

Chapter 1

The Recruiters

Tomas' nape prickled in anticipation. Every pair of eyes in the room would stare at him if he raised his hand. It would be so much easier to lie low. Madame Martin gave the room a final passing gaze, then moved the paper toward the corner of her desk—

He raised his hand. Someone near him murmured, and Madame Martin looked up as Tomas said, "I want to meet the recruiters."

She took a moment to reply. "You, Tomas? You aren't the type of young man to want an early dismissal from class."

His mouth felt dry. How could she think he wanted to shirk school? "I want to meet the recruiters."

A row in front of Tomas, one boy muttered to another. All the students aged about ten standard and up turned in their seats. His desire to speak to a military recruiter defied their stereotypes of him, and their guarded expressions and shared whispers showed how much they disliked his defiance. Even Véronique, who'd shared a few dances and even kissed his cheek at the last Harvest Fête, widened her eyes. Her hand rose defensively to the closed collar of her dark green jumpsuit. Tomas felt a trickle of relief at being in his final year at the *lycée* and having no one sit behind him.

"Quiet," Madame Martin told the other students. "You're

disrupting the first years' work on addition." She cast Tomas an arch eye. Would she ask him if his mother knew? Instead, she quirked her eyebrows for a moment, then said, "You're old enough to make this choice." She picked up her pen and wrote his name on the paper with trim motions.

A few minutes later, the *lycée's* secretary came in. She bowed to Madame Martin and took the paper. On her way out of the room, her gaze fell to the list and she hesitated with her hand in air near the classroom door's handle.

The same boy snickered and Tomas bent his head to his physics and current-affairs papers. The younger boy tried to catch his gaze but soon gave up. Tomas' face cooled.

He spent a few minutes skimming over a description of optical fibers. He gave a little more attention to a diagram of an array of fibers wicking light around a solid wall, but still set those papers aside as soon as he could. He turned to a current affairs paper about the Space Force's victory over a Unity relief mission near one of the artificial wormholes in the New Liberty system, but a movement outside the window soon distracted him.

The secretary swung open the wrought-iron gate, crossed the street to leave the *lycée's* property, and took her phone from her handbag. She cradled the phone between her neck and shoulder and pulled out a paper. Calling the recruiters with the names of students from the *lycée* who would meet them later in the day, Tomas guessed. But when she lowered the phone, call complete, she kept it out, swiping across the touchscreen to place another call. Her eyes danced with excitement and she covered the mouthpiece with her free hand. *You won't believe what happened*, he imagined her saying to the other party. *The étranger twelfth year, Neumann, signed up to meet the military recruiters today!*

Soon everyone in town would know. Before long, word would reach his mother.

He forced his attention back on the printout, spending the

rest of the time until fourteen o'clock rereading the article about the Space Force victory. Tomas imagined the SF men, strapped into their gee fluid pods, lifting their strong arms against the acceleration generated by their fusion drives, pressing buttons, turning dials, flying their ship into battle. The colonels and generals commanding the ships and task forces inspired their men and outsmarted the enemy emerging from the artificial wormhole inbound from Nueva Andalucia.

Soon the SF would take the war into Unity space on multiple fronts and score a victory so great the enemy would capitulate. Within a few months, he could be there, part of the Confederated Worlds' triumph.

He reread again, skimming the paragraph about the Ground Force's continued mission to clear the remnants of Unity infantry from the surface of New Liberty. Wasn't it unnecessary? Couldn't the SF destroy the enemy infantry from orbit?

At fourteen o'clock, Madame Martin looked up from the civics lesson for the middle years. "Guillaume, Tomas, you are excused to visit the recruiters."

"Thank you, Madame," Tomas said. The other boy had already risen and started through the arrayed desks for the door. Tomas followed him into the hallway. The door at the far end already started closing on the view of green-black foliage and Guillaume's untucked shirt and rumpled trousers.

Outside, the indigo sky was cloudless. In the southeast, two-thirds of the way to zenith, Soleil-de-France's fat red disk hung above the engineered maples and elms lining the *rue des Lycées*. In six hours, the hazy blue bulk of the gas giant Napoléon would eclipse the red sun.

Tomas went out through the wrought-iron gate and turned east to walk down the *rue des Lycées* to the *Place des Citoyens*. The street in front of him was empty.

Puzzled, he stopped, turned. Guillaume scurried in the opposite direction, away from the recruiters. "You're going the

wrong way," Tomas said.

Guillaume kept walking.

"Place des Citoyens is this way."

Shoulders hunched, the other boy stopped. He looked over his shoulder with a scowl. "Just 'cause you're a goody-goody doesn't mean I am. I got out of school early, I'm going fishing at the river. Who cares about those recruiters?"

I'm not a goody-goody crossed Tomas' mind. The thought of the river, swimming to midstream with deep strong strokes, warmly bubbled up from his subconscious.

He sighed and rejected the thought. *I promised Madame Martin I'd see the recruiters. It would be wrong to not go.* Then another thought came to him. "Madame Martin can look down *rue des Lycées*. If she doesn't see you head that way, she'll know you're playing hooky. Follow me, then split off at *boulevard Hyperborée*."

Guillaume grunted, then trudged toward Tomas. "Didn't think of that." The two boys walked down the street. Other than the churr of tires from passing automobiles and the harsh calls of grackles and crows, they started in silence. Tomas expected the other boy to want to talk. To forestall Guillaume, he looked to the eastern sky. Sometimes ships could be glimpsed on the transit between their colony on Joséphine and the artificial wormhole to the al-Aqsa system. Not today.

From the corner of his eye, Tomas glanced at Guillaume to see if he too watched the sky. The other boy instead kept his gaze on the asphalt skin of the living street. To the sounds of the town, from time to time Guillaume added the skitter of sloughed aggregate as he kicked small, tarry pebbles to the curb.

Guillaume finally spoke at the corner of *boulevard Hyperborée*. "Go talk to those recruiters if you want, but I still don't care about them." He headed south on the boulevard, toward the river. Tomas shrugged and kept going.

Rue des Lycées soon jogged to the left and climbed uphill.

Eight hundred meters ahead, the Ecogenesis Ministry's local heatwick stood like a giant mushroom on the hilltop overlooking the town. The heatwick loomed over the granite-tile roofs festooned with solar panels of the town's wealthier houses on the upper slopes of the hill. The largest building in sight was the *Lycée Supérieur*, two stories tall, fronted with diorite columns. The personal automobiles, coupes and sport sedans, belonging to the LS' upper year students formed a line at the sidewalk in front of the building. None of those smug rich kids would meet the recruiters. Tomas breathed a little easier when he remembered he could avoid the LS by taking a side street, *rue Saint-Girard*, to get to the *Place des Citoyens*.

He turned and halted at the sight of a familiar face. Etien wasn't a friend, exactly, but Tomas felt closer to him than any other teenager in town. Son of a government scientist from the capital, eccentrically dressed, he too didn't belong in this small town. "You aren't homeschooling today?" Tomas asked.

Etien lifted his kepi by the visor, then placed it back on his head at a jaunty angle. "I was going to accompany my dad on a survey of magma flows in his sector, leaving at eight o'clock, but his ornithopter's diagnostics flashed red before we took off. It's grounded until Ecogenesis gets a maintenance crew out here from Couronnement. My schedule's been open all day."

"Your mother didn't give you schoolwork to make up for it?"

"It's the will of Odin, she says in situations like this." An odd woman, from Midgard, Etien's mother wore dresses instead of jumpsuits, drank beer instead of wine, and homeschooled her only child. Etien laughed. "I've been ambling since this morning. Despite your fears, my friend, my wanderings have even been educational; I just studied anatomy with the widow DuBois." He laughed again.

Tomas noticed a red smear on the side of Etien's jaw. Lipstick. He ducked his face, cheeks suddenly hot. Envy filled his

crotch, but it was soon doused by fear that Etien would ask him about his amorous adventures, of which there had been none.

"Speaking of school, Tomas, what takes you away from Madame Martin's gimlet eye?"

The change of topic gave him a moment of relief. "I'm meeting the military recruiters."

The relief evaporated. Tomas expected Etien to put on a look of mockery, or at best, disbelief, but instead, Etien took it in stride. "I heard they were coming today. Both Space Force and Ground Force."

"I want to meet the SF recruiter," Tomas said.

"I believe you. Yet I'm sure GF serves some useful purpose, else the Confederated Worlds would have disbanded it." Etien shook his chronometer out of the sleeve of his Nehru jacket, then looked at the face on the inside of his left wrist. "You have fifteen minutes. I'll walk with you." He started down the street and Tomas hurriedly caught up.

Once abreast of Etien, Tomas studied the other's face. "You aren't going to ask why I'm meeting them?"

"I hadn't planned to. Enlisting to escape this vile ville would be reason enough. Whatever your reasons, clearly they are good. Otherwise, you wouldn't meet them."

As they neared the St. Girard church, the houses and their lawns on both sides of the street grew smaller, behind shorter, plainer fences of extruded mycocrete instead of wrought iron and quarried stone. At this hour, the street was quiet, with children at school and parents working in skilled trades in the industrial quarter down by the river.

The quiet soon gave way to a churring sound rising in volume, coming up the street behind them. Tomas glanced up as the car sped past: a red teardrop, two doors, with badges on the trunk lid from car designers throughout the Confederated Worlds. Even without the *Lycée Supérieur* parking sticker in the back window, Tomas identified it as Lucien LaSalle's car. Prob-

ably on his way to lacrosse practice, or to help his father dun tenants for rent. Lucien had been born lucky and made sure everyone knew it.

Four hundred meters ahead, Lucien turned right on *boulevard Hortense*, away from the *Place des Citoyens*. Yet even after he left their sight, Tomas' gaze remained on the intersection as he talked to Etien. "Aren't you going to ask what my mother thinks of me meeting the recruiters?"

Etien frowned. "I hadn't planned to, but if you want me to—"

"No."

"Are you certain, my friend? You brought it up—"

"I'm certain."

"Fair enough." They approached the corner, passing through shadows cast by flying buttresses of the St. Girard church. "I'll take my leave, friend." Etien flourished his kepi. "I wish you a productive meeting with the recruiters." Etien moved to replace the hat on his head, but hesitated. "Since I hate receiving advice," he said, "I'm loathe to give it."

Would any other townsman than Etien hesitate before telling him what to do? Tomas said, "I'm listening."

"You might consider whether you're meeting the recruiters because you want to, or because your mother doesn't want you to. That's all. Take care." He flourished his kepi again, then seated it on his head and walked away down the boulevard.

Tomas turned the other direction and quickened his steps. *Boulevard Hortense* bore more traffic, from private cars and for-hire jitneys to bicyclists and pedestrians. Cafés and the show-rooms of handcrafters lined the street, on the ground floors of buildings with walk-up flats and mansard roofs. The people sipping espresso at sidewalk tables, the shopkeepers plying custom furniture and clothing from their front windows, all glanced at him and then looked away. *Étranger*, foreigner. Observer. Preacher's kid. Not poor enough for social protection,

but close enough. Not one of us. He hurried on, along the boulevard, across the lanes of the traffic circle at the boulevard's end, to reach *Place des Citoyens*.

Grass covered most of the plaza, except for the straight walkways leading to a small paved area in the center, in front of a statue of the symbolic empty throne, awaiting a legitimate heir of Bonaparte to take his seat. A dozen locals, ten boys and two girls, milled around the paved area. Two military personnel waited at the front side of the paved area, furthest from the statue. A woman, whose large dark eyes and faint unibrow looked al-Aqsan, wore a gray Ground Forces dress uniform with some chevrons on the jacket sleeve. Some enlisted rank. Next to her stood a male Space Forces lieutenant, his beard and turban suggesting he was from Navi Ambarsar, his dress uniform as deep blue as Joséphine's sky.

The SF lieutenant extended his hand. "Welcome to our presentation on military careers. The chief recruiting officers will be speaking in a few minutes." He lifted a tablet computer. "Your name, please?"

"Neumann. Tomas Neumann."

"Noy-man..." The lieutenant swiped his fingers up and down the touchscreen. "I don't see any Noyman on the list."

Tomas wanted to protest, but his mouth felt like a seized-up engine. *I'm on the list don't let your dangerous machine exclude me don't make me face my mother for nothing—*

"Lieutenant," said the Ground Forces enlisted woman, "if I may, look under n-e-u. You aren't native to Joséphine, Mr. Neumann?"

Tomas nodded. The motion freed his voice. "I was born on Sankt-Benedikts-Welt. We moved here when I was young, after my father died."

"There you are," said the lieutenant, "sorry." Someone came up the walkway behind Tomas. "Welcome to our presentation..." he said, stepping past Tomas.

"Thank you, lieutenant," the new arrival said. Tomas knew

that smooth baritone voice. It belonged to a past builder of playground coalitions that excluded Tomas, a present-day charmer of girls whom Tomas fancied. "It's L-a-capital-s-a-l-l-e, Lucien."

"You're on the list. The chief recruiting officers will speak in a few minutes."

"Excellent. Pardon me, lieutenant, corporal?"

Tomas glanced over his shoulder. The SF lieutenant looked vaguely embarrassed and the GF enlisted woman stifled a frown when she noticed Tomas looking. He counted four chevrons on her sleeve and vowed to look up what rank that number signified after the meeting ended.

He avoided making eye contact with Lucien, but the other's smooth, hooded-eye gaze passed over him, then lurched back. "Tomas? I wasn't expecting to see you here, but what a pleasant surprise."

"I'm surprised too. Didn't I see you turn the other direction on *boulevard Hortense*?"

Lucien lifted a cardboard coffee cup. "My favorite café is a few blocks south of the Saint Girard church."

Tomas leaned back, wary of the other's motives in talking. "I hadn't expected you to be considering a military career."

A glint came to Lucien's gray-blue eyes. "Time and place came together. We LaSalles are well-known here on Joséphine, but I don't want to be just a member of the planetary legislature. I could gain a much higher office in the Confederate Worlds government, I'm sure, but I need some name recognition among the masses, plus contacts with the brokers of power. Service in wartime is a great first step to getting both. My father has a friend in Couronnement who can introduce me to an admissions officer at officer candidates school."

Lucien angled his head. *Now comes the mockery*, Tomas thought.

"You're interested in the Space Force?" Lucien asked.

Tomas replayed his words, looking for subtext in the

other's tone but finding none. "I am."

"I knew it. It's the branch I'm looking at, too. By far, the more important one. I'm glad to know you could be serving under me. The physics you're learning is obsolete, but you're good at math, and they can slot technical skills into you easily enough." Lucien glanced at the dozen locals already waiting and lowered his voice. "I'd much rather have you than those hicks. Public schoolies, all of them, slotting in trade skills as if that's enough. You can't build a palace on a foundation of sand and you can't make a tech sergeant out of a cretin. Those ones are only good for the mudbugs."

Lucien glanced up, then slapped Tomas on the shoulder. "The recruiters are preparing to speak." He slipped forward, the local boys recognizing him and making way. Tomas drifted unnoticed to the rear of the crowd.

A riser had been placed in front of the statue of the Imperial throne. The two chief recruiting officers stood at the back of the riser, talking to each other in low voices, each with a tablet in hand. Both shook their tablets. After reviewing the results, the GF recruiter stepped back, and the SF recruiter smiled and strode to the front of the riser.

"As always, the Space Force is the first on the scene. Greetings, young women and men of Portage-du-Nord. I'm Major Bäckström." The SF recruiter looked to be from Österbotter, with steel-blue eyes and a fuzz of blond hair at the sides of his head, under his dress cap. He spoke Joséphine French with a precise, upper-middle-class accent. A Cross of Valor, second class, decorated his chest. "This is my first visit to your town, but judging from your display of patriotism, it won't be my last."

The major continued. "I'm certain you've heard about the vast opportunities an enlistment in the Space Force would open for you." He surveyed the crowd with an easy, confident manner. "I'm here to tell you they're all true."

The major spent the next minutes talking about benefits of

service in the SF. Travel, technical skills applicable to numerous civilian careers, pride in defending the travel routes binding the Confederated Worlds together, respect and admiration from civilians in their ports of call. As he strode the riser, the rays of Soleil-de-France would sometimes glint in the Cross of Valor and dazzle the locals' eyes.

"There's danger, of course, given we're in wartime. But the risk is less than in—" He angled his head and motioned with his eyes toward the GF recruiter, "—other branches, and, the better you perform your task, the lower the risk. No other branch can say that. And no other branch will have as great a say as we will in bringing about a victory over the Unity. Does anyone have any questions?"

"I saw the news story about how you kept your men firing their gun in the first battle at New Liberty," said one of the local boys. "What's it like to be a hero?"

"I only did my duty to my ship and my service in spite of the damage we suffered. If you want to call that heroism, I can't stop you. Other questions?"

Lucien said, "Does the SF favor officers who graduated from the Space Force Academy over those who emerge through officer candidates school?"

The major paused, checked his tablet. "I assure you, Mr. LaSalle, whether you come to have a single brass bar or a flock of eagles on your epaulets, your rank is the only thing your men and your fellow officers will see. No other questions? Thank you for your attention. Let me turn the stage over to my colleague."

Lucien slipped back through the crowd as the recruiters changed places. "Why bother listening?" Lucien murmured to Tomas.

"It would be rude to slip away."

"Pff." Lucien shrugged. "It's your time to waste." He passed the lower-ranked military personnel at the back of the paved area on his way to his parked car.

The GF recruiter, a stocky man, had a captain's bars on his shoulders and a set of plain ribbons on the front of his dress gray jacket. "Hello, I'm Captain Schreiber. Before we start, I'd like to thank Lieutenant Singh and Staff Sergeant Bath-al-Uzzá for their efforts in organizing our meeting with you today. I also should thank Major Bäckström for his service as well."

Continuing in passable *jozéphinais*, Capt. Schreiber said, "The major drew a lot of distinctions between what his branch can offer you from what the Ground Forces can. Even though he oversold some things—that travel he spoke of is in a windowless can from one space station to another—he got one thing right. The Ground Forces get their hands and their uniforms dirty. Even if you don't carry a rifle as part of your duty assignment—most GF soldiers don't—combat support personnel still face hardship and risk.

"That said," Capt. Schreiber added, "GF personnel can benefit in ways spacemen can't. The bonds you can form with your squadmates are stronger than any other, except the ones with your families. You can see the wide variety of human worlds and human beings, up close and personal. And though there's less glamour, the wisest civilians will commend your service, because they know the truth. All other combat arms, from the Space Force to the Intelligence Bureau to the Foreign Affairs Ministry, exist for only one purpose: to put the Ground Forces infantryman in sole possession of the battlefield."

Capt. Schreiber went on, his manner gruffly affable, and Tomas found himself warming to him and his branch. The captain's honesty refreshed Tomas, and made him wonder. What else had the SF major obfuscated or downright lied about?

After a public question-and-answer period at the end of his presentation, Capt. Schreiber said, "If you want to talk more informally with the major or me, we'll be around for a few minutes."

With that, the meeting broke up. Tomas stood in the same

place for a moment. Most of the locals drifted away, but one figure strode effortlessly against the current: Lucien, returning for more face time. He went directly to Maj. Bäckström without a glance to either side.

Tomas swallowed once, his Adam's apple feeling thick, and walked to join SSgt. Bath-al-Uzzá and two local boys around Capt. Schreiber.

Soleil-de-France now hung a few hours away from Napoléon. A storm in the gas giant flashed lightning in its gibbous dark face as Tomas reached the group around the captain.

"But wasn't the major right?" one of the local boys asked. "GF is a lot more dangerous than SF, yeah?"

"If you look at total casualty rates, that's adding up killed, wounded, and taken prisoner, sure. But you can't be taken prisoner in a space battle, and you're a hell of a lot more likely to end up killed in a ship than you are wounded. Here, let me show you all something." Capt. Schreiber lifted his tablet, swiped the touchscreen, then turned it to them.

Tomas glimpsed a photo of a long black shape occluding background stars on the touchscreen, then shut his eyes and turned his head. *The photograph was the first step toward Earth's virtual fugue*, his mother had said a thousand times. *We may only look at what is, not what was, somewhere else, some time ago.*

"From this side, the ship looks intact," came Capt. Schreiber's voice. "Even from the other side, the only damage looks minor. Let me zoom in. See? Not much, right? Now, here are some photos the SF recovery team snapped from the interior, far from the hull puncture." A fingertip sounded on the touchscreen.

"Ugh," said the boy who'd asked the question.

"I don't feel good," said the other, voice queasy.

"There's lots of ways to die on the ground," Capt. Schreiber said. "But for your eyes to bulge and your lungs to hemorrhage, you have to be in space." He held a pause, then

said, "We've excluded Mr. Neumann enough. Didn't know you were an Observer. I'll warn you next time."

Tomas opened his eyes. The tablet dangled in the captain's hand; the touchscreen showed plain text. "Thank you, sir."

Capt. Schreiber nodded in acknowledgement, then continued speaking to the group. "In Ground Force, you're a damn sight more likely to get wounded and live. Sergeant, you were in medical corps, weren't you?"

A faraway look passed over SSgt. Bath-al-Uzzá's face. "I was," she said quietly.

"I'll give you the honor of quoting medical corps' motto."

"If they come to us alive, they'll stay that way." She blinked and turned away for a moment.

Capt. Schreiber held his gaze on the other boys in turn, then Tomas. "I can attest to the truth of that motto." His thick hands unbuttoned his gray jacket with surprising quickness. He handed the jacket to the staff sergeant, then opened the links at the cuffs of his white starched shirt. This close, his hands were visibly different: the left had thicker nails and larger veins than the right.

He pushed his sleeves back to his elbows. His right arm was fresher-looking all the way to the elbow, skin more pink, hair less gray. "There are civilian young ladies present across the way," he said with a nod at the cluster around Major Bäckström, "so modesty bars me from baring my chest, but you could see the beginning of my regrown arm right here." He gently chopped his right shoulder with the side of his left hand.

Tomas digested his words in a few moments of silence. "But still, a lot of Ground Force die," the second local boy said.

Capt. Schreiber gave him a firm look. "That's true. And? You think you're guaranteed to live a thousand years if you sit this war out? The more men we have who are unwilling to risk their lives, the more likely we are to lose this war. If the Unity wins, do you trust them to keep you alive? If you want guar-

antees, go listen to the major blow smoke." His expression changed to take in the entire group. "More questions?"

The first boy spoke. "The major made it seem like SF guys get—" He jolted his gaze to SSgt. Bath-al-Uzzá and blinked a few times. "—I mean, more, respect—"

"Spacemen get more *vulve*? Pardon my language, sergeant."

"I've heard worse, sir." SSgt. Bath-al-Uzzá sounded mildly amused.

Capt. Schreiber returned his attention to the boy. "I don't know if that's true. Now it may be that some dumb girls see Shirley Foxtrot in casual blues and give it up more easily, but I hear you can get all the *vulve* you want on Sol b." Earth, whose billions slept in virtual reality chambers while the real universe unfolded around them.

Was the captain an Observer? Or at least sympathetic to Observer precepts? Tomas wondered if his long-dead father had been as honest, as challenging, as worthy of respect as this man.

What the local boys might think now struck Tomas as irrelevant; his nervousness at school a few hours earlier now seemed unreal. "What about Observer doctrine?" he asked. "Can a man serve in the GF without being forced to see previously-recorded video or hear previously-recorded audio?"

Capt. Schreiber thought a moment. "He can. I have to tell you, some duties are impossible to reconcile. Others can be done, but you'd be in for a tough road persuading your commander you can hack it without all this." He lifted and wagged his tablet. "Live video and audio are okay for you?"

"They are."

"Then there will be duties to fit you." After a look around the group, Capt. Schreiber asked, "Nothing further? That's fine. GF isn't asking for a decision today. You have to earn your *baccalauréat* or your skilled trades aptitude cert before you can enlist. Let me print out or beam you my contact infor-

mation. You can call or mail me anytime with any questions, or your decision yes or no."

He pointed at the far side of the *Place des Citoyens*, where a line of public hire jitneys stood at the curb opposite the mouth of *boulevard Hortense*. "For now, your ride home is on us."

A few minutes later, Tomas sat in the back of the jitney, heading north of town. He held the captain's business card between thumb and forefinger, flexing it. He paid no attention to the driver's route. They could be driving past the *Lycée Supérieur* for all he knew, or cared.

A few minutes later, sweat broke on Tomas' forehead and the jitney's air conditioning blew louder from the vents. He neared the heatwick atop the hill on the north side of town. As they passed a hundred meters from it, a space between rows of black-green maples gave a glimpse of the heatwick's base, dirt piled up around it, graffiti staining the black ceramic. The heatwick blocked a wide swath of the eastern sky, as if the gas giant Napoléon had darkened and fallen to the world's surface.

Almost at the top of the hill, Tomas glanced over his shoulder. Portage-du-Nord covered the slope falling toward the Friedland River, three kilometers distant, with low roofs and clumps of elms and maples. He'd seen the town every day coming to school, but today, Portage-du-Nord seemed like a flattened stain on the terraformed landscape, insignificant under the indigo sky. Soleil-de-France shown amid the sparkle of a dozen bright stars, stars where he could serve, not as a cog in Lucien LaSalle's machine, but as a man with men like Capt. Schreiber.

He crested the hill and the town slipped from sight. The boulevard narrowed to two lanes. Its median tapered, then gave way to a yellow center stripe. The road now continued in a straight line as it rose and fell with the jumbled landscape. Cuts in ridgelines showed strata of primordial lava and compressed ash, splotched with moss and lichen and tufted with a

few tenacious plants.

After half a dozen kilometers, the car climbed the tallest ridge since the Portage-du-Nord heatwick. Off to the right, the Observer parsonage showed as a small artificial block, in contrast to the natural lines of the ridge meeting the sky and the curves of the Observing pews. The driver slowed and pulled off onto the extra-wide shoulder approaching the driveway to the parsonage. "Take you to the house?" he asked Tomas.

"I'll walk. Thank you." The car stopped and Tomas climbed out. This far between heatwicks, the cool air made him shiver. He unlocked the gate across the driveway and went in, zipping his jacket after his first two steps.

His mother was supposed to be gone all day, Observing a funeral in Bois d'Orme, but as he paced up the driveway, he didn't relax until he noticed her car missing from the carport next to the parsonage. Relief hit him. He had a few more hours to work out what to tell her.

His relief faded when he came closer to the fence around the parsonage, carport, and lawn. The yellow flag on the gate post, next to his mailbox, had been raised. He trudged to a stop. Reluctantly, he lifted the mailbox lid and pulled out his mother's message to him.

We're doing a snap Observation of today's eclipse of Soleil. Clean the pews. Love Mother.

He frowned at the note for a moment, then slid it into the recycling bin and stalked down the path that led around the parsonage to the Observing pews. He kicked a pebble across the parallel yellow lines of the parking lot. Even though she was twenty kilometers away, he couldn't escape her commands.

Tomas yanked the microfiber mop from the custodial dugout behind the pews, then let the dugout lid clang shut. The pews formed a semicircular amphitheater facing downslope. The main entryway was at back center, flanked by two diorite pillars bearing black and white *taijitu* symbols. He

waved the mophead at the *taijitus* and entered. He glanced downslope, where a lectern bearing another *taijitu*, the receding line of sparingly-traveled road, and the distant heatwick over Portage-du-Nord were the only artificial constructs visible under Napoléon's looming bulk. The Observing pews gave a great vantage point, but a snap Observation? No one would hear about it in time to plan their attendance. Mother would be lucky to have three people make the drive from Portage-du-Nord or Bois d'Orme.

He lazily swept the mophead over the granite pews in the outermost ring of the semicircle. Dust could linger in the corners, who cared, why bother digging for it. But as he went on, habit kicked in, goaded by guilt. Cleaning the pews had been his chore since they'd moved to Joséphine. He couldn't help it. He pushed the mophead deep into the corners of the first pew in the second ring, then sighed out a breath and went back to the outermost ring to redo them.

Don't be such a coward. You'd rather give her what she wants then tell her it doesn't matter. Yet despite the thoughts passing through his mind, he persisted in sweeping the pews according to his mother's expectations.

About halfway through, another thought hit him. Even if cleaning the pews didn't matter, even if he left town the day after receiving his *baccalauréat* and headed straight to Capt. Schreiber's office in Couronnement, this was the duty assigned to him, and he owed it to himself to do it as best he could. The critical thoughts fell away after that and he found himself entering a rhythm, sweeping quickly and efficiently. He lost track of time. Surprise widened his eyes when he realized he'd reached the innermost ring of pews.

He sat for a moment in the right front pew, next to the central aisle. Joséphine's tidal lock to its primary meant the bottom limb of Napoléon always just grazed the top of the lectern as seen by his vantage point. The gas giant's face was dark and already it obscured a curved sliver of Soleil-de-France.

"You better be done cleaning if you're sitting around," came his mother's voice from the top of the amphitheater. A low wall behind the lectern reflected her voice as well, pummeling him from both sides. In addition to her brusque tone, she spoke in Sankt-Benedikts-Sprach, the language she normally used when she wanted to keep her words to Tomas unintelligible to locals.

Tomas lurched out of his seat and the end of the mop handle spun in a wide circle before he settled it. He winced that he jumped even when she gave no command and lifted his chin when he faced her. "I cleaned everything."

She came closer. Though ten centimeters shorter than Tomas, he still felt small in her presence. Her brown eyes were usually narrowed in a scowl, but now the expression was more intense than usual, with her lips pressed tightly together. "Even the tops of the *taijitus*?" She lifted her hand and pointed her forefinger at him. She wore a white glove, and her fingertip bore dust.

"Sorry, I must have missed there."

"We have to be attentive to detail. The local people will probably never meet other Observer ministers. If we don't show them the Observer way as perfectly as we can, they'll end up in virtual fugue and whose fault would that be?"

His heart thudded and he forced himself to look into her eyes. "I need to talk to you about something, mother."

She leaned back. "I don't have much time. I need to rehearse the homily for the Observation of the eclipse."

"It's important, mother." Tomas swallowed. "I want you to hear it from me and not from anyone else."

Alarm crinkled her brow. "What is it? Did you get one of those girls pregnant?"

"After I finish the *lycée*, I'm going to enlist in the Ground Force."

Her expression clouded. "No you aren't."

"I'm eighteen standard. When I have a school leave-taking

cert—"

"You will go to the seminary on Péngláishān. You have a gift for Observing. You have to practice and perfect that gift for the people of the Confederated Worlds, to save them from virtual fugue." Her tone buffeted him with her certainty.

He clutched the mop handle. "I don't know if I have a gift."

"You have a gift. I've never lied to you, have I? Becoming an Observer minister is the best thing you can do."

A cold breeze flowed down the slope toward them. It lifted the ends of his mother's brown hair from her shoulders, but she stood still and her face showed no sign of distraction.

"I could always go to seminary after finishing my enlistment—"

"Enlistment?" She stepped closer and looked at him as if he suffered some grave illness. "You would throw your pearls before swine if you joined the Ground Force! All they want is boys with empty heads to give more room for their slotted skills and knowledge. Empty heads they can fill with lies of glory and sacrifice. Empty heads no one will miss when they're splattered across some foreign planet!"

Tomas flinched, then remembered Capt. Schreiber's comment to the second local boy. "There's risk in serving, but there's also risk in doing the same old thing."

His mother's head reared back and her eyes widened in passing. She groped for words. "This is your life we're talking about. You're eighteen standard. You think you're immortal and infallible. You aren't. You know you aren't. The local boys will clutch their napoleon medallions and their crucifixes around their necks, thinking divine favor will keep them alive when bullets fly around them. But you know those gimcracks make no difference. The emergence of each moment from the one before will cut down the pious and the impious alike—"

"If the GF medical corps finds a wounded man still alive, they'll keep him alive."

"And the people on both Earth and Heinlein's World count themselves kings of infinite space," she said in an incontrovertible tone. "People say all sorts of things, but saying doesn't make it true."

"They can rebuild arms and legs—"

"Can they rebuild heads? And I don't just mean you might get your head shot off. Do you know what war does to the men who fight?"

Tomas brought the mop handle, still clutched tightly, in front of his body. "They see bad things."

"Worse. They do bad things. They kill people. They destroy things. They harm the innocent. Most of the *joséphinais* who'll enlist will turn to drink or drugs to dull the pain of their memories." Her voice softened. "But you're an Observer. You see everything as it is. Drink and drugs are barred to you." She peered at him, and her tone grew cold. "Unless you renounce Observing, after all it has done for you."

He grasped the mop handle with both hand. "I can both serve in the Ground Force and be an Observer. Captain Schreiber said so."

"He lied. His only goal is to press the shilling on enough boys to meet his quota to his superiors. Soon as you would take it, he'd forget you. He'd love to get an Observer to enlist. The military wants to destroy us—"

"What? No!" She hadn't met the captain; she wouldn't say these things if she had. And she'd never denounced the military before.

"They want to revoke the limits we Observers call on our peers to follow, so they can misuse computers and time-shift recorded data to better make war. You think that's all? Do you believe you'll have any say in what they will slot into your brain? They'll make you watch and listen to recordings. They'll make you use computers for purposes other than reading text. You'll have no choice."

"I will too have a choice. Captain Schreiber told me."

Anger overwhelmed meekness. He pushed the mop away. The wooden handle clattered against the nearest pew. "He's the only man I've ever met who's treated me with respect."

The corners of her mouth turned down, and her eyes looked as cold as the handful of stars at the indigo zenith. Voice dispassionate, she said, "You're just like your father."

Shame flooded him when she did that, as it always had when she'd said those words in that tone before. But now, he felt something else. The captain's demeanor was a lifeline as he thrashed to keep himself from drowning. "He was a man and I am his son. Maybe I should be like him."

"You should be a fool? Throwing his pearls to swine and getting trampled to death in the process? He had immature daydreams, just like you, and he didn't know what he was getting into, just like you. And he died for it, just as you are likely to if you enlist. You want to be a soldier? You want to come home in a plastic bag? Or with a mind forever broken by the shame and guilt your actions would earn you? Then in your last lucid moments, when you'll know your life or your sanity are ebbing away to never return, see how much it comforts you to know you're your father's son."

Her words stung him, but in a moment, his timidity fell away. *You know nothing about being a man*, Tomas thought, but then his anger faded. "Thank you for telling me what you think I should do. But I will enlist."

Her mouth opened without speaking, expressing disbelief. She blinked and her eyes glistened, and muscles momentarily worked in her throat. "Don't make me cry."

"You don't have to. I'm not dead yet."

She drew in a breath and peered down her nose, gaze suddenly hard. Arms folded over her chest, she said, "You're close enough. You're no longer an Observer. Get out of my pews."