

Flag in Exile

by David Weber

PROLOGUE

Admiral of the Green Hamish Alexander, Thirteenth Earl of White Haven, sat on HMS *Queen Caitrin's* flag deck and gazed into his display. The Nightingale System's G3 primary was a white speck of fire, and its single habitable planet, too distant to be seen on visuals, showed as a tiny, blue-green light deep in the plot.

So did the angry red rash of enemy warships between it and *Queen Caitrin*, and White Haven studied that crimson wall of light with care. The People's Navy's sensors had detected him hours ago, but the Peeps hadn't tried anything fancy; they'd simply formed a wall between his task force and its objective and steered to meet him well inside the system's hyper limit. That left him the initiative, yet there was only so much he could do with it. They knew why he was here, and they were inside him and able to stay there. Worse, they were staying together, without the erratic maneuvering he'd seen so often. They outnumbered him by four to three, and he'd abandoned any thought of tactical sleight of hand in the face of their steadiness, but he was confident in his ships' qualitative superiority. If he could neither split them up nor outmaneuver them, he was willing enough to meet them head-on.

He checked the range once more, then looked into the com screen to *Queen Caitrin's* command deck.

"Very well, Captain Goldstein. You may open fire."

"Aye, aye, My Lord!" Captain Frederick Goldstein rapped, and the first, massive salvo spat from *Queen Caitrin's* port broadside.

The rest of Battle Squadron Twenty-One fired with her, and all eight superdreadnoughts simultaneously flushed the missile pods towing astern of them. BatRon Eight and BatRon Seventeen's dreadnoughts followed suit, and thirty-two hundred impeller drive missiles lanced out across five and a half million kilometers of vacuum.

White Haven watched their outgoing tracks, and his frown deepened. The opening phase was almost classic, straight out of the tac manuals, yet he felt a nagging, unformed uneasiness. He had nothing overt to justify it, but there were more targets over there than there should have been. Peep resistance had been spotty for months, based on whatever frontier formations had held together long enough to be redeployed against Manticore's drive on Trevor's Star. But this formation's unit strength looked far more like a proper task force, and the difference between its steady, unswerving course and the confusion which had plagued Peep fleet commanders since the war's start was too marked. It roused an instinctive wariness, and that instinct jabbed at him like a sharp stick. It was why he'd fired at such long range rather than closing before he unleashed his first and heaviest salvo, and he made himself sit motionless, fighting an urge to fidget, as return fire stippled his plot.

That fire was lighter than the deluge his own ships had spawned, for the Peeps had no equivalent of Manticore's missile pods, but there were four full battle squadrons—thirty-two ships of the wall, all of them superdreadnoughts—over there. The Peep wall of battle spat twelve hundred birds back at him, and White Haven swallowed a stillborn curse as he realized they'd concentrated solely on BatRon Twenty-One's eight units.

The deadly fireflies streaked towards one another. *Queen Caitrin* twitched as she expelled her second broadside, and her third, and then the green dots of defensive fire spewed out to meet the destruction roaring down on White Haven's lead squadron. Peep missiles began to die, ripped apart by charging counter missiles, but there were simply too many targets. The Peeps were catching on; their tightly concentrated fire was an unmistakable bid to saturate BatRon Twenty-One's point defense, and despite Manticore's superior technology, at least some of that massive salvo would get through.

White Haven's opening broadsides reached attack range first and drove in through the desperate

lattice of last ditch defenses. Lasers swiveled and spat coherent light, fighting to kill the incoming missiles at least twenty-five thousand kilometers out, but probability theory plays no favorites. White Haven had spread his fire over three squadrons, not one, yet his salvo density was actually greater, and bomb-pumped lasers gouged at their targets as laser heads began to detonate.

Impeller wedge sidewalls twisted and attenuated the beams, but scores of them got through, and battle steel hulls spat glowing splinters. Atmosphere streamed from the Peep leviathans' lacerated flanks, men and women died, weapons were smashed away, and energy signatures fluctuated as drive nodes blew apart. Yet even as White Haven's missiles pounded his enemies, the remnants of the first massive Havenite salvo broke past his own counter missiles. It was *his* laser clusters' turn to spit fire, but BatRon Eight's lasers were too far astern to range effectively. It was all up to BatRon Twenty-One and BatRon Seventeen, and they simply had too few clusters. Sheer weight of numbers swamped them, and the green lights of friendly ships flashed the spiteful sparkle of battle damage.

Fresh salvos scorched out, battle chatter and the beep of priority signals washed about White Haven, and his eyes narrowed. His squadron commanders and captains knew their business, and their first broadsides had hurt the Peeps badly. CIC's estimates of enemy damage danced across the bottom of his display, and three times as many Peep ships had taken hits. One or two looked to have been half-wrecked, but they kept coming, and *Queen Caitrin* lurched as something got through to her. She bucked again to a second hit, and his plot flickered. It steadied almost instantly, and a corner of his mind noted the damage control side-bar. *Queen Caitrin's* wounds were light, but the two walls of battle angled together, missiles streaking back and forth with mounting fury as the range fell, and he knew it was going to be ugly.

"There goes the first one, My Lord!" his chief of staff announced as a crippled superdreadnought pulled out of the enemy wall and rolled up to interpose the belly of its wedge against the Manticoran fire.

"I see it, Byron," White Haven replied, but his flat voice lacked Captain Hunter's exultation, for his sense of this engagement's new and dangerous rhythm only grew as the wounded vessel withdrew. Mounting damage might have driven that ship out of formation, but its consorts held their course, missile tubes belching back at his wall, and his jaw clenched as he realized the Peeps had finally gotten themselves back together. Their initial, concentrated targeting had been a far cry from the dispersal of the earlier battles, and so was their steadiness under fire. By now, that wall should have been shedding ships by twos and threes. It was being hit far harder than his own, and the fresh proof of Manticore's technical superiority should have taken the heart out of the demoralized Peeps. But it hadn't, and that was frightening to any admiral who knew how the People's Navy still outnumbered the RMN. These people knew Manticore's superior missiles and electronics gave White Haven every advantage in a missile engagement, and they were coming in anyway, taking their losses in ships and lives to get to energy weapon range.

A green light in the plot suddenly flashed the red critical damage icon as half a dozen Peep lasers blasted into HMS *King Michael*, and White Haven's hands clenched on his command chair's arms. The superdreadnought's wedge faltered, then came back up, and for a moment he thought that was the extent of it—until the entire ship simply blew apart. Eight-and-a-third-million tons of warship and six thousand human beings vanished in a sun-bright boil of plasma, and someone behind him gasped in horror.

"Starboard fifteen, Captain Goldstein." White Haven's voice was cold as his eyes while his flag captain acknowledged the order. His vector edged away from the Peeps—not in flight, but simply to hold the range open and exploit Manticore's missile advantage—and his lips tightened as the Havenite force matched his maneuver. More than matched it; they were coming in even more sharply, despite the marginally better angle that gave his fire. More of his missiles were detonating in front of their

ships now, sending lasers lashing down their wedges' open throats, and the first Havenite ship suddenly exploded. The range was down to a bare four million kilometers, and more of White Haven ships were taking hits, but so were the Peeps. Another enemy ship blew apart, then a third. CIC's projections flickered and changed, the odds against his command falling as still more Peep weapons were destroyed, and he bared his teeth as he felt them shifting in his favor.

"Port ten, Captain Goldstein. If they want to close, let's oblige them."

"Aye, aye, My Lord. Coming ten degrees to port," Goldstein replied, and the task force stopped trying to hold the range open. The missile exchange redoubled, but the weight of fire favored Manticore more and more heavily as Peep launchers fell silent. Another Havenite fell out of the wall covering herself with her impeller wedge as best she could, and something stirred in the back of White Haven's mind. That was five Peep SDs destroyed or out of action to only one of his. At this rate, he'd have a decisive edge, even at energy range, when the two fleets finally came together. Whoever was in command over there had to know that, so why in hell was he still coming in this way? Nightingale was an important outwork for Trevor's Star, but hardly worth the destruction of a force this size! There had to be a reason—

"New contact! Multiple contacts—multiple capital ship impeller sources at zero-four-six zero-three-niner! Range one-eight million clicks and closing! Designate this force Bogey Two!"

White Haven's head snapped around to the main plot as the passionless computers updated it. Two dozen fresh lights glowed crimson off *Queen Caitrin's* starboard bow as a *second* force of Peep superdreadnoughts lit off their drives, and his nostrils flared in sudden understanding.

No wonder that wall had closed so steadily! White Haven extended his enemies a single moment of ungrudging respect as he recognized the trap into which that unflinching Peep formation was herding his own. Another fifteen minutes, and he would have been hopelessly boxed, committed to close action against Bogey One even as Bogey Two came boring into his flank from above, and he'd walked straight into it.

But they didn't have him boxed yet, he thought grimly. The new Peep government's purges of its officer corps had cost them dearly in experience, and it showed. Bogey Two's commander had jumped the gun, possibly out of panic at the losses Bogey One was taking, and lit off his drives too soon. A more experienced CO would have waited, whatever happened to Bogey One, until he had the Manticoran wall at point-blank, trapped between both enemy walls and with its long-range advantage negated in an energy weapon engagement.

White Haven studied the projected vectors, and his blue eyes hardened in concentration. He couldn't fight a force that size and live. He had to break back across the hyper limit before they trapped him, and he couldn't simply reverse course to do it. The Peeps' vectors converged twelve million kilometers ahead of him on his present track, and his velocity was too high to kill before he reached that point. His only chance was to break to port, away from Bogey Two, but that would take him right into Bogey One's teeth, and for all its damage, Bogey One still had the energy weapons to kill too many of his ships.

He made himself accept it. It was going to be even uglier than he'd thought, but at least his people would give as good as they got as they broke past Bogey One's wall. His fingers flew as he punched a new course into his auxiliary astrogation display. Numbers flickered, and a core of fire flashed in his eyes as vector projections changed. He was ahead of Bogey One. Not by much, but by enough that he could cross its track without turning straight into its broadsides and letting them rake his entire wall. The Peeps would have to alter course, curving inside him, or let him cross *their* wall's bows. They could stay with him, if they chose, draw out the pounding match to cost him more ships, but it would cost *them* more ships, too.

"Come to two-seven-zero zero-zero-zero! Maximum military power! All units roll ship against

Bogey Two and continue engagement against Bogey One!"

Acknowledgments crackled, and his wall turned sharply towards Bogey One. Its units rolled, presenting the roofs of their impeller wedges to Bogey Two—still far beyond the powered missile envelope—while their own missiles ripped into Bogey One across the dwindling light-seconds between them, and White Haven glared at his plot as he ran for it.

And he *was* running. He knew it, just as he knew how much the approaching beam engagement was going to cost, and so did everyone else, the Peeps as well as his own people. For the first time, the People's Republic of Haven had stopped a Manticoran offensive cold, and he watched numbers dance across the bottom of his plot as both Peep forces changed course and CIC worked the new numbers to tell him just how bad it was going to be.

It would be close, even if he made it out, but the problem with this sort of trap was that the timing had to be exactly right. Space was big enough to hide whole fleets as long as they radiated no betraying emissions, yet for an ambush to succeed, the ambushers had to be on the right vector when they *did* bring their drives up, and even when the intended victim cooperated as he had—

The numbers froze, and Hamish Alexander breathed a silent, heartfelt prayer of thanks. They'd missed. Bogey Two had lit off its drives just too soon to catch him. That meant it was all up to Bogey One, and—

Another green light flashed scarlet in his plot, and he tasted blood from a bitten lip as HMS *Thunderer* broke in half. Life pod beacons flashed in the display as her survivors bailed out, but he could do nothing for them. If he slowed to pick them up, Bogey Two *would* overhaul his wall, and another light units he detached for search and rescue purposes would be overtaken and destroyed.

Thunderer's broken halves vanished in a brilliant flash as her scuttling charges blew. A sixth Peep superdreadnought joined her in death moments later, and Hamish Alexander clenched his jaw and shoved himself firmly back in his command chair. At least Bogey Two would have plenty of ships available for SAR. No doubt they'd pick up his people as well as their own, and he tried to soothe his guilt with that cold comfort. A prisoner of war camp—even a Peep POW camp—was better than death, he told himself bitterly.

"Energy range in thirty-seven minutes, My Lord," Captain Hunter said quietly. "CIC estimates Bogey One can stay with us clear to the hyper limit if it wants to."

"Understood." White Haven made himself sound calm and unworried. He knew he wasn't fooling Hunter, but the rules required them both to pretend.

He watched a seventh SD withdraw from Bogey One's wall and tried to be glad. It was only twenty-two to twenty-five, now, and his missile crews would make those odds still better before they reached beam range, yet Bogey One maintained its unwavering course. The People's Navy was larger than the RMN, able to accept heavier losses, and Bogey One's obvious intention to do just that sent a fresh chill through White Haven.

The war had just changed, he thought distantly, watching the exchange of fire grow still more furious. The Peeps were back on balance. They were initiating, no longer reacting with clumsy panic to Manticoran attacks. He'd known it was coming, that the People's Republic was simply too vast to be toppled in a rush, but he'd prayed for it to take longer. Now he knew it hadn't, and he drew a deep breath.

"We'll go with Delta-Three, Byron," he said quietly, formally committing himself to hyper out and run for it as quickly as possible. "Put everything we've got on their central squadron. That's probably where their flagship is; maybe we can take it out before we get to energy range."

"Aye, aye, My Lord," Captain Hunter replied.

The Earl of White Haven listened to his chief of staff passing orders over the task force command net and leaned back in his chair, watching the flash of warheads pock the visual display. He'd done all

he could.

Now it only remained to see how many of his people would survive.

CHAPTER ONE

Like all public buildings on Grayson, Protector's Palace lay under a controlled-environment dome, but a corner of the grounds held another, smaller dome, as well. It was a greenhouse, and High Admiral Wesley Matthews braced himself as an armsman in the House of Mayhew's maroon and gold opened its door for him. An almost visible wave of humid heat swirled out, and he sighed and unhooked his tunic collar, but that was as far as he intended to go. *This* time he was going to stay in proper uniform if it killed him.

"Hello, Wesley." Benjamin Mayhew IX, Protector of Grayson, greeted his senior military officer without looking up from whatever he was doing.

"Good morning, Your Grace." Matthews' respectful reply sounded curiously stifled, for the climate in here was even worse than he'd expected. The Protector was in shirtsleeves, his forehead beaded with perspiration, and the high admiral mopped at his own suddenly streaming face, looked at the environmental display, and winced. Resolution was no defense against a temperature of forty degrees centigrade and a ninety-six percent humidity, and he grimaced and stripped off his uniform tunic to emulate his ruler.

The rustle of fabric wasn't loud, but it was very quiet in the greenhouse. The soft sound carried well, and Benjamin looked up with a grin.

"Did you turn the thermostat up just for me, Your Grace?" Matthews inquired, and Benjamin looked innocent.

"Of course not, Wesley. Why would I do such a thing?"

Matthews arched a polite eyebrow, and the Protector chuckled. Wesley Matthews was extraordinarily young for his rank, even for a world like Grayson, where the prolonged anti-aging treatments were only just becoming available. He'd jumped from commodore to commander-in-chief of the Grayson Space Navy less than four T-years ago, and like Bernard Yanakov, the man he'd succeeded, he was baffled by his Protector's taste in hobbies. Floriculture and flower arrangement were high art forms on Grayson, but they were traditionally female ones. Matthews willingly admitted that his ruler produced breathtaking arrangements, yet it still seemed an . . . odd avocation for a head of state. Bernard Yanakov, however, had been Benjamin Mayhew's older cousin, as well as his senior admiral, which had given him certain advantages Matthews lacked. He'd known the Protector literally since birth and twitted him about his hobby for years; Matthews couldn't do that—which hadn't kept Benjamin from guessing how he felt.

Matthews had been vastly relieved when the Protector chose to be amused rather than offended, yet sometimes he wondered if things had worked out so well after all. Benjamin took a positive glee in summoning him for meetings during which he pattered about with vases and cut flowers or which just *happened* to take place in spots like this greenhouse furnace. It had become a sort of shared joke, and Tester knew they both needed any relaxation they could find these days, but this time the heat and humidity were almost overwhelming.

"Actually," Benjamin said after a moment, "I hadn't intended to inflict anything quite this, ah, energetic upon you, Wesley, but I didn't have much choice." His voice was genuinely contrite, yet he also returned his attention to the blossom before him, and Matthews stepped closer, fascinated despite himself, as the Protector manipulated a collecting probe with surgical precision and continued his apology, if such it was.

"This is a specimen of Hibson's Orchid from Indus, in the Mithra System. Beautiful, isn't it?"

"Yes, it is, Your Grace," Matthews murmured. The bell-shaped flower was an incredibly subtle blend of blues and dark purples with a deep-throated, golden core shot with scarlet, and the admiral felt an odd, drifting sensation, as if he were falling into its perfumed depths. The feeling was so strong

he had to shake himself, and Benjamin laughed softly.

"Indeed it is, but it's extremely difficult to propagate off-planet, and the male flower only blossoms for a single day once every three T-years. I've been fascinated by it since I first saw it in a conservatory on Old Earth, and I think I'm on the brink of developing a hybrid that will bloom about twice as frequently. Unfortunately, timing is everything in a project like this, and reproducing its natural environment is critical. I'm afraid I didn't expect it to flower today, and I hadn't actually expected to drag you out here when you asked to drop by, but if I don't jump on it right now—"

He shrugged, and Matthews nodded, forgetting for once to assume his proper attitude of martyred tolerance as the orchid's beauty worked upon him. He stood in respectful silence while Benjamin finished collecting the pollen and examined his treasure under a magnifier with intense satisfaction.

"Now we just have to wait for *these* to open," he said more briskly, waving to the tight-furled buds on another vine.

"And how long will that take, Your Grace?" Matthews asked politely, and Benjamin chuckled again.

"At least another forty hours, so I don't expect you to stand around and wait." The Protector slid his pollen into a storage unit, wiped sweat from his forehead, and gestured to the door, and Matthews sighed in relief.

He followed his ruler from the greenhouse, and Benjamin's armsman fell in at their heels while they crossed to a comfortable nook beside a splashing fountain. The Protector took a seat and waved Matthews into a facing chair, then leaned back as a servant appeared with towels and iced drinks. The admiral scrubbed his soaking hair briskly, then mopped his face and sipped gratefully, and Benjamin crossed his legs.

"Now, Wesley. What was it you wanted to see me about?"

"Lady Harrington, Your Grace," Matthews replied promptly. Benjamin sighed, and the admiral leaned forward persuasively. "I know you still think it's too soon, Your Grace, but we *need* her. We need her very badly, indeed."

"I understand that," Benjamin said patiently, "but I'm not going to push her. She's still recovering, Wesley. She needs time."

"It's been over nine *months*, Your Grace." Matthews' tone was respectful but stubborn.

"I realize that, and I also realize how valuable she could be to you, but her life's hardly been what you could call easy, now has it?" Benjamin held the admiral's eyes, and Matthews shook his head. "She deserves however long she needs to heal," the Protector went on, "and I intend to see she has it. Wait till she's ready, Wesley."

"But how will we know when she *is* ready if you won't even let me ask her about it?"

Benjamin frowned, then nodded as if against his will.

"A point," he admitted. "Definitely a point, but—" He broke off with an angry little shrug and sipped his own drink before he continued. "The problem is that I don't think she's gotten herself put back together again. I can't be certain—she's not the sort to cry on people's shoulders—but Katherine's gotten more out of her than I think she realizes, and it was bad, Wesley. Really bad. I was afraid we were going to lose her completely for a few months, and the way certain elements have reacted to her hasn't helped."

Matthews grunted in understanding, and a look of something very like guilt crossed Benjamin's face.

"I knew some of the reactionaries would come into the open once they got over the initial shock, but I didn't expect them to be quite this blatant, and I should have." The Protector's free hand fisted and pounded his knee while he grimaced in distaste. "I still think it was the right move," he went on, as if to himself. "We *need* her as a steadholder, but if I'd realized what it was going to cost her, I never

would have done it. And when you add the protesters to Captain Tankersley's death—"

"Your Grace," Matthews said firmly, "this isn't something for you to blame yourself over. We didn't have anything to do with Captain Tankersley's murder, and Lady Harrington knows it. Even if she didn't, you were right; we *do* need her as a steadholder if the reforms are going to stand, and whatever the lunatic fringe thinks, most of our people respect her deeply. I'm quite sure she knows *that*, too, and she's a very strong person. We both know that, because we've both seen her in action. She'll get through this."

"I hope so, Wesley. I hope to God she will," Benjamin murmured.

"She will. But that brings me back to my point. We need her naval experience just as badly as we need her as a steadholder, and with all due respect, Your Grace, I think we're doing her a disservice by not telling her so."

It was the admiral's strongest statement of disagreement with his own view Benjamin had heard yet, and he frowned. Not angrily, but in consideration. Matthews recognized his expression and sat waiting while Grayson's ruler ran back through the arguments and counter arguments.

"I don't know," he said finally. "You may be right, but I still want to give her as much time as we can."

"Again with all due respect, Your Grace, I think that's a mistake. You're the one who insists we have to learn to treat women with full equality. I believe you're right about that, and I think most of our people are coming around to the same view, whether they like it or not. But I also think you haven't quite learned to do it yourself yet." Benjamin stiffened, and Matthews went on in a calm, measured tone. "I mean no disrespect, but you're trying to protect her. That's a very fine thing, exactly what I would expect from any decent Grayson . . . but would you try quite so hard if she were a man?"

The Protector's eyes narrowed, his expression arrested, and then he shook his head in chagrin. Unlike most Graysons, he'd been educated off-world, on Old Terra herself. The traditional Grayson view held that asking women to bear the same responsibilities as men was a perversion of nature, but he'd been exposed to a society in which the notion that men and women might possibly be considered *unequal* would have been regarded as equally grotesque, and he'd accepted that view. Yet at the bottom of all his genuine commitment to it, he was a Grayson, and one who owed his entire family's lives to Honor Harrington. How much *had* his auto-reflex instinct to protect her affected his judgment?

"You may be right," he said at last. "I don't think I want you to be, but that's beside the point." He rubbed his chin for another long moment, then met Matthews' eyes once more. "I'm not saying I agree or disagree with you, but what makes it so urgent to press the point right this minute?"

"The Manticorans will have to pull their last capital units out of Yeltsin within two months, Your Grace," the admiral said quietly.

"They will?" Benjamin sat up, and Matthews nodded. "No one's said anything about it to me or Chancellor Prestwick—not yet, at least."

"I didn't say the decision had been made, Your Grace. Nor did I say they wanted to. I said they'd *have* to do it. They won't have any choice."

"Why not?"

"Because the momentum is shifting." Matthews laid his tunic across his lap, extracted an old-fashioned hardcopy note pad from one pocket, and opened it to double-check the figures he'd jotted in it.

"In the war's first six months," he said, "Manticore captured nineteen Havenite star systems, including two major fleet bases. Their total capital ship losses during that time were two superdreadnoughts and five dreadnoughts, against which they destroyed forty Havenite ships of the wall. They also added thirty-one capital ships to their own order of battle—twenty-six captured units

exclusive of the eleven Admiral White Haven gave us after Third Yeltsin, and five more from new construction. That put them within roughly ninety percent of the Peeps' remaining ships of the wall, and they had the advantage of the initiative, not to mention the edge the People's Navy's confusion and shattered morale gave them.

"In the last three months, however, the RMN's captured only *two* systems and lost nineteen capital ships doing it—including the ten they lost at Nightingale, where they *didn't* take the system. The Peeps are still taking heavier losses, but remember that they have all those battleships. They may be too small for proper ships of the wall, but they provide a rear area coverage the Manties can't match without diverting dreadnoughts or superdreadnoughts, which frees a higher percentage of the Peeps' ships of the wall for front-line use. Put simply, the Peeps still have more ships to lose than Manticore does, and the war is slowing down, Your Grace. Peep resistance is stiffening, and the Manties are transferring more and more of their own strength to the front in an effort to hang onto their momentum."

"How bad is it?" Benjamin asked intently.

"As I say, their losses are climbing. They've already reduced their Home Fleet to barely a third of its prewar strength, and it's not enough. I think they know it, too, but they also know the Peeps are going to bring them more or less to a halt in another few months. They're trying to push as hard as they can before that happens—to get as deep into the People's Republic as possible before the Peeps can start thinking about counterattacks. That means they're going to start calling in every ship they can spare—maybe even a few *more* than they can withdraw with complete safety. Given that the last of our own SDs recommissions in January, Yeltsin's Star is certainly one place they can trust to look after itself. In light of that, I'm astonished they haven't already pulled out the last of their capital units. Certainly no strategist worth his salt will leave them here much longer, Your Grace. They can't."

Benjamin rubbed his chin again. "I knew things were slowing down, but I hadn't realized how drastically. What's changed, Wesley?"

"That's hard to say, Your Grace, but I've been in correspondence with Admiral Caparelli, and Admiral Givens at the Manties' ONI confirms that this Committee of Public Safety that's running the PRH has consolidated all previous security organs under one new, monster umbrella. You'd have to look back to Old Earth's Totalitarian Age for a parallel to how ruthlessly they've purged their officer corps, and there are rumors they're sending out 'political officers' to watchdog their fleet commanders. Their purges cost them virtually all their senior—and experienced—flag officers, and the officers they *haven't* killed off are competing out of their class against the RMN, but the ones who survive are learning . . . and they know what'll happen if they fail the new regime. Add in some sort of political commissars to *remind* them of that, and you get a navy with a powerful will to fight. They're far clumsier than the Manties, but their navy's still bigger, and once some of their new admirals start lasting long enough to gain the experience their predecessors had—"

Matthews shrugged, and the Protector nodded unhappily.

"Do you expect Manticore to totally lose the initiative?"

"Not totally, Your Grace. What I *do* expect is a period of balance . . . and then for things to get really nasty. I imagine the Peeps will try a few counterattacks, but I also expect the Manties to chew them up when they do. I can't predict events with any certainty, but I can give you my personal estimate of what's going to happen, if you want to hear it."

Benjamin nodded, and Matthews raised his hand, extending one finger at a time as he made his points.

"First, there'll be a period of stalemate, with both sides skirmishing for advantage but with neither daring to withdraw too many ships of the wall from the main combat area. Second, the Alliance will get its industry fully cranked up. The Manties are already there. They had eighteen of the wall under

construction in the Star Kingdom itself from prewar programs; those units are now proceeding on a crash priority basis to commission over the next six months, and their new war program will start delivering additional units within ten months. Our own yards will complete our first home-built SD about the same time, and the Manty yards in Grendelsbane and Talbot will do the same. Once we hit our stride, we'll be turning out four or five of the wall a month.

"On the Peeps' side, they've already effectively lost their advantage in ships of the wall, and the Manties have taken out a half dozen of their major forward service bases. That means simply repairing battle damage will put a greater strain on their building yards and, in turn, slow construction rates. Despite its size, their industrial plant's less efficient than the Alliance's, and I don't think they can outbuild us. On the other hand, *we* can't outbuild *them*, either, certainly not by a decisive margin, and they still have the battleships I already mentioned. Which means, three, that this is going to be a long long war unless one side or the other completely screws up.

"In the long run, the decisive factor will probably be the relative strengths of our political systems. At the moment, Pierre and his Committee have instituted what amounts to a reign of terror. Whether or not they can sustain that, or find something more stable to replace it, is the critical question in my own view, because this war isn't about territory anymore. It's become a war for *survival*; someone—either the Kingdom of Manticore and its allies, including us, or the People's Republic of Haven—is going down this time, Your Grace. For good."

Protector Benjamin nodded slowly. Matthews' assessment of the war's political dimensions dovetailed exactly with his own, and he'd developed a powerful respect for the high admiral's military judgment.

"And that, Your Grace," Matthews said quietly, "is why we need Lady Harrington. Virtually our entire cadre of senior officers was wiped out in the Masadan War, and we're promoting men who've never skippered anything heavier than a light attack craft to command destroyers and cruisers—even *battlecruisers*. My own experience is limited enough by Manticoran standards, and when the Manties pull out, I'll be the most experienced officer we've got . . . except for Lady Harrington."

"But she's a Manticoran officer. Would they even let us have her?"

"I think their Admiralty would be happy to," Matthews replied. "It wasn't *their* idea to put her on half-pay, and, historically, the Star Kingdom often 'loans' half-pay officers to allies. They've already loaned us a lot of other officers and enlisted people, for that matter. I don't know what political impact commissioning Lady Harrington in our Navy would have, of course. Given her expulsion from their House of Lords, I suppose it might be viewed pretty negatively, but my impression is that Queen Elizabeth is firmly in Lady Harrington's corner."

"She is, and so is most of the House of Commons," Benjamin murmured. He leaned back and closed his eyes in thought, then sighed. "Let me think about it. I agree with your assessment, and I agree we need her, but whether it's parochial and protective of me or not, I refuse to place fresh demands on her until I'm certain she's ready to bear them. It won't do her or us any good to drive her too hard too soon."

"No, Your Grace," Wesley Matthews said respectfully, but deep inside he knew he'd won. Benjamin Mayhew was a good man, one who cared deeply for the woman who'd saved his world from Masada forty-two T-months ago, but he was also the planetary ruler of Grayson. In the end, the overriding responsibility of that position would force him to put Honor Harrington into Grayson uniform . . . whatever it cost her.

CHAPTER TWO

Lady Dame Honor Harrington, Countess and Steadholder Harrington, took three quick steps and bounced on her toes. The diving board flexed sharply, and she arced through the air to enter the water with scarcely a splash. Ripples turned the surface to wavy glass, but the pool was crystal clear, and Senior Chief Steward James MacGuinness watched her glide over its tiled bottom with a dolphin's grace. She planed up to the surface, then rolled and backstroked towards the far end of the fifty-meter pool on the final leg of her regular morning swim.

Harrington House's crystoplast dome muted the strength of Grayson's F6 primary, and a sleek, six-limbed treecat opened grass-green eyes in a puddle of filtered sunlight atop a poolside table as MacGuinness draped a towel over his arm and crossed to the pool steps. The 'cat rose and stretched his sinuous, sixty-centimeter body luxuriously, then sat upright on his four rearmost limbs. He curled his fluffy, prehensile tail about his true-feet and hand-paws, and a lazy yawn bared needle fangs in an unmistakable grin of amused tolerance as he watched his dripping person emerge from the pool. She wrung out her shoulder-length braid before she accepted MacGuinness' towel with a murmured thanks and the 'cat shook his head. Treecats hated getting wet, but Nimitz had adopted Honor Harrington forty T-years before. He'd had plenty of time to get used to her sometimes peculiar notions of enjoyment.

Major Andrew LaFollet of the Harrington Steadholder's Guard hadn't, and he did his best not to look uncomfortable as the Steadholder wrapped the towel about herself. Despite his youth, the major was the HSG's second ranking officer and very, very good at his job. He was also Lady Harrington's personal armsman and the head of her permanent security team, and Grayson law required that a steadholder be accompanied by his—or, in Lady Harrington's very special case, *her*—bodyguards at all times. It was a requirement LaFollet knew she'd found less than easy to accept, yet there were times he and his fellows found the arrangement even less comfortable than she did.

The major had been horrified when he learned his Steadholder intended to *deliberately* immerse herself in over three meters of water. Swimming was a lost art on Grayson; LaFollet hadn't known a single person who'd ever acquired it, and he'd been unable to imagine why any sane individual would want to. Grayson's high concentration of heavy metals meant even its "fresh" water was dangerously contaminated. In all his thirty-three T-years before entering Lady Harrington's service, Andrew LaFollet had never drunk or even bathed in water which hadn't been distilled and purified, and the notion of putting thousands of liters of precious water into a hole in the ground and then jumping into it was . . . well, "bizarre" was the kindest word which had sprung to mind when Lady Harrington ordered her "swimming pool."

Of course, any steadholder—and especially this one—was entitled to his or her foibles, yet LaFollet had nursed one deep concern over the project. Well, two concerns actually, but only one he cared to voice to Lady Harrington. She and Chief MacGuinness were the only two people in the entire Steading of Harrington who could swim, so what were her armsmen supposed to do if she got into trouble out in the middle of all that wet stuff?

He'd felt like a blushing, untutored yokel as he put that gruff-voiced question to her, but she'd simply considered it gravely, and his blush had turned darker when she didn't laugh. Of course, she seldom laughed anymore. Her huge eyes seemed perpetually dark and shadowed, but this time they'd held a small gleam of humor, too, and, despite his embarrassment, he'd been glad. It was far better than other things he'd seen in them, yet that amusement had also underscored the very thing that made it so hard to do his job properly.

The Steadholder had problems with the concept that protecting her was the most important task in

her armsmen's universe, and the things she enjoyed doing were enough to turn any bodyguard's hair white. LaFollet had been able to accept her naval career, when she'd had one. Though he hadn't really *liked* it, the risks that came with commanding a warship were fitting for a steadholder and far less . . . frivolous than certain others she insisted upon running.

Swimming was bad enough, but at least she did that on a nice, flat piece of Harrington House's protectively domed grounds—which made it infinitely preferable to her *other* pursuits. Hang-gliding was a planetary passion on her home world, and LaFollet cringed every time he thought of it. He knew she'd been an expert glider before *he* learned to walk, yet her refusal to so much as consider taking along an emergency counter-grav unit was less than reassuring to the man charged with keeping her alive.

Fortunately, hang-gliding was as out of the question on Grayson as skinny dipping. Over the course of their thousand-year history, Graysons had developed higher tolerances for heavy metals than most humans. Lady Harrington hadn't, and—praise God fasting!—her career as a naval officer had given her a healthy respect for environmental hazards. Which, unfortunately, wasn't much help on her rare visits to her parents. LaFollet and Corporal Mattingly had spent an absolutely horrifying afternoon following her fragile glider around Sphinx's craggy-peaked Copper Wall Mountains and far out over the Tannerman Ocean in a tractor-equipped air car, and thoughts of what an ill-intentioned person with a pulse rifle might have done to such a sitting target were not calculated to help a bodyguard sleep soundly.

Her passion for mountain climbing was even worse, in a way. He was willing to accept her assurances that other people did "real" rock climbing, but scrambling up and down steep slopes and along the brinks of towering precipices with her—and on a 1.35-gravity world, at that—was quite enough of an adventure. Then there was the ten-meter sloop she kept in her parents' enormous boathouse. Even counter-grav life jackets had seemed dreadfully frail props to people who hadn't had the least idea how to swim as she sent it skimming over the waves and they clung white-knuckled to stays or cleats.

She'd done it on purpose, and LaFollet even knew why. It was her way of announcing her refusal to abandon the life she'd spent forty-seven T-years learning to live just because she'd become a steadholder. She was willing to accept her armsmen's insistence on guarding her as their oaths required, but she was who she was. Her refusal to be anyone else might set her at infinitely polite loggerheads with her chief armsman on occasion, yet he knew it was also one of the traits which won her people's devotion, not simply the obedience to which any steadholder was entitled. And despite all the worry it caused him, it eased his heart to know there were things she could still enjoy doing.

Still, there *were* times he wished she were just a *little* like a traditional Grayson woman. His own concepts of propriety had been—"expanded" was the best word for it—as her armsman, but he was still a Grayson. He'd tackled the task of learning to swim and completed a life-saving course out of grim devotion to duty and, to his own surprise, found he enjoyed it. Most of her security detail did, though Jamie Candless still harbored pronounced reservations. They'd even taken to spending many of their own off-duty hours in the Steadholder's pool, but Lady Harrington's swimsuit was an armed assault on Grayson mores. LaFollet's standards had become progressively less "proper" over the past year—which he was prepared to admit, intellectually, was probably a good thing—yet he was guiltily aware of the ingrained criteria of his rearing whenever he watched his Steadholder swim.

He knew she'd made concessions. Her one-piece suit was positively dowdy by Manticoran standards, but the corner of his mind where the most basic elements of socialization lived insisted she might as well be naked. Worse, she'd received the newest, most efficient prolong treatment in early childhood. She looked absurdly youthful, and her exotic, almond-eyed, strongly carved beauty and athletic grace threatened to provoke a highly improper response in the major. She was thirteen T-years

older than he, yet she looked like someone's younger sister, and he had no business at all thinking of his Steadholder as the most attractive woman he knew—*especially* not while her soaked swimsuit clung to every supple curve.

Now he stood with his back to her while she finished drying, then heaved a mental sigh of relief as she accepted a robe from MacGuiness and belted its sash. She settled into the poolside chair, and he turned back to take his proper place at her shoulder and felt his lips twitch as she looked up with one of her small, crooked smiles. It wasn't much of a smile, and the tiny hesitation as the left corner of her mouth obeyed its rebuilt, artificial nerves pulled it off center, but it showed she knew what he was thinking, and her amusement was far too gentle to resent. There was nothing taunting or condescending about it. It was a wry, shared awareness of the differences in their birth societies—nothing more—and just seeing it warmed his heart. Darkness lurked behind it even now, and he knew how quickly and unexpectedly it could be quenched, yet the grief and loss which had weighed upon her for far too long had begun to ease at last. It was a slow and painful process, but he was profoundly grateful it had begun. He could stand a little embarrassment if it made Lady Harrington smile, and he shrugged to acknowledge their shared awareness of his harassed cultural parochialism.

Honor Harrington's smile broadened at her armsman's acknowledgment of his own sense of the absurd, and then she looked away as MacGuiness uncovered a tray and set it on the table with a flourish. Nimitz leapt up into his own chair with a happy "Bleek!" and Honor's smile became a grin. She preferred a light luncheon, and MacGuiness had prepared one of salad and cheese for her, but Nimitz's whiskers twitched in delight as the steward placed a dish of roasted rabbit before him.

"You spoil us, Mac," she said, and MacGuiness shook his head fondly. He poured rich, dark beer into her stein, and she selected a cheese wedge and nibbled it appreciatively. She still had to approach Grayson foods with care—the Diaspora's two millennia had taken Terran vegetables to very different environments, and subtle variations between nominally identical species could have unfortunate consequences—but the local cheeses were delicious.

"Ummmmmm!" she sighed, and reached for her beer. She sipped and looked back up at LaFollet. "Are we on schedule for the dedication, Andrew?"

"Yes, My Lady. Colonel Hill and I are going over the arrangements this afternoon. I should have the finalized schedule for you this evening."

"Good." She sipped more beer, but her eyes were thoughtful, and she cocked an eyebrow as she lowered the stein. "Why do I have the feeling you're not entirely satisfied about something?"

"Not satisfied, My Lady?" LaFollet gave a slight frown and shook his head. "I wouldn't say that." Her other eyebrow rose. He met her gaze levelly for a second, then sighed. "I suppose I *am* still just a bit unhappy about the crowd control planning, My Lady," he confessed, and she frowned.

"Andrew, we've been over this. I know it bothers you, but we can't go around arresting people for exercising their right of assembly."

"No, My Lady," LaFollet replied with deferential obstinacy, resisting the temptation to point out that some steadholders could—and would—do just that. "But we certainly *can* exclude anyone we think is a security risk."

It was Honor's turn to sigh, and she leaned back with a small, fond grimace. Her empathic link to Nimitz was far stronger than the normal human-'cat bond. So far as she knew, no other human had ever been able to sense a 'cat's emotions, much less sense those of others *through* the 'cat, and she'd tried, at first, to discourage Nimitz from sharing the feelings of those about her with her. But it was like trying to remember not to breathe, and, she admitted, she'd clung to Nimitz with such near desperation over the last T-year that it had become almost impossible not to know what people around her felt. She told herself—or tried to—that it was little different from being exceptionally good at reading expressions, but either way, she'd finally accepted that Nimitz wasn't going to let her *not* use

her newfound abilities.

Like now. Nimitz liked LaFollet, and he saw no reason not to convey the major's emotions to her—or to hide his own approval of him. Both of them knew how devoted to her LaFollet was, and she was perfectly well aware the true reason he wanted to crack down on demonstrators was only peripherally connected to security risks. Oh, there was a trace of that, but his real motives were far simpler: outrage and a determination to protect her from fresh wounds.

Her smile faded, and her long fingers toyed with her stein. She was the first female steadholder ever, the symbol and, many would say, the *cause* of the upheavals echoing through the bedrock of Grayson society. Worse, she was not only female, but a foreigner who wasn't even a communicant of the Church of Humanity Unchained! The Church might have accepted her as Harrington Steading's liege lady, just as the Conclave of Steadholders had accepted her into its membership, but not everyone supported those decisions.

She supposed she couldn't blame the dissenters, though it was sometimes hard to remember that. Their attacks could hurt—badly—yet a part of her actually welcomed them. Not because she liked being vilified, but because her desperate, back-to-the-wall defense of Grayson against the fanatics of Masada gave her a stature with the majority of Graysons which she still found an uncomfortable fit. The honors with which they'd heaped her, including her steadholdership, sometimes left her feeling uneasily as if she were playing a part, and the proof that not all Graysons saw her as some sort of holodrama heroine could be almost reassuring.

It was unpleasant, to put it mildly, to be called "the Handmaiden of Satan," but at least the street preachers' ranting cut through the deference others showed her. She remembered reading that one of Old Earth's empires—she couldn't recall whether it had been the Roman or the French—had placed a slave in the chariot of a victorious general as he paraded triumphantly through the streets. While the crowds screamed his praises, it was the slave's function to remind him, again and again, that he was only mortal. At the time she'd read it, she'd thought it a quaint custom; now she'd come to appreciate its fundamental wisdom, for she suspected it would be seductively easy to accept the endless cheers at face value. After all, who *didn't* want to be a hero?

That thought flicked her unexpectedly on the raw, and her eyes darkened with the sudden stab of cold, familiar pain. She gazed down into her stein, mouth tightening, and fought the darkness, but it was hard. So hard. It came without warning, perpetually waiting to ambush her. It was a weakness deep within which she knew had diminished her, and the complexity of its components only made its attacks harder to anticipate. She never knew what would set them off, for there were too many still bleeding edges, too many wounds to be ripped open yet again by some unexpected word or thought.

None of her Grayson subjects knew about her nightmares. No one but Nimitz knew, and she was grateful. The 'cat understood her pain, the grinding, hopeless guilt of those horrible nights—becoming blessedly, if slowly, less frequent—when she remembered how she'd become Grayson's heroine . . . and the nine hundred people who'd died aboard the ships of her squadron in the process. The people a *real* hero would have kept alive somehow. Nor were they all the deaths she had to mourn. She'd always known commanding a warship meant people might live or die by her judgment. It was only in stupid stories written by idiots that good triumphed unscathed and only the evil died. She'd *known* that, but where did it say *her* people must always be the ones to pay for victory?

Her hand tightened on her beer stein, and her eyes burned at the universe's uncaring callousness. She'd had to face her dead before, yet this time was different. This time the pain sucked her under like a Sphinx tidal bore, for this time she'd lost her certitude. "Duty." "Honor." Such important words, yet the bitter, wounded part of her wondered why she'd ever devoted her life to such thankless concepts. They'd seemed so clear, once, so easy to define, but they'd become less so with every death. With every medal and title heaped upon her while the cost to others grew and grew. And under the pain of

all those deaths was the knowledge of how fiercely another part of her clung to those honors—not for their own sakes, but in the despairing hope that they proved it had *meant* something. That the one thing she did better than anything else had some meaning beyond the pointless extinction of people who'd followed her orders to their deaths.

She drew a deep breath and held it, and she knew—didn't simply think, *knew*—that her people's deaths *had* meant something, and that no one else blamed her for not dying with them. Nimitz's ability to share others' feelings with her proved it, and she knew about "survivor's guilt." She knew *she* hadn't created the terrible odds which had killed so many, and she'd done her best.

There'd been a time after the Masadan War and even after the Battle of Hancock when she'd been able to accept that. Not happily or easily, but without the terrible dreams when she heard and saw her people die once more. She'd faced the same doubts then and fought them down and gone on with her life, but this time she couldn't, for something had broken inside her.

She knew, in the dark hours of the night when she faced her soul with desolate honesty, what that something was, and knowing made her feel small and contemptible, for the loss she *hadn't* learned to live with—the one that had destroyed her ability to cope—was personal. Paul Tankersley had been but one man; the fact that she'd loved him more than life itself shouldn't make his death so much more terrible than those of all the men and women who'd died under her command. Yet it did. Oh, *God*, it did! They'd had less than a single T-year together, and even now, ten months after she'd lost him, she still woke in the night, reaching out to the emptiness beside her, and felt the terrible weight of her aloneness once more.

And it was that loss—*her* loss—which had truly stolen her certainty. It was her own selfish grief that weakened her and made all the other deaths so much more terrible, and a part of her loathed herself for it. Not because she was uncertain, but because it was unspeakably weak and wrong to grieve for all those others only as an echo of her anguish over Paul's death.

She'd wondered—sometimes, when she let herself—what would have become of her without Nimitz. No one else knew how she'd longed for extinction, how much part of her had hungered simply to quit. To end. She'd once intended, coldly and logically, to do just that as soon as she'd destroyed the men who'd killed Paul. She'd sacrificed her naval career to bring them down, and a corner of her mind suspected she'd actually *wanted* to sacrifice it—that she'd planned to use the loss of the vocation she loved so much as one more reason to end her dreary existence. It had seemed only reasonable then; now the memory was one more coal of contempt for her own weakness, her willingness to surrender her own pain when she'd always refused to surrender to anyone else.

A soft, warm weight flowed into her lap. Delicate true-hands rested on her shoulders, a cold nose nuzzled her right cheek, a feather-light mental kiss brushed the wounded surfaces of her soul, and she folded her arms about the treecat. She hugged him to her, clinging to him with heart and mind as well as arms, and the soft, deep buzz of his purr leached into her bones. He offered his love and strength without stint, fighting her quicksand sorrow with the promise that whatever happened, she would never truly be alone, and there were no doubts in Nimitz. He rejected her cruel moments of self-judgment, and he knew her better than any other living creature. Perhaps his love for her made him less than impartial, but he also knew how deeply she'd been hurt and chided her for judging herself so much more harshly than she would have judged someone *else*, and she drew a deep breath and reopened her eyes as she once more made herself accept his support and put the pain aside.

She looked up and smiled wanly at the worry in MacGuiness' and LaFollet's eyes. Their concern for her flowed through Nimitz's link, and they deserved better than someone who floundered in the depths of her own grief and loss. She made her smile turn genuine and felt their relief.

"Sorry." Her soprano was rusty, and she cleared her throat. "I guess I was wool-gathering," she said more briskly, her voice determinedly normal. "But be that as it may, Andrew, it doesn't change facts."

As long as they don't break any laws, people have a right to say whatever they want."

"But they're not even from the Steading, My Lady," LaFollet began stubbornly, "and—"——

She laughed softly and interrupted him with a gentle poke in the ribs.

"Don't worry so much! My skin's thick enough to put up with honestly expressed opinions, even from outsiders, however little I may care for them. And if I started using my security people to break heads or quash dissent, I'd only prove I was exactly what they say I am, now wouldn't I?"

The major looked mulish, but he closed his mouth, unable to dispute her argument. It was just that it was so cursed unfair. He wasn't supposed to know the Steadholder's treecat let her sense the emotions of others. He hadn't quite figured out why she was so intent on hiding that from everyone, though he had more than sufficient reasons of his own to agree with her. Even on Grayson, whose people had reason to know better, humans persistently underestimated Nimitz's intelligence. They thought of him as some exceptionally clever pet, not as a person, and his ability to warn the Steadholder of hostile intent had already proved a life-saving secret weapon.

As far as Andrew LaFollet was concerned, that was ample reason to keep it secret, yet no one could serve her as closely as he did without realizing the truth. But he'd also realized she could sense *only* emotions . . . and that she thought no one knew how badly she'd been hurt. That none of her armsmen—or even MacGuiness—knew about the nights she wept with quiet desperation. But all Harrington House's security systems reported to Andrew LaFollet, and he knew. He was sworn to protect her, to die for her if that was what it took, yet there were things no one could protect her from, unless that someone was Nimitz, and to hear bigoted pigs, deliberately shipped into Harrington Steading to harass her, rail at her and denounce her when she'd given so much, *lost* so much, filled him with rage.

Yet she was not only his Steadholder, she was right. And even if she hadn't been those things, he refused to add disputes with her own armsmen to all the things already weighing down upon her, so he closed his mouth on counter-arguments and simply nodded.

Her small smile thanked him, and he smiled back, grateful once again that Nimitz wasn't a telepath. After all, what the Steadholder didn't know wouldn't upset her, and Colonel Hill's intelligence net had identified the agitators most likely to inveigh against her for the "lechery" of her unmarried affair with Paul Tankersley. They were the truly dangerous ones, he thought, for the sanctity of marriage—and the sinfulness of unmarried sex—were part of Grayson's religious bedrock. Most (though certainly not all) Graysons reserved their contempt for the man when such things occurred, for female births outnumbered male on Grayson by three to one, and Grayson was a hard world, where survival and religion alike had evolved an iron code of responsibility. A man who engaged in casual dalliance violated his overriding obligation to provide for and protect a woman who gave him her love and might bear his children. But it wasn't entirely one-sided, and even the Graysons who most respected the Steadholder were often uncomfortable over her relationship with Tankersley. The majority of them seemed to accept the self-evident fact that Manticorans had different standards and that, by those standards, neither she nor Tankersley had done wrong, but LaFollet suspected most of them did their best not to think about it at all. And he more than suspected that the handful of fanatics who hated her for simply being what she was knew it, too. Sooner or later one of them would use it against her when *she* could hear it, and the major knew how cruelly that would wound her. Not just politically, but inside, where the loss of the man she loved had cut so deep into her soul.

And so he didn't argue with her. Instead, he made a mental note to double-check the agitator files with Hill for the names of the true scumbags. No doubt Lady Harrington would be furious with him for . . . reasoning with those individuals, but he was prepared to risk much more than that to shut the mouths of the only filth who might truly hurt her.

Honor's eyebrows lowered for just a moment as her chief armsman met her gaze. There was something going on behind those innocent gray eyes, but she couldn't quite figure out what it was. Sh

made a mental note to keep an eye on him, then put the thought aside and set Nimitz back in his own chair so she could return her attention to her lunch.

Her afternoon's schedule was crowded, and she'd wasted enough time feeling sorry for herself. The sooner she finished eating, the sooner she could be about it, she told herself firmly, and picked up her fork.

CHAPTER THREE

Honor stopped dead on the path as Nimitz catapulted abruptly from her shoulder. She watched him vanish into the formal garden's shrubbery like a streak of cream-and-gray smoke, then closed her eyes and twitched a smile as she followed him through flowering masses of Terran azalea and Sphinxian spike-blossom via their link.

Andrew LaFollet stopped when his Steadholder did, and his eyebrows rose as he noted Nimitz's absence. Then he shook his head in wry understanding, gave their peaceful surroundings a careful scan out of sheer, instinct-level habit, and folded his arms in patient silence.

On most worlds, a garden such as this would have included at least some local flora, but no native plants, however beautiful, were allowed on Harrington House's grounds. Grayson's vegetation was dangerous to humans, especially to those who'd grown up on safer worlds, and none of the Manticore Binary System's three habitable worlds had toxic-level concentrations of heavy metals. That meant Honor lacked even the limited tolerance for them which adaptive evolution had given Grayson's natives, and the people who'd planned Harrington House had declined to expose her—or Nimitz—to them. Instead, they'd gone to the expensive (and clandestine) effort of discovering which of her home world's flowering plants she most loved and imported them, but most of the garden's contents were pure Old Earth species.

As with flora, so with fauna. The grounds were a botanical and zoological garden of Terran and Sphinxian species, crafted specifically for her pleasure, and she'd been both touched by the gesture and shocked by its cost. If she'd known what was planned, she would have fought the entire project, but she'd found out too late and Protector Benjamin himself had ordered its construction. Under the circumstances, she could only be grateful, and not just for her own sake. Nimitz was smarter than most two-footed people, and, despite his inability to utter anything like human speech, he understood more Standard English than the majority of Manticoran adolescents, but concepts like "arsenic poisoning" and "cadmium" were a bit much to expect him to grasp. She was confident she'd convince him danger lurked beyond Harrington House's dome, yet whether or not he truly understood the nature of the risk was far more problematical, and the garden was his playground even more than hers.

Now she located a bench by touch and sank down onto it. LaFollet moved to stand beside her, but she hardly noticed as she sat, eyes still closed, and tracked Nimitz through the undergrowth. Treecats were deadly hunters, the top of Sphinx's arboreal food chain, and she felt his happy sparkle of predatory pleasure. He had no need to catch his own food, yet he liked to keep his skills sharp, and she shared his zest as he slunk silently through the shadows.

The mental image of a Sphinxian chipmunk (which looked nothing at *all* like the Old Earth animal of the same name) came to her suddenly. The 'cat projected it with astonishing clarity, obviously by intent, and she watched as if through his eyes as the chipmunk sat near its hole, gnawing at a near-pine pod's heavy husk. A gentle, artificially induced breeze stirred the foliage, but the chipmunk was upwind, and Nimitz slithered noiselessly closer. He crept right up to it and hovered, sixty centimeters of needle-fanged predator perched at the small, oblivious animal's shoulder, and Honor felt his uncomplicated delight at his own success. Then he stretched out a wiry forelimb, extended one true-hand's long, delicate finger, and jabbed the chipmunk with a lancet claw.

The near-pine pod went flying as the little beast leapt straight up into the air. It whirled in astonishment, then squeaked, paralyzed by terror as it found itself face-to-face with its most terrible natural enemy. It quivered, trembling in every muscle, and then Nimitz bleeked cheerfully and battered it nose-over-tail with the same true-hand. The blow was far gentler than it seemed, but the chipmunk wailed as shock broke the spell of terror. It rolled madly to its feet, and all six limbs blurred as it

darted for its hole. It vanished down its burrow with another wailing squeak, and Nimitz sat up on his haunches with a chitter of amused satisfaction.

He padded over to the hole and sniffed at it, but he had no more intention of digging his quivering victim out than he'd ever had of killing it. The object—*this* time—had been to make sure he still could, not to deplete the garden's livestock, and he flirted his prehensile tail as he sauntered back to rejoin his person.

"You're a pretty terrible person, aren't you, Stinker?" Honor greeted him as he emerged.

"*Bleek!*" he replied cheerfully, and hopped up into her lap. LaFollet snorted, but the 'cat ignored the armsman's amusement as unworthy of notice. He examined his claws and flicked away a stray clot of earth, then sat up and groomed his whiskers at Honor with insufferable smugness.

"That chipmunk never did anything to you," she pointed out, and he shrugged. Treecats killed only out of necessity, but they *were* hunters who took an undeniable pleasure in the stalk, and Honor often wondered if that was why they got along so well with humans. But however that might have been, Nimitz clearly cataloged his hapless prey as "edible, chipmunk, one," and any trauma it might have suffered was a matter of supreme indifference to him.

Honor shook her head at him, then grimaced as her chrono beeped. She glanced at it and grimaced again, harder, before she picked Nimitz up and set him back on her shoulder. He rested one strong, delicate true-hand on her head for balance and chattered a question at her, and she shrugged.

"We're late, and Howard will kill me if I miss this meeting."

"Oh, I doubt the Regent would do anything *quite* that extreme, My Lady." Honor chuckled at LaFollet's reassurance, but Nimitz only sniffed his disdain for the importance humanity in general—and his person in particular—attached to the concepts of "time" and "punctuality." He recognized the futility of protest, however, and settled down, sinking the claws of his true-feet and hand-paws securely into her vest as she moved off.

Honor wore reasonably traditional Grayson costume, and her long-legged stride swirled her skirts as she strode towards the East Portico. LaFollet, like most Graysons, was shorter than she, and he had to trot to keep up. She supposed it made him look undignified and spared him a silent apology for making him scurry, but she didn't slow down. She truly was running late, and they had a long way to go.

Harrington House was entirely too large, luxurious, and expensive for her own taste, but she hadn't been consulted when it was built. The Graysons had intended it as a gift to the woman who'd saved their planet, which meant she couldn't complain, and she'd come to a slightly guilty acceptance of its magnificence. Besides, as Howard Clinkscales was fond of pointing out, it hadn't been built *solely* for her. Indeed, most of its imposing space was given up to the administrative facilities of Harrington Steading, and she had to admit that there seemed to be precious little room to spare.

They emerged from the garden, and she dropped to a more decorous pace as the permanent sentry at the East Portico—Harrington House's main public entrance—snapped to attention and saluted. Honor suppressed a naval officer's automatic reflex to return the salute and settled for a nodded reply, then swept up the steps with LaFollet just as a fierce-faced, white-haired man emerged from the guarded door and gave his own chrono a harassed glance. He looked up at the sound of her foot on the steps of native stone, and his scowl vanished into a smile as he came down them to meet her.

"I'm sorry I'm late, Howard," she said contritely. "We were on our way when Nimitz spotted a chipmunk."

Howard Clinkscales' smile turned into a grin any urchin might have envied, and he shook a finger at the 'cat. Nimitz flicked his ears in impudent reply, and the Regent chuckled. Once upon a time Clinkscales would have been far less at ease with an alien creature—not to mention horrified by the very notion of a woman's wearing the steadholder's key—but those days were gone, and his eyes

gleamed as he looked at Honor.

"Well, of course, My Lady, if it was *important* no apologies are necessary. On the other hand, we *are* supposed to have the paperwork ready when Chancellor Prestwick comes to confirm Council's approval."

"But it's also supposed to be a 'surprise announcement,' " Honor said plaintively. "Doesn't that mean you can cut me some slack?"

"It's supposed to be a surprise to your steads and the other Keys, My Lady—not to *you*. So don't try to wiggle out of it by wheedling me. You haven't acquired the proper knack for it, anyway."

"But you keep telling me to learn to compromise. How am I supposed to do that if you won't compromise with *me*?"

"Hah!" Clinkscales snorted, yet they both knew her whimsical plaint had its serious side. She was uncomfortable with the autocratic power she exercised as a steadholder, yet she'd often thought it was fortunate things were set up as they were. It might be alien to the traditions under which she'd been reared, but, then, she would have been supremely unsuited to a government career back in the Star Kingdom, even without the unpleasant experiences the rough and tumble of Manticore's partisan strife had inflicted upon her.

She'd never really considered it before she was pitchforked into the steadholdership, but once she'd come face-to-face with her role as one of Grayson's autocratic Keys she'd recognized the true reason she'd always disliked politics. She'd been trained all her life to seek decision, to identify objectives and do whatever it took to attain them, knowing that any hesitation would only cost more lives in the end. The politician's constant need to rethink positions and seek compromise was foreign to her, and she suspected it would be to most military officers. Politicos were trained to think in those terms, to cultivate less-than-perfect consensuses and accept partial victories, and it was more than mere pragmatism. It also precluded despotism, but people who fought wars preferred direct, decisive solutions to problems, and a Queen's officer dared settle only for victory. Gray issues made warriors uncomfortable, and half-victories usually meant they'd let people die for too little, which undoubtedly explained their taste for autocratic systems under which people did what they were told to do without argument.

And, she thought wryly, it *also* explained why military people, however noble their motives, made such a botch of things when they seized political power in a society with *non*autocratic traditions. They didn't know how to make the machine work properly, which meant, all too often, that they wound up smashing it in pure frustration.

She shook free of her own thoughts and gave Clinkscales a smile.

"All right, *be* that way. But watch yourself, Howard! *Someone* has to make that speech to the Ladies' Gardening Guild next week."

Clinkscales blanched, and his expression was so horrified Honor surprised herself with a gurgle of laughter. Even LaFollet chuckled, though his face went instantly blank when Clinkscales glanced at him.

"I'll, ah, bear that in mind, My Lady," the Regent said after a moment. "In the meantime, however—?"

He waved at the steps, and Honor nodded. They climbed the last few meters to the portico together with LaFollet at their heels, and she started to say something else to Clinkscales, then froze. Her eyes narrowed and took on the hardness of brown flint, and Nimitz gave an ear-flattened, sibilant hiss. The Regent blinked in surprise, then grunted like an irate boar as he followed the direction of her gaze.

"I'm sorry, My Lady. I'll have them removed immediately," he said harshly, but Honor shook her head. It was a sharp, angry gesture, and her nostrils flared, but her fists unclenched. She reached up to stroke Nimitz, her gaze never moving from the fifty or so men gathered just beyond the East Gate, and

her soprano was toneless when she spoke.

"No, Howard. Leave them alone."

"But, My Lady—!" Clinkscales exclaimed.

"No," she repeated more naturally. She glared at the demonstrators a moment longer, then shook herself and managed a crooked smile. "At least their artwork's improving," she observed almost lightly.

Andrew LaFollet's teeth ground as he glowered at the demonstrators marching stolidly back and forth beyond the dome gate. Most of their placards bore biblical quotations or passages from *The Book of the New Way*, the collected teachings of Austin Grayson, founder of the Church of Humanity Unchained, who'd led the Church from Old Earth to the world which bore his name. Those were bad enough, for the sign-makers had dredged up every citation they could think of to denounce the notion that any woman could be a man's equal, but half the other posters were crude political caricatures that turned Lady Harrington into some sort of leering gargoyle intent on leading society to ruin. The least offensive of them would have been a deadly insult to any Grayson woman, but even they were less infuriating to the major than the signs which bore only two words: "Infidel Harlot."

"Please, My Lady!" His voice was far harsher than Clinkscales. "You can't just let them—!"

"I can't do anything else," Honor said. He made an inarticulate sound of fury, and she laid a hand on his shoulder. "You know I can't, Andrew. They're not on the grounds, and they're not breaking any of our laws. We can't touch law-abiding demonstrators without breaking the law ourselves."

"Law-abiding *scum*, you mean, My Lady." The cold venom in Clinkscales' voice was frightening, but he shrugged unhappily when she looked at him. "Oh, you're right. We *can't* touch them."

"But none of them are *our* people! They're all outsiders!" LaFollet protested, and Honor knew he was right. Those men had come to Harrington—been sent, really—from outside, the expense of their journey and their support here paid by contributions from others who felt as they did. It was a crude effort beside what the professional opinion-shapers of Manticore might have managed, but, then, they were handicapped by their sincerity.

"I know they are, Andrew," she said, "and also that they represent a minority opinion. Unfortunately, I can't do anything about it without playing their game for them." She gazed at them a moment longer, then turned her back deliberately upon them. "I believe you mentioned some paperwork that needs attention, Howard?"

"I did, My Lady." Clinkscales sounded far less calm than she did, but he nodded in acceptance and turned to lead the way indoors.

LaFollet followed them down the hall to Honor's office without another word, yet Nimitz carried the major's emotional turmoil to her. The 'cat's own outrage seethed in their link, melding with LaFollet's to snarl in the back of her brain, and she paused at the door to squeeze the major's shoulder once more. She said nothing. She only met his eyes with a small, sad smile and released him, and then the door closed behind her and Clinkscales.

LaFollet glared at the closed panel for a long, fulminating moment. Then he drew a deep breath, nodded to himself, and activated his com.

"Simon?"

"Yes, Sir?" Corporal Mattingly's voice came back instantly, and the major grimaced.

"There are some . . . people with signs at the East Gate," he said.

"Are there, Sir?" Mattingly said slowly.

"Indeed there are. Of course, the Steadholder says we can't touch them, so . . ." LaFollet let his voice trail off, and he could almost see the corporal nod in comprehension of what he *hadn't* said.

"I understand, Sir. I'll warn all the boys to leave them alone before I go off duty."

"Good idea, Simon. We wouldn't want them involved if anything untoward were to happen. Ah, by

the way, perhaps you should let me know where to find you if I need you before you're due to report back."

"Of course, Sir. I thought I'd go see how the Sky Domes' construction crews are coming. They're finishing up this week, and you know how much I love watching them work. Besides, they're all devoted to the Steadholder, so I try to sort of keep them up to date on how things are going for her."

"That's very kind of you, Simon. I'm sure they appreciate it," LaFollet said, and broke the connection. He leaned back against the wall, guarding his Steadholder's privacy, and his thin smile was hard.

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