

CHANGE

by

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Content Advisory: Some violence, substance abuse, sexual content, foul language.

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CHAPTER ONE

‘You see, his fears were groundless,’ said Ral Dannan.

Seated beside him in the rear of the off-white, open-top limousine, the Princess Vel Toyan followed his gaze. In the bright sunlight his features looked sharp and well defined. The Imperial heir apparent, his close-cropped, jet-black hair was typical of the ruling Sarajevias dynasty. Vel Toyan watched him take a breath of the warm, dry air. *Was this wise?* She wondered. *Will we get through this alive?*

Ral Dannan raised his right hand, acknowledged the crush of bodies thronging the thoroughfare.

‘Let us hope so,’ she replied. She hid her concern. ‘Though I fear Varian is seldom wrong in matters such as these.’ For a moment their eyes met. *We should have heeded his warning, my love.*

Immiss, the oasis city, stood just north of the equatorial line. Surrounded by desert, it was the administrative capital for this region of the Imperial frontier.

Ahead, two security transits slowed to a crawl.

‘What now?’ Ral Dannan muttered.

Was she mistaken? She detected a hint of unease in his tone. She decided to say nothing, continued to smile, as if unconcerned by the noise and close proximity of the crowds. *Why is there no update?*

In the warm breeze a light blonde ringlet escaped its silver fastening. Freed from its restraint, it brushed her cheek with a gentle caress. She raised her hand, touched the strand with a styling pin, felt it weave effortlessly back into the binding.

‘We will be underway shortly,’ he offered.

She recalled their arrival, the view from the State Coach as they made their descent. Beyond the irrigated foliage, mile after mile of concealed rock, covered over millennia by parched, barren sand. Beneath its arid surface lay untold wealth. Accumulated over aeons, riches attractive to the Corporates, all eager to bleed its black gold, in an effort to supply the ever-increasing demand.

We’re moving at last.

The scorching yellow orb beat down through the cloudless blue sky, causing the sun-washed streets of the low-rise metropolis to swim in a dry heat haze. Beneath the midday glare the main thoroughfares were clogged with people, humanoid mostly, awaiting the arrival of the overdue off-world procession. Here and there, water carriers plied their trade amid the hot expectant clamour.

What was...? The vehicle’s shield shimmered; a bloom glanced off its transparent shell. She had only a rudimentary understanding of the physics of the thing. Though air and sound permeable, it would react instantly to a bolt or live projectile.

At last! Her bio-implant delivered an update via Net feed. Indispensable, it gave her access to developments in real time. *How could we have known?* Beside her, Ral Dannan betrayed nothing of the doubts she knew he harboured inside.

Vel Toyan focused on the forward vehicles. On either side, low-rise buildings stood, their white facades resonated to the fervour of those gathered there. *Damn.* Again the cavalcade slowed. She frowned momentarily. Her neural link was down.

‘Why have we stopped?’ she pitched her voice below the melee.

Beside her, Ral Dannan spoke to acknowledge a com update.

‘Minor problem in the Parliament Square,’ he replied. ‘It’s nothing. Security handled the matter admirably.’

Again he avoided her gaze. She thought she hid it well. ‘How fortunate,’ she replied.

She looked away. *He’s concealing something, I’m sure.* She plucked a delicate antique fan from the seat opposite. *He should know better. This is neither the time nor place for intrigue.*

Her eyelids flickered as her implant went live.

She engaged the interface and reported the fault. It was just one of several interruptions experienced since their arrival here. Though intermittent, those failures appeared localised within the conurbation. It was probably atmospheric. *Still, one can never be sure.* Her thoughts drifted to the impending succession, to the political manoeuvring within the Senate, the board rooms of the Corporates and certain enclaves on the Outer Fringe. Despite their best efforts a New Corporate doctrine was born, supported not by old dynastic rivals, but by a new, far less malleable breed. Though they advocated freedom, she feared covertly that they would bind the populace with less transparent, but far more tensile chains.

The cavalcade crept forward, turned right off the main thoroughfare into the vast Parliament Square. Here the plaza was crammed to overflowing, with planetary residents and a myriad of visitors from the wider Empire. As word spread of their arrival, a cheer welled up. Caught in the hysteria, the throng pressed forward in an attempt to catch a glimpse of the royal couple. She watched the waist-high force barriers give slightly. *If they knew the risks taken to ensure our presence here...*

Ahead loomed the stone pillars of the five-storey parliament building, due to be opened officially following a brief ceremony in the open air. The lime-green central dome was atypical for the provinces. The main structure was an imposing rectangular off-white affair. On either side the windows of austere, low-rise offices looked down, as if scornful of the proceedings which had nudged them from their slumber. She caught the sweet scent of acara spice as it carried on the air. The aroma lingered.

Vel Toyan fixed her attention on a small child at the front of the gathering, borne aloft on the shoulders of a tall, swarthy young male. She waved briefly, grateful to see the innocent smile which spread across the tiny features. *Gods, there are so many.* She felt vulnerable and alone. Despite the aerial scans, it was too easy for a weapon to be concealed at state occasions such as these. The limousine supplied the illusion of security, but it was deceptive. *One shot from a half-seen face, and it will be over.* Any one of them could be the assassin. She would never know.

She glanced at Ral Dannan. *We are committed now.*

Off to her left, two hundred strong, their khaki-clad honour guard. An impressive show of force, designed to leave no subject in doubt the might of Empire extended even here. *Almost there.* She felt the limousine pull gently round, watched it glide over sun-bleached cobbles to halt by the steps of the parliament building.

She registered several tiny specks at the limit of her visual range. Dividing her attention in real time, she absorbed the feed, merged with the cortex-enhanced eyes of the observers as they quartered the masses.

She accepted the silent communication.

‘Highness, we are in position.’

She pulled her consciousness back within the limousine. *‘Very well. Providing Ral Dannan is in agreement, we may proceed.’*

Young, slim and platinum blonde, Hellia Vallion adjusted the collar of her short light-blue business suit. Surrounded by her bio-wired crew, she stood on the steps of the parliament building, to the far right of the approaching cavalcade. Calmly, she narrated the scene in real time, for trillions of subscribers throughout the Phylean Empire. Hellia steadied her breathing, focused on the eyes of the Net-wired male in front. With practised ease she smiled for her audience, then turned to the sea of eager faces thronging the plaza.

On cue, the live com cut away to focus on the royal party.

'Damn you to hell!' In a nanosecond her expression changed, from a mask of sweetness to a grimace of unchecked rage. She took a breath, accessed her implant, jacked up the output feed.

'WHAT THE FUCK IS HAPPENING UP THERE?' Hellia shook her fist at the clear blue sky. 'Ha!' She grimaced. 'Bet that made his skull vibrate.' *Even if he is lying in a module at thirty thousand feet.*

She took another breath and let rip.

'My Net feed's glitching cus you're up there snorting that shit. Look, just do your job or I'll walk. JUST SORT IT!'

Hellia spun round, turned on her Net-wired crew. 'And what the *HELL* do you think you're looking at – mmm?'

She ignored the shocked expressions and stormed away, made her way up the steps toward the parliament building. *This can't be happening, not here, not now.* She stopped dead. *Shit, the bastard's out to ruin my career! And for what...? A lousy drunken one night stand. That's it! If it wasn't him, then who? Must be doing something pretty fucking drastic to scramble the stream like this!*

She thought about it.

No, it's him. I know! He'd set the neural cue so low, she couldn't possibly follow it above the sound of the crowd. *Yes, well, for me that says it all!*

'Aggh! FUCK!'

In pounding polyphonics, the voice of the producer hit her right behind the eyes. In her rage, she'd forgotten to turn the audio down. Hellia winced. 'Damn it! Ouch!' Felt like her head had been split by a plasma round.

Oh... come on, you're kidding me.

Her vision swam. *I know what this is and I don't need it right now!*

She grabbed for the pillar; her senses reeled. Usually she could prepare; there were tell-tale signs. *Get a grip, stay calm, just stay out of sight!*

'Here it comes!' She swayed, felt nauseous as her perception moved through time.

'Fuck Prescience. Here it comes!' She swayed, felt nauseous as her perception moved through time. Hellia braced, as the prescient vision took her.

Hellia heard it, no, she felt it, a deep grinding tone. Buildings shivered, the world vibrated. Everything around her turned monochrome grey on black. As she stepped out, the dark wind buffeted her as it tried to force her back. 'Woh!' Deep in her stomach, something pulled. In sequenced freeze frame, the plaza leapt toward her with every jarring step she took.

Shit!

Hellia raised her hand, swept the hair from her eyes. Bodies lay strewn around

her on the scorched plaza floor. Of those standing, some staggered, she ignored their garbled cries. A bass echo reverberated from the buildings, from the grey forbidding walls. *Wassat?* Ahead she spied a crater, a black plume billowed out. She could smell it, taste the bitter sweet tang of the dark, acrid smoke. *Oh, oh that's gross!* It rose up to form a mushroom beneath a grey ceiling of cloud.

'What the fuck...!' In her head, it was like a bubble just popped.

The floor felt solid. *That's good?* Carefully, she opened her eyes. 'Hey!' Hellia took a breath, grabbed the pillar and held on tight. *Is it over?* She exhaled. *Gods, that was seriously intense!* Her body trembled. *OK, take a moment. Now then, just steady yourself.*

As the tremors subsided, Hellia peered around. *Fuck! It hasn't happened yet, so you're safe for now.* Overhead, through a cloudless sky, the burning sun beat down. She felt sick, her head was splitting, seemed like every nerve was raw. *Breathe, keep it together, not like it hasn't happened to you before.* She closed her eyes, tried to immerse her senses in the soothing murmur of the crowd. 'Shit!' She glanced at her crew. *Fuck em... good, no one saw.*

She froze the feed, reduced the volume to a non-concussive level once more. *Now where...?* She ran her fingers down her jacket. Hellia found her nano-pocket, popped a pill. Didn't take long, she got a warm fuzzy feeling as it gently eased her down.

'Mmm, worth every pfenny.' *Good to go now.*

She'd deal with what had happened later. Right now she needed to prioritise. She took a breath, gathered herself and put her implant back online.

Hellia pouted, shook back her hair, then, in her most cloying tone she said, *'Jaren! Hi! Look I'm reeally sorry... Oh, totally unprofessional I know... Temporary glitch – well, forgive me for saying this, but I really don't think so? Noo! Firing him's too harsh... Rehab...? Yes, I think it's for the best... Yes, I know, I know he won't like it. Promise, I'll be ready in five... kiss kiss.'*

She glanced skyward, smiled a wicked smile. 'Don't fuck with me, dahling. Gods, the guy is such a prick!'

She adjusted her hair, smoothed her blue two-piece, then walked down the steps to her crew. *Yes, and if only everything was that simple, mmm?*

'Damn it!'

It was Mother's fault. *Fuck precognition!* She was totally to blame. *If the bitch finds out there'll be hell to pay. But should I intervene?* She pondered for a moment. *Naa, stop right there. They'll trace it back to you!* Unbidden, the cries enveloped her, played over in her head. Her conscience called for action. *Er, you kidding? No, just go with it instead.* She was older now, knew better and she'd been down that road before. *No way in hell they'll evacuate the plaza on the strength of one anonymous call.*

Anyway, she knew where that would leave her when the main event went down. She shivered at the thought of those tight metal cuffs and that horrid darkened room.

Fuck it! Hellia licked her lips to enhance the gloss. *When it happens, if I'm savvy, it'll be me calling the shots.*

She fixed her smile and re-joined her crew. 'Miss me... anyone?'

Only one person acknowledged her.

Right, screw all of you!

Hellia pouted. Seemed to her that they were too caught up in the expectant atmosphere. As she waited on the steps, her stomach felt tight. *Any minute now...* She gazed out across the sea of banners and flags, saw a thousand faces, each one

desperate for a glimpse of the royal couple.

Vel Toyan watched Ral Dannan straighten his white dress uniform. As if oblivious to the heat, he waved cordially to the heaving masses gathered there. Lost in reverie, their response caught her unprepared. She flinched as the roar engulfed the vehicle, felt it overwhelm her like a vast dissonant wave. She steadied her breathing. *Stay calm. It will be over soon.*

Ral Dannan patted her hand as he rose to greet the crowd. He glanced down, smiled wearily, as if he shared her misgivings regarding their presence here. This time, she prayed she might be wrong. *Still, we are committed now, no matter what the cost.*

He held her gaze for a moment then looked away, saluted the ranks turned out to greet them beneath the hot midday sun.

Just then she caught the flicker from the corner of her eye. ‘Down!’ She reached out; fingers extended to grasp his hand...

‘Oh... My...!’ From the steps Hellia saw a flash of white light. It came from the third storey of the council offices on her right. Incandescent, the dart lanced out. She heard the incendiary crackle as it split apart. The first shard hit, took the shield straight down. Rear seat, the second slammed in hard. *This is it!* The plaza shook as the vehicle erupted in a fiery crimson plume. ‘Uhh!’ The thump deafened her. Wreckage shot into the crowd.

As the shockwave hit, Hellia sprawled. She reached out, grabbed an arm, and dragged it with her to the ground. ‘Gods!’ She coughed, shook her head and tried to peer through the smoke. ‘What the fuck!’ She was pinned. ‘Hey! What is this?’ He clutched at her, babbling, one of her Net-wired crew. ‘Gods, get off me! Pervert! Fuck, just move will you!’ Hellia kicked herself free, scrambled to her feet. ‘Woh!’ The world swayed around her; it took some effort not to puke.

Slowly, she straightened and patted herself down. ‘Gods damn it!’ *This suit’s ruined... hair’s a mess.* She was covered head to toe with soot and detritus from the blast.

Hellia glared at the crewman as he crawled to his knees.

‘Thank you, oh, thank you!’ He grabbed her arm and sobbed.

He stood up, right in front of her, blocked her view. ‘Move!’ Hellia pushed him aside. She scanned the bodies strewn across the plaza where the crowd had been before. *OK, OK, get a grip.*

She put her implant online. *‘Is anyone out there getting this?’*

Hellia squinted, tried to see the crater through the smoke. Beyond the steps, edges still molten, it was gouged deep into the plaza floor. Inside, twisted remnants sparked and spat. The limousine frame glowed; flames flicked out to lick the scorched indentation. Her legs felt like jelly. *Fuck, get over there now!*

She coughed; set off down the steps toward the burning wreck. ‘Eeew!’ Just

then, she spotted a corpse, it lay on the cobbles to her left. *Gods, it's burnt to the core. Another... No, there's movement – think that one's alive.* Its clothes smouldered; its body shook. Hellia focused on the stump; the leg was ripped off at the thigh. Red arterial blood pumped out onto the blackened ground.

'Oh... ca-rap!' Hellia threw up. Her body shuddered and she fought to regain control. 'Come on, come on,' she muttered. 'This is a story to die for...'

'Screw it!' Slowly, she straightened and wiped her mouth. 'Oh... that was gross... that stain won't come out!'

She steadied herself, looked up and squinted through the haze. Finally she found her crewman. She stuck two fingers in her mouth and whistled. When that failed, she waved frantically.

'You! Yes you! Get your arse down here now!'

When he arrived she tuned her implant and interfaced with him. She checked her appearance through his eyes. *Grief, I look hideous in this!* Apparently dazed, he turned his head. 'Shit! Look at me, look at me!' Her fist shot out and caught him square in the chest. 'Gods, man, get over it! If it wasn't for me you'd be dead!' She tidied her hair as best she could, glanced across the square and went online. *Here's one in the eye for you, Mother. I hope you're watching this!*

She began to describe the carnage; tried to keep the tremor from her voice as she hammered out her tragic lines.

In dribs and drabs the remainder of her crew filtered in. Hellia divided her attention, gave the silent order to spread out.

Damn it! Across the square there was movement, security personnel. 'HEY! COME ON, ALL OF YOU, MOVE IT! Look – are you getting this?'

'What...!' She ducked. Above her head, sirens blazing, two ambulances swooped down. She watched them land; covered her face as smoke billowed out. Burnt flesh smelled porcine sweet. It felt heavy on her lungs. She gagged. It took some effort, but she managed to carry on.

'OVER THERE – OVER THERE!' Hellia pointed to the offices on her right. She fixed her attention on a group of armed men. In tight formation, they moved into position around the old council building.

'*Stay on me!*' She focused in. 'Oh Gods, this is really happening.' The squad knelt among the bodies, took aim and opened fire. 'Up above me, third storey, splintered glass is raining down...' Hellia watched the body fall, watched it tumble, end over end... '*Stay on me.*' It landed with a dull thud on the cobbled stone paving.

'...one by one, the attackers are taken out with a vengeance. Yes, this is Hellia Vallion, for TransGalactic News, coming to you live from Immiss city in the Llhos system...'

CHAPTER TWO

Transition: The interface of consciousness via bio-technology, with the virtual world.

What a mess! Major Patricea Markis squinted in the afternoon glare. Aged thirty-two Standard, high cheekbones, softly tapered chin. Her full lips were pursed, her dark auburn hair was plaited, pinned back military style. From the steps of the parliament building she gazed across the open plaza. The crowds were gone; still, there were pockets of activity here and there. She checked them out: media, security mostly, and the remainder of the clean-up crew. Off to her left, wisps of smoke rose from the crater, carried up by thermals into the dry desert air. The plaza was sealed tight. Inside the perimeter, guards paced purposefully behind high force barricades. Beyond them the crowds lingered. Their voices travelled like a murmur, deep and yet subdued.

She adjusted her dark navy uniform and moved down the steps, noted the dishevelled blonde standing there. Early twenties, her face was ashen in her tattered blue two piece. She drew on a cigarette, seemed distant and ill at ease. *Shame, she's a beauty. Different time and place, maybe?* For a moment Patricea caught her eye. *Gods, she saw it all.*

Above her head the blazing sun shone down. The heat overwhelmed her, but she had to see the rest. She made her way to the crater gouged into the plaza floor. *Feels awkward, like I shouldn't be here at all.* Patricea peered into the fissure, caught a whiff of charcoal in the air. *Military issue, twin warhead. Punched straight through the shield and the ablative armour plate.*

'I've seen enough,' she murmured.

She terminated the feed. The world shimmered. Patricea transitioned from virtual to the real. Around her the plaza vanished, to be replaced by the transit cylinder stateroom's plush decor.

Varian was right, we just waited. We should have intervened. She smoothed her tunic and rose from the gilt-edged leather couch. Her uniform, a dark navy formal two-piece. It hugged her contours as she approached the outer wall. In front of her the bulkhead became transparent, Patricea looked out. *We're close.* From the stateroom she gazed into the cold dark abyss. Off to port, one of the planet's twin moons shone down. Its light bathed the dark, cloud-obscured orb below. The radiance faded as they dipped beneath the murky atmosphere. There was sweat on her palms, her stomach felt tight. The view wall darkened as the external armour flared bright. *Not long now. The others will be here soon.*

'Ready, Major?'

The voice was deep. Its resonance settled her, made her feel secure. 'Marshal Varian, you're early.' She managed an uneasy smile. 'Why this place? So remote. Looks so desolate down there.'

Varian shrugged. 'I'm sure he has his reasons, but they're not for us to know.'

A greying man of late middle age, she watched him tense then relax his thickset frame.

He cleared his throat. 'Any news from Darryn?'

Patricea shook her head. 'No, nothing from the expedition since it left the outer rim.' She frowned momentarily, wished he hadn't mentioned it. She'd pushed Darryn from her mind to prepare for this. 'Archaeologists travel – I know the score. He's bound to fall off the grid every once in a while.'

'Still, it's been some time.' Varian joined her by the wall. 'We're on approach. I've been here often. Still sends a shiver down my spine.'

Post re-entry she switched the aspect to forward view. *There it is.* Beneath her the Winter Palace lay carved into the hard granite wall. Above the bleak, barren lowlands, for a thousand cycles it had stood firm. A myriad of lights betrayed its existence, exposed to the elements of this inhospitable world. She focused in. At the base, she glimpsed a tethered five-man crew. They pressed on across an outcrop, bodies enclosed in bulky environment suits.

Swaying in the maelstrom, the lead man looked up. Her implant negotiated the suit protocol, gave her access to the cam from real time, ground view. In her mind's eye, high in the evening sky, a bright pinprick of light flared. Its gold cylindrical hull reflected light from the twin moons above. The mote grew brighter as it descended toward the jagged mountain range below.

Visitors were rare to Curthil Murgis, the Palace of Solitude.

Without warning the vessel halted, thirty miles out from the sheer rock wall. This was their State Coach, sturdy enough to ferry them from the drive barge in orbit to the citadel down below.

We're moving.

'Sit with me, Major.'

His voice broke her reverie. She disengaged her implant.

'Before you brief the Emperor, I need to bring you up to speed.'

Patricea followed as he led her to the couch.

'Yes... of course.' She glanced back, saw the State Coach pause, just metres from the storm-weathered wall. Moments later it slid through the granite barrier, as if it had been absorbed.

When they were seated, he spoke.

'This is for your ears only. Do not share it with anyone when we disembark...'

Marshal Varian materialised deep within the enclave.

Beside him stood four others, each cocooned in a shimmering blue haze. All were clad in beige floor-length greatcoats, their faces shrouded beneath loose-fitting cowls. A cold empty silence pervaded the gothic-style antechamber. Four archways led from the arrival point, each sealed by a grey granite block. Close to the roof a black sphere hovered.

He glanced right, at Patricea. She looked back at him.

Now it begins.

A sharp thought penetrated.

'Remain Still!'

Five cones of white light shot out from the droid to encompass his party. They held for a second, then vanished, leaving the chamber silent.

'Access Granted!'

Varian opened his cloak, exposed the opaque black body armour of the Imperial Guard. On the breastplate, an engraved bird of prey glared off into the distance. On either side his companions did likewise. Two males, two females of indeterminate rank. They looked at him expectantly.

‘If anyone wants to leave, do it now,’ he said.

His steel-grey eyes scanned them. No one spoke.

‘Walk with me.’

He led off, approached the arch. With a hiss, the stone melted to allow access to a large oval room. There were couches positioned around the periphery. The dark leather complemented the deep mocha wash which decorated the walls. *Easy now.* By the far wall, two armed guards flanked a silver-haired woman of late years. Their body armour was functional, it matched their military-grey fatigues. Behind the welcome party lay a closed metal door.

The courtier stepped forward, nodded briefly. She was slim, her movements precise. Her expression was dour.

‘Marshal Varian.’ She smoothed the material of her burgundy gown.

‘Senator.’

He caught the slight reflective sheen. The fabric shimmered as she moved.

‘Forgive my formal appearance. Matters of state. A shame – such gatherings are increasingly rare these days.’ She stepped forward, separated herself from her retinue. ‘He’s been asking for you.’

Varian frowned. ‘My report is for his ears only, Calius. Please escort me to him at once.’

She gave a short bow. ‘Very well, Grand Marshal. However, in the interests of security, your companions must remain here. Sidearms are not permitted within the sanctum. Please leave your weapons with them.’

‘Major Markis will accompany me, at the Emperor’s request.’

‘Of course,’ she replied. ‘Her attendance is mandatory...’

Varian passed his blade and sidearm to the nearest of his entourage. Beside him Patricea did likewise. He felt uneasy. *Protocol be damned!* He was loath to walk unarmed through the corridors of this place.

One of his party, the older male, signalled covertly in finger-speak. Varian noted the guards had raised their weapons to cover his group. He buried his misgivings, reassured his companion that the fears expressed were groundless.

The senator faced the door and motioned the guards to move aside. As she approached, the barrier melted to reveal a circular drop tube. Varian glanced briefly at Patricea as they stepped inside. The door reformed and the platform began to rise.

‘How is he?’ Varian asked guardedly.

Calius seemed tense.

‘He will outlive us all,’ she replied.

He sensed her reluctance, didn’t feel it wise to press her further.

They left the tube and set off down a brightly lit walkway. All the while he knew his progress was being monitored by unseen eyes. At the end of the corridor they halted by a sealed entrance. Two guards in chem-rad armour were positioned at either side.

‘Wait for me here,’ he told Patricea. ‘The Emperor will call for you when it’s time.’

Calius conversed briefly with the sentries, then placed her palm against the lock. When the portal faded, he followed her through a gossamer-thin membrane into the dimly lit chamber beyond.

Varian took a breath of the crisp antiseptic air. The place was dark and featureless, its four walls bathed in shadow like some long-abandoned tomb. *As I feared.* The room's lone occupant lay unmoving on an ornate suspensor bed. Small needles of varicoloured light shot at intervals from the headpiece to monitor the frail, wizened charge.

'Your Majesty.' Calius spoke in a hushed tone. 'As per your instructions, Marshal Varian has returned.'

In front of him the shrunken creature remained motionless. To all intents and purposes it did not respond.

Varian felt the intrusion. This time the voice was softer and more laboured.

'Senator... you may leave us'

Calius didn't hesitate. She bowed respectfully, turned and left the room.

'You may relax, Varian... We are alone. Although we trust Calius with our life, what we are about to discuss must not pass beyond these four walls.'

He barely recognised the husk of a man, the Emperor he'd served these many cycles.

He removed a small orb from his tunic and placed it in mid-air.

'Interface and project.'

He felt it sync with the Emperor's machine. To his left a grey-robed figure formed.

'Your instructions regarding the Order of Orrisian have been carried out, Majesty. Sevas, a senior cleric, has been selected to protect your grandson, the young Prince Kal Jerran.'

'Ah. You are sure... we can rely on him?'

Varian nodded. 'Absolutely, Highness. Simple access to the Matrix Archive is his price. Major Markis will take the boy to Veda. They will rendezvous with Sevas a month from now.'

The robed figure faded to be replaced by Veda's star. With a thought he adjusted the image, zoomed to the third planet out.

'And what... of our other grandson...?'

'Majesty...' Varian paused. The room was silent as the grave. 'According to our sources, in six weeks Standard, Prince Ral Karjeck will proclaim himself Emperor in your stead.'

The Emperor did not stir as he lay upon the bed.

'Ah, yes... this does not surprise us... in truth, we feared as much.'

Varian glanced at the dark marble floor. *If there was another way... but no matter.* He knew it must be said. *If they'd listened...* The intercepts, increased chatter, that should have been enough. *Fools, if they'd acted, we wouldn't be in this damn mess.* Instead they'd closed ranks, locked the intel down. They'd dismissed his concerns as hearsay. He'd been systematically undermined. *Damn them to hell!* Now he'd no choice but to witness the Emperor's grief as he mourned his son and heir.

'Highness, I have no proof of Ral Karjeck's involvement in his father's death, as yet. None of the Erask Separatists involved survived intact. Ral Karjeck ordered a retaliatory strike. Taremar City is now a cinder. As a result, all of our leads have been conveniently removed.'

'Nevertheless... by all accounts his action was popular within the Senate,' the Emperor replied.

Varian frowned. 'Highness, he was waiting for this. Now he has an excuse to begin a purge of all so-called enemies within. Our allies are wary. They will tread carefully now.'

'And what of the military? Which way will they move?'

He took a moment to consider his reply.

'Many senior officers are still undecided as to where their long-term loyalties lie. Ral Karjeck has support within the young officer class. To avoid civil war, some of the old guard may follow.'

'Ah yes, and who can blame them? He was clever... even as a boy.'

'Majesty, your granddaughter, the Princess Vel Nadia, could unite them. Ral Karjeck knows this. At present she is held in protective custody by his own personal guard.'

He watched the beams of the medical monitor complete their cycle. The fate of the imperium now lay solely in the Emperor's wizened hands.

'Thank you... Varian,' replied the husk of a man. *'Would that we had passed control to our son sooner... rather than seeking to continue our reign through him. Power is addictive, my friend. Addictions weaken a man, impairing judgement and hastening one's demise. This is not our only mistake; it is one of many.'*

He seemed to falter.

'But, no matter... We have prepared for this eventuality. Although, in truth, it is upon us far sooner than we would have wished. Our life has spanned over three hundred cycles. We are not afraid of death. Death, unlike most things, was always a certainty...'

Was it his imagination? Did the voice take on a pleading note?

'Varian... we must not perish knowing our error has led to the collapse of ethics... which have bound this Empire together for a millennia or more.'

In mid-air, a palm-sized biodrive materialized.

'Guard this... with your life. The contents may be useful in securing the cooperation of certain officials within Ral Karjeck's administration. Included... are Network override codes... together with the locations of several secure bases within the Disputed Territories. As a precautionary measure, I suggest you gather our remaining forces and move them there.'

Varian frowned. *'Will this not create problems within the Evion Matriarchy?'*

'Our public stance with the Matriarchy has never halted constructive private dialogue,' the Emperor replied. *'Ral Karjeck's ascendancy does not bode well for them. Allowing us to encroach within the Disputed Territories is but a small price for them to pay.'* His tone became grave. *'Use this information as you see fit, Varian. Above all, you must ensure the survival of Kal Jerran and his sister, Vel Nadia. Steps... must be taken to secure her release from the palace on Reagal. She must not remain within Ral Karjeck's sphere of influence for any length of time.'*

Varian bowed. *'Your instructions will be carried out, Majesty.'*

'Good' came the reply. *'Be assured... we have every faith in you. We must not fail.'*

The chamber became silent. Varian sensed his audience was done. He bowed from the hip and turned to go.

'Varian!'

He paused.

'Before you leave, you must speak with Veba Calius. She has information crucial to your understanding of what is to come.'

'Majesty.'

'Farewell, my friend, and good hunting. I hope we meet again...'

As the Emperor's words faded, Varian saluted and moved out of the room.

Calius? His mind raced as he wrestled logistics necessary to move men and equipment beyond the Rim. *Damn, best get it over with. No doubt there's more to this.* He'd not slept and the audience had drained him, but there was still much to be done.

The lights startled him as he passed through the protective membrane. He nodded to Patricea. Her face looked drawn. 'He'll call for you shortly.' He smiled reassuringly. 'Give him a moment to prepare.'

'I'm ready.' She exhaled. 'Just nerves, that's all.'

'Don't worry.' He tapped her arm. 'I'm sure you'll do fine.'

'Major.' He couldn't linger. Calius was waiting.

Darn.

He noticed she wasn't alone. Her companion glanced sideways, registered his approach. Solid build, of medium height, he wore the anthracite-grey uniform of the Palace Intelligence Corps. In this light, his attire matched the colour of his close-cropped hair. *Strange?* From a distance, they seemed intimate. Their conversation ceased abruptly, as if a shutter of protocol had been drawn down between them both.

He decided to ignore it. *Probably just fatigue, nothing more.*

Calius gestured. 'Marshal, this is Colonel Jaras. He is responsible for ensuring His Majesty's safety while he is in residence here.'

Varian reached out and grasped Jaras's hand. 'Honoured to meet you, Colonel.'

He noted the weatherworn features. The movements were decisive and precise. *This man's seen action.* Back on Immiss he'd had his fill of the hereditary officer class. Their incompetence was surpassed only by their arrogance. *Wouldn't last a day on the front line.*

'Marshal, likewise,' Jaras replied.

Then in an aside. 'If you've time, well, I'd really appreciate your opinion on the upgrades for the Palace RTI.'

His tone betrayed some urgency, yet the overture was polite. *Something he's not telling me; I can see it in his eyes.* Straight away, it was his manner, he felt an empathy with the man. Over the last few days, well, he'd seen that look before.

'Well, of course, but I'm really no expert. One of my aides could drop by...' The Real Time Interface wasn't a priority. Still, he didn't want to say it outright.

He sensed Jaras read between the lines.

Jaras frowned. 'Yes, please do that, I'm sure that will be fine.' He gave a terse bow. 'Thank you.' With that he moved off toward the Emperor's chamber.

Deep in thought, Varian turned to Calius. 'I believe we've something to discuss. If you're not busy, would you mind...'

The courtier nodded. 'Of course, Marshal. If you will accompany me to my chambers, I think it's better we talk there.'

Did she sense his fatigue? Calius ushered him away, back in the direction of the drop tube.

CHAPTER THREE

The amount of damage done to unsophisticated cultures by unregulated expansion is unquantifiable, and it is for this reason that the Department of Socio/Economic Planetology humbly requests the following:

- (i) That indiscriminate commercial intervention in Class III cultures by Imperium-based corporations be restricted forthwith.

For too long it has been our brief to limit the consequences of such immoral action. We, whose efforts are under-supported, under-funded, and in many cases undermined by vested interests within the regime. In light of your recent address to the Senate, it is hoped the enclosed report may be of use in drafting regulations to curb this blatant rapine.

Extract from a letter to His Majesty Ral Jarlan Sarajevias II
From: The Rt Hon J Kartzasi ISI. Minister: Department of Socio/Economic Planetology. 10/07/1097 AI

Stocktown, Middle England: Mid to late 21st Century (1106 AI)

The carriage shuddered; Paul opened his eyes. *Did I miss it?* He yawned, took a quick look around. The green electric tram moved through the centre of town, beneath a grey, overcast sky. Within the drab interior a handful of passengers sat in silence, isolated from the bustle of shoppers clogging the pavements on either side of the road. It was nearly Christmas. Today the churches were all but empty. Sunday was just another day for the credit cards to come out in force.

He felt the lurch as the vehicle took a slow right. It left the town centre, followed the tracks one stop at a time. After a while, the buildings acquired a tarnished look, in contrast to the tinselled facade they'd left behind. He got up as it came to halt. *This'll do fine.*

Paul stepped off the number 48 and started to walk. He passed a shop, grimaced at his reflection as he carried on by. 'Gross.' Medium height, early thirties, slightly built. *Can't be bothered shaving when I feel like this.* He shivered. The cold wind chilled him to the bone. Like an immune system, every year the weather got worse, as if trying to rid itself of the human virus which ravaged its host.

He shrugged, zipped up his black leather jacket, and crossed onto Redhill Road. 'Mad to come here,' he muttered. 'She won't be home.' Either side, tenement windows gazed onto the neglected thoroughfare. Gardens littered with refuse fronted the peeling paint facades. *We're screwed.* Things had gone downhill fast after *The Fall*.

He walked as far as number 29. She owed him money. It was nearly Christmas. *Just goin round to say hi, is all.* He checked his pocket, made sure the card was still inside. Paul opened the gate and walked down the path. He stared up at the old three-storey building. *No sign of life.* It wasn't encouraging, but he thought he'd better give it a try.

He reached the entrance and rang the bell.

No answer.

He tried again...

Finally, there was movement. The door creaked open – a bit.

'Bernadette!' His tone was chiding. 'You took your time.'

'Huh? I was waiting for somebody to open it, stupid,' she replied. She stared past him down the path, like she was looking for something.

'Anyone I know?' Paul frowned.

Bernadette shook her head, pushed her long black hair from her eyes. She gave him the onceover. 'Is it Sunday?' She rubbed her brow and yawned.

She was slim, West Indian mostly. Bit Caucasian, five foot five. She looked gorgeous; she'd got this really cute nose.

'Well, seeing as you're here, you can come up, I suppose.'

She tucked her T-shirt into her jeans and stood back to let him pass. It was like she was doing him a favour. *Bit ironic that.* He felt like swatting her with the newspaper, still in the letterbox at two-thirty in the afternoon.

'I'm only half awake.' She parted her hair as he moved into the hall. 'Honestly Paul, I feel awful.' She waved vaguely. 'Be a dear, close the door.'

'Yeah, right.' He pulled it to, followed her up the decrepit stairs to the first-floor landing. *Some things never change.* The aged flowered wallpaper was peeling and the bin liner was still by the door. The place had a musty smell about it, like it hadn't been heated for years.

'Can't drink as much as I used to,' she mumbled. 'Two martinis, that's it nowadays.'

Really? He stayed silent as he followed her down the hall to her flat.

She slouched into the front room and slumped down in a threadbare armchair. 'Er, yeah, sit down wherever. Just... make yourself at home.' She picked up a magazine, put it to one side.

'Nice pad,' he mumbled. 'Like what you've done with the place.' Paul glanced at the rock band posters which covered the otherwise bare walls. Above the fireplace, well, for a start, the clock on the mantelpiece was slow. He walked over, put it right, checked the mirror and was about to... 'This yours?' He picked up the comb, noticed strands of black brittle hair.

'Erm, no... it's nothing. Well, it's just some guy I know.'

She shifted, evasive. 'Forgot what he looks like. Abe, Dave...? You know that's really odd, Paul.'

They'd not been together for a long time, so he just let it go.

'Do you want a coffee?' she asked. 'Paul, make me one too.' She grinned. 'Try the kitchen, second shelf, in the cupboard over the sink.'

'Oh come on? You are kidding me. Really...?'

He swallowed his pride and went off to do as he was told. *Idiot!* Times like this, he wondered why he ever bothered visiting her at all. 'That's just great!' He found the kitchen in the same sad state. *Hmm, wait a minute. That wasn't here before?* High on the wall the blue insect-flash glowed. 'It's the middle of winter!' he muttered. 'What's she got that on for?' He shut it off, plugged in the kettle, checked

the cupboard over the sink. ‘Damn it!’ He rummaged to find the coffee, but the coffee wasn’t there. Finally, he found two sachets on the worktop next to a chair.

Just then the kettle boiled.

He poured hot water into two large mugs and stirred the contents with a well-used metal spoon. In the fridge he found some milk. *Well past its sell-by date, but... Still smells OK.* He poured it in and gave it a stir. It looked foul.

Bernadette raised her head as he passed her the steaming mug. ‘Thanks, Paul.’ She sat forward briefly and gave him that really grateful look.

‘For you.’ He passed her the card.

‘Oh, thanks.’ She opened it casually. ‘Sorry, I didn’t get you one.’ She shot him a glance. ‘Try phoning maybe. Never know when you’re coming round.’ She put the card on the coffee table, and took a sip. ‘Ughh!’ She smiled sweetly, grimaced, and placed the cup down by the chair.

He chose his moment. ‘Erm, that cash, don’t suppose you’ve got it lying around?’

She looked sheepish. ‘Oh right, I get it. That’s why you’re here.’ She looked away. ‘Had to buy a phone, so now I’m really skint, you know. Look, I get paid Friday. You could meet me after work?’

‘Shite!’ Her eyes widened. ‘It’s my late night. Look, you will get it, though.’

He glanced down, caught a glimpse of the petite wafer-thin affair. It lay discarded, abandoned apparently, next to the red leather bag by her chair. *Must have cost a small fortune.*

‘Nice phone,’ he muttered.

She followed his gaze. ‘Got it cheap.’ She was coy. ‘My last one got stolen, and there’s this guy I know, rite.’

‘And the one before that...?’ Paul sniggered. He looked across at her and smiled. ‘Maybe the fish got my message. That’s why I don’t call you anymore.’

‘God, you’ll never let me forget that, will you, Paul?’ Bernadette pouted and flicked back her hair. ‘Hey, so it fell in the canal. I was really stoned, OK!’

She picked up the magazine, threw it at him.

‘Shit!’ He’d spilled coffee. ‘Nice one Berne!’

‘Look, it’s not my fault someone called the cops. Next thing I knew, this van turned up. There was this searchlight, lots of shouting, then two thumpin’ great coppers dragged me out. Some bastard thought I was drowning. Was just trying to find the phone I dropped.’ She put her head in hands. ‘God, I hate you. Hell, can’t a girl keep some pride, Paul?’

How many hits...? He sniggered. ‘You’re a YouTube star.’

‘Fuck off, Paul!’

Whatever. He looked around, tried to find something else to talk about.

‘Anyway, tell me, what have you been doing with yourself?’

Bernadette glared. ‘Don’t ask! You know, men are such bastards, Paul. It’s just me, me all the time, and then, let’s talk about me some more!’

Yeah, right! It didn’t matter how much crap you’d had; it was never as bad as hers.

‘I’m glad you came round,’ she said as she slumped back in the chair. ‘You know Sundays are always shite, Paul, and I was really, really bored.’

Paul groaned. *God, she’s only twenty-four.* They’d met a couple of years back, a year after his divorce. After a rollercoaster six-month relationship, they’d parted on fairly good terms. His main worry was hitting forty. She’d told him that was just stupid; he’d a good ten years to go.

‘Wassat?’ He came out of his daze. *Forgot she can talk for hours.* He glanced at his watch. *Nearly seven-thirty.*

‘Fancy a drink?’ he asked her.

She thought about it. ‘OK, I’ll put a skirt on. Can we get some food? I’m starved!’

He frowned. ‘Always takes you ages. If we could leave by eight, be nice.’

‘Give me a minute.’ She pulled a face and left the room in a huff.

Paul picked up the magazine, flicked idly through the assortment of glossy script. He looked up, noticed the clock on the mantelpiece said 7:45.

Knew it. It was about an hour later when she finally reappeared.

‘How do I look?’ She adjusted her top, grinned and twirled before him in her long floral skirt.

‘Gorgeous.’ He said it like he meant it. ‘Can we go now, please?’

She blew on her fingers, each one in turn. ‘Don’t be mad. Just let me dry my nails with the hair dryer first.’

‘Berne.’ *Oh, what’s the use?* He stood up and stretched his cramped frame. ‘For goodness sake, Berne, it’ll be nine at this rate.’

‘Erm, Paul?’ As she reached for the dryer Bernadette frowned. ‘The flash thing in the kitchen, did you turn it off just now?’

‘Look, you’re skint. It’s the middle of winter.’ He tried to stay calm. ‘Berne, you’ve got a problem. Ever thought of counselling?’

‘Uh uh, that’s not the point!’ Her tone was matter of fact. ‘They freak me out. If you knew how much I hate things that buzz with wings. Honestly, Paul, you...’

‘Shit!’ He stepped back.

A loud *CRACK* rang out across the still night air. The shock wave reverberated through the building. The clock on the mantelpiece crashed to the floor.

‘What was that?’ Bernadette backed into him, dropped the dryer.

‘Oow!’ He inhaled. ‘That was my toe!’

She winced. ‘Ooo, Paul!’

‘Uh?’ He relaxed his grip, realised he was holding her tight.

Bernadette reached up, forced his arms apart. She pushed away and looked in the mirror. ‘No, have you seen this, Paul?’

The mirror, top to bottom, it was cracked in two.

‘Damn! My lipstick’s smudged. Need to fix it before we go.’

He checked his phone. It showed ‘*no signal*’ and ‘*no emergency calls*’. He walked to the sideboard, picked up the radio. *Just static.* He tried the TV and got more of the same. ‘Berne, look at this. Hey, something’s wrong, OK.’

She just preened in the mirror like nothing had happened at all. She applied some finishing touches. ‘Right, I’m ready. Paul...?’ She shook back her hair. Calmly, she smoothed her skirt.

‘OK, who are you?’ This wasn’t like her. ‘What have you done with Bernadette?’

She shot him an odd look, then moved to open the outer door. ‘Come on,’ she said, ‘Shut up for once. Let’s go! Just trust me, Paul.’

He hesitated, unwilling to leave the security of the four plasterboard walls.

‘Whatever it was, we should stay put. It sounded really close.’

Bernadette beckoned. It was clear she didn’t care. As he emerged she reached past him and pulled the door to. ‘Out of my way,’ she said. She pushed it a couple of times, made sure it was secure. ‘Look Paul, nothing’s working, right? We don’t know what’s happened, so we need to get outside.’

He wasn't convinced.

'I saw it on telly. If there's an aftershock we don't want to be in here. Paul? Are you...? Paul, you should get out more. You look really pale, you know.'

He gave her a wan smile, wondered how her head was wired. 'Hey, wait a minute. Aren't you even a bit concerned?'

She shook her head. 'Uh uh! I've got more important things on my mind.' She tugged his sleeve. 'Paul, there's no way in hell you're getting out of buying me dinner tonight.'

Was she serious? 'Face it, Berne, you are fucking insane!' She ignored him. Paul gave up and followed her to the stairs.

'Honestly, Paul! Sometimes I don't know why I bother with you at all.'

Her expression was sullen as they moved down to the lower floor.

Just then the lights failed.

'Crap!' She grabbed his arm. 'Paul, I can't see shit!'

He took her hand. 'Don't worry, I'm here. Slowly does it.'

Step by step, they made their way to the front door. The hairs on his neck stood on end, but nothing he could say would stop her. In the hallway he fumbled, tried to find the latch.

'Here, let me!' She pushed him aside.

'Hey, Berne, slow down!' As the door swung toward him, Paul moved back.

'There you go! Just need to apply yourself, Paul.'

She turned her back and stepped onto the path.

He lingered in the doorway. 'Let's just stay put.'

'Really...?' She pouted, tapped her foot, clearly unimpressed.

'Oh look, whatever.' Resigned, he followed her out of the house. 'I know you don't wanna listen, but... Hey, did you see that?' Just for a second, a face peered from the window of the house opposite. *Waste of time.* They wouldn't see much in the moon's half-light. He took a breath, caught the scent of ozone on the cold evening breeze. Somewhere, a dog barked. The night was eerie and still.

She reached past him, slammed the door and gave him a push toward the street. As they erupted onto the pavement, he saw that they weren't alone. In dribs and drabs they filtered out, the assorted residents of Redhill Road.

Gradually their eyes turned skyward.

A deep murmur spread through the crowd. Paul took Bernadette's hand. 'Oh crap...!' He looked toward the centre of town. 'Up there. No there! What the fuck is that?' It was vast, half a mile in diameter if he'd judged it right.

We should get back inside. It looked like a flat black rectangle, enveloped in a semi-transparent field. His ears popped. 'Shit!'

A collective gasp went up from the crowd. Above, the shape expanded till it hovered above the street. Paul glanced down. She looked up speechless. *Well that's a first, I think.*

He felt a warm wind blow over him. Paul shrank back as a deep bass note boomed out. The vast hulk looked like an oil platform. Small lights flashed, seemingly with no sequence, around the dingy black frame. Across the road, someone pointed up toward the dark underside.

From the centre, sharp beams of electric-blue light shot down. Methodically, they swept the streets, moving slowly out from the centre of town. In the distance screams broke off, echoing across the still night air. *That's odd?* Nothing exploded. No buildings erupted or crashed burning to the ground.

He took her hand and edged back. 'Time to go!' he muttered. The beams moved closer, flicking this way and that. They sliced through the air with a precision that chilled him to the bone. Seemed the others sensed it too.

'Berne, run!'

Around him everyone scattered...

'Ugh!' The world turned blue, something solid hit him hard. He tried to run but he couldn't, felt like his body turned to stone. *Fuck!* The street winked out of existence... to be replaced by a harsh, white glare.

He couldn't breathe, he couldn't move. Paul felt like his cheek was pressed against an invisible wall. He ignored the groans, fought the crush of bodies and gripped her hand tight. As the light flickered, he glimpsed something from the corner of his eye. *Cubes?* His brain processed the image as he fought to fill his lungs. *What the fuck?* He looked again. *God... there's hundreds.*

Row after row, they went on for miles. Their occupants seemed frozen; their faces grimaced as if locked in some macabre, silent scream.

As the seconds ticked by, the glare subsided.

The light flashed – once, twice, three times. Then he understood. Paul writhed as the white light hit him, and time stood still...