

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 Confederated 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 Péngláiishān. 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."

Chapter 2

Taking the Shilling

Five months later, Tomas stood in a line of recruits in the middle of the GF's main intake base, a space station in orbit high above Challenger, capital of the Confederated Worlds. From the exhaustion of weeks of travel getting here from Joséphine, the jet lag going from the standard day on board ship to the nineteen-hour Challenger day on the station, the heavy weight in the station's outer rings, and the bewildering mix of delay and hurry making up the intake process so far, the conversation going on behind him seemed unreal.

"Man, why'd they have to cut my hair?" asked a smooth-faced Österbotterman in school-slotted Confed. He rubbed his palm over the blond fuzz on his scalp.

"It's SOP," said an al-Aqsan. He must have been on the same ship as Tomas, but Tomas had first seen him at the start of intake a few hours earlier.

"But he's got all his." The Österbotterman nodded up the line, where a Navi Ambarsari waited. "A beard, and he's got hair under that headwrap, doesn't he?"

A Challengerite with a chummy manner leaned in. "I think it's called a turban." He caught Tomas' gaze and rolled his eyes without the Österbotterman noticing. The whites of his eyes contrasted with the massed green uniforms of the recruits lining the corridor behind him.

"Whatever it's called, it isn't fair."

"He gets a religious exemption from the grooming regs," the al-Aqsan said.

"Religious exemption? I checked 'Evangelical Lutheran' on the religious preference page and they still buzz-cut me."

Tomas remembered the intake form. He'd hesitated at the religious preference page for several seconds, before the intake sergeant on the other side of the table cleared his throat. Tomas' finger had hovered over *None*, spite toward his mother building up in his chest, before he shook his head and pressed *Observer*.

"They're stripping away our civilian lives," the al-Aqsan said. "Same reason we're wearing unadorned green with no rank insignia. We all start out as soldiers with nothing."

"Except our 2d barcodes." The Challengerite tapped his fingers against a dense black pattern on the left side of his chest.

"They had to cut your hair," said another Challengerite, a short fellow with dark brown hair and a bulbous nose, to the Österbotterman. "It's so they can drill the skill implanters into your brain."

The Österbotterman's eyes widened in passing, then a surly look formed around his mouth. "That's crap. They would've shaved the Ambarsari too."

The chummy Challengerite exaggeratedly shook his head. "For him, they'll have to use the penile catheter. That's why the girls got routed a different way for this part."

"In school they used medicine and video goggles," the Österbotterman said, disagreement in his voice but fear in his eyes. He looked around. "Hey, Saint Benny, isn't it like that here?"

Tomas couldn't remember if he'd only told the intake sergeants his birthworld, or if he'd also mentioned it to some other recruit. How had it gotten out? "I don't know," he replied. He winced at his poor fluency in Confed. Madame

Martin didn't use any skill-slotting to teach her students.

"They've got to use more than grade school tech," the short Challengerite said. "This isn't about learning languages and arithmetic. It's got to take high powered stuff to make us soldiers."

A sergeant surprised Tomas, coming from the front of the line. His green fatigues showed a camouflage pattern with bright red bands around the arms and at the collar. "Listen to you lot. You don't even have your pubes yet." He brushed the back of his hand over Tomas' upper arm, where the solid green fabric lacked chevrons. "You know as little about skill-slotting as you do about pussy. At least you're going to find out about one of those today. To the chambers, now!"

The line moved forward in bursts. Eventually it led Tomas around the corner to another sergeant. He waved a plastic wand over the barcode on Tomas' chest. "Keep going."

Tomas went over a pleated plastic strip in the floor to a narrower, lower-ceilinged part of the corridor sloping upward. A wider, level space opened out past the top of the slope. Tomas climbed, the al-Aqsan and the Österbotterman behind him, when the sergeant paused the line. A wall hid the two Challengerites from view.

"Glad to be rid of them," the Österbotterman muttered. "From the capital and they think they're better than us—whoa!" All three of them reached for handrails. "Something happen to the station?"

Tomas remembered Capt. Schreiber's words about horrible death in space, yet he kept calm. The far end of their part of the corridor slewed over a thickness of alloy and nanotube fiber on its way to another wide, level space. "The station is okay. The corridor is moving from one destination level to another."

Another sergeant waited for them in the wide, level space. The light came dimly from ceiling bulbs and cast long shadows down his face. "One to a chamber." The sergeant jutt

his hand toward six open doors on the far wall. "Lock it behind you, strip down, and climb in."

"Into what?" the al-Aqsan said.

"You'll see. Move it, prepubes!"

The doors seemed narrow, the spaces within dim. The air carried a sick-sweet smell. The scared speculation of a few minutes ago suddenly seemed plausible. "Have you seen anything like this?" Tomas said to the al-Aqsan.

"No—"

"The chambers, prepubes! And strip means *strip*! Bare-assed, on the double!"

Tomas went in and locked the windowless door. In the tiny room, he had to turn sideways to fit between the side wall and a table bearing a plastic box, over two meters long, about one wide, and sixty centimeters high. The box had an opened lid. The interior looked to be coarse black plastic with grilles and nozzles jutting into it from the box walls.

It's not a coffin, they won't kill their recruits. Though if there's a chance we'll die it would be easy to bury us.

Tomas shook his head to push the thought away. He would survive this. But another thought jolted him. The Österbotterman had talked about video and audio in skill-slotting. Those feeds had to be recorded. Didn't the recruiters know he was an Observer? The third sergeant hadn't scanned his barcode! A mistake, he'd go out and tell the sergeant—

He rattled the handle. Locked. Of course, he'd just locked it. Tomas took a breath, then reached for the unlock dial.

The dial refused to turn.

He tried again and again, putting more muscle into it each time, fear burning his chest. He had to get out. He lifted his fist to pound the door when a thought held him back. If he didn't go through with their skill-slotting, what would they do? Discharge him.

What would his mother say?

He opened his fist and turned to the coffin. He looked for

video displays and audio loudspeakers in the interior. He knew what they looked like—his mother had let him watch live transmissions of public pronouncements, like the President's address upon the declaration of war on the Unity—and the coffin held none. The GF probably had better tech than a public school on a sparsely-settled planet and didn't need video and audio.

Or else most Observers weren't as fanatically against unreal images and sound as his mother.

Tomas stripped. He hung his plain green shirt and trousers on a hook on the door, then followed them with his underwear. Suddenly, the urge to piss struck him, but he glanced around and failed to see any bedpan or slot in the wall. *Climb in.* The GF had planned for this too. He could probably piss in the coffin if he had to.

He climbed and noticed another door, on the wall opposite the one he'd entered. He sat down in the coffin. The plastic felt warmer and softer under his ass than he'd expected. He stretched out. The plastic's soft warmth soon lost its luster. The room was cold. His *biroute* shrank and his scrotum pulled his balls toward his abdomen.

The second door then opened. Three figures entered in green fatigues with white trim at the cuffs and collar and red crosses on white circular fields just above the elbows. Even before he heard their first words, Tomas realized they were women. His cheeks grew hot. He pressed his legs together and cupped his hands over his genitals.

One woman, her blond hair tinged with gray and captain's bars on her collar, said, "The corporals need your arms."

"Arms? But—"

"We've seen more penises than a midwife. Arms, recruit. For the IVs."

"I need to—" He sought a polite word to use around women. "Urinate."

"You can wait ten minutes?" the captain said. "The urge

will go away."

He wanted to appear in control. "I can wait." Tomas breathed shallowly, then pulled his hands from his crotch and rotated his arms to expose the veins inside his elbows. The corporals, one of them, from her dark skin tone, clearly native to Zion-against-Babylon or Garvey's World, pulled equipment from shoulder bags, plugged tubing into nozzles in the coffin's interior wall, and prepared his arms. Tourniquets squeezed his upper arms and evaporating iodine solution made his skin tingle. The needles stung when the corporals inserted them and then stopped hurting. Skintape, clicking plastic, swipes and taps on tablet touchscreens. More skintape followed, applied to sensor discs across his chest, abdomen, arms, legs.

While the corporals worked, the captain did too. "This is the TMI helmet," she said. With one hand she guided Tomas to lift his head, then pulled the helmet down. It fit snugly from occipital bump to eyebrows. She cinched a strap snugly under his chin.

"You really had to cut our hair for this," he said.

The captain ignored his words. "This goes over your mouth and nose." She held up a curved, lumpy piece of clear plastic. The lobate edge glistened with a bright blue gel. She pulled out a strap and nodded to bid Tomas lift his head. He did. She slid the mask over the TMI helmet, then guided it toward his lower face.

"Why not put on the mask before the helmet?" he asked.

She connected one end of a tube to the mask and the other to the coffin wall. Gas hissed as she moved the mask to his mouth and nose. The bright blue goop sucked itself onto his face. "Recruits are more likely to freak out from the mask than anything else." She plugged cables from the helmet into ports in the coffin interior and made a few motions on a tablet.

"Farewell, recruit." The lid swiftly lowered toward Tomas, then sealed him with thuds. Darkness. No getting out now.

His breathing became ragged and he wanted to push on the lid. Not scared, just testing the situation... He resisted the urge. If the GF monitored his actions in here, he wouldn't show panic. And even if the GF wasn't watching, he watched himself. He remembered Capt. Schreiber. The captain had gone through this. Tens of thousands of other men had gone through this. If his mother thought him less a man than the all those other men, he'd prove her wrong. He might be afraid but he would stay calm.

The darkness was so deep his vision couldn't adapt. Eyes open or closed, the view was the same darkness. Tomas paid attention to his other senses. Pumps sounded in several spots in the coffin wall or nearby. Shouldn't something be happening? Did some defect delay the start? *Let's get this over with....*

His thoughts seemed stretched out. The touch of the coffin liner disappeared and a warm feeling spread up his flanks, his armpits, into his ears. Water? He thrashed his head, heard a few splashes. The feeling soon covered his eyes and all his skin.

He couldn't tell if he lay on the coffin bottom or floated in the water. Beats sounded, alternating ears, in a quick rhythm that set up a resonance filling his awareness. He couldn't tell if they came from hardware in the coffin interior or in his own head, induced by the TMI helmet. The need to piss had faded. He couldn't tell if his brain had heightened its control over his body or if his bladder had emptied into the fluid surrounding him. He couldn't find any of the answers, and it was no longer important to ask the questions.

Thoughts slowed and broke apart like crystals crumbling to powder. *What's happening? Did Capt. Schreiber get more recruits from Portage—any port in a storm—port—starboard—star—star....* His mind lost the ability to make words. Only sensory impressions remained: Soleil-de-France near eclipse. Véronique's shy smile before she pecked his cheek behind the bleachers at the Harvest Fête. Dead men in Space Force blue jumpsuits, lungs

prolapsed out mouths frozen in screams. His mother's cold look. Beneath a waving oak under a golden sun, a man with brown hair and a narrow jaw, known with a sudden certainty to be the father he'd never seen....



A strip of light ran vertically through his field of vision, ends beyond the reach of his eyes. The strip widened, widened. Solid off-white in the distance, a triangle of yellow-white glow expanding as the strip widened. Faces, too, two pale, one dark.

Tomas blinked and started, pushing his weight into the coffin bottom for a moment before relaxing.

"Welcome, private," the captain said.

"Thank you, ma'am, corporal, corporal." The corporals touched styluses with glowing red tips to the skintape over his body. The skintape shriveled with a tingle over his skin. He was still naked, but unashamed. Not only had they seen more penises than a midwife, but he now knew women received recruit intake skills implantation duty after medical service in a field battalion. They'd seen more blood, torn limbs, and open wounds than even an armored grenadier or airmobile hussar.

"Doing our jobs, private," said the corporal from Garvey's World.

"Your fatigues are where you left them," the captain said. "Take five minutes to dress, then head out the front door."

"Yes, ma'am."

The skills implantation team left the room. Tomas climbed out of the coffin. Except for the taupe smears of hemostop over the IV needles' puncture sites in his elbows, his body looked no different. Yet he felt different. He stood taller, but there was more. New capabilities lurked in his muscle memory, ready to come out when needed.

He found his clothes on their hook. Underwear on,

trousers on, tunic... He paused when he saw a sleeve. A single chevron pointed toward the shoulder seam. Private. He stepped into his boots and pressed the button inside at the top of the heel to tighten them, then reached for the door handle. It opened easily.

Where the mouth of the sloping corridor had been, a temporary wall stood, mounted in upper and lower tracks. In the wide, level space, four privates stood in a rank with their backs to Tomas, and as he stepped forward to join them, he realized they were his companions up the ramp.

The same sergeant waited, but this time, with three officers: two captains and a lieutenant colonel. Tomas came to attention and saluted.

"At ease," the lieutenant colonel said.

Tomas stole glances at the other privates. The Österbotterman stood two places to the right. He looked wiser than he had sounded waiting in line a few—

Minutes? hours? days? ago. How long had they been in the skills implantation chambers?

To his left, the final door opened. The al-Aqsan joined the rank of privates, saluted, was ordered to ease.

"Men, I'm Lieutenant Colonel Gallegos, commander of 1st Recruit Intake Battalion. Over the past two days, we have given you the skills to be soldiers. I know you can already sense some of the changes in yourself. There are even more you'll discover in the coming weeks, when you are assigned to a specialty, receive further skills implantation in that specialty, and get your first active duty assignment."

Lt. Col. Gallegos went on. "But there's more to being a soldier than what's in here." He tapped his temple with his forefinger. "Part of being a soldier is knowing you are part of a team, where all your teammates, whatever their rank, their world of origin, their religious beliefs, have certain things in common. Here's one of them."

Slender fingers undid the top three buttons of his fatigues,

then pulled out a polished gray medallion about three centimeters in diameter and a half-centimeter thick. Tomas recognized it immediately. "This is the Multi-Purpose Individual Data Acquisition Processing and Communication Device. Charged up by the motion of your body, it is a friend-or-foe beacon, a medical telemetry device, a short range communicator, and a dog tag. We call it the shilling."

Lt. Col. Gallegos shifted his weight. "One reason we call it a shilling is its shape, like a medallion or an ancient coin. But the other reason is a custom going back to ancient England. You see, even now, you can back out. Maybe you sense the changes we made in you are ones you don't want. Fine. The skills implantation team can take those soldiering skills out of you as easily as they put them in. A little bit of paperwork, you're discharged honorably, the end. But if you take the shilling, you're a soldier till your enlistment expires."

Blunt, truthful. Just like Capt. Schreiber. Maybe just like the brown-haired man with the narrow jaw. Was that really what his father had looked like?

"Take a minute. Think about it. If you take it, you've declared, to GF as a whole, to the men before you, to your fellow privates on either side, your commitment to serve. And most of all, you've declared it to yourself. If you make this commitment, there's no backing out." Lt. Col. Gallegos let his words reverberate in their thoughts for a time, then he, flanked by the captains and the sergeant, stepped forward to each man in turn. The al-Aqsan said yes, as did the next man.

When they reached Tomas, Lt. Col. Gallegos said, "Do you take the shill-?"

"Yes, sir!" His heart pounded.

"You're certain? 'Marry in haste, repent at leisure,' ever hear that one?"

"Sir?"

"Enthusiasm is good, but flightiness isn't. Do you understand what this means? For five years, Neumann, we will own

you. Are you ready for that?"

Tomas drew in a breath and stood as tall as he could. He spoke in unaccented Confed. "I am ready to take the shilling, sir."

The lieutenant colonel nodded. "Welcome to our ranks, Neumann." One of the captains handed Gallegos a chain with a shilling on it. The lieutenant colonel lowered the chain over Tomas' head. The shilling thumped gently on Tomas' chest.

The officers moved to the next private. Tomas laid the shilling in his palm and unbuttoned the top buttons of his tunic with his free hand. Regulations about proper care and safe-keeping of the shilling passed just below consciousness, like a school of fish near an ocean's surface, and so too did protocols about supplemental charging and field reboots. Those thoughts faded as the polished gray metal filled his gaze. It had been proper and good, to receive the gift of new life in a womb from a woman; but even better and more fitting, to receive the gift of comradeship from a man.



The next days blurred by. Physical training in the morning, then breakfast, tests, lunch, more PT, more tests, dinner and a lecture on the GF's proper place in the Confederated Worlds' politics and society, yet more tests, thirty minutes of relaxation, then lights out. The shorter day carried a shorter sleep cycle, and Tomas went through the five minutes between reveille and the fall in for the march to the PT ground in a mix of exhaustion and epinephrine-boosted alertness.

PT was the longest length of time he got outside the barracks buildings, mess hall, and testing facilities, and under the transparent shielding roofing the station's rotating ring. Tomas couldn't remember ever seeing ground cover as green as the grass. If Tomas lucked into the timing, he would do crunches or weighted getups when Challenger, Epsilon Eri-

daniel, was high overhead, just above or below the opposite side of the station's ring. He didn't dawdle when flat on his back between repetitions of any exercise, but he paid as much attention to the planet as he could. Clouds and deep blue oceans on dayside, the glow of a thousand cities on nightside. A hundred million people lived down there. The number boggled his mind. Half the population of the Confederated Worlds. Most of the privates hoped for a week of liberty on Challenger after finishing prelim training, but Tomas didn't. A week would barely get them up and down the space elevator to McAuliffe City. The glimpses Tomas took from here were enough.

The tests ranged from stylus-on-tablet to hands-on. Literally, in one case: a sergeant lifted a lid on a box full of parts and gave him thirty minutes to assemble a metals extractor. He worked the full time and still had a dozen pieces left over. Apparently he failed; the al-Aqsan talked a few days later about taking a second, comparable test while blindfolded.

Within a week, some of the privates received duty assignments and left the barracks, leaving only empty lockers and crisply-made beds for their fellows to find on returning before meals or at the relaxation time. Before long, it was Tomas' turn.

A sergeant stopped him on his way out of the mess hall after lunch. "Neumann, follow me."

They wound down walkways set in narrow lawns between buildings. Shadows cast by EpEri slid over their path. A turn and a glance over Tomas' shoulder showed the PT ground far up the ring behind him. At a double door, they entered a gray myconcrete building near one end of the facility.

The sergeant led him to a room with windows viewing an interior courtyard, then withdrew. A lieutenant and two enlisted stood near a major seated at a desk. The major brought a narrow-eyed gaze up from a tablet. Tomas saluted.

"At ease, Neumann. We've reviewed your aptitudes, and

we are offering you a position in intelligence analysis."

In the ensuing silence, Tomas frowned. "Sir, permission to speak?"

"Yes?"

"I'm not ordered to it?"

"Normally we would, but there are some notes on your file.... You're an Observer?"

"Yes."

"And you don't look at images? Did our recruiting officer on Joséphine get that right?"

Tomas spoke quickly. "I avoid prerecorded photography and audiography. I may see and hear live transmissions of real events."

"Do you make a distinction between prerecorded real events and fiction?"

"Prerecorded events are fiction, sir."

The major leaned back in his chair. "Hell of a strict Observer you are, son." His gaze slowly cycled between Tomas and his tablet. "This is a tough situation. Intel can certainly use you, and you can use it. It's your best aptitude. But the task it needs you for is analysis. That means looking at prerecorded pictures, video, and audio. After intel, your next best aptitude is the armored grenadiers, so if you turn intel down, that's where you'll go."

"I'll gladly serve wherever I'm assigned."

The major had a sour look. "You ever break a bone? Get cut by a knife? Injured in a car accident?"

"No."

"Ever shoot a rifle? Go hunting? Get into a fight against someone armed?"

Tomas remembered Capt. Schreiber's words. All other arms serve the infantryman. He stood taller and put more emphasis in his voice. "No."

The major took off his cap and brushed brown hair back from his forehead. "Son, I'm not trying to burst your bubble. I

think you could sack up and do infantry. But any infantry duty gives you a risk of death every day. Armored grenadiers aren't immune because they ride a battle wagon into the combat zone. Intel? You'd be in a secure area on New Lib or whatever planet we next liberate from the Unity. Clean beds, three hot meals a day, Daughters of Astarte on base, no one shooting at you."

"I didn't enlist for comfort, sir."

"You enlisted to grow as a man? Here's a chance to learn and practice skills related to the best aptitude you have."

Tomas said, "At the price of my spiritual beliefs, sir?"

"Spiritual beliefs change and evolve and... hell, I'm not selling you on it. Yeah, son, it doesn't fit with how you interpret being an Observer. Now the damn Unity would say to hell with that and force you into intel. We aren't like that. Being a soldier involves making tough choices, and we'll give you practice at that. Your best aptitude or your spiritual beliefs? Which will it be?"

There were other ways to be an Observer than the one his mother had drilled into him? The thought echoed in a mental space suddenly much larger. He could both follow his talents and conform to the spirit of being an Observer.

"Neumann, we need a decision now."

Whose spirit, though? How many Observers on Earth and Heinlein's World had, in all sincerity, acquiesced to photographs, recorded television, recorded music, virtual reality, and every other form of reality-denial leading to virtual fugue? The major was right, the Confederated Worlds were better than the Unity. The Confederated Worlds didn't force doctrines on its civilians or its soldiers.

So who was the major to tell Tomas the proper way to be an Observer?

"Neumann?"

Tomas snapped his heels together. "Thank you for allowing me the choice, sir. I will join the armored grenadiers."

Chapter 3

In Transit

"Get on board!" the SF captain shouted in the holding area. He raised his voice over the rumble of the airlock door opening. "Come on, mudbugs, we aren't going to hold up ten thousand tons for your sorry asses!"

"Space Force hospitality never changes, does it?" shouted back a GF soldier in the middle of the crowd in the holding area.

"You want to be in a hurry dirtside, not up here!" called a woman.

"Yeah, I hear a Unity soldier was spotted within a thousand clicks of the spaceport!" yelled a man.

The SF captain looked annoyed, but no one had impugned his dignity as an officer. "Shut your pieholes, sweaties, and board the shuttle!"

Tomas stood up and hoisted his sack to his shoulders. Two months of being shipped around like talking luggage by the SF came to a close today when he landed on New Liberty and got a unit assignment. He moved with the other GF personnel, their travel slow, their chatter echoing off the holding area's nanotube alloy walls. Nervous energy rocked Tomas' weight from side to side every time the crowd halted.

At the airlock's open door, a GF lieutenant, a turbaned and bearded Ambarsari, swiped a scanner over the shilling hidden

under each soldier's tunic. The SF captain looked bored as he swiped the touchscreen of his tablet. "The canned spam got to send a captain to do a lieutenant's job," muttered a GF private near Tomas in line.

"They do give us space supremacy," replied a captain with an airmobile hussar badge, an ornithopter above and to the right of a diagonal stripe, on his sleeve.

"If they're not too hung over to operate the lasers." The SF captain glanced up and the private blanked his face.

Through the airlock, they entered a pressurized tube the height and width of a narrow hallway, on the floor of the transport ship's docking bay. Two hundred meters square and fifty high, the docking bay was large enough to show the curvature of the transport ship's outer hull. A seam ran down the middle of the floor, where joined the two docking bay doors, now closed. A stalactite field of girders, flexible piping, and articulating arms jutted from the ceiling. Clangs of metal and throbs of fluid ran through the docking bay doors and up from the soldiers' feet.

The pressurized tube bent upward; the flat floor became a staircase. The clanging and throbbing faded. Banks of floodlights cast smeared shadows over the GF personnel in the pressurized tube. Between the lights, the press of people, and the shallow viewing angle through the tube's thick plastic wall, Tomas barely glimpsed the shuttle before he entered its airlock. He only noted a cylinder, wider than tall.

Inside the shuttle, GF sergeants stood throughout the corridors, guiding the new arrivals to a large round chamber in the shuttle's center. The floor was a black mesh and large blue sacks, roughly the size and shape of sleeping bags, hung on guide wires between the ceiling and floor. The sacks were arrayed in rows and columns like trees in an orchard, and each had two openings, a small hole about a meter and a half off the floor and a large slit running most of the way from the small hole to the floor. The sacks made Tomas think of a rup-

tured cocoon—

“Kali’s yani,” muttered a mustachioed soldier from Satyayuga.

An SF lieutenant, green-eyed and scowling, stalked between the sacks. “Pick a gee-sack. Clip your ruck on the back and get in. Stick your face out the hole, then zip up from the inside. Gee-fluid will fill up to your neck. You’ll feel it pump when we’re in free fall, and if we need to pull gees; this will help your heart and lungs, so don’t panic. We’ve got better things to do than clean up mudbug puke.”

The sacks hung so closely together his sleeves brushed clipped-on rucks and someone climbing into one jostled him as he passed. Tomas found an empty one and climbed in. As soon as he closed the zipper, fluid squished in, cold jets hitting his legs and torso. A far cry from the skills implantation couch back at Challenger.

Some soldier nearby called, “You want my hands in the sack? What if there’s a rupture? How can I put on the emergency oxygen?”

“Sonofabitch.” Tomas judged by the SF lieutenant’s voice his scowl had deepened. “There’s no emergency oxygen. If there’s a rupture, the lack of hull integrity will tear the shuttle apart when we hit atmosphere. I’d rather pass out before getting ripped apart, how about you?”

The sounds of milling soldiers grew quieter. An SF sergeant stopped in front of Tomas, tugging on tubes connected to the back of the sack in front, checking a display on his tablets before moving on. Viscous gee-fluid sloshed around him. The gee-fluid felt warmer than at first, and the view of the backs of other sacks was monotonous. Someone nearby snored. Tomas’ nervous energy faded. He almost shut his eyes—

A shudder ran through the ship, rocking him in the gee-sack. On the back of the sack in front, a video display lit up. In the corner, a clock showed current time in 24-hour standard,

just past ten-hundred. Live? Girders and moving arms filled the display. One piece, in the center, remained fixed, while the rest slowly shrank and slid toward the center of the view and more filled in from the edges. The docking bay's ceiling?

Nanotube alloy walls came into view from the display's edges. Tomas put it together: an articulating arm held the shuttle by the nose and pushed it out of the docking bay. After a time, the dock doors and the transport's hull appeared on the edges of the display. The shuttle was clear of the transport ship.

Without warning, Tomas' stomach rose and his feet lost contact with the sack bottom. The video display showed the transport's hull scrolling up the screen, and then the scrolling sped up as a low mechanical sound came from somewhere in the ship. Tomas felt queasy and shut his eyes.

He wasn't alone. "Christ, warn a fella!" yelled a sickly voice from amid the sacks. The SF personnel made no reply. Tomas decided he would reopen his eyes, and keep them open as long as he could.

The transport ship scrolled off the display, leaving a view of the stars over New Liberty. Suddenly, a deep, loud rumbling filled the ship and Tomas felt heavy. The entry burn had started.

A countdown timer appeared in a lower corner of the display. 9:52, 9:51, 9:50.... The view of the stars remained unchanging. *Switching to simulated stern view* appeared, and below it the numeral 3.

"Simulated?" A wave of anxiety flowed through Tomas' torso. "Why simulated?"

2...

"You can't see a damn thing through the drive exhaust," came a male voice through a speaker somewhere in his sack.

1...

"It's a rare GF who even wonders why," the voice added.

Tomas shut his eyes. GF personnel around him talked.

"So that's what New Liberty looks like."

"Who cares? It's all green and gray on base."

"Some of us fight for a living, pogeey."

"Why no lights nightside?"

"NL's too close to its primary," came the hussar captain's voice. "Tidal lock. Permanent dayside, permanent nightside. See that greenish-black band crossed by lakes and rivers just sunward of the terminator? The only place Nlers live."

"Like Nuova Toscana," someone said.

Tomas had read up on New Liberty during transport from Challenger. Sounded like he missed nothing by refusing to watch the screen.

"Band? Like a landing strip?"

"Landing strip? That's how the local girls wear their snatch hair?"

"Like you'll ever know."

The shuttle kept rumbling, and the soldiers swayed in the gee-sacks.

"Where's the cities?"

Tomas spoke up. "Two million people on the whole planet."

"Two million? Don't lie to me. That's too small for the planetary gene pool."

"Not even close," someone said. "Learn some biology. Maybe history too while you're at it."

"Goodbye, McAuliffe City," came a wistful voice.

"Screw you, smarty pants."

"Small gene pool? That means they're all inbred?"

"Woohoo! Retarded girls are too dumb to guard their landing strips!"

"Damn, isn't it getting big?"

"It better," a woman said. "We're landing on it."

"How fast are we going!?"

"Slower every second, mudbug!" called the SF voice who'd spoken to Tomas.

The soldiers grew quieter for a short time, but soon their chatter returned. Tomas gathered the shuttle approached the landing cradle of the main GF base, just outside Reagantown, capital of New Liberty, population forty thousand, all of whom had welcomed the Confederated Worlds' forces not just as liberators, but as long-lost cousins.

The apparent gravity generated by the entry burn intensified. Waves sloshed through gee-fluid, pounding Tomas like a clumsy masseur, pushing in his stomach as he exhaled, ebbing as he inhaled. "Here we go!" someone shouted.

The shuttle's rumbling cut off and Tomas instantly felt lighter. He took a few breaths. In front of him, sacks twisted as GF personnel craned their necks to see how close they were to leaving the ship. Tomas kept still. So far, his military career had consisted mostly of travel, as much spam-in-a-can as the SF personnel around them.

The major's words at the time of choosing his duty assignment back at Challenger came back to Tomas. He might look back with longing on this time of doing nothing.

Tomas set aside the thought. A pump sounded nearby, pulling gee-fluid out of the sack. SF personnel moved among the sacks, checking their tablets, then unzipping soldiers from the outside.

"GF personnel, this way," yelled a GF sergeant somewhere behind and to the right of Tomas.

An SF sergeant let Tomas out of the sack. Walking felt easy, despite the surges in apparent gravity during the entry burn and the dregs of gee-fluid dripping from his clothes to the mesh floor. New Liberty's local gravity was about point-seven gee and the air was enriched in oxygen compared to Joséphine. He knew these facts in his head, but his first step outside the shuttle's hatch, onto a pedestrian bridge extended from the lip of the landing cradle to the shuttle, put the knowledge into his body.

The white ceramic parabolic dish that made up the pri-

mary capture system of the landing cradle poured heat up his body. Dregs of gee-fluid turned to powder and drifted from his clothes.

Tomas glanced to his left. New Liberty's star, locally called Constitution, was a red dwarf, dimmer and fatter than Soleil-de-France as seen from Joséphine. Dim, but bright enough to make him squint if he looked directly at it. Low in the sky, it cast long shadows across the landing cradles, driveways, and dark green fields of the spaceport. The planet's tidal lock meant the star would never appear to move. It was permanently late afternoon on New Liberty.

The sky was a deeper indigo than Joséphine's. High thin clouds streamed away from the sun. In passing they veiled bright stars.

A GF sergeant with a scanner waited at the other end of the pedestrian bridge. Just a sergeant—Tomas wouldn't see any SF personnel until he left the planet. After the scan, the right side of Tomas' shilling throbbed against his chest. He turned that direction, toward a large building nearby. He pulled out his tablet. On a map, a yellow line led through the building to a small auditorium inside.

He started off down a walkway. Scattered across the grassy field between him and the boundary of the spaceport, antimissile lasers were parked behind berms and under camouflage netting. Outside the door to the large building, he glanced back. The shuttle passengers had strung out along the walkway. In the distance, the shuttle had two pedestrian bridges connected to it. Two? The second reached higher on the shuttle than the one Tomas had taken, mating with a hatch on the opposite side of the ship. A few people walked in clusters down the second bridge, voices too distant to hear.

"What's that?" Tomas asked.

A corporal in the airmobile hussars, with a trimmed reddish-blond beard and weary eyes, trudged past. He glanced up, then said with a Midgard accent, "The bifrost bridge, vir-

gin. Allows the orificers to descend from heaven."

"But a captain rode with us...." Tomas said. The door swung shut behind the Midgarder. It was an honest question. The Midgarder didn't have to be rude. Maybe the airmobile hussars had a chip on their shoulder. No matter. Tomas would join his fellow armored grenadiers soon.

Tomas went in and soon found the auditorium. Eight rows of twelve seats descended to a stage. Behind the stage, a large video display, mostly black, showed in large print the text *Infantry Replacement Sitrep*. Broad stripes of Confederated Worlds red, white, and blue ran up the windowless walls. Less than a dozen soldiers waited, scattered around the room, not talking to each other. Tomas looked for armored grenadier patches on his fellow soldiers' sleeves. He saw half a dozen, but no one met his gaze. Still, they were his comrades, so he sat near one on the second row back from the stage.

A few more soldiers came in, and then a door to the stage opened for a major, followed by a couple of aides, an enlisted man and woman. The soldiers in the auditorium stood and saluted.

"At ease. Good morning, I'm Maj. Mueller." He had a round, ruddy face and he sounded bored. "I'm going to brief you on the situation here, then give you your unit assignments."

The major cleared his throat. "At this time, our operational posture is the pursuit of remnants of Unity infantry formations in order to deny them an opportunity to reorganize and contest our dominance of NL." Thanks to his skills implantations, Tomas was able to translate the jargon into plain Confed. *Keep them on the run till they give up.* "Here's a map."

The display flickered, showed an image. Though no map was ever live, a map was a pictorial representation of data, not a photograph purporting to be reality. Tomas studied the map as the major spoke. "At present, intel has confirmed elements of five Uni regiments have pulled back to a mountainous re-

gion, the New Rockies Plateau, about six thousand clicks sun-left from here."

Instead of directions relative to planetary magnetic poles or the local or galactic ecliptics, and as people did on other tidally locked worlds, the GF referred to two of New Liberty's four cardinal directions as *light*, toward the local sun and *dark*, away from it. If the local sun was to one's left, one faced *sun-left*; if to one's right, one faced *sunright*.

"The New Rockies Plateau is roughly eight hundred clicks by a thousand. About two thirds of it lies darkward of the terminator and bears glaciation at higher elevations. The glaciation spawns a number of rivers winding through the plateau. The lightward third is heavily forested. The terrain favors the defense."

The major tapped his tablet. Five red icons, replete with alphanumeric codes, appeared on the plateau, amid smears of red crawling down valleys and fading the further the smears got from the icons. "All the Uni regiments are understrength as a result of sustained combat over the last standard year, so each is smaller than one of our brigades. Locations are approximate based on last best intel and models of Uni movement potentialities. Questions?"

"Sir, aren't they recruiting locals to replace lost manpower?" asked a fusilier.

"They can't," said the grenadier near Tomas. He had a faint accent Tomas placed to the continent of Endeavour on Challenger. "The locals are descended from Challengerites who came out here three hundred years ago to terraform. They're loyal to the Confederated Worlds. No one would join the Unity forces."

The major said, "To answer the original question, no. One disadvantage of the Uni forces' current disposition is the exceedingly sparse settlement of the plateau. There are no more than ten thousand civilians residing there, most of them in three towns." Another tap on the tablet and the three towns lit

up on the map. All were on the light side, within a hundred kilometers of the flatter land around the plateau, on some of the few paved roads into and through the region. "So there's a small manpower pool the Uni forces could draw from. Plus, our civilian interface officers have repeatedly emphasized to the NLers this isn't their fight. If they stay out of it, we leave them alone. The vast majority of them heed that message."

"Sir?" asked the same grenadier. "They welcomed us as liberators. *Confederated Worlds Today* has always been clear about that."

The major looked pained, and his next words came carefully. "I don't know what the civilian news organs on Challenger base their reports on. All I can say is that the people of NL are generally neutral."

The grenadier's brows still furrowed. Tomas understood his puzzlement. Every news story about New Liberty's civilians—the people whom the war was described as liberating from Unity oppression—painted a picture of joy at the *Confederated Worlds'* presence on planet and in the system. Those were lies?

Tomas thought further. What if Unity forces from Nouveau-Normandie had occupied Joséphine at the start of the war? Would Guillaume or any of Madame Martin's other students joined them? Etien the ambler? Lucien LaSalle might have. Not out of cultural loyalty with other descendants of ancient France, though; only if the Unity showed itself as the stronger horse. "Most people want to live quiet lives," he whispered to his fellow grenadier. "Better the devil they know than the angel they don't."

The grenadier's puzzlement turned to a surly narrowing of his eyes. "Shit, what do you know, smartypants?" He looked away.

Tomas' face fell and anxiety knotted his gut. I'm on your side I'm one of you don't you see that—

"No one is at liberty for side conversations!" The major

said. "You have something to say...." A glance at his tablet, then, "Neumann? Say it to us all!"

Tomas labored for words. "Sir, I was trying to inform a fellow armored grenadier--"

"What about the grenadiers on the far side of the room? And the hussars, fusiliers, engineers, and scouts? Do none of them matter? Speak!"

He swallowed. "People would rather be governed by the devil they know than the angel they don't. Sir!"

"Hmph." The major cocked his head. "You're wiser than you look."

Relief flowed through Tomas' limbs as the major said, "Let's move on to your unit assignments." He lifted his tablet, swiped. "Bannister. Third Scout Squadron. Beltran..." Tomas' heart quickened as the major moved down the alphabet, Jäger, McPherson, "...Neumann, 2nd Battalion, 21st Armored Grenadier Brigade. The Blackjacks, good unit. Quinoñes...."

The major soon finished the list. "That's it. The sergeants here will guide you to your transport. Godspeed, men."

Thirty minutes later, Tomas trudged to an ornithopter waiting on a tarmac behind the building. A Bluejay, the smallest noncombat transport thopter in the GF's hangars, squatted on four legs. Heat poured from the reactor in the thopter's tail. Tomas winced and swung wider. A cool darkly breeze felt pleasant as he reached the boarding ramp in the middle of the fuselage under the wing. At the top of the ramp, his shilling throbbed from a scanner mounted in the doorframe.

Inside, the plastic mesh seats were laid out in banks on the sides of the cabin, eight facing the ramp and six on the other wall. About half had occupants, mostly toward the front. The Midgard hussar slouched down, rucksack under his seat and garrison cap down over his eyes. Tomas had to sit next to someone. Maybe he could connect with the Midgarder this time, during the next hours in the air.

The Midgarder stirred and lifted the front of his cap a few

centimeters. "Virgin, word of advice." His tone was off-hand, but kind enough.

"Yeah?"

"Never pass up a chance to take a nap." He dropped the cap back over his eyes and settled deeper into the plastic mesh.

They waited for a time. "Come on, let's get going," said one of the men from the briefing. The scout, Bannister, Tomas remembered.

"Zip it, virgin," said a private in the engineers.

"I don't want to sit here all day. Do you?"

The engineer rolled his eyes. "We're replacing dead men. I'm in no hurry getting there."

Bannister looked abashed and grew silent. Eventually the copilot, a warrant officer, sidled through the narrow opening between the cockpit and the cabin. He looked at each of the men in turn as his finger tapped the air. At the end, he made a sour face. "Yeah, seven," he said over his shoulder, raising his voice above the whine of the reactor.

The pilot's voice, muffled by distance, obstacles, and extraneous sounds, said, "Damn it."

"You knew the shillings were counted right."

"I know. Where's that damn lieutenant?"

Motion on the boarding ramp caught the copilot's attention. "Officer up!" he said.

Tomas and the other men stood and saluted. The Midgarder rose rapidly from his nap, and the pilot too emerged from the cockpit with a salute.

"At ease." The lieutenant wore gray-green camouflage fatigues. The name *Tower* showed on his breast pocket and an armored grenadier patch, on his sleeve. His name poorly fit his presence; he was shorter than the Challenger average, and lacked the stockiness of most heavy world natives. As if to make up for a soft chin, his gray-blue gaze scowled across the cabin. "Mr... Pilot, where's the officer seating?"

"Bluejay's too small a bird, sir."

"We don't deserve a bigger one for this flight?"

"Transport assigned our bird to this run today, sir."

"I see." He turned to the man in the most forward seat on the side opposite the boarding ramp. "Private, I'll take your seat."

"Sir?"

The lieutenant raised his voice. "Do I have to quote the manual?"

"Sir, of course not. Permission to remove my stow?"

"Permission? You mean to tell me you were thinking you'd leave your ruck under my seat?"

The man put on an innocent look. "Sir, I only sought clarity of the order."

The lieutenant kept his piercing gaze for a moment. "Is it clear?"

"Yes, sir." The man knelt at his seat, slid out his rucksack, and moved to the rear of the cabin. As he passed Tomas and the Midgarder, he whispered "Paper tiger" through gritted teeth.

Tomas frowned.

Amid the rustle of the men returning to their seats, the Midgarder murmured, "Graduate of the Ground Force Academy."

"I never heard that term for GFA grads."

"I know, newb. The skills imp only gave you knowledge the orificers want you to have. Remember that."

"I will," Tomas said, but how would he know what skills he really needed?

The pilot's voice came over the intercom. "We're lifting in fifteen seconds."

"Thanks, chief," called one of the experienced enlisted men. The ramp swung up. Tomas double-checked his seat belt. In preparation for launch, the wings beat, sending big chuffs of air downward and bouncing the thopter's suspen-

sion. The cabin sank for a moment, then the thopter sprung on its legs and sped up its wingbeats.

Tomas expected the Midgarder to already be asleep, but the other gazed at the live view from external cameras, displayed on video screens above the heads of the men on the opposite side of the cabin. Maybe he would talk more if given the chance. "Why does a paper tiger act so lordly?"

"All new louies have a touch of it."

"But Academy grads worse? They think a piece of paper makes them better than us?" His last sentence froze Tomas' thoughts. Part of the status of Joséphine's *lycées* lay in granting *baccalauréats* instead of the skilled trades diplomas granted by the public schools. He'd bought into that mindset. Maybe his mother had pushed it on him, but he'd relayed it out, expressing disdain for the public schoolies. Maybe some of the dislike he'd received from the locals in Portage had been in response.

"No." The Midgarder glanced at Lt. Tower. "They fear their lack of experience makes them inferior."

The thopter climbed higher. The display showed a view of the GF base, the spaceport, and Reagantown beyond. The thopter darted, sickening Tomas' stomach for yet another time this day, and the view abruptly gave way to a rolling plain, dark green made darker in spots by the permanent shadows of the terrain's relief. By the time fresh questions came to Tomas, the Midgarder's garrison cap was back down over his eyes.



"Squad," said Sergeant Johnson, "Welcome Private Neumann."

Tomas stood at the sergeant's side at the entrance to the shelter, a low structure of reinforced mycocrete bermed with a dried slurry of plowed soil and polymer. Blocks of armored, transparent plastic formed the shelter's windows. A shaft of sunlight from Constitution caught dust motes and com-

pounded the late-afternoon feeling dragging down Tomas' eyelids and fogging his mind. Twenty-two hours on planet, sleeping fitfully as the thopter hopped from base to base near the main routes from sunright onto the plateau. Hard to believe it was oh-eight-hundred.

Sixteen pulldown cots lined the walls in the front and middle of the shelter. Half the cots were pulled down, where men sat with tablets and earbuds. Most glanced up from their music, videos, and letters, but after giving Tomas their once-overs and terse greetings, most turned back to their activities.

Sergeant Johnson led Tomas in. "Pick a spare cot." Tomas found one in the middle of the room. A blank video display on the bottom of the cot had a slot next to it. Tomas fished out his shilling and slotted it. His name appeared on the display. He stowed his rucksack in a locker mounted on the wall to the left. A display in the locker wall also showed his name, at eye level for a man of average height.

To the back of the room stood a door to the toilets and showers, a kitchenette, and a long table. Four men sat around one end of the table, hunched over tablets, engaged in some game. One, with pale blond hair and a narrow nose, looked up. "Where's the other spare part?"

"Voloshenko, we got one replacement. We make do." Sergeant Johnson raised his voice. "Idrin, make sure you get yourselves to the oh-nine-thirty inspection on time. We have a new platoon commander and we be turning out smarter than B squad." He left.

Maybe the disinterest would fade with the sergeant gone. *They want to meet me without any superiors present.* Yet most still ignored him. He grabbed the handle of the pulldown bed for a place to sit while getting ready for the coming inspection. The bed was lighter than he expected; the swingout leg clanged on the floor.

Men at the table chuckled. "Keep it down," said one, with black hair and sunken eyes.

Tomas ducked his head. He tapped the inside of his left wrist to call up a chronometer. The visually active fabric showed the time, and another tap gave a countdown till the inspection. Less than ninety minutes. He glanced around. Might as well get ready, even though everyone else remained leisurely. He rummaged in the locker for shoeshine, a rag, and a spray bottle of water, then sat and took off his boots.

Voloshenko and the black-haired man rose from the table. As they stepped closer, Tomas noticed the name *Alvarez* on his breast pocket. "Just what we need," Alvarez said. "Another virgin." He gave the name on the locker a cold squint. "Your name's New-man? Right as shit."

"It's pronounced *Noy-mun*."

As if Tomas hadn't spoken, Voloshenko said, "New-man wastes time on chickenshit."

"New-man wants to make us look bad," Alvarez said. "Suck up to the new louie. Were you the teacher's pet back in school, New-man?"

The rest of the men took an interest now. Tomas couldn't muster a reply. He blinked a few times and realized he held his breath.

"Where you from?" Voloshenko asked.

Tomas relaxed a bit. "Joséphine—"

"Double shit," Alvarez said. "Josies are useless fuckups."

"I just went through skills implant—"

"Oh? Skills implantation? Why didn't you say so?" Alvarez's sarcastic tone filled the room. Everyone looked up now. "Goddammit, you think jacking off makes you less of a virgin?"

"What do you care?" Tomas said.

"About your ass, New-man? Not a goddam thing. You're going to be dead in a week and I'm not going to care. But if you take someone better than you with you to hell, then I'm going to care. Good men die when virgins fuck up. So stay the hell away from me."

Tomas wanted to reply, yet Alvarez's ire drove words away from his vocal cords. Before he could rally himself, a new arrival, a corporal, distracted him. He had a stout chest and a fair firmness to his features.

His voice sounded deep and profound. "Are you part of the solution or part of the problem?"

Alvarez looked sullen. "Just kicking the tires on the new spare part, Marchbanks."

"Jumping on a virgin for bullshining his boots? Maybe he knows something you don't."

"Like hell," Alvarez said.

Marchbanks went on. "I've been gathering scuttlebutt on the new platoon commander, Lieutenant—"

"—Tower?" Tomas said.

Some of the men in the background blinked, leaned forward. Alvarez narrowed his eyes. "What do you know about him?" Marchbanks asked.

"We took the same Bluejay here from the spaceport. Paper tiger. Orificer. Bifrost bridge." Tomas slowed his words. "He ordered a soldier to the back of the bus and called the Bluejay pilot 'mister' instead of 'chief.'"

The men in the background grumbled. One or two swore under their breath. Soon most of them, including Voloshenko and Alvarez, reached for their shoeshine kits, or called up the diagnostics apps on their tablets to check their fatigues for dead pixels.

Marchbanks stepped away for a moment, then returned to Tomas' cot with a shoeshine kit. "Here, let me show you the quick way."

"Sure. Thanks."

Marchbanks sat, pulled off his boots, dipped a rag in polish. "Nobody wants to get close to the new guy. Every man here has seen someone they like die and wants to armor himself against that much loss ever happening again."

"And new guys die a lot."

"The skills imps give you skills you need, but they can't teach you to work in a team. That's the second most important thing to do out here. Work as a team. No, wet the rag, not the boot."

Tomas sprayed the rag, applied it to the boot. His heart pounded. Finally, he found the camaraderie he'd been looking for. "So what's the most important thing?"

"Keep your head down. No, not while bullshining. 'Hero' is a four-letter word for 'dead man.' I want all my men to tell their grandchildren what a good old sonofabitch I was. Remember, no one wins a war by dying for his country. You win a war by making the other bastard die for his."

Tomas glanced at Alvarez, who sat near the front of the shelter with buds in his ears and a comm cable between his tablet and the breast pocket of his fatigues. "What about him?"

Marchbanks glanced along the line of Tomas' gaze. "Both things I'm talking about set him off. Alvarez disliked the Josie from the start. No offense."

"About? Josie?" Not much. That's what men did, right? Break each other's balls? "No. Plus, I was born on Sankt-Benedikts-Welt."

Marchbanks smiled. "We're practically neighbors, then. I'm from Scotia." He dropped the smile. "So the Josie wasn't just a virgin, but you know how sometimes men start off on the wrong foot? Same with the Josie and Alvarez."

Marchbanks finished brushing his polish. His boots bore a dull coating. How would he get a shine out of that? He wetted a rag and gently rubbed each boot, talking to Tomas without looking at his handiwork. "I don't know why, but his first mission, the Josie went cowboy. I should've kept him in my fireteam. Dammit. Anyway, Josie ended up in a Uni foxhole against a machine gun crew. Killed two of them, silenced the machine gun. But multiple wounds himself, and for nothing, because our platoon sergeant took a round from a sniper, and

our former platoon commander's vehicle hit a landmine."

"So the platoon retreated."

"First they tried to get the Josie to the ambulances."

Tomas nodded. "Never leave a man behind."

"Yes, and there's a counterintel benefit, too; someone badly wounded may be in too much pain to pop his memory disrupters. Unis have transcranial magnetic receivers, like the skillsimps' TMI helmets in reverse. Read a prisoner's thoughts, we can do it too. Anyway, Alvarez's buddy goes out to recover the Josie, but then he takes a bullet to the head. His shilling broadcasts a medical emergency over the squad's channel, but he doesn't say a word. Very bad sign. Soon telemetry says both he and the Josie are dead."

"Alvarez blames the Josie." Dead men, the experience of combat, what could a virgin say? "Maybe there's a way to persuade—"

"Don't force it," Marchbanks said. "Alvarez will either warm up to you or he won't."

Tomas took a few breaths. He wanted these men to be on his side. At least Marchbanks was. "Your boots look sharp."

"Yours aren't bad, either. Now, Neumann, what are the two most important things?"

"Work as a team. Keep your head down."

"Exactly," Marchbanks said. "Stick with me and you'll do fine."