

PROLOGUE

SIX MONTHS AGO

“CAPTAIN, we have a 750 live and running,” the weapons officer of *Cornelia* said calmly. The missile was too insignificant to show amid the mayhem on the forward viewscreen. There must be fifty missiles running, theirs and the enemy’s. A Morriganian capital ship turned towards them, unscathed and untouched. *How was that possible*, Victoria Antisia wondered. *At this point, surely something would have gotten through countermeasures*. It was almost impossible to make sense of what was going on. There were forty ships engaged plus the orbital stations around Morrigan. They’d punched through and now the Morriganians counterattacked. Whoever their new Warlord or Warlady was, they were good.

“The flagship’s identified,” the comm officer said. “*Perilous* is launching all tubes.”

“Don’t get distracted,” Antisia said. She sat forward in her command seat. “Our mission is to punch through. We’re in the vanguard, as Altissimus Iulus directed.” And that was a source of pride. Of course she had the vanguard. She’d joined Iulus as a fresh young aide fifteen years ago. Now she captained a capital ship. Now she led the vanguard.

The forward viewscreen showed a 900 and a pair of 500s closing on the Morriganian flagship. Surely at least one of them would get

through active countermeasures and do some real damage! And yet the flagship didn't seem to be launching countermeasures at all. The missiles closed.

Lightning sprang across the void. It leapt from the Morriganian flagship, an impossible blue flash, current catching the 900 in its run, skipping to the pair of 500s, all of them detonating.

"What was that?" the first officer said incredulously.

"I have no idea," Antisia managed.

"Captain, a missile has acquired on us," the weapons officer said. "750."

"Countermeasures," Antisia said. She watched the countermeasures package launch. "Turn our nose into it," she said, but there was no time. The missile streaked straight and true toward their side. It was going to hit just forward of the midline.

Impact. The screens went blank, power flickering. The high, keen sound of the depressurizing alarm. And then the wind.

The screens over the ventilation system in the ceiling gave, air rushing upward to the holes, rushing upward to the gaping breach in the deck above. It didn't matter if doors sealed. It didn't matter if the ventilation system tried to. The ducts themselves were destroyed.

It was like sitting in a maelstrom. Everything in the command center was caught in a hurricane. One of the wallscreens came loose, slapping into the first officer as it flew, pulping him in his chair. The wind dragged at Antisia, only the belts of her chair holding her. The navigator, small and slender, was simply yanked out from under her straps, her mouth open in a soundless scream as she was bounced against the jagged hole in the ceiling and then through.

Antisia closed her eyes, holding her breath instinctively for whatever good it would do, for whatever few seconds of extra life it would give her. She held on as though muscles could bear the strain. *Void take me*, she thought. She had always known she would die in space.

The wind stopped. Somewhere, a seal had held. Somewhere on the deck above a bulkhead had closed. Around her, every alarm sounded. The lights were out, only the instrument lights for illumination. She could hold her breath no longer.

Antisia took a breath, choking. The air was thin, thin as a high

mountain, but not completely gone. Systems were supposed to replenish, if they were still working. The gravity was out. The viewscreens were out. "Who's here?" Antisia managed. "Report."

There were two people capable of answering, the comm officer and the astrographer. "Here, Captain."

The command arm was under her fingers. There were no visuals, but she could pull a plot on her armscreen. They were sandwiched between Morrigan's orbital stations and their approaching fleet. Half of *Cornelia* was depressurized.

"Status report," Antisia said. Her head was swimming from lack of oxygen. "Tarn, see if you can get an environmental update." It wasn't the astrographer's duty, but he seemed to be in one piece.

His voice shook. "We have twenty-seven compartments depressurized. Eight are open to space. The ventral scrubbers are offline. The ventral reclamation tanks flash-froze and then ruptured. We still have radiant heat in the floor of this deck but the heat is off for all decks above this and starboard of the mainline."

"What do we have that's working?"

"We have main engines," the comm officer said. "We have port, forward, and aft thruster control."

"That's something," Antisia said. "Tarn, see if you can reroute any environmental systems. Meanwhile, go on supplemental oxygen." She opened the compartment under her chair, pulling out the mask and its small tank. She hated to use it because it only held thirty minutes supply, but if she didn't get her head clear, nothing else would matter.

"Captain."

Antisia fixed the mask in place, taking a measured breath. Don't gulp. That would cause more damage. Her swimming head cleared.

"We have a general withdrawal signal," the comm officer said. He sounded incredulous. He keyed it on speaker, Iulus' voice unmistakable. "All ships, disengage! Jump as you are able. Repeat, all ships disengage! Jump when you are able."

"He doesn't say where to jump to," Tarn said.

"Anywhere," Antisia said grimly. She knew a rout when she saw one. And there was the plot, but how to get out of this gravity soup? Her hands were shaking. It was hard to use the board. How? There

must be an avenue. How? She saw her hands as though they weren't her own. And there was the track, a sling around Morrigan's light side into the space between Morrigan and the system primary. There was enough room to run up for a jump without interference. The inner planets were on the other side of the primary. There was just enough room. "Setting a new course," Antisia said. She turned *Cornelia's* nose toward the gap, the big ship sluggish but responding.

A frigate fell in behind them, seeing the same opening. Behind them, the flagship had been cut in half by fire, each end swinging crazily. The Morriganians closed like a hunting fish pack, dark against the stars, lit by impossible flares of lightning here and there.

"Run," Antisia said quietly. "Run."

Morrigan's cities were bright against the darkside, an orbital station firing on a frigate. The frigate turned, following them as well, thrusters firing unevenly.

"I have a jump plot," Tarn said. He didn't look at the officer dead in the seat beside him. "To an intermediate point eight light years away."

"We'll take it," Antisia said. "Send it to the frigates if that's possible."

"Confirmed," the comm officer said. "It's the greatest defeat in a generation," he said quietly.

Antisia didn't even feel it. They ran sunward, mayhem behind.

CHAPTER ONE

SIX MONTHS LATER

THE EARLY SPRING snow was falling in fat flakes past the many-paned glass doors, the twilight deepening, and Sura laid aside the broom she had used to sweep the floor around the statue. She took a long breath, looking up at it. It stood on a low stone plinth in the middle of the square chamber, unadorned and unpainted wood, save that it was blackened to charcoal on one side. The Shrine had burned eighty years ago. The image had been saved, but not without damage. The Lord of the Dance stared into the middle distance, his harp beneath his arm, half of his face charred away with the arm that would have plucked the strings. He faced the back of the chamber, the solid doors that led to the anteroom. Sura bowed to his Bright Face and walked around the statue.

It had been carved from a single piece of wood, two sides and two faces. The other face looked out through the glass doors to the terrace and beyond it to the estuary and the distant lights of Tranquility. Unscathed, it was a beautiful and stern face, his spear in his hand and his hound at his side, the Dark Face of the Lord of the Dance, the Bringer of Justice. Sura closed her eyes. "My dear Lord," she whispered. "Do not let me fail here at the test." There was no sound save the heavy plopping of snow dripping from the roof tiles.

Sura went to the double doors, her red skirts trailing against the

floor she had just swept and opened them enough to pass through. It was cold. The ancient apple tree that clung to the terrace had snow sticking to its branches, but unless it iced it wouldn't hurt the buds. What was merely spring rain in Tranquility often fell as snow at this altitude. Beneath the terrace, fir trees clung to the rocky slope. Across the estuary, red lights showed among the others on the mountainside, beacons for starships incoming to Tranquility, glowing amid a golden haze of pollution clinging to the deep valley. Sura fed the fire in the stone basin. It did not gutter. There was little wind, just the slow fall of heavy flakes, each one turning and turning as they fell.

There was the sound of an electric engine, her acolyte's three-wheeler turning into the narrow lane that ran up to the back of the Shrine from the road. Sura's heart beat faster. She schooled her face to impenetrable calm, arranging the medallion that hung down onto her forehead, the gold heavy against her skin. She stood by the fire, her hands in her opposite crimson sleeves, the only bright thing besides the fire against the snow.

The rear door to the chamber opened, her acolyte coming in accompanied by a young man. He was thirty or so, lean and tall, his curling black hair cropped close in the Calpurnian fashion, a little mustache above his full lips. He wore a dark coat against the snow, and his eyes looked around the Shrine curiously, stopping on the burned face of the god. He said something Sura could not hear through the door. Her acolyte answered.

She knew the moment he saw her. She saw his eyes widen just a little. But of course he did not know her. He simply saw the priestess standing in the snow, white hair making a headdress of many braids, her gown as red as blood.

Her acolyte slid open the doors. "I have brought Bel Alan, my lady."

Sura inclined her head. "Be welcome, Bel Alan," she said as he came through the doors onto the snowy terrace.

"Thank you." He was looking around curiously, taking in everything at a glance. "I'm honored, but I have no idea why you wanted to see me."

Sura nodded to the acolyte, who made a slight bow as she withdrew to set the tea in an internal room. "Make the offering with me."

"If you like." He looked perplexed. "But I don't..."

She took the applewood dipper and the bowl of resins and precious herbs. "...make offerings?" she asked. "What god do you serve?" She thought she knew the answer.

"None," he said. His eyes met hers directly. "I'm not a religious man."

Sura smiled. "If you do not believe, then it will do you no harm to simply follow a quaint local custom." She put the dipper in his hand, her hand over his, arranging his fingers on the handle as though he were a child. "There. One scoop, no more, for the Lord of the Dance who holds His hounds in check." She helped him scatter it across the flames, dried flowers burning blue for a moment before they flared out.

"Forgive me," Bel said. "But do I know you?"

"I think not," Sura said. She stepped quickly away, putting the dipper back where it belonged. "But I know of you, Bel Alan. They say you are a very clever man and capable of undertaking the most delicate deceptions."

"Is that what they say?" he murmured. Bel glanced around the terrace. "But what's that to you?"

"I find myself in need of someone to provide very specialized services," Sura said. She went to the doors. "Come inside and we will discuss them."

He followed her, of course. She went through the square chamber and through another sliding door to the right, into a room set against the edge of the terrace. The screens were open, showing night and falling snow. A little table had been set with two scarlet cushions, a steaming teapot and cups waiting. Sura sank down onto one cushion. Bel sat cross-legged on the other, reaching for his coat. "Do you mind if I take it off?"

"Of course not," Sura said. "Make yourself comfortable." He wore a loose black shirt beneath it, wide sleeves clasped tight at the wrists, half-boots that were worn and reheeled despite the polish of the

leather. He was very graceful and not as young as she had imagined, but that was foolishness as she knew his age to the day.

“What’s the job?” Bel asked.

Sura poured the tea. Her voice was steady. “I need someone to recover an object from inside the Viceregal Palace.”

He whistled. “That’s advanced.”

Sura smiled as she handed him his cup. “And that is why I have contacted you. I understand you’re expensive but the best.”

“I am expensive. And I am the best.” Bel smiled and took the cup. “Tell me more. What’s the object and where is it?”

“The object is a headdress referred to as the Solaste Crown, a gift from the Morriganian Warlord to the Princess of Lono some eight hundred years ago. It was one of the treasures of the royal family until their extinction eighty years ago. It is currently in the treasury of the Viceregal Palace, an example of ancient and barbarous art.” Sura smiled at him over the rim of the cup. “Needless to say, it is of considerable symbolic value to us.”

“Us?”

“The people of Lono, who would see it redeemed from our conquerors.” Sura returned his smile pleasantly.

Bel frowned. “That doesn’t sound like the kind of thing that can just go missing and not have anybody notice. Not to mention getting into the Viceregal Palace, which other than the starship yards might be the most heavily guarded place on the planet.”

“And that is why you are ideal,” Sura said. She lifted her left hand to tick off the reasons on her fingers. “First, you are Calpurnian. You will not arouse suspicion as a Lono would. Second, you are unknown to the Viceregal Palace’s current occupant, Altissima Antisia. Third, I have a plan.”

Bel grinned. “I like a lady with a plan. So what is it?”

“As you know, until recently Lono was the province of the Autarch Altissimus Iulus. While he was here only rarely, he derived enormous income from Lono. And he was here more often in the past, when he was a young man. But now he is dead.” She opened her hand. “Assassinated after his failure to conquer Morrigan. Antisia was a faithful deputy of his and loyal to the end. She has fallen out with Altissima

Thurinia who claims everything that was his. Antisia would be delighted to find an excuse not to turn Lono over to her. If, for example, a natural son of the Autarch were to appear and lay claim?"

Bel looked thoughtful. He took a drink of his tea, eyes sweeping shut as he drank, then looked up. "So you want me to pretend to be this natural son? There's a big problem with that. They'll pull a DNA sample in ten minutes flat and check it. The moment they see I'm lying, it's over."

"Of course they'll pull a DNA sample," Sura said. "But do you think they have the Autarch's DNA just lying around? They'll have to send your sample on a courier ship to Calpurnia for comparison, and then the response will have to be brought back. That will take five or six days. In the meantime, you can convince Antisia to allow you to stay in the Viceregal Palace and give you honors and access. That's where your cleverness comes in."

Bel took a deep breath. "So before the courier ship gets back, I steal this thing and disappear."

"Along with whatever substantial personal funds belonging to the Altissimus Iulus you have convinced Antisia to grant you access to." Sura lifted her cup. "I want the Solaste Crown. The funds are entirely yours. And of course any other valuables you remove."

Bel leaned back. "That's quite an offer."

"I need a con man who can play the Calpurnian Altissimus to the hilt," Sura said. "And you're about the same height and build as the Autarch was, dark-skinned and dark eyed. You don't look so dissimilar that it's unconvincing. I can certainly provide you with a cover story, including that you've just learned of your patrician birth. Once you're in, you've got five days, or four if you want to be safe, to get the Crown and anything else and get out."

"This is actually not crazy," Bel said.

"Indeed," Sura said. She watched him. "Are you interested?"

"I believe so," Bel said, and touched his cup to hers.

FOR A MOMENT WHEN HE AWOKE, Bel was uncertain where he was. The warmth of the old-fashioned box bed radiated upward from the

mattress cover, and the sheets and blankets smelled faintly of juniper. He had dreamed—something. It dissipated, leaving only contentedness. He had spent the night at the Shrine. Bel looked around the tiny room, one narrow window with a closed shade, a box bed built into the far wall. There were no distractions. Either this room was intended for pilgrims or people who were very serious about getting away from the rest of the world. There was no screen, no pictures or anything else. And yet he'd slept well. Like a baby in its mother's arms, the saying was. Maybe there was something to the heated bed thing.

Bel sat up, stretching, and walked over to open the shade. The window showed nothing but a strip of snowy garden, though the snow was beginning to melt, the sun coming watery through low clouds. He took a shower in the adjacent cube. There was a brick of soap, green and smelling of some herb he couldn't quite name. It made him smile.

It was with quite a sense of well-being that he emerged from his room and went in search of the priestess. It had probably been a good idea to come back to Lono. A good job, a challenging job that paid well, was a chance to turn around the streak of bad luck that had plagued him for nearly a year. Since then it had been one thing after another, one lost stake after another, one costly mistake after the next. He'd run through his currency and his welcome fast.

The room with the burned statue was quiet. Bel slipped through in stockinged feet. There was something about not wearing outdoor shoes in the Shrine, or at least he thought so. Its blank eyes followed him. It was creepy the way they'd carved it, like it was looking at you and measuring you, and that was made worse by the burns, like someone who ought to be dead watching you.

The priestess was down the hall in a techno office. Mostly techno, anyway. The floor was still bare polished wood, and there was the same narrow window to the dark bushes of the garden, but there was a desk with a big screen built into the surface, a kneeling chair with thick padding, and all the things you'd expect in an office that wasn't on Lono. It was a little surprising to see her sitting in the chair, her red robes less ornate than yesterday, though her many braids were pinned

up like a white crown. She looked up when she saw him, a smile transforming her face. "Ah, Bel. I hope you slept well?"

"Yes, thank you." He stopped just inside the door.

"I have some things for you," she said. "I've been working this morning." There was a faint reproach in her voice.

Bel scrubbed his hand through his damp hair. "What time is it?"

"Nearly noon." Her mouth twitched. "I have had hours to prepare these documents for you."

"I'm sorry." Bel winced. Way to make a great impression, sleeping in like a kid! "I didn't set an alarm."

"No reason to." She passed him a reader. "Take a look at these, if you will, and tell me if you think they will suffice for your purposes."

There wasn't a second chair in the room. Bel stood while he flipped through the documents. The first was a registered certificate of birth stating that Nereus Iulus was the natural and biological child of Amari Calado and Sanius Iulus, with Bel's own birthdate filled in neatly, the creation date on the document matching the birthdate. The second was an affidavit signed by Sanius Iulus stating that Nereus Iulus was acknowledged as his son, the date twelve days later. Lastly, there was a legal document again purporting to be from Sanius Iulus leaving to his natural son, Nereus, all of his personal property and currency on the world of Lono, up to and including honors granted, "given that he is also the son of Amari Calado, a Descendant of the Sun." It was dated four months later, the date verified by document creation and download.

Bel looked up with a respectful nod. "These are good work," he said. "Very convincing. You have good people."

"Yes," the priestess said. "I do." She glanced down at her screen, frowning at something she saw there. "Can you work with that?"

"Absolutely," he said. "I'll need a good cover story to explain where Nereus has been for the last thirty years."

"Well then," she said. "If you will take the midday meal with me, we will concoct something that seems plausible." She looked at him critically. "You don't look too dissimilar as it is. The shape of your face isn't so different from the Autarch's. You are dark as he was, and you may seem to have the Calado eyes." She began to rise, and Bel offered

her his arm to help her out of the kneeling chair. She leaned on it a moment. "Do you know of the Calado?"

"Not much, madam," Bel said. Women everywhere appreciated politeness and charm whatever their age, even if it was from their employee.

"They were the Descendants of the Sun, the old dynasty of ruling Princes of Lono. Some branch or other of the Calado had ruled this world for nearly seven hundred years. I won't say all ruled well." She smiled at him sideways as they went down the hall to the room they had taken tea in the night before. It was laid for the midday meal, the silent acolyte standing by with a pitcher to pour the soup. "And that was their downfall, of course. The last Prince was lazy and far from intelligent. He was easily provoked by the Calpurnians into starting a war he could not win. Lono was crushed."

"Yes, I know that part," Bel said. He sat down on the cushion opposite her. "I'm actually half Lono myself."

"Are you?" She looked pleased, but there was a false note in it. Probably she already knew that.

"My mother is Lono," Bel said. "But she's married to a Calpurnian and they live in the Adelphi Rim. She met him when he was an enlisted soldier."

"Your father?" The priestess glanced up at the acolyte. "We will take the full meal today. I know I don't usually, but I have a guest."

"Yes, Sura," the acolyte said, and slipped out.

"No, my stepfather," Bel said. "My bio father didn't stick around."

"Ah," the priestess lifted her soup bowl, drinking the clear soup.

"So this Nereus," Bel said. "Is his mother a real person?"

"She was. She died many years ago, so she can't unfortunately reappear and mess up this plan," the priestess said. "She was from one of the cadet lines of the Calado, and her mother survived the disaster eighty years ago, so she had a claim to the Principate. But she's long dead."

Bel frowned. "So you've written it that Nereus is royal?"

"It has to be convincing that she is someone Sanius Iulus would find important enough to acknowledge a son with," she said. "He

certainly wouldn't acknowledge a child by some serving girl. Too plebian."

"No," Bel agreed. "Well, that works for me. As long as there aren't a bunch of long-lost aunts popping out of the curtains that I'm supposed to recognize."

"There is no one on Lono who you could possibly be expected to recognize," the priestess assured him.

"That would be hard to carry off." Bel looked up as the acolyte returned with baskets of steaming rolls. "If it's just creating a persona, it's best to stick to lies that are mostly true. If nobody knows anything about this Nereus, I'll say I grew up on Adelphi so that I can talk about it convincingly."

"It is indeed best to stick to lies that are mostly true," the priestess said with a smile. "So tell me what you intend to use as background. We will say that you found these documents among the effects of your late mother, who raised you on Adelphi in exile. Discovering them, you brought them to me to understand what they meant."

"Works for me," Bel said.

"So who is this Nereus?" the priestess asked. She looked like she was enjoying this part. "Is he married? Involved? Has children?"

"No, too complicated," Bel said. "He's the kind of guy who never settles down. There's always something else out there, someone fascinating right around the corner. It's a big galaxy. What's the point of limiting yourself? He's got a lot going on."

"What's his education? Did he go to the university on Calpurnia?"

"He dropped out," Bel said promptly. "He's not good at conforming. At fitting into a tiny little slot so he can live in a tiny little box with tiny little people."

The priestess' smile grew. "A man with ambition. Curious. Clever."

"Yeah, maybe so," Bel said. "But Calpurnia's no place for a man with ambition, unless he's a patrician."

"But now Nereus is," the priestess said. "So..."

Bel nodded, taking a bite of a crunchy roll. "He's in a hurry to be recognized. He wants Altissima Antisia to get this done so he can start exercising the power he's inherited."

The priestess nodded approvingly. "Not wealth?"

Bel shrugged. "Currency is worth the opportunity it buys. Or the happiness. By itself, it's just something you gamble with. Spend it, and you've got a thing, even if that thing is just a memory of an experience."

She looked startled. "You are not the mercenary I expected, Bel Alan."

"No?" He raised an eyebrow. "Besides, we're talking about Nereus."

"So we are." She lifted the soup bowl again. "Then let us finish his backstory, and I will see if I can beg an appointment with the Altissima Antisia. The afternoon is yours to do with as you like. I will ping you when I've arranged an appointment."

GOLDEN WANDERER came out of jump just within the orbit of Lono's greater moon, screens resetting as the exterior cameras came online. The comm board pinged. "This is Lono Control. Please identify yourself."

Aurore Melian tilted her seat into the upright position, swinging the arm with its touch screen across her body. She keyed the comm on. "This is the Menaechman merchanter *Golden Wanderer* inbound for Tranquility Yards." Around her, the other three crew were locking their seats upright as well.

"What is your port of origin and your cargo?" Lono Control sounded bored at the routine questions.

"Port of Beira, Menaechmi," Aurore replied. "Top cargo on our manifest is coffee beans and textiles. Additionally, 60 percent of our hold is consigned freight on pallets to individual importers."

"Tranquility Yards, not Tranquility Port?"

"We're coming in for a refit," Aurore said. "We'll offload and go into a refit slip—Mari Brothers is doing the upgrade."

"Got you, *Golden Wanderer*," Lono Control said. "Sending your approach vector. You're cleared for Tranquility Yards dock seven."

"Affirming, Tranquility Yards dock seven," Aurore said. "Thanks, Lono Control. Seeing the vector now."

One of the two forward screens had shifted to show the approach

corridor, an unusual one, but there must be a lot of traffic, coming in over the Armstrong Sea from the east, across the big island of Saetag, and then into Tranquility overland. Usually the approach was from the west, over the Northern Ocean. Lono was 90 percent ocean, its small island continents in chains across the seas from pole to pole.

"Passengers and crew leaving the yards area must go through customs," Lono Control added.

"Understood," Aurore said. She wondered if she could get a through line to the factor, but probably not. Lono usually had too much traffic and the authorities weren't terribly flexible. Well, maybe they'd at least notify. Her voice was casual. "Can I get a ping sent to Idra Melian, House Melian's factor? Just an autonotify to let her know we're inbound?"

"Sorry, you'll have to let your own factor know after landing."

"Understood," Aurore said. "Starting our approach now." Well, it would have saved time, but it wasn't critical.

Lang, in the second seat, leaned over as Aurore cut the comm. "That would be the reason," he said, nodding at the other forward screen. A Calpurnian capital ship rode in low orbit over the Northern Ocean, lines out from its crumpled bow tethering it to a tender. A frigate held geostationary position further out, its extensive battle damage clear even on long-range sensors. There might be a third one beyond it in a polar orbit. "Look at that thing. It's a wonder it's in one piece."

"Damage from Morrigan," Aurore guessed. "Want to put money on there being a couple more in Tranquility Yards? I don't think you could land that capital ship, but if there's not a frigate or two in the Yards I'll be surprised." She craned her neck as though that would somehow make the plot show more. "There weren't so many last time I was here."

"Think there's going to be any ordnance for us?" Lang asked. After all, the whole point of the refit was to equip *Golden Wanderer* with a pair of missile launchers.

"We're paying for it," Aurore said. Her father had literally yelled at the cost, but he'd agreed and they had cash upfront for the payment.

"Yeah, but will we shoot up the place if we don't get it?" Lang asked. "They run the planet. We don't."

"Money talks," Aurore said. "I can grease some palms if I need to." She shrugged. "We'll get what we need."

Lang nodded, apparently willing to trust in House Melian's purse, though Aurore was all too aware it wasn't actually bottomless. She'd rather run the ship any day than go over the books with her father, but he was determined that she was going to understand every nuance of the House's finances. "After all," he kept saying, "you're my heir and who knows what might happen?" He'd had a close call and now mortality was creeping up on him, but at least he hadn't refused to let her handle the armament. She'd been afraid he'd insist on her not going off-world, and that would be intolerable, stuck in an office with the books instead of the helm of a starship.

They were passing through a cloud layer, *Golden Wanderer's* steering thrusters firing to slow them. Lang read off altitude and vector by routine, though she could see it plainly displayed. Slowing. Thrusters fired again. "Attitude adjustment beginning," Aurore said on the internal comm for the benefit of crew and passengers. "Artificial gravity going offline." *Golden Wanderer* tilted, nose rising, preparing to land with the engine pod down. There was a sudden, sickening drop as the gravity adjusted. Instead of facing forward, she was lying back strapped in her chair, the screens above her head rather than in front of her.

They broke through the cloud layer, the camera reorienting to show the land below, the big island dusted in snow on the mountains, the estuary silver in the dim sunlight.

"There you go, captain," Lang said. "Right on. Looks like a pair of frigates snugged in there."

Aurore was preoccupied with the landing procedure and barely spared a glance. "Bet they're in crap shape." There were the field beacons, the concentric circles that marked their zone, bright green lights visible even by day. "Starting final orientation."

Golden Wanderer tilted straight up, slowing further, easing down on its own thrust in the middle of the lit circles. Eighty meters. Twenty meters. Twelve meters. It seemed like they were barely moving.

"Touch," Aurore said, and with a jar the gear touched down. "Full engine cut."

"Cutting the main engine," Lang said.

Golden Wanderer eased down onto the field.

"Welcome to Lono, *Golden Wanderer*," Lono Control said. "Turning you over to the tow boss."

"Got it. Thanks, Lono Control," Aurore said.

"Nice landing," Lang said. "Not a bounce."

"I never bounce," Aurore said with a smile. It was a long-standing joke. She turned the internal comm back on. "We're down," she said. "Please stay strapped until the tow has us in the cradle." She could see the tow coming out, ready to take *Golden Wanderer* to its berth. This was always the tedious part, waiting for the tow to secure them and then tilt them down again, nose forward rather than up, and then pull them to the correct berth. *Golden Wanderer* was too big to dock by itself, not like a little shuttle or scoutship.

Local info was pouring in as wireless data connected to the port systems. Chilly but not cold, respiratory alert for those with pollution sensitivities, 84 percent humidity, local time 13:47 of a 26-hour day, so midday on a damp day in early spring. While the tow secured them, she sent a quick burst to Idra, the factor, to let her know *Golden Wanderer* was in, and another to Mari Brothers to let them know *Golden Wanderer* had arrived for the refit and requesting an appointment to go over the specs.

"How long is our layover, captain?" Lang asked.

"No idea yet. At least a local day to offload, though I'll need most of the crew for that. Then we'll turn her over to Mari Brothers to mount the missile launchers, which shouldn't take more than a couple of days. Load ordnance, familiarize ourselves with the new systems, and then we'll take *Golden Wanderer* home." Aurore smiled. "They'll be some time for a layover while they're mounting the launchers."

"I should think so." Another voice joined the conversation, and Aurore twisted around to see her sister standing in the command center door.

"Didn't I say to stay strapped in?" Aurore asked.

Dian Melian shrugged. "Until we tilted. But right now we're just

rolling along in the tow to the dock. My screen's not showing anything useful."

"You've got the same view I do," Aurore said. She wished she hadn't had to bring her sister on this trip, but their father had insisted. *You'll need Dian for diplomacy.* That was a load of excrement. There was no diplomacy involved in a refit. He'd wanted her gone because he wasn't sure how Dian was handling Caralys's pregnancy and a business trip to Lono was a good excuse.

"Is Idra going to meet us at the dock or are we going to her office?" Dian asked.

"I don't know yet. I just pinged her."

The camera view changed as the tow turned into the lane of berths. The forward view was suddenly filled with the ship in the first berth, its enormous bulk dwarfing *Golden Wanderer*. It was a Calpurnian frigate, sleek and streamlined, paired missile tubes forward and on its ventral surface, *Impenetrable* painted on its side in letters three meters high. And yet just aft of the missile tubes, the sides were covered in scaffolding, plating removed to show compartments within. The aft thruster pod was missing, twisted struts showing where it had been taken off.

Dian took a deep breath. "Dancer, that's fucked."

Aurore nodded. "This must be the end of the battle line from Morrigan finally getting in for refit. I'm not sure how that landed with half its steering thrusters messed up."

"Maybe they had some steering and the yards have taken the pod off because it was a total loss," Dian said.

"Yeah," Aurore said. "Those look like scorch marks on the hull. See there? What could do that?"

"No idea," Dian said.

Lang looked up. "How'd you like a ship like that, captain?"

"I'd like one in better shape," Aurore said. And yet her eyes devoured the lethal shape of it.

"So a good part of the remaining Calpurnian Navy is loyal to Altissima Antisia," Dian mused.

"Where do you get that?" Aurore asked.

"They're here, aren't they? They wouldn't be berthed for a refit on

Lono if they hadn't pledged to her," Dian said. "Which means Thurinia holds Calpurnia." Aurore must have looked blank. "The one who is emerging as leader of the Social Logic faction and potential Autarch. Do you not pay any attention to politics?" Dian said impatiently.

"Not if I can help it," Aurore said.

"And Daddy wants you as House heir," Dian said.

"We are not getting into that again," Aurore said with a look that said, *not in front of the crew*.

Dian nodded. They were in agreement on that. Despite any conflicts between the mainline family, in public they presented a united front.

"Let's get docked," Aurore said.

CHAPTER TWO

BEL ALAN THREADED his way through the narrow streets of Tranquility. The land sloped steeply down to the estuary, and all the flat land along the shore was filled with industrial buildings, the haze of chemical exhaust lying low in the valley. Above, the steep sides of the mountains were a tangle of houses and apartments clinging to the contours of the land. Some were new, Calpurnian architecture of glass and steel, sealed buildings with extraordinary views. Most were traditional however, wood and mortar, upper stories built onto older buildings beneath, wooden balconies leaning out over dizzying drops, bluish-green conifers everywhere to help hold the land in shape. Their root systems prevented landslides. It wasn't impossible for the whole mountainside to simply collapse. It had probably happened. And yet people built where they did for a variety of reasons.

Bel went on foot through the narrow streets. He'd gotten Sura's acolyte to drop him off on the theory that he needed to get his clothes from his lodging. That was true, but he had a lot more to do than that. He waited at a tram stop, the clouds lowering but not quite drizzling. If it had snowed in the city as at the Shrine, it had all melted. The tram pulled up. People piled out, old women clutching string bags, grizzled men with their lunches wrapped in waxed paper, a few younger women laughing and talking despite the drizzle, a few with small chil-

dren. Older children would be at school or at work. So would everyone who worked in the vast starship yards or the factories that supplied them. That was where the good wages were.

Bel swung up on the back step after a woman with a toddler, hanging onto the handstraps. In his blue wrapped overcoat and boots he attracted no attention, looks that were not out of place on Lono, nothing in his dress or manner foreign. Bel was good at blending in. And he'd been back to Lono since he'd left as a child, though of course never to the Shrine before. His business was more often with gambling marks than religious leaders. Still, he knew his way around.

He rode the tram down the winding streets, past shops and open-fronted stick shops, the smells of their roasting vegetables and meat following him. The tram skirted the square with the open-air second-hand market, wares protected against the drizzle by red and yellow tarps. Then it turned into a steep modern street, cutting through apartments that hung over the road, straight down to the estuary shrouded in haze rising from the round tanks of the Reer Factory. They bottled liquid chemicals under pressure for starships—hydrogen, oxygen, chlorine—everything that a ship carried in a tank. Most of them were harmless. Some weren't. He vaguely remembered someone telling him about a chlorine leak at the plant that had killed a bunch of workers a few years ago, saying insouciantly that thankfully chlorine was a heavy gas and their apartment was two thousand feet up the mountainside.

Yeah. Lono was like that. They took the bad in stride and made bad jokes about it, took a flask of warm wine and drank to the Blameless Prince. Someday a huge, hulking, blessed warrior would arise from the Old Line and drive the Calpurnians away. Well, it had been eighty years they'd been waiting. They'd keep waiting, singing sad songs and working in the factories. And that was probably what Sura was up to, wasn't it? Bel thought. She wanted the Solaste Crown. It was an emblem of that dead royal house. Presumably that made it a symbol of Lono's independence. He was happy to get it for her, but a crown doesn't change anything. Anyway, by now Lono's economy was so entwined with Calpurnia's that if every Calpurnian suddenly disappeared, everybody would starve.

Bel looked out the window at the factory gates behind their fences. Nobody was getting on or off here. It was the middle of the shift. These were the good jobs, even if they came with the inevitable religious stigma of dealing with technology. Though what was that anymore, Bel wondered, when even the Shrine had a modern datalink? Ok, it wasn't in a public part of the building, but it was there.

And sure, not every ship that was made or repaired here was Calpurnian, but without the Calpurnians and their shipyards and their heavy industry, what would people do for a living? And what about people like him, part Calpurnian and part Lonoi? His mom had moved to Adelphi when his stepfather was assigned there, but there were tens of thousands of people like him in eighty years. Were they supposed to leave? Even if they'd lived here their whole lives? What about people married to Lonoi, with Lonoi children?

Bel shook his head. Old people would teach sad songs to youngbloods who wanted a fight, but it was a foolish dream. There was no Blameless Prince, no promised one rising to save Lono. But it was probably better for the Shrine to have the crown than for it to sit in an anthropological display. And Sura had promised him everything else he managed to liberate from the Altissima, which would certainly be enough for a stake, a new start.

If the deal worked. Bel stepped down from the tram when it stopped at the main entrance to the starship yards. Sura might double-cross him. Easy enough to take the crown and the other goods too and leave him to hang out to dry with the Calpurnian authorities. He'd have to get out before the DNA test came back. No reason Sura couldn't simply delay him until it did. Then he'd be in hot water, with nothing except his word to show that the Shrine had anything to do with it. No, you never count on a client for your exit strategy. You depend on yourself.

The rain had finally stopped. Bel made his way down the line, looking up at the massive ships in dock. There was a warship that looked truly beyond repair. Well, none of the warships did him any good. He headed down the line toward the smaller ships at the end.

There was a sturdy merchanter in berth, the hull shiny and neatly painted, scaffolding underneath. Someone in a painter's mask was

touching up the name on the rear hull: *Golden Wanderer*. Meanwhile, a crew was removing hull plating just aft of the center, probably to install the sleek 250 missile launcher cradled on a lift beside. A woman was scrambling around on the yellow poly nets that led from the scaffolding up onto the curve of the rear hull, cargo pants and a white shirt under a loose, worn jacket. She slid down the last ladder.

"Hey there," Bel called. "Is this your ship?"

She turned. Her dark hair was cut short, hacked off in what was supposed to be a blunt cut, but humidity had turned it into a loose mass of waves around a startlingly pretty face, pale and angular with full lips. She was his age or perhaps a couple of years younger, and she looked him up and down, apparently deciding that he wasn't an authority or someone who worked for the yards. "I'm the captain," she said. "Why?"

Bel walked over to her. "I'm looking for passage off Lono. What's your registry and where are you bound?"

"*Golden Wanderer* belongs to House Melian out of Beira on Menaechmi," she said. "We're fitting a missile launcher and then we're loading cargo and bound to our home port. We've got room for paying passengers if you don't mind not knowing exactly what our schedule is yet. We're still mounting the launcher and waiting on ordnance."

Bel held out his hand. "Bel Alan," he said. "Menaechmi sounds good. How long do you think you'll be?"

"Aurore," she said, shaking his hand firmly. "A few days? Maybe four or five? Are you flexible on your dates?"

Bel nodded. "Reasonably flexible. A week is too long, but three days, four days, five days, that's aces."

"I don't think we'll be five days," Aurore said. She took off her work gloves. "Unless something is seriously wrong. The launcher is being installed today and then there's a couple of days for systems integration and structural testing. After that, it's just restocking O₂, water, flushing the systems that might have been affected by the refit—that's not big stuff."

"No," Bel said. "What's Beira like?"

She raised an eyebrow. "You want to go somewhere you know nothing about? Ever been to Menaechmi before?"

"I've been to Casera," he said. "Briefly. Different city." He shrugged. And that had been a disaster. He'd spent almost the entire time in a casino running a con which had crashed and burned. He'd been lucky to avoid arrest. However, the Cities of the Coast were all separate entities. Even if he was wanted in Casera, another city wouldn't be looking for him. And Menaechmi was certainly not on friendly terms with Calpurnia right this minute. "Nice place. Nice beaches."

"Yeah, we have those too," Aurore said. "Bigger than Casera. Older. A good bit cooler, since Beira's well north of the equator." She quirked an eyebrow at him. "Are you in some kind of trouble with the law?"

"No, but I'm planning to be," Bel said with a grin.

Aurore laughed. "Sure. If that's how you play it."

"I'll play it any way you like, beautiful one," Bel said. Menaechmen liked polish.

She didn't stop smiling. "Don't you beautiful one me," Aurore said. "I don't do charm and I don't like *hapalos*."

"Excuse me?"

She eyed the open collar of his coat. "Flowered shirt. Little mustache. Cologne. *Hapalos*. You could translate that as 'fancy man.' Not my taste."

"You mean like a gigolo?" Bel said. He raised an eyebrow suggestively. "You think I'm smoking enough to make a living on it?"

"I expect you're making a living on something I don't need to know about," Aurore said.

"You probably don't want to know," Bel said. A pretty starship captain with a sense of humor was definitely brightening his day, with extra points for verbal sparring. "Unless you like rogues."

"I absolutely do not like rogues," Aurore said. The corners of her mouth twitched like she was trying not to smile. "I like respectable, hardworking men with a solid work ethic and a serious mind."

"So do you have one?" Bel asked.

"Not at present." Aurore tilted her head. "But we were talking about passage to Menaechmi." She named a sum that was substantial but not unreasonable.

"That works," Bel said. Of course he didn't have the currency, but he would, right? "Pay you at boarding?"

"Sure," Aurore said. She did smile now. "That means if you don't show up, I leave you."

"Right." Bel grimaced. "So can you ping me a couple of hours before you lift?"

She nodded. "Where can I reach you?"

"How about if I ping your ship and give you my code?" Bel said. He'd give her his comm bracelet, but he'd rather wait until everything was surer.

She gave him a cynical look. "Yeah. Even odds whether you do or not."

"It's a passenger, not an assignation," he said with mock indignation. "Like you said, I don't show up, you raise ship without me. If I get left, it's on me."

"That's the deal then," Aurore said. "Send me your code and I'll let you know when we have a departure time."

"Absolutely," Bel said with a little bow. She shook her head and walked off toward the boarding ramp. He grinned. That had lifted his spirits. There was a lot riding on this job and it made him nervous. But now at least he had a back door that didn't depend on Sura playing straight. These were high stakes. Best to have a card of his own up his sleeve.

"YOU DON'T HAVE ANY MISSILES?" Aurore said incredulously.

On the screen in *Golden Wanderer's* command center, Tenn Mari shrugged. He was an Innocent, the tattoo of a leaping flame over his right eyebrow, his head shaved. "Oh, we have 'em," he said. "But I can't give them to you. The Altissima has requisitioned all missiles for the Calpurnian Navy."

"Then what in the name of the Infernal did we just pay you for?" Aurore spread her hands. "We just handed over hard currency."

"For missile launchers and their installation," Tenn Mari said. "You've got 'em."

"And the missiles!" Aurore said. "What good do you think the launchers are without any ordnance?"

"The Altissima has requisitioned all missiles for the Calpurnian Navy," Mari said. He shrugged again as if at the vicissitudes of the world.

Aurore shook her head. "So you have them, and we've paid for them, but you can't give them to us."

"Yep." Mari grimaced. "That's the way it is. I can give you a refund on the missiles."

"I don't want a refund," Aurore shouted. "I want the missiles that we paid for! That's the whole point of arming the merchanters. To have missiles!"

"Can't do it," Mari said. He shook his head. "We can't release any missiles without the express permission of the Altissima."

Dian had come in and was perched on the edge of one of the couches, making cutting motions out of sight of the camera.

"House Melian has currency. We could buy them from somebody else," Aurore pointed out.

"Nope," Mari said. "All the fitters are under the same order. And all the ordnance coming off the line. It's all supposed to go to the Navy unless they release it."

Dian's eyes widened, her cut motion broader.

"Fine," Aurore said. "Thanks for your time." She cut the comm. "What, Dian?"

"He can't do it," Dian said. "And he's more scared of the Calpurnians than he is of you."

"Dancer's balls, what are we supposed to do?" Aurore said. "We can't go anywhere else because we already paid for the missiles. We paid for this expensive refit. Dad's going to blow up like the Old Man if we come back without any missiles and can't do anything. He's stuck paying the Eresh pirates until we at least get a couple of merchanters armed."

"So we get the Altissima to release the missiles to us," Dian said. She crossed her legs. "We need to employ Dad-levels of charm." She looked at Aurore. "Me, not you. You don't always make a good impression."

"And you do?" Aurore huffed.

"I can be charming," Dian smirked. "Unlike you. Who will walk in and demand the Altissima give you the missiles."

"They're our missiles," Aurore said. "We paid for them."

"And we want them to defend ourselves against the Calpurnians," Dian said. "Which the Calpurnians can't be very happy about." She leaned back against the couch arm. "Yes, it's a different faction, Federationist rather than Social Logic. By all accounts, Altissima Antisia was loyal to the Autarch Iulus. She didn't recognize any authority from Altissimus Cassian and probably didn't mind a bit that the Eresh pirates killed him when he shook down Beira. But it doesn't make us look like friends. Maybe enemies of her enemy, but not friends. She's not going to let us take delivery of ordnance unless she's convinced that we're not going to use it against her."

"So you're going to talk her into it?" Aurore asked skeptically.

"Dad-levels of charm," Dian said.

"It's not going to work."

"If it doesn't work, what have we lost?" her sister asked. "We don't have missiles now. We don't have missiles then. But if it does work, then I convince her to release our ordnance and we go our merry way."

"Fine," Aurore said. "It's your show then."

Dian stood up. "Then unpack your party clothes and I'll see what I can do."

BEL STRAIGHTENED his immaculate black coat, making sure the fold of the wrap style fell correctly against the matching black trousers. He knew better than to wear any hint of color or pattern. Everything about it shouted Calpurnian gentleman, down to his raw silk shirt dyed to exactly the same shade. His hair was freshly cut and pomaded. He looked in the mirror and saw a man of substance, a man who might belong in the rarefied strata to which he aspired.

It was morning. He'd sent his bonafides to one of Antisia's assistants the previous day, and worked his way through the resulting comm call at the Shrine with Sura to coach him. It hadn't been neces-

sary. The documents spoke for themselves, and he was perfectly at home in the persona of a Calpurnian patrician. Yes, Bel thought, with a smile for the man in the mirror, he looked good if he did say so himself. Now it was showtime. If he didn't come off as the Autarch's son at this point, he'd simply be shown to the very elaborate door of the Viceregal Palace. Bel looked at the mirror in its ornately carved frame over a matching table, pale wood an accent against the dark red wall. Very fancy, but the style was Lonoi. He'd bet a bunch of this furniture was original, when it was just the Palace and there was no Calpurnian Viceroy.

A very stern looking man emerged from the chamber beyond. "The Altissima will see you now."

"Thank you," Bel said. He entered, pacing down the wooden floor with its contrasting planks set into an intricate pattern toward the desk at the other end.

The Altissima was perhaps five years his senior, reddish hair cut at her chin, though to his surprise she did not wear a uniform. Instead, she wore a bronze-colored double-breasted coat over trousers of the same color, the natural slub of the silk its only ornament. Her face was thin, a few freckles across her cheekbones. Her green eyes were the pale color of peridots and she wore no makeup. She watched him measuringly as he approached.

Bel stopped a few feet from the desk, making a proper and deep bow. "Altissima Antisia, it is a very great honor."

He looked up to see her frowning. "Turn around," she said. "And walk back toward the doors."

"If you desire," Bel said. This might be the shortest interview in history.

"Now come back."

He complied.

Her expression was appraising. "It might be," she said. "You have something of him about you." Antisia stood. "I served under the Autarch for fifteen years. He was more a father to me than my own. He was an exceptional commander and an exceptional human being, the greatest man I have ever known. For you to claim to be his son..." She broke off.

"I mean no disrespect," Bel said carefully. "I had no idea of any of this until I found these documents among my late mother's papers. But then I suppose she was not my mother, though I had always thought so. I presume my birth mother sent me to foster for my safety." He met her eyes guilelessly. "I have heard of the Altissimus Iulus all my life. I had no idea that I had any connection to someone so rightfully revered and admired."

Antisia looked away. "He would have brought us together if he had not been murdered by people not fit to wash his clothes. Now his assassins are dead in their turn, run to ground by the Hounds of Justice." She looked back at him, sharp green eyes reminding him suddenly of a hunting cat. "One may hide from human justice but not from the vengeance of the gods. Are you afraid of the gods' vengeance?"

"I am not a religious man, Altissima," Bel said with a little bow. Most Calpurnians were not. Just his luck to find one who was.

"Ah." She raised her chin. "What do you fear, then?"

Bel felt considerably on the wrong foot. "I suppose the things that all men fear," he said. "Loss, want...dishonor." The latter was something of a stroke of brilliance. "If I do prove to be the Autarch's son, I will have a great deal to live up to, and I will fear failing at the attempt."

She nodded. "Indeed you will. And you are not certain that you are his son?"

Bel spread his hands. "Altissima, I knew nothing of this until my mother's death, and I have no more evidence than what I have given you. It was her wish that I read these documents and act upon them, but I have no more idea than you whether they are genuine. I hope that they are, for what fatherless boy does not dream that his father is a great hero? But I do not know."

Her eyes did not leave his face. "And you did so?"

Bel looked up at the ceiling, lamps hanging from crossbeams of fragrant wood. "Of course. I imagined who my father might be. I hoped that he was wonderful. I feared that he was not. I pretended that he might suddenly show up and claim me, but of course that was no more than a child's dream. To find these documents... Altissima, I

am at a loss. I did not know who he might be until he was dead. More than anything I wish that I had known this a year ago."

"And then he could have told us himself if you were who you claim to be," Antisia said. She took a deep breath. "But your blood will tell its own story. I presume you are willing to undergo a genetic test? A simple blood sample will suffice."

Bel nodded. "Of course. I'd be happy to provide a blood sample."

"Excellent. I will schedule that as soon as possible." Antisia looked at the screen on her desk. "Where are you staying?"

"At one of the hostelrys in town," Bel said. There was the in, time to come up with a reason to stay at the Viceregal Palace. "If it would be more convenient, I could stay here in guest quarters."

She frowned. "It wouldn't be appropriate for you to stay here until we have more certainty. However, I trust you will be willing to meet some of Altissimus Iulus' acquaintances?"

"Of course," Bel said courteously. A skeptical woman. He was going to have to be cooperative and flattering. But at least a function in the Viceregal Palace would mean that he was inside and not watched constantly as he was at a solo meeting. "I would be incredibly honored."

"There is a reception this evening," Antisia said. "If you will find it in you to attend at the nineteenth hour?"

"I would be delighted," Bel said with another bow.

"I will arrange for you to go directly to a blood draw," Antisia said. Her eyes were sharp on his face. "I presume you would like certainty as much as I would. These claims you make are quite substantial."

"What I desire most is the truth," Bel said.

"Then we will endeavor to find it as soon as possible," she replied. "And I will see you this evening." She touched the comm on her desk. "Felis, please take this gentleman to the clinic. He is to have a blood draw for genetic sequencing."

"I appreciate your tolerance, Altissima," Bel said sincerely. "I will arrive at the nineteenth hour and place myself at your disposal." At least a reception, unlike a seated dinner, would allow him to move around and perhaps find out where the Solaste Crown was displayed. Surely it would be natural to want to see famous artifacts!

"Until then," the Altissima said, a dismissal if he'd ever heard one.

The door at the far end opened, the same man returning, presumably to escort him to the clinic. "Altissima," Bel said with another bow, and followed him out.

THE CLINIC WAS UTILITARIAN, the blood draw no different than one might expect, a sample taken from his arm by a brisk medic who had no idea what it was for. It took only a few minutes. Presumably the Altissima would have it sent by dispatch boat to Calpurnia in good time. She didn't seem like the sort to dally. Just his luck to find the sort of subordinate who had personally known the man whose son he was claiming to be.

For a moment Bel felt a pang of guilt. She'd be upset when she discovered she'd been taken. Well, not if he professed ignorance himself. He might manage to make it appear that it was an honest mistake. But not if he stole the Solaste Crown. And that was the job. He was here to do a job. That was the whole point. Steal the crown. Steal whatever else was possible and get out. He wouldn't be here when Altissima Antisia found out she'd been lied to. There was no reason whatsoever to imagine her response. He'd be on a merchanter flirting with its pretty captain on his way to Menaechmi when the results of the genetic test came back.

The first thing had been to get the Altissima to accept his claim. The second thing was to locate the crown. That was the task for tonight. He'd make nice at a reception, eat little snacks, and see if he could find out where the antiques were kept. No going for it tonight. He'd just get a general idea and see what the plan was going to have to be.

So it was with a serious and respectable mien that Bel showed up at the Viceregal Palace at 19:00 on the dot. Which meant of course that he was early. All other guests were fashionably late. He knew very well that 19:00 really meant that people would arrive an hour later, but it seemed to Bel that precisely following instructions might express seriousness to Altissima Antisia. She came in ten minutes later as Bel examined the elaborate buffet table without sampling.

"You're here," she said.

"Indeed." Bel inclined his head. "Did you think I'd leave?"

"It occurred to me." Antisia looked at him thoughtfully.

Time for sincerity. "I want to know the truth," Bel said. "It seems this is the only way to find it."

She took a deep breath. "You're no coward at any rate."

"I'd like to think not," Bel said. Certainly running a game like this took balls. What would be his question if he were Nereus? "Altissima, if it is not too painful, what was the Altissimus Iulus like?"

A muscle twitched in her face and then stilled. "Very clever," she said. "Measured. Always thinking. He had a plan and a backup plan and a backup to the backup plan. He danced circles around the Senate. There was always a move inside another move. But it wasn't cruel. Expedient, perhaps. But not cruel." She shook her head. "You must understand, his life was not his own. He could not afford to do things simply because he wanted to. He was not some self-indulgent merchant prince. He was disciplined. And if that meant giving up his son, then so be it."

"I don't think I could live like that," Bel said quietly.

"Probably not." Antisia's voice was sharp. "You are half Lonoï, and they are a passionate people. Calpurnians do not indulge in passion." He couldn't quite make out whether her tone was critical of his supposed flaws or of the sentiment itself. "We step on the Path of Honors when we are small children. We attend the correct primary school where we are weeded by intelligence and conventionality. You do not step on after you are four years old. But you step off. Any flaw, any point at which you do not attend the right lessons or acquire the correct experiences, and you are not bound for the top ranks. By the time you are twenty, you have either achieved or failed."

"And you became Altissimus Iulus' aide?"

"Obviously I had achieved." Antisia snapped her fingers and a waiter appeared, a tumbler of liquor with ice in it on a tray, which he presented to Antisia with a bow. She took a substantial drink. "Tell him what you want and he'll fetch it."

"Wine, please," Bel asked. Starting with hard liquor this early would mean that his head wasn't as clear as it needed to be.

Antisia seemed to have no such compunction. She drained the glass and put it back on the tray. "Bring me another," she directed.

Guests began to arrive. It seemed to Bel that he stood there forever being introduced to one after another. All of them were dressed alike, which did make it hard to remember who they were. All of them wore sharply tailored black suits as he and Antisia did, though hers was more severely cut than most. Remember them by pieces of jewelry? That was a mnemonic. The woman with the butterfly pin. The man with the diamond bracelet. The man with the matching ruby rings on each hand. Otherwise it was a sea of black-dressed people not enjoying themselves at all while wondering who would be the first to breach the buffet table.

Bel bowed to another elderly couple and straightened up just as the assistant announced the next arrivals. "The Ladies Melian, of House Melian on Menaechmi."

She wore gray, a suit as sharply cut as any of the men here, the shoulders padded and the front open enough to see an immaculate white shirt with white-on-white embroidery. Her unruly hair was sleek, her face defined by heavy makeup, but it was unmistakably Aurore, the merchant captain. Heads turned. The other woman was even more startling. Her black trousers and white shirt were topped with a long coat in a rich blue color, thick with golden embroidery. Her hair was longer and worn down, lighter than Aurore's, the tips of it dipped in blue that matched her coat, framing her angular, haughty face.

They made their way toward the receiving line. Could he bolt? Not without being extremely obvious. He was standing next to the Altissima. Leaving in a hurry would raise questions. And now an old gentleman was asking him something and he had to reply. By the time Bel looked up they were coming down the line.

He knew the exact moment Aurore saw him. Her eyes widened just slightly between lengthened lashes. Bel gave her what he hoped was a conspiratorial glance. Why oh why hadn't it occurred to him that the captain might also be the owner? Well, because it was a Menaechman merchant house. Surely house members ought to be lounging on a

beach somewhere, not climbing around the hull in the rain! What kind of merchant princess did her own refits?

Aurore frowned. He waggled an eyebrow, which he hoped conveyed that they could talk privately later if she just didn't blow his cover the moment she reached him in the receiving line. The Altissima was right next to him.

Then she was in front of him. "May I present the possible Nereus Iulus?" the Altissima said, as she'd said fifty times already.

"Aurore Melian," Aurore said. Her frown deepened.

"I am honored," Bel said with a little bow. "I have heard a great deal of you and your starships. Perhaps we could discuss them as the evening progresses?"

Her disapproving expression should have curdled milk. "Yes, I think that would be agreeable," Aurore said. "I am eager to talk about our starships." There was definitely an edge in her voice. Ok, she wouldn't call him on it now, but he'd better catch her as soon as he could and come up with a good reason why he had two different names.

"I shall look forward to it with great pleasure," Bel said.

The line moved. "Dian Melian," the other woman said. She was looking past him at the Altissima.

"A pleasure," Bel said.

She moved before he had a chance to say anything else. "Dian Melian, Altissima. It is indeed a pleasure to meet our renowned host."

"I'm hardly renowned as a host," the Altissima said dryly.

"Did I say so?" Dian's brows rose. "And yet you have distinction, if not..." she gestured around the party, "for sparkling gatherings. Still, we must all do what we must do."

"Indeed." The Altissima seemed to be actually seeing her, a first for the evening. "And is it your custom, Lady Melian, to wear plebian clothing to a formal affair?" Amid the sea of black suits, Dian Melian's blue and gold coat stood out like some exotic bird amid a gathering of crows.

"Am I plebian?" Dian asked innocently. "I thought I was just signaling that lovers could aspire."

For a second the Altissima looked like she'd choke. Then she actually smiled. "If that is your intention, Lady Melian, you convey it most clearly." A little bow, and the line moved on.

Aurore glanced back at him at the end. He was going to have to get away soon.