defeated by better than 99 to one.”

For a wonder, Tony grinned. “So there is. And it’s simple, isn’t it? It’s not aristos and Dolists,
or Manties and Peeps. It’s people. Some stand up, some fall down, and most sit and shudder. And
what you’re telling us is very like El — our Pres — no, hell, like Eloise trying to get Javier to accept
his due. Being President and Deputy CNO are burdens. And so, if you are one who stands up, is
being a Duchess or Grand Duchess or Mighty Panjandrum or whatever.”

“Just so. And I shall greatly enjoy suggesting in all seriousness that next time Honor does
something altogether impossible she be created Mighty Panjandrum of the Star Kingdom. Will you
help me design the regalia? Let’s see. Or, quartered, the first argent, a freed slave azure volant, the second gules, a basilisk sable couchant, the third, ermine, the boatman Charon sanguine rampant, and the fourth a treecat vert salient. Supporters, a manticore rampant and a knight with drawn sword. The whole, mousetrapped.”

How much of that Tony or anyone had followed in detail Eloise hadn’t a clue; she was at a loss herself but the tenor was plain, and Tony was laughing with many of them.

“You do it and I’ll join in. You work because you’re called to it, and it’s needed, and you do it right because it’s an honour to be trusted and you have to look at yourself in the mirror. And rank brings privilege — no getting around that. But others heaping praises on you for doing your job? That’s their right, not your deserving.”

His Grace’s eyes narrowed. “I can’t altogether agree, Mr Nesbitt. And commend to you W. E. B. Du Havel’s *The Political Value of Sacrifice*. Very smart book.” Eloise saw Tony, characteristically, make a note. Du Havel was a thinker she was reading herself as time allowed. “But I take your point, and its much what Honor feels. All the same, when someone does what she’s done, it’s our way to bestow titles and promotions, but we’d pretty much run out of both to bestow until San Martin’s accession. I note Her Majesty said President Ramirez’s request had the backing of his legislature, which given what she showed Janvier to be intending doesn’t surprise me at all. And there are some practical politics wrapped in it — it stops San Martin being odd man out, and undercuts arguments about precedence dinosaurs have been snorting about. And — hang on.”

The Commons had completed their business and the screen showed Her Majesty informing the Lords. She would be grateful to their Lordships and Ladyships if seating Barons Black River and Morstone could be done expeditiously, and would expect to hear from the Lord Speaker at his earliest convenience. The formal reseating of Her Grace of Harrington as Her Grace of San Martin and Harrington would have to await the return of His Grace of Manticore, but took immediate effect so far as rules were concerned; and she took great pleasure now in presenting Her Grace with the appropriate mantle. The herald who’d carried out the decreations was admitted with an assistant bearing a vast bundle of bright silk, and Her Grace, looking resigned, was assisted out of the mantle she was wearing and into the new one — but in donning it paused, feeling the shoulders, and looked a question at the herald, who nodded, speaking briefly. Whatever he said brought a grin to Harrington’s face, and once the mantle was on — an astonishing thing, embroidered with the manticore over mountain peaks that was the new planetary emblem of San Martin — a gesture brought the treecats who’d been watching from her seat leaping sinuously to her shoulders to offer nods of their own as she bowed to Queen and House before sitting.

The House plainly had mixed emotions. San Martinos were delighted and a clear majority pleased, but others looked thunderous or at best as if biting into lemons. Eloise had to admit Harrington looked magnificent, graceful figure and sharp beauty framed by the mantle, which must have seriously superior tailing beneath its decorations for it flowed around her as she moved, and was clearly less cumbersome than one would think. The treecats on each shoulder were like heraldic supporters — that bit of His Grace’s flight of fantasy she had been able to follow — and their green-eyed gazes bracketing hers were enough to give anyone pause. Then the scene cut out and Tom was back once more.

“That’s about it until you get here, except that His Imperial Majesty has accepted Her Majesty’s invitations, and will send the Herzog von Rabenstrange. His Grace Protector Benjamin is coming in person, and combining it with a state visit, so his family will also be here. And two of Erewhon’s triumvirs will be with their delegation, so it’s a full house. Oh, and you must have been as knocked sideways as I was by Honor’s proposal for a memorial to our dead as well as Manticore’s, so I’ve added a recording of the space — extraordinary to find so much open land in the middle of a
city — to give you some parameters. Theisman, out.”

Before the last file could open Eloise paused, looking at His Grace.

“Did you understand that business with the mantle?”

“The shoulders? Honor has a form of body armour in most of her clothes so the ’cats can hang on without injuring her. Their claws are scalpel sharp. Her Majesty must have made sure the mantle had it. As a Grand Duchess Honor will have to wear it more often than she did her ducal one — one of the more tedious bits of our protocol — and I imagine it was also an apology for mousetrapping her into accepting the title.”

Eloise hadn’t considered the mechanics of having treecats on one’s shoulders, and tried to think about a system where a monarch apologised to someone for making them a Grand Duchess by adding armour to their clothing, but gave it up with a shake of her head.

“If you say so. In any case, you were saying?”

“Only that the final reason I can think of for Her Majesty pushing this award so swiftly concerns popular acceptance of the treaty or treaties we’ll be hammering out. Trevor’s Star was a focus of fighting for so long that its formal union with the Star Kingdom is charged with a certain symbolism. And making our finest warrior its Grand Duchess fits that. Given Janvier’s intentions it also expresses Her Majesty’s opinion.”

“Mmm. That I can understand, because such an association of Her Grace with San Martin has a similar symbolism for us, if inverted, of course. But forgive me, the relationship between Her Majesty and Her Grace seems very odd.”

“Not really, Madam President, just very uncommon. How many real friends have you made since coming to office? The kind you can argue, fight, and kick back with, not having to mind your words? It doesn’t happen, does it? Her Majesty came to the throne at 18, and outside her immediate family I’d say that since then she’s made exactly one.”

That was a thing to think about, but with the need to ponder the memorial and digest this latest data Eloise didn’t have much time to do so before finding herself on the bridge with the other senior members of the delegation as the SDs came over the hyperwall at Trevor’s Star. HMS King Roger III had gone first, to warn system defence a Havenite SD was just behind her, and Eloise had her first experience of FTL communication when they were within minutes greeted by Admiral Kuzak and Terminus Command. The long queue of merchant ships waiting to use the wormhole was halted as they approached, RMN vessels flashing wedges in salute; then a fleeting, disorienting moment of transit, and RNS Nouveau Paris emerged into a lane between a staggering array of fixed defences. Haven not having any wormhole termini, Eloise was unfamiliar with the sight of fortresses, however she knew of them by report, and if those at Trevor’s Star had been impressive, these were something else. The urgency of her hopes was compounded by memories of discussions they’d had about how such things could be attacked, but after formal greeting by Astro Control with directions for a parking orbit at Manticore, still some hours away, the magic of FTL returned, and the screen lit with a familiar face.

“Madam President.” Harrington surveyed them, Nimitz beside her, and gave Shannon Foraker a brief but intense smile. “On behalf of Her Majesty, I warmly welcome you and your delegation to the Star Kingdom. Admiral Theisman is waiting to brief you, and has details about where you’ll be lodged, and questions about what sort of protocol you would like to govern your formal welcome by Her Majesty. But Her Majesty wishes to meet you all informally as soon as possible, so I invite you to dinner this evening. Her senior ministers and Space Lords will be here,
and Mr Imbesi, as he remains my personal guest, but though I have my Grayson identity, no other nation’s delegates — though that will follow tomorrow, if you are willing.”

“Certainly, Your Grace. Please convey our greetings to Her Majesty. And allow me to thank you, and Lord Nimitz, for all you have done. We all share the sentiments Admiral Theisman expressed giving evidence.”

Nimitz bleeked at her greeting, and Harrington looked down as his true hands flashed in a complicated sequence that made her grin.

“He says he and Golden Voice look forward to meeting the fellow elders of Dreams of Peace, are very happy their hunt for our bad elders helped bring this about, and hope two legs can go on behaving sensibly as it makes a nice change not to be at war. A sentiment I share, Madam President. It’s just past noon here, and it’ll take you about five hours to orbit, so shall we say 7:00 for 7:30?”

The whole process of the negotiations had a slightly unreal atmosphere Elizabeth thought everyone felt and no-one could quite shake. And it wasn’t just the wild improbability, even a few months back, of it happening at all, nor the shocking speed with which everyone’s world had turned upside-down; it was that when you came right down to it, it was increasingly clear that, even before the fall of Saint-Just, Star Kingdom and Republic had been fighting more out of habit and momentum than over anything substantive.

The primary _casus belli_ had been Haven’s relentless expansion under the Legislaturists, and the political will that had underlain that policy had largely died with them. It had taken a while, because the Committee for Public Safety had embraced a rhetoric of defeating Manticoran inequalitarianism, but that was hardly a practicable war aim, and with the loss of Trevor’s Star any serious hope of gaining the Junction had gone, at least until High Ridge had set it flickering again, and even then the cost had been too high. In any case, in more than a decade of all-out war, much of the economic structure and BLS policy that conquests had been needed to finance had also been swept away. The current Republic, having already slashed the BLS to the bone and beyond, renounced territorial ambition; had no desire to occupy anywhere by force, and every desire for maximal trade as it struggled to create a more stable and sustainable prosperity; and was, within its badly strained means, willing to pay what reparations it could for the crimes of its former rulers. Because its current ones _did_ acknowledge them, openly and squarely, and from her first meeting at the Bay House with Pritchart and her delegation, Elizabeth had known that whatever her hatred of Haven had been, she could have none for these people.

Pritchart was in every way a striking woman, her looks matched by a will Elizabeth found she could readily admire. The assessments made by High Ridge’s people of her and the delegates she’d brought were yet another indication of how profoundly incompetent he’d been, but the GONI files Honor had long since provided were far more detailed and exceptionally sharp in their analyses. Honor had also arranged a cabinet briefing by Admiral Yu and Commodore Caslet on exactly what it meant to have risen to command an Aprillist brigade, survived under Saint-Just, and joined Theisman to secure _every_ demand of the original April Tribunal. And Pritchart’s first motivation, her sister’s murder, gave her a grief as well as a cause with which Elizabeth could wholly sympathise.

Pritchart’s ministers were no less fascinating and in their various ways impressive — as well as a far more disparate group than any cabinet of Elizabeth’s had ever been; a point she’d made sure Willie noted. The Attorney General, LePic, who’d protected Theisman until he could take down Saint-Just, had sought out Caslet to apologise for a report he’d once had to make, and was another whose integrity and will had been tempered by experience. So too, even more extremely, was the former marine, Usher, whom she and Ariel both registered instinctively as a predator, and whose mindglow the ’cat told her was _very_ focused. But they all were, in differing degrees; and all had made a sustained effort to be as open and pleasant as they were courteous and clear. Nesbitt, the Commerce man, was a blunter soul, but his distaste for the trappings as much as practice of aristocracy was stringently suppressed, and what he’d had to say about historical enquiries into Manpower’s malign influence had been intelligently shaded to address shared anger and injury rather than foisting off blame. And he’d joined the class in Sign Stanton had urgently requested, to the ’cats
pleasure, and made rapid progress.

And then there was the altogether riveting Ginny Usher. On the day the Havenites had arrived Honor had commed Mount Royal mid-afternoon to confirm who’d be at the dinner and give Elizabeth two warnings. The first was that Nimitz was intending to make clear his appreciation that Shannon Foraker had saved his life, as discussed, and the second that Kevin Usher’s wife, who was their Ballroom contact, was in the delegation. Then to Elizabeth’s surprise she’d called in Captain Zilwicki, to give her a hair-raising tale of what had actually happened in Old Chicago, including an assessment of both Ushers by an admiring friend. His Gryphon burr had been strong and his advice as forceful as unexpected.

“Don’t think of Ginny as a Havenite, just, nor an adjunct. She’s a Dancer who was allied to the Aprillists against the PRH, and is now allied to the Republic. She likes to play the loose cannon, and she’s damn good at acting drunk, but she’s got an alcohol tolerance I wouldn’t want to try to match and her sense of humour’s as rich as it is pointed. And she’s a C-line who went through a purer hell than either of us can begin to imagine and came out ferociously sane.” He’d given her a measured look. “Frankly, Your Majesty, she’s a blast, and no respecter of persons. Expect the unexpected and roll with it. Look to the purpose behind any outrage of protocol, because there will be one. I wasn’t expecting her to come, but there are at least three reasons she’s here. One is that they think they might need an independent means of contacting the Ballroom. Two is that the Ballroom wants her here, though I can’t say why except she’s a friend of Jeremy’s. I shall be trying to find out, of course. And I have a guess, because three is that His Grace of Manticore tells me she intends to be a public interface — in but not of the delegation, free to speak to newsies in ways they can’t. Specifically, there are things they believe about Manpower’s influence on key Legislaturist decisions for which they have only circumstantial evidence — she can articulate the belief and lack of solid proof, which makes sense. She’ll also give Haven a very beautiful and usually laughing face, and I’d be willing to bet that a month from now she’ll be wildly popular with a great majority of your subjects. But while both those briefs are entirely real, I’ll bet there’s another, from the Ballroom, to do everything possible to maximise action against Mesa.”

“I see, Captain. I presume Cathy will be aiding and abetting that?”

“Certainly, Your Majesty.” He’d cracked a wide, dangerous grin. “His Grace said he thought they’d get on like a house on fire. Uncommonly sensible for a Grand Duke, present company excepted, of course.”

She hadn’t been able to stop her startled laugh and he’d nodded massively.

“Do that with Ginny too, Your Majesty. It’ll serve far better than outrage.”

And he’d been right. When she’d been introduced to the woman, her mind still coping with the impact of Pritchart, she’d seen the glint in those outrageously blue eyes before she’d followed her greeting — “And just so you know, Your Majesty” — by sticking our her tongue to show the genetic lettering, C-17a/65-4/5.

Mentally blessing Honor and Captain Zilwicki, Elizabeth had considered her gravely and nodded.

“I see. Thank you. And just so you know” — she’d stuck out her own tongue — “I believe all tongues should be free of the obscenity imposed on yours and I will do everything in my power to bring that about.”

The smile she had received was breathtaking, and Zilwicki’s wisdom sharply borne out as she realised the incident had in large measure broken the ice. Havenites were relieved their loose
cannon had caused no offence, her ministers that she’d taken no offence, and there was also, she realised, astonishing honesty involved — in effect, a declaration to her of the other brief Zilwicki had identified, for the gesture was that of a Dancer, not simply one of the freed. It also occurred to her that having a Dancer among an official non-Manticoran delegation, someone she had to meet, was a very useful precedent — which she suspected was intentional. The message sent to Honor had been splendid and very interesting, and this was another clever step.

Beyond those on security duty there had been a considerable number of ’cats present, and once a fair buzz of conversation was going and Honor’s excellent champagne had begun to do its work, Nimitz had interrupted proceedings by leading them all to sit in a half-circle before Shannon Foraker, who’d instinctively crouched, a smile on her face and wonder in her eyes as she looked at gathered ’cats. Her hand had reached out to stroke him, hesitated and begun to shape in offer of a handshake instead, but he’d flowed forward, butting her hand so it slid over his head and along his back as he raised a true hand to caress her cheek. Then he’d sat back and up, and Miranda LaFollet had translated.

<You saved my life, and that of Dances on Clouds, for without me she would have died. You thought you lied, but it was true, and I felt the threat to you and what you felt. So I owe you the debt of life, and I offer thanks.> He’d reached to take her hand and planted a cold nose on it, making Foraker squeak and the ’cats bleek laughter. <Golden Voice and I have a gift for you. Our own gifts are things of use, and it is hard to know what a Person can make that a two leg would find useful, but the Guardians of the Trees> — “The Sphinx Forestry Service, Admiral.” — <have a medal for those who save a Person in danger, and we have asked their elders and Soul of Steel to give it to you.>

He’d paused, glancing at Elizabeth where she watched beside Honor and Pritchard.

“The Treecat Cross, Admiral, introduced by Queen Adrienne. If you are willing to accept it, and President Pritchard consents, there will be a formal investiture later, but Nimitz has his own version now.”

The stunned look on Foraker’s face had been priceless, and Elizabeth had suspected the ’cats were doing whatever it was they did to help people contain excess emotion, and the woman’s gaze had gone straight back to Nimitz who’d carried on briskly.

<I do. Works in Metal has learned to make patterns with the burning liquids, and he made this for you and knotted the strap. It shows the picketwood we live in, where the living may run and the dead cannot.> The small etched disk was startlingly complex and beautiful, and Elizabeth had already asked the ’cat artisan to make her a larger depiction of Sphinx as he perceived it; the long, knotted silk ribbon was a work of art in its own right. True hands had taken it from Foraker’s trembling examination and hung it gently round her neck as she bent her head. <I do not know it is of any use to you, but I hope it may be of value. And perhaps it may serve a wider use, for while it shows the thanks of myself and my mate and all the People to you alone, we recognise it may help in ending fighting between two legs.>

He’d swung to face everyone, massed ’cats with him, not threatening but intent, and Miranda had given her voice a cutting edge.

<And I say to all, do so, whatever it takes. We established a colony on the Far World because we understand your wars could kill our world in an instant. Perhaps you would not intend it, but it might happen anyway. And you have all your two-leg rules and reasons, but it is madness all the same, and must stop. We will not accept failure in these talks. Two full turns and more of killing is too much for anyone. Learn to live and not to kill. That is all.>
“Treecats measure turns by the Sphinxian year, which is 5.22 T-years.” Honor’s voice had carved silence. “And I do assure you all, my lords, ladies, and gentlemen, that Nimitz is entirely serious. If any become unhelpfully heated, Alliance or Havenite, ’cats will intervene; and while it will be their call, I suspect anyone trying to walk out in high dudgeon before a treaty is secured will … not find it easy, shall we say? In any case, dinner will shortly be served, and as there are rather a lot of us, and my dining-room here is the size of an SD, Senior Chief Steward MacGuinness has seating-charts you may find helpful.”

Not to mention politically charged, as Elizabeth had observed them discover with unexpected, bubbling amusement over and above her sense of the new reality Honor was imposing. The basic grouping had been by portfolio, so useful contact could begin, but with Honor’s other guests interspersed — her parents with Stanton, lawless but honorable Imbesi with honorably lawful LePic, and thickly, among everyone, ’cats provided with high stools and a range of cutlery that had most Manticorans as well as all Havenites blinking. The foot of the enormous table, given to a still bemused Shannon Foraker, had been naval, with Theisman and Hamish to right and left, Tourville and Space Lords clustered round; while Honor took the head, flanked by Nimitz and Samantha, with herself and Pritchart right and left, and Willie next to her. MacGuinness had outdone himself, and the food had been delicious. A young legion of HSG-uniformed men — and, Elizabeth had noted, women — had besides serving provided every ’cat with a translator, conversation flowing in every direction. Sheer repletion slowed it eventually, and during a lull Pritchart had met her eyes.

“Your Majesty, I — ”

Elizabeth had held up a hand. “Protocol matters a great deal in public, Madam President, but I think in private plainness matters more. And I do realise that in the nature of things our titles are an affront to your sensibilities, while we are entirely used to abandoning them gratefully when we can. So shall we be Elizabeth and Eloise?”

“Gladly, Elizabeth.” A hand little lighter than her own despite the platinum hair had been extended and she’d taken it, suppressing her own trembling but feeling a tremor run round the table. “And what I was going to say was that I find myself wondering what we now have between us except a savagely unhappy history. It has taken the discovery of a common enemy both of us always knew about to bring it to our attention, but in all honesty I have not known since the revolution against the Legislaturists what we have been fighting for except survival. And that at a cost I cannot bear nor begin to justify. Laughs Brightly is quite right. And looking at your original diplomatic correspondence, and ours, I see no fundamental differences of principle. Every world has a right of self-determination. We renounce territorial ambition, and admit our inherited guilt for provoking and initiating hostilities. And we want to stabilise and normalise relations, recognising the trade balance will for some time be strongly in your favour. So I wonder if we might agree, here and now, that whatever the details to be settled, this war is history too.”

It had been so much easier than she’d ever supposed it could be.

“Gladly, Eloise.” The handshake had already been done so she’d raised her glass instead. “To permanent, well-founded peace and co-operation, and damnation to Manpower and all its works.”

And in a palpably real sense, that had been that. There was of course a mountain of detail to parse and confirm, and while Haven was willing to accept any once-conquered world, the Star Kingdom was willing only to guarantee with its allies mutual defence of any world wanting independence, with a proviso to consider in five T-years any request for annexation, and most definitely no promise of acceptance. Mutually low tariffs, though, were a no-brainer, and an offset for reduced Junction-fees a cause for back-slapping by Nesbitt and his staff, though Haven’s
staggering lack of any currency besides the credit remained a gross impediment to trade on the scale both sides wanted. That had to change, but reinventing their currency had not been something a new administration with what amounted to a civil war on their hands could tackle, especially with their economy on a long-term war-footing.

The navies, with the ACS, had no difficulty agreeing positive steps permitting RN ships, with proper notice, to use the Junction, and providing for pursuit of suspected pirates, slavers, or StateSec rogues into one another’s space and requesting support. Both sides knew a potentially much greater agreement was waiting in the wings, and thanks to the trust Honor had built between Hamish Alexander and Thomas Theisman, and her own trust in Shannon Foraker, were willing to make useful gestures. Some of Foraker’s guesses about Saganami-Cs were confirmed in exchange for equivalent data on Haven’s new classes, as was the scale of the RMN’s withdrawal from Silesia (saving Sidemore); thornier issues had also been tackled, including prisoners who had died or disappeared in StateSec hands. Nothing could bring them back, but Haven had been thorough in its investigations and offered results with painful apologies.

Grayson had been a very helpful presence. Benjamin and his family had arrived in high style on an extended state visit that was extremely popular and gave newsies something to talk about besides negotiations. The Grayson delegation, GSN-heavy, had also done a lot to ease things along. There were as yet no reports from the ships Honor had sent to Erewhon, and RN ships could not yet have arrived there, but High Admiral Matthews had strongly welcomed the prospect of joint operations wherever they might be appropriate. Besides trusting Theisman himself, he had with all Graysons warmly appreciated his performance in the Lords, and shared Nimitz’s opinion of Foraker, whom he went out of his way to thank on behalf of the GSN. Her investiture with the Treecat Cross, attended by many ‘cats as well as delegates, had also been instrumental in shifting public opinion from nervy tolerance laced with resentment of necessity to a degree of approval and liking, a development fuelled by more substantive change.

In the nature of things most Manticorans had thought of Haven as far more monolithic that it had ever truly been, even — especially — under Saint-Just, and understood the Republic’s recent history only in outline infused with hostile propaganda. What stories Legislaturists and Committee had allowed Solarian newsies to have before and during the war had equally been un informatively slanted and partial; nor, Elizabeth admitted to herself, had her own views helped. And though God knew that after Hades she and everyone had had ample evidence of how internally riven the PRH had been, rejoicing at Honor’s return and the PoWs’ deliverance had taken priority, while Jurgenson’s tenure at ONI had seen nothing further done with the vast database she’d brought back. But Theisman’s HD broadcasts had begun to change perceptions, and serious news and current affairs channels were tackling the backlog of history with skill and vigour. How much Honor had to do with it Elizabeth wasn’t sure, but she’d made Yu and Caslet available for interviews that punctuated many documentaries. And it was certainly Honor who’d hammered the yellower newsies into some kind of line.

The damages four media companies now owed her and Sky Domes would bankrupt them, and she had let them stare down the barrel for ten long days, shares nosediving, before saying that if a tenth was paid now (crimping budgets badly and wiping out any possible bonuses or dividends for several years), she would suspend payment of the rest on certain conditions, which amounted to their behaving like responsible human beings concerned to inform the public of things that were actually important. Attitudes had to change, with editors, boards, and lawyers; reporters must have a new code of conduct and be held to it; paparazzi antics by employees were out, and so was buying material from any freelance who continued such behaviour; and yes, it was certainly autocratic of her, but perfectly legal, and if they didn’t like it they were welcome to pay up in full and go bankrupt instead, in which case she’d own them all outright and they’d really find out what draconian meant. A small section of the public was quite put out when they’d knuckled under one by one, but a much
larger section was delighted. In any case, one result had been restrained and quite responsible
coverage of the Havenite delegation, erring towards sympathy for enduring and resisting Saint-Just
and largely free from the sort of slavering and snarling Elizabeth had feared.

And Manticore’s newsies of all stripes had also had Ginny Usher to contemplate, whose skill
at wrapping people (especially men) around her little finger, willingness to say almost anything,
frequent gusty laughter, and deadly seriousness about Manpower had commanded all the attention
Theo had supposed. She had amused, informed, entertained, and charmed; and challenged by an
urbane HD host on her open approval of the Audubon Ballroom, she’d given him a flat-voiced,
lengthy, and detailed description of what Manpower’s so-called phenotype technicians did by way of
‘optimising’ C-lines that left him and most listeners white. Cathy Montaigne and others had said it
before, but hearing it in the first person, from this first person, was something else. Along the way
she became, so far as Elizabeth could remember, the only person to express any sympathy for
Georgia Young, pointing out that whatever favours and inducements Manpower had offered her
would not have included treatment for rape trauma, so an utterly skewed psychology was a given.
And she’d said something else that mattered a great deal.

“Everyone calls the Ballroom a terrorist organisation, but it isn’t and never has been. If you’re
a bent enough shithead to think Manpower and slavery should be tolerated, terror won’t change your
mind worth a damn, and the Ballroom knows that, as does every ex-slave. It’s an association of
revengers who want Manpower and their clients dead. Good. So do I, and I don’t care how. It’s also
a liberation army, which does all it can to free slaves and help those it can’t, on Mesa and elsewhere.
Good again. So should everyone. I imagine you support the Star Kingdom’s enforcement of the
Cherwell Convention? And pride yourself on it, as a muscular liberal? Even though it and the
equipment clause provide for summary execution by spacing? Then tell me, if you can, what the hell
is your problem with the Ballroom?”

The host and other guests had tried in various ways, but she’d shot them down, cleaving to a
very clear line, that where legal authorities acted on evidence of slaving and gross parasitism the
Ballroom did not interfere; it was where authority prated lip-service to the Convention but protected
slavery and its perpetrators that it acted where others would not, overwhelmingly in the Solarian
League and Silesia; and every last one of the arguments they were waging at her depended on there
being a legal authority that would act. None of them had any experience of what it meant for there
not to be such an authority, however High Ridge, or Low Ridge, or whatever he was now besides
dead — she’d grinned — had given them a taster; and having made that crystal clear she’d led them
even further out of their depth by asking what sort of responses they’d condone from slaves or
seccies — a term she had to explain — on Mesa. It was a brutal, clinical, emotional and intellectual
beating, and when she was done, with the show due to end, she’d laughed, told them she needed
some better opposition, because there were issues that should be debated, and why didn’t they try
again tomorrow? With W. E. B. Du Havel, say?

Whatever guests had been slated for the morrow found themselves bumped by Du Havel and
a range of other ex-slaves, whose political opinions crossed the spectrum. Several later programmes
on the channel were summarily cancelled as a truly ferocious argument developed, not about the
Ballroom’s rights or morality in its actions — those were a given — but about whether repercussions
among those who hadn’t a clue were an acceptable cost; whether more clinical and less messy
documentation would be a viable policy given the psychosis many Dancers of necessity endured and
the need for publicity in polities where parasites and worse were protected; and — openly, at last —
what the Ballroom might be willing to do, given the radical shift in understanding taking place across
the sector. Well before the end audience figures were through the roof, the whole thing was promptly
made available to view freely at will, and in extended discussions that followed in every medium a
wide consensus began to emerge that if the Ballroom would forswear murder in the Star Kingdom
and its allies, and offer whatever assistance it could in a campaign against Manpower and its Mesan
partners, an amnesty would be more than warranted.

It was another political inconceivability slipping seamlessly into place just as it was needed — and so another part of what Elizabeth had come to think of as Honor’s Magic. Even beyond all the things she’d done or ordered, wearing her various hats, or contrived to have happen, she was what Justin dryly called a new proof of non-local causality; and as her intentions had expanded from stopping High Ridge, to discrediting his entire political base, to securing massive and concerted military action against Manpower, the quality of command Elizabeth had first seen all those years ago in the bridge-recording of HMS *Fearless* had extended to envelop those who shared that goal. Which, dear God, meant not only the GSN and purged RMN, with the Treecat Clans, Beowulf, Erewhon, the Ballroom and ASL, but also Haven and the RN. Honor was no more comfortable than she had ever been with the power, respect, and gratitude so very many people gave her; but for this she was utterly prepared to use it, and at a deep level what truly made the negotiations feel so persistently unreal was that delegations were all at least half-consciously co-operating with her to set the stage for that action.

Though herself a member of both Manticore’s and Grayson’s delegations she’d taken on a different role. For all sorts of reasons the Bay House made a superb venue for negotiations, and though delegations were staying in the upper half of a high-rise hotel the government had commandeered, coming and going by armoured naval pinnace under extremely heavy stingship escort, Theisman and Imbesi remained her personal guests, watchdogging their delegations while she acted as hostess. And besides provision of sumptuous facilities for all negotiating strands, any data that might conceivably be wanted, and internal com facilities that allowed smooth exchanges between strands when needed, she had from the first insisted all senior delegates, with rotating juniors, dine together each evening — with any available family members, which brought in her own parents, Justin, Roger, and Katie, Benjamin’s wives and daughters, and cabinet spouses, including Emily Alexander and (when not out HD-ing) Ginny Usher, with very beneficial effects. Lunch and tea were self-serve buffets, and under MacGuinness’s thoughtful eye had swiftly evolved to meet particular tastes, including many kinds of baguette — a tiny detail with disproportionate effects on the Havenites’ disposition; but dinners were command exercises in problem busting that over and over again anticipated and finessed ahead of time things that might have caused friction.

Receiving the Havenite submission about the proposed memorial, Honor had convened a work-group to generate designs, seconding interested naval members from every delegation and pulling in some Manticoran and Grayson architects on retainer. Not in the least coincidentally, the site inspection on which she’d taken Elizabeth, with Pritchart and her senior delegates, had provided a single intelligent and respectful reporter with a half-hour bombshell showing them walking, talking, and briefly answering pertinent questions in the former North Hollow gardens; after its first broadcast it had been provided free to all channels, striking another important note of reconciliation. And it had been followed by the longest interview ‘cats had yet given, as Sam, Nimitz, Ariel, Monroe, Farragut, Hipper, Works in Metal, and others tried to convey how ‘cats thought of what two legs called art and their understanding of the purpose the memorial in their embassy garden would serve. Craft they understood, and the distinction of utility and attractiveness; more abstract two-leg ideas remained a mystery. Figurative fine art wasn’t a problem, though they had to learn to recognise images immediately clear to two legs; nor statuary, with particular reference to the one of Laughs Brightly and Dances on Clouds on the Far World (a description even Honor treasured for its order); but a memorial was a much stranger mindblind idea. They had, however, a sharp sense of Memory Singing as a skill that extended potently into what had to be called politics, for it seemed that while all Memory Singers were by definition accurate, some were more so than others — more vivid, or detailed, or something — and could in some measure direct their audiences’ attention to aspects of a communicated experience, shaping how it was understood. So their net understanding was that Dances on Clouds wanted to perform a Memory Singing for two legs, and while it was for most
incomprehensibly odd that the medium was material, they were happy it was to be in their garden.

Many delegates had seen the interview live, but as that evening’s dinner rolled into replete conversation Honor had played it again for everyone, and taken them through to yet another room, with simulators piled high against one wall. Manticorans as well as others had stared in some confusion, and Honor had grinned.

“When I invite cadets from my Saganami classes to dine we do extra practicals. And while I’d gladly have moved them somewhere else, you’ve actually managed between you to fill every suitable room, so we just stacked them as out of the way as possible to make space for this.”

This was the tweaked holoprojector she’d used in the House trial, and ignoring the buzzing conversation as civilians digested that Her Grace really did invite cadets to dinner by the score, and visiting naval officers were informed by their RMN counterparts that practicals meant fighting-teams assisted and opposed by Honor herself and any available senior-grade captains, flag officers, and ATC staff who fancied singing for a superior supper, she brought up images of the garden space and a library of memorials. Half-familiar icons from old Terra were only the beginning, displays ranging across the known galaxy, including all star nations present. Honor commented on some, but for the most part left it to Emily Alexander, who understood them not just as art and history but as an experience — the drama of confronting them, walking through or around them, and returning to a world looking different in their light. The ’cats were also asked for reactions, even if only a liking or disliking without explanation, from which an odd polarity emerged, in preferences for clean geometrical shapes but also sinuous waveforms.

There was a concentrated section on memorials whose designers had faced a basic impossibility of displaying the names involved because they were so many. Old London still had memorials to a pre-diasporic conflict in which thousands of civilians had been lost at sea; and a slightly later conflict in which millions had been murdered, not in combat but in some kind of insane purity campaign, had produced an extraordinary range of attempts to list and remember. There were buildings whose every square centimeter was packed with names; a vast silver tree with names on every leaf; a hollow hilltop lined with mirrors where a recorded voice spoke a name every 30 seconds in a cycle lasting nearly six T-years; and other designs where the attempt to hoard and display names was abandoned in favour of inclusive simplicity or a narrower commemorative target — the dead of one nation, or (weirdly) skin colour, sexual preference, or clan designation. Then there were the many memorials to the Eridani Epsilon Incident, and the extermination of the Amphors.

It wrenched everyone into a different kind of thinking, and produced clear parameters for what would and would not command majority favour; and whether it was that or a certain impatience among delegates the next three days saw gathering momentum, threads concluding and producing recommendations for ratification. Which left the one, great issue that had been set aside, reparations — and so led to the present session of the most senior delegates, where a long morning had already been spent in plain statements of costs incurred, tallied dead, and what Haven could and could not conceivably afford. Anything actually reflecting those costs was plainly impossible, and what value could you set on human life anyway? Besides, to fail over this, now, would be obscene, and the whole issue of memorials had served to make clear to everyone how catastrophic Haven’s losses had been, whatever the cause or guilt. And enough was enough. Elizabeth rose, and strained arguments died away.

“This is serving no useful purpose. Haven cannot pay what it does not have, and with issues of alliance against Manpower and Mesa pending it can aid none to impose anything crippling. But, Madam President, there is principle.” She saw Eloise stiffen at the formal address. “And it is cold fact that Haven started this war. So while I cannot speak for any of the Star Kingdom’s allies, I can say
absolutely what my own minimal terms are. First, that Haven acknowledges all illegitimate casualties, by which I mean those killed or injured by StateSec in defiance of the laws of war and your Uniform Code. You admit them to compensation programmes whatever their nationality or residence then or now, and that specifically includes San Martinos, all Alliance nationals, and Her Grace of San Martin and Harrington, as well as Nimitz — which I understand you have already offered.”

San Martin would have plenty of claims given how brutal StateSec had been there, including a raft from Ramirezes, but they had known that and had, strikingly, understood Nimitz as a victim even before his performance with Foraker, asking him and Samantha if sponsoring research to aid treecats medically and otherwise was an acceptable recompense — which once he’d grasped the idea it had been. She saw Eloise nod.

“And second, when you finally produce a sensible currency with some external value, one of the first struck coins of the highest denomination goes to each member of the Alliance. You acknowledge the guilt. But it costs your pride, not your treasury.”

There was a silence.

“That’s it?” Pritchard sounded incredulous and everyone except Honor and Benjamin wore surprised looks.

“Yes. I want at least a stable, prosperous neighbour, and at best a stable, prosperous ally.”

“Seconded.” Benjamin nodded sharply. “We cripple prospects of alliance if we cripple you economically, but Her Majesty is correct that morality and principle must be observed.”

The Erewhonese were willing, but some smaller nations that had suffered badly, especially Zanzibar and Alizon, still trying to rebuild the orbital industry trashed by Lester Tourville, were less able to relinquish the bottom line. Those attacks had, however, been entirely legitimate, conceding payment for them would reopen the whole can of worms, and one part of the Zanzibaran calculus especially was that High Ridge had done nothing to help them rebuild, while Willie had not been willing to reach the kind of aid deal the Caliph wanted before elections and negotiations. His delegation’s obstinacy was really an attempt to twist Willie’s arm, and irritated Elizabeth considerably — but Willie could see it perfectly well, and knew just what he was and wasn’t willing for the Star Kingdom to offer them, the Caliph’s position being more hopeful than reasonable. It was also exposed, as was Alizon’s, not least because the woman who’d delivered most of their captured personnel back to them within a year was listening to their special pleading with an increasingly stony expression, Nimitz’s tail-tip twitching in full view; and with everyone watching them — including an increasing number of intent ‘cats, also with twitching tails — the Zanzibaran at last conceded, and Alizon followed. The Caliph would be grumpy, but he was welcome, and if he wanted the RMN to maintain Hancock Station — which he did, badly — he could mind his manners and co-operation.

Either way, something very close to a comprehensive peace treaty was complete, and with the usual efficiency of Honor’s staff everyone soon found themselves with a data package comprising a full text — long and detailed, with more attached schedules and appendices than you could shake a stick at — and a terse, superbly clear summary. Elizabeth read it carefully, twice, and the long sense of unreality she’d been feeling condensed into a wormhole moment.

Peace. With honour, and by Honor. Her eyes met Pritchard’s, then Benjamin’s, Imbesi’s, others round the table, and tension abruptly slackened, leaving them all slumped and blinking as they took it in. But Honor was upright, energy crackling in her blinding smile.
“So. Congratulations, everyone. Let’s be about it, then — people are waiting on us.”

* * * * *

The galaxy’s most wanted terrorist — or perhaps most sought-after diplomat — had spent most of the last few months doing paperwork, and very dull it was too. One disadvantage of being highly illegal everywhere, even if many nations were willing not to do much about it, was the difficulty in having anything resembling a headquarters; the very dispersed and mobile cadre architecture basic to security also militated against any permanent location. But over five centuries the Dancehalls of the Ballroom had amassed an enormous volume of data on Manpower, its Mesan ‘partners’ — read, wholly owned subsidiaries and fronts — and corrupt placemen in the Solarian League and elsewhere, all of which had to be stored and backed-up somewhere; and if much was now obsolete, the trouble was no-one alive really knew what was and wasn’t, nor what else might be in there, because analysing it properly was a major project needing a lot of computing power and specialists in many things with somewhere safe to use it. And none of that had ever been readily possible.

Beowulf had, down the years, provided occasional and very discreet help with particular windfalls, and among the yottabytes of data were assorted summaries and breakdowns of various subsets of it that to knowing eyes would tell a very sensitive story. But even that most openly supportive polity had until now had sharp limits to how much they could do without courting political trouble at home and more widely within the League. It was a problem that had bothered Jeremy ever since he’d inherited it, and his unexpected friendship with Cathy Montaigne during her exile on Terra had provided one place where a substantial chunk of accumulated data could be safely collocated, while the irruption of Anton Zilwicki, besides producing a huge data coup of its own, had offered another angle. The man was, after all, a top-grade analyst, and as he’d be tearing into what he’d gleaned himself anyway, the Dancers who formed L’Ouverture, the nearest thing Jeremy had to a cabinet, had been willing he should be asked to help sort out old data so long as anything live was redacted. No safe house was used for more than a few years, and everything else shifted pretty rapidly too, including people, given that all too many Dancers did not have Prolong; but friends and sympathisers were another matter, and there were other concerns that meant everything needed checking first. In the two and some years since Cathy’s return to Manticore and refitting of her town house to suit her new political needs, as well as Zilwicki’s professional ones, Jeremy and Isaac had between them gone through a fair amount, if only a tithe of the whole, and some results had helped inform speeches she gave.

Well and good, though checking file after file for date and sensitivity was still hellishly boring — but the explosive implications of Young’s identity, the even more explosive results of turning her over to Harrington and telling Haven, and the radical turn in events that followed, had made the task abruptly urgent. Confronted with the true volume and disorganisation of the data, Anton had blinked once, growled several times, thought hard holding up one massive hand, and said flatly that a team was needed to do anything useful in the time available, and as the Ballroom couldn’t keep it in-house, would ex-slaves be acceptable? Jeremy and Isaac had been viscerally reluctant, but needs must, and it was actually a better solution than they’d hoped for. Anton had then surprised them both considerably by contacting Miranda LaFollet and telling her, without explanation, what he needed. Eyebrows high, she’d cocked her head and asked if being an ex-slave was, besides superior comp, data-mining, and analytical skills, the only criterion? And in a little over a week a number of people very surprised to find themselves on paid leave from Sky Domes, Hauptman Industries, Harrington Steading’s civil service, and in at least one case the GSN, had shown up, stared, done some blinking and growling themselves, ordered assorted equipment and programmes, all of which arrived very
expeditiously, and started tearing into the mass at frightening speed.

Their presence had been a considerable nuisance in that his freedom of movement within the town house had been even more restricted than usual, but sufficiently interesting things had emerged from the analysis in a steady stream that he wasn’t repining. Much. And besides still having to check more recent material for necessary redactions, which kept his own nose sadly to the grindstone, and chivvying all available members of L’Ouverture to do the same, liaise with Autentico Jews to get their relevant data, and send it all along — which was easier when sitting only hours from the Manticore Junction than when anywhere else — Jeremy had to confess he’d had some entirely splendid distractions.

He felt sorry in an abstract way for those killed and injured by North Hollow’s spectacular demise but it had set him capering, not only for the sheer wonder of Harrington’s security and the death of an especially vile parasite, but for the documentation of it. Despite the very thorough data Harrington had offered, her larger accusation was on the face of it so preposterous as to be incredible — but so was the ignoble Earl snarling drunken obscenities and patting a case of illegally obtained naval HE while attempting a revenge killing with incidental mass murder of newsies and diplomats live on system-wide HD, and those splendid seconds capped by that glorious explosion had, however illogically, stamped everything she’d said TRUE in letters heard and seen by the Star Kingdom’s entire population and any number of other people. And while it would have been marvellous fun to go with Isaac and Anton to watch the Lords trial, HD was no less satisfying, and their absence gave him more room to cartwheel round the room in celebration and pulsing admiration for Harrington’s final performance, with all its splendidly capital results.

Nor had he missed the extent to which Harrington and the Queen were operating in slick tandem — which spoke to all sorts of things. In so far as anyone could, he’d become used to Harrington’s spectacular habit of doing the unthinkable, incredible, or plain impossible, seemingly at will; but with Summervale, her first North Hollow, bisected Burdette, and even the jaw-dropping astonishments of her return from Hades with an army of ghosts, the convulsive political consequences had been, when you came down to it, side-effects of direct action on her own behalf. But what she’d just done, however she thought of it and whatever immediate practical ends it might serve, had been a primarily political act; if she hadn’t anticipated how comprehensive a hit it would prove, she’d certainly been aiming for those targets — and the lady had a fearsome aim, every bit as good as his own and using heavier weapons with longer ranges. Moreover, however much of a fantasy daydream it seemed, given the question she’d made sure Miranda LaFollet knew she’d sent via the Queen’s envoy to Nouveau Paris, and via others to various interesting places, the fact that her political aim now seemed to be a full-out military alliance of the second, third, fourth, and fifth most powerful navies in the galaxy, for the purpose of taking Mesa down permanently, had to be considered in most deadly earnest. Amazing as she had been, even the old Harrington couldn’t have begun to do anything of the sort; but this one, who’d just taken two GSN destroyers, a laser-cluster, twenty pulse rifles, and a Colt M-1911 to Manticore’s political classes … well, if he were a betting man — and of course he was! Snake-eyes would be his middle-name, if he had one — he’d be willing to put down a fat sum at odds as long as you liked.

Anton had rolled his eyes at the form of message to Harrington he’d proposed, calling him a dancing fool, but once Cathy had stopped braying laughter and realised he was serious she’d become very thoughtful for a while and told him to do it with as much style as he could muster, adding a direct offer of contact. Isaac had laughed too, for a wonder, and accepted the calculated risk of exposing himself, however disguised; the four other members of L’Ouverture present on Manticore or Beowulf had agreed it was a risk worth taking; and Cathy did happen to have a standard range in one of her basements so Anton and his security men could keep up to scratch. The intense juggling and gunplay had been a welcome release, and he’d been delighted to get it right first time — Deadeye Dick X, that was him! — but when very discreet word had come of those Harrington had
chosen to share the message with, his tension had redoubled. However varied Ballroom ops might be, they were specific missions with limited objectives, and like every one of its leaders before him he’d been following a well-charted course; to emerge from the shadows, gambling for a prize of such potential magnitude, was for him as frightening a prospect as plunging into a waltz of Dancers would be for most people.

Then Harrington and the Queen pulled their double act again over confiscated properties, and his cackles had overlain further appreciation of their political sophistication. When Cathy had finally staggered in soon after the polls opened she’d agreed completely, reckoning the two broadcasts had added ten points to turnout, grabbed the remaining swing votes, and stolen a further chunk from the discredited. The results supported her judgement, and swift confirmation in her ministerial role — no longer an interim appointment with a flavour of special needs but a senior post with power over domestic, FO, and military resources in a government with a handsome majority — had been another paradigm shift to chew and swallow. And a danger — she’d already had to do some fast talking, because most ministerial homes had PGS or LPD security and only the demonstrated efficiency of her own system, with the fact that both agencies found themselves seriously stretched, had kept their presence to a couple of armed policemen at the gate. He shouldn’t be here yet had to be, and coming and going would be worse than staying put and trusting to what Cathy insisted on calling the priest-holes.

Then galactic delegations started to arrive, draped in glamour even for the jaded sophisticates of the Star Kingdom, and though Cathy was only peripherally involved in the negotiations her ministerial status meant she could discreetly pass requests to Ginny, who responded with typical style. Web Du Havel was no Dancer, and often fiercely critical of Ballroom tactics as counter-productive, however momently satisfying, but they’d once spoken at length, Du Havel too had a real admiration for Harrington, and he was very clear about what might be at stake, making sure with Ginny’s help that the argument stayed tightly focused and moved in the right direction. The temptation to use Anton’s encrypted equipment to call in and give some surprising answers as to what the Ballroom might be prepared to do was strong, but Cathy had told him with a screech not to be a bloody fool and let Web and Ginny do their work, before returning to her imperious string of instructions to staffers at her ministry and the ASL.

Opinion polling started immediately, and with careful monitoring of responses in all media a significant shift in long entrenched and all but automatic attitudes became plain within days. Cathy was ecstatic, but he found himself possessed of gloomy doubts — the Manticoran public had had a taste of reality and would vote with their mouths awhile; but there were millions yet in slavery, vats, and phenotype workshops. Sensing it, she’d taken his hands and looked at him, for once grave.

“Cold feet, Jeremy? Forget them. This isn’t just a blip in the graph — there are hard changes in these figures, and they open the political door wider than ever. All we need is for the treaty with Haven and discussions over Silesia to work out, and we’ve got a real shot at making the state of war with Mesa a naval reality above and beyond the huge hit the bastards are taking from having the Junction closed to them. And we’ll surely get to liberate Congo, as well as depots in Silesia, if I’m reading things right. Maybe more. Not the time to bottle out because the audience is actually attending to you for once.”

Which was all very good, and negotiations did deliver, surprisingly rapidly — a full-out treaty between Haven and every Alliance member to end hostilities, normalise relations, promote trade, and guarantee referenda on a hundred occupied or liberated worlds. With ambivalent feelings he watched Manticore take a very deep breath and heave a long, complicated sigh of profound relief, while sharper commentators asked ‘What next?’, and were they really serious about redirecting rather than suspending military effort? But no-one had much of a chance to answer before the immediate convening of bilateral talks with the Andermani, meaning in the first place a formal
meeting between Their Graces Grand Duchess Harrington and the Herzog von Rabenstrange; and even less of a chance to answer before Their Graces unexpectedly reappeared after only a few hours, and Her Grace made a brief, blinding statement.

“His Grace and I find upon careful examination that there is in fact no substantive dispute. His Imperial Majesty has territorial ambitions in Silesia; Her Majesty has none, and besides the Gregor Terminus and our treaty obligations to Marsh, only commercial concerns. And as His Imperial Majesty recognises our possession of the Terminus and Gregor-A, guarantees the inviolable sovereignty of Marsh, and solemnly promises no trade barriers of any kind will be set in the way of Manticoran commerce with any possession of His, Her Majesty is happy to recognise Silesia as an Andermani sphere of influence. Other deployments permitting, however, the RMN, IAN, and RN will be mounting joint anti-piracy patrols targeting rogue StateSec ships believed to be behind the recent surge of losses. The RMN remains free to pursue any enemy vessel into Silesian space as it finds necessary. A formal text will follow shortly.”

His Grace added an even briefer statement amounting to ‘what Her Grace said’, and Their Graces then strolled off, leaving a gaping room of newbies to hear Klaus Hauptman say he and other major traders in Silesia were greatly relieved by His Imperial Majesty’s generosity, for which they thanked him sincerely; further thanked Their Graces for such expeditious and sensible agreement; and warmly welcomed the promise of more vigorous measures against any and all pirates, slavers, rogue SS warships, and Mesan vessels cut off by the closing of the Manticore Junction but as yet unseized.

Yet another whopping rabbit had just been pulled from a hat with seeming insouciance, and Hauptman’s support for what was in effect a substantial Andermani bribe to be allowed a free hand cut the feet from under any opposition. Geared up for a long haul, HD channels were taken completely by surprise, and it was a while before they could upgrade from colour commentators to real analysts. Once they did, though, and the text of the memorandum of understanding had been released, there was a strong consensus that the Star Kingdom was left considerably stronger both navally and commercially. What might have become the Silesian front was comprehensively neutralised, and as His Imperial Majesty’s possessions meant the Empire as well as any acquisitions that might be anticipated, not only would the recent, punitive tariffs incurred by High Ridge’s idiocy be removed, longstanding regular ones would fall. No wonder Hauptman was pleased; so should everyone be — except Silesians, but that was their lookout.

Cathy was for once home reasonably early, and over food regaled him and Isaac with a bubbling account of the process by which Harrington and von Rabenstrange had short-circuited everyone, cut to the chase, struck a deal, and had Hauptman enthusiastically endorse it before half the supposed negotiators had managed to finish their coffees and take their seats. It did sound like fine fun, however peaceful, but Jeremy was again forcibly struck by how consummate a politician Harrington had become in so short a time — and how strange a politician. The art of the possible, maybe, but the continuation of warfare by other means was nearer the mark, and despite the nature of this agreement compromise didn’t get much of a look in. Considered soberly, there was a hard-edged, ruthless quality to the deal, and he’d bet it hadn’t come from von Rabenstrange — more like, ‘I’ll make you an offer you can’t refuse, Your Grace. Happy now? Then let’s get down to real business.’ Or just wham, bam, thank you Ma’am. Huh? The thought amused, especially given von Rabenstrange’s imperial Andermani dignity, but talk was cut short when Isaac’s com sounded and after a moment he raised surprised eyes to Cathy.

“Duchess Winton-Henke is here to see you.”

Cathy blinked. “She is? What on … oh, the ASL op-poll analyses, I suppose. She did ask about them but didn’t say it was urgent. And we’ve never been friends. I’m too uncouth and she’s as
couth as it gets. Still, can’t keep her waiting. Hop it and hide, Jeremy.”

At least in this house he didn’t have to squeeze behind false bookcases with no space to stretch, never mind caper when the mood took him. There was an auxiliary command-room with access to all cams, inside and out, so he was watching comfortably with a cheese-board and coffee as the Queen’s aunt and Manticore’s former regent was shown in, Isaac taking his usual position by the door and receiving an interested glance.

“Your Grace — an unexpected pleasure.”

“Ms Montaigne. Captain Zilwicki. I’m sorry to disturb you at home.” She looked around. “I haven’t been here since your father’s time. I like how you’ve had it done up, quite apart from Captain Zilwicki’s first-rate security.”

“Thank you.” Cathy laughed. “He wants to upgrade to laser-clusters, of course. Typical male competitiveness.” Anton rolled his eyes. “But I doubt you came all this way to admire my décor or security. The ASL analyses?”

“Well, those certainly. Her Majesty is very interested and will much appreciate them. It was quite the argument, wasn’t it? So refreshing. The Prime Minister is being cautious, of course, but the firmer the shift in opinion can be shown to be, the easier it’ll be for him.”

“I don’t disagree, Your Grace, but I’d have sent them over tomorrow.”

“I’m sure you would, but discussing them now makes a useful cover, because it’s a true one. And that’s best, isn’t it, Captain Zilwicki?”

Massive eyebrows rose. “It is, Your Grace. Usually, anyway.”

“When would it not be?”

She seemed genuinely interested and Jeremy’s attention sharpened.

“If you wanted a cover story to collapse to reveal a misdirection, say. Or were creating one for someone you actually wanted to expose.”

“Oh my. What a complicated world we live in. Still, neither of those considerations apply to this. But there is an awkwardness, Ms Montaigne, and some discourtesy I trust you’ll forgive, because I’m playing errand-girl for Her Grace the Grand Duchess” — a smile flickered — “and Steadholder Plenipotentiary, and my message isn’t actually for you or for Captain Zilwicki, though you’ll be contacted ministerially. It’s for Mr Douglass.”

Jeremy came bolt upright as Isaac managed to keep his reaction to a raised eyebrow, old stone-face that he was.

“For me, Your Grace?”

“Yes, Mr Douglass, following a previous suggestion, if of necessity very discreetly. Her Grace is giving a confidential working dinner next week, at the Bay House, ahead of multilateral talks about responding to the various acts of war committed by Mesa. Those attending will have to make some decisions, and so need information.” She hesitated. “Forgive me for speaking to it directly, Mr Douglass, but there’s also of course the position of the Audubon Ballroom in all this, and Her Grace feels the time has come to explore that properly.” Her mouth quirked. “So she wondered if Mr I. X and Mr J. X might like to come, and sends these.” She produced two data-wallets, Isaac taking them as if they might explode in his hands. “They extend Steadholder’s
Protection to those gentlemen as her invited guests, initially for a limited period only, I’m afraid, but she hopes that might prove extendable. And there is, I’m afraid, a question of, um, singing for one’s supper.” A curious look crossed the dark, austere face. “I gather there’s been some data analysis going on, and Her Grace said that if those seconded have made any progress, the dinner would be a good time to present results.”

Isaac actually blinked. “There are many results, Your Grace. Do you have any guidance on which might be of most interest?”

“Not as such, Mr Douglass, but I would note Her Grace’s purpose is to reach a decision in principle, and it’s the sort of principle that depends on practicability. If Captain Zilwicki were to inspect the repairs to the Bay House’s defences tomorrow, as provided in his contract, he might bump into Ms LaFollet, or even Her Grace.”

Anton had the abstracted look that meant things were falling into place, and after a moment nodded, an odd look in his eyes. Respect?

“A very proper suggestion, Your Grace. Not that laser-clusters or those vast generators of Colonel LaFollet’s are quite my side of things. And I rather think thanks might be due to you also.” He inclined his head quite deeply, the Gryphon equivalent of a full bow, so it was respect.

Eyebrows rose elegantly. “Whatever for, Captain Zilwicki?”

Good question, but Anton’s voice became as bland as his burred basso rumble allowed.

“Relaying the message, of course, Your Grace, and your strong support for the ASL.”

“Ah.” A very sharp glance. “No thanks needed, in either case, Captain. Like you, I know my duty to my kin.”

“Indeed. May I ask if you’ll be attending this dinner yourself?”

“I will, as it happens, as a reward for running this errand, though I have no real claim to be there.”

“Somehow I doubt that, Your Grace.”

When Anton and Cathy returned from seeing her out Jeremy and Isaac were already scanning chips, and marvelling. The lady really didn’t deal in halves — the guarantees were generous and rock solid, provisos common sense, and security checks required to enter the Bay House physically and electronically thorough while specifically excluding biometrics. Anton and Cathy crowed round, and after a moment Anton looked at him with, dammit, a knowing amusement.

“So, Jeremy the Kid, or whatever it is this week, how are your courtly pavannes and galliards?”

He stood and spun, more because he had to move than anything else.

“Ballroom standard, of course. But I’ll admit I’m less sure about this presenting results. A lecturer I’m not.”

Anton waved a hand. “That’s alright. What Harrington will want is the stuff tying Manpower to everything Mesan, so they can’t try disowning a front, and everything on Mesa itself, especially Mendel, to identify targets.” He grinned. “Sending the marines isn’t so different from sending
Dancers, Jeremy. They need to know where they’re going.”

Isaac stirred. “What was that thanks about, Anton? By all accounts, you barely offer the Queen that much deference.”

“It wasn’t anyone wearing her uniform who sold my daughter down the river. And several things now make more sense. Her Grace was in it all up to her neck. Or her attic.”

“In what?”

“Nailing High Ridge. It’s beautiful.” He shifted his bulk, leaning back. “One thing that’s been bothering me is that no-one seems to be tearing the place apart apart finding out how an official surveillance system in Government House got tapped. I would be, and the PGS made a start. So did Ingledew. Then they both stopped — which made no sense, unless they had an answer, which they don’t, at least officially. I’d worked out that if still pissed off that, and mystified how, they must be satisfied they knew who, and more to the point that no-one else could do it. But this is cream.”

Cathy rolled her eyes for them all. “Explain, lover boy. They must have known it was Harrington — that’s obvious — but why the rest?”

“Because to do whatever it was exactly you need” — fingers were raised — “to be able to give very odd orders to a treecat that will be scrupulously obeyed, and not mentioned by any other ‘cat; access to whatever it was the ‘cat planted, which I’m betting wasn’t something radically new but something radically old, almost certainly Grayson old tech; access to whatever it was that picked up what the ‘cat planted, which is certainly not anything for which specs are available, probably very classified navy tech; and a place to put it that has line of sight to Government House, which I will now bet was Her Grace’s attic.” He grinned. “Beautiful. Every step a comfort to the poor afflicted security man, and if they got that far they found it was signed off by a former regent who still has every security classification in the book and all the rest too. I’ve also been wondering how Harrington has been managing the Queen, no mean feat, by all accounts — but an aunt who was her regent knows a thing or two about that. So I ought to be shot, because Harrington was Countess Gold Peak’s room-mate at the Academy, which I knew, and that means she’s known Her Grace for more than 40 years.”

He sat forward again, frowning.

“Her position’s changed. For years she’s kept out of the spotlight. And after her husband and son were murdered she was by all accounts shut down for a year or more. But Harrington’s recruited her.” He snorted, impressively. “Reward for running an errand be damned. If she’s going to be there, Harrington thinks she’ll help get her the outcome she wants.”

“Pronouns, pronouns.”

“Tchaa. Think about it, Jeremy. Smacking Manpower is one thing and everyone’s up for that because they’re so angry about the war having been rigged. But putting Mesa out of business permanently is another matter altogether, because it means taking on the SLN. You really think Frontier Fleet at least wouldn’t send serious force to defend their cash cow? Plenty of people could drop dead from fright just thinking about that. But Harrington must believe it can be done, and she’s marshalling serious support. Including Her Grace, who is very well connected, and respected, in lots of places Harrington herself can’t easily reach.”

Cathy had caught up and was nodding. “Hauptman too. And she’s locked down the newsies who’d scream loudest. San Martinos cheerfully believe she walks on water. Hell, so do most Manticorans — her personal ratings are jammed in the high 90s and have been for weeks. Benjamin
must be on board, and Imbesi and Theisman, in principle at least. Shit. Anton, can we really take on the SLN? Aren’t they invincible by sheer weight of numbers?”

“So everyone thinks. Except Harrington, apparently.” Anton shrugged massively. “On one hand, she thought 30 men was enough to destroy a BC, capture a prison planet, and achieve the most comprehensive, one-sided slaughter in space-naval fleet history. On the other, she did it. So I’m thinking you’re in for an interesting dinner, Wyatt X. And one thing I’d best try to borrow tomorrow is whoever put together that holo-projector sequence Harrington used in the Lords. Sky Domes people, maybe GONI or GSN staffers. Because we want our data to look its best, don’t we? And here’s a natty question for you and Sundance over there. What are you going to wear with your matching moustachios? I’m not up on the well-dressed terrorist’s dinner-party look these days.”

Damn, but Anton could be annoying. Especially when he had a point.

* * * *

If anyone had told Alfredo Yu his duties as Deputy CO of the Protector’s Own would one day include chaperoning a democratically elected President of Haven and half her cabinet on a skiing holiday he would have wondered what they were on ; but here he was, and in a peculiar way enjoying himself, if only because his chaperones were even more bemused than he was.

Holidays weren’t something Yu had taken in the last two decades, but he had at least had down time. For more than a year after his defection he’d done little more than answer questions from ONI and GONI, and once he’d become a GSN officer he’d had statutory leave, even if he hadn’t known what to do with it beyond seeing to his house in Harrington City and attending an occasional Treecats’ game. But if Pritchard had ever had a holiday it was in childhood, before her sister’s murder : holidays really weren’t something any Aprillist took, let alone a brigade commander, and for a (seemingly) dedicated, humourless senior People’s Commissioner would have been dangerously aberrant ; while for an embattled new president they hadn’t even been on the radar. The same was broadly true for many delegates, and the journey to Manticore had been a strange hiatus for them — but there was now an enforced pause in negotiations while Protector Benjamin returned to Grayson for a funeral, Steadholder Coleman having keeled over in his garden, and others within range took advantage to communicate with home.

Her Grace was, gritting her teeth only slightly and almost sorry to miss Coleman’s obsequies, making use of the time to pay San Martin a visit, taking Sky Domes people to begin assessing what would and would not be practicable by way of building lower-elevation domes. The engineers were interested, Grayson’s domes all being on level ground and the notion of constructing them to cover terraced mountain-side settlements under 2.7 G offering a challenge ; moreover, the mountain-top granted Her Grace as her formal Grand Ducal seat not only needed an appropriate residence — as Graysons defined appropriate — but had a substantial plateau only about 1,000 metres too low for safe habitation, a choice that made Her Grace roll her eyes and mutter darkly. In her absence her parents might have hosted the Havenites on Sphinx, but both had a long backlog of Manticoran requests for professional consultations they were wading through, and their house wasn’t set up for so many guests anyway. So as the residences at the Gryphon Duchy were newly complete, and it was their winter with skiing in full swing, Gryphon it had been, with Alfredo finding himself tapped as stand-in host not so much as a Havenite himself as (he strongly suspected) someone who could provide his own company of Grayson Marines to handle security and give the PGS some much needed relief.
His long stay in Manticore orbit, and inclusion in Her Grace’s daily briefings, did at least mean he was familiar with the way the Duchy was being developed, and knew Richard Maxwell, the resident Factor. The Queen’s grant from the Westmount Crown Reserve had been wilfully generous, producing peculiar boundaries to ensure the Duchy included a long strip of coastline and mountain terrain suitable both for casual and family skiers and for those wanting a serious challenge. The developers had been drooling, but the contracts Clarise Childers negotiated had strict provisions about environmental impact and safety, ranging from an outright ban on powered leisure-craft to an insistence the ski resorts use a counter-grav shuttle system that could lift itself out of the path of any avalanche, rather than fixed cable-cars or drag-lifts. It had meant longer development time and higher costs, which Clarise cheerfully acknowledged by reducing initial licensing fees substantially and accepting (much as an Old Terran shark did a proffered leg) a higher tithe of profits. Sky Domes had leased at cost serious excavating and boring equipment, speeding things up again, and the main resort had opened a few months back, proving immediately popular. It had been the LaFollets who quietly ensured the Sky Domes machines also dug out Her Grace’s residences, on the coast and here in the high country, before they left; and Colonel LaFollet’s notions of security meant Alfredo’s marines didn’t have a great deal to worry about except curious mountain-goats.

Most of the space had been excavated from a sheer face above what would in summer be a small alpine meadow, surrounded by steep slopes. Had it been flat it would have been too exposed, but a trick of rock strata and weathering had produced a wide bowl with a small lake and clustered trees as well as open sward; and the exterior construction had used excavated rock to provide a substantial terrace, well-heated, enclosed in armorplast, and affording stunning views — quite often, given Gryphon’s winter weather, of whirling snowflakes. But this morning the sun was shining, the air as still as it ever was at this altitude, and delegates arriving piecemeal at the breakfast table on the terrace were greeted by an assault on every sense. Pritchart, like Yu a very early riser, had been there a while, recovering sufficiently from the view to put away a substantial MacGuinness breakfast, but others were staring at the panorama. Most were just gaping, but Tourville was looking across the void at a far, high slope, and when a silently observing MacGuinness offered him an old-fashioned telescope couldn’t stop his exclamation.

“Will you look at that!” He lowered the tube from his eye, passing it to Shannon Foraker. “That’s the Devil’s Run?”

“That’s correct, Admiral.”

“Huh. How do they get up there?”

“Airbus, Admiral. Numbers are strictly limited, hence the early start, and for obvious reasons it is open only to those rated Highly Skilled.”

“Not sure of your ratings here, Senior Chief Steward, but I ski seriously at home. Tambourin. We have biig mountains, and plenty of snow.”

MacGuinness considered briefly. “Your qualifications will need to be tested, Admiral, if only for legal reasons, but I can arrange an appointment to do so today and reserve you a place for tomorrow, if you’d like. There is an obligatory briefing session for those undertaking it for the first time, on account of sidewinds, I believe, and the section known as the Flying Gate.”

“Please. It’s a stunning run.”

“You’re joking, Skipper? It’s insane.”

“Nonsense, Shannon. Well, maybe. But only as a luxury, not as a challenge.”
“Rather you than me, Skipper.”

Tourville shook his head. “You need to get out more, Shannon. A dirtside day like this isn’t for ’puters.”

Most seemed to agree and breakfast was followed by a mass exodus to the main resort. At least it gave the Marines something to do, though as a slope had been cleared for them all, not much; MacGuinness and Maxwell between them having everything smoothly in hand, Yu didn’t have much to do either, and found himself left with Pritchard (Sheila Thiessen behind her, looking thoughtful), Foraker, and Ginny Usher, all idly nibbling at this or that.

“Is there anything I can do for any of you?”

Ginny shook her head. “There are movies I haven’t seen on the system here. I’ve no idea what a samurai was or why you’d want seven of them, but I’m booked.”

“Another addict?” Yu almost rolled his eyes. “The samurai were an Old Terran warrior caste, big on swords and a sort of code duello. Her Grace made the sad mistake of introducing that movie to Grayson some years back. It remains inexplicably popular.”

“I bet. Sounds wonderful. How much do they wear?”

He grinned. “Robes, mostly, I’m afraid, or it would never be allowed on Grayson. Though they do get shed or blown aside sometimes. Some very odd armour, too.”

“Blown aside is good, and odd armour a decent second best.”

“How come you’re into movies, may I ask? I’ve never come across them anywhere but Grayson.”

“Kevin saw one called Casablanca in Old Chicago and fell in love with the dialogue.”

“He certainly did.” Pritchard shook her head as she saw him make a note. “Don’t. It’s contagious.”

“Even so. Finding things to give Her Grace she doesn’t already have isn’t easy, and a good movie recommendation isn’t to be passed up.”

“Huh. I don’t suppose it is.” She looked at him speculatively. “Forgive me, Admiral, but your relationship with her extends to gifts?”

“Certainly. She demurs but is pleased, and the ritual of gift-giving on birthdays and some religious feasts is strong on Grayson. More so for children and godparents than adults, but nevertheless.”

“Fair enough. You consider yourself a Grayson now?”

“Very much so, however by adoption. I mean no offence, but they understand both redemptive penance and loyalty.”

Pritchard winced slightly. “Which the Legislaturists certainly didn’t, unless you were already an untouchable. I don’t suppose their trying to cosy up to the Masadans helped any, either.”

“Not much, no. A dim decision, even by their standards. Admiral Parnell was strongly opposed, he told me, but was overridden in Cabinet.” Yu offered the coffee-pot, glancing at
Thiessen, who shook her head, refilled his own mug, and sat back, considering Pritchart. “I think of it as a sign of more than one thing, though. It’s not just that Masadans were and are grotesque by any standard, and not allies or even cat’s-paws anyone sane would want, but that the decision was in effect dictated by the Star Kingdom. Astrography gave them a natural advantage with Grayson, and they sent a far better ambassador than the Republic — he’s now Foreign Secretary — so Masada was supposed a necessary counterweight, regardless. Bad strategy for bad reasons, resulting in nominal allies who couldn’t be trusted, weren’t liked, and were seriously unpredictable.”

Pritchart nodded. “Agreed. Those poor sapients on Basilisk were another choice like that, and preying on their drug-addiction a similar abdication of conscience.”

“A point Her Grace has noted. Though the mekoha scheme may have been Denver Summervale’s, I believe. There were indications of how involved he was in the North Hollow papers.”

Foraker blinked. “The one she shot?”

“Yes. A cashiered marine turned fixer for hire. I doubt he designed the rifles, but he was certainly responsible for training the first Stilties who were given them.”

Pritchart nodded again. “Makes sense. The design was ours, I’m sorry to say. That much was clear in surviving data I’ve seen. We dug out what we could find when we were annulling those trumped-up charges.”

“An honesty that was much appreciated.”

Pritchart waved a hand. “A needful one. And no more than a gesture in the right direction.”

“I don’t believe that’s how Her Grace feels. Nor her parents. Nor Graysons for that matter, to whom it was an important and welcome indication of change.”

“Maybe so, but withdrawing a gross libel is hardly something to be proud of. And we share one problem, Admiral, because a gift would be in order, and I don’t mean only for Her Grace’s extraordinary hospitality and, well, kindness, I’d have to say.” Pritchart gave a sudden grin. “Even Tony has been heard to admit that if all aristo tycoons used their money the way Her Grace seems to the whole system would make quite powerful sense. Though I’m not sure he’d digested how many palaces she seems to have, even if one per world is hardly unreasonable.”

Yu grinned back. “She wouldn’t disagree, you know. Harrington House in the Steading is a working seat of government, as the Bay House is a working embassy and more. So’s the official Residence at the shore here — it holds the Magistracy as well as Treasury and Duchy Guard HQ, which includes Coastguard and Mountain Rescue. The house on Sphinx is family property, a rambling homestead and in no sense a palace, however roomy. So this place is the only indulgence, and Andrew and Miranda more or less presented it to her as a fait accompli. Who knows what’ll happen on San Martin, mind — it sounded to me as if what President Ramirez has in mind is more like a second Harrington City than a house.”

“A fait accompli?”

“Pretty much. Miranda sneaked it through a morning brief as a chalet, I believe.”

Pritchart and Foraker both blinked, though Ginny Usher just grinned.

“But the budget …?”
He shrugged. “The heavy equipment belonged to Sky Domes and was here anyway. So were engineers and architects, and Miranda has very wide discretion.”

“She’s Harrington’s Ballroom contact, Eloise.” Ginny idly snagged a sweet roll. “And sent along a bunch of number-crunching J-lines from Sky Domes, Harrington Steading, and the Protector’s Own when they were needed to help mine files, I’m told, much to everyone’s grateful bemusement.”

“Now that was properly approved, I believe.”

Pritchard was still blinking, but Foraker’s gaze sharpened. “When was that, Ginny?”

“As soon as Jeremy got back from Nouveau Paris. Why?”

“Huh. So Her Grace started forward planning for a Mesan strike at least three months ago.”

“She did?”

“I think she must have, Madam President. None of us have embassies or much intel on Mesa, but the Ballroom does, so I’ve been assuming that’s what they’re being tapped for next week. But I’ve been wondering what kind of intel, and how they could correlate it in the ways we’d need. What ways will we need, anyway? But clearly help was provided.” She shook her head. “Damn, but I hate playing catch-up all the time.”

Yu smiled sympathetically. “It’s hard not to with Her Grace at any time, and even those of us on the inside have been doing it for months on this one. No-one anticipated the Young data, but within a short time she’d projected strategy that’s still unfolding. And she’s still playing need to know with everyone, though I imagine next week will answer many questions.”

“I hope so. I want to know how she means to deal with what I think of as the hexapuma on a string — the League after we whack the SLN.”

He couldn’t stop his laugh. “You should mention that metaphor to Her Grace, Admiral. She’d appreciate it. And one of her ancestors, I discovered, is the only person on record to have faced a hexapuma armed only with a vibraknife and lived to tell the tale.”

“That’s true? I though the SFS people were pulling my leg.”

“Quite true. A Stephanie Harrington, who was 12 at the time, I believe. The Bright Water Clan saved her, of course, but she survived long enough to be saved.”

“So how do we do that? And who’s playing treecats for us?”

Yu spread his hands. “Who knows? But it might be more what’s playing Treecats. And the League’s nothing as agile as a hexapuma.”

“Mmm.”

“Enough already.” Pritchard shook her head to clear it. “I’m still trying to get my head round real treecats, never mind metaphors. And no decision has been reached yet, whatever the possibilities. But you’re confirming, Admiral, that Her Grace was … proactively considering what shape a strike against Mesa might take months ago?”

“Oh yes. Even before we had news of Mr Giancola I had orders about sims and intel to that end.” Yu hesitated, but co-operation was the whole point. “And once Admiral Theisman confirmed
your willingness in principle to consider joint ops, further detailed orders. Even before all this blew up, she was planning ways to use the Own to act on, um, information received about slavers and depots in Silesia and the nearer Verge. I expect some of that may happen in the meantime, but once even the faintest possibility of more direct and concerted action came up, well, it wasn’t ignored.”

“Casimir, Part Two.” Ginny grinned. “We’ve been waiting for it long enough. You could say Harrington’s been proactively considering it for nearly 20 years, Eloise, except the bloody war got in the way. And though Tony says he can’t find any evidence, there are those of us who’ve been wondering lately if Harris pulling the trigger as soon as he did only happened to come hard on the heels of the single strongest direct action anyone’s taken against Manpower in centuries. Oh, I know the Legislaturists were pushing anyway, but still — Manpower undoubtedly heaved a sigh of relief.”

“Huh. Maybe, Ginny — I do see the point. But there’s a danger of thinking they really are behind everything that suits them.”

“Easier to push something that’s already moving, though. And as the conservative estimate is that Casimir cost Manpower not less than six billion Solarian dollars in direct losses and Mesan companies at large up to 20 billion in delayed or lost profits — close to 10% of their total losses to direct action over the last five T-centuries — they had motive as well as presumed means and opportunity,” Ginny waved what remained of the sweet roll with some violence. “But that’s by the by. What matters, Eloise, so far as the Ballroom is concerned, is that given the least sniff of direct action, Harrington laid her career on the line and acted, comprehensively. And when she made herself a billionaire, her next-to-first thought was how to help the freed — you heard what Theo said about that — and her second-next how to work on others to the same end. Then, the RMN’s always been pretty good about the Convention, but riddled with parasitic shits all the same. Until lately, anyway. But the GSN, moulded in her image, has — well, how many GSN officers have any time for slavers, Alfredo?”

“None. Some for old-fashioned bigots and many for misogynists, even now, but for slavers — not one I’ve ever met. Besides easing the strain of new construction, our peace dividend is largely being freed to go after Manpower more aggressively, in Silesia and elsewhere. Her Grace didn’t remake the GSN only in terms of which the RMN would approve. And we have studied her career on our own account, Casimir included.”

“I bet you have. Not to mention her effects on Hauptman. Just think, Eloise — a whole navy trained to respond as Harrington did at Casimir. It’s no surprise to me she was planning moves against Mesa within hours of learning about Young. She must have almost as many fantasy ones as I do.”

Pritchart stared, Usher stared back, eyebrows rising, and Yu found himself meeting first Foraker’s half-amused look, then Sheila Thiessen’s half-concerned one.

“Ah, perhaps we might cut to the chase, Madam President?” Her gaze snapped to him. “Tell me, in all honesty, what still motivates you? Forgive me, your sister’s murder?”

Pritchart’s gaze was hot for a second before it was banked to a fierce smoulder. “Mostly, Admiral, but Estelle’s murder was what made me an Aprillist, and I remain one.”

“And have triumphed as one. So, The Aprillist programme is equality before the law, be you governor or governed, rich or poor, wealthy-born or Dolist, yes?”

“In essence.”

“Which is why you abhor slavery, though Manpower was never an Aprillist target as such.”
Pritchart shrugged. “More or less. I would abhor slavery anyway, but even the Legislaturists were clear it was vile. It was never an issue between us.”

“Quite so. And what do you suppose motivates me?”

“Frankly, Admiral, I don’t know. You had a Legislaturist loyalty, once; then changed it to Grayson, and to that you seem true—but what drives that, beyond what you said before? I wouldn’t presume to guess.”

Yu inclined his head slightly. “Most proper. Tell me, does the name Mercedes Brigham mean anything to you?”

Pritchart frowned, thinking. “I’m afraid not. Should it?”

“Not really. She’s an RMN officer, in Grayson service for a while now. She was XO of one of the ships my forces destroyed at First Yeltsin, and was rescued from space only because I insisted the Masadans pick up survivors. Which turned out to be less merciful an act than I supposed, Madam President. Of 28 female PoWs whom the Masadans took into custody, two—two—survived to be rescued by Her Grace when she took the Masadan base; Mercedes was one. The other never wholly regained her sanity.” Pritchart and the others winced. “The RMN shrinks never really thought Mercedes was healed, but she returned to service, transferred to the GSN, and wound up serving under me. Of all people. And she did it, Madam President. Not without qualms and sleepless nights when she lay and hated, but she did it. When I bit the bullet and asked her straight out how she could bear it, she told me two things I’ve never forgotten. The first was that violation of the body was nothing compared to violation of the mind, and her mind remained her own.” His gaze shifted to Ginny Usher. “As you also prove. Mind over matter, yes?”

“Oh yes. Always.”

Yu gave a seated bow, seeing her acknowledge the motive behind the gesture. “The second was that the irrational accommodation she had made was that, as it was Her Grace who had rescued her, and come within a hair’s-breadth of murder in rage at what had happened, she’d found a...sufficient peace in serving Her Grace’s adopted world. She knew it wasn’t logical, but didn’t care, and it worked for her. But it meant internalising some Grayson values, and one was Father Church—not the credo, as such, but the values, which include a hatred of slavery second only to the Ballroom’s. Outsiders don’t easily see it because Graysons remain so patriarchal, but treatment of wives and daughters was a central issue, perhaps the issue, in Grayson’s civil war, which lasted more than six T-centuries, one way and another. And Father Church’s position throughout was, and is, that the attitudes of the Faithful—Masadans—towards women were tantamount to enslavement. So Mercedes found opposition to slavery, a standard but sober belief for a Manticoran, promoted, shall I say? Made more urgent, anyway.”

Yu carefully filled his coffee-mug again.

“The point being, Madam President, to ask what motivates Her Grace. And that seems a very complicated question. Many Manticoran talking heads—I imagine you’ve heard some—incline to believe it is personal loss; that she took down High Ridge and North Hollow primarily because she hated them for attacking her and murdering Captain Tankersley. I would note, however, that in more than a decade following that murder she took no action against either that was even questionably beyond the law, until two related conditions applied. The first was a ceasefire, however ridiculous and hamstrung, and the threat of renewed war between Manticore and Haven; we can all understand that one. But it is I think a mistake to suppose it was only the threat to her navies and star nations that moved her, for there is also the continued protection of Manpower such a resumption of hostilities would represent. And the second condition was that High Ridge and North Hollow had taken to
protecting Manpower themselves — not that they understood it in those terms, but nevertheless. They chose for political advantage openly to protect individuals plainly implicated in enslavement. And not much more than a year later both are dead and all they represented is in shambolic ruin.”

He shrugged delicately.

“Only Nimitz, I suspect, could tell you for sure, but I for one believe the second factor was critical. Her Grace had inherited views about Manpower strong enough to precipitate Casimir, and that was before she became a Grayson Steadholder and devoted serious time to the Book of the New Way and other teachings of Father Church, as well as developing a bond with the GSN that is, I believe, without parallel; certainly modern parallel. And then discovery of Young tied danger to her navies and wilful protection of Manpower together. So I am as unsurprised as Ms Usher that she looked more swiftly than anyone to a maximal strike against Manpower and all its works.”

To his surprise it was Thiessen who spoke first.

“You are suggesting, Admiral, that chance cohered with inherited and acquired determination? And that Her Grace’s hatred of Manpower and its works is far stronger than any resentments she may have of us — of Haven, I mean — developed during the war?”

“Yes to both.” Yu hesitated. “With the possible exception of the … mutilation, she calls it, suffered by Nimitz. She accepted letting Young live with difficulty. If those who harmed Nimitz were still alive I am sure she would go after them however she could.”

Thiessen nodded. “Injury to herself she accepts, but not to another? Especially a dependent?”

“Just so.” His gaze switched. “Hence her special gratitude to you, Admiral, for putting your life on the line to ensure it was no worse.”

Foraker shrugged uneasily. “No one could do less, sir. Ransom and her people were grotesque. Savagery. Sadism with no purpose at all.”

“On the contrary, Admiral — many could and did do less. I never had to deal with StateSec myself, nor with a People’s Commissioner riding herd on me, but I think of them as the Republic’s Masadans, those for whom a supposed ideology, in fact no more than egotism run riot, trumped all law and decency. Graysons would say that when you faced your Test you passed it handsomely, and I would not disagree.”

Foraker was embarrassed, but Ginny Usher grinned and reached to rest a hand on her shoulder, and both Pritchart and Thiessen nodded.

“You’re as bad as Harrington is about accepting praise, Shannon.” Usher’s voice was warm. “Lots of people get buried in ‘puters — I’ve met enough J-lines to know. Blind as bats, half of them. But the moment you noticed, you acted, to excellent purpose. And I remember what you said the one time I managed to get you pissed enough to say anything personal at all, that mistreating PoWs was bad enough, but seeking to kill a sapient companion was pure fuckry. Delightful word.” An uncompromising gaze met Yu’s. “I’m betting Harrington saw exactly that.”

He inclined his head. “She did, Ms Usher.” He ignored her rolling eyes and considered, then shrugged again. “This is delicate territory, not least because ‘cats have for centuries induced, or reinforced, in adoptees a strongly protective instinct that included being very cagey indeed about their real abilities. But as they have blown that wide open in the last two years, it seems reasonable to say that an instinctively protective response to their … projected furriness, shall I say, works strongly on adoptees. If any condescension can be removed, the nearest human equivalent might be a parent’s
regard for one who has protected their child. And in so far as the ’cats understand the concept of slavery — and I’m not sure how far that is — they regard it much as Father Church does. For individuals aware of the whole mind of every other individual they meet, the concept of utterly subordinating, degrading, and abusing someone is incomprehensible — a sickness equivalent to wilfully abusing yourself.”

He looked at Pritchart. “If you wish to understand Her Grace, Madam President — and good luck — don’t ever forget Nimitz. And therefore Samantha. And therefore all treecats.” He shrugged again. “You might say everything has conspired to create Her Grace’s attitudes — nature, nurture, experience, Beowulf, Manticore, Grayson ; and treecats. Haven was an enemy because it threatened home, family, including ’cats, and nation. But Manpower was and is intrinsically an enemy, abhorrent in its raison d’etre, not merely its actions. Which leads me, Madam President, to the reason I’ve been so forthcoming. You have the permanent treaty you needed and wanted. Good. And you have any number of urgent internal problems, from remaining StateSec rebels to a worthless currency. How easy then to call it a day and look inward the while.”

Pritchart was silent, though she raised eyebrows, but Foraker and Thiessen spoke together.

“But?”

“But how much stronger than being good neighbours is being allies in a passionate crusade? Bottom line, Madam President? I’ve given Her Grace the same analysis. You can drop out, watch the Star Kingdom’s back, and get by. Barely. Retreat and muddle along, surviving with mild resentment in your wake. Or you can sign up, help take on Manpower, which means taking on the League and SLN, using the tech window that exists, and become a partner. You’ll naturally see the great risks ; think also of the even greater advantages. Win through — and the practicalities of that are what next week’s about — and you can clean up, with what would become the galaxy’s single strongest economy and a bunch of others as enthusiastic friends. I do understand expanding Aprillism to mean the destruction of Manpower and all its works is a risk for you, but it’s Haven’s best opportunity in years.”

Pritchart stared, then swung in her chair to look at Thiessen.

“Sheila?”

A shrug. “Honest advice, I’d say. The one treaty always looked toward the other. And in making treaties — alliances, friendships, whatever — work means work. Always has, always will, whether it’s work that’s welcome or a chore. And smashing the crap out of Manpower is welcome enough.” A swift, calculating glance raked him. “I recall Director Usher’s advice, with which Cabinet agreed. Believe me, I understand why taking on the League gives you … pause ; but it’s always been a logical implication of this mission. And if it can be done, militarily, well … I’d rather shoot Mesans and Solly slavers than Manties. By a long way.”

Pritchart nodded, and swung back. “But can it be done, Admiral? Tom, Lester, and Shannon all tell me yes. Do you?”

“Certainly. Our military advantage is enormous, and will remain so for five years minimum from now, and more like eight. Maximum — 20 or 30.” He hesitated again, then shrugged again. “That’s on current data. And I’d be willing to bet real money Her Grace has something else up her sleeve, that she thinks adds in seriously. She has … an air, sometimes, that makes me think so.”

Foraker nodded sharply. “Me too, Admiral. And it’s to do with the Saganami-Cs. The specs and telemetry are dazzling, but there’s at least two things we haven’t been told. Admiral Cortez was very vague about crew numbers, so I’m guessing they have way more automation than anyone’s
admitting. Meaning, Madam President, more can be got into service quicker than would seem possible.”

“Shallower hole, narrower window. Not that it’s relevant any more.”

“Yes. But beyond that the Admiral’s right. Her Grace is more confident than someone of her experience should be, by some way. Some kind of x factor would explain a lot.”

Pritchart’s gaze swung and Ginny Usher shrugged in turn.

“Don’t expect me to argue against allying to take on Manpower and Mesa, SLN or no, Eloise. I don’t know enough about the tech stuff to know if it really can be done, but so far as I’m concerned whatever is possible is not just a no-brainer but an obligation.”

“Fair enough, Ginny, but exchanging the Alliance for the League as enemies in a shooting war wasn’t in anyone’s manifesto. And as angry as people are, I’m not at all sure what support it would command.”

“Then let me add one thing, Madam President, which is a part of Her Grace’s calculations.” Yu spread his hands. “Manticoran thinking, and Grayson’s, is as much as Haven’s war-weary and more, wounded with grief. But also, increasingly, sick at heart in a different way, as the idea sinks home that it all meant close to nothing — a conflict long promoted by a hidden hand, a war that could have ended at almost any time after your first revolution, that the Committee with whatever help from Manpower wilfully sustained. But one thing the war has unquestionably achieved is a revolution in ship design and the nature of space combat — and so the tech window we have, in which for the first time there is a genuine possibility of doing something effective about the horror Mesa represents, and the OFS as the bane of the Shell and Verge, and damn the SLN and its corrupt masters. And that’s a real answer to some of the heart-sickness, using what our wars have wrought to bring Manpower down once and for all. Not a new war — the final phase of the same one, and to far better purpose.”

Thiessen and Foraker nodded, and Pritchart gave a very dry smile.

“Now that makes political sense. And would have some traction. Quite a lot, in some quarters.” She shook her head. “But it still depends on that tech edge, which we can only assert, not really explain.”

Both Yu and Foraker opened their mouths, and he gestured her to continue.

“I can’t agree, Madam President. The new classes are public, and so is the fact missile ranges have increased dramatically. And the facts of improved compensators and FTL.”

“Maybe so, Shannon, but everyone also knows the SLN is too big to be defeated.”

“The defeats saying otherwise will start as soon as any action does.”

“I agree.” Yu smiled. “But it’s a matter of trust, isn’t it? And there we come back to Her Grace again. Governments have been known to lie, in Manticore as much as in Haven, and — present company excepted, of course — that old joke has it that you know a politician’s lying when you see their lips move. But in so far as Her Grace is understood to be a politician at all, she’s largely exempted; if she says something can and should be done, a great majority of Graysons and a sizeable majority of Manticorans will believe her. Others also, though I don’t suppose that helps much in Haven.”

“You might be surprised.” Pritchart was looking thoughtful. “Liking’s one thing, but in her
case credit’s another. But we’ll have to see. In any case, Admiral, thank you for plain speaking.” She stretched, gesturing to the panorama before them. “Is it possible to walk down to that lake? I’d be glad to work off some of this huge breakfast before Senior Chief Steward MacGuinness starts fattening us all again at lunch.”

“Certainly. There are cold-suits and snowshoes in a room by the door. It’s as safe as can be, but my Marines will form a perimeter against any stray goats, and there are stingships up.” He met her surprised gaze. “Colonel LaFollet’s standing orders. People will keep trying to assassinate Her Grace, and as with laser-clusters, better safe than sorry.”

“She has her own sting-ships?”

“Well, we couldn’t keep borrowing them from the PGS. And it’s not as if Her Grace can’t afford them. But let me show you the way outside, and introduce you and Colonel Thiessen to your perimeter.”

When he returned there was no sign of Foraker or Usher, but from somewhere within he could hear the soundtrack of The Seven Samurai and sighed. It was an interesting enough tale, but it still felt like being hit over the head with all that absurd armour. And the dialogue was far from addictive. Perhaps this Casablanca would be better, and he went in search of a com terminal to find out.

* * * * *

Tonight, despite everything, Honor didn’t feel nervous, only determined and intermittently amused by the many and varied feelings of her guests. Elizabeth, Benjamin, Eloise Pritchart, Walter, and Alessandra Havlicek, the Erewhonese triumvir who’d remained for the second round of talks, were by now familiar enough with one another that all were quite relaxed, though filled with anticipation and curiosity. But the assorted admirals and ministers present, though mostly known to one another, were more on edge, uneasily aware of how much power was concentrated in the room, with the whole purpose of considering whether to use it, and discombobulated by guests they hadn’t expected at all, not least a strong Beowulfan contingent. Her uncle Jacques they had grown used to, but the presence of CEO Chyang Benton-Ramirez, Director of Defence Gabriel Caddell-Markham, and Director of Intelligence Fedosei Mikulin, all with an air of decision, was something else. And Beowulf was a member of the Solarian League, which didn’t seem to fit at all.

Benjamin was responsible for more unexpected guests, having returned with Steadholders Mackenzie and Owens, and though scrupulously courteous, the two visibly older men — neither with Prolong — disturbed many sensibilities. They were also a study in contrasts. John XII Mackenzie, now in his late 70s, had suffered a spiritual crisis when Mueller was exposed, and come out of it accepting Honor was indeed beloved of the Tester, and Benjamin’s reforms in accordance with His will. He couldn’t like it, and would never be easy with it, but having once decided it integrity held him to it, and the result (besides a guarded willingness to support Benjamin politically) was a degree of formal deference to Honor touched with piety and a strange pride that had to do with her cluster to the Star of Grayson. She found it exasperating, but his voice held a lot of Conservative sway, and she understood why Benjamin wanted him on board from the beginning. Similarly, Aaron Hears held a lot of Moderate sway, and his daughter’s choice of career — with her transformation into his heir — had given him a galactic focus far sharper and wider than most Steadholders’. More than 20 years younger than Mackenzie — Abigail was his eldest child — and much easier in temperament, he bristled with energy; he was also grateful to Honor, as a father, for care of his
daughter, and bursting with a more straightforward pride than Mackenzie’s at how well she was doing.

All of which was fine, and Hearns was as personable as Mackenzie was pious. But both were Grayson Steadholders, ruling autocrats used to wielding power in a very personal manner, and what was equally amusing and dismaying Honor was the rippling surprise she’d sensed as others were given a rare chance to compare Steadholders — herself and Benjamin included. Saving Elizabeth, of Manticorans present only Hamish, Willie, Thomas Caparelli, and by proxy Pat Givens had sufficient experience of Grayson to have realised that whatever else she’d been doing over the last year she’d been operating as a Steadholder, far more ruler than serving officer. Katie and Mike had understood because they’d seen her and Elizabeth speaking as equals, but for those used to thinking of her primarily as an admiral, a new duchess (and newer grand duchess), or an independent speaking to naval affairs in the Lords, however potently, it was a shock. Honor didn’t much care for it, but she’d accepted the rank Benjamin had thrust on her all those years ago, and if there was one thing truly worth doing with the power she had, this was it.

Other Steadholders’ presence had also added considerable gaiety to the mix of nervous bodyguards. Andrew and her Harringtons in their green on green, supported by Orbit Dogs, had been joined by Mayhew maroon, Owens blue on grey, and Mackenzie red on black, complementing Ellen Shemais and other PGS personnel, and Sheila Thiessen. The Erewhonese, interestingly, had been happy to leave their minders in the guard quarters below, Havlicek dryly observing that there were enough security factions without adding their own brand. Nor had the Beowulfans insisted on BSC guards coming further inside, but Honor’s other unexpected guest more than made up for it. Chien-lu’s apologetic enquiry, the day before, if he might bring his cousin Gustav, Duke of Potsdam, had taken Honor entirely by surprise. She knew several Old Earth regional rulers had used lesser titles as a form of weirdly official incognito, including a Russian who’d figured in books her father had given her, but had never heard of an Anderman doing it and couldn’t square the idea with what Alfredo had told her about the Emperor he’d met — but it wasn’t the time to say ‘no’, though she had asked Chien-lu if his cousin understood just how much protocol would of necessity be set aside, as well as who else would be there. Reassured, quite fulsomely for Chien-lu, she’d had the interesting pleasure of telling Elizabeth, Benjamin, Eloise, and Walter about it, and receiving startled looks — though nothing as to those of Pat Givens and Tony Langtry this evening, who’d had no inkling of an imperial presence on-planet until they saw him enter. But the man’s proud bravura, at once heavily jocular, utterly dignified, and very watchful, largely dispensed with awkwardness — despite the four uniformed and very tense Totenkopf Hussars in absurd hats who accompanied him and Chien-lu, and had joined Andrew, the Grayson Armsmen, Ellen Shemais, and Sheila Thiessen in a wary union of mutual sympathies.

Introduced to her by Chien-lu as His Grace Gustav XI of Potsdam, he’d nodded at her bow, returned a soft heelclick, and after an intense mutual stare smiled widely before straightforwardly offering a hand to her and then to Nimitz, riding her shoulder.

“Formidable, indeed. It is my pleasure to meet you, Your Grace. And to meet you, Lord Nimitz. Chien-lu has been eloquent over the years about your mutual achievements, and I agree entirely. My warm thanks also, for all recent events.”

“And mine in return, Your Grace.” True hands flashed. “With Nimitz’s. The Silesian data you provided was invaluable.”

He waved a hand. “To me also, and you made excellent use of it, Your Grace. The Memorandum of Agreement is very pleasing too — we came close to something like it with Cromarty, but …” He shrugged, surprisingly delicately. “And I thank you for this evening. I haven’t
been just Potsdam in years, but I believe I might resurrect the practice more often, if not quite like this. It served me well in my days as heir.”

“I imagine it must have, Your Grace.” Honor smiled, waving her own hand slightly. “I’ve had to grow used to titles in adulthood, and being officially incognito is still beyond me, alas. But be welcome to the Bay House. I’m as delighted as I am surprised you’ve come, and I don’t think you’ll be disappointed.”

“Nor I.”

“Let me introduce you.” She looked at the chief among her waiting and watching guests with a genuine smile. “And if no-one minds, I’ll keep the titles to a minimum or Mac’s dinner will burn before we’re done.”

The interchange of imperial, monarchic, autocratic, and generally rulerish stares had been intense, the crackle of mutual assessment all but audible, but when it came to the less exalted Gustav had reverted to straightforwardness, greeting Alfredo warmly, Tom and Hamish with marked respect, and all with a strange mixture of frankness and wilful illusion in which he was always what he was, but just now was what he was willing to be — a trick Honor rather envied, and would bet Elizabeth and Benjamin were interested by as well. It wasn’t unlike Steadholder Harrington not telling Admiral Harrington something, or vice-versa, but it wasn’t the same, and had in it an imperial hauteur in which reality was of course as he declared it to be, with a touch of a flag officer generously but usefully throwing open discussion beyond usual constraints. When she murmured a question to Nimitz, he made the startling observation that it felt like the opposite of the lying-to-themselves thing two legs did, enhanced rather than blinkered self-awareness, and she stored that carefully away to think about.

And despite all the surprises and tensions, the dynamics of the whole bizarre gathering were so far working out nicely. National groupings had been overridden by professional ones, heads of state wanting to get one another’s measures as much as naval officers and politicians, and those who didn’t fall neatly into any group — Justin, Roger, Katie, Ginny Usher, herself, Miranda, and Katherine and Elaine Mayhew — were able to circulate, stir, and bridge. So too were ‘cats, listening attentively, joining conversations more often than usual — which made their point as much as anything they actually said — and (she strongly suspected but couldn’t sense directly) doing some of their mental magic to soothe and relax.

Honor was listening with interest to an exchange between Shannon and Chien-lu about ways of tracking rogue StateSec ships in Silesia when Miranda’s voice in her earbug said her final guests had arrived. The protocols here were impossible, but Andrew had arranged for Ellen Shemais and Sheila Thiessen to accompany him at this juncture, and a brief exchange with the senior of Gustav’s Hussars brought him along too, to see on screen, in a small room specially equipped, the checks that Andrew’s people — and Farragut — made on the arrivals. A multiscan showed nothing untoward, and an old-fashioned frisk was enlivened by the HSG searcher clearly showing thin surgical gloves he donned, and when he was done peeled off to cast into a molecular destructor.

“I promised him no biometrics,” she explained, hearing grunts of understanding. “The other is Isaac X, also Douglass, Catherine Montaigne’s butler and a Casimir rescuee.” She was interested to sense Shemais and Thiessen relax by a degree, but not the Hussar, and cocked her head. “I’m sorry, Herr Kolonel, I didn’t catch your name, but the significance is that Isaac has strong personal reasons not to, well, embarrass me. He’s known, so his presence is what guarantee they can offer. The strong Beowulfan presence is also a guarantee.”

Dark eyes met hers, and heels clicked gently.
“Yi-Sung Lutzendorff, Your Grace. I see that, thank you.” He scowled. “Everything is irregular, but I appreciate all reasonable measures have been taken. And action tonight would make no sense in any case. It’s just that … him.”

“Oh, I know, Herr Kolonel. Him. But consider the trust being offered.”

Another grunt. “There is that, yes.”

The conversation didn’t continue because they were both more interested in watching the dapper little man walking beside Isaac in Miranda’s wake. A fluid grace of movement hinted at the figure she’d seen in the Ballroom’s message, but there was no facial hair and the suit was elegantly simple, screaming of the kind of tailoring Cathy could afford. And as the party reached the last turn in the passage leading into the house proper she turned to the door, feeling everyone focus with her. Samantha and four other ‘cats were arrayed in a semi-circle, and she could feel the dual relay from Nimitz and Sam as Isaac and his friend entered. For a moment there was a humming silence as gazes were exchanged, and her direct impression of Jeremy X was supplemented by the ’cats’ — a vast superficial complexity shot through with amusement, trepidation, and curiosity, immense physical energy under iron control — it wasn’t heavy-world mods but he was as much a genie as she was herself — and within a steel-hard core of pure determination, an absolute will unnervingly like a ’cat’s undeviating sense of the world. Then after a flickering glance at the various guards, with a sharp spike of surprise at Lutzendorff, he gave her an exquisitely slow bow, hands always visible, and came upright again, one finger wagging slightly at those behind her.

“Please relax, ladies and gentleman. I promise not to bite anyone tonight, and your principals could hardly be better defended.” That gaze rested briefly on Andrew as it came back to her, flatness flicking through amusement before fading into immeasurable depth. “Laser-clusters, yet, but I do like a thorough man, Colonel LaFollet. And Your Grace. Whatever comes of this, thank you. You are owed.” Amusement flooded his mind as his disconcerting gaze shifted. “Laughs Brightly — such a splendid name.”

He extended a hand and Nimitz bleeked laughter as he took it ; when he let it go true hands flashed, Miranda translating.

“He says <Greetings from one joker to another>, Mr X.”

“Oh, Jeremy, please, Ms LaFollet. In my circles Mr X gets so confusing.”

“But not in mine.” Honor’s voice was dry. “And despite your kind gift, neither Grand Duchess nor Admiral X are quite workable, yet.” His grin was charming. “As Grayson law requires a verbal as well as written declaration, with two witnesses, Andrew, Miranda, for the record I hereby extend Steadholder’s Protection to Mr Jeremy X, and to Mr Isaac X, on the terms previously communicated and recorded. A pleasure to meet you again after all these years, Mr Douglass. I did see you in the Lords’ Gallery, and I’m sorry I couldn’t say hello. You’re well?”

“Very much so, Your Grace, and the better for your doing.” He bent with immense dignity to kiss her hand, Grayson style, and smiled as Nimitz extended a true hand before shaking it. “And you, my Lord. I’ve very much enjoyed your speeches.”

Honor laughed. “Don’t flatter him, Mr Douglass — his ego’s big enough already. We should go in. You have the data-chips, Miranda?”

“All done, Your Grace.”

“Excellent. Thank you. If you’ll follow me?”
The wash of 'cats and mixture of uniforms behind made for quite an entrance. Inevitably, quite a few had had to know who was coming, but nothing like all, and conversation died into quivering silence as Honor led them straight to Elizabeth, pitching her voice to carry.

“Your Majesty, Mr Jeremy X and Mr Isaac X, both present here under duly witnessed and extended Steadholder’s Protection. Mr X, and Mr X, Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth.”

Amid surging tension that had the silent watchers bug-eyed two very correct Manticoran bows were offered, and Elizabeth nodded gravely, extending a hand.

“Mr X. And Mr X. It is extremely interesting to meet you both. And despite the very many … pressures, shall we say, surrounding this evening, I would thank you both for the trust you extend in coming here, in our need if at your own proffer.”

Honor had argued hard for that statement, and could feel its effect. She’d meant what she said to Lutzendorff, but there had been far more awareness in most of trusting than of being trusted, and that had taken a knock. What she hadn’t known was how Jeremy X would respond, and felt his appreciation and an impulse to mischief barely suppressed.

“Thank you, Your Majesty. But I must say I have no difficulty trusting you in person. I do, believe me, understand nominal subordinates who escape one’s control.” That was well-judged, and Honor (if perhaps no-one else but Justin, Roger, and Caitrin) saw the minute relaxation in Beth at the offered pass on High Ridge. Then Jeremy X let his gaze take in the other heads of state. “Let me say immediately, Your … mmm … Majesties, Graces, and Excellencies covers it, I hope, that the Audubon Ballroom herewith declares a cessation of all armed activity in every polity here represented.” He smiled disarmingly. “Not that we have ever had much occasion to supplement any of your justices, and whatever may come of this we are glad to thank you all sincerely for your various enforcements of the Cherwell Convention and receptions of the freed. You know our angers and hatreds ; know also our gratitudes and respects.”

Over handshakes guarded nods were offered, and Jeremy nodded back, individually and deliberately. Havlicek’s and Walter’s faces were neutral, and Benjamin’s had a look Honor recognised as tempered admiration ; while Mackenzie was concealing pious distaste, and Hearns something much more complicated. But Gustav quirked an eyebrow.

“You don’t think an ’Imperial Majesty’ needed also, mein Herr X?”

Jeremy shrugged minutely. “You wear no imperial sunburst, sir, so I assume you are being something else. A Grace, I thought. Besides, if you were going to be picky about that sort of thing Her Grace would have warned me, I fancy. And anyway, I’m not insisting on Herr Obertanzmeister K-86b/273-1/5 X, now am I?”

Whether Gustav knew what it meant for any Dancer to speak their number Honor didn’t know — she only knew herself from Miranda — but it didn’t matter because Gustav surprised everyone with a nasal guffaw. Chien-lu had an appreciative look too.

“Obertanzmeister, indeed. So you have certainly been in Silesia, mein Herr, from time to time.” Gustav’s face sobered. “This evening I am indeed merely Your Grace, though ‘sir’ is acceptable. And I must apologise, I fear, that those verdamte sklavhändleren find such opportunities there. That will be stopping, very soon I hope. So one thing I wished to say” — his eyes momentarily found Honor’s — “and saying it is one reason I have come here tonight, Your Grace, is that whatever else may happen, Herr Obertanzmeister X, in all seriousness, I — We — would welcome some, ah, exchanges of data, even sooner, about how certain Silesian sector governors might most severely be … incommode is the word, I believe.”
Jeremy offered Gustav the same fluid bow he’d given her, if a bit shallower and considerably faster.

“Certainly, Your Grace, and no apologies are needed. Silesia has always been a pit of vipers. Just so long as that incommoding is merciless and permanent.”

“Oh ja.” Gustav nodded massively. “Very permanent indeed, if I have my way.”

“Then while I enjoy Steadholder’s Protection, as and when you will.” Jeremy’s gaze flicked to Cathy Montaigne and Anton Zilwicki, hovering anxiously outside the circle of rulers. “As I imagine you already assume, Your Grace, a message to Ms Montaigne will reach me sooner rather than later. And as it happens, we’ve had occasion to sift our data rather thoroughly, of late, so I’d be surprised if a chip with much of what you might want couldn’t be couriered to your ambassador tomorrow.” Honor couldn’t see it but she knew that gaze had gone flat again. “With some documentation on one or two persons in your service that we haven’t acted on but someone really should.”

Gustav’s eyes went flat too, and his shoulders tensed. “Ah. I have wondered, since Solecki was exposed. Much as it pains me to say it, if we missed him who else might we have missed? So send that documentation, if you will, mein Herr, and providing it is documentation of your usual high standard please believe that it will indeed be acted on, whatever the names involved. Some things cannot be excused.”

“So they can’t.” Jeremy’s emotions, even in the thin version Honor could sense, were complex, exultation mixing with exasperation and deeper swirls of frustration, but as he turned to a patiently waiting Eloise Pritchard much of it cleared to simple pleasure laced with mischief.

“Madam President.”

“Mr X.” Eloise’s emotions were also a giddy mix. “I don’t believe Haven owes you any apologies, but we do owe you some sincere thanks for your message. And, as I understand it from Kevin and Ginny, for some timely interventions against the late and very unlamented SS Citizen General Durkheim.”

Jeremy smiled mirthlessly. “Ah yes, Citizen General Durkheim. Now there was a man in need of killing, not that I had the pleasure myself.”

An abrupt shiver somehow reminded Honor of the juggling gunman she’d seen in his message, and she was aware of bodyguards tensing, their hands twitching towards holsters — but only twitching, and she had from Nimitz an abrupt understanding of a physical urge to move, to leap, and dance, and laugh, so strong that it was painful to control. Eloise perhaps understood it too, for one hand discreetly signalled Thiessen to relax while the other opened in query.

“Well, the reports were a bit vague. Kevin’s especially, most unlike him. But Ginny’s filled me in a bit on some of the things that got left out.” An odd note came into Eloise’s voice. “If only by way of exonerating Officer Cachat from any untoward acts of slaughter.”

Jeremy grinned. “He’s a very lamb, I assure you. And so terribly close shorn.” He shot a glance at Ginny Usher, who was suppressing a laugh. “You just need to be sure he’s pointed in the right direction, and that you’re somewhere else at the time.” His voice sobered. “And my thanks, rather than ours, for your grace to Ginny. She needed it.”

“As we need her, M’sieu X.”
There were more smiles, but the critical meetings were done, and with everyone at last assembled Honor found herself impatient to get to the real business; yet all courtesy was necessary, and she found she enjoyed walking Jeremy and Isaac through a brisk round of introductions. Caitrin, Willie, and Hamish had known, though it amused Honor that Katie was far smoother, her greeting warm with thanks for Casimir on Mr Hawkwing’s behalf, while Willie all but twitched and Hamish was a bit stiff; most Havenites were notably unfazed, if no less curious to meet a legend, with Shannon openly curious. And Honor enjoyed the whirling calculation visible in the eyes of both Pat Givens, who managed to look professionally envious as well as politically croggled, and Lucien Cortez when Jeremy let a sliver of mischief loose by gravely thanking him for his consistent concern for the freed among RMN officers.

Another interesting meeting, oddly, was with the Ushers. Ginny was an old friend, no pretence being offered about that, and their swift embrace was warm, with a whispered something that made Ginny swallow bright laughter; but beneath a shared and blazing hope of the occasion the relationship between the men felt extremely complex, a wary trust laced with qualified affection and a degree of competition, however Usher’s amusement at Jeremy’s unfamiliar role also came through. And as she was introducing the many ‘cats, all offering true hands, she could feel Jeremy’s burgeoning realisation of what meeting them seriously, as interlocutors, meant. Several offered congratulations to a hunter, some to a jester, others to an elder, and the pressure of their regard wasn’t what he’d anticipated, as he told her with rueful amusement; but his delight in furry tricksters was clear, and she found herself liking as well as respecting him.

She had with difficulty restrained Mac, and dinner, if as exquisite as ever, was distinctly streamlined, kept moving by HSG servitors. Comfort was as important as despatch, but a schedule was followed, though everyone’s banked curiosity about what was to come grew steadily more palpable. Despite the late addition of Gustav she’d kept the Ushers and Cathy Montaigne, as well as Katie, with the rulers’ group at the crossed head of the long table, where Jeremy and Isaac had to be, and after Chien-lu, with the air of a chess-player risking a pawn, asked about views of Web Du Havel she had to do little but listen. After her mentions of him to the idiot newsie and in the Lords, and Ginny’s debate, sales of The Political Value of Sacrifice had rocketed, and Du Havel had notably increased his HD appearances, cheerfully handing interviewers their heads before reattaching them more satisfactorily — clips everyone had seen, even Gustav, so they didn’t lack for lively opinions.

She ate only a single dessert before getting everyone up and across the hall to the simulator room, now clear except for the holoprojector and a large circle of comfortable chairs with interspersed coffee tables, as well as a dozen cheeseboards, splitting the difference between new concentration and continued ease. With everyone seated again and armed with cups and sideplates, bodyguards round walls, and doors very firmly shut, she took a breath and rose. Nimitz had insisted he be on her shoulder, but Sam was sitting with Ariel and Monroe.

“With imperial, royal, presidential, and other permissions, ladies and gentlemen, I’m going to keep honorifics to a minimum. But for all this is technically an informal briefing, make no mistake. We are here as people controlling power, to decide if we are going to use it. We all know what the problem is — I’ll call it Mesa, though that’s only a label — and we all know we would like to do something about it. But thereafter we dither and factionalise, and now we have discovered that is not just our foolish humanity but a calculated strategy by Mesa. And while we’re all still edgy about giving away too much, every navy represented here knows that in the last decade we have between us revolutionised space combat. We shy from the implications, but the navies represented here acting in concert would be far and away the most potent military force in human history, both in firepower and in the ability to apply it as needed.”

She spread her hands.
So we have a shared end and a putative means. In between there are two questions, one that seems to be military but is political, and one that seems to be political but is military. And—that's the hard edge on her voice—“first we have something else, because this is all predicated on taking Mesa as an enemy, so we better have. The Alliance is treating it as one politically and commercially, but saving the Audubon Ballroom, of course, what military steps have any of us taken? None, in defence or offence, which whatever else we may decide has to stop, right now.”

The navy people knew because she’d told them all, weeks back, but others looked baffled, and she could feel the intensity of Jeremy’s and Isaac’s gazes.

“Forgive me, but you all think far too much about raw numbers. Yes, the Mesan Space Navy—or at least, the system-defence forces we know about—is a tiddler next to any of us, even if mercenary ships were added. Does that mean it couldn’t send in waves of missiles, ballistic at high c-fractional velocities, aimed at home systems? And do we really suppose Mesa, of all people, would give a single solitary damn about breaking the Eridani Edict, even if they didn’t have de facto control of the navy that enforces it?” That was clearly not a thought many had had. “Moreover, first-order analysis shows clearly they wouldn’t have to intend planetary bombardment, only not care about misses, because if I was in their shoes, and wondering about how best to put a hole in any plans we were developing, I’d target space facilities—HMSS Vulcan, Weyland, and Hephaestus, the dispersed yards here, Blackbird and Grayson’s orbital farms, Bolthole if I knew where it was, IAN facilities at Potsdam. Drop ships in a long way out, beyond detection, and come in ballistic. The ships could be c-fractional when they launched and even SDM’s could reach 0.7c or more. Would we cope?”

Faces became congealed.

“Exactly. At my nagging insistence, the RMN has a half-squadron of Home Fleet SDs deployed to each R&D station, and the GSN a full squadron at Blackbird, running constant anti-missile watch. There are also extra tugs on close station, to use their oversize wedges as a last-ditch defence. Some spare laser-clusters—of which I’ve taken previous advantage—have been or are being assembled into rows of five on armatures with a couple of drone sensor suites and a targeting AI. And there’s one other thing.”

She briefly explained the metal extraction project, and the millions of ten-ton blocks of metal now in Grayson orbit.

“We had to park them somewhere. But once I thought about the new threat environment I started having them shunted out to Blackbird and arrayed as a curtain about 50 klicks out from the major facilities. Pilots curse me, and the restriction on using wedges does add a few days to production times, but the proximity reduces the number of blocks needed for acceptable coverage. No-one has ever produced a missile-wedge less than five klicks across, and one thing wedges as weak as a missile’s really don’t like is encountering solid material head-on, so a square five-klick interval means no contact nuke or KEW could get through, a seven-klick interval gives better than 90% coverage, and a ten-klick interval about 60%. Stand-off laser-heads would be another story—hence the SDs on missile watch, and the tugs and laser-clusters—but with the tighter intervals there would be some additional protection, if only by attenuation. I’m afraid Manticore and Grayson cannot even now just release the grav tech involved in filters, though I hope and trust that day will come, but a dozen extraction plants are already functioning on Grayson, and Hauptman and Sky Domes freighters will shift megaton loads as swiftly as may be. Additionally, if anyone has a practicable source of appropriate metal ores within viable distance of a vulnerable target, the GSN and Sky Domes are prepared, with the right guarantees, to set up processing on site. And the RMN will similarly make available at need the miniaturised targeting AIs that will fit on armatures but can control multiple laser-clusters, as well as micro-fusion plants to power those clusters. But whatever
we decide tonight about anything else, and however you feel about it all, reconfigure your threat environments to include Mesa, now, above and beyond any rational military attack.”

Rulers had known because naval officers reported upwards, and thought there had been incredulity at her thinking until she’d run a sim showing what she could manage with the known Mesan Navy, action was well underway. But most were shaken and she let it sink in for a second.

“Nor is inaction an answer. Even if we do nothing it doesn’t mean they’ll do nothing, nor that anything they may do will involve agents like Young, Giancola, and Solecki. Remember that Manpower used an assassination squad aimed at Cathy Montaigne and Anton Zilwicki even while Young and Descroix were containing the damage they were doing more silently. Brute force, here in Landing. Now scale it up. And if Protector Benjamin will forgive the analogy, as with Masadans, don’t suppose we’re dealing with people who limit themselves to what we think rational. We face utterly amoral technocrats who in the nature of their trade, without once blinking, commit mass murder daily. Every — last — day — that they still breathe.” She took a breath, feeling Nimitz’s calming touch. “Moreover, given their origins as refusers of the Code, they may also have been modifying themselves, with who knows what effects, so we need to rethink biosecurity too. Fedosei?”

The Beowulfan rose, nodding briskly to rulers but not not wasting more time on formalities.

“Sers. We received from Haven samples of nanites recovered from Giancola’s home safe and labelled with Grosclaude’s genome, with a request for urgent analysis. We have done all we could in the time available, but they are unlike anything we have seen before, and the only thing I can say with certainty is that there were two varieties, one clearly an effector, very probably for muscle action, the other varied parts of a dispersed control architecture. It is the latter which are wholly new, and we do not have sufficient samples to allow more than grim guessing about what they do. The entire package is now on its way to us, and we may be able to infer more when we have all the control nanites. Meantime, Grosclaude’s genome had plainly been used in their design, and assuming the whole is a bioweapon designed to kill the logical interpretation is that the control nanites would under a programmed set of conditions activate the effectors, imposing a specific behaviour. We think there would be quite strict limits to what that behaviour could be — nothing requiring cognition or voluntary action.”

Kevin Usher was nodding. “But pure muscle movement? Putting a pistol to one’s head and firing, say? Or, while piloting a lightflyer, diving and accelerating?”

“So we supposed, Director Usher. If we learn anything more, we will inform you.”

“Thank you, Mr Director. I’d assumed that with these particular samples we were looking at a means of killing that was supposed undetectable, but if they can induce suicide, as by forcing someone to shoot themselves, they could presumably force someone to point a gun elsewhere.”

“Oh yes. And the only useful parameter we can offer is that we think the nanites are designed to be inhaled rather than injected. So we have introduced two new security protocols we recommend to all, first, that any incident in which anyone exposed to a spray or sneezed on by some apologetic person with an allergy be immediately reported, and second, daily blood sampling. But we do not know how long these nanites might take to embed themselves and become next to undetectable, so Honor — Her Grace, I mean — is right biosecurity must be upgraded. Mesa thinks outside our boxes.”

No-one missed the slip, or thought it anything but intentional, and a part of Honor’s mind reflected on just how smart Fedosei was. The effects the revealed depth of her Beowulfan connections might have had worried her, but he’d merely flapped a hand, saying they’d all
understand it when they thought about it, and Beowulf’s record in denouncing the League’s Federal Government, with her mystique and the news they’d be dropping, would take care of the rest.

“Yes it does, Fedosei.” He sat, and Honor formally thanked him. “And we all need to remember what we’ve collectively and individually been missing for decades, if not centuries. Do not suppose that any one of us has stopped missing things, and go right on thinking and looking, hard. But there is also the consideration that the best defence is offence, so we come to the question that seems military but is political. Any navy represented here could readily wipe out the Mesan Space Navy and take control of the high orbitals. But then what?”

Miranda was controlling the holoprojector, and the display Honor needed appeared.

“Mesa. The population isn’t too scattered, and all major governmental centres as well as all transstellar HQs are in Mendel — so far as we know. But our quarrel is only with the 30% of the population who are slave owners, and the other 70% — slaves and descendants of slaves debared from full citizenship, known as ‘seccies’, from ‘second-class’ — would be extremely vulnerable. Moreover, our objectives would critically include taking databases unpurged and decision makers alive, so control of local space and orbitals would be only a first step. And beyond it we simply don’t have the data we need to plan a strike. But the Audubon Ballroom does. Mr X?”

As she sat and Jeremy rose the display zoomed in to a panoramic view of Mendel’s clustered high rises and sprawling slums. His voice was light, but his eyes weren’t.

“Ah. Mendel. Home, sweet home. I haven’t been back in a while myself, you’ll understand, so I should say that the data we have comes from a lot of people over many years. Ballroom and Autentico, mostly — we share what we need. Some was paid for in blood, all in fear and sweat. And it starts with a lie.” Grids of buildings began to be picked out as he spoke. “Manpower’s HQ. Slave vats and crèches. Phenotype conditioning centre — we call it Rape Central.” His voice became whimsical. “Or The Garden, it being where all flowers are gathered.” There were winces, and he reverted to briskness. “Jessyk’s HQ. Belton Conglomerate’s. Other transstellars’, all supposedly independent and competing. Governmental ministries, housing the executive, which supposedly oversees things. There’s no legislature except the General Board, and a very limited judiciary, but extensive civil forces — police, open and secret, civil guard for riot suppression, and a small but well equipped army. Their various barracks and HQs. All true, and all a lie, though it took us a while to realise it. The evidence comes in tranches.”

The first was a huge, scrolling schematic showing memberships of the transstellars’ boards and the General Board over the last four T-centuries, and spiralling patterns of movement between them.

“These are controlled and repeating career-paths not consistent with competing companies, even allowing for gross corruption, and imply a higher level control and command of which both major transstellars and government are tools.” Honor saw Tony Nesbitt nod sharply. “And as you can see in that bilious yellow tracery, those careerists are the ones who have had known high-level contacts with the OFS, on Mesa and around Verge and Shell. There’s a great deal of intricate financial data too, beyond my stars to explain but available to you all — Ms LaFollet has the chips — and in every analysis so far possible what it all adds up to is an unseen but very controlling hand.”

Jeremy’s face became very still, voice flattening

“There’s also an especially charming bunch we’ve only ever picked up rumours about, called the Long Range Planning Board — what we have is also on those chips. It seems to concern itself with an inner core of citizens, the long-range planning in question is genetic, and rumours suggest testing and culling, they call it, of children up to adolescence.” That was new and Honor saw
grimaces that reflected her own. “I mention it because it supports the idea of an inner group practicing experimental modification of genomes.”

Mobility abruptly returned to Jeremy’s face, with something like glee.

“But this you really have to like. Some preamble, if you’ll forgive me, conditions on Mesa not being like those anywhere more civilised. Where slaves can and can’t go, especially in Mendel, is very stringently regulated, as is what they are and are not allowed to do — which is how the seccy population Her Grace mentioned thrives as it does, doing things too dangerous or menial for citizens, but forbidden to slaves. So. About 40 years ago that included an upgrade to traffic monitoring and control systems without bothering to stop traffic, seccies’ safety not being a Mesan concern, of course.” It was said casually, but there were more grimaces. “And as it happens, thanks to a far-sighted predecessor of mine, some taps and trap-doors were added.”

Jeremy’s smile was unreadably complex, the emotions Honor could sense threaded with what she thought was grief as well as a conjuror’s anticipation of a rabbit; and a treecat’s.

“Quite what use she imagined terabytes of traffic data would be I have no idea, but I kiss her long-dead feet because” — the image shifted — “that heap of spaghetti in this splendid display is a map of Mendel’s citizens — has to be, because no-one else can own vehicles or use the citizens’ public transport system — going to work on day shift for the last 39 and some years. And you will notice a small but very prime residential area that might as well be a black hole. No data at all. Not a byte. Does no-one there ever have to go to work, I wonder? Moreover, no-one can find any civil data whatever on what’s there — not the Ballroom, or the Autenticos, who both have agents with access to some restricted as well as public records — so something must be. And in that area, with such secrecy, something that matters a great deal and certainly ought to be shot, as often and soon as possible.” This smile was savage, but the glee immediately returned in force. “But this is the really sweet bit, dug out by the inspired number-crunchers Her Grace sent along when we asked for some help.”

He raised an eyebrow at her. Rulers had known what she’d done, or rather Miranda had arranged, but not everyone, and trust mattered.

“Ex-slaves drawn from GSN, Sky Domes, Harrington Steading and Duchy, and Hauptman Industries staffs. All superior analysts.”

Jeremy grinned. “Very superior. The thing is that because of Mesa’s tax structure — which may be a front but still pays for civil and local governmental services — there are annual public filings for numbers of employees per building, government and corporate, necessarily quite widely distributed and that friends of ours managed to obtain, so those number-crunchers, with much moaning, subtracted b from a … and we see three things clearly.”

And you could, remaining lines glaring.

“Three dense clusters around apparently residential towers in the limited area closed to all non-citizens, including personal slaves, none of which are registered places of work, and where no construction other than the towers is on record, but where many thousand daily journeys unfailingly end.” The image changed without changing. “Night shift shows the same thing, as you can see, so whatever those places are they’re large, underground, secret, and staffed round the clock. We believe they are command and control centres, designated Alpha, Beta, and Gamma, though who knows which might be which?”

Jeremy’s voice flattened again.
“How it might be done militarily I haven’t a clue, but to prevent a bloodbath you will need to neutralise the police, with which we can help, and the civil guard and army, with which we can’t because we don’t have heavy weapons, and to control government and transstellars. And to get the people and data you want, you will need those four places, with whatever the nominal government has.”

He bowed amid the hum of interest, and sat as Honor rose.

“Thank you, Mr X. That is very helpful. And I do have a clue.” There were wry smiles.

“This is not the time or place for detailed military planning, but in outline, with apologies to President Pritchard and her delegation, recall what Admiral White Haven did at Lovat, sending in LACs ballistic, and consider that LACs can tractor a pinnace or three. They also have energy weapons perfect for destroying orbital command and control, as well as any warships with wedges down, and though they would inevitably blow past the planet, pinnaces released inside the hyperlimit and given nullfoam coatings could decelerate fast enough to bleed the rest off in atmosphere. I’ve run sims, and it wouldn’t be much fun for anyone on board, but if we combine LAC resources, and use the best assault troops we each have, it’s feasible to put tens of thousands of boots on the ground within 30 minutes of the Mesans’ first alarm when the pinnaces started braking. And very shortly after that first alarm, they would lose everything in orbit, including satellites, stations, and navy ships. No slaves or seccies are allowed in orbit except in two designated loading-zones, so some pinnaces could use a grazing orbit to brake and come back round for those, but everything else can just be taken out. It would be a more brutal assault than any of us would usually consider against one another, but perfectly legal, and I find myself oddly indifferent to MSN casualties. The capital ships could then drop in right on the hyperlimit for a least-time approach of 82 to 91 minutes, depending on orbital position at the time.”

Honor looked around the ring of intent faces.

“We are bound by the Eridani Edict, of course, not because of the SLN but by our own consciences. But our duty is to slaves and seccies, not Mesa’s citizens, especially those under arms, and ruthlessness on the ground as in space will save many lives. The pinnaces can take out barracks, none of their civil forces are geared up to fight battle armour in divisional strength, and in the window available we can at least begin forced evacuations of those residential towers. Troops may be able to gain access to whatever is underneath them, but if not we will have to use KEWs.” No-one liked it but it was also legal. “In any case, military here becomes wholly political, because having secured Mesa we would face two problems. What do we do with it? and what do we expect the Solarian League would do about it? The first is easy in principle, but fraught. Plainly, we must give it to the freed. The data the Ballroom have supplied is invaluable, but their greater role, besides inhibiting police response, will be to control seccies and newly freed. In the heat, as both Mr Xs and Ginny Usher agree, their tongues will do instantly what nothing else could. And we will need a lot of medical and psychiatric assets in the first wave from the capital ships.” The obvious detail had an odd effect, jerking dazed people beyond incredulity to practicalities. “But what then?”

She opened her hands.

“I have not, of course, been able to check that those I name would be willing, and the form of government needed is very open to debate, but would anyone here object in principle to a free Mesan polity, guaranteeing basic human rights to all, in which Jeremy X was Minister of Justice and W. E. B. Du Havel chief executive of an interim administration charged under our joint authorities to establish a sane system of their choice and hold elections as soon as possible?”

Jeremy, eyes dancing, gave her the most elegant seated bow. “Not me, Your Grace, nor Isaac or L’Ouverture. And I dare say not Web, though you realise we’ll fight like puppies?”
There were more smiles than laughs, but the atmosphere lightened.

“So we do have a military option that should work, and an option for the future of Mesa, or whatever it might be renamed. But what will the Solarian League do? Ser Benton-Ramirez?”

The Beowulfan CEO rose, and like Fedosei ignored formalities beyond a brisk nod to her.

“Your Grace. Let me be blunt. It is our assessment that a military response by the SLN could not be politically prevented, which has caused us a great deal of heart-searching. We all know the League is hopeless — corrupt, democratically paralysed, and ruled by bureaucrats in conjunction with cabals of senior SLN and OFS officers. In theory Beowulf can and will veto any declaration of war against any polity here on this account. In practice SLN ships will move, though it will take them a while. And at that point Beowulf will face a decision to which there can only be one answer. We could not remain in a polity whose military forces were being openly employed to reimpose Manpower’s control of Mesa. The situation with Frontier Fleet and OFS has sickened us for centuries, nausea growing ever worse. This would force us to secede from the League, and as the more senior among you already know the negotiations will include a privy strand securing for us, in that event, membership of your Alliance.”

A lot of people suddenly had very wide eyes.

“It is also our assessment that at least a dozen other Core worlds would initiate referenda on secession, and more could be pushed. Sector Governor Barregos on Smoking Frog is not a predictable man, but we are sure he intends unilateral secession at some point, and estimate the chance of his doing so within a decade at 90%. Action against Mesa might jog his arm, one way or another. But whatever all this does to what passes as the League’s Federal Government, it will not prevent the SLN from arriving at Mesa. And those in command — probably Rajani himself, if he’s taken as much Manpower money as we think — will be angry, desperate, and scared to find themselves so openly challenged and financially jeopardised.”

“Yes, they will.” Miranda brought up the next image as Benton-Ramirez sat and Honor rose again. “Ladies and gentlemen, this is the political question that’s actually military, because what we will have to do is not to defeat the League and seek to manage it — we would fail. And just as with Mesa, our target is not the populace of League members, but the League itself, which when it comes down to it is in practice little more than the SLN and OFS, plus a parasitic command bureaucracy in Old Chicago. So what we would have to do is destroy all three, swiftly and cleanly.” She was getting used to the shock that produced. “And yes, together we can do exactly that. None alone has the force, but jointly it’s straightforward. You are looking at a Scientist-class Solly SD, counting its various mods by far the commonest class in Battle Fleet. I’ve assumed they’ve given it every upgrade GONI knows about, and added a 50% margin on range, armouring, and anti-missile capability. And those are the resulting specs.”

She gave the civilians a moment to read them.

“The naval officers present know the specs of one another’s SDs, to within a few percent, and one SD of any navy represented here could with full magazines take on four of those without breaking sweat, never mind an SD(P). The tech gap we’ve created really is that big. Every officer here knows it, and I have asked every CNO present how many Solly SDs they believe one of their SD(P)s could take on — receiving answers of between five and ten.” Hamish had been more cautious than Tom or Wesley, but he was still shaken by the general state of the RMN he’d inherited from Janacek. “What we haven’t done is really thought through the implications of that for force-levels, because they don’t apply against one another. But if we were all gunning for the SLN, then leaving Home Fleets intact we can put a lot of ships into space, not quite in penny packets but in
small TFs, with high confidence they can account for almost anything hostile they come across, Battle or Frontier Fleet, and have the legs of anything they can’t.”

She held up a hand as people stirred.

“The real trick is going to be forcing surrenders, in mercy and because a steady stream of paroled PoWs, who have seen their ships scuttled, being courteously returned to their homeworlds will begin to destroy the League’s credibility.” That idea reached more than naval minds. “And the more often what they have to say is that one of our SDs — and they don’t yet know the difference between SDs and SD(P)s, remember — took out a squadron of theirs, or better still, a CA took out an SD, which those CNOs all agree could happen, the more profound the shock. But something else comes in here, because you may have been thinking, reasonably, that as we can anticipate the SLN concentrating on Mesa, we would have to concentrate there also.”

The Scientist-class was replaced by a gleaming Manticoran CA.

“Our new Saganami-C class CA, which we are now constructing at top speed in the largest numbers Grayson and Manticore together can manage. As most of you are now aware, besides accommodating dual-drive, tube-launched missiles with a greatly increased yield, the main development is in telemetry. They have a broadside of 20, and are configured to double-stack double broadsides, which means 80 control channels, while at need AuxCon can control 40 of 48 backups, for a salvo of 120. The launch cycle is 17 seconds. So a squadron can put out waves of 960 missiles, all controlled, at 51-second intervals, and assuming an engagement range of 40 plus million klicks, those birds will go in at 0.6c or better. Which is why a squadron of these CAs could cheerfully take on two squadrons of Solly SDs. The only problem is magazine space. And oddly, that problem just became far worse.”

She found the face she wanted down the table, and raised an eyebrow, but Sonja Hemphill, restored to BuWeaps, shook her head.

“Your story to tell, Your Grace.”

“Your baby, Admiral, but as you will. And I must thank Her Majesty for permission to speak of this.”

Elizabeth’s voice was very dry. “As I knew nothing about it myself until a few weeks ago, and the only treaty that really matters in this regard is already signed, objections seemed … tactless, to say the least.”

Honor inclined her head. “I did apologise for the secrecy. In any case, Admiral Hemphill and I haven’t always seen eye to eye, but when it came to podnaughts and CLACs we found ourselves entirely in accord. And about our drone and missile programmes. So when she found herself facing dismissal and heard about Janacek’s proposed budget cuts for R&D, she got discreetly in touch to ask if Sky Domes could rescue one project that had been a complete bear but she rightly thought had to be maintained. So did that project’s team, to a woman, and before Sonja left they transferred to facilities in the Hauptman Yard that are maximally secure. Officially, the personnel were loaned to the GSN, taking them off Janacek’s radar, and rather less officially I assigned them to the Protector’s Own while Sky Domes covered the budget. And a while later they managed to do something very clever. It’s called Apollo, and it has fearsome implications.”

A new schematic appeared, and Honor saw Shannon Foraker straighten, others not far behind.

“As you see, the number of missiles in this pod has dropped to nine, an apparent
disadvantage, though all are triple-drive. But Apollo is the larger, central missile, and the bear was miniaturising an FTL link that will fit, with an AI big enough to control the other eight. There’s no warhead.” Naval jaws dropped and faces froze. “Which means, ladies and gentlemen, that a single Saganami-C armed with this could not control only 120 missiles. It could control 960, and a squadron could put out salvos of 7,680 effectives. The problem is, of course, that they aren’t podlayers, and even if they were would shoot themselves dry far too quickly. And the answer is a collier adapted to do nothing but store and launch pods.” Another schematic appeared as officers gaped. “At just over nine megatons it slows the squadron down, of course, and is wholly vulnerable to anything at all with teeth that gets into range. But nothing should, because with 20 six-pod launchers and a recycle of 14 seconds, the squadron can fire and control nearly a thousand salvos of 7,680 ship-killers at 56-second intervals. And should its rear-admiral have been sensible enough to deploy pods in advance, as one would expect when, say, guarding a planet, intervals of ten or 12 seconds, depending on how sharp his firecrews are. And while I’ll stay with the Saganami-Cs for now, this system can readily be extended. We can’t retrofit existing ships with the necessary FTL links, but we wouldn’t need to — just equip them with a pair of deployable drones, like tethered decoys, that do have the FTL links and feed into their existing light-speed channels. Those are called Keyhole, and we’re building them already, also in numbers. A Medusa-class SD(P) has more than 350 channels, using its redundancy from AuxCon, and one ship with two colliers could put out salvos of 2,200 at 34-second intervals.”

“That hexapuma is so dead.” Foraker was staring at the schematic, and Honor thought she had probably quite forgotten who was present, though Havenites were smiling. “What’s the yield on the ship-killers, sir?”

“50 megaton range.”

“Shit!” It was only breathed but Honor had to swallow a laugh. “And that horrendous ECM of yours, the jammers and multipliers, fit the pod?”

“Oh yes. Dazzlers and Dragon’s Teeth, by the way. I thought one of each per pod, and six killers.”

“Yes. And with that yield and closing speed, 150 hits will wreck anything, so a Saganami-C squadron could have 38 dead SD targets per salvo.”

“Optimist.” Foraker looked round, professional amusement lighting her narrow face. “Sonja and I allowed 200 killers per SD for 28 targets per salvo, with the odd 160 weakening a twenty-ninth. Admiral Hemphill?”

The sim they’d run together appeared and Sonja rose, her voice clipped.

“The parameters were artificial, for simplicity, and only a handful of people yet have any command experience in Saganami-C’s, while none have any with Apollo outside sims. But the hyperlimit Rear Admiral McKeon was asked to defend is that of Mesa, and the specs of all SLN ships are the boosted ones Her Grace mentioned. Other SD classes were included, in the sort of proportions the SLN might manage, and given similar boosts, which include, I remind you, armouring and anti-missile capacity. In one major respect, though, what you will see is improbable, because Admiral McKeon’s orders were to destroy anything that crossed the hyperlimit, and the SLN were programmed to keep coming without regard for losses. So I would call it a worst-case proof of concept.”

So would Honor, though she treasured the look on Alistair’s face when a solid block of exactly 1,000 Solly SDs dropped onto his plot only a few light seconds outside the hyperlimit. He already had Hermes buoys deployed, so he did get in a formal warning that any ship crossing it
would be fired on, but received only a haughty Solly demand to surrender his forces and stolen planet or be annihilated. His bemused mutter of ‘Stolen planet?’ was also a memory to keep warm.

The smooth precision of his fire crews was equally pleasing, and its results infinitely terrible. The Sollies had a awful lot of ships, but they also had more than 377 million klicks to come, and she had placed no restrictions on what Alistair could do. His waves of MDMs were using two full boost-stages at 48,000g before going ballistic, which meant their terminal attack velocity was over 0.8c, and though it took the first wave 23 minutes to reach the incoming Sollies they didn’t stop a single one. With 200 killers targeting each ship the rate of absolute destruction was close to 100%, with the rest hulked, and with salvos every 12 seconds 140 SDs were dying each minute. Nor were there very many 140s in 1,000 — far fewer than the number of minutes needed to cross the radius of the hyperlimit of a G2 star like Mesa’s, and the last full salvo went in with the last untouched SDs still more than 100 million clicks away. The sim froze, and Honor heard a fervent Gruß Gott! from Gustav, but Sonja’s voice was bone dry.

“I note that 84% of the SDs targeted by only 160 killers were destroyed or hulked, and all showed significant damage, so Admiral Foraker is right that we could drop to 150 per target, which would speed the destruction. And I agree entirely with Her Grace’s remarks about forcing surrender, because the butcher’s bill for that would have been well over six million, crew-heavy as the SLN is. My own assumption is that destruction of 20% of the force would have compelled surrender of the rest, and Admiral McKeon’s real problem at this point would be that with total personnel of less than 4,000 he would have taken somewhere around five million prisoners.”

Sonja was still shading crew numbers — with eight Sagami-Cs Alastair’s command would have been under 3,000 — but Honor saw Foraker’s and Chien-Lu’s eyes narrow, and rose yet again.

“So all those pinnaces and LACs will be needed for more than one purpose, and I do not, of course, propose leaving no capital ships. But I do seriously propose using the CAS and Apollo like that when whatever force the SLN puts together comes over the Mesan hyperwall, capturing their own logs of it, along with however many officers and crew who will see their surrendered SDs scuttled, except for those we give to the new Mesan government, before being paroled and returned to their home worlds. And the minute we reach that point, or face any clear Solarian Act of War against our Alliance, our real strength can be used elsewhere.”

The display changed once more, to a general schematic of the whole Solarian sphere, Core to Verge, dotted with wormholes and termini, markers for known SLN strength by sectors, OFS hubs, and — courtesy of the Ballroom — major locations of slave labour.

“All wormhole termini would be taken and closed to all League shipping — Manticore has had plans in place for that for more than a decade now, since we forced them into the arms embargo and they said all sorts of threatening things. Any and every SLN warship encountered would be destroyed or taken and scuttled, PoWs being paroled and sent in merchies and liners to home worlds. And once those OFS hubs are taken, Old Chicago would find its cashflow dried up. Also” — six more markers appeared, deep in the Core — “we would need first-wave strikes against the SLN reserves other than Terra itself. There would almost certainly be SLN casualties, but there shouldn’t be any civilian ones unless someone’s very stupid. And though God knows those ships are militarily irrelevant, sight of their destruction — and we would of course have Solly media along throughout — would be a hammerblow. It isn’t only we who think of the SLN as having 11,000 capital ships. The Sollies think of themselves as having that number, and their public would not be at all happy to learn that, at a conservative estimate, 80+% have been destroyed in less than a month. And the figures would keep coming as we whittled Battle and Frontier Fleets down as fast as we could find them. There are, of course, infinite permutations in what local commanders might try to do, especially given the tensions between the fleets. Most wouldn’t matter much, but for strategic rather
than tactical reasons we would need to prevent them from concentrating on Terra. Concentrations anywhere else would just be handier targets, but we would not want their Home Fleet around Mars and Hyperion One reinforced. Let them waste their effort trying to unmothball the reserve at Terra, and somewhere between six and ten months after any SLN strike at Mesa we would be in a position to concentrate on Terra ourselves, in sufficient force to take out their Home Fleet, with Hyperion One, decant crews, scuttle the whole lot ever so brightly in the Old Chicago night sky, and very, very gently park as many capital ships as we fancy in Terran orbit.”

Jeremy’s smile was beatific and she deepened her voice.

“No battle plan survives contact with the enemy, of course, and we would take casualties. But only through very ill chance and people screwing up. We can, acting together, take Mesa with a reasonable hope of getting data or people who will cause severe confusion; and we can both defeat any SLN response, and once a state of war with the League obtains annihilate both its fleets. Then it would be back to politics, alas, with matters of justice to pursue. But with Beowulf and others seceding, Shell and Verge free of the OFS to hold referenda on what they want, it should be eminently possible to enforce abolition of the League and independent re-emergence of its constituent polities, each individually or in small federations a signatory to a mutual defence pact with the Alliance obliging them to enforce the Cherwell Convention with absolute rigour.” She could feel her analysis biting. “With no penalties of any kind enforced against polities for complicity in the League’s Act of War, only against the League itself, which would by that point be little more than a number of empty buildings in Old Chicago, such a treaty would be far and away the route of least resistance. I dare say we’d be finding scattered lighter SLN units that manage to hide out for a few years — the Verge is a very large volume — but otherwise, ladies and gentlemen, that would be that. So the question is after all straightforward, if not simple. We can, if we all cooperate for three to five years — we have to build enough Apollo missiles and get new construction in service — take down both Mesa and the League, and eliminate the commercial slavery they represent. So are we going to?”

She looked around the circle, seeing everything from glazed shock to deep, snarling desire.

“I’ll add three things. One is that the financial cost, however stupendous, is no greater than what every one of us is now budgeting in naval construction and salaries. It just won’t have the butcher’s bills attached, on our own side at least. The second is something Admiral Yu pointed out, that there would be a resonant justice in it, above and beyond intrinsic virtue, however measured. Even a healing, though that sounds pretentious. Mesa bears a primary responsibility for successive conflicts that have cost us all dearly. But one thing our wars have given us is overwhelming technical superiority, a series of breakthroughs honed into effective doctrine. We have only a brief opportunity to use it — such a thing cannot in its nature last. And I agree with Alfredo that where the Republic and the Alliance are concerned, our dead — who died as one another’s enemies, at one another’s hands — can be united in this, as we still living would be. It’s partly why I raised the memorial issue as I did. The third thing is from Nimitz.”

He had been utterly still on her shoulder whenever she was standing, but now braced hand-feet and began to sign. She let Miranda translate.

<The People cannot judge for ourselves if this is a good hunt, but we trust Dances on Clouds, and what we do understand we approve. Enemies who threaten are always best dead, and Dances on Clouds says she believes this is the best way to reduce the risk of more fighting, so our world will be as safe as life can be. And while we cannot know how we may help, we will do whatever we are asked that we can. We also ask that any who oppose this hunt explain to us in terms we can understand why they do so.>
Honor heard Andrew behind her mutter *Nimitz X*, and couldn’t honestly disagree.

The discussions, unsurprisingly, went on for a long time, and Miranda was kept busy replaying things on demand, but filtering though her own perceptions, and those of Stinker X and Sam (still both pondering what Jeremy’s treecat name should be), Honor knew it was more grasping the whole idea than any reasoned objecting. Beth and Benjamin both wanted their best shot at Mesa, and though scared of the League accepted that the military calculus made it all possible. The Republic had in effect been committed for weeks to some joint action, and Tom (who had known) was with Shannon and Lester Tourville underlining the pure naval supremacy at the heart of it. So were Sonja, Hamish, and other Space Lords (with a side discussion of admiring if slightly scandalised interest in how Sonja had saved the Apollo programme). Nesbitt and Willie were already using a mini-comp to crunch the Ballroom’s financial data, with the analyses Anton Zilwicki and the loaner team had provided, and making predatory exclamations, while Beowulfans took advantage of the chance to talk to Jeremy and Isaac openly, discussion skewing towards what a Free Interim Government of Mesa would need.

The Erewhonese were interesting. Walter had known in outline, Havlicek hadn’t, and both wanted a guarantee that the Congo wormhole would not be left in anyone’s rear — but invited to assume that, shifted into a dialect, perhaps once a form of Italian, no-one else understood. From what little Honor could tell they weren’t arguing so much as discussing philosophy, and it ended in shrugs before Walter gave her an appraising look.

“RMN, GSN, and RN are doing this anyway, aren’t they, Honor? Whatever we or Emperor Gustav decide?”

“I believe so, Walter. Those fleets would be sufficient, though timescale would extend. But it would be easier with everyone on board, and your units would be invaluable.”

“You will lead this?”

“If I’m asked.”

He waved that away. “Who else? The bottom line, Alexandra, is they’re going to try. If they fail, we’re cooked, long-term, no matter what. And if they succeed without us, we’re sidelined. So it’s a simple decision, whatever the grotesque complications, and has style enough even for us.”

If he meant anything beyond strategic efficiency, Honor wasn’t sure what, but Havlicek seemed to agree, as did a laughing Jeremy, sliding across to join in. How well the Ballroom and Erewhonese seemed to understand one another was an interesting thread, and she suspected it had to do with being honest with oneself. In Ginny it came out as a flirtatiousness not — God help her — unlike her mother’s, though directed at women as readily as men, but between Jeremy and Walter it was a more romantic but coldly violent mutual approval she couldn’t pretend she didn’t understand.

And then there was Gustav, who had spoken rapid German with Chien-Lu for some while, before falling silent. What he was thinking she hadn’t a clue, but his emotions were at once wild and fiercely contained, desire and caution at extreme odds. She saw yet another rerun of the sim catch his attention, then found him looking directly at her, eyes unreadable.
“Did Admiral Yu tell you I was a theist, Your Grace?”

“He did, Your Grace.”

“You are also, I understand, as Elizabeth and Benjamin are.”

“Certainly. Though I confess that as one raised Third Interstellar but most often worshipping with Father Church, I have very confused notions of doctrine.”

His smile was warm. “I would imagine so, but I am no different. Most of my predecessors were atheists, and We have neither an established church nor any equivalent of Elizabeth’s fine cathedral, which I quietly visited earlier today.” His look was inward. “I find I prefer reformed Protestant to reformed Catholic services, but both flourish among Our subjects, as does Buddhism of a sort. Yet as with this extraordinary plan, detail matters less than viable principle, and I find it is my conversation with Admiral Yu that comes back to me. There is a tide …?”

“In the affairs of men. Yes, he likes that one. It does fit well.”

“It does. But I was thinking, there is also a tide in the affairs of God, whatever one supposes the exact state of his, her, or its dispensation. And I cannot but believe it at its flood, just now. But there is Silesia, dear to my heart. Must it wait entirely?”

Honor had seen that one coming. “Not in the least. I believe in live-fire exercises, and Silesia’s always been the RMN’s training-ground, as much as the IAN’s. A joint sweep through the Confederacy would be an option to weld Grand Alliance fleets together.” Her eyes narrowed. “Am I right to think you intend to offer SN formations a choice between alliance plus independence as planetary defence forces or destruction plus annexation?”

“Yes. Chien-lu said you would see it. The working two-thirds of the SN and Confederation are as sick to death of the rest as Beowulf is sick of the League. If I have no Manticoran or Havenite opposition, I will roll up Silesia like a carpet, annexing and signing mutual defence treaties with a score of new independents.” He shook his head, looking rueful. “And I thought in my pride I was thinking big-time!”

Stinker was the first to bleek laughter but when he did they were both lost, and an assiduous Mac presenting them with handkerchiefs on a silver tray didn’t help at all.
Epilogue -- Five Scenes in the Lives of Other People

1. Albrecht Detweiler

Mendel, May 1920 PD

As self-appointed genetic supremo of the galaxy, Albrecht Detweiler was not having a good year, for the third year in a row, and did not appreciate the experience one bit. Worse, he still did not really understand how so much could have gone so wrong with all his very careful plans, and so blindingly fast.

It was partly, of course, that information flow was as crimped as everything else was fast becoming. The exclusion of all Mesan ships from the Manticore Junction and much sharpened eyes cast on all non-Alliance traffic had bitten deep; as, however incidentally, had the purges of Manpower clients on Manticore, quite apart from the loss of agents there and elsewhere. The League had protested itself black and blue at such ‘extreme and unjustified commercial warfare’, with blustering threats, but found itself entirely unheeded, so even with a hundred work-arounds and false-flaggings the flow of data and control loops for remaining agents anywhere useful had been grossly disrupted. But it was also that what had demonstrably happened defied rational explanation in the first place. Once Saint-Just had been killed he’d never counted on getting Manticore and Haven back to full-out war, though for a while it had looked as if it would happen, but nothing beyond a sullen armistice had been projected to happen for decades yet, when it would be irrelevant. And the chance of immediate and active alliance had been so tiny not even the Mesan Alignment’s wilder contingency planning had factored it in.

All that was bad enough, and a major nuisance, but it still shouldn’t have become the rolling disaster it had. A lot of that was down to the sanctimonious Beowulfans, who got Manticoran news in close to real time and from the first of Harrington’s explosive public statements had made sure League publics across the Core had a new favourite HD series. Even that should only have been another bloody historical costume drama, but Beowulfan ambassadors and oddly expert commentators on Manticore had popped up everywhere to hammer home its reality and — worse — insist on the probability of what was being said and implied about Manpower and Mesa generally. The figures they had on OFS budgets and payments were uncomfortably accurate, and though everyone knew Beowulfans had fanatical ideas about Mesa, they did keep making sense.

And that sense had been underlined a few months later by rolling announcements, from Manticore and allies, including — ludicrously — Haven and the Anderman Empire, that in return for a laying down of arms they were decriminalising the Ballroom and recognising it as a legitimate representative of all still in slavery. There had been shock and apoplexy across the Core, and the League’s condemnation had been as savage a statement as it had ever issued, but there was also the undeniable fact, absorbed by an inconvenient number of people, that a longstanding galactic consensus had been shattered by a swathe of very different polities, whose governments all clearly thought they were doing the right thing and demonstrably had popular support. That alone was upsetting almost every Alignment plan there was, and the long, courteous, and funny statement by
Jeremy X and L’Ouverture that had followed had done very odd and unwelcome things to figures that had been stable and predictable for centuries. Nor were some handy assassinations a viable option, much as they appealed, even if agents could have been contracted, for the few reports he had indicated clearly that the nanotech method was known, presumably through that idiot Giancola, and that anyone getting remotely close to any of the targets had to run a gamut of checks and tests, including repeated declarations before the never sufficiently damned treecats, serving as lie-detectors.

He had of necessity become crossly resigned to the loss of Verdant Vista, but had not anticipated that the new Grand Alliance force that took it would have quite so many embedded Solly reporters beside their own PR machines. The Peep SS people they’d captured when they took out the mercenary guard squadron had come as a severe shock to a League public used to swallowing Saint-Just’s propaganda, and even he had to admit that conditions on Verdant Vista were terrible — which was why you used disposable slaves in the first place, of course, not that most would admit that basic and incontrovertible logic. Nevertheless, it had been a PR disaster for Manpower, strengthening belief in the general accusation, and quite apart from the very burdensome costs of exclusion from the Junction, every Mesan transstellar had found itself under severe pressure on most Core worlds.

The one good thing in the whole clusterfuck was that once the so-called Grand Alliance had knocked off Verdant Vista, and wasted a drone or three through its wormhole that MAN forces took care of, they’d hung up on it. The freed slaves had bizarrely opted for a monarchy, and become the next new HD favourite across the Core. Some was just lunacy rolling along — like the choice of Zilwicki’s adopted daughter, not even a slave, as their queen, which had, he swore, on its own jacked viewing figures by an order of magnitude — but someone had made smart moves, including renaming the place as Torch. And the whole thing made a perfect platform for reality HD shows about the newly freed and their medical and psychiatric needs — another data stream that was doing nasty things to long-term stable numbers. It couldn’t last indefinitely, but while it did it was uncomfortable. More positively, one price of the absurd alliance had become plain when their fleet had gone from Verdant Vista to Silesia, which was welcome to it and would keep it occupied long enough to let him salvage everything that really mattered.

Collectively, though, the whole thing had pushed him into a serious misjudgement, however understandable, in advancing Oyster Bay against the advice of several clone-sons. They’d agreed necessity but argued for a trial strike before a wider commitment; he’d opted for a chance of maximal damage, and been truly shocked by comprehensive failure. Not a single missile had found its target, despite every TF achieving a surprise launch, and the few ships that had returned had logs showing a range of co-ordinated defences that unequivocally said the attempt had been anticipated. A recent report from Grayson had tentatively answered the question of where the heavy metal block-screens had come from, but that was nothing beside the capture, intact, of streak and spider drives.

It shouldn’t have been possible, but at both Manticore A and B, and at Yeltsin’s Star, someone had flashed orders within seconds of the TFs launching, and Home Fleets with hundreds of other assets had responded instantaneously. Besides waves of jamming so powerful Colin had flatly said whatever had produced them had to have their own microfusion plants, preventing any refinement of missile aims, hundreds of predeployed missile-pods had launched, despite having nothing but an extrapolation to aim at. Misses had been numerous but kills had been brutal, and they had crippled without destroying seven ships; worse still, five had not managed to scuttle before being boarded, and hard evidence of two unknown drive systems, confirmed over the following months by imported techs and endlessly reported by Solly media, had gone a long way towards confirming Mantie arguments about facing an enemy of unknown capacities that could only be Manpower.

Captured crew had also been shown very rightly lying their heads off — and being consistently called on it by treecats; under which pressure a disgraceful amount of truth had
emerged, even if believing it was another matter. The net result was that he’d had to spend a huge amount of time soothing a jittery Alignment council, and more working with every clone-son he had on containment, deflection, rebuttal, and distraction, none of which had stopped him making a cold-eyed assessment of where all this had to be going, and initiating preparations for evacuation through the secret wormhole to the Darius System. Alignment security came first, always, and though this particular wretched necessity had not been adequately foreseen in little more than a month they would be gone from Mesa, leaving a bloody puzzle that would give any number of people a huge headache. It set things back by decades, and was extremely irritating.

With the hours he was working he was sleeping heavily, especially in the first hour or two, and the speckle of lights in the night sky didn’t wake him despite an open window. Nearly 20 minutes later, his bedside com did, and a grim-faced and slightly wild-eyed Colin looked out at him from Alpha control.

“21 minutes ago tracking detected a shower of small craft abruptly on radar. 19 minutes ago everything in orbit went dead — ships, satellites, stations, the lot. So what’s happening up there I don’t know, but there’s trouble on planet too — multiple reports of attacks on police. With small craft it might only be Ballroom, but with MN ships taken out we have to reckon it’s a full attack.”

“Shit!” His mind churned, cutting losses, reckoning necessities. “Whatever it is, Colin, I need an hour. Do what you can. Rendezvous Zeta when possible.”

Logey with tiredness it took him precious minutes to access the command level on the master terminal, for any error would lock the system down, and more to transfer the most precious data to the portable store, wiping it behind him. Flaring lights and thundering booms told him there were indeed incoming troops, and he sighed relief as he started to enter the long, deliberately complex and multiply guarded sequence that would purge everything and start an autodestruct countdown for all control centres. But he was barely a quarter of the way through it when a fusillade of far sharper cracks from outside brought a rush of bitter-smelling gas through the window, and he stared with pure horror at the receding screen and his own paralysed hands before unconsciousness claimed him.

* 

The armoured Grayson Space Dog who crashed throught the window eight minutes later took a brief look at the slumped body and a longer one at the pulsing comscreen before buzzing his captain. Less than a minute later a quite different, growling voice he had come to know well asked him to focus on the screen, swore, and issued sharp instructions. The unconscious Mesan’s hand was set to a palm-scanner, and used to answer a long set of prompts, and the Space Dog sighed relief as the autodestruct programmes obediently went back to sleep. The voice growled again.

“Get that Mesan fully restrained before he wakes — if he could authorise that lot he’s someone we need to be talking to. And grab hold of that portable data store, will you, laddie? It’s the very sort of thing Her Grace is wanting.”

2. Rajampet Kaushal Rajani
The CNO of the SLN had also been having an awful year, for the third year in a row, and if it wasn’t really a CNO’s job to lead a fleet, even the biggest and most powerful ever assembled, Rajani didn’t care in the least. Nothing would have stopped him from the pleasure of finally stomping on the neobarbs as they so richly deserved, and once he’d done so at Mesa he had every intention of doing so again in their Home Systems. All of them. No-one, but no-one, got away with the kind of crap they’d pulled this time, and they were going down.

It should have been done three years ago, when the neobarbs had the unbelievable gall to close their bloody Junction to Mesan ships, but Kolokoltsov and the other mandarins had dithered. Of course Mesa wasn’t a League member — how could it be, when the idiots who’d been ruling the League then had signed up to the Cherwell Convention? — but it had always been understood that it had SLN protection, and its transstellars’ merchie fleets certainly did. Yet the neobarbs’ seizure of thousands of vessels had gone unanswered, because Kolokoltsov had been sure they’d back down once they’d made their point, whatever it was, and because their ostentatious repatriation via Terra of the merchies’ crews, with documented exception of those caught with slaves or contraband goods and weapons, had made a public splash. Even the complete shock of the neobarbs’ recognition of the Ballroom had gone unanswered, Kolokoltsov pointing out that the League could hardly go after three major multi-system neobarb nations for a domestic policy decision. And by then cashflow had been almost restored to what it ought to be, albeit with a bigger deficit to manage from the disruption of wormhole traffic, while the graphic reports from newly conquered Verdant Vista had made — said the bloody mandarins — any intervention in Mesa’s defence ‘politically unsustainable’.

And look where that had got them! Even Kolokoltsov had been white when news of the Mesan strike had come in. The orders to every Battle Fleet detachment in the nearer Core to assemble had gone out even before the ghastly stream of data started coming in from the traitorous reporters the neobarbs had managed to tote along. The sheer, irresponsible ruthlessness of the attack had been bad enough, with MSN ships destroyed in orbit and police and army barracks blown apart without warning. They’d even threatened to use KEWs, for fuck’s sake, on a city like Mendel! Shooting Manpower techs out of hand was only to be expected with Ballroom lunatics involved, but the swiftness of summary trials and the mass execution that had followed had been beyond words — except the newsies had found some, and had Manpower’s own documentation of exactly what phenotype technicians had done. Against that the incineration of those techs and a few thousand of their bosses crammed aboard a Manpower slaveship when its fusion plant was let go had somehow been made to seem acceptable.

What had been far worse, though, was who wasn’t being put on show, dead or alive, for the most senior board-members of Manpower and Jessyk he’d always dealt with were nowhere to be seen, though their captures had been announced. But what they’d been saying began to become horribly clear as both the so-called Grand Alliance and their puppet Ballroom government had started to release centuries of data about exactly how what they called the Mesan Alignment had used the transstellars in co-operation with the SLN and OFS to exploit the Verge and Shell. They’d started with old stuff, naming no-one living, but week by week the story had advanced, always casting everything in the worst possible light, and the idiot public had been lapping it up, speculating about the contents of more current data. And Kolokoltsov knew as well as he that if the neobarbs did have it, which they must, its release could not be allowed. His concentration of SDs could not be concealed, and more than the Beowulfans had begun screaming, but there was no more time to waste.

Even his own people had been gibbering. The crap pouring through from Manticore had
implicitly asserted naval superiority over the SLN, with alphabet gibberish about new classes of warships and claims of FTL com capacity. That had to be nonsense. People had been trying for 2,000 years and no-one had ever come up with anything that worked at all, but various cowardly shits had been worried about the new classes — SDs adapted to lay pods, for fuck’s sake, and ships of SD tonnage for carrying LACs.

He was willing to concede the Manties were quite sharp for neobarbs. The imagery from Mesa had shown a lot of very accurate if completely reckless piloting of small craft, and the ground assault had been as clinical as it was criminal, while the LACs they’d gone back to building were clearly fast and armed with a very heavy energy weapon as well as oddly effective missiles. But LACs were still only LACs, of not the slightest use against SDs. It was however true that if these pod-layers could put out pods of five or six missiles — probably bigger and longer ranged than anything tube-launched — they would be able to throw large salvoes. Records from Verdant Vista when an armada of their capital ships had taken out those ugly Havenite SDs did seem to suggest they had a missile range a good 10% greater than his own, and the yield meant they had to be big bastards, which coupled with the range advantage would mean he’d have to take some fire before he could bring the hammer down. But even the worst screamers agreed that to carry and launch pods in those kind of numbers the new classes had to have sacrificed so much internal armour and redundancy they’d be far too vulnerable to last beyond initial engagements.

But — he had to smile — all the credulous worry had meant he could justify the enormous force he’d assembled as proper precautions given the reports of neobarb developments in design. 50 squadrons from Home Fleet had been joined by more than 100 from other Core Sector commands; and nearly another 50 had met them en route. It was a sledgehammer to crack a nut, but it wouldn’t be when the Alliance force at Mesa was debris and he moved on to the Manticore system itself. And if it had stuck in his craw to pretend caution, the kick of knowing that he controlled the greatest fleet ever seen and would order salvoes of more than 15,000 missiles was seriously worth it.

Not that the lazy fuckers could keep station worth a damn, and the whole journey in hyper had been ragged. But they could by God fire well enough, and that was all that mattered. He had reluctantly agreed that coming back into N-space a full 20 light-minutes outside the hyperlimit was a sensible margin. Even an SD couldn’t argue with the gravity well of a G2 star. And it meant they could make a soft translation — no point in being nauseated by crashing down through the bands, however satisfying it was to think of the effect on the neobarbs as their plots went wild. More importantly, that mark was only minutes away, and he was really looking forward to the conversations he’d be having in another few hours with some brown-trousered neobarb piker. With any luck it would be Harrington herself.

With every admiral he trusted allocated to oversize group commands he had only a small personal staff with him. His Flag Captain, Carrow Fleurmat, was no-one he knew but came recommended, and the choice of the SLNS Gregor Mendel was irresistible when Mendel was his destination. And the man seemed competent enough, taking on the surprising demands of organising more than 1,300 SDs into one hell of a wall of battle with some gusto, once he’d got over being flabbergasted at the opportunity. He also eased them down through the bands well enough, but N-space brought a surprise, for when the computers reported in the lead squadrons were only two light-minutes short of the hyperlimit, and even while Rajani mentally cursed the astrogator he remembered the uses he’d have for this bridge log and put on a wide smile.

“Wonderful precision, Captain. Others seem to have straggled a bit, I see. Launch the drones but let’s get in proper battle order before we head on in.”

“Aye aye, sir.”
Ranks and ranks of gleaming SDs slowly moved into proper array, and in half-an-hour were almost as they should be when Fleurmat acquired a very peculiar look.

“We have a com request from the neobarbs, sir, asking for you by name.”

“We do, do we? It’s not surprising that they’re shitting themselves already.”

“Ah, the source of their request is very close, sir, but we can’t seem to find it. And they named the ship as well as you.”

“What?” He thought it through. “It was no secret this was my flagship. Probably some damn reporter scooting ahead of us. Do we have a neobarb name?”

“The request was from Grand Fleet Admiral Harrington, sir. But sir, we’re 23 light minutes out and it’s only 31 since we came out of hyper. So they really do have FTL coms. And the drones haven’t yet seen anything, though they’re more than half-way in, but gravitics are indicating only a hundred or so ships in orbit, with 12 about 50 million klicks out, and nothing anywhere near enough to be talking to us like this. I don’t like the implications at all.”

He was trying to think it through, balking at the notion that neobarbs could have cracked FTL, when Fleurmat’s coms officer reported. “Request’s being repeated, sir, with a general band warning that any ship crossing the hyperlimit will be engaged and destroyed.”

Fury overwhelmed him. “A warning! Put Grand Panjandrum or whatever Harrington on right now.”

The face that appeared on his com screen was familiar, and scorn joined fury as he saw the comically mismatched tabs on the shoulders of her skinsuit, no doubt pandering to all the proud neobarb navies she’d wound up commanding — until his eyes came back to her face, and he met her cold, infinitely arrogant gaze. It was oddly unsettling, and so was the green-eyed animal on her shoulder. Which was also skinsuited. He blinked. And her voice flayed.

“CNO Rajani. You haven’t yet bothered to introduce yourself, but I assume from your bumbling attempts to form a wall of battle with those obsolete ships that you intend to offer combat. Be aware first, that any SLN ship crossing the hyperlimit will be engaged and destroyed by the Planetary Defence Task Force, and second, that if any SLN ship so forces us to engage it will be taken as an Act of War by the Solarian League against every star nation in the Grand Alliance.”

He could almost feel his eyes popping. Clearly, the mad had no limits and just didn’t see it coming. But this was going to be an even more useful record than he’d anticipated, and a more satisfying one. The phrases formed in his mind.

“So noted, Grand Admiral Harrington, or whatever it is you’re calling yourself. But you have perhaps failed to notice that I have well over 1,300 SDs with me, while even someone as unobservant as you can’t have failed to notice that you and your ragbag forces assailed a sovereign planet and murdered thousands of its citizens. An act, Admiral, of terrorism as well as war, for which the bill is now falling due. If, and only if, you promptly surrender all forces, including the Ballroom terrorists you’ve chosen to associate with, I’ll guarantee fair trials. And if you fire a single shot against the SLN, you and the motley star nations you represent will find out what going to war really means. Captain Fleurmat, get us underway at maximum acceleration, if you please.”

He was settling back, one eye on the plot as the gorgeous armada of his forces began to move in, the other impatient for the sight of her face when his words reached her, when she was speaking again.
“An act of war against whom, CNO Rajani? Your grasp of law seems very shaky. Mesa was not a member of the League, and 47 League polities have made public their veto of any military action in its support. On what legal basis do you claim to be acting?”

Amid the shock twisting in his belly the thought occurred that taking the neobarbs’ FTL away from them would add a tremendous bonus. And while law was irrelevant when you had power there did need to be a cover for this record.

“League citizens died in your murderous attack, Admiral, made without any declaration of hostilities, and the SLN cannot allow neobarbarians to murder its citizens with impunity.”

“Seven League citizens died, CNO Rajani, all employees of Manpower killed by slaves they had abused. Nearly 200 SDs per citizen seems somewhat excessive, especially when the complaint sent by the League has received a full diplomatic reply to which no answer has been made. And you lie. Manticore and Grayson informed Mesa that a state of war was presumed more than three years ago, and the Grand Alliance made a formal declaration of war before the attack on Verdant Vista. It’s hardly our fault the Mesans were arrogant enough to suppose we didn’t mean it. But as you are now less than 15 light seconds from committing an Act of War yourself, we have a more pressing problem than your threadbare attempt to give yourself a legal figleaf. Open the general channel, please, Abigail.”

Drawing breath to stamp on her astounding presumption, his mind spun. Why in space did she intend to speak on a general channel?

“CNO Rajani, I’m perfectly aware of the 1,368 SDs you have, and we finished confirming classes and names 15 minutes ago. My drones can read the names on your hull-plating, not that you have the least idea they’re there, and we’re speaking FTL by the way, in case you hadn’t noticed, from a drone less than ten k-klicks from your flag bridge. Which you can’t see either, because your equipment is as obsolete as your assessment of your threat environment. So I repeat, you’re now less than 15 light seconds from starting a war that you will lose. And as we will want you personally alive, both for committing an Act of War and to answer for the data about your perverted and murderous habits with children, fully recorded in Manpower’s confidential files, it will be other SLN personnel who will be dying because of your corrupt and desperate stupidity. Specifically, the ships targeted in the first salvo will be the 140 between SLNS Agarty Priajal, Richard Dawkins, Robert Boyle, and Wai-hei Leung. They and all SLN ships are advised that the missiles that will be fired at them if they cross the Mesa hyperlimit are far outside your anti-missile doctrines. They will close with a terminal velocity of better than 0.8c, and you will not be able to stop more than a fraction of them. In the event that CNO Rajani really is so stupid as to press this illegal and hopeless attack, made wholly unconstitutionally, without any declaration of war, you are warned to abandon ship immediately. I have no wish whatever to kill enlisted SLN ratings, non-coms, and officers whose only fault is criminal and criminally stupid superiors, and we will of course provide S&R. But those who stay at their posts will very probably die. The second salvo will target the 140 ships between SLNS Pythagoras, Werner von Braun, Mikado, and Santa Cruz. For the love of God, ladies and gentlemen, save yourselves while you can. CNO Rajani and other SLN admirals have taken billions of dollars in Manpower bribes. Do you want to die defending slavery? And though I do not want to kill even one of you, if I have to I will kill you all, to the last woman, to prevent the resurrection of Mesa. You now have 11 light seconds in which to stop. Do so or face the consequences. Harrington out.”

He was still trying to assimilate the words, swinging between rage, shock, and sheer confusion, when the plot at last updated properly and he saw the paltry forces she had. 44 SDs were in orbit, with a clutter of lighter units, and eight ships labelled as the neobarbs’ oversize CAs hung 50 million klicks out, with four much bigger vessels behind them that CIC tentatively thought were
merchies.

“What the hell does she think those are going to achieve?”

Fleurmat was as shocked as he was himself.

“I don’t know, sir.” His face screwed up in concentration. “Perhaps those merchies are colliers. We knew they’d be able to put a lot of missiles into space, sir, and if she was telling the truth about their closing speed they’ll be very hard to stop.”

He stared. “They’ll be ballistic at anything over ten million klicks, and no threat at all.”

“Will they, sir? She has to be telling the truth about drones. CIC can’t find anything, but her ship names and numbers were right. And if they have FTL telemetry as well as coms …”

It wasn’t a happy thought, but even if the neobarbs had managed such a thing it wasn’t going to make any difference. It couldn’t. “Maybe we will take more hits than we’d like, captain, but I doubt it. Going to a general channel like that was no more than a colossal bluff. The fact they’d even consider it might work shows how little they know.”

He was still trying to persuade the odd jumping things in his stomach when they crossed the hyperlimit, and he watched the vast arc of his ships sweep over it behind them. The last were just deep enough in Mesan space to be trapped in the gravity well when the plot went entirely insane, and an already awful year became abruptly and spectacularly worse.

3. Oravil Barregos

*Shuttlesport, January 1921 PD*

Governor Barregos prided himself on having a level head and taking a long view, but events had of late been enough to confuse anyone. A carefully planned secession from a hopelessly corrupt League was one thing, but hadn’t happened yet, and if he was in most ways entirely delighted that the new and terrifying Grand Alliance had punched out Mesa, they had to have known the SLN would respond. News of Rajani’s seizure of the planet was expected within a week or ten days, as was the result of the Beowulfan referendum on secession, and a full-blown war between League and Alliance seemed inevitable. It would be no skin off his nose save that, unfortunately, he was still officially the League’s Sector Governor and Luis’s forces, including his nice new Erewhonese-built BCs, were still, on paper, SLN ships.

The staggering technical developments that had come out of the Manticoran–Havenite war had been a major basis of his planned secession, and he had had every intention of locking down Manticoran recognition before pulling the trigger. Besides making it easier to look at himself in the mirror, his strong stance on slavery and generous treatment of the freed had been aimed at Manticoran sensibilities, and the unbelievable effect of the titbit Luis had thrown the Ballroom about the Young woman — in conjunction with the equally unbelievable Honor Harrington — had been a marvellous bonus. And he’d done all he could to build on it, unilaterally recognising Torch and leaking to the Manties the blistering memo he’d sent Kolokoltsov, explaining that while the sheer number of freed on Smoking Frog made his action necessary it was also a step they should follow with all haste; not that they’d even considered it. He’d also publicly lauded the Grand Alliance’s seizure of Kuy and several other Manpower operations not far from the Maya sector, while noting
privately that they had not yet touched anywhere that had a permanent OFS presence, and surmising that that would not last.

The long Silesian deployments of so many Alliance forces, swatting pirates throughout the Confederacy and summarily arresting assorted planetary and even sector governors while managing to split the SN into a small number of casualties and prisoners and a much larger number of cheering observers, had seemed to take the pressure off. The League had still been screaming blue murder about the continuing closure of the Junction to all Mesan vessels, but the price rises and supply disruption the embargo had caused throughout the Core had begun to be absorbed and to produce some awkward questions about just how much of the League’s enormous collective economy Mesa controlled. The astonishing but comprehensively foiled attacks on Manticore and Grayson, with the revelation of the Streak and Spider drives and the bludgeoning testimony of PoWs under treecat observation, had also produced visible cracks in any number of League monoliths, besides raising a lot of very interesting questions he hadn’t considered, or even thought of. Some of the wilder things the ASL and even some Alliance governments had been saying abruptly seemed rather less wild. The Alliance had also been astoundingly clever in its PR, and the massive popularity of the endless shows pouring out of Torch with its riveting, whimsical queen and hideous history had had the interesting and welcome side-effect of boosting his own popularity as well as making a lot of people in the League — if not anyone who actually made any decisions — extremely thoughtful.

He and Luis had concluded that while the Grand Alliance probably could take on the SLN and win, they’d decided not to risk it just yet and settled for posting a warning they hoped even the idiots running the League might notice. The systematic reduction of any and all Manpower operations not under direct OFS protection had to be biting deep, the stunning recognition of the Ballroom had to make anyone think very carefully about the kind of determination that was being attested, and the purging of Silesia amounted to a further declaration that wholesale galactic reorganisation was no barrier, and political power no defence.

Then the stunning news of the Mesan strike had broken, and though he and Luis had been as dependent on HD programming as everyone else, they’d had superior analysis available, and could provide some themselves. And with hindsight, he acknowledged, several things had become very clear. Silesia had been, coldly, one enormous working-up exercise, and though a staggering number of ships had been involved in the clinical assault on Mesa, that was for the sake of their pinnaces; much as the CLACs had been there only to provide LACs — though the personnel and lift capacity of capital ships and liners had also been needed for the waves upon waves of functionaries who had followed the overwhelming assault. Medical and psychiatric staff were first, but a whole government had followed in astoundingly short order, and the sheer political skill of the dance, PR barrage, and constitutional evolution that had been simultaneously managed, with the planet’s renaming as Toussaint, had left them both deeply admiring and seriously worried.

The Alliance was after all going for the kill, now, using the enormous tech edge they undoubtedly had, and the proximity of the Maya Sector to Erewhon meant it might very well not be ignored for long. He had sent a private message to Queen Elizabeth, on Luis’s strong advice copied to Harrington, expressing personal satisfaction at the destruction of Manpower, and received bland acknowledgements, but nothing more. Until the appearance, half-an-hour ago, just outside the hyperlimit, of a Grand Alliance fleet entirely capable of annihilating every SLN ship in system without breaking sweat, which he found more than a little ironic. On the other hand, most of it was just sitting there, while a couple of ships were loafing towards Smoking Frog, and must have deployed one of their FTL drones because the com request had already come in. So there was at least a chance to talk, though he thought there’d be little chance to demur, and wondered again what on earth they thought they’d do with the League once they’d pulverised the SLN.

The figures who appeared on his screen a few moments later were not in the least whom he’d
expected, and it took him a second to recognise Walter Imbesi and Jacques Ramirez y Chou, flanking an unknown admiral in Havenite uniform with mixed shoulder flashes whose teeth were clamped around a large but unlit cigar.

“Tourville” came a hiss from Luis before the Beowulfan spoke.

“Governor Barregos, I am Jacques Ramirez y Chou, Third Director at Large of Beowulf’s Board of Directors, and I speak as an Ambassador Plenipotentiary of the Grand Alliance. As that may surprise you almost as much as it surprises me, I offer you in the first place several facts that will not yet have caught up with you. The first is that our referendum vote was 84% in favour of immediate secession, which Beowulf has now declared. The second is that that vote activates a secret treaty we signed with the Star Kingdom and others three years ago, and we are now full members of the Grand Alliance.”

A hand waggled gently while Barregos’s world spun.

“The legality of that treaty is perhaps disputable, as we really should have declared such a thing to the Federal Parliament, but I imagine you’ll understand why we decided not to, and don’t expect to be held to any account on that score. Which is helped by the third fact, which is what happened when CNO Rajani came calling at Mesa with his 1,368 SDs, and met the squadron of RMN CAs who’d pulled planetary defence duty against just such an eventuality. We’ve put together a special version, with rather more detail than the one that will be rippling throught the Core, that we thought you and Admiral Roszak would appreciate. It runs for quite a few hours — well, several days, actually — but we’ve marked about 90 minutes you might want to watch first. I dare say my frightening niece would reprimand me in her charming way, but I believe I'll risk saying, enjoy.”

Imbesi and Tourville both laughed before the live feed was replaced by the blurring signal of a compressed transmission, and a moment later the beginning of a record that it took him a moment to understand. There were parallel feeds, the SLN one of a standard SD bridge where Rajani was gloating over a threadbare plot as he headed in-system, and a vastly busier one, of a Flag Control suite that had Luis drooling, where Honor Harrington was coolly examining a crowded holotank.

“Fuck me sideways. Oravil, they beat him. They must have, or they couldn’t have his bridge log.”

It wasn’t easy to believe, seeing the grotesque weight of SLN SDs rumbling towards Harrington’s tiny forward force, but the two plots spoke volumes. Rajani’s drones, sweeping inwards, had yet to get themselves close enough to the planet to report on the forward Cas, let alone SDs, SD(P)s, and CLACs in orbit, but they had already failed to spot hundreds of Manticoran drones and LACs lining their way in, some at ranges of less than a light second. Luis was muttering inventive obscenities, and he couldn’t disagree. But …

“Luis, why are the LACs out there like that?”

“Best guess, S&R, Oravil, look at Harrington. She is completely confident that eight — eight — CAs controlling what has to be pod-launched salvoes are going to cream better than 1,300 SDs. She also has to have been right. And I cannot begin to imagine how in space they managed that.”

The exchange between Rajani and Harrington that followed had Luis laughing, then frowning.

“Hell on a pancake, Oravil, she’s baiting him. She wants him to head on in, fat and angry.”

Luis fell into a fascinated, intent silence, until Rajani’s entire, ludicrous command was well
inside the hyperlimit, and the largest wave of missiles he’d ever seen was launched at them, shortly followed by another. A sideways glance showed him Luis as white as a sheet, with a ferocious scowl of concentration etched on blanched features.

“God fuck three ducks. FTL telemetry. Has to be. Oravil, those missiles are clumped. Look at them manoeuvre. The CAs have at least a hundred telemetry channels each, and every channel’s controlling a pod. Fuck, fuck. One bigass FTL capable bird, and … eight slaved to it. Those megatonners with the CAs are colliers. Sweet baby Jesus, the carnage is going to be godawful.”

And it was, but Harrington’s general channel message had been heard, and even with ships targeted in only the second salvo a speckle of small-craft and bod-pod launches could be seen on both plots as destruction tore down on them. The unbelievable EW that ripped great swathes of jamming across the SLN plot while generating tens of thousands of decoys multiplied the hapless panic on Rajani’s flag bridge, and Luis made a flat-voiced observation that that was what you could do if you had the energy budget of a fusion plant for each EW bird. His conjecture about the LACs had been right, too, for they and hundreds of pinnaces they must have had tractored to their hulls were beginning S&R as soon as the trailers of the SLN fleet had passed — a rash of data on Rajani’s plot that had him staring and demanding energy fire be directed at them until Fleurmat, voice shaking, pointed out what they were doing. From the third-wave targets the volume of abandonment was very much greater, and in the fourth-wave targets ships began to strike their wedges — at which groups of missiles headed for them either swerved violently to new targets or blew up a few million klicks short; so Luis had to be right about FTL telemetry as well, though how in God’s name the Manties had engineered the massive installations he’d seen in interior imaging of Erewhonese ships down to drone and then missile size was one for the ages. Then wedges began going down across the formation, and the combination of cool command from the Manties and screaming panic from the SLN was joined by an additional Manticoran broadcast, Harrington’s crisp soprano giving precise instructions to the captains of surrendered SDs. SLNS Gregor Mendel was the last, rushing on towards Mesa as everything else Rajani commanded fell behind, until Fleurmat, staring with a glazed look at his plot while Rajani screamed demands that he do something, abruptly nodded, took his regulation stunner from its holster, shot Rajani down, and ordered his wedge struck and a channel opened to Harrington. His ship was still over a hundred million klicks from Mesa, and a message appeared on the display.

*We suggest you jump to 05.10.00 for five minutes, then 07:21.00. Finally, 79:46:00 is worth a look.*

Luis was already tapping commands into the comconsole, and the image that came up punched what little breath he had left from his lungs. There were multiple feeds in a grid, and each showed a boatbay of dazed SLN officers and ratings being evacuated to small craft, but only after each had spoken an oath of parole, acknowledging their status as PoWs, swearing to take no further part in the war against the Grand Alliance begun by the Solarian League, and sealing it with a palmprint. It took him only seconds to follow the political calculus, and after watching three identical swearings he waved a hand.

“Jump to the next mark, Luis.”

His breath was harsh in his throat, for this scene showed a dishevelled, dazed, and security-cuffed Rajani being escorted by armoured Andermani marines into a boatbay where Harrington waited, beside her the immaculately suited, hot-eyed, and terrible, dapper figure of Jeremy X. The senior Andermani saluted.

“Your Grace. CNO Rajani, as ordered.”
“Thank you, Herr Kolonel. CNO Rajampet Kaushal Rajani, you are a registered prisoner of war of the Grand Alliance, but the Provisional Government of Toussaint has filed criminal charges against you, to wit, multiple counts of participation in enslavement and rape, and three counts of capital murder. It is alleged, with primary documentary evidence from seized Manpower and Mesan Alignment files, that you did on dates specified murder C–6b/21–4/5, a human being, then six years of age; C–11b/19–1/5, a human being, then seven years of age; and C–18b/61–5/5, a human being, then five years of age. The Deneb Accords both permitting and requiring that PoWs facing civilian capital charges in any non-belligerent polity be surrendered on proper request to the appropriate authorities, and the Provisional Government of Toussaint being at war with none and having made such a request, you are hereby remitted to their custody to face trial on those charges. Secretary of Justice X, your prisoner, CNO Rajampet Kaushal Rajani.”

“Thank you, Your Grace.”

Barregos tried to think if he’d ever heard a more complex human voice, and gave it up. Jeremy X was quivering where he stood, and if he’d started cartwheeling around the boat bay, juggling and shooting as he went, no-one could have been surprised, for it was all in his voice — an utter, cold rage that would see Rajani decanted and dead, and a blistering, crackling glee, the whole fried, with more side-dishes than anyone could count, in sizzling admiration of Harrington. And he could share all of that himself. Yes, the Grand Alliance had had a huge advantage, and yes again, the SLN hadn’t had a clue, but Harrington had still had to play out the hand events had dealt her and she’d done so pulling force multipliers by the dozen out of her apparently inexhaustible hat. The pure contempt of using one squadron of CAs to blow Rajani away, with her wallers not even bothering to leave orbit, was also a screaming propaganda multiplier. And though she must have killed a million or more SLN personnel, she’d had S&R prepositioned against Rajani’s incompetent and corrupt idiocy, and she’d captured five million, from every last one of whom she would have secured a sworn parole — and would doubtless have despatched them all back to the League. Why try to secure, feed, and oversee them when they could be turned into weapons every bit as deadly as those missiles of hers, and launched simultaneously against every world in the Core? While plucking out their supreme commander, more comprehensively humiliated than anyone in history, naming him a serial child killer, and handing him over — with complete legality — to the only single individual more notorious, galaxy-wide, than she was herself. It was beautiful.

And there was the last time chop Ramirez y Chou had specified, which showed some 300 captured SDs departing under escort, 50 more in a tight group in Toussaint orbit, and the rest — more than 650 of them — being simultaneously scuttled. One single, huge, sparkling bang, and not only close to a quarter of the SLN’s capital strength but every last fragment of its reputation for invincibility was debris, and he was blowing out a long breath as the com blinked alive again with the improbable trio. Tourville’s cigar was now alight, and this time it was Walter Imbesi who spoke, voice soft but implacable.

“Governor Barregos, you and Admiral Roszak will of course realise that as a result of CNO Rajani’s actions at Mesa a state of war obtains between the Grand Alliance and the Solarian League. The Alliance is already prosecuting that war vigorously throughout the Shell and Verge, and the task force commanded by Fleet Admiral Tourville has orders to take out the OFS and Frontier Fleet bases at Randal and Robert, and then to move on the Sankar–Lima sector. But Fleet Admiral Tourville being, despite his abominable cigar, a well brought-up Havenite, he declines to leave an SLN sector fleet such as yours and Admiral Roszak’s in his rear, and I must confess I see his point. Then again, if it weren’t an SLN sector fleet but the System Defence Force of that newly seceded polity, the Republic of Maya, there wouldn’t be a problem at all.”

Launching a revolution three years early wasn’t usually a good idea, but if Harrington hadn’t provided the perfect cue he didn’t know what one was, and it wasn’t as if he had any choice
anyway. He didn’t hesitate.

“As it happens, Mr Imbesi, I was drawing up a unilateral declaration of independence this morning. The chance that any former SLN force under my control will do anything to annoy Fleet Admiral Tourville is nil. Director Ramirez y Chou, I won’t strain your plenipotentiary status by asking for any immediate decision, but I do formally ask, as, ah, President-soon-to-be-elect of the Republic of Maya that you convey to, um, the power of which of you are a plenipotentiary ambassador that the Republic requests the convening of talks that might lead to its membership of the Grand Alliance. I would imagine that you could use all the resources you could lay hands on, and many here would love to support Toussaint however they might. And in the meantime, if Admiral Roszak’s, er, RMSDF forces can be of any use to Fleet Admiral Tourville, they are of course at his disposal.”

He hadn’t even looked at Luis, whose answer was smooth.

“I await any orders, Fleet Admiral. And should you prefer me to remain here, inactive, I would ask you to take an observer of mine with you. The Sankar–Lima sector includes the Mfecane System, which I must suppose a primary target. Solarian Marine Lieutenant Thandi Palane is from Ndebele, and would, I believe, have some personal satisfaction in witnessing your liberation as well as an interesting credibility there.”

It was Tourville who replied, smoke spouting harmlessly but impressively from his mouth.

“By all means, Admiral, and Mr President-soon-to-be-elect. Fire her along.”

4. Innokentiy Kolokoltsov

Old Chicago, June 1921 PD

The Senior Permanent Secretary and de facto ruler of the Solarian League had been having a worse year than could be imagined, even though it was happening. He’d always known the League was profoundly inefficient — the basic unworkability of its constitution was, after all, what had forced the Permanent Secretariat to the control it had exercised for centuries — but that the SLN could be so overwhelmingly outclassed by a bunch of neobarbs was still beyond his comprehension.

In the wake of the unbelievable report that had come back from Mesa with more than five million paroled prisoners — far too many to contain, even if the newsies with them hadn’t already had the whole thing — a reeling Deputy CNO Kingsford had dug up a Captain al-Fanudahi, who’d spoken crisply of reports dating back a decade or more that suggested a range of surprising military developments driven by the neobarbs’ endless wars, and surmised a combination of multi-drive, pod-launched missiles with FTL telemetry and evident EW abilities that he said explained what the report showed. Al-Fanudahi had been as shocked as everyone, but there’d been professional admiration for the neobarbs in his eyes, and a bitter scorn for what he’d openly called the ossified complacency of his superiors, who’d not only ignored those reports utterly but frozen his career for insisting as loudly as he could on the unwisdom of that.

Kolokoltsov still didn’t really understand what the neobarbs had done to the realities of space power, let alone how they’d done it, but he had understood the political side of their operation as soon as it had begun to unfold — and there had been nothing whatever he or anyone could do to stop it. The return of paroled PoWs to their home worlds — which given their numbers meant just
about every system in the Core — in captured SDs with slagged battle computers that had then been scuttled in full view of everyone, had been a deadly and very shrewd blow; backed up within a fortnight by the comprehensive destruction of the entire SLN reserve outside the Sol system itself. The neobarb admirals who’d done it — destroying the pointless picket forces, giving just enough time for any tech work parties to evacuate, and hitting each and every ship with exactly one missile, a massive nuke into the unprotected centres leaving a useless collection of ragged hammerheads spinning and shattering one another still further — had magnified the effect with their icy politeness, blisteringly clear statements of exactly why they were at war with the League and would not rest until it was destroyed, and painstaking care to ensure that the vast swathes of orbital debris they were leaving behind posed no threat to any planet. And the almost daily reports that kept coming in of further annihilating defeats of Battle and Frontier Fleet detachments, increasingly bloodlessly and producing further mass arrivals of paroled PoWs, had gone on relentlessly underlining the League’s complete vulnerability.

So too had the unbelievably swift seizure of wormhole termini, closed to all League traffic except newsies, but used by floods of neobarb merchies and despatch boats by the hundred that delivered streams of hugely damaging data. Most Solarians had never known — or taken care not to know — just what went on in the Protectorates, and where the revenue streams that kept their Federal Government going came from. But now their faces were rubbed in it, violently and repeatedly, and many of the images had been a shock even for him — he had known the facts full well, of course, but found he hadn’t quite imagined what those facts looked like on the ground. The terrified blathering of so many captured OFS and Gendarmerie commanders had made any kind of claim of unfortunate aberrations unworkable, and as the fact that for the OFS mass enslavement, mass murder, and every brand of abuse were SOP sank in, public rage fuelled by terrified realisation that the war Rajani had started was already lost found a target. Paroled OFS people had to be taken into protective custody on arrival, and hasty trials were already underway on hundreds of Core worlds; not that the worst of them had been paroled. Time and again neobarb admirals handed them over to the planets they were not only liberating but immediately recognising as fully independent polities and offering mutual defence treaties with the Grand Alliance — on the solemnly sworn condition that all prisoners receive fair and properly conducted public trials; a condition ensuring that still more detailed evidence of exactly what had been going on, from local as well as captured Mesan sources, began to form more streams of utterly damning data.

What had not been public — at first — was the effect of the pattern of the rolling strikes against OFS operations. The major hubs in the near Shell that had gone first had at a stroke reduced cash flow to a trickle, and there had also been clinical strikes against the hubs of the Solarian transstellars most entangled in the Mesan network, sending shares and market values into freefall. Nor were the panicking and gibbering banks in any state to pick up the tab, even in the short term, so within weeks paying salaries became impossible. There was a certain justice in knowing the SLN were hardest hit, but the sight of the Federal Government very obviously falling apart as furious juniors spoke to newsies of not being paid and ceased to turn up for work was another disaster.

The neobarbs had also, he had to admit, been very clever in giving the vast numbers of transstellar merchies they were seizing to the polities they were liberating and recognising, along with lighter SLN units as planetary defence forces. Kicking the OFS to death would have been enough to make the neobarbs wildly popular across the Shell and Verge, of course, but the political calculus they were running, and the limited but very intelligently targeted aid tens of thousands of Alliance envoys and consultants were providing was generating not just adulation and gratitude, but something like intoxicated love. All the senior neobarbs he’d seen seemed to be ferociously competent as well as stringently courteous, and with their various exotic uniforms, strange accents, and clear, consistent grasp in outline of the new galactic order the Grand Alliance intended to create, they were riveting figures. The political tenor of their actions and manners in addressing the ‘utterly...
shameful and criminal oppression’ of the OFS, the ‘profound and unacceptable hypocrisy’ of the League in paying lip-service to the Cherwell Convention while nurturing Mesa, and the duties properly owing between citizens or subjects and governments of whatever form, were also — though the thought was alien — a moral declaration, not as the usual irrelevant intellectual chatter but backed by overwhelming force; and although he didn’t understand how it worked he knew a sense of shame was joining the seething shock, fear, and rage dominating life on every Core world.

And behind the neobarb admirals and envoys, often mentioned but rarely seen, was the towering figure of Harrington. The combination of sheer contempt for Rajani and Solarian complacency with active, direct concern to minimise casualties among junior officers and ratings that she had shown at Mesa had set the tone; and the long, formal statement that had accompanied the first paroled SLN personnel, listing the string of neobarb polities from whom she held plenipotentiary powers and stating that every one of them considered the League to have committed an Act of War against them that would be answered, promptly and in full, had been capped by the treecat riding her shoulder. The Clans of Sphinx — or so the soft Grayson voice providing a voice-over translation had said while the treecat waved its paws — were not formal members of the Grand Alliance but were assisting it as they could, and while they didn’t understand all the odd mindblind behaviour involved, whatever that meant, they strongly advised all the bad two legs to do everything and anything Dances on Clouds — their incomprehensible name for Harrington, apparently — told them to do. Opposing her was very stupid, as hands of hands of hands of two legs had already found out, and if they didn’t agree to dance with her, they’d find she danced on them as well as on clouds. Somehow a trace of amusement in that soft Grayson voice had conveyed that the allusion to the language of the Ballroom was deliberate, the staggering implications about the depth and range of Treecats’ intelligence no surprise at all to anyone who knew them. And the exasperated, laughing love that had flickered in Harrington’s eyes as she’d turned her head to give the treecat a look eliciting a bleek had given her abrupt depth as a commander across species as well as polities.

Thereafter, though Harrington had Solarian as well as other newsies aboard her flagship, she was little seen except working like all her subordinate admirals with a fleet detachment, rolling up the OFS and Battle and Frontier Fleets across the Shell and Verge. Kolokoltsov didn’t understand why she wasn’t exploiting her personal celebrity status more, but it hadn’t made much difference. Tens of billions of League citizens had at least known her name from her escape with all those PoWs from the Havenite prison planet, and the HD of her more recent activities on Manticore and at Verdant Vista had given her startlingly high public recognition figures even before her appearance at Mesa. Now he doubted if there was a single League citizen in the Core who couldn’t have recited her entire history — as he could himself. No individual had so dominated a moment in human history since the Diaspora, and while she wasn’t giving the interviews everyone wanted, plenty of other people were. The Manties and Graysons had severe restrictions in place to prevent her kin, friends, and stepping from being overrun by ravening newsies, but to do so they had to make controlled access available, and a steady stream of Casimir rescues, Hades escapees, liegers and officers of Harrington Steading, personal friends who weren’t serving with her, RMN and GSN admirals commanding Home System fleets who’d worked with her, treecats who in some strange way remembered her ancestors over several centuries and found their ‘mindglows’ very strong and attractive, and eventually even her parents, saying little except that of course they were desperately proud of her and hadn’t named her Honor for nothing, had generated a picture as detailed as it was incredible. The qualities had all been there at Casimir, Basilisk, Hancock Station, and Yeltsin, almost a quarter-century ago, and Protector Benjamin’s extraordinary action in making her a Steadholder with autocratic powers, fuelled by the Manties’ crazy prize-money system, had been like throwing hydrogen on an already roaring fire.

It was hard to know how to begin to describe her — warrior, ruler, stateswoman, billionaire, pioneer, heroine, machiavel, killer, icon; and in all of those roles, and seemingly everything she did, a leader of people. That she commanded fierce loyalty from those she led was as evident as the
implacability with which she destroyed those who opposed her, and on an ever-widening scale those who practised, condoned, and protected slavery; and though Solarian fear of her as she ripped through the League was a qualifying current, there was also both a wide certainty that those not in SLN uniform and sincere in their detestation of slavery — which was a vast majority of ordinary citizens — need not fear for their lives or prosperity, however intellectually and philosophically traumatic events might prove, and a growing, open, and fervent admiration for Harrington. The Federal Government had never been much liked and always widely reviled, and a shrugging, self-protective agreement was developing that it had always been clear that only an outside force majeure could do anything about it, and it had been high time one did, if one was honest. The abrupt, ghastly exposure of the incompetence and obsolescence of the SLN, with the rolling revelations of what Frontier Fleet and the OFS had really been doing all this time, made it possible to add that despite the terrible loss of life at Mesa and elsewhere — casualties that Harrington was doing everything she could to minimise, as all the paroled could and many did attest — the forcible dismantling of the League’s bloated and worse than useless military was a necessary step. Kolokoltsov’s only real admiration was for the way the data was being managed, and the successful presentation of an enemy neobarb leader inflicting trillions of dollars of losses daily as a principled reformer, assisting honest citizens, was a classic for the books.

And now Harrington was here. He and everyone had known she was coming, but to see the unbelievable hyperfootprint that had appeared outside Sol’s hyperlimit the day before yesterday and the inevitable surrender, evacuation, and destruction of Home Fleet, the useless reserve, and Hyperion One was to feel a new, singing hollowness in the gut, and to know it as pure fear. The several million new parolees accounted for the delay, which had brought the entire Terran population to a state of nervous exhaustion, staring at HD feeds hour on hour, but with the last now on planet and the captured SLN units that had transported them scuttled, a group of SDs and lighter units moved into orbit directly above Old Chicago, and — addressing the President on a general band — Harrington’s scalpel voice stated the legal and military conditions that had been met, and required the unconditional surrender of the Solarian League to the forces of the Grand Alliance.

It was, God knew, the only real political decision President Yeou kun Choi had ever made, but if he was far whiter than any sheet and visibly shaking, he made it all the same.

5. Benjamin Mayhew

_Austin City, August 1923 PD_

His Grace Protector Benjamin IX was finding it hard to keep a smile off his face, and didn’t see why he should. Irrespective of time zones, the entire planet was awake and watching, because for the first time since departing for Verdant Vista, Her Grace the Steadholder was coming home, and they were going to welcome her with proper ceremony and then have the biggest party since her return from the dead.

It would be Benjamin’s third such party in as many weeks. He’d been on Beowulf with Elizabeth, Eloise, Gustav, and almost all Alliance heads of state (including a dozen steadholders he’d dragged off planet for the first time — to _Beowulf_ of all places) to welcome her back from Terra, give formal thanks for rearranging the galaxy, and begin the process of ratifying the thousands of treaties she and her scores of admirals had signed in their various names. Beowulf’s citizens had seemed just about recovered from the political whiplash of finding themselves an Alliance member on the day they had seceded from the League, if not from their incredulous perusal of seized Mesan Alignment
records, nor from the more recent discovery of the Alignment’s secret wormhole and the now
liberated Darius System. That was a concern for everyone: every Alliance navy had tech crews
examining the captured streak- and spider-drive vessels, and what the 1.9 billion Mesans and 2
billion unusually well treated former slaves would do once they had digested the galactic facts and
hideous truths of which they had been kept stringently ignorant was anyone’s guess. But in the
meantime the rolling sequence of the stunning assault on Mesa, the intense interrogation and eventual
execution of the monstrous Detweiler clones, and the ongoing convulsions of justice against Mesan
agents, clients, and parasites throughout Verge, Shell, and Core, including the so-called Renaissance
Factor heads of state, had created on Beowulf a state of mind Benjamin could well understand
because it was much what Grayson had felt when Admiral White Haven had completed the conquest
of Endicott and ended 600 years of civil war.

In the moments before Honor’s shuttle had touched down he had been standing with her
parents and uncle, and though Jacques Benton Ramirez y Chou was one of the most urbane and
controlled people Benjamin had ever met there had been something wild in his eyes and tears on his
cheeks. Alfred and Allison had been quivering where they stood, and if some of it was not having
seen their daughter for most of three years, rather more was a shock that remained raw at what their
little girl had done, and become. That he could understand — but in Jacques and Allison there had
been something more and other, a purely Beowulfan exaltation at an unhoped for delivery and (the
words had forced themselves into his mind) sense of atonement. Mesa had in so many ways been
Beowulf’s dark twin, the stain on its conscience that had driven its immense generosity with its
bioscientific discoveries; and though Honor never thought of herself as a Beowulfan, and not one in
a hundred of the furiously proliferating biographies of her made any more of her ancestry than an
opening chapter, that was not what Jacques thought, nor any other Beowulfan Benjamin had met. To
them it was a Ramirez y Chou who had brought a mountain down on Mesa’s head, slaying the devil
and all its works, and the planetary veneration of the whole family had a new and ultimate icon.

But if the massive crowds had cheered and roared Honor until they were hoarse and Nimitz’s
eyes glazed with the overload of emotions, it had still been less complex than events when the whole
circus had moved on to Landing. 1919–20 had not been altogether easy in the Star Kingdom as flat-
out naval building continued at breakneck pace and staggering cost without any obvious enemy to
fight except the Silesians, already proving no obstacle. Manpower or Mesa, whichever it had truly
been, had been heavily punished by the loss of Verdant Vista and scores of depots, the RMN fleets
guarding the Junction wormhole termini were back to acceptable strength, the attacks on the R&D
stations had been soundly beaten off, and there was a healthy reserve even before ships already in
construction were factored in — so surely the time had come for this crushing financial burden to be
eased? There had never been a real political problem, Crown Loyalists and Centrists being solid, and
Cathy Montaigne having made it very clear to the True Liberals that they were giving the policy one
full term of five years, and that she would accept their judgements at the end of that time, not one day
sooner. There had also been a lot of pointed and very helpful support for continued expenditure from
a variety of people who rarely spoke to such matters, at least in public, that Elizabeth had with a wry
headshake told him was down to her Aunt Caitrin, apparently recruited to the task by Honor in the
aftermath of the Parliament Square executions. But a lot of people had still been hurting financially,
not only from taxes, and for the first time since Janvier’s fall a genuine and popular opposition had
begun to emerge, while with the roll of victories in Silesia it had been increasingly obvious to even
the least thoughtful that the real target of the new construction flooding into service could only be the
SLN — a thought that scared almost everyone silly.

Then news of the Mesan strike had broken, and besides fascination with a stunning victory,
stupefied outrage at the captured data that had flooded out in the following weeks and months, and
the riveting spectacle of Jeremy X and W. E. B. Du Havel creating the polity of Toussaint, with an
army of dancers, freed slaves from across the galaxy, and loaned functionaries, there had been the
steady terror of the SLN’s massive assembly of what could only be a crushing force. With Honor herself unavailable it had taken every bit of Elizabeth’s and her Space Lords’ steel determination to hold the line, and the repeated reassurances that, however it could not be discussed, all necessary defensive policies and strategies were in place and fully functioning, had produced as much fretting puzzlement as uncertain comfort. On Grayson the fear had been tempered by faith and appreciation of a Test, but Manticore had by all accounts become really quite febrile when images of Rajani’s departure for Toussaint had hit.

Since those of his arrival there, of course, everything had changed utterly, and it had been profoundly fascinating to watch both the Manticoran public and his own Graysons slowly realise what they were privileged to be watching — not merely a senile, frail, and viciously mad polity they had supposed invincible being put down with unanswerable might and absolute skill, like a vet coolly dealing with a rabid dinosaur, but an entirely new galactic order very largely purged of slavery being raised from its ashes. They all had experience of seeing Honor stand up to intervene radically in their own star nations; now they saw her do it yet again, on the greatest possible scale — and neither he nor anyone would ever forget the image of her gravely accepting from President Yeou the unconditional surrender of the Solarian League, Nimitz and Samantha on her shoulders, Theodosia Kuzak, Alistair McKeon, Alice Truman, Aivars Terekhov, Michael Oversteegen, Mike Henke (on whom Honor had forced a long-overdue promotion), Alfredo Yu, Judah Yanakov, Jonas Greentree, Tom Theisman, Lester Tourville, Shannon Foraker, Chien-Lu Anderman, and a score of other admirals around her, then crisply declaring the surrendered, misconceived, malfunctioning, and inimically overlarge polity to be utterly abolished with immediate effect, and every last one of its officials and employees out of a job.

All sovereign powers (she had continued, implacably, as Terra reeled) therefore reverted to the 851 former full members and 1,411 formerly associated members or so-called protectorates. The latter were mostly their own business, besides being overwhelmingly victims of the defunct League, but the former (saving those that had already seceded or were still holding secession referenda) had allowed war to be waged against the Alliance in their names, however incompetently, and so were now her business. Barring a small number of individuals who would be militarily prosecuted for war crimes, and a rather larger number who must be prosecuted, under their various polities’ own laws, for participation in slavery with associated rapes and murders, the Alliance had no quarrel with the citizens of those 851 polities, and certainly no wish for any further loss of life, but the polities themselves, including Terra, inherited from the League a state of unconditional surrender. They therefore had certain obligations to meet before entering into mutual defence treaties with the five major partners in the Grand Alliance — to whose navies now fell the general galactic obligation of enforcing the Eridani Edict, Deneb Accords, Cherwell Convention, and the protection of other sapient species needing it against the ways of humanity. Former delegates to the Federal Parliament were therefore directed to return immediately to their home governments bearing her order to each to send to Terra, arriving within 60 days, a delegation of no more than five persons, at least one of whom must hold plenipotentiary powers to reach a full and permanent settlement. Support staff were allowed, entirely at their star nations’ own expense, but five only would be allowed at negotiations, and latecomers would not be admitted, but dealt with unilaterally after treaties with the competent and punctual were signed.

*And God said unto them, Go, and they went.* The line had occurred to many Grayson commentators, and it wasn’t blasphemy, just wondering wisdom. Benjamin had watched the process that subsequently played out with rapt enjoyment, shared with Elizabeth, Eloise, Gustav, and others in admiring exchanges. The ships that took former parliamentarians home all had aboard at least one polite but utterly intransigent Alliance officer, at Captain (SG) or above, who gave regular reminders of the relevant deadline for despatching a delegation and — always publicly — explained what would be required of it. One might have expected screaming, squabbling chaos — and there had
been a certain amount of that at first, among politicians, anyway — but the Beowulfans had been out and about in very large numbers, with others they trusted, and the continuing streams of news from Torch, Toussaint, and the wilder parts of the Verge, where fleeing OFS and Frontier Fleet units were still being pursued, had been another persistent stimulus.

There had been some real horror stories among the streams, too — isolated smaller Manpower or OFS operations that had inevitably had lower priorities, and as news of what was happening had hit them had torn apart into desperate slave uprisings with huge fatality rates or escalating abuse from terrified owner-operators. But even with those appalling cases another strand of Honor’s strategy emerged, for news heading in for Terra came to other polities first, and depending on sector those intransigent Alliance officers immediately suggested — in a tone very like Elizabeth requesting and requiring — that medical and other relief be despatched at once. This was League-sponsored mayhem coming home to roost, and every former League member had an obligation to help as best they could. Between natural compassion at suffering, shame at what had been revealed about the late League, and an eye to the trivial costs and likely benefits of doing as the Alliance suggested, it had worked marvellously, hugely increasing the general flows of assistance outward from Core worlds to Shell and Verge, and giving particular Core worlds strong interests in specific sets of League victims.

At the same time, for every horror story there were 50 more positive ones as treaties between liberated ‘protectorates’ and the major Alliance polities were concluded in outline. Benjamin had despatched a score of Steadholders and more of their close kin, including wives and daughters, to be gracious and sign things, and had been perfectly delighted, at the request of the Conclave of Steadholders, to make all such limited grants of plenipotentiary power extensions of the grant to Honor, rather than direct, so every Grayson signature was technically in Honor’s name, under his authority. Nor had the ships she had concentrated on Terra stayed idly in orbit, but spent the 60 days assiduously visiting Core worlds with reach.

There was no point attempting to conceal the true facts of pod-layers, MDMs, CLACs, fission-plant LACs, and FTL capacity, and as well as stark reminders of the sheer depth of military superiority the Alliance enjoyed, by way of sticks, governmental and system defence people could have sight and smell of dangled carrots. The new LACs could be invaluable to small federations, providing improved local security at far lower costs, CLACs offered a means of projecting limited power within regional volumes ditto, and the contingents of breezy, devil-may-care LAC crews among the hundreds of thousands of Alliance personnel given limited local leave did no harm. He and Rachel had been in stitches at the record of a private warning Honor had delivered to all her ships before any had left Terra, promising most faithfully that anyone under her command who (a) embarrassed her and/or (b) put a spoke in a diplomatic wheel, would be left praying for a lifelong place on Hades; and even Wesley, who’d brought it to share, was heard to chuckle. Nor was the threat an idle flight of fancy, for the growing problem everywhere of nausea with mass executions had been solved by Eloise, who had said that any and all persons properly convicted of participation in enslavement would be hosted at cost on the revamped prison planet. There would be frequently changed Manticoran, Grayson, Andermani, Erewhonese, and other observers to make sure there were no abuses; but it had to be admitted that Hades’s conditions did make it eminently suitable for keeping large numbers of profoundly malign people in safe and punitive inactivity.

Senior Manpower and Jessyk people were already there, as well as a growing number of OFS and Frontier Fleet muckety-mucks who turned the stomach but weren’t quite bad enough to pitch wholesale into trials that almost invariably produced capital sentences. And it had been an answer the Ballroom would accept, as well as the most liberal among the freed, not least because, even before Honor herself had endorsed Eloise’s offer, her personal connection with Hades had given it her implicit imprimatur. When Eloise had privily proposed it among senior Alliance heads of state Benjamin’s one hesitation had been what Honor’s own feelings would be, and her long,
ruminative answer to his formal question had been troubled but in the end as ruthlessly pragmatic as ever.

“...You know, Benjamin, it doesn’t really seem wrong. Only harsh and distasteful, besides something closer to just than not unjust. And Stinker thinks it’s hysterical, as well as something there isn’t a two-leg word for that involves the sharpness of claws and teeth and the joy of laughter. I’m guessing at what Chien-Lu calls schadenfreude with an extra dose of whatever passes as Treecats’ sense of irony. And God knows I’m sick to death of executions, so discomfort for adequately fed and exercised life seems a decent bargain when something permanent continues to be needed.”

Nimitz had independently, following Honor, expressed approval of the scheme. What exactly the ‘cats felt about it had become a hot topic in many fora, not least because any who were asked said that Laughs Brightly had earned his name and had many new meanings for laughter besides, including this one, which every Person was still thinking about. Punishing people in ways other than a cuff to an over-rambunctious kitten or defensively necessitated death was a new issue for the People, and what did the questioner think of c-u-s-t-o-d-i-a-l s-e-n-t-e-n-c-e-s? Alliance newsies had gained some experience with ‘cats, not that it did them much good, but most Solly reporters had been left as high and dry as landed fish. Some really interesting interspecies conversations had ensued, and while there had been a small if vocal set of protests in many polities, the vast majority of humankind seemed content with the idea of those who had enslaved spending their lives with heat rash and a tedious diet somewhere a very long way away.

In any case, the net result had been 851 punctual five-person delegations, an efficiency in itself a huge step away from the shadow of the League, and Honor’s private communications had dwindled as she threw herself into an enormous repeat of what she’d trialled at the Bay House. It had taken 20 months rather than three, and he with everyone else had been fascinated to see her work it all. He’d signed, with the unanimous consent of both Conclaves, a second exemption allowing the HSG to be further expanded with unarmed personnel, and she had hundreds of, overwhelmingly, youngsters from her Steading, smartly uniformed, extremely polite as well as intelligently courteous, and liable in answering any question to ride an airbus through the questioner’s assumptions. Every one of them sincerely believed Her Grace was beloved of the Tester, demanding as He did that everything be Tested, His own word not excluded, and once Tested acted on with consistent honour. Very little in any Solarian’s experience had prepared them for the practicalities of such a faith as Father Church’s, and the HSG were not alone.

He and other Alliance heads of state had nobly resisted temptation, but all sorts of people from every Alliance polity had been drawn to the riveting spectacle, some able to command Honor’s personal attention — Klaus and Stacy Hauptman, Hamish Alexander, an increasingly frail Howard Clinkscales, Cathy Montaigne and Anton Zilwicki, Queen Berry, Du Havel with a formal question that could perfectly well have been sent by courier and, when he returned to Toussaint, Jeremy X with another. He stayed more than a month, and the legion of roughly polite if flat-voiced dancers he’d brought with him had given some splendid impetus to several strands of the talks. They also interacted with a delegation of treecats from Sphinx, who signed questions and answers with slow, careful dignity, and brought to proceedings an unflagging insistence on a comprehensive answer that precluded two legs doing things that might kill planets by accident. Besides their intrinsic fascination, and vital nose for lies, Benjamin and Elizabeth had both strongly suspected them of what she called emotional management, and the length of time everything had taken was more down to the sheer volume of work involved than any real intransigence.

Honor’s starting-point was that the League had inevitably become the deadly failure it had been because it had been too large. Haven too had until now been more damaged than nurtured by its size, and there were excellent reasons the Andermani (with Grand Alliance help) were actually annexing very little of Silesia, while breaking up the rest into polities that could function. Federations
of up to ten Core worlds were therefore invited, which divided the unwieldy mob of 4,255 delegates into manageable streams, and what really took time was for them to make their various decisions about workable federal governance and who got what bits of it — matters to which Honor was indifferent. But she insisted on immediate individual signatures to the Cherwell Convention, a no-brainer that produced an early mark of unity in a mass ceremony, while Alliance ships around the Core prodded governments into setting about any necessary housecleaning.

She also dealt superbly with the issue of reparations, not to the Alliance but to Shell and Verge planets that had been victimised by the OFS. The polities of the Alliance were doing all they could, in honour and common sense, for besides the crying needs of many liberated planets most were potentially very wealthy markets. The OFS had, after all, seized them for a reason, and as protectorate tithes vanished and wormhole transit fees reverted to their proper owners almost all had the wherewithal to pay for at least some of the help they genuinely needed to get back on their feet. During the period of wormhole network closure to Solarian vessels, Manticoran, Grayson, Havenite, and Andermani merchant lines had leaped for the new markets, bringing an enormous and very welcome economic stimulus on top of the peace dividend in greatly reduced naval construction. But there were far greater needs across Shell and Verge than the Alliance could possibly meet in a timely fashion, and Honor had combined the break-up and distribution of Solarian transstellars that had been active parasites, giving small emergent federations their own merchant lines, with a programme assigning to each group of former League members a swathe of OFS victims to receive generous favoured nation trading status and direct governmental and economic assistance with rebuilding and restructuring.

Building on the aid for the real disaster spots, the process set up what were in effect reparations payments that also wove a new galactic mesh of political, cultural, and trade links. Introverted Core worlds were forced to look out, and more isolated Verge and Shell worlds given a specific conduit into what remained the densest volume of human settlement. He had spent a fascinating evening with Elizabeth (on a second and much happier state visit to Grayson) analysing schematics of the patterns Honor was creating, and seeing the interlocking structures that would bind the new mosaic of small star federations in ways calculated to promote individual development and differentiation. Core polities and Verge or Shell systems were not linked on an astrographical basis that might have encouraged political re-expansion, but according to particular needs and capacities. And even while the talking went on, ex-SLN personnel not being absorbed into small system defence forces were shifting into devolved merchant marines, as SLN dockyard and building capacity was transferring to civilian use, to serve the new trade routes.

It had Beowulfan fingerprints all over it, but over and above the mix of reparations and trade there was defence. Honor was very clear that the Grand Alliance was a tool needed for this job, not a permanent political institution, however certain specific responsibilities would be shared between its various navies, and that meant treaties of mutual defence had to be with the major constituent members. Nor was it necessary for every new polity to have a treaty with every Alliance member, and Manticore, Grayson, Haven, Erewhon, and the Andermani each found themselves with a carefully distributed scatter of new treaty partners — ensuring that any misbehaviour by any of them would bring in at least two Alliance partners to squash it. There were also responsibilities for the lesser members of the Alliance, contenting Alizon, Zanzibar, Candor, Minette and others.

Honor had kept him and other heads of state informed by the simple expedient of regularly sending records of the briefing sessions she held with her team of executive deputies in the huge Flag Conference facilities on GSNS Benjamin the Great, chosen as her flagship for that very reason. The many admirals who’d been assigned to Grand Fleet, from every Alliance nation, had been welded into a superbly efficient command team, and though many were still in the Verge and Shell Honor’s first team were using their staffs to push everything along as fast as may be under her leadership. Ops briefings were held daily, and a review board once a week, where discussion was lively and opinions
of some of the pricklier and less realistic delegates scathing — but decisions about particular logjams were made promptly, often with considerable foresight, and once made acted on. Whatever else they might be these men and women were admirals — the kind who fought battles, not paper pushers — and used to wartime workloads and efficient despatch; they also had a very high degree of camaraderie, knowing they had together done a mighty historic deed. And as Elizabeth had agreed, there was even with these powerful people what Lucien Cortez at BuPers and Wesley had identified years ago, the Harrington effect that made subordinates — and every one of them took Honor’s ultimate military command entirely seriously — not only want to do their best, but deliver it in abundance.

And so it was all marshalled and chivied, pushed and pulled and manoeuvred into place. There was no singular grand ceremony — as Honor had tartly observed, the monumental was precisely not the point — but last autumn completed polity arrangements and treaties had begun to be signed, delegations leaving to submit them to referenda, and by the time the first votes of hugely relieved approval began rolling in the last few problem children had been threatened with economic spankings and, however grudgingly, accepted arrangements they still didn’t like but agreed were workable — as their subsequent public approvals showed. And the circus was finally over.

The military trials of the League’s mandarins, Mesa’s placemen, and transstellars’ boards were also wrapped up, with most despatched to Hades, and the resurgent Terran government, long suffocated by the vast federal parasite it had hosted, had taken over basic civil functions. But for all sorts of reasons, symbolic as well as practical, it did not want the cluster of Old Chicago towers that had hosted the bloated League and SLN bureaucracies, and Honor’s final act had been to remove them. Demolishing countergrav towers was notoriously hard, but with the sort of energy equipment navies had (and a large exclusion zone) it was perfectly possible to cut them through at the base; and while they were immensely heavy, the whole point of countergrav was that neither mass nor weight intrinsically mattered. The transatmospheric lifter-tug built for the job at the Blackbird Yards — at, he discovered with a mix of amusement and exasperation, Honor’s personal expense — had worked well enough.

The spectacular show took several days, punctuated by the biggest firework displays anyone had ever seen as plascrete grudgingly yielded to lasers, and the truly peculiar sight of towers being drawn like rotten stumps out of the cityscape and rising offplanet to be assembled in high orbit. The Terrans, sensibly enough, threw a blowout party for the duration, and though there was a lot of optimistic excitement about the future there was also real regret at seeing Honor go, which considering the circumstances of her arrival said a great deal. And then she was gone, the flagship SDs of her most senior admirals tractoring the buildings onto courses for Sol and without waiting to see them immolated vanishing over the hyperwall for Beowulf.

By the time the Beowulfan party had spilled through the Junction to Manticore, some smart artist-entrepreneur had combined an image of those buildings as they had begun to melt with the fiery salamander of the Protector’s Own, doing the melting, and sent it to Stacey Hauptman and the ASL — so it was everywhere, a perfect icon of the incredible that had to be believed. Even the crustiest, sourest Gryphon peer could find no possible quarrel with comprehensively defeating and dismembering the Solarian League; and as those among the wealthy and powerful who had been less than sincere in condemning slavery were mostly dead, despatched to Hades, or in prison elsewhere, there was also a universal, bone-deep (if stunned) satisfaction at its mass eradication. Cathy Montaigne had for months had an enormous display outside the Honor House showing the daily precipitous fall in the ASL’s estimate of those still in slavery, with tallies of the freed, and the sense of more than one impossible achievement was strong, with a concomitant national pride that had been building over three years but had as yet found only limited expression.

With the Manticoran economy booming in overdrive, the previous year’s general election had
been almost as peculiar as the last one, and Willie had increased his majority to a point he not only
found embarrassing but thought unhealthy. Prodded by Elizabeth he had responded by drawing a
much wider range of people (and a permanent treecat observer) into his new cabinet, a process
echoed in the diplomatic appointments of hundreds of new ambassadors, most needing to establish
their embassies. More or less everyone had been tracking news from Verge and Shell polities where
Manticore had been the primary aiding power, as well as news from Old Chicago, and citizens’
groups of many kinds had become involved, some on the government’s dollar but many voluntarily,
contributing resources. Elizabeth had seen it long before Willie — the Harrington effect at work
across a whole, usually fractious polity, because they were in awe of her, in love with her,
der"

ferociously proud of her, and wanted to live up to her example.

But it also gave them a collective headache, because at some point she was going to come
home, and they would need to say something. It was far and away the biggest political problem
Willie had faced, and there was enough time for a number of people to be heard, including a
ruminative Elizabeth who had pointed out that (a) even she had run out of toybox items and (b) she
wasn’t going to risk another scold like the one she’d received for mousetrapping Honor into
becoming a Grand Duchess. As Honor’s refusal of the PMV after Hades and resistance to being
rewarded were common knowledge, Her Majesty’s further point that something imaginative and
sincere rather than grand was needed was a cue for a lot of extremely interesting discussion ; and
though Benjamin didn’t know how much of it Honor herself was aware of, she had shortly thereafter
dropped a large rock by letting it be known that whatever else anyone might be contemplating she
would herself, on the day of her return, be attending a Mass of thanksgiving and then, with CNOs
Caparelli, Matthews, and Theisman, with small RMN, GSN, and RN delegations, plus
representatives of other old Alliance navies, dedicating the joint memorial to their dead.

It hadn’t of course stopped the population from turning out and celebrating, but it had
absorbed thanking Honor into thanking God, and induced a certain solemnity. The two tributes
Willie and Elizabeth had between them agreed were a new and unique award, a Kingdom’s Thanks
rather than a Monarch’s, with a spectacular quintuple gold chevron and double crown, that Honor
accepted with only a mild look of resignation ; and — a mayoral suggestion seized on, when a very
interesting bit of news had broken — the renaming of Landing Square as Treecat Square, with an
oversize and very good statue not only of Nimitz, but of Sam, with their new litter. The bronze
treecats were a generic ball of sleeping paws and tails, but the adults were genuine portraits, sitting
on either side of their young and echoing their appearance on Honor’s shoulders. It made Honor
laugh and moved her, though she said it would do Nimitz’s ego no good at all, while Nimitz and
Sam were very smug, bleeking and signing with all the other ’cats who had inserted themselves into
events ; and as the kittens could hardly be excluded the whole thing became a disorderly interlude
between the solemnities of St Michael’s Cathedral and the Memorial Gardens. And that had been
perfect, for they stood at the junction of past and future, old grief and new hope.

The design eventually chosen for the Memorial combined the ’cats’ preferences for sinuous
waveforms and geometry. An undulating semi-circular wall bore the names of ships, navy by navy
but without distinction beyond their prefixes, curving around a large part of the extensive garden ; at
its centre it squared up to display simple words, that we might live, that yet had a twist, for one could
say that even StateSec personnel had died that others might live, though not in the obvious way. And
around the garden were terminals where every ship could be called up, with names of its crew.
Families across the Alliance were still supplying images of their dead as they would like them
remembered and the database was updated constantly. But for all the stone, it was the garden’s
verdure that dominated. Treecats liked trees, and their garden was a place of play and relaxation
however it might be hosting a two-leg memory singing, so while they had been respectfully silent
and still while the solemn navy delegations and heads of state heard Wesley, Thomas Caparelli, and
Theisman, as the senior CNOs, formally dedicate the memorial to all the dead, and offer Honor brief
but blazingly sincere thanks for its conception and commission, solemnity had not lasted. The undulating wall made far too good a perch from which to examine the oddity of two legs to be ignored, and quite a few ’cats seemed more than a little dazed with the emotions that must be battering them.

Before the HD coverage ended Honor had spoken once, standing before the centre of the memorial but addressing the camera more conversationally than oratorically.

“If I have learned anything as a commander it is that no resource should be wasted, and your attention in this moment is a potent resource — so I will say two things. The first is to thank you all for your trust while it was still not possible to reveal the depth of our military advantage. I have sought always to requite it. The second is more complicated.” She had gestured. “This used to be the North Hollow’s garden, of course, and you won’t be surprised that to me that name represents the very worst of which human beings are capable. God knows the data we recovered on Mesa shows our wars really were planned and prodded into starting by others, but that does not absolve us of our own share of the responsibility. And we remain as frail as God made us, however purged for the moment; yet now, for a while, it is we with our close allies who are dominant, and to whom others look not only for help but as a model. We may rightly be proud, and rightly enjoy it. But do you realise just how easy and insidious a process it would be for us to become as bloated and complacent as the League was? As smug, and callous, and carelessly extreme? I do, and while I am frankly delighted to be surrendering the powers and authorities delegated to enable me to do what I have done, I remain a member of the House of Lords, as of the Chamber of Steadholders, and will as an independent here and Protector’s Champion there be keeping a very watchful eye. So if you really want to thank me, then in years and centuries to come, make your decisions that matter consciously considering how not to be like North Hollow or the League. This place will remind you of exactly why it matters, even though the slave and Solarian dead aren’t here, nor Silesians and Andermani. And its name is Sorrow Singer.”

Honor had never had a formal party affiliation, despite becoming a major opposition spokesman on naval affairs, but reasserting an independence from government, however closely aligned, was a necessary move Benjamin wholly approved. She was now and for ever far too great a figure to serve in any government directly, and a role as her nations’ conscience as safe a containment for her as could be managed; he also privately thought the care steadholdership had taught her with its personal autocracy had been the Tester’s hand preparing her to be a safe custodian of the astonishing power and potential power she now commanded across thousands of star systems. And he knew her regret for the Solarian dead was real, the burden of Rajani’s destroyed SDs, sacrificed as the least cost in a manner calculated to save millions of other lives, one she felt daily and was haunted by. What she needed was a few long months on Sphinx, gliding and sailing and doing ordinary things, but that still had to wait on required visits to Grayson, Erewhon, New Berlin, and eventually Nouveau Paris. In the meantime Elizabeth, who knew it too, had unilaterally kept the evening meal to family and the major heads of state whom Honor liked, with those she wanted to invite, and dialled down the formality as far could be managed.

It had still been a large gathering, but like that memorable night at the Bay House one where much was set aside. Then the purpose had been decision; now it was celebration, but of safe return more than achievement, and with personal rather than political talk. There were children as well as ’cats, Crown Princess Rivka’s new daughter as well as Faith and James, grown out of all recognition since Honor had last seen them and far less interested in their big sister’s achievements than in Nimitz’s and Samantha’s ‘kittens. Outside, of course, the entire city had been one giant street party, with sporadic outbursts of singing and cheering among the crowds around Mount Royal, loud with Honor’s name. When one had died away she’d caught his eye and come over.

“How bad it is going to be on Grayson, Benjamin?”
“Severe, I’m afraid, though not as bad as it might be.”

“Oh?”

“Handing over treaties and returning your plenipotentiary powers will be solemn but cheerful, followed by a service of thanksgiving Reverend Sullivan’s agreed to keep as short as he can, which won’t be very. But everyone understands you wanting to get back to your own steading for a while before you have to slog off for Erewhon, so you’ll be able to get away after that and see people you actually want to see.”

It had been enough to forestall further questions, though she’d given him a fish-eye as she’d sensed his emotions, but as he stood in the summer sun, seeing the distant glint of the descending shuttle and thinking how few even of the visitors now bothered with breath masks, he wasn’t at all sure quite what was going to happen. Of all the Alliance nations that found themselves bestriding the galaxy, Grayson had come farthest and fastest, from neobarb desperation to unprecedented power, security, and influence in only 20 years; and that journey was overwhelmingly the work of Honor Harrington. From the moment they’d seen the bridge record from HMS Fearless, most Graysons had known her, as he had himself, to be a daughter of God like none they’d ever met. After Burdette, Hades, her second North Hollow, High Ridge with his entire, godless crew, Mesa, and the Solarian League, he doubted if there were a dozen adults of any stripe who didn’t believe she was the chosen instrument of the Tester’s grace — and one other thing she’d done had seared it home, for among the clauses in those many, many treaties she would shortly be delivering for ratification was one that in insisting on mutual religious tolerance gave all faiths a quasi-constitutional right to organise on Grayson, recognising a growing reality among its increasingly diverse population, and reciprocally gave Father Church guaranteed access to an unconverted population in the trillions. Moreover, a defining annex specifically listed the Masadan Faithful among a small number of religious groups explicitly denied recognition and freedom of worship, on the grounds that their doctrines amounted to enslavement. And when that had got out, something had happened deep in the Grayson soul.

They had all had enough time to learn to live with the fact that despite everything Honor was still not a communicant of Father Church, though the Champion of its Protector and when on-planet a regular attendant in the Strangers’ Aisle. And even the stickiest traditionalists had admitted long ago that she really was a good and godly woman, not least — though it stuck in Benjamin’s craw — because she so obviously still mourned Paul Tankersley that the fact they hadn’t been married really did seem unimportant, even to the stern, who whatever their faults understood and respected both love and atonement. They had even, mostly, managed to accept that she more than rivalled Isaiah McKenzie, though the Tester’s purpose in raising such an utterly formidable warrior elsewhere and bringing her to Grayson as its saviour twice-over was even more than usually inscrutable. But the radical effects of the gravfilters, combined with Allison Harrington’s genetic work, had daily and intimate implications for all, magnifying everything. And then there was Masada.

More than a decade of occupation had achieved little beyond a nominally ‘moderate’ government that took responsibility only for basic civil services, and still needed a very substantial occupying force to keep the lid on; and besides the continuing danger of any male Faithful who managed to get off-planet — terribly demonstrated in the StateSec sponsored assassinations — the issue of basic human rights was a constant thorn. The schismatics remained utterly opposed not only to Prolong but to almost all modern medicine, which was their privilege, but also denied it to their wives and children, which wasn’t, any more than their adamant refusals to countenance the notion that a woman had any rights at all; but doing anything about it had proven impossible, until with the Havenite War over Honor had despite everything somehow found time to turn her industrial muscle to the problem.

Sky Domes had paid for two things — cheap, small, and simple coms distributed free by the
tens of millions, and a quartet of satellites that gave planetary coverage to a dozen channels, including Grayson, Manticoran, Havenite, and Solarian newscasts, a first-rate children’s science primer, a couple of more adult stations explaining what medicine could now do — including Prolong and preventing the frequent miscarriages of male foetuses with which Masadans as much as Graysons were burdened — and a theology channel on which members of the Sacristy patiently and carefully explained the history of the Church of Humanity Unchained and its schisms, including the sacred texts the Faithful repudiated. The Masadans had been livid, foaming their displeasure, but though several hundred women and children had been killed by husbands (subsequently executed) who caught them watching the coms, there was nothing they could do to stem the flood of information or its radically transformative effects.

And then a further channel had been added, for Honor had persuaded the ASL, Ballroom, and Allied governments that all women on Masada, and minor children, counted as enslaved, entitled on liberation to the same support as any of the newly freed — Prolong where still possible, necessary medical and psychotherapeutic treatment, housing and social support — until they could find their own feet. It also meant that nothing done to an owner-abuser was regarded as criminal. Moreover, given the particular issue they had faced, a second domed city was under construction in Harrington Steading where local authorities and services would be exclusively female — and an address by Honor, first privately to the Keys and then Grayson-wide, had appealed for competent women to augment Harrington Steading’s own resources in staffing the new city of St Barbara, should the number of Masadan women seeking asylum reach the numbers she hoped for. The smarter among the Keys had seen just how dangerous a precedent Honor was establishing, but the move was unanswerable, and Benjamin, Kat, and Elaine had laughed themselves silly as the request had been unanimously approved and the public response had gone from positive to wildly enthusiastic.

And the Masadan women with their minor children had come, by the Tester, a trickle becoming a flow and then a flood. A fair few left male corpses behind them, and battalions of additional ground troops had been needed, but a great swathe of the capital had been cleared of men and served as a reception and holding area, while Harrington and Hauptman Lines merchies shuttled women and children to Grayson, Manticore, and beyond as fast as they could turn around. Some refugees were very happy to leave all theocracy behind, but many were not apostate, just sick of the Faithful’s vile ways, and thought an all-female dome on Grayson with a Father Church that honoured women a wonderful proposition. And as the numbers grew into the millions and tens of millions, even the dimmest members of the Keys realised that the huge boost to Grayson’s female population, just as Allison Harrington’s genetic fix for the lethal embryonic mutation was equalising male and female birth-rates, was going to cushion the change they most feared and preserve a traditional family structure for at least another generation. It was a severe (and to Benjamin purely beautiful) irony of Honor’s crafting that gaining that benefit for their own steadings meant establishing female domes that gave public authority and political experience to women, but needs must. Only four steadings had yet to start such domes, and besides the direct practical effects, the HD coverage of traumatised and incredulous but triumphant women, and above all slowly relaxing children learning to smile and play without fear, had been a planetary balm. Between that and the stream of triumphant galactic news Grayson’s feelgood factor was through the roof, to a degree that actually had people worrying about it.

There had also been the grim yet deeply satisfying spectacle of the Faithful realising that their schism was doomed to dwindle away as the demographics of their population skewed more and more wildly to the adult male. It would take a while yet — there had been more than two billion women on Masada, and some were too cowed or indoctrinated to flee, even now — but the percentage of women of childbearing age was already at a level seen only on the road to extinction, and their own denial of Prolong and medical interventions meant both that they had no way round it and that their death rates were far higher and average life-span far lower than either needed to be.
The Tester made very sure your sins came home to roost, and His justice was rightly severe.

And then Honor had put yet another nail in the Faithful’s coffin by making each and every male who maintained the doctrine of female enslavement persona non grata in most of the galaxy, and simultaneously won a reciprocal formal acceptance of Father Church. The only possible valid comparison was St Austin himself, and no-one Benjamin had heard — not even the stiffest conservative patriarch — was prepared to deny that Her Grace at least might be a living saint of Father Church: which was not anything anyone had any experience of at all, unless, of course, they had been acquiring it without realising these last 20 years.

Feeling the spiritual crisis swell, Benjamin had asserted Protector’s Authority to command a special meeting of Sword and Council, both Conclaves, Sacristy, the full clergy and congregations of every steading cathedral, all linked by HD, to hear First Elder Sullivan, who had a marvellous, pragmatic view with a paralysing sting in its tail. He had no doubt whatever that Her Grace was a beloved instrument of the Tester and so a most paradoxical saint of Father Church — but the paradox must command attention. How could one not of Father Church be its second saint? And why would the Tester so bless them when those privileged to know Her Grace personally could have not the slightest doubt that any attempt by Father Church to acknowledge her as such would cause her the greatest distress? Every communicant’s conscience was their own, but under his leadership no formal discussion of canonisation would ever be held, for amid it all one thing was entirely and abidingly clear to him. As an instrument of the Tester, Her Grace was herself, in her nature, a great Test, for Grayson, for every Grayson, and for Father Church. To understand this new and wonderful and terrible Test, they must live with her, speaking to her as its embodiment, as a teacher and example, and besides the gross insult to her feelings, which he took to be a warning, formalised veneration could only inhibit that understanding. The Book was never closed, and none could doubt that a further portion of the New Way had been opened to Father Church, and to them all. And of course a very special respect for Her Grace was proper and necessary. But formal liturgical thanks to her would be restricted to the existing annual service in memory of the Martyr Julius Hanks, who had died that she might live and could again in his own great grace stand between her and those devout communicants who would, convinced of their own righteousness, do her harm.

There had been a great deal of soul-searching, and some of the sermons Testing the First Elder’s advice had been as tangled as he had been clear, but the ruling had been very widely accepted with a curious sort of relief. Quite how not acknowledging a living saint walking among them was easier and better than doing so remained a mystery, but there had been a synergy with the parallel problem of Grayson’s increasing number of respectful non-communicants that had begun suggesting interesting answers. The freed in Harrington Steading, including those now admitting to Ballroom membership, had been especially vocal, as for them a saint was one who Did Right, and the proper response was helping them, not getting mystical. It was a view resident ‘cats had emphatically endorsed, amid disclaimers of understanding this religion business at all and an intransigent insistence that they did understand Dances on Clouds, who while extremely painstaking was not one to fuss. Besides, didn’t the two legs think she’d done more than enough for them already?

All in all, Benjamin was reasonably sure no-one would do anything quite so crass as prostrating themselves, but beyond that he wouldn’t have bet a single Austin on almost anything except gross emotional overload. As the shuttle came in, the ranks of the Conclaves and Sacristy assembled in welcome were quivering, and he had a distinct sense that the sanest Graysons present were his assorted children, Rachel in her new GSN uniform to the fore with an arm around Honor, both at least as impatient to see the mentor and godmother they loved and had missed terribly as overawed by what she had done. Rachel had found her Saganami curriculum dominated by a rapidly shifting understanding of galactic events, with what sounded like a weekly dose of near-chaos when new data were discussed, but Hipper — a very active participant — had kept her and others firmly
grounded. Of course Her Grace was amazing. She also flipped a mean frisbee and wasn’t called Dances on Clouds for nothing.

Benjamin was inordinately proud of his eldest daughter, who had used her natal rank exactly once in four not-so-easy years — to wangle an invitation to learn to hang-glide out of the SFS, and spend her second summer vacation taking it up, Hipper in harness and her Armsmen having little choice but to nominate two among their number to learn as well, while others hovered about in aircars looking dyspeptic. She’d had the terrifying sense to take along a single embedded reporter as well, from the Church Times, while effortlessly recruiting the SFS and much of Yawata Crossing to stymying all others, and the helmet-cam images as she’d meticulously obeyed instructions and achieved a swoop to skim a cloud-top and be hurled aloft on its updraught, laughing her glee as Hipper bleeked his own, had struck Grayson hard. There had also been the images of Abigail Hears, blooded on her Middie cruise to Verdant Vista, promoted to Lieutenant (JG) on deployment to Silesia, giving exemplary service as an ATO, and appointed as one of Honor’s many Flag Lieutenants in advance of the Mesan strike. It was nurture, not nature, as the equal employments of Harrington Steading and Sky Domes had long declared, and the swelling ranks of female officials and workers in the new domes underlined, and Grayson’s most hardened patriarchs had shivered where they stood.

The shuttle touched down, settling as the engine whine faded, and the hatch hissed open. Benjamin had anticipated that Honor would let the guardian treecats (with wriggling ’kittens) disembark first, Grayson protocol notwithstanding, but not that when she did appear she would have both Nimitz and Sam on her shoulders, and a sleepy, cranky Faith in her arms. Nor the squad of Flag Lieutenants led by Abigail but representing every major Alliance navy who bore the trays arrayed with thousands of data wallets, and enumerated their contents to him, on Honor’s behalf, with rapid military clarity. But however fortuitous it might be, he understood exactly what Honor was doing when she interrupted her soothing of Faith, handed off with a look to Abigail, to kneel and surrender back to him the scroll he’d given her long ago in the hope that she could save the GSN from combat with the Andermani, rise again, and roll her neck and shoulders in obvious relief.

Cast thy bread upon the waters : for thou shalt find it after many days.

So he had, and so he had, by the bakery, and he rejoiced with his people as Honor, careless of protocol, congratulated Rachel warmly and knelt again with simple happiness to embrace her impatient goddaughter, who squeaked as a cold treecat nose was touched to her own.

Very much later he found himself with Kat and Elaine, Rachel, Honor, her parents, Wesley, Reverend Sullivan, and an assortment of ’cats, the humans savouring glasses of an ancient vintage and the ’cats a liquidised celery beverage MacGuinness had concocted that had much the same effect. Honor was stretched out in a comfy chair, sleeping ’kittens draped about her, and replied to his soft query without opening her eyes.

“Erewhon, New Berlin, Nouveau Paris, where they are duplicating Sorrow Singer in Napoleon Park, and then at least three years without anyone asking me anything, Benjamin. I’ll be on Sphinx for a while, and not only because the ’kittens need to get to know the picketwood. Daddy’s going to try the new therapy for Nimitz, and he’s waited more than long enough.” There were bleeks of agreement, including Nimitz’s own. “But after the Steading the most pressing backlogs are San Martin and the duchy on Gryphon. Hector Sanchez and Richard Maxwell have
done wonders, but they can’t make formal policy so I have months of rubber-stamping to do.”

“Honor, you have never rubber-stamped anything in your life.”

She still didn’t open her eyes.

“I know. So I have to read all the stuff they’ve worked out properly. I have kept up, sort of, but only skimming, and there’s a full quarter’s reading waiting in each duchy HQ. And the city my poor Sky Domes techs have been bullied into building on San Martin as a demonstration of lower-altitude viability. Which reminds me”—almond eyes snapped open, though she didn’t move—“of two things. One is that San Martino mountaintop machismo doesn’t take especially well to dome discipline, I gather, so I need a bevy of sturdy Grayson housewives to rap their knuckles until they acquire some common sense. Are there any still available?”

Kat and Elaine, both listening, laughed, assuring Honor recruits were still coming forward in droves, but gave her speculative looks her mother echoed; and it was Allison who responded.

“What’s the second thing, dear?”

Honor’s eyes glinted. “Personal. Do you remember Tom saying that learning to ‘glide was top of his personal peace dividend?”

“Vaguely. The night President Ramirez turned up and you took that picture of the poor condor owl?”

“That’s the one. Well, he was serious, and intends to resign as CNO of the RN. He hasn’t had any leave in decades, so while Eloise and others will scream he doesn’t think they’ll actually stop him. Javier Giscard apparently wants to retire as well, because having been Acting CNO all this time he says it isn’t a job he wants at all, and he thinks Eloise needs more domestic support, so Tom’s scheming to get Lester installed with Shannon as his deputy.” Honor had a gently amused look Benjamin hadn’t seen on her face since news of Paul Tankersley’s murder had arrived. “It’ll be interesting to see. Anyway, Tom asked me if I’d teach him to ‘glide, on Sphinx, and I said I could think of nothing I’d like more.”

Her eyes had a challenging warmth that stirred Benjamin’s soul, and both Allison’s and Alfred Harrington’s eyes were daring him to object to anything he might surmise. He wondered a bit, too, seeing on Beowulf and Manticore the easy affection between Honor and Theisman, and the back of his brain considered briefly what Father Church would make of its probable living saint marrying an avowed atheist, and then, sweet Tester, what any children of those two might be like. Haven would have some adjusting to do as well, which should prove entertaining. But mostly he found himself filling with joy as he realised the warmth in Honor’s eyes was a hope of personal happiness, as well as a knowledge of peace to enjoy it in. The Tester Tested hardest those He loved best, and Honor’s many Tests had been brutally hard, but He also rewarded them, and if He had managed to give her something beyond the power of the most grateful ruler or generous people Benjamin would offer sincere thanks.

He listened to Rachel telling Honor enthusiastically about her own experiences of learning to ‘glide on Sphinx, with interruptions from Hipper and interested questions from Nimitz, and thought life very good.
And before anyone says *But that's an absurd wrap-up!*, (a) yes, I know, and (b) I'm wilfully and ironically pastiching, because (c) canon has become equally absurd in the opposite direction, and I'm fed up with waiting.

My thanks to my brother David, Scott Washburn, David Carter, and Eva FanAuthor for beta-ing, with apologies to Eva for not taking a particular suggestion.

For me a fic and non-fic response to a canon often go together, and this has a companion-piece, *The Exasperating Case of David Weber, or The Slow Death of the Honorverse*, available at Kindle Stores in the US, in the UK, and everywhere else. I wish it weren't so but I can no longer pretend to myself that the Honorverse is not broken, and as this fic serves as a requiem (and the ending, absurdly deferred in canon and by now unlikely ever to be realised), so *The Exasperating Case ...* stands as an inquest. Starring and reviewing at Amazon or Goodreads much appreciated, thanks.

Oh, and you can take it that Manticore discovered the Lynx terminus a year or two down the road, that folks already delighted by the fate of the OFS were even happier, and that events in the Quadrant played out very peacefully without interference from anyone.

Works inspired by this one: Honor Among Thieves Cover by chipper

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