

[The] truth is so precious that she should always
be attended by a bodyguard of lies.

—Winston Churchill

Chapter 1

The Rally

The wall of the subway station entrance cast a narrow shadow on the steps. Tomas emerged from the station into the yellow-orange light of Epsilon Eridani. Though bright, the steps remained cool underfoot all the way up to the street.

At the top of the steps, long, skinny signs hung from poles flanking the entrance. *Firstlanding Square South*. On his side of the street, skyscraper walls of curved concrete and vast sheets of mirrored glass towered above the sidewalk. A step brought Tomas into glare reflected from more mirrored glass cladding an upper floor of a high-rise across the street.

He squinted and turned his head, and the sounds of downtown McAuliffe city pummeled his ears. Rustling feet, the whisper of automobile tires and the squeak of brakes, and conversations over phones and wearable communicators flooded him.

He felt more exposed in downtown McAuliffe than he had on any battlefield.

Tomas took a breath. He would follow through on Rolston's invitation. Forrester's campaign rally would help him decide about the candidate, one way or the other.

He started along the sidewalk toward the square. He held his shoulders back and chest up. Civilians in the latest fashions—one exposed shoulder, sequined necklines plunging to the breastbone, oversized sunglasses doubling as video displays, earbuds curling like cooked plastic shrimp, and those were just the *men*—loomed in front of Tomas, then veered

away at the last moment. They smoothly continued their conversations, as if skills imps had planted in their brains how to walk crowded streets without noticing the people around them.

Tomas slowed. How could he find Rolston and Unzai in this crowd?

The only answer came from a man's step on his heel. "Keep moving, tourist," the man muttered as he walked by.

Tomas picked up his pace to keep with the flow of pedestrians. He neared a walnut-brown awning and cramped chairs and tables of a sidewalk café. Half a dozen youthful men in garish clothes stood near a pair of tables, shouting and gesticulating at someone the crowd hid from Tomas.

A few more steps, and he found Rolston and Unzai.

Rolston's garrison cap sat low on his forehead, nearly touching the top of his augmented reality glasses. The position of the garrison cap accented the sharp lines of his eyebrows and the venom in his green eyes. "Sit you down, each be-damned one of you."

One of the men, with bulging eyes, in a shirt speckled and iridescent as a trout, slapped the back of his hand against a friend's shoulder. "A warmonger *and* a stupid Endeavourite."

Another of the men, his teeth partially exposed in a sneer, cocked his head and flicked it back. His voice dripped with smug superiority. "We don't sit down for some lieutenant or whatever from a continent covered in *lichen*."

Rolston's hands clenched into fists. Next to him, Unzai tapped his fingers on his pointed chin and muttered something too quiet for Tomas to catch. Rolston's angry gaze remained locked on the sneering man. "You don't sit down for me? True, you don't. You only kneel. For the Progressive Republic. So you can catch their pubes in your teeth when you —"

Tomas hurried to them. He extended his arms and pressed his palms against Rolston's chest and the sneering man's. He

alloyed his voice with steel. "Enough. Both of you."

The sneering young man took a half-step back and swatted at Tomas' arm with his hand. "Or what? You're another war-monger? Hiding a gun to brandish at me?"

"We can take these swine with our fists," Rolston said.

"We could." Tomas turned his head. "But we will let him go. He has his right to speak, just as we have ours."

Rolston shrugged away from Tomas' hand. "Maybe by law. But by justice? We earned our right to speak in the mud and blood on New Liberty and Navi Ambarsar."

"You volunteered," the sneering young man said. "You got what you deserved."

Tomas narrowed his eyes and fixed the sneering man with a scowl. Man? Boy. A cocooned boy, with enough income to drink overpriced coffee and buy clothes handcrafted by a tailor. As if he could know even the tiniest fraction about the soldier's life to dismiss Tomas, Unzai, and Rolston.

"What I deserved?" Rolston clenched his fists and leaned forward. "A back stab from you?"

Tomas squared his shoulders to the sneering young man. On the other side of Rolston, Unzai did the same.

The young man's gaze flicked from side to side. He shifted his weight to his heels, and his sneer curdled into mild fear.

His companion in the speckled, iridescent shirt leaned closer. This one looked toward the subway station and his eyes bulged even wider than before. "Let it go."

The young man's eyes turned in the direction his companion watched. Tomas glanced that way as well.

Five men approached, wearing blue jackets and matching pants. On their hips, secured by instant release adhesive, rode handled batons. An armband ringed their right sleeves, showing a red cross barby against a blue field. These five men wore garrison caps, similar to Rolston's, but coming to a flat vertical face over the wearer's forehead. On each flat face of their caps stood the dark disk of a camera.

Passing civilians veered wide around them.

The five men in blue belonged to the Restoration Party's security organization. A thug squad, some of Forrester's opponents called the bluecoats. The RP's militia, planning street battles if Forrester lost the upcoming election, said others.

The young man and his companions quickly sat down. Their rigid backs did not touch their chairs. Their gazes and voices remained amongst themselves.

Rolston adjusted his cap to a jaunty angle. "Good afternoon, team leader," he said to a bluecoat with crow's feet around humorless eyes, and white stripes of rank flanking the cross barby on his armband.

"Good afternoon to you, captain—" The bluecoat team leader nodded to Thomas and Unzai. "—citizens. All well?"

Rolston glanced at the young men seated at the nearby tables. His mouth puckered as if to spit cherry pits into the young men's ornate hairstyles. "Well enough."

The bluecoat team leader squinted at the young men, then nodded with an air of finality. "We'll see you at the rally, captain?"

"All of us." Rolston lifted his hands twenty centimeters to indicate Unzai and Tomas.

"Glad to hear it." The Restoration Party security team walked on toward Firstlanding Square.

Rolston glanced at the lower left corner of his vision. "It's 1545 already? If we don't go now we'll be far from the stage." He led Tomas and Unzai down the sidewalk. The RP security team provided a wake shield. This time, no pedestrians loomed in Tomas' path.

"Unzai, Neumann," Rolston began. Despite being raised here on Challenger, he pronounced Tomas' name correctly enough, *Noy-mun*. The thick soles of Rolston's black service-dress shoes clacked on the sidewalk. "Why the civvy garb, you two?"

Tomas reached inside the collar of his polo shirt and

scratched his nape. His topsiders muffled his footfalls. "You know regs forbid appearing in uniform at partisan political events."

"That's right," said Unzai.

Rolston clapped his hand on Tomas' shoulder, squeezed the blue cotton of Tomas' polo shirt. His green eyes danced. "Right, I can trust you two to follow regs. But the regs are a guide, not a lifeline to cling to. Neumann, I've heard your stories about New Liberty and Arden. You've deviated from regs to better pound the Unis or the PRs. Now I'm doing the same."

"The same?" Tomas said.

"Right, not all the same. You poor married bastards lack my grasp of fashion. Unlike you, if I wore civvy garb, I'd look too much like our lilies of the field back at the café." Rolston laughed.

Tomas pressed his lips together. He'd left Lissa at home with the boys for this. "You know there are cameras everywhere. What if some higher rank sees video of you?" On the other side of Rolston, Unzai nodded.

Rolston gave a jaunty shake of his head. "Higher ranks will attend the rally in uniform. The GF brass is pro-Forrester —"

"I know," Tomas said, though all he knew was r-mail, rumor. His mouth felt dry. "But we're supposed to appear impar —"

Rolston laughed again. Tomas gritted his teeth. "Relax, Neumann. If the brass call me on the carpet for taking sides while in uniform, I'll tell them you tried to stop me."

They walked on. Challenger's rapid rotation shrank the shadows of highrises as Epsilon Eridani neared the third noon of the calendar day.

Soon the skyscraper vista opened up to Firstlanding Square.

A ring of streets defined the square's perimeter. They

climbed steps to a footbridge held up by stylus-thin strands of nanotube alloy. Above the crowded streets, sinuous highrises stretched glassy faces into the sky.

Tomas surveyed the highrises, then relaxed. Peacetime. The buildings lacked sniper nests.

He, Rolston, and Unzai reached the far end of the footbridge. Two men in gray-black windbreakers and shaded videoglasses, Confederate Police, studied a pair of Restoration Party bluecoats. The bluecoats stared back.

Down the steps from the footbridge, concrete slabs paved most of the square. In two ranks of raised planters, cypresses extended branches like high thin clouds. Ten meters beyond the inner row of planters, the concrete slabs stopped at a four-strand railing. Beyond lay a zone of rippled, reddish-brown basalt. Five standard centuries earlier, the first ship to land on Challenger had softened that rock with the heat of its fusion drive. The LZ remained a monument to the planet's terraformers.

At the railing, a small sign showed the cross barby and an arrow pointing to the right.

Readily visible from two hundred meters across the square, a crowd faced a stage. Behind the stage, rising above the foliage of cypresses, a huge backdrop showed another cross barby, the Restoration Party's logo, against a red-white-and-blue ripple evoking the Confederate Worlds flag. A lectern near the front of the stage looked tiny beneath the flag. Next to the logo stood the words *Forrester for President 3018. Honor Restored.*

Halfway between the small sign and the stage stood a line of bluecoats. The nearest one shifted his position to intercept Tomas, Unzai, and Rolston. A chemical sniffer, like a tiny alloy lizard, rested on his shoulder. The bluecoat's eyes seemed as wide as the camera lens on his cap. He had a smooth face and a voice of naïve confidence. "Good afternoon, captain, citizens. Have you already selected Forrester as your first prefer-

ence on the ballot?"

"Yes, absolutely," Rolston said.

Tomas shook his head. "Not yet." He leaned toward O'Brien of the Outworld Alliance Party.

The smooth-faced bluecoat stood taller. "That will change when you hear Forrester speak. He understands our problems and our only acceptable solution better than any other candidate." He gestured toward a line of waiting people. "Please queue up for a security screen."

Rolston leaned forward and stretched his palm toward the young man. "We can set that aside, can't we? You approve us."

"I would if I could, captain."

A temporary railing ran from the rippled basalt field to the outermost row of cypress planters. The queue led to the only passage through the railing, a security scanner crewed by more men in shaded videoglasses and dark windbreakers.

Tomas said, "ConPol doesn't trust you to provide security?"

The smooth-faced bluecoat shook his head gravely. "We don't trust them. Captain, gentlemen, please proceed."

Tomas, Rolston, and Unzai started forward. Angling toward the rear of the queue a few steps ahead of them went a solitary man wearing a tan, baggy, plastic jacket. He faced away from them, showing only a thick mop of brown hair and a sharp facet of cheekbone.

Unzai tapped his fingers on his chin. His voice carried a disbelieving tone. "That young fellow's listened to too much of Forrester's rhetoric. ConPol wouldn't intentionally fail to protect Forrester."

Rolston's eyebrows arched. "Don't be you naïve, Unzai. The older parties and the senior bureaucrats all hate Forrester. His every word gut-punches them with a reminder they surrendered rather than risk their precious capital cities to orbital fires." He wagged his hands to indicate both McAuliffe, the

planetary capital, around them, and Confederal City, the capital of the Confederated Worlds, four kilometers east across the lake. "They can't stomach that. They'll pull every string they can to get ConPol looking the other way if an assassin comes after him."

"You think they could be that duplicitous?" Tomas said. Rolston's brow crinkled. "Double-dealing?"

"Think it? I feel it in my bones."

They reached the queue and shuffled forward. From the slow progress of the queue and the focused motions of the personnel at the security scanner, the Confederal Police seemed serious about security.

When they neared the scanner, Tomas' impression grew stronger. Ahead of them, the scanner hummed for long seconds around the man with the baggy jacket and sharp cheekbones. A sharp glance between two ConPol agents, and they beckoned the man aside for handheld scanning. He held his arms straight out to his sides while ConPol swept wands over his body. His mouth turned down. "I haven't done anything. You're singling me out because I got my jacket from the fab utility. That's class warfare...." His voice faded as Tomas and Rolston took turns going through the scanner.

"There's a good spot." Rolston pointed at one of the cypress planters, about a dozen meters from the stage. They wound their way through the growing crowd, and stopped under the cypress' canopy. A faint citrus scent came from the leaves. On a nearby platform two meters above the ground, audio and video technicians chatted among themselves and prepped their equipment.

The crowd filled the space for a while longer, under the watchful gazes of Restoration Party bluecoats and ConPol agents standing near the front of the stage. Rolston's earlier comment about military personnel in uniform proved true. Amid the civilians stood noncoms and junior officers in Ground Force service gray and officers in Space Force deep

blue.

Personnel from each service mostly clumped together. Two lieutenants provided a rare exception. Though their uniforms differed, they matched by wearing white turbans and beards pinned under their chins. Their long noses made them look like brothers. The turbans and beards suggested they were Sikhs from Navi Ambarsar, a world lost to the Progressive Republic at the end of the war.

A few minutes before 1600, the halves of the backdrop parted. The first notes of an old patriotic song, *Challenger, Gem of the Spaceways*, played from elevated speakers. The crowd hushed and focused on the stage.

Instead of the candidate, out came four men, two in suits of gray and two, of blue. Not the services' dress uniforms, but civilian suits cut in Ground Force and Space Force style. The men had unlined faces and wrinkled eyes produced by decades of rejuvenation treatments.

"The budget cuts and finger pointing pushed them into early retirement," Rolston said.

The retired officers took measured steps forward and stopped in a gapped line just behind the lectern.

From the speakers boomed an announcer's voice. "Ladies and gentlemen, please stand at attention, and gentlemen, remove your hats, as together we sing the Confederated Worlds anthem."

The crowd stirred in compliance. Tomas clapped his hands against his sides as the anthem began. Rolston held his cap over his heart and sung along with gusto. "....Confed'rated Worlds, we stand on guard for thee!"

As the final word echoed around the square, the halves of the backdrop parted again. Two aides, one man and one woman, scurried out and held the backdrop halves. The announcer said, "Ladies and gentlemen, your next president, Roderick Forrester!"

Cheers and applause erupted from the crowd. Cameras

and parabolic microphones swung toward the stage. Forrester emerged from the backdrop and strode toward the lectern.

His aides dropped the backdrop and hurried after him. Forrester stood head and shoulders above them—almost exactly two meters? No. Assuming the retired officers stood not much taller than average, recalibrating Forrester's height when he reached them put him at a meter-ninety, still taller than the average man raised on Challenger.

Forrester shook the hand of one of the Ground Force retirees and laughed at something the other one said. Forrester's teeth gleamed in rows as regular as the line of cypresses.

He took his hand back from the Ground Force retiree, then turned to say something to one of the former Space Force officers. After a brief clap on the other Space Force retiree's shoulder, two steps brought Forrester to the lectern. His dark-blond hair, swept back, remained fixed against a sudden breeze sighing through the square. His hazel eyes gleamed as he waved to the cheering crowd.

Toward the sides of the backdrop, at the height of the cross barby and the campaign slogan, chameleoncloth panels woven into the fabric came to life. Each showed a closeup of Forrester captured by a camera around the rally. A tan suffused his clear skin. The few wrinkles at the corners of his eyes, and the few gray hairs at his temples, implied he combined the wisdom of years with the vigor of relative youth.

Tomas looked away from the video panels. The immense closeups were too much to take in, even if they only magnified a sight he could have seen with his naked eye.

At the lectern, Forrester pointed his hand at someone in the crowd and nodded. His head swiveled to Tomas, Unzai, and Rolston, and he smiled as if he saw old friends. In a moment, he looked toward someone else.

Tomas clapped more quietly. "Do you know him?"

"What?"

Tomas raised his voice over the crowd noise. "Do you

know him? Or he you?"

"Never met him," Rolston said. His mouth remained slightly open. "Yet."

The smile of recognition had to be some politician's trick. Tomas pressed his lips together. A leader like Forrester aspired to be should abstain from such tricks—

A thought bubbled up from Tomas' subconscious and relaxed his mouth. *The skills imps implanted into your brain a dozen skills or more for managing enlisted men. He's the same as you.*

Somewhere in the crowd arose a chant, "Honor restored. Honor restored...." The chant built for a few moments, and Forrester's smile beamed at the crowd. Finally he pushed his hands down through the air. The chant died out. Forrester nudged the lectern's microphone closer to his mouth.

"Fellow citizens, good afternoon." Even without the microphone, his deep, resonant voice would have carried to Tomas. "I am deeply honored to see so many Challengerites before me who know the struggle we face...."

Forrester continued his speech. From time to time, Rolston nodded, and occasionally emphasized the gesture with a poke in the ribs or a whisper to Unzai or Tomas. Overhead, a two-man ornithopter with the ConPol logo on its side hovered on slow beats of its mechanical wings.

"....There are *those*," Forrester said, and his enunciation of the last word drew echoes of disdain from the crowd, "who say I'm blind to the reality of the Unity and the Progressive Republic. *They* say I can't see the reality of the human galaxy since the end of the war. *They* say New Liberty belongs to the Unity."

Forrester looked at the brothers in turbans. "*They* say Navi Ambarsar belongs to the PR. And because I say otherwise, *they* call me blind."

Voices in the crowd hissed. Someone shouted "Shame!"

Forrester's words tugged at parts of Tomas, like a magnet summoning iron. But other parts of Tomas, metal alloyed with

the mud and blood of New Liberty and Arden, remained immobile.

"But *they* are the ones who are blind!" Forrester said. "For I have seen the Progressive Republic far more clearly than *they* ever will! I saw its weapons rend my ship. I spent two years as its prisoner. The Progressive Republic lifted its mask and I stared its inhuman monstrosity in the face!"

Tomas shuddered. He remembered a scene like this, on Arden. Crawling under dripping blood. Pursuing the elusive PR agent—

"Its malevolence will not rest until its tyranny enslaves every citizen of the Confederated Worlds! In the sight of the god I worship, I swear I shall not rest until the Unity and Progressive Republic's threat is broken for all time!"

Someone passed behind Tomas. An elbow brushed Tomas' back. "Pardon me," said a slightly familiar male voice.

"Sure," Tomas said while focusing most of his attention on the stage. Then an intuition pricked him. He glanced over his shoulder. The voice belonged to the man with sharp cheekbones and baggy plastic jacket. He wormed through the crowd toward the nearby cypress planter.

The crowd erupted in applause and cheers. Rolston glanced around, then pumped his fist and shouted "Hoo-rah!"

Tomas craned his neck to keep an eye on the man in the baggy tan jacket. Sweat suddenly bloomed on his forehead, and not from the rays of Epsilon Eridani.

"Pardo me," he said to Rolston and Unzai. He sidled through the crowd, following the man in the baggy jacket. He stopped with a screen of spectators between them, slicing his view of the man into vertical strips.

The man stood on tiptoes, with his belly against the flat concrete ledge rimming the planter. The bottom of his jacket dangled between the planter wall and his leg. Something bulged in the jacket's front pockets. With an intent look in his eyes harmonizing with the sharp angle of his cheekbones, he

dug through the planter's loose soil with both hands.

He rose from the planter holding a transparent bag. Soil clung to the thick plastic and obscured the object inside. A bluish-gray shape, a thin cylinder about twenty centimeters long.

The man brushed the dirt from the bag, then plunged it into one of his jacket pockets. Suddenly, his thick mop of hair flowed with his head, as if he sensed he was watched.

Tomas jolted his gaze up to Forrester. From the corner of his eye, he glimpsed the man's sharp cheekbone and newly hunched shoulders.

"The path stretches before us." Forrester's voice echoed from the speakers. The man's shoulders eased back and down. The weight of hands, and more, in his pockets pulled taut his jacket.

Forrester continued his speech. "The way is long and difficult. But it is far more dangerous for us to heed the fool's counsels of the complacent, to hide our heads in virtual realities, and do nothing to gird against the Unity and Progressive Republic's renewed aggression!"

The man snaked closer to the stage. His jacket sleeves rippled, as if his hands worked at some intricate assembly in his pockets.

Tomas' peripheral vision fell away. His eyes became a scope locked on the man. "Out of the way," he said to the people around him. "Move it." He pressed hard on elbows and shoulders.

Angry looks and muttered curses followed him. He barely noticed. He craned his neck and peered after the man. The man kept his head facing the stage and his hands in his jacket pockets. He worked at something behind the jacket's closed zipper.

"For aggress they will!" Forrester's hand chopped the air. "The Progressive Republic and the Unity have not chosen peace, but a truce! Which they shall break the moment they

conclude us too weak to defend ourselves!"

The man stopped behind a clump of spectators six meters from Forrester. The edges of Tomas' vision turned gray and spotty. Tomas shoved through the crowd. No apologies. Too focused to speak.

Forrester's voice thundered. "Elect me, and I vow to put forth every effort to defend us from our enemies and neutralize the threat of our domestic foes!"

Tomas came within a few steps of the man, behind him and to his right. The man's hand emerged from his jacket pocket. A dark blue pistol. The man wrapped his left hand around his right, thumbs aligned under the slide—

Tomas lunged forward. Knee into the back of the assassin's legs, left hand on far shoulder, right arm reaching under the assassin's arms. The pistol roared as he toppled the assassin backward over his knee. Another shot, another, high into the air over Forrester.

His ringing ears muffled the crowd's screams.

The assassin collapsed. Tomas jumped on him. His right hand clutched the assassin's right forearm, keeping the pistol aimed into the air. His left hand pushed the assassin's head against the concrete.

Pain bloomed around Tomas' right eye. He winced. The assassin pulled back his left fist for another punch.

Tomas grunted. He shoved the assassin's head harder against the concrete. He shifted his left knee into the assassin's neck. "Drop the pistol!"

The crowd had backed away. A glance at the stage showed the now-empty lectern. ConPol in dark windbreakers crouched around two of their peers lying on Forrester. From somewhere at ground level, dimly heard through the ringing in Tomas' ears, male voices shouted at one another with the intensity of soldiers in combat.

The assassin dropped the pistol. It banged against the small bones of Tomas' hand as it tumbled to the ground. The

assassin's face turned purple, yet he sneered at Tomas. "We lost," the assassin hissed. "This time." He gnashed his teeth together in a brief but complex rhythm—

Bluecoats arrived first. Young men, their eyebrows low in a look of brittle toughness. The tips of their batons turned tiny circles through the air. "He swallowed a lethe capsule!" Tomas said. "Empty his stomach before it dissolves!" Otherwise, the assassin's memories of the recent days would evaporate into a mist no brain scanner could read.

The assassin barked a laugh. "Lethe capsules. You want to fight the Progressive Republic and you think lethe capsules are state of the art?"

The young bluecoats gave each other puzzled looks. Finally, the one with team leader stripes on his armband said, "How can we empty his stomach?"

Boots clomped closer. "With your baton, virgin." The speaker's voice sounded like some gruff uncle. He had blond hair like a wheat field after harvest on some planet where people chose to grow food by farming. Enough wrinkles edged his authoritative gray eyes to mark him as a few years older. His armband showed more stripes than the team leader. "That's how we did it dirtside in the war. Make him puke."

The young team leader nodded. He stepped forward and aimed his baton's tip at the assassin's mouth.

The older bluecoat sharpened his voice. "You aren't having sex with your high school sweetheart for the first time. You're banging some off-base whore. Like this." He wrapped his hand over the young team leader's and shoved the baton into the assassin's mouth.

The assassin gagged. Muscles clenched under his jacket and he twisted his head to the side.

His vomit hit the concrete. One of the young bluecoats hot-footed twenty centimeters back in a vain effort to keep his boots clean. His comrades chuckled.

The older bluecoat poked the toes of his boot through

clumps of vomit. "Where's that damn capsule?" He toed the assassin's ribs. "How long ago you swallow it?"

"What did I tell you about lethe capsules, morons?" the assassin said.

Without rancor, the older bluecoat kicked the assassin in the belly.

The assassin gasped for breath. "That's a violation—undue force—"

The older bluecoat drew his foot back for another kick.

"That's enough, sergeant," Tomas said, and how did he know the older bluecoat had been a sergeant? The older bluecoat stepped back. His gray eyes remained unabashed.

"Listen to the civilian," a deep voice said. Three ConPol agents now waited nearby.

The older bluecoat looked up at them. "About time you showed up."

One of the ConPol agents, with the dark skin and coiled hair of a Garvey's World native, shot the older bluecoat a cold look, then stepped toward the assassin. "You are under arrest for the attempted murder of a candidate for confederal office. You will be taken into custody and subjected to interrogation augmented by brain scanning." To his fellow agents, he said, "Grab him."

The other two ConPol agents went toward the assassin's sides. The Restoration Party security team stepped forward, threatening to block them.

The chief agent swept back a panel of his jacket and set his fist on his hip, near a holstered pistol. His other hand pulled videoglasses from his eyes. He glowered at the older bluecoat. "Do I look like I want to take shit from a pack of boy scouts?"

The older bluecoat's face turned unreadable. Definitely a former sergeant. He stared back at the chief ConPol agent, then slowly turned to his men. "We did our job. We know what really happened, even if ConPol try to take the credit. Let them take him."

The Restoration Party security team stepped back. The ConPol agents lifted the assassin to his feet. One ConPol agent cuffed the assassin's hands behind his back, and another shackled his ankles together with a short chain.

The assassin's forehead crinkled. He looked around—the ConPol agents, the crowd, the stage. His thick mop of hair gave him a dull look.

Tomas' breath caught. The assassin acted as if he recognized nothing. As if he had no idea what brought him here.

Inhale. A breath in Tomas' chest, the next one in his belly, and he could think. The assassin must have taken a week or so to select cypress planters and hide the parts of his pistol. A lethe capsule could erase memories that far back, even a little further. Yet even if he'd taken a lethe capsule, the assassin must have planned to shoot Forrester for months, and that memory would remain.

A cold feeling trickled down the inside of Tomas' chest. "He didn't swallow a lethe capsule."

The chief ConPol agent kept most of his attention on the assassin's puzzled face. "We'll make that call." The chief agent nodded to the two men guarding the assassin. They walked the assassin away. The stunned crowd quickly vacated their path, then slowly refilled the space left in their wake. Wide-eyed gazes returned to the stage.

Forrester stood at the lectern. ConPol agents and Restoration Party bluecoats reached for his elbows, like fretting wives or timid subordinates urging retreat. Forrester kept all his attention on the crowd.

"Fellow citizens!" Forrester's voice boomed from the speakers. "Fellow citizens, you have seen our enemies in action!" He jutted his finger at the assassin and the ConPol agents escorting him away. "They see the threat I pose their heinous plans! He is not the first, and will not be the last, to try to bury me. But I am not the message! I am merely a mirror dazzling our foes' shifty eyes with the light of truth! For I am

merely one of millions of true sons of the Confederate Worlds—joined by true patriots such as this man!” He extended his hand toward Tomas. “And we will do whatever is needed to keep our worlds strong and free!”

Forrester’s words echoed around the square. After a moment, someone in the crowd broke the silence with slow applause. Others joined in then, with livelier applause and a few ragged cheers. Even so, the civilian faces around Tomas still showed shock.

And surprise. A man with a lined face and a collar pin from the KIA families association came closer to Tomas. His hands probed for Tomas’. “You saved him. Thank you, sir, thank you.”

Other faces turned to Tomas. Eyes wide, lips parted, as if they beheld a worker of wonders.

Tomas wanted to squirm. He shrugged. “Anyone would have done the same, if they’d noticed the assassin.”

The older bluecoat stuck his baton back onto the adhesive strip on his pants. “But you’re the one who did.” He suddenly angled his head, looking like he listened to someone through an earbud. “Sir? Yes, he’s with me.” He nodded once, a crisp bob of his chin. “Yes sir.”

He turned to Tomas. “Forrester would like you to join him on stage.”

Tomas blinked. His head swiveled, scanning the crowd for Rolston or Unzai to deflect Forrester’s interest in him. *Keep me out of politics!*

Someone in a gray jacket and trousers pressed through the crowd. Energy flashed in Rolston’s green eyes. He clapped Tomas on the shoulder. “Neumann. I’m tingling with awe. What about the shooter got under your skin?”

Tomas shrugged. “I can’t tell you. I just knew.”

The older bluecoat leaned his square head toward Tomas. “Sir, Forrester is waiting—”

“Waiting?” Rolston gaped. “Neumann, what in the hell is

holding you back? Climb you up there!"

"I don't want to get involved in politics," Tomas finally said.

"When you stopped the shooter, you stuck your hand in the monkey trap." Rolston leaned toward Tomas' ear. "When Forrester wins, you'll ride the promotion fast track. Give you me just one hand up, when you get a chance, is all I ask you. Remember you us little people, will you?"

"I—what? I'm going back to work on Oneday same as you."

Rolston chuckled. "Oneday, perhaps. But you won't be staying long."

Tomas rotated his upper body, trying to pull his shoulder from under Rolston's hand. "It's two weeks till the election. He won't remember. If he even wins."

Rolston lowered his hand to Tomas' upper back. "You saved his life, Neumann. He will remember. Not if he wins. When." He shoved Tomas toward the stage.

Tomas took two steps before he could think. Forrester's voice boomed from the loudspeakers. "Here he comes! The hero of the hour!"

A thousand eyes seemed to cast smoldering rays onto Tomas' skin. Applause and cheers struck him like a stiff rain. He trudged forward until he stood near the edge of the stage.

On stage, two bluecoats came forward. They bent their knees and extended their banded arms toward Tomas. He lifted his right arm, but then surprise froze it in mid-air. Forrester strode around the lectern. "I'll help him," he told the bluecoats.

They stepped back. Forrester reached down from the edge of the stage. He and Tomas grasped forearms and he pulled Tomas up.

"Thank you for saving my life," Forrester said. Though low in volume, and competing with the cheers of the crowd, his voice still resonated through Tomas' mind. "What's your

name?"

"Tomas Neumann."

"Law enforcement? Military?"

"Ground Force."

Forrester beamed, though a wry note pulled down the corners of his mouth. He moved his head closer to Tomas' ear. The spectacle of the rally, the noise of the crowd, all receded. "I know my old comrades in Space Force dismiss your contributions. It pains me to say it, I dismissed them too, years ago. But interservice rivalry is part of what led us to defeat. Undoing it will be part of what will restore us our rightful place in the galaxy."

"I'm glad to hear that, Mr. Forrester. I agree completely." Tomas' memories of mud and blood softened. *To get to the destination this man sees for the Confederated Worlds, the price in lives and pain is worth paying.*

A glint filled Forrester's eyes. He spoke with leonine certainty. "I see I can rely on you."

Chapter 2

Reassignment

Figures with concealed faces pierced the back of Tomas' wrist with pins and he woke up. His right hand groped for his watch and tapped it to silence. He blinked open his eyes. The bedroom curtains attenuated the light of the bioluminescent cypresses at the curbside in front of the house. Shades of gray painted the ceiling and walls in the colorless palette of 0500.

He swung his legs out of bed. Lissa lay on her side, breath reedy in her nose. She shifted her limbs at his motion, yet remained asleep. At least she faced him. The night before, he'd gone to bed before her, while she glumly drank a glass of riesling and watched the election results from outsystem. *She gets a little time after the boys fall asleep and she watches content she can read the next morning. She needs downtime, fine, but when the idea of making love stiffens her back—*

His bare feet touched the cool floor of nanofabbed wood. Tomas made his way through the living room and kitchen. His foot came down on a toy car. The toy rolled across the living room floor. *She could tell Stefan to put away his toys—* His legs tensed and he angled his head, listening for sounds from upstairs, but the boys stayed asleep.

Four minutes after waking, he lifted his kettlebell off its rack in the garage. He took it to the workout mat in the corner, between a tool rack and boxes of Stefan's old toddler clothes, too big yet for Artur. First, a set of swings—

His watch prodded his wrist again. He'd turned it off, not set it to snooze. Hadn't he?

He stopped the kettlebell at the bottom of its arc, lowered it to the workout mat. He squinted at the watch face. Not an alarm—an incoming call. *From: Brig. G. Echevarria, 1st Armored Grenadier Brigade.*

The caller identification kicked Tomas in the back. The brigade commander? Skipping two layers of channels to call a mere battalion staff officer over an hour before dawn?

Don't make him wait any longer. Tomas swiped his finger across his watch face, then held his wrist close to his mouth. "Good morning, sir. Sorry about the audio-only. I'm in the middle of my workout—"

"Get you to a video screen."

Tomas gulped. "Right away, sir."

He padded into the kitchen. In the gray light before the day's first dawn, disassembled baby bottles and breastpump hardware cluttered the countertops like the phantoms of spent smoke canisters and rocket propelled grenades littering a battlefield. He went to a tablet mounted on the wall between the cooktop and the oven. He pulled it away from the wall on its flexing arm, then tapped and swiped. His finger motions made the tablet wobble on its arm. Video appeared in the tablet's display. "As you asked, sir."

Echevarria sat in front of ornately-molded walnut bookshelves bearing a golf ball embedded in transparent plastic and a crude statue of a man's head and torso carved by tin-snips and pliers from the lid of an ammunition case. The brigadier wore a civilian polo shirt tight across his chest and around his upper arms. He leaned his head on his elbow, his elbow on a desk. His brown eyes looked like slits, despite heavy blinks and a steaming coffee mug near to hand. "You know why I'm calling, Newman, so I'll get to the point—"

"Sir? With respect, sir, I don't know. I look forward to as much information as you can share."

Echevarria squinted. "Don't play you the innocent with me. It's too be-damned early in the morning for that."

Tomas racked his mind for some clue. His voice sounded rushed. "Did Forrester win?"

Echevarria's eyes remained slit-like. Tomas imagined a boulder stared at him. Then the brigadier reached for his coffee. "You watched the election returns last night?"

Tomas shook his head. "I sacked out around 2530."

"You checked the results this morning?"

"No. I knew Rolston would tell me when I got to battalion headquarters, if I hadn't heard before then."

Echevarria shook his head in ponderous shakes. "You really don't know. Listen you, it's not my job to tell some battalion staffer what's happening in the worlds, so I only say this once. The last votes didn't come in from Arden until sometime between 2800 and midnight. The outworld voters who ranked their local candidates first mostly ranked Forrester second, and he got more first- and second-place votes from here than the peace-at-any-price party wanted to believe."

Tomas tried to follow the details of the preferential ballot. Too early in the morning. He shut his eyes and nodded. The details didn't matter. "Forrester won."

The brigadier wrinkled his nose. "Why else would I be calling? You put him up to this, nay?"

"Put whom up to what, sir?"

"Two hours ago, General Olafson called me. Woke me out of a fine sleep, he did. I dreamed of beefier Badgers and Gray-wolves for my armored grenadier and armored battalions when he roused me."

General Olafson? The Chief of Staff, the Ground Force's highest ranking officer? "What did he ask you to do, sir?"

Echevarria raised an eyebrow like a black and gray caterpillar. "You still want to tell me you didn't put Forrester up to this? An hour before Olafson called me—barely an hour after the acceptance speech—Forrester called Olafson. Forrester wants you assigned to his office as his special assistant for Ground Force affairs."

Tomas rested his hand on the countertop. He shut his eyes and a glowing green rectangle drifted across his eyelids. How could he get out of this? "I'm flattered, sir, that he should think of me—"

"Drop you the act. You asked him for the job, nay?" Echevarria's mouth looked sour. "All the cameras caught you two talking in plain sight on stage after you stopped the gunman. You seized your opportunity."

Eyes wide, palms facing the camera, Tomas said, "Sir, I first heard of the President-Elect's job offer when you mentioned it to me a moment ago." He spoke a little more slowly. "I speak the truth. And I speak the truth when I say, I don't want to work for Mr.—President-Elect Forrester."

Echevarria angled his head down. His gaze seemed so intense it seemed it could singe his eyebrows. "You think you have a choice?"

Tomas froze. A mouse trapped in a room with big cats, hoping to go unseen. From upstairs came a throaty shriek. Baby Artur needed milk or a clean diaper.

"Do you?"

Tomas' back stiffened. "I belong with my battalion, and your brigade, improving our combat effectiveness. I wouldn't add a fraction as much value working in an office in Confederal City after Forrester takes office."

The baby kept crying. Every few moments, he paused to catch his breath. Each time, part of Tomas hoped the baby would soothe himself. Each time, the rest of him would castigate himself. *Hope is not a planning factor.*

On screen, the brigadier dropped his thick hands to the desktop. "It doesn't matter what you want. It doesn't matter what I want. It doesn't even matter what Old Man Olafson wants. He was ires beyond belief to be roused from his beauty sleep, I say, and if he told me true, he pushed back at Forrester for a good ten minutes to work through proper channels."

Tomas let out a breath. A faint warm pleasant glow en-

tered his chest. "I'm pleased the Chief of Staff agrees with me."

"Bah. Olafson pushed back for he wanted Forrester to pick a horse from his stable, not some unknown battalion staff officer who splashed across our screens a month ago. What be-damned noise is in the background?"

Artur kept crying. Lissa's footsteps plodded up the stairs. "My baby, sir."

"Get you your wife to soothe it."

"She's working on it, sir."

"Good." Echevarria nodded like a teetering boulder. "Because you ought ready yourself right now. Report you to Forrester's transition office by 0900."

A ball of dread formed in Tomas' belly. "Today?"

"What did it sound like, captain? Yes, today!"

"But Forrester isn't yet commander-in-chief—"

Brig. Echevarria's gaze grew even more stony than usual. "He's going to be. All his campaign speeches about restoring honor, you know what that means."

"A bigger budget for both forces." More ships, more equipment, better pay and benefits for volunteers—

"And promotions. And opportunities for better housing, choicer assignments, all of that. For you, and me. So you will go today, and every day until he leaves office, and today and every day, you will do the best be-damned job you can. Hear you me?"

Tomas dipped his head and slowly blinked. "I will do any assignment to the best of my ability."

"You will do more than that. You will put in a good word for me with Forrester every chance you get. And if you foul up, and Forrester sends you back to me, I wouldn't keep you. I'd pack you off to Nuova Toscana. Good luck slowing down the PR army if they push through the wormhole and get orbital supremacy."

Tomas' mouth hung open. He closed it and lifted his

shoulders. "Your orders are clear, sir."

"Good. I've already told Lt. Col. Sokolov you've been reassigned from his battalion staff. Today, 0900. The Hotel Transstellar in Confederal City. Look you up the address. Echevarria out."

Tomas stepped back from the display and shut his eyes while the afterimage faded. He nibbled at his lower lip. Echevarria's words rattled around his mind and soured in his gut.

He knew regardless of merit, a man had to play politics to rise to brigade command. But to see it so blatantly... the sour feeling in his gut intensified. Politics didn't matter. Only readying the Confederated Worlds' forces mattered, against the day the PRs renounced the peace treaty and started the next war.

That's all that matters to Forrester, too.

Tomas relaxed, until another thought speared him through the shoulders. He had about three hours to get sixty kilometers across the capital cities. He reached for the display to call up directions—

"What's going on?"

Lissa stood in the open way from the living room. She held Artur at her hip. His thick hands groped at the hem of her loose, milk-stained nursing blouse. A blond lock, an escapee from her hairband, dangled toward a wary eye.

"I've been reassigned."

She remained still for a moment, then slumped her shoulders as a breath escaped. "We've barely settled in here—"

"Not a transfer," Tomas said. "Forrester wants me to serve as an assistant. The brass ordered me to start today."

She clutched Artur closer. His head squashed her breast, yet her gaze remained fixed on Tomas. "You want to work for Forrester?"

"No, love."

"Then say no."

He peered at her. "I've already gotten the order."

"Go today if you have to, but get out of working for that man. Please."

Tomas dropped his hands to his sides and widened his stance. "What's bothering you? I know you ranked him low on your ballot, but he's the President-Elect. It's not yet official, but he'll be my commander-in-chief. I took an oath to go where I'm ordered."

"Does that man only want you because you saved him from the assassin?"

Tomas shrugged. "That's the only thing that makes sense to me. Plenty of bluecoats have as much military experience as me."

She stepped closer. Her free hand cradled Artur's head. "That lone gunman was no lone gunman. Whoever wants Forrester dead won't stop after one failure. They won't stop if you're in their way." Intensity burned in her eyes. "You could turn me into a widow and leave two young boys fatherless!"

"That won't happen. He has—" A double layer of ConPol and Restoration Party security. Yet the risk to Tomas was only a rationalization. He could tell from the tight line of her mouth. His hands rose to his hips and his elbows jutted out. He leaned forward. "What's the real problem?"

"The risk to you isn't problem enough?" Lissa said.

"Regardless of my assigned duty, there's risk every day I hold my commission, and you know that. You knew it when we got married, before I shipped out to Arden." He padded across the cool tile and reached for her shoulders. "You accepted the risk then."

Lissa backed away from his touch. "You say you stand for high values, service, duty, but you just want an excuse to leave me alone with these two—" She jostled Artur. "—and my career and everything else I have to deal with. And you'll get that excuse in spades, won't you? Working in Confederate City till all hours, never seeing Stefan awake, leaving me to

get up in the night to feed Artur. What do the boys and I get out of it? A chance to fake smile and say we're so proud of you?"

The dimly-lit kitchen seemed to press on him, like the gray walls of a maze's cul-de-sacs. Since Artur's birth, they'd had variations of this argument dozens of times.

But never before when the President-Elect waited for him.

"We all have our jobs," Tomas said. "I'm going to get ready for mine." He strode past Lissa toward their bedroom. He did not look back.

Chapter 3

Transition of Power

On a floor of the Hotel Transtellar given over to office spaces, Forrester's transition team worked out of a set of adjoining suites. Shortly before 0900, a young man with a caesar haircut and a Shambalese accent ushered Tomas into the corner suite.

Floor-to-ceiling windows gave views to south and east. Presumably reflective coated on the outside, and armored in the middle. Forrester's team would have taken anti-surveillance and anti-sniper measures before they occupied the space.

So why did Forrester want Tomas assigned to him?

It would come clear soon enough.

Tomas glanced out the windows. A Daughters of Astarte temple adorned with classical columns stood catercorner. In the distance, marble-white Confederate government buildings—Congress surmounted by obelisks, the Foreign Ministry's four cylinders, the white mountain of the Defense Ministry—towered above the jumbled roofs of civilian buildings. Sharp-edged shadows showed Epsilon Eridani hung just west of the zenith. At a conference table, Forrester and a group of aides, five men in jackets and ties and a woman in a pantsuit stood over bundles of smartpaper. The top sheet of each bundle showed a photo of a politician and bullet-pointed lines of text.

Forrester looked up. His dark-blond hair moved like a helmet. "Neumann, you're a sight for sore eyes." He crossed to Tomas, shook his hand. Forrester gripped strongly and gave a

slight twist to Tomas' forearm. "Stay there. I need a minute to see this—" He wagged his hand at the tabletop. "—to a break point. Then I'll tell you what I need you to take a look at."

"As you wish, sir."

One of the male aides spoke. Deep lines ran down from the corners of his mouth. He peered over the straight top edge of semicircular smartglasses. The expression added to his dour tone of voice. "Mr. Forrester, while I appreciate you have an important task for the captain here, we need to bottom out on a vice-presidential selection very soon."

"We will."

The aide went on. "It's customary to select a vice president from a prospective coalition partner. We have a majority in the Senate of the Worlds, but not in the House of the Peop—"

Forrester's voice contained a steely core. "I'm aware of that." Then he smiled and looked up. "Neumann, who would you pick as my vice-president?"

Tomas' mouth fell open. The room suddenly seemed glaringly bright. The Constitution empowered the President-Elect to select a vice president from among all presidential candidates who had received at least one second-place vote out of all the instant-runoff ballots cast across the Confederated Worlds.

The President-Elect, not a young Ground Force captain! "Sir, I don't follow politics closely—"

Forrester waved away Tomas' objection. "You don't need to. After you ranked me first on your ballot, you ranked someone second, after all. Who?"

"Thank you, sir. I ranked second O'Brien from the Out-world Alliance Party."

The aide blinked. "O'Brien." He reached to his right for a smartpaper bundle. "O'Brien is a man of principle. He's moderately popular across most worlds other than Challenger, and he supports a strong defense. Definite pluses. That said, I see a few minuses." He picked up the bundle and held it face-out in

front of his chest. "He and the OAP have very few supporters on Challenger. That makes his share of the House of the People too small to give us a majority. Also, on a number of out-worlds, primarily the ones dominated by single-planet parties affiliated with the world's dominant religion or ideology, he's very unpopular."

Forrester stared at the aide. "I see. Tomas, why did you rank O'Brien second?"

With a jolt, Tomas stood taller. "He doesn't know me, but I knew his son. The best platoon commander I served under, in the war. His son recommended I apply for OCS. His son set me on the path to my commission."

"It appears O'Brien raised his son to be a fine man," Forrester said. "Have you seen him since you went to OCS?"

Pressure welled behind Tomas' eyes. He swallowed down a lump in his throat. "I heard he died fighting the Progressive Republic on Navi Ambarsar."

Forrester peered at the aide. "True?"

"Yes, wait, I believe so, let me confirm...." The aide pushed back pages in the bundle. His fingers slipped like a man climbing a slippery slope. "Yes, a son, Ground Force.... this can't be right."

"What?"

"A Congressman's son enlisted? Then went through OCS? That can't be right."

"My research team took its eyes off the ball?" Forrester spoke evenly, but a hard look formed in his eyes.

"No, no, we double-checked everything, that must be true, it just surprised me, Mr. Forrester, a man like O'Brien having a son enlist instead of attending one of the military academies. I agree—" He gestured to take in the other aides, who nodded even before he kept speaking. "—We agree with Captain Neumann that O'Brien is a fine man. Again, though, there are multiple factors we might want to consider, Congressional vote math—"

Forrester aimed a taut-skinned palm and splayed, stretched fingers at the aide. "We'll look at this issue later. Now I'll show Neumann what I need him to do."

"Mr. Forrester—" The aide bowed his head. "You're right. We can table this for an hour. A break might freshen our perspectives."

A hooded stare from Forrester emphasized his next words. "Yes it might." He turned to Tomas and the stare vanished. "Neumann, come with me."

Forrester led the way out of the conference room and through the office suite's narrow hallways. Tomas strode quickly to keep pace. Junior aides pressed themselves against the walls. Women demurely looked away from Forrester, and mens' adam's apples bobbed under freshly beardstopped faces.

In response, Forrester nodded and greeted each by name without slowing down.

Finally, Forrester and Tomas came to a door guarded by a hard-faced bluecoat. The crisp tailoring of the security man's uniform and the smooth round third eye on the front of his cap clashed with his thick features and nose distorted by at least one break. The bluecoat snapped his heels together and opened the door.

The room beyond was small and windowless. A lighting panel in the ceiling bloomed with yellow-white light, the spectrum of far-off, interdicted Sol. The light showed a circular table and two chairs, all with stylus-thin legs of nanotube alloy. On the table sat a blank smartpaper, next to a box the size of a child's fist. A green LED on the box blinked at the sedate pace of an endurance athlete's resting heart. Tomas recognized the box as a scanner and scrambler of eavesdropping devices.

The guard shut the door behind them. In the small room, Forrester's presence felt even greater than it had on stage at the rally.

"We're hidden in here from prying eyes and ears," For-

rester said. "I appreciate you being willing to switch duty assignments with three hours notice."

Tomas drew a breath. He wanted to cut to the chase, but Echevarria's warnings weighed on him. "First, if I may, Mr. Forrester, I want to thank you for the opportunity to serve. I understand Chief of Staff Olafson resisted your request, but I assure you, Brigadier Echevarria and I are eager to comply."

"Superb. Glad to hear that about you and the brigadier. As for Olafson, he only resisted because he didn't see a way for your glory to shine on him."

Tomas shrugged. "I don't know about glory, sir."

"Your perceptiveness, quick thinking, and physical ability saved my life from that shooter. That looks like glory to me." Forrester fixed Tomas with an intense expression of his hazel eyes. "Which brings us to why I asked for you to be assigned to me."

Forrester tapped out a quick, dense pattern on the smartpaper. Black lines of text and a full-color image appeared, oriented toward Tomas. A thick mop of hair, sharp cheekbones, a confused expression. The would-be assassin.

Forrester popped a fingernail against the smartpaper. "It's been a month and we know next to nothing about this bastard. Jordan Walters, 22 years old, born and raised in a middle-class neighborhood of McAuliffe city. He was a volunteer for one of the soft-on-defense, submissive-to-our-enemies parties in the '14 and '16 elections, then dropped out. Between the '16 election and Firstlanding Square, we have no clue about anything important. Where did he get the pistol? Who might have helped him?"

Tomas squinted at the smartpaper. "ConPol has held Walters for a month."

"ConPol." Forrester sniffed out a breath. "Two days after this bastard's assassination attempt, Assistant Director MacAdams from ConPol showed my team and me all the background info I just summarized. He said he'd share more

info after they extracted it from Walters' brain. A brain scan should take, what, an hour?"

"In the field, with freshly captured prisoners, about that," Tomas said. "Intel would spend more time, and brain scans were only part of a test battery."

"Then a day or two. But it's a month later, and ConPol hasn't shown us a damn thing." Forrester straightened himself to his full height. "Your first assignment is to go to ConPol to find out what they know about Walters. Your second assignment is to find out what you can about ConPol. What do they know about this bastard? What have they not shown me? And if they're keeping something hidden, why?"

Tomas blinked. His mind roved over the problem. "I'll do all I can, sir. Though ConPol might refuse to share information with a mere Ground Force captain."

Forrester's chest puffed out. He leaned toward Tomas, eyes intense. He raised one finger and said, "You are no longer a mere Ground Force captain. Now you work for me."



Epsilon Eridani set and rose and set again before Tomas reached a waiting room down the hall from Assistant Director MacAdams' office. MacAdams' assistant, a tall and sturdy woman, seemed genuinely to regret the delay, once a co-worker confirmed Tomas acted on Forrester's orders. "The AD is extremely busy today, or he would have seen you by now," she said. "Here, have a seat. Coffee?"

Tomas waved a hand. Almost a decade since he'd left his mother's house, his mother's strict interpretation of the Observer faith, and he still avoided stimulants. He spoke with more energy than he felt. "Just water, thank you." Not this woman's fault a chain of ConPol bureaucrats had sent him from office to office before he finally made it here.

Here was an elevator lobby strewn with overstuffed brown

armchairs. Carpet as white and plush as cloud lay under his black shoes. Accent lights shone down on framed oil paintings showing people, mostly men, most in ancient garb. Copper plates on the bottom of each frame showed embossed names. Montagu. Pinkerton. A woman in a long dress, Boyd. Legends in spy craft, presumably. One name, Fouché, under a painting of a man with slender fingers and a long, narrow nose, seemed familiar. Probably from the Bonapartist catechism he'd rolled his eyes at, as an offworld-born boy growing up on Joséphine.

The swishing sound of her skirt marked the assistant's return. "The AD will see you now." She led him down a lengthy hallway to a corner office, then beckoned him to enter.

"Come in, captain. Have a seat."

MacAdams looked like a bowling ball in a gray suit. Across his craggy face he wore a wraparound strip of smartglass. Reversed texts and images, unreadable to Tomas, scrolled along the bottom of the smartglass. A rigid nanotube mesh hung down near the ends of the strip and covered MacAdams' ears. He splayed his hands on his hips and pointed his elbows away from his body, nearly brushing the side of his desk. He rocked up on the balls of his feet. A ConPol ID card hanging from the front pocket of his suit jacket bobbed with his motion.

Tomas sat facing the desk. MacAdams went behind it. The room seemed too narrow for a ConPol assistant director, though the windows gave views north and east toward the lights on top of Congress's obelisks and the lighted windows of hotels and mid-rise office towers toward Lake Liberty. On MacAdam's desk, video loops of presumably his wife and children, along with stacks of smartpaper, filled the sides. Sol-spectrum light from ceiling panels glossed the relatively empty central region of the glass desktop.

MacAdams lifted a bundle of smartpaper and set it atop another closer to the edge of the desk. His hands swept across