

Empire * Book Three

Majesty

by

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Chapter One

Peace

The official period of mourning had finally ended, long live the new Emperor. Daniel Grayson was that new Emperor, a title he had only reluctantly accepted. A good and simple life given over to service to the Empire.

Daniel had taken some time to celebrate a quite fourteenth birthday at Sir Ian Murphy's family farm on New Albion, so had Ian, they were only weeks apart in age. The Imperial Yacht had a permanent spot reserved in a wheat field a short distance from the farmhouse. A small armada of escort craft would orbit New Albion whenever the new Emperor decided to come for a visit. So far there had been only time enough for one visit since the death of the last Emperor and Daniel's subsequent coronation.

The visit had lasted almost a week, Daniel would have preferred that it last forever, so would Ellen, Ian's twin sister and the young Emperor's first and only love. Ian had elected to return once again with Daniel to Earth, the lure of his own research facility on the very grounds of the Sun Palace was just too tempting to pass up. Daniel had told Ian that he could pursue any line of research he fancied, he could keep his own hours, his budget would be unlimited.

Ellen was as upset as ever when Daniel had to take his leave once more. It seemed to the girl that all they ever did was say goodbye to each other. She was consoled that her school term would soon be over for the year. Daniel had promised her a long visit with himself and Ian on Earth (properly chaperoned by Ian and a few thousand retainers from the Imperial household). Ellen's parents had agreed to her upcoming visit with Daniel, if she wasn't safe with the Emperor then she wasn't safe anywhere.

The Sun Palace, Earth

Ian's research lab had once been an indoor netball court that was rarely used, Daniel had ordered a quick conversion to suit his friend's modest needs. When the Emperor wants something done quickly it is an amazing thing to witness, people do tend to move right along with their tasks.

Ian was deep into a spinoff theory of his shield technology, projected and focused 'beams' of shield energy. Like many eggheads, Ian at times dropped a decimal place here and there.

The resulting rumbling explosion brought everyone on the palace grounds running, even the Emperor was seen to be proceeding at an extremely undignified pace (a mad dash).

"What the shit happened?" Daniel demanded as he gasped for breath, courtly language cast aside. There was an extremely large and perfectly round hole in the far stone wall of the lab, in the distance there was a neat quarter-mile long divot taken out of the nearest hill.

"Too much power, apparently." Ian was covered in stone dust, a slightly befuddled expression on his face.

"Are you all right?" Daniel asked, a bit calmer by now. He had feared that his friend might have finally pushed the wrong switch and vaporized himself.

"Except for the ringing in my ears. I seemed to have damaged your humble abode."

"This is coming out of your paycheck," Daniel replied, by now relieved and a little amused at his genius of a friend's latest accomplishment (catastrophe).

"I don't get a paycheck," Ian rightly observed.

"A good thing too. Maybe you should try out this gadget of yours at a more remote location next time, how about the far side of the moon?"

"That sounds reasonable," Ian replied, "I had only intended to punch a hole in a plastic target, a minor miscalculation actually."

"At least it wasn't pointed at the palace, what the hell is it supposed to do when it works right?"

"I thought it would make a very efficient tunneling device, it also seems to have some considerable weapon potential," Ian explained.

"To say the least." Daniel could see the obvious use for the device, this could be the final nail in the Snake's collective coffin.

"Come on, let the medics check you out, you look like you did when that rating used his starter on you back on New Taz."

By now the whole area was awash in emergency personnel and security people, the Emperor steered his dazed friend into the arms of the medical team who then whisked Ian off to the palace infirmary.

Ian would be fine after the ringing stopped, the lab needed some serious repairs.

Marine Colonel Anson Bryce, the day watch head of palace security, was not amused when he came to seek a private audience with the Emperor an hour later.

The officer bowed the correct distance away from Daniel before speaking.

"Your Majesty, forgive my intrusion. May I speak with you about Sir Ian?"

Daniel had been trying to make some sense out of the mind bending expenditures for defense, any interruption was welcome. The Emperor liked Colonel Bryce, perhaps now was a good time to try and put the two of them on a more informal basis.

"Of course, Colonel. Please be at ease, no ceremony. From now on why don't you be more informal when there's just the two of us, speak your mind at all times. I...We respect your opinions and advice."

Daniel still had a lot of trouble adapting to the use of the royal 'We' in his speech.

"Thank you for that, Sire, I will speak plainly. Sir Ian is a true gift to the Empire but I fear that his experimental work so close to your presence is a danger. The accident in his laboratory could have destroyed the palace and you, Sire."

"True. We spoke with him about just that, any further testing of experimental devices will take place at a distance far removed from here, We suggested the far side of the moon, Ian agreed."

Bryce just had a large weight removed from his shoulders.

"That would seem a wise choice, sire. It occurs to me that whatever Sir Ian was working on would make one hell.. Excuse me Sire, one very effective offensive weapon."

"We thought the same thing, Colonel. One hell of a weapon."

It was "one hell of a weapon" that would not be needed. The Snakes would soon offer surrender without conditions, they were beaten. Three days after Ian's mishap in the laboratory the Admiral of The Fleet came in person to deliver the momentous news to his Emperor. The portly officer found Daniel in the rose garden near the south entrance. The boy liked roses, his mother had always carefully tended a few of the plants in Gryphon's hydroponics section.

"Your Majesty, it is over."

"Admiral?"

"We have received an official communications from the Home Nest (the closest translation for the Snake's home world)."

"That says what?" Daniel asked.

"They have ceased all resistance, the Snakes have surrendered totally and without conditions."

"Good God." Daniel's response was almost a whisper.

"Indeed, Your Majesty."

"Can this be a deception, some sort of ruse?" Daniel had no trust in anything the Snakes said or did.

"They have grounded and abandoned their few remaining capital war vessels, we now have a reconnaissance squadron in orbit around their home world with no offered resistance or hostilities. They have indicated that they have captives, human captives, and that they wish to return them to our forces. They also request to send a delegation here to make their case for mercy. This has all happened quite suddenly, our intelligence people believe that some sort of internal rebellion or uprising has overthrown their leadership."

Daniel sat down on the garden bench where the Admiral had found him. So much suffering had occurred, so many had died, his family had died. He had nearly died, so had Ian. Now it was over. There was peace. No war.

Mankind's Emperor wept, the Admiral of The Imperial Fleet stood beside his Emperor and felt moved to do the same. After some time both were composed enough to continue, there would be much to do.

"Has this news been released to the public yet?"

"No Your Majesty, that is properly your decision to make. The consensus at Fleet is that we should wait a short while for things to stabilize, to see if the Snakes are as sincere as they appear to be."

"Agreed. Instruct your forces to make the freeing of our people held by the Snakes their first priority.

Don't take the Snakes word for anything. Let's give it two days, then if things seem to be holding together I will address the Empire."

"Very well, Your Majesty. This day has been long in coming."

"Too long, Admiral, far too long."

After the Admiral had taken his leave instinct guided Daniel to find Ian, there was something he needed to say to him. As predicted the Emperor's friend could be found fussing over his soon to be tested 'gadget'. The new masonry had just been completed on the lab, perhaps in another two-hundred years it would blend better with the surrounding stones.

"Ian, knock off for a bit."

Sir Ian Murphy turned at the sound of Daniel's voice, he could sense that something had changed.

"What's wrong? I'm not going to power up this thing." Ian still felt like a total ass for blowing a large hole in the Sun Palace.

Daniel just motioned his friend to come close, Ian was taken by surprise when his Emperor grabbed him in a bone crushing hug.

"Thank you," Daniel said quietly.

"Huh? For what?" Ian was wondering if Daniel had finally snapped completely.

"For winning the war. The Snakes have surrendered without conditions."

"Oh. Oh my!"

Things did hold together, the Snakes were totally defeated and demoralized. A revolt had indeed occurred, something without precedent in the hive-like society where individual initiative was a rare thing. The ordinary Snake 'citizens' had finally had enough of being cannon fodder for the ruling elite, the uprising was short and brutal.

Approximately ten-thousand humans were scattered on the four star systems that were the core of the Snake civilization. There had been many more captives during the first years of the war, most perished providing amusement for the cruel military and knowledge for the Snake scientific community. Most of the remaining survivors were children, elite Snake 'civilians' fancied them as exotic pets that could be easily trained and could even provide useful household labor.

On the planet called Home Nest the two human pets of the Holder of Ground nest (household) were being readied to take to the local assembly point for human captives. They had been washed and decorated with their best ribbons and fitted with their nicest leashes. The children were made to understand that they would be returning to their own kind. The two children had learned much of their captor's language and could pronounce a good many of the raspy words, they still remembered their own language and used it between themselves. They spoke as much younger children would, words were rapidly blurred together, some words were their own invention. For almost their entire period of captivity they had only each other for human company.

Jeremy and Alexandra (Alex) were nine and eight-years old respectively. The two children had been together for almost four years, they had been taken very early in the war. They still had some remembrance of their families and were after a fashion still mostly sane. Jeremy's last name was Walker. Alexandra's last name was Grayson.

The Emperor did indeed address his subjects, all of mankind paused to listen to the rare event of hearing their monarch's actual voice. Daniel had terminal stage fright but managed to get through the short statement without passing out.

"Citizens of The New Empire, the war is over, we are victorious. Our mortal enemy has surrendered unconditionally to Imperial forces now in orbit over their home world."

"Our time of darkness has come to an end, the blood we have shed has secured our freedom from the oppression of a monstrous foe. Now is a time for celebration and reflection, we have been spared a terrible fate."

"Peace is once more with us but we must remain vigilant and strong, we now need to rest from our struggle. I would say to all citizens to give thanks to their God, and to give thanks to the next person in uniform that you may meet. Let us remember those who have been lost, let us honor those who remain."

The brief announcement was well received to say the least, there was literally dancing in the streets.

Chapter Two

Reunion

The Admiral of The Imperial Fleet was briefing his Emperor.

"The turnover of the captives is proceeding with few incidents, Sire. There are some very disturbing aspects about the mental and physical condition of the survivors."

"Disturbing?" Daniel could well imagine their condition having once been one of the Snakes prisoners himself.

"The captives that have survived are mostly young children. This is very distressing to relate, the children seem to have been kept as household pets of the elite class."

Daniel's eye's narrowed and his nostrils flared slightly. "Pets?"

"Yes Sire. Most are malnourished from the lack of a proper human diet, a few seem to have lost all touch with their humanity. They will all need very special care, both for their bodies and their minds."

The Emperor was silent for some moments, he was within a heartbeat of ordering the complete destruction of every Snake in the galaxy. With some effort Daniel calmed himself before speaking.

"What of the Snake delegation?"

"They are due here in eight days, Sire. As a show of good faith their new 'government' is bringing along the former Supreme Warrior to answer to you for the attack and ensuing war on humanity."

"Good God! What do they expect Us to do with him, or it, as the case might be?"

"That I cannot say, Sire. I expect they are hoping to curry favor and lenient treatment."

"If they expect any fucking leniency from me they will be sorely disappointed!" Daniel stood abruptly, the Admiral could only blink in amazement at the language the Emperor had used as he too quickly stood.

"Keep Us informed of any development, don't hesitate at any hour of the day."

"Yes Sire, certainly."

The briefing was over, Daniel felt like killing something.

Maybe in eight days he would.

As if Daniel didn't have enough to occupy his every minute, a very rattled Ian came to him the next evening. Ian looked as if he had just eaten a platter of bats.

"You look like shit, are you sick?" Daniel asked with real concern.

"I'm in major trouble," Ian began, "I don't know what to do."

Daniel guided his friend over to the large couch facing the fireplace.

"Sit down and spill it."

Ian did, he was indeed in trouble.

"I've just been reading a hand delivered message from Rebecca's father, he's here on Earth with her and her mother."

"Oh shit," Daniel whispered.

"Yes," Ian agreed.

"And?"

"Rebecca's totally pregnant. Her father is demanding that I marry her or he will call me out."

"Oh shit."

"Yes."

"You're only fourteen!" Daniel exclaimed.

"Yes, I may not see fifteen at this rate."

Daniel thought for a moment, what to do?

"She seemed to be very free with her favors, are you sure you're the father of her kid? She came to me, if my ratty appearance at the time hadn't scared her off it could be me who's the father. There were other males on that tub you know."

"Well.... We did do it several times," Ian explained rather weakly.

"Wonderful. Let's be doubly sure about this and level the field some. Have them come here to the palace tomorrow afternoon, I'll stand with you while we sort this out. I want the Royal Physician to confirm that you are the daddy before you say 'I do' with anyone."

"All right. God I'm so sorry to be causing this mess now of all times!" Ian seemed about ready to burst into tears.

Daniel placed his hand on Ian's shoulder.

"We've been in worse messes than this, we'll get through this one. Can you change a diaper?"

This last remark earned mankind's Emperor a solid punch to his left arm.

"Ow, shit! You know it's an automatic death sentence for striking the Emperor!"

"Better that than diapers," Ian said, a bit of a smile finally on his face.

Daniel could no more desert Ian in his time of need than his friend could ever desert him.

Promptly at two the next afternoon Alfred Hyde, his wife Gertrude (?) and his daughter Rebecca presented themselves to the palace Appointments Secretary as arranged. Alfred Hyde had not counted on being asked by Ian to come to the God Almighty Sun Palace, this was not going quite as planned.

"Sir Ian asked us here to meet with him, I believe he is expecting us."

"Yes Mister Hyde, you are expected," explained the male secretary, "if you would be so kind as to follow me I will take you to him."

"Thank you." Hyde and his family were like most visitors to the Sun Palace quite overwhelmed by the scale and opulence of the vast seat of power. The walk to meet with Ian seemed to go on for miles. Hyde began to feel some real misgivings when four dress uniformed Imperial Marines snapped to attention as they approached a very impressive gilded door.

"Do go in, Sir Ian is waiting for you," the secretary motioned the three people through the now open door. Hyde could see Ian standing inside the large and ornate room and entered feeling more confident. Ian greeted them.

"Mister Hyde, Misses Hyde, Rebecca. Welcome, please come and be seated." Ian was nervous but pretty much in control of himself.

"Thank you. My wife and Rebecca will sit, I would prefer to stand while I have my say."

"Of course sir. Do you mind if a friend of mine joins us, a confidant who will remain discreet?"

Hyde was about to object as Ian gestured to where Daniel was now standing quietly behind the three visitors. The man paled and finally remembered to bow before his Emperor, Gertrude and Rebecca did likewise. Ian didn't have to say another word during the meeting.

"Please be at ease, no ceremony," Daniel said quietly.

"Your...Your Majesty, we had no wish to trouble you about this matter," Hyde stammered.

"Ian's trouble is Our trouble, sir." Daniel then turned to the girl. "Hello Rebecca, please sit down. Are you feeling well?"

The girl was well along in her pregnancy.

"Yes Your Majesty, I'm fine."

"Good. Let's all speak our minds on this matter, this will remain confidential. Why don't you begin, Mister Hyde?"

Daniel sat across from Rebecca and her Mother, Ian and Alfred Hyde remained standing.

"Very well...Sire. As is all too apparent my daughter is with child, she has assured me that Sir Ian is the father. Advantage was taken of her while on board the research vessel Cooke while Sir Ian was acting as engineer and navigator."

"Advantage, sir?" Daniel asked calmly.

"Indeed, Sire! This must be put right or I will be forced to demand satisfaction on behalf of my daughter!"

"Remain calm sir," Daniel began, "as We see it there was more than one male aboard the Cooke who could have caused your daughter's condition, Ourselves included. Before matters proceed any further, We

must insist that Ian and your daughter submit to a paternity test by a qualified physician. We offer the services of the Royal Physician or if you prefer the doctor of your choice."

Daniel and Ian had a long talk with the Royal Physician the day before this meeting took place.

"Very well, Sire. That does seem a reasonable course of action." Hyde felt like a mouse talking with a cat but after all his daughters' good name and her family's name were at stake here. Hyde apparently held a higher opinion of his daughter than circumstances warranted.

Everyone stood as Daniel did, the Emperor walked over to the large desk and pressed a small button on its mirror polished surface.

"Please send in Doctor Kwan."

Ian wasn't the father.

To further put an end to the matter Daniel had himself tested also. Alfred Hyde was mortified. Rebecca finally fessed up to her varied shipboard activities.

"Jason. I was with Jason Becket also."

"I... Can you forgive me for this, Your Majesty?" Hyde asked quietly.

"Nothing to forgive, sir. Perhaps you now need to speak with Mister Becket, We would suggest calm and rational talk rather than dueling."

"Indeed, Your Majesty. I am in your eternal debt for your patience and understanding on this matter."

"We have all learned from this, let's consider this as a closed book and part as friends."

Part they did.

Daniel had some words with Ian after the Hyde's had left.

"You dodged the proverbial bullet, maybe we both did."

"Thank you doesn't quite cover it, I was ready to marry her," Ian replied.

"What would you have said to your folks?"

"Please kill me? Father probably would have strangled me anyway."

Home Nest

Jeremy and Alexandra sat clutching each another waiting for something to happen. The two human pets were in a group of perhaps thirty others, they all huddled close together in the empty alien plaza. As directed by Imperial forces there were no Snakes within sight of the plaza, a safe evacuation of the children was the first priority.

Like the other pets, Jeremy and Alex had been ordered to sit and stay. They were well trained and would stay put until they died of hunger and thirst if need be. Both children were thin to the point of emaciation, their hair long and uncut for years, their skin was tanned and marked with faded scars and a few new welts. The children were very small for their age, the food provided by the Snakes lacked the right proportions of nutrients by humans for normal growth.

"I'mscaredJermy!" Alex whispered.

"Metoo!" Jeremy held his only friend tighter, two heavy Imperial Marine landing craft were settling near them on the plaza. The children all wanted to run away but they had been ordered to sit and stay.

The Scalies hurt you if you didn't do what they ordered.

Marine Gunnery Sergeant Boone thought that he had seen just about everything during the war, the scene that greeted him in the middle of the plaza changed his mind. The battle ready marines slowly approached the small group of naked and obviously terrified children, Boone knelt down next to a small boy and girl

who held onto each other like life itself, they were shivering with fright.
"Hello there, don't be afraid. My name is Tom, can you tell me your names?"

The grownup human was talking to them the way that the children spoke to each other, they still remembered grownups. Mommy and Daddy.

"J.. Jermy. Myname'sJermy," the boy replied, his answer all one word.

"Jeremy, you mean?" Boone asked gently.

"Uh huh, JermyWalker, I'mJermyWalker."

"Jeremy Walker. Who's your friend?"

"Lex, she'sLex."

"Lex is a funny name. Can she talk like you?"

"Uh huh." The skinny little boy silently urged the girl to say something, she hesitated for a minute and then long forgotten words seemed to burst from some hidden place in her brain.

"AlexandraGraysonoutofGryphon. I'mAlex."

"Alex." Boone could only understand the last part of the girl's blurted out words.

In any event they had to get these poor kids out of here, there wasn't time for a long talk to put them more at ease. Other marines were already gently carrying some of the other children to the landing craft.

"I need you both to stand up now, we're going to take you home now, to your real home."

"We're 'sposedtositanstay, theScaliessaidto," Jeremy replied while still tightly holding onto Alex.

"What they said doesn't matter now, they can't hurt you anymore. You're safe now, we need to leave this place."

"Arewegoing... totheGoodPlace?" Jeremy asked.

"Yes we are, to the Good Place," Boone replied gently.

"kay."

The boy timidly rose, urging the girl to do the same. Boone extended his arms to them and instinct guided the lost children as the large marine carefully picked them both up, one in each arm.

They didn't weigh very much at all.

The Sun Palace

"The Frigate Sullivan has rendezvoused with the Snake envoy vessel in orbit around Pluto, Sire. Sullivan will ground here at thirteen-hundred local tomorrow."

The naval briefing officer kept glancing at bit nervously at the ornate revolver his Emperor was absently holding in his right hand.

"Not to worry, Captain. We rarely shoot anyone before lunch," Daniel smiled at little as he replied.

"Forgive me Sire. If I may observe, that is a beautiful weapon."

"It is, isn't it." Daniel agreed "The manufacturer sent it along just the other day as a gift."

Daniel surprised the officer by handing him the weapon, the palace security staff took a dim view of armed visitors, even naval officers. The captain gingerly held the weapon with his fingertips, careful to keep the muzzle well away from the Emperor. The intricately engraved and jewel encrusted weapon was in fact unloaded at the moment, it was the same model now worn by all naval fighter pilots save that it was worth a large fortune.

"I believe We shall wear it tomorrow, I..We had use for a pistol the last time We were face to face with a Snake."

"Indeed, Sire. I don't blame you in the least, although I believe our visitors will be well searched and very well guarded."

"They will be. We may shoot the ugly bastards just for the target practice."

The officer chuckled for a brief moment until he noticed that the Emperor wasn't even smiling. Daniel had

just received some additional briefings that day about the 'pets' that the Snakes had been keeping.

On board HMS Striker, Inbound to Britannia

There had been no hospital vessels near the Snake's home worlds, it was just too risky. Naval warships were being rotated in and out of the area, each carrying as many of the human pets as their limited medical sections could accommodate. Sergeant Boone had established a small connection with the two children he had first picked up on Home Nest. The marine spent as much time with the two bewildered little souls as he could manage, the ships medical officers also encouraged this bonding.

Nothing could separate Jeremy and Alex, things got very loud and exciting if they were made to be more than two arms lengths from one another. Boone sometimes felt close to tears as he sat trying to get his two small charges to talk and make some sense. What had they been through?

"Good morning you two, how was breakfast?" Boone sat at the foot of the bunk that the two children shared, they would not sleep apart.

"Good!" Jeremy answered. "Hadtoastnjam!" The boy had remembered how to smile, so far the girl hadn't.

The rescued children were being very slowly readjusted to food more suited to humans. Their systems weren't ready for a sudden influx of calories and the needed vitamins and minerals they had needed for so long.

"Alex, can you say good morning to me?" Boone asked gently.

"Gmornen." Alex still had a bit of jam on her chin, she held very still while Boone carefully wiped it away for her. She was still having some trouble with anyone but Jeremy touching her.

The two 'pets' were also getting used to the feel of clothing again, small hospital pajamas had been fabricated to fit them. They remembered (mostly) about human bathroom devices, how to use a toilet instead of "theplaceoutsideinthebigyard."

Boone remembered the girl saying something he had never really understood when he first met them on Home Nest.

"Alex, can you tell me your name, your full name. Can you tell me the name that your mother and father gave you?"

The girl thought for a moment, it came rushing out of her again as if from nowhere.

"AlexandraGraysonoutofGryphon. I'mAlex!"

It was so fast, both children spoke in a supersonic blur. Boone patiently asked the girl to say it as slowly as she could.

"Alex-and-dra Gray..son out...out of..Gry...phon. I'm Alex!"

Something finally clicked into place in Boone's brain.

"Grayson. Gryphon." It wasn't possible.

Was it?

"Alex, do you know what a Free Trader is?" Boone asked.

"Uh huh."

"Can you tell me what they are? Try to talk slow."

"Mommyndaddy are freetraters, metoo! We liveon Gryphon!"

Boone gave each child a gentle pat on each of their heads and told them he would be back in a little while. He bypassed his immediate superiors and went directly to Striker's commanding officer.

Striker's captain, Anson Schiffer, was a bit put off when he was told that one of the marine enlisted men

wanted to talk to him. There were after all proper channels to follow.

"Very well, tell him to come in."

Lieutenant Short nodded and left his captain's day cabin, whatever the marine wanted had better be very, very important.

It was.

Boone came to attention and saluted.

"Permission to speak, sir."

"Granted. This is outside of the lines you know."

"Yes sir, I do know." Boone almost didn't know how to begin, but he did. "Sir, one of the children... A girl I have been helping out with."

"Yes, go on." Schiffer looked up from his paperwork at the nervous marine.

"Sir, I have been able to get her to talk some. She says her name is Alexandra Grayson. Her folks were Free Traders. She says she's out of Gryphon."

Everyone who could read or understand the spoken word knew the background of their new Emperor, including Captain Schiffer.

"Are you serious, sergeant?"

"Yes sir, I don't think she knows how to lie."

The Great Court of The Sun Palace

A good portion of all of The Knights of The Empire and a large number of planetary governors were present along with most of Fleet command. Mankind's absolute ruler sat calmly on the massive gilded throne that dominated the hall, the fingers of his right hand tapping lightly on the glittering pistol strapped to his thigh.

An armed Emperor was a new precedent for a session of The Imperial Court, whispered speculations ceased when the Snake delegation entered under heavy escort.

The Snake that was named Kills With Blades remained unbowed while the rest of the reptilian delegation showed the proper respect to their victorious foe. Kills With Blades had just recently been the Snake's military ruler, their emperor if you will.

No more.

The Emperor finally broke the heavy silence.

"You do not bow before Us."

The newly revised and enhanced translation modules were working as designed.

"I do not bow before filthy animals." The translator could not mask the hiss of contempt in the alien voice. If anything the silence in the room grew deeper as the Emperor quietly stood and drew his weapon.

"Yes you do, this one time."

Daniel put all eight rounds in a small pattern precisely in the middle of the thing's chest.

He had been practicing. A lot.

It was a small revenge for great wrongs, the oozing thing on the marble floor got off easy.

To say that this action by the Emperor caused some considerable stir in the great hall would be correct. The Archbishop of The Reformed Church had fainted dead away. The remaining Snake's stood uncertainly, their neck frills shifting colors in the manner that Naval Intelligence had learned indicated stark terror. The Snake envoys had hoped to negotiate some sort of treaty or agreement that would allow them some measure of autonomy or self rule. There would be no negotiations, the Emperor simply told them the way things would be.

"You are quarantined. You will remain on the worlds that you now hold. You may have any form of government that suits you, We want nothing from you, no contact, no communication. You are denied interstellar travel of any type for the next one-thousand Imperial years. Any violation of this edict will result in all of your worlds being sterilized, you will cease to exist. These proceedings are closed."

Within the space of two years the quarantine would be irrelevant. Snake society would collapse totally into tribalism and endless petty wars. In a way the situation would resemble Earth before the formation of the New Empire.

Aboard HMS Striker

Captain Schiffer, Sergeant Boone and the vessel's chief medical officer were having a quiet conference in the captain's day cabin.

"I would suggest a low dose of Recall for the girl. If that helps to confirm what she's told Boone here then we should do a DNA sequence on her and send it along to Fleet," Lieutenant Commander Lao explained.

"Is that safe for her, sir?" Boone asked, he felt very protective toward his two adopted kids.

"Completely, the dosage that I would give her would be very small, just enough to clear away the dust and cobwebs."

The gentle interrogation took place an hour later, after Jeremy and Alex had finished their lunch. As always the two children sat side by side, the girl didn't even flinch when she was given the tiny injection.

"Alex, can you remember about your family? Can you say their names for us?" Lao began.

"Uh huh."

"Please tell us then."

"MommynDaddy, an BigJohnwho'soldest. MaryanLizbethanDanny. I like Danny, hereadsfunny stories tome."

"Talk slowly. Is his full name Daniel Grayson?"

"Uh huh, that's Danny."

The three men exchanged glances at this.

"Tell us about your home," Lao continued.

"Grifun. It was good, the Good Place!"

"What was Gryphon?"

"Cargship. Good Place!"

"Thank you, Alex. You did really good."

The DNA coding was dispatched to Fleet an hour later but there was no doubt in Boone's mind about just whom the tiny girl was. She was the Emperor's little sister. Sweet Jesus!

The Sun Palace

The meeting with the Snake envoys had left Daniel feeling dirty and stained, Ian joined him for a long swim in the palace's south pool. The cool water and the hard exercise had the desired effect on both of them. After a while it seemed that a great burden on both boys had been removed, there was no more war.

"So now what happens?" Ian asked as they sat resting on the edge of the enormous pool.

"So now nothing," Daniel replied. "The entire Empire needs a rest, so do I. It'll be years before all of the war damage is repaired, people will have to adjust to being at peace. Everyone will want to get back to business as usual."

"Most of the Empire wasn't really touched by the war," Ian said, "remember all of those rich tourists on Polynesia."

Daniel nodded in agreement, for a good part of the Empire the war had been something far removed from reality.

"There's still a lot to be done though, the navy and marines will have to be pared back quite a lot. Fleet thinks that we should maintain a larger reserve force, men and ships that can be quickly activated. The active fleet will be at about prewar numbers but with better ships and weapons. Your shield has changed the strategic thinking a lot. Shit, it won the war!"

Ian said nothing for a moment as they sat in the afternoon sun, he remembered back to the first time that the two of them had met. So much had happened in the last four years. Both of the boy's silent thoughts were interrupted as they sighted the Emperor's Chief of Staff hustling toward them with a message form in his hand.

"Now what?" Daniel groaned.

Cedric Clarke bowed quickly as he arrived, the COS looked like he had seen a ghost (or maybe heard about one).

"Your Majesty, Sir Ian. Something quite unbelievable has occurred. Your Majesty, it concerns a member of your family."

"Mister Clarke, what are you saying. We lost Our family early on in the war, you know that." Daniel had the oddest feeling in the pit of his stomach.

"Sire, this is very hard to say so I will not beat about the bush. One of the children who was being kept by the Snakes has been positively identified as Alexandra Grayson, your youngest sister."

Daniel looked as if he had just been shot in the heart, indeed he had been. Tears quickly filled his eye and overflowed, he could only silently move his lips as if unable to find any words at all. Ian asked the questions that Daniel could not.

"How can this...what happened to her?"

"Sir Ian, it is assuredly His Majesty's sister, the DNA tests leave no room for doubt. She remembers her name and some of her life aboard Gryphon. There is speculation that when the Snakes attacked Gryphon they first took captives before destroying the vessel."

Daniel finally found his voice.

"She was only just four..."

"Could there be others from Gryphon still alive?" Ian asked softly.

"There's no way to know for sure at the present, sir. It seems unlikely."

Daniel stood abruptly and started to towel himself off as he asked the next question, he seemed more in control of himself.

"Where is she now?"

"Aboard HMS Striker bound for Britannia, Sire." Clarke replied.

"Is there any reason they cannot divert to Earth?"

"No Sire, none at all."

"Divert them. Go do it now!"

"At once, Sire." Clarke bowed and then made good speed for the communications center, he ran in fact.

On board HMS Striker

Captain Schiffer had been expecting just such an order as the one he now held in his hand. A call to the watch officer carried out the order.

"Lieutenant Banks, call all hands to station for a course alteration, our new destination is Earth."

"Yes sir, at once. May I inquire as to why, sir?"

"One of our young passengers seems to be His Majesty's sister, you may pass that word to the crew."

"Yes sir. My God!"

A course alteration involved moving into normal space and recomputing the destination. Within an hour HMS Striker was headed for mankind's home planet.

Jeremy and Alex continued a slow and painful reentry into human society, the progress of the other rescued children on board followed a similar path. Some of the children did surprisingly well, others had simply lost all contact with sanity and would need special care the rest of their sad lives.

Sergeant Boone finally persuaded his charges to accompany him on a short tour of part of the warship. Smiling grownups greeted the timid pair along the way, kind words and pats on the head helped to reassure them. The sergeant was worried about what would occur when they arrived on Earth, the Emperor himself would no doubt want to have a long talk with him. Boone was determined to persuade the Emperor to keep the two children together, he thought that separating Jeremy and Alex would shatter both of them.

Coming face to face with the absolute ruler of mankind gave most people butterflies, Sergeant Boone needn't have worried.

The Sun Palace

While Sergeant Boone was having butterflies, Daniel was having a serious case of the blind dithers. As always Ian was at his side to keep him on the ground, at the moment he was sitting on the Emperor's back.

"Get off!"

"Not until you get a grip," Ian replied calmly.

Sir Ian and The Emperor were on the west lawn area, by now the security teams had learned to ignore any physical or verbal exchanges between the two boys. Ian had managed to get the advantage in the impromptu wrestling match, usually Daniel was the faster and stronger of the two but he was very preoccupied as of late.

Daniel sighed and ceased his struggles. "I suppose I have been a bit nuts lately, this waiting is driving me insane."

"It's just another three days, you need to be calmed down some when you meet Alexandra." Ian got off the Emperor's back and stood, Daniel rolled over and sat up.

"I wonder if she'll even know me?"

"Don't be upset if she doesn't, she was just four when they took her. You've changed, Lord knows what she's been through."

Both boys vividly remembered their own time as guests of the Snakes.

"What's the last thing you remember about her?" Ian asked gently.

"My father had picked up a small white kitten for her somewhere, I forget what colony we were at. She really loved that scraggly little hairball, she carried it everywhere. She named it Mister Bonk after some silly character in a story I read to her. The cat was a female."

"You read to her?" Ian asked.

"Yeah. It was sort of an evening ritual, I'd be trying to watch the vid in the common room and she would climb up beside me with one of her dopey story books. I guess I sort of liked it too."

"Get her a kitten then, a white one," Ian suggested.

Daniel nodded in silent agreement. Where to find one at this time of the year? Kittens tended to be a seasonal sort of thing.

Some considerable searching ensued. An animal protection shelter in what was once Nebraska answered an anonymous call inquiring about white female kittens, yes they had one. Can you hold it? Yes.

Alma Winslow was trying to compile the quarterly finance report for the small animal shelter when a voice behind her in the reception area interrupted her efforts.

"Just a minute!" Alma wasn't a very good financial manager, she preferred working with furry and feathered creatures who needed serious help.

The woman finally ceased her fiscal efforts and turned to deal with whoever was interrupting her.

Standing patiently was a young boy with black hair and green eyes in some sort of plain black uniform, behind him was another boy in civilian clothes. Two very large and very armed Imperial Marine Guards stood behind the two boys.

"You said that you had a white kitten?" Daniel asked politely.

Alma managed not to faint.

The purring white fuzzball took an immediate liking to her Emperor.

The shelter received an Imperial size donation.

Port Ayers, Earth

Daniel had been torn between wanting to be immediately with his sister and the needs of the other small refugees from war's cruelties. In the end Daniel waited quietly until all of the other children had been disembarked. He stood at the bottom of the vessel's ramp and barely managed to avoid weeping in public as the small victims of a vast war passed by him. At the invitation of Striker's commanding officer the Emperor climbed the ramp into the warship, Ian was at his side as always. Daniel carried a small white kitten close to his chest to where Sergeant Boone was waiting at the top of the ramp.

"Your Majesty," Boone bowed before his Emperor. Daniel moved close to the man and shook his hand as the marine stood upright.

"Sergeant Boone, We are in your debt for what you have done for Alexandra and Jeremy."

"Your Majesty, they are very special children. I told myself that I would fight tooth and nail to keep them together, I would be so bold as to ask you to not to separate them." Boone had gone over his short statement in his mind many times, he prayed it would have the right impression.

"We have no intention of parting them, ever. Can you take Us now to see my sister?"

"With pleasure, Your Majesty."

Jeremy and Alex were sitting alone and a bit forlorn on their bunk in the medical section when Daniel quietly walked in, Ian waited just outside the small ward. The Emperor immediately knew that the skinny little girl was his sister, there was something about her green eyes and her funny little nose.

Those green eyes fastened immediately on the white kitten that Daniel held. She finally remembered how to smile as she took the small warm animal into her thin arms.

"MisterBonk!"

Daniel somehow stopped himself from picking up his sister and holding her close to him, instead he sat close to Jeremy on the bunk and asked the girl a question.

"Pest, do you remember me?"

The mention of Daniel's nickname for the girl snapped her attention away from the kitten that she cuddled close to her. Alex tilted her head as she looked very carefully at the new person.

"HiDanny." The girl spoke so very quickly, she was used to the almost telepathic link she had with Jeremy.

"Hi Pest, will you and Jeremy come home with me?"

"GoodHome?"

"Yes Alex, a very good home. Can you give your big brother a hug?"

She could and did, an opened arm drew Jeremy into the embrace also. The children felt so thin and small in his arms, Daniel held them for a long while with tears in his eyes. Finally the Emperor composed himself, it was time to go home.

With a child holding each of their hands, Daniel and Ian made their way to where Captain Schiffer and Sergeant Boone were waiting.

"Sergeant Boone, can you come along and stay for a time with Us at the palace?" Daniel asked.

"I would be very honored to, Your Majesty."

Chapter Three

A Good Home

Jeremy and Alex along with Mister Bonk were finally asleep, curled up as usual as close to each another as it is possible to get. Bath time had been somewhat of an ordeal, the large (huge) gilded and bubble filled tub had frightened both kids, they apparently couldn't swim and were afraid of water. In the end a shower had been used, something that Jeremy and Alex were more familiar with, their captors had just hosed them off periodically. It was debatable as to who was the wettest during the shower, the children or their bathers. Ian seemed to have received the worst of it and had to go and put on dry clothes.

Daniel was talking that evening in his study with Doctor Kwan and a consultant from the Royal Society of Physicians, a Doctor Huntz. As always, Ian was there as a needed friend. Sergeant Boone was also present, his knowledge of the children's first days back with humanity was very welcome.

"The children have been deprived of adult human contact during a very crucial period in their development," Doctor Huntz began.

"They have also been lacking many of the nutritional needs that a young person needs, it has slowed their physical development, possible it has damaged their mental development as well," added Doctor Kwan.

"How do We proceed, what's the best way to help them?" Daniel asked.

"They are responding well to their better diet and to the supplements, they are starting to gain weight," began Doctor Huntz, "but myself and my colleagues are concerned about their total dependence on one another. They do everything together, never more than an arm's length from one another. I think we need to work on making them more independent of one another, they can never have a normal life without some measure of independence."

"How do we that?" Daniel knew that the children were like one person with two bodies.

"Play activities are a good place to start," offered Doctor Huntz. "Activities that cause them to be briefly apart, ball games and that sort of thing."

"I'm not sure they know how to play sir," Sergeant Boone said. The marine had grown much more at ease in the presence of the Emperor, in fact he liked the young guy a lot, Sir Ian too.

"So we teach them," Ian concluded.

As usual Ian had the simple solution.

Efforts were underway to try and find any relatives of Jeremy's, so far the search had turned up not a thing. The boy's situation was not unusual among the surviving children, many had lost their entire families and all close relatives in the massive Snake attacks on the outer colonies.

Daniel's official duties were minimized but could not be ignored altogether, a great war had just ended. The list of decrees and decisions to be made seemed endless and Daniel at times didn't feel qualified to make any of them. Make them he did though. In truth something as big and complex as the Empire pretty well ran itself. The Emperor remembered lessons learned while in the navy, delegate tasks, just tell people what was needed and let them work out the details.

Word that the Emperor's sister was among the survivors had swept across the width of the Empire in short order, Daniel had conceded to the news media and allowed a few photographs of Jeremy and Alex to be published. The Murphy family on New Albion had received personal messages from both Daniel and Ian, Ellen would have to do her share of watching over the children when she came to visit (that was only two weeks away). Daniel was reluctant to delegate the care of his sister and Jeremy although inquiries were being made for suitable nannies who had experience with emotionally troubled children.

On the third day after Jeremy and Alex had arrived at the Sun Palace it was time to go outside and play. Both of the children were still terribly shy and timid with strangers, they were most at ease with Daniel, Ian and Sergeant Boone. Their training at the hands of the Snakes caused them to just sit quietly together if no one was interacting with them, you didn't get hurt if you didn't do anything. A small clearing in the enormous west gardens would make a good place to play, a red ball the size of an orange would be the first tool used to start prying apart Jeremy and Alex.

"I throw it to you, you throw it to Jeremy and he throws it to Ian."

Daniel was attempting to convey the concept of senseless fun to the two waifs. "Stand over there, Alex." Daniel pointed to a spot about ten feet away, Jeremy started to go with her.

"Wait here Jeremy, you have to go over there next to where Ian is standing."

The small boy hesitated a moment before finally doing as Daniel had asked, after all he could still see that Lex was still quite close and in plain view. In a few seconds the five people were arranged in a small circle, Sergeant Boone then tossed the red ball to his Emperor.

Daniel caught the ball and gently lofted it over to Alex, naturally she dropped it, no one had ever played ball with her (that she could remember). The girl quickly retrieved the ball and tossed it awkwardly to Jeremy, to everyone's surprise he caught it easily and fired a good toss to Ian. Apparently the boy remembered something of the games he had played before being taken by the Snakes. And so it went. The process of learning to be a human being again might take years, perhaps a lifetime. But the process had begun.

Daniel realized that he had been taking Sergeant Boone's presence for granted, he was so absorbed with Alex and Jeremy that he hadn't even thought to ask the marine about his family or his plans for the future. An evening around the great fireplace in the Emperor's private rooms was a good place to ask those questions.

"Sergeant Boone, tell Us about yourself."

"Sire?"

"Your family, what are you going to be doing with your life?"

"I've been putting money aside for my own farm on New Albion, my brother has a place there, my wife and son are living with his family right now."

"New Albion!" Ian and Daniel both exclaimed.

"Er.. Yes Sire, near Walsford."

"Ian's from New Albion!" Daniel couldn't believe the coincidence.

"Where, sir?" Boone asked Ian.

"Just outside of Freehold, we grow grain crops. Where's Walsford?"

"It's dead in the middle of Plainsland (a continent on the opposite side of the planet from Freehold)."

"What do they grow, or rather what do you intend to grow?" Daniel asked

"Cattle Sire, the land is perfect for them."

"Cows are way too big, they can step on you," Daniel observed.

"Dan...His Majesty isn't an animal person," Ian explained, "I once got him on a horse, it was a major struggle."

"Not so! I.. We like dogs and cats, small dogs that is." Daniel pretended indignity.

"I have had cows step on my feet, His Majesty is justified in avoiding them." Boone's reply caused Daniel to give Ian an 'I told you so' look.

"Not to pry, sergeant, but will you be able to buy your own place and everything?" Daniel asked.

"I think I'll have to do another tour of duty Sire, I have enough for the land now but I'll need to buy some stock to begin my herd."

Daniel just nodded in understanding.

The sergeant wouldn't have to buy anything at all. The Emperor spoke with his Chief of Staff early the next day. The marine's discharge papers would be on hand that evening, also first class passage to New Albion. There would be an envelope for the sergeant when he left the palace, along with stern instructions not to open it until he was underway for new Albion.

The sergeant was handed his walking papers after the evening meal and before the Jeremy and Alex's bath/monsoon.

"Mister Boone, We believe that you are wearing the Empire's uniform without authorization," Daniel began with mock sternness.

"Sire?" Boone was at a total loss.

"You are now a civilian, this says so." Daniel handed the man his full military discharge document.

"But..."

"No buts. The fine print says you are to receive your full retirement pay," Daniel explained, "there's also this for you."

Boone accepted the first class passage to New Albion as if in a dream. With his full retirement pay and a side job he could now afford a small starter herd of cattle.

"The Rose of Arcadia leaves in four hours from Port Bremen, you had best pack your bags, Mister Boone."

Jeremy and Alex gave the ex-marine hugs and kisses as they had been coached to do, they didn't really understand that they would probably not be seeing him again. Ian gave the man a firm handshake, mankind's Emperor gave Boone a handshake and a very un-regal hug goodbye. By some small feat of magic Boone had found a full wardrobe of properly fitting civilian clothing laid out on his bed, everything had been already packed for him. As he made a last farewell to the Emperor and his adopted kids Daniel handed the man a final envelope.

"Under penalty of mayhem you are forbidden to open this until the Arcadia is underway."

"Sire?"

"Go. And thank you, thank you so very much." Daniel pointed to the waiting Imperial shuttle.

"Thank you, Your Majesty."

Boone did as his Emperor said and was in his oversized cabin in the Arcadia when he sat opening the

envelope. Ten-thousand acres of rich grasslands, one thousand head of pure bred Angus cattle, five-hundred thousand Imperial dollars. Not a bad start on a cow patch.

Ian asked Daniel what had been in the last envelope he had given to Boone.

"Land for a cow farm and some cows, some money."

"That would be for a 'cattle ranch' actually," Ian corrected.

"Whatever. They're still too big and they smell bad."

Aboard the Royal Yacht HMS Persiphone

Ellen Murphy was the only passenger on the small and very fast craft, the two midshipmen on the vessel kept falling all over each other to answer her every question and to fulfill her every desire. Daniel and her brother Ian were only two days away, they would have almost two months to be together. Ellen worried that Alex and Jeremy might not like her. Silly girl.

Jeremy and Alex's progress continued, they were blossoming physically as neglected plants will when finally given water and fertilizer. Mentally, progress was slower. Years of pain and loneliness surrounded by monsters cannot be made right with good food and love alone. It takes time. A small step backwards in their progress occurred the day before Ellen was due to arrive.

The Sun Palace was as much a museum of mankind's history and art as it was a royal residence. The two children's curiosity was beginning to emerge, long suppressed by the threat of punishment and pain if they were deemed to be unruly pets. A delicate and priceless ceramic figurine of an angel had fascinated Alex since she had first arrived at the palace, finally she worked up the nerve to actually touch it.

Daniel was deep into discussions with the administrators of the Imperial Bank, Ian was in his lab still trying to work out the bugs in his palace destroyer. A small crashing sound and then a thin wail from the adjoining rooms brought the Emperor and a good part of the Empire's financial elite running. Mister Bonk tore by in the opposite direction at a speed only panicked kittens can manage.

Alex was curled up on the floor, Jeremy was wrapped around her as if to protect her as best he could. The senior residence maid was torn between the terrified children and the shattered and priceless figurine, she looked at her Emperor with an anguished expression.

"Sire, I.. I'm not sure what happened. They were sitting by the window, I was just tidying up the lunch..."

Daniel put his hand on the woman's arm as he spoke.

"Don't worry, let me talk to them."

Daniel turned to the bank officials and asked them to please excuse themselves for the moment, they bowed and did, he then knelt beside the two trembling children.

"It's all right, no one's going to hurt you."

Jeremy's body tensed with a jerk as Daniel put his hand on the boy's back.

"Krazzschssziztok!" The boy had apologized in the throat wrenching language of the Snakes, terror had taken him back to Home Nest. Daniel felt a renewed rage at his hated enemy, he forced himself to let it pass for now.

"Jeremy, look around you. You are both very safe here, no one will ever hurt you again. There is no punishment here."

After a moment Daniel's gentle words had some effect, Jeremy and then Alex peered up at him. The

children's trembling ceased as Daniel gathered them into his arms, the three of them sat together on the floor in a quiet embrace for a very long time before total calm was restored. The finance officials could come back tomorrow. Mister Bonk poked her nose around the door, it was safe to come back.

The Colony of Temple

Fanatics of all sorts and persuasions have existed in all civilizations, the New Empire was no exception. The planet called Temple had been colonized by a 'religious' sect known as The True Children of God nearly one-hundred years before Daniel assumed the title of Emperor. The planet was well inside the Empire's sphere of influence and rule, something that of late did not sit well with the new Named Priest of Temple.

The True Children of God, referred to by most people as 'The Children', believed in total purity of race (white) and did not tolerate those who believed in anything else. This would not ordinarily be a problem in the live and let live Empire, but of late the sect had been attempting to export their religion and genetic preferences to planets that didn't especially appreciate the effort. Daniel's predecessor had come down hard on the leadership of The Children. A new Imperial governor had been appointed for Temple along with a small garrison of Imperial peace officers. The new governor was finding it very hard to penetrate the closed religious society. There were reports of citizens being kept against their will, little more than serfs for the church hierarchy. So far no hard proof of such things had been established.

In another time and place in history Temple's Named Priest, whose name was in fact Wilfred Beemens, would have been perfectly happy wearing a swastika and stoking ovens with humanity that was deemed to be inferior. At this point in time Beemens was laying plans for overthrowing the Imperial rule of Temple and with some luck and God's will perhaps sowing the seeds to destroy the Empire itself. Beemens was a lunatic, but history is replete with lunatics who have caused the deaths of millions.

"Purifying our Temple will be futile without control of our own planetary shield to hold the Empire at bay, we must construct our own device," Beemens explained quietly.

"The device at the Imperial compound cannot be taken, it has fail-safe self destruct circuits, any attempt to seize it will render it into so much slag." Erik Strome was Beemens' strategist and was as much of a madman as Beemens was. "The technology is closely held by the navy, so far our people have been unable to gain access to it on any planet. The security is just too tight."

"So how closely held is the shield's inventor?" Beemens asked.

"He's at the Emperor's side almost constantly!" Strome exclaimed.

"Almost constantly. Sir Ian can be taken if the right care is used. Anyone can be made to cooperate with the right sort of persuasion."

The Sun Palace

HMS Persiphone was one of the smallest of the Imperial yachts, it settled with room to spare onto the vast forecourt of the royal residence. There were only four people to welcome Ellen Murphy, the only four people who really mattered to her on Earth. Jeremy stood tugging at the collar of his first formal shirt, Alex had on an actual dress with a pattern of soft pastel flowers, she loved it dearly.

Ian and the Emperor stood just behind the two small children as Ellen was escorted down Persiphone's

ramp by the vessel's captain. Daniel managed to resist the urge to say the hell with dignity and to run and meet his first love. Some distance from his Emperor the naval officer stopped and bowed to correctly kiss Ellen's hand goodbye, another bow to the Emperor signaled Ellen to proceed on her own. Ellen was a nervous wreck with all of the attention but she treasured the moment and always would.

"Hi, sis!" Ian spoke first.

"Hi yourself, braincase."

Ellen then correctly bowed toward her Emperor, Daniel felt awkward as always when someone close to him showed the proper respect in public.

"Your Majesty."

"Hello, Ellen. Welcome to the house of confusion," Daniel began, " say hi to Jeremy and Alex."

Daniel gently prodded the two children forward, they had been carefully instructed about whom Ellen was and to not be afraid or shy. They weren't really afraid but they were still rather shy as they tentatively stepped forward. Ellen bent down and gently kissed each of the waifs on their heads, their smiles told everyone that they approved of this new person.

Daniel could hold back no longer and moved to embrace Ian's sister and his true love. Ian managed to withhold his usual rude remarks as Ellen and the Emperor scored high marks in the hug and kiss competition. Alex and Jeremy managed some not very discreet giggles, something they were doing more of as of late.

Ellen's rooms at the palace could have accommodated several medium size families, Daniel had placed her next to Ian's rooms. At the Emperor's direction there would also always be a female Imperial agent nearby, he wanted no whispered words of improper behavior. Ellen was no Rebecca, this arrangement suited her just fine.

The girl nearly passed out when she walked into the room sized closet to see where her maid had hung her modest wardrobe. Ellen's clothes were all there along with several dozen creations from the current elite of women's (and girl's) fashions. All of the designers had hopes that the Emperor's 'girl' would be seen wearing one of their creations.

Dinner was a very quiet and private get together, neither Daniel nor anyone else cared very much for large formal affairs, besides they were all just family. The people serving dinner were minimized, just put it on the table and we'll do fine, and thanks. Using proper utensils was still an ordeal for Jeremy and Alex, Ellen sat beside the younger girl and gave gentle pointers during the meal. Fingers were around before forks and no one chided the younger ones if they became too impatient with learning proper manners.

Alex and Jeremy were immediately taken with Ellen, Daniel and Ian felt a bit miffed at their seeming preference for the girl. At some point in the evening it occurred to Daniel that Ellen would some day make an excellent mother. Would he make a good father?

I think so, in a way he already was.

After dinner everyone retired to the Emperor's quarters, Alex and Jeremy were allowed an hour watching a perfectly sappy vid about a family of field mice, it was good to see them smiling and laughing. Bath time wasn't quite the disaster it usually was, Ellen seemed to have a natural instinct for handling small and soapy humans. The female of the species has it's own special talents, perhaps talents more important than those of the male. Raising children is probably mankind's greatest mission, everything else is just security, support and supply operations.

"See you in the morning, are you up to a picnic?" Daniel asked.

"Sure," Ellen replied, "where are we going?"

"My surprise. Good night."

Yes they kissed, quite well actually. They were getting better at it.

The female agent was a good way down the wide hall and managed to be preoccupied with a hangnail.

North American Continent - The Redwood Coast

There were no trees like this on New Albion, or Home Nest. The massive life forms had survived war and pestilence, stupidity and genius. The giant redwoods measured their time in centuries, the small beings standing at their base would be gone in an instant.

"They're huge!" Ian voiced what everyone felt. This was also Daniel's first visit to the almost sacred groves. They all stood in silence for a time before the lure of the deep green forest drew them further away from the cool foggy beach they had landed on.

The Emperor had flown the shuttle himself, none of his security team could find a good reason for him not to, after all he was still the best damn pilot in the Fleet. Escort craft orbited at a far distance, ground security kept well away and as invisible as they could manage.

"Isawamouse!sawamouse!" Alex and Jeremy still tended to speak in a supersonic blur when excited, the small girl had remembered the vid she had seen the night before.

"That was chipmunk I believe," Ian explained correctly.

"Ithadafuzzytail!" Jeremy quickly added.

"They look like a rat with extra fur to me," Daniel offered.

He had seen the small animals at a distance at the Summer Palace and had studiously avoided them.

"They attack in packs you know," Ellen said in all seriousness.

"Really?" Daniel had bought it all.

"They go straight for your eyes," Ellen continued, "if we see more than one we'd better run for it."

Daniel finally realized he had been had, he really needed to do some much needed studying about his fellow mammals. Cow farms? Growing up in a trading vessel rather insulated one from most of nature.

The hike brought them into warm sunlight filtered through gaps in the green canopy, the stream they followed widened and formed a small pool. A good place for the simple lunch they carried in their knapsacks.

"Playinthewater!" Alex and Jeremy exclaimed in stereo. They were rapidly losing much of their fear of water, they had even been persuaded to wade in the shallow end of one of the pools at the Sun Palace.

"Okay, for a little while, then we have lunch. I'm starved," Daniel agreed.

Both of the small refugees from war were out of their shoes and clothes in a blur, the icy water raised the decibel level considerably. By some unspoken agreement Daniel, Ian and Ellen just elected to sit and watch the two splashing wood elves, it didn't seem quite proper somehow to undress and join them. At this time in human history it wouldn't have been deemed at all improper to be nude in this setting, all the same it didn't seem quite right between Ian, his sister and Daniel.

"I have some grim news, I'm afraid," Daniel said in a serious tone.

"What's wrong?" It was Ellen's turn to swallow the bait.

"It's just awful, two days from now." Daniel looked away as if in terrible anguish.

"What is it?" Ellen was close to panic by now, Ian wasn't looking too calm either.

"The Royal Opera Company's opening night of the season, 'We' are expected to attend, it's traditional." Daniel's grin told them they had been totally had. Pay backs, you know.

Ellen whacked mankind's Emperor on the back of his head, Ian offered his sympathies.

"You poor devil, I hear great boredom can actually drive people insane."

"Then we'll go crazy together, you're both coming with me."

"No way! I have a low pain threshold where caterwauling is involved." Ian didn't like the look in Daniel's eyes at all.

Ellen rather fancied the idea. A night at an actual opera, all of those beautiful clothes in her closet at the palace. What to wear?

"I'm not going!" Ian insisted.

"Yes you are, 'We' have decided. If need be Imperial Marines will transport you."

"Well, shit!" Ian knew he was defeated.

"And mind your tongue, there is a lady present," Daniel rather enjoyed seeing Ian squirm like this, misery loves company.

"That's no lady, that's just my dopey sister!"

Ellen and Daniel looked at each other and nodded their heads. Ian then discovered that the water in the pool was far too cold for swimming.

Alex and Jeremy approved of Ian's sputtering and echoed his funny words.

"Ohshitohshitohshit!!!"

Alex and Jeremy were the subject of a meeting that Daniel, Ellen and Ian all attended the next day. The two children were not unique among the pets that the snakes had held, in a way they were not completely human in the way that their brains functioned.

"They are not retarded, they are both very intelligent," began Doctor Huntz, "it's just that their minds do not totally function in the way that a child their age should, or even any human for that matter."

"What are you saying, doctor?" Daniel asked.

"Sire, in some ways we believe that they may reason and process information somewhat like their captors might do."

"They think like Snakes?" Daniel was clearly irate by now.

"No Sire, forgive me if I gave that impression. They have had to adapt to conditions that no human was designed for, a very young person's brain is a very pliable thing, it can rewire itself as conditions demand."

"Can they...will they ever be normal?"

"We believe that they will adapt once again, they are still very young. But there will always be some element in their makeup that is unique, even somewhat alien in nature." Huntz was not at all comfortable telling his Emperor this, a lot of it was just conjecture and consensus opinion. There was no real precedence in any of the medical literature for this sort of thing.

"Recommendations?" Daniel asked.

"Love them, be patient with them. They may surprise us all with what they become."

"We do love them, doctor. We will be patient."

Chapter Four

Missing

A night at the opera. Ellen loved it, Daniel actually liked it, Ian decided that he might have possibly been wrong about opera in general. Everyone smiled. Jeremy and Alex were wisely spared the whole thing and were sound asleep in their bed.

Aida. The music and lyrics were timeless, the sets and costumes conveyed an age long past. The three young people in the Imperial box were painfully aware that as much attention was being paid to them as to the opera.

"We should have all brought red clown noses and put them on after the opening scene," Ian suggested in a whisper.

The designer of Ellen's gown was made public by one of the Imperial press staffers, it was only fair, the gown was worth a fortune for its materials alone. The fashion world would be in a buzz the next day, it had been a long time since there had been so young and pretty of a female at the side of an Emperor.

Daniel and his guests broke another tradition that evening by going backstage after the performance to congratulate the cast of the opera. Ian managed to get his face on the vids for making the mistake of testing the heft of one of the cast's spears and for looking very silly in the process.

Despite Ellen's visiting and himself trying to oversee Alex and Jeremy's reentry into humanity, there were still many official duties on Daniel's schedule. A successor to the throne should be named and soon. Past events had shown that life can be very tenuous and fleeting, the Empire needed continuity in the event something should happen to the current Emperor. A number of very senior Fleet officers were in the palace briefing room, including the Admiral of The Fleet.

"I... We need some help on this matter," Daniel began, "a list of naval and marine officers who have distinguished themselves during the war will be a good place to start. Heroism shouldn't be the only qualification, We need people who can lead, who know how to get things done, who can organize."

"Did Your Majesty have any thoughts...anyone in mind yet?" Asked the Marine Commandant.

"No, that is the problem. We would name Sir Ian in a flash but despite his great contributions to the war effort he is not a leader. Ian would be the first to tell you that, it does him some great credit that he isn't a mean enough son-of-a-bitch for the job."

This response drew some chuckles and smiles from the officers around the great table. The new Emperor was an easy person to talk to and an easy person to like. The officers also knew that the young Emperor could indeed be a mean son-of-a bitch when the situation called for it.

The meeting ended with a short briefing by a junior (and nervous) intelligence officer concerning the situation on Temple.

"Our efforts to get an agent into the inner leadership of The Children have so far been a total failure. The last man we sent in has simply disappeared. There are also some reports about large purchases of surplus military equipment for rendering into scrap. Temple has no large industrial base, the need for scrap would seem a bit odd."

"Are the purchases legal?" Daniel asked.

"Yes Your Majesty, weapons are stripped from all of the craft and ground equipment before being sold as surplus."

"Could new weapons be reinstalled?"

"Of course, Your Majesty. They would be very difficult to come by and very illegal to purchase but it could be done. There is one other disturbing development."

"We're all ears, Captain," Daniel prompted.

"It seems that The Children have been attempting to recruit recently deactivated pilots and support personnel, they have offered very good pay and a few people are believed to have signed on with them."

"Who would do that?" Daniel asked.

"Single unattached men. Perhaps some with a gripe against the Empire, some with no immediate employment offers. A great many men are being discharged or sent to reserve units, some of them will be at loose ends until they can be assimilated into the civilian job market."

Daniel thought for a moment, what in the hell were those fanatics on Temple up to?

"Do you have any opinions as to The Children's plans for these men?"

"Your Majesty, the current Named Priest is to put it mildly, a complete egomaniac and a total fanatic."

Intelligence believes that some sort of confrontation with the Empire is brewing, they may want to break away entirely, by force if need be."

"But surely they must know that they have no chance of success?"

"They may think otherwise, Your Majesty."

They did indeed think otherwise.

That evening Daniel had a short discussion with Ian about the situation on Temple. Ian's logical brain could often see a simple solution to a thorny problem.

"Intelligence hasn't been able to get someone on the inside, I guess they're pretty hard to fool on Temple," Daniel explained.

"A pilot would be the best bet then?" Ian asked.

"Yes, but someone with a mind for the devious, someone nasty with a lot of brass."

"Where is Ensign Starling these days?" Ian asked with a wicked grin.

Ian was indeed a genius. Tomorrow morning would find Ensign Starling facing his Emperor.

Ensign Heywood Langston Starling was at the moment still making those around him miserable on board HMS Thunder. Starling was by now a competent pilot but he had always seemed to be in just the wrong position when things got too hot in combat. He had a fine sense of self preservation and a general contempt for just about everyone. An early morning summons to the Captain's day cabin could not be good news.

"Now what does that fat fuck want?" Starling wondered after he acknowledged the call.

"This has just arrived by Imperial courier, for your eyes only." Thunder's Captain handed the wax sealed envelope to Starling, the impression in the wax was the Emperor's personal chop, a gryphon. Starling opened the parchment document with some foreboding, was Grayson finally going to ruin him? The message was in the Emperor's own hand.

"Ensign Starling, your presence is requested at your earliest convenience - Grayson."

Now what the hell did that mean? Starling did know that when the Emperor said "at your earliest convenience" it meant get your ass right over here.

"Sir, I am to report to His Majesty at once, may I have the use of one of the shuttles?"

"Yes. May I ask what the Emperor wants of you?"

"My apologies, sir. I'm not at liberty to disclose that."

"I see. You were once shipmates with His Majesty, weren't you?"

"Yes sir, we were good friends actually."

Daniel had chosen his spy extremely well. Starling could lie easier than he could breathe.

Ian had opted out of the meeting with Starling, he was close to a breakthrough on a method to penetrate a defensive shield. Besides, Ian really detested Starling.

A marine escort led the naval ensign from his shuttle and into the vast Imperial palace, Starling was too nervous to very much appreciate his surroundings. At last the final doors were opened, his escort motioned Starling to proceed on his own. The Emperor was standing at the window watching Jeremy and Alex playing with Ellen in the garden below. Daniel braced himself and then turned to greet his least liked person.

"Ensign Starling, we meet again. Be at ease, no ceremony."

Starling bowed properly before replying.

"Thank you, Sire." There was just the slightest bit of contempt in Starling's voice, but then there always

was.

"Come and sit. We have a need for your talents."

"My talents, Sire?"

"Yes, We need a spy with brass balls and an attitude. You fit the bill."

"A spy, Sire?"

"An undercover agent, if you will. This is voluntary, there is some serious risk if you accept. Good things will come your way if you are successful."

The Emperor now had all of Ensign Starling's attention.

"First, let us both acknowledge the obvious. We despise one another on a personal basis. For this matter we need to set that aside as much as possible, can you do that?" Daniel asked.

Starling seemed almost decent in his reply.

"I believe so, Sire. What exactly did you have in mind for me?"

"There is a situation developing on Temple, We believe that there is the possibility of an action by The Children's leadership to sever ties with the Empire, an armed rebellion if you will."

"Those religious assholes!" Starling thought, and then aloud, "And I would be doing...?"

"They are trying to hire on discharged pilots and flight support personnel, you would be such a pilot. We would need you to get as close to the leadership as you can manage, try to find out just what the hell they have planned."

"I have no experience as a spy, Sire."

"None of Our intelligence types are qualified Falcon pilots. You have the wits and nasty disposition for the job. As We said before this is totally voluntary on your part, if you decline this meeting never happened. We will not cause 'difficulties' to come your way if you refuse."

"You mentioned 'good things' coming my way if I were successful, Sire?"

"We did. A promotion to Senior Flight Lieutenant, commendations written in my hand. It will pain Us to do so but We will see to it that you are rewarded."

"And if I fail, Sire?" Starling was starting to try Daniel's patience.

"You will probably be dead. All We need is an honest effort, Ensign Starling."

Starling weighed his options for a very long moment. Postwar promotions were damned hard to come by, commendations from the Emperor himself would assure future promotions. Still, there was the risk.

"If We could have an answer today, Ensign." Daniel was remembering why he hated this ass so much.

"I accept the assignment, Sire. I am at your disposal."

"Good." Daniel rose and came around the ancient desk, Starling was just late enough in rising to badly bend protocol, as usual. Daniel offered an envelope to his snotty acquaintance.

"Take this directly to Admiral Winston at Fleet for a more detailed briefing. Your fake discharge will be forthcoming, We know that you can manage to be suitably outraged and will have colorful things to say about the Empire and Ourselves."

"That I will, Sire."

"Then this meeting is over, Ensign."

Starling snapped to attention and bowed properly before leaving, as he neared the door Daniel called after him.

"Oh Starling!"

"Yes Sire?"

"Good luck."

"Thank you, Sire."

"One more thing, Starling."

"Sire?"

"We'll still be watching you."

Ian was very much in demand to lecture at universities. He was limited about what he could say about his shield theories but there were other areas that interested him. Ian decided to accept an invitation from the Royal College of Applied Science, he would be speaking about faster than light navigation theory.

"It's just once a week for the next month," Ian explained to Daniel, "some of the best people in navigation theories will be there."

Daniel nodded in agreement, after all Ian wasn't tied to the Emperor's coattails, he was free to lead his own life.

"I'll send along some security people with you, just to keep the panting females away."

"There's not really any need for that, physics lectures rarely turn violent," Ian explained.

"Humor me. Your brain has some valuable bits and pieces."

"Yes, Your Clumsiness." Ian knew better than to argue the point.

Ellen wanted very much to go shopping in Paris (it was still called that). Daniel didn't see the need but then he only had the average male's understanding of the female mind, perhaps less.

"Anything you want you can have sent here, you have tons of clothes in that warehouse of a closet,"

Daniel argued, to no avail.

"I wanted to get a few things to take back to New Albion, something nice for mother. A few things for the next school year." Ellen replied with enormous eyes.

"Paris is very expensive," Daniel was fighting a rear guard retreat.

"I have some money I've saved up, you don't have to pay." Ellen was switching from sad eyes to pout mode. Daniel hoisted the white flag.

"All right, but I'm coming along so that you don't get carried away."

"Won't that cause a big fuss?"

"Incognito. We'll go in unmarked fliers, I'll wear a beard and a hat."

Ellen smiled and hugged the grinning Daniel, if (when) they ever married it would probably be Ellen who ruled the Empire.

Security had a fit but followed the Emperor's orders.

Paris

The money that Ellen had managed to save up wouldn't buy socks and underwear in The City of Lights. Daniel gently pressed an Imperial Bank 'card' into her hand as the wide-eyed girl led him through the first apparel establishment.

"I didn't want to take your money," Ellen whispered.

"I could buy the city if I wanted to, just buy anything you want and enjoy yourself." Daniel could indeed buy the city with just petty cash.

"Are you sure?" Ellen had always had to count her every penny.

"Very sure. I need to show you the Empire's jewels sometime, you wouldn't worry so much then."

"I need some under things first, you sit here for a few minutes." Ellen had consigned Daniel to 'shopping with a female hell', he would regret his decision to join this shopping expedition, he already did.

Imperial security was in a similar predicament, it would be a trying day for all. So far the store's staff had no clue about whom their young customers were. The few security people who came inside were in civilian clothes also and tried to look like browsing customers.

There were the usual chairs for bored husbands to use, Daniel picked one at random and commenced his thumb twiddling. A middle-aged couple seemed to be engaging in some subdued bickering as they

entered the expensive and very exclusive establishment, the man seemed to give up in disgust and took a seat near Daniel. Security missed none of this and started to move toward the man, Daniel used one of the subtle hand signals (ear tug) that told his bodyguards everything was fine, stay put. Just the same hands were kept on concealed weapons.

"Women!" Jacob Bascom had been just about shopped to death, this was day two for him.

"Can't live with them....," Daniel began.

"Can't live without them," Bascom replied with a tired smile.

"This is my first shopping expedition with my girl," Daniel said, "this is just the first store and already I think I have made a big mistake."

"Then you're learning an important lesson early in life son, from now on just give her all of your money and run for your life."

"Yet here you are, sir?" Daniel replied.

"I'm a very slow learner. My name's Jacob Bascom, and who might you be young sir?"

"Daniel. Are you visiting Earth, sir?"

"I guess it shows, doesn't it. We're from Heartland, I've been promising the missus a trip to Paris for twenty years. Do people ever tell you that you're a dead ringer for the Emperor?"

"I get that a lot, some people even bow. Are you a businessman, sir?"

"Yeah, metal recycling and military surplus sales."

Serendipity.

"I know some people who do that. I guess with the war being over you have a lot of business?"

"Too much. I just closed a big sale and decided to spend some of the profits on this trip."

"What sort of sale, sir?"

"Decommissioned naval fighters and assorted spares. Some small shuttle craft."

"Who would want used fighters?" Daniel smelled a gold mine of information here.

"Those loonies on Temple, they said they were starting up a small light industrial operation. Converting fighters into fast civilian craft."

Daniel's probing conversation was interrupted by Ellen's need for advice.

"What do you think, the red or the blue sweater with this skirt?" Ellen was deep into a shopping trance by now.

"I like the blue." Daniel replied.

"But the red has such a nice pattern, are you sure?"

Five minutes later Ellen had finally vanished back into the changing area. Jacob Bascom had some more advice for Daniel.

"Never actually say you like something, it always turns into an argument."

"I can see. What do you say?"

"Tell her that they both look really nice, she won't listen to your opinion anyway."

"Thanks, I'll remember that. Those fighters you were talking about, what happens to the weapons and stuff like that?"

"Oh, the military pulls out all of that crap before I ever see it. You seem very interested in the scrap business for a young kid?"

Daniel only nodded and casually scratched his head, another signal that brought two agents before them in an instant.

"Your Majesty?" Agent Boca bowed quickly, one hand ready to pull out his weapon.

Jacob Bascom almost had a coronary.

"You are... Your Maj..." Bascom managed to stand and bow awkwardly, trying to imagine how he had managed to be so damned stupid.

"Our apology's sir, please sit back down. We may have need of your assistance on a matter of some importance. Will you be able to have dinner with Ourselves and some other people this evening?"

"I... Of course, Your Majesty. But what can I...?"

"You have some knowledge about Temple, you may be able to do a service for the Empire."

Bascom's better half took this moment to reappear wanting the usual unheeded opinion about the frock she had on. Daniel politely stood as she modeled for her dumb struck husband, she seemed oblivious about the boy and the two muscular agents.

"It looks really nice, Ma'am." Daniel offered.

"Thank you dear. Jacob, what do you think?"

"I agree with His Majesty."

It took a moment before Eleanor Bascom realized what her husband had said and who was standing beside him, then of course she fainted.

There was some considerable excitement for a few moments, the security team's medical specialist quickly revived Bascom's supine wife. Ellen reappeared in yet another skirt and sweater combination. The owner of the establishment and all of the clerks seemed to be bumping into one another, not knowing which way to jump. So much for incognito.

Order eventually prevailed. The Bascom's were dispatched in a cab to their hotel, they would be picked up at five for the shuttle flight to the Sun Palace. Daniel endured two more clothing stores and one shoe boutique before finally pulling rank.

"Enough! We'll need a cargo shuttle as it is!"

"I still need some things for the winter!" Ellen put on her best sad puppy expression.

"Paris will still be here tomorrow if they can restock it in time! My war wounds are acting up, I could collapse at any moment now."

"You poor sweetie," Ellen kissed him gently on his cheek, "let's get you back for a nice nappy-poo."

"Thank you, dear."

Ellen would do some considerable more shopping in the following days, Imperial agents would earn their pay. In truth her purchases were fairly modest considering the unlimited funds she had access to. Daniel would be occupied with other matters during her next shopping trips, any matters he could find.

It was five on the dot as Jacob and Eleanor Bascom stood at the entrance to their hotel. A shiny black shuttle with the Imperial crest on it's side was waiting for them and was attracting a lot of attention.

"Jacob Morris Bascom, just what have you got us into this time?"

"I don't know dear, but I think we'd best not be late and keep our host waiting."

"My God, what will people say when I tell them I had dinner with the Emperor?" The woman was in need of some light sedation or a stiff drink.

"They won't believe you. Come on, there's a crowd gathering."

A first visit to the Imperial Sun Palace can be simply overwhelming. Daniel played the good host by meeting the Bascom's as they disembarked the shuttle. The man and woman managed a proper bow as Daniel bid them welcome.

"Welcome to Our house. Please relax and be at ease, no ceremony."

Relaxing was not too likely, still the pair managed outward calm.

"We are so very honored to be here, Your Majesty...Sire," Jacob Bascom replied.

"You may have to pay for your supper, We have a favor to ask of you later."

"I am at your service, Sire."

"Let's go meet the rest of the gang, Jeremy and Alex may be a little shy at first."

It seemed to the Bascom's like they were just talking with a young family friend rather than the Emperor of The New Empire.

Alex and Jeremy approved of the new people, so did Ian and Ellen. After the simple but elegantly

presented meal it was time to get down to the object of the evening.

"Ma'am, may We be so rude as to make off with your husband for a while?"

"If I get him back later on, Sire."

"That you will, ma'am. Thank you."

Jacob followed the Emperor for a short distance into an adjoining sitting room, the men in civilian clothing who rose to meet and bow before them could be nothing but military intelligence types.

"Let's all sit and be at ease," Daniel began, "everyone speak their minds, no ceremony."

For a long moment after everyone sat, Bascom felt like a known criminal, everyone was staring at him. Daniel broke the silence.

"We need you to sell some illegal weapons, Mister Bascom."

A careful background check had been done on Bascom in record time, he was an honest businessman who played by the few rules that there were.

"Sire?"

"Before we proceed any further, We must ask your absolute discretion about what is discussed here."

"Of course, Sire. I must say this is all just a bit intimidating."

"We apologize for that. Can you establish contact with your customers on Temple and delicately offer them some items for sale that are, shall we say, not on your listed inventory?"

Bascom nodded in agreement before asking the obvious.

"What sort of items, Sire?"

"Falcon rail cannons and particle beam guns."

"Those are very forbidden items, Sire."

"Charge them a very high price, you can keep everything from the sale."

"How will I come into these 'items', Sire?"

"There will be a small news release in a few days about a large munitions theft on Britannia, when you have returned to Heartland there will be further details for you alone, then you make your offer."

"I see. And if my customers aren't interested, Sire?"

"We think they will be, if not you will have Our thanks for your help in this."

"My family....?"

"Will be afforded the protection of the Empire until this matter is resolved, so will you."

"Then I am your willing servant, Sire."

Temple

"Sir Ian will be giving a series of lectures at the Royal College of Applied Science over the next month. His security will very likely be minimal, we can take him and have him off-planet in the space of an hour."

"Without being traced?" Asked The Named Priest.

"No departure plans will be filed for our vessel, once in non-space there is no tracing any vessel."

"That snot nosed little shit of an Emperor will wet his pants when his playmate disappears. This planet will be shield protected and free of Imperial contamination by the time they put two and two together." The Named Priest was nothing if not confident.

Britannia

There are small unused nooks and crannies in just about every device of any size. All of the weapons that were going to be 'stolen' from the Imperial munitions and supply base would have miniature transponders

installed. When the transponders received the correct coded signal they would reply with the electronic equivalent of "here I am!"

The Sun Palace

Jeremy was finally talked into a haircut, his dark brown hair was as long as Alex's. It was a big moment for the boy, one that he passed with a minimum of fuss.

"Feelscold!"

"Say it slowly, Jeremy," Daniel prompted.

"It feels cold."

"Of course it does, but now you look like a proper boy should."

"DoIlook... Do I really look all right now?"

"You have always looked all right Jeremy, now you look even better."

Daniel and Ellen were rewarded with one of the boy's mile-wide smiles. Alex gently touched her small counterpart's head and added her comment.

"It looks good! Can I have my hair cut off too?"

Ellen fielded that one.

"It's proper for a girl to have longer hair, Alex. We can shorten yours a little if you want, but I think it's very pretty the way it is now."

The small girl's long black hair was indeed beautiful, a proper diet and added supplements had brought out its luster and fullness.

"Don'tcut...Don't cut it off, please!" Jeremy pleaded.

That settled the matter.

An unsettling message was delivered to the Emperor that afternoon, Jeremy's surviving relatives had been located.

"His uncle?" Daniel exclaimed.

"Yes Sire, submitted DNA samples indicate a definite family link. It seems that Jeremy's family emigrated from Skye when he was about one year old, they settled on Aspen where his father worked for a mining concern." The Emperor's Chief of Staff hated these sorts of meetings.

"What are...what does his uncle wish to do?"

"He is claiming Jeremy as family, Sire."

"He can't have him." Daniel's tone and cold stare told the COS that this was not a point to object to.

"Sire, it seems that Jeremy's Uncle and his wife are at this moment enroute to Earth. They have obtained a legal writ from the Imperial Court on Skye naming them guardians of the boy. Will you wish to meet with them when they arrive?"

"We do not wish to meet with them, but We will. Alex and Jeremy simply cannot be parted, it would destroy both of them."

"There is some considerable legal precedence for his uncle's claim, Sire."

"We are the final court. Jeremy stays here."

"Yes Sire, if I may be so bold I agree with you completely."

"You may be so bold, and thank you."

"Well sure!" Ian muttered to himself. There was a fairly simple way to match polarity frequencies with two defensive shields. A vessel could merge fields and move inside the larger planetary shield. Ian scribbled some quick notes on a pad and dictated an idea for the detector circuits before leaving for his first lecture.

The lecture hall was packed. Ian felt a few (a lot) of butterflies as he peered out through a partially

opened door at the assembly of the few people on the planet who could begin to understand what the lecture was about. Not all of the people in the hall were concerned with navigation theories, three of them were taking notes on Ian's movements and his security team's procedures. Today's lecture would be without incident, also the next one. In time all of the Named Priest's plans would be finalized and Ian would simply disappear.

Malcolm Walker and his wife Megan were not by any means bad people for wanting Jeremy. Malcolm's brother and all of his family, save for Jeremy, were killed when the Snakes attacked and seized Aspen. The boy was all that they had left of a big part of their extended family. The fact that they had used a good part of their savings to make the trip to Earth showed serious intentions, to face the Emperor himself with a court order demanding Jeremy back took some considerable grit. The Emperor also had some considerable grit and the Emperor was the law.

"What are they like?" Daniel asked his COS. The Walker's were waiting in the outer receiving rooms. "They seem quite ordinary people, Sire. They are of course nervous about this meeting, they seem very determined."
"Shit."
"Indeed, Sire."

They were indeed ordinary people in an extraordinary situation. Malcolm and Megan Walker bowed in the correct manner when the Emperor walked into the room. Daniel was determined to be civil with them, he was also determined not to part Alex and Jeremy.

"Welcome, be at ease, no ceremony." Daniel moved to politely shake first the man's hand and then his wife's. In most meetings with the Emperor a handshake was simply not expected or even correct protocol.

"Thank you for seeing us, Your Majesty." The man was very tense but managed to say the words he had rehearsed in his mind.

"Come and sit, both of you. This is a very difficult situation, let's all just talk to one another as people with a mutual interest."

Malcolm Walker began the conversation.

"Jeremy is all that we have left of my brother's family, Sire."

"He is also all that Alexandra had for four years," Daniel replied, "they only had each other to maintain their sanity and humanity."

"Sire, we do not wish to cause harm to either of the children, but Jeremy is our flesh and blood, our kin!"

"He is that. Jeremy is also so very much more to Alex than just kin, the two of them are forever linked in a manner that runs deeper than family. We will never see them parted from one another, at least not until they can adapt once more to life as human beings."

"We have a legal order Sire, from the Imperial Court on Skye naming us as his legal guardian!" Walker said forcefully

"We are the final court in the Empire," Daniel explained gently, "the boy stays with Alex. Before you think too badly of Us you should see Alex and Jeremy together, you need to see the way that they need one another."

"But Sire, he is my brother's child!" Walker was red in the face and nearly shouting at the Emperor. At this outburst four armed palace guards moved silently into the room and stood unseen behind the Walker's. Daniel tugged casually on his ear to signal the men to hold their place.

"Tread lightly, sir. There are limits to Our patience in this matter." Daniel gestured toward the guards behind the Walker's. Malcolm Walker turned as he stood up, four beam pistols were pointed at his chest.

"Malcolm! Control yourself, please!" Megan Walker stood beside her by now very frightened husband,

she then spoke to the Emperor. "Your Majesty, please forgive my husband. It has been a very trying last few weeks for us both."

"We understand that. Let's go see Alex and Jeremy now. I must caution you both to keep your emotions under control, the security people here take their jobs very serious."

"I apologize, Your Majesty. I was out of line speaking to you like that." Malcolm Walker seemed to have regained his self control.

Daniel just nodded and let it pass. This was a perfectly awful mess.

It only took a few minutes for the Walker's to see what Daniel had explained to them about Alex and Jeremy. Both of the children could sense some peril to them when they were gently introduced to Jeremy's uncle. Alex hung back a little just behind Jeremy's back, neither child would so much as shake hands with the two strangers.

Ellen had politely greeted the Walker's, she could sense the tension between Daniel and the two adults. "They're not usually so timid," Ellen explained, "they seem a bit frightened about something. We haven't told them anything about your visit."

Megan Walker could see why the children were behaving in such a way.

"I believe they know why we came here and it frightens them. I think we should go now, coming here was a mistake."

The woman's husband seemed defeated by now and nodded his agreement.

"Your Majesty, if you can forgive my words..." Walker began.

"Nothing to forgive, sir. Perhaps We should ask for some forgiveness also, Our guest's usually don't have weapons pointed at them while in the sitting room."

"That was my big mouth, Sire. May we part on a friendly basis?"

"Of course, you may come for a visit whenever you wish, the Empire will provide transportation for you. We will send regular letters and vids of your nephew's progress."

They did part on a friendly if somewhat strained basis. This had been a very bad day all around. Worse days were ahead.

Port Bremen

Ensign Heywood Starling (Ret.) had been making himself obnoxious in every bar around Earth's largest space port, it was a role that he was born to play, he just had to be himself.

"A Falcon pilot with eight years in the fucking navy and they put me on the beach! Screw 'em and screw that little shit of an Emperor!"

"Watch your mouth, asshole!" A very large ex-navy rating was tending the bar and very much liked the new Emperor.

Starling sized up the hulk standing behind the bar and decided to throttle back some on the insults to the Empire. He was supposed to hook up with people from Temple, not get himself beaten to a bloody pulp.

Starling felt a hand on his shoulder and a kind word in his ear.

"Let me buy you a glass, let's go sit at a table away from this ape."

"Who the fuck are you?" The Starling charm was still full on.

"Someone who may have employment for you."

"What kind of employment? I'm not going to push cargo skids around for anyone!"

"How about pushing a Falcon around?"

Starling had finally found his man.

A day at the beach was a very good day, a holiday from Imperial responsibilities, a day for everyone to have some mindless fun. The warm clear waters of the Mediterranean had at first intimidated Alex and Jeremy, the water went all the way to the horizon and was very deep. It was time for a first swimming lesson in the buoyant salt water. Daniel remembered his first swimming 'lesson' and proceeded gently with his two small charges.

"It'sso big!" Alex exclaimed.

"Slowly," Daniel corrected.

"It's so big."

"Yes, but it's just water. It will taste salty and you can float in it really easy. We'll all be right beside both of you."

"kay."

Ian and Ellen were both along on this picnic by the sea, it was Ellen's first real experience at the seashore also. Clothing had been shed without much care, after all this was just the beach. Still, Daniel could not help his eyes from lingering on the sight of all of Ellen, the girl was indeed starting to blossom into a very pretty young woman. It took some effort to concentrate on the matters at hand, a poke in the ribs by Ian brought him out of his daydream. Time for lesson number one.

"Wade out a little way with me, get used to the water," Daniel urged.

Both Jeremy and Alex trusted Daniel explicitly by now and each tightly held his hand as he led them into the water up to their waists.

"Now lean over and put your face in the water for a bit, blow some bubbles out of your noses."

Both nervous children did as directed, much sputtering and squealing resulted. Jeremy surprised everyone when he suddenly pushed forward in the water and began a well-executed dog-paddle, he could swim after a fashion. It was the sort of lesson one never forgot no matter how early in life it had been learned. Aspen had oceans and that memory had finally returned.

Alex was determined to do as her counterpart did, in a few minutes she was able to imitate Jeremy with more enthusiasm than skill. The short lesson concluded with the two children being persuaded to float calmly on their backs with just their faces clear of the warm water, small kicks and arm motions maintained their positions.

Sand castles and lunch were the next order of business, that and some talk of what the future held. Ellen sat between her brother and Daniel on the beach spread. Jeremy and Alex were busy digging a very deep hole in the sand for no apparent reason. Mister Bonk was along for the outing and seemed at a loss to be in the midst of the biggest litter box in the world.

"I can't believe I have to leave in just one more week, it seems like I just got here," Ellen said.

"I've made arrangements for a Titan Class naval cargo transport to haul your shopping home," Daniel replied with a perfectly straight face.

Whack!

"The new barn should hold most of it," Ian added.

Whack!

Both boys rubbed the back of their heads and edged away from Ellen a little.

"When will you be coming for a visit, providing I let you?" Ellen asked Daniel.

"As soon as my skull fracture heals and I can see things clearly again."

"Serves you right, after all you did give me that bank card," Ellen sniffed.

"True. Another of life's lessons learned."

Whack!

"Damn, quit that!"

"Then be nice," Ellen replied with a grin.

Daniel caught Ian's eye and nodded toward the ocean. Ellen was repaid with being tossed into the Mediterranean, twice.

Lunch did not go to waste, a basket packed with care by the chefs in the palace kitchen was wondrous thing to behold. A serious nap was in order after the meal, Mister Bonk was the first to doze off under the canvas beach shade. Eventually everyone roused themselves after a lot of pulling and tugging by Jeremy and Alex, they wanted more swimming lessons.

At days end and as the sun was getting close to the horizon it was finally time to pull their clothes back on and return to the palace. They decided to walk the mile up through the gardens and woods to the gleaming white palace. The staff would collect their picnic things and tidy up the beach.

"I'm going with Ian tomorrow for his last lecture," Ellen began as they walked along, "mother asked me in her last message to get some vid of him trying to make some sense."

"That'll be a first," Daniel replied.

Whack! Ian had once more committed the capital offense of striking the Emperor.

"Damn! Now he's doing it!"

"The Irish have a violent history," Ian explained.

"You're telling me!"

The security team who had been keeping a distant watch over the group had to smile at their Emperor's discomfort. They had all grown very fond of Daniel and his family, perhaps they had also grown just a bit complacent about those who might do them harm.

"Break a leg!" Ellen said as Ian started to walk out onto the lecture stage.

"Huh?"

"I read it somewhere, some sort of ancient good luck wish," Ellen explained.

"Oh. Well, thanks. Keep your thumb off the lens."

Ian was referring to the tiny vid recorder that Ellen was using, he was even more nervous this time knowing that his family would eventually be watching this lecture.

The lecture went well as usual, Ian simply had the best grasp of the mind bending theories of anyone alive. One of the students in the audience asked a question that they had all been advised not to ask.

"Sir Ian, could you speak to us in general terms about your shield theory?"

"No."

End of lecture.

"You cut that last twit off rather short," Ellen observed after the lecture.

"He knew better than to ask."

"Is it that secret?"

"Yes it is. If I told you about it I would have to strangle you."

"We're twins, how come none of what you had to talk about this evening made any sense to me?"

"We fought over the brains while we were in the womb, I won."

Whack!

There was a short walk across the darkened campus to the shuttle, a poorly lit archway proved that security around the Emperor's family had grown too lax. Sleep darts identical to those that had once made Daniel a slave dropped the two Imperial security agents in their tracks, two more snapping sounds collapsed Ellen and Ian in a heap beside their guards. A silently hovering civilian shuttle swiftly landed on

the damp lawn, four figures quickly ran down the unlit boarding ramp.

"What about the girl?"

"Bring her, she's the Emperor's little slut and Murphy's sister. She'll provide some extra leverage."

Chapter Five

Rage

"I am not going in there alone! You can face the music right beside me!" The Emperor's Chief of Staff had been down this road before with the previous Emperor when Daniel had been taken by slavers. This new Emperor had been known to simply shoot people, and things. The news of Ellen and Ian's abduction would be the hardest message that the thin, gray haired civilian staffer had ever had to deliver. The watch commander of palace security could also answer some of the hard questions, it was after all his people who had misplaced two of the Emperor's adopted family.

Daniel had given in to Jeremy and Alex's pleas to stay up until "EllenandIan" returned from the evening lecture. One of the as usual silly vids featuring small furry animals had soon put the Emperor to sleep, by the time it ended his two charges were curled up against him. Jeremy tended to snore a little bit.

"Your Majesty," whispered the COS as he radically departed with protocol and actually tugged on the Emperor's sleeve to wake him.

"What?" Daniel jerked a little as he awoke.

"Sire, a dreadful thing has happened, may we speak with you away from the children?"

Daniel was fully awake with those words and nodded silently as he carefully disengaged himself from the still sleeping children.

"In there," Daniel motioned the two men toward the royal study.

"Sire, this is so very hard. Sir Ian and Miss Murphy have apparently been abducted as they left the lecture this evening."

"What are you saying?" Daniel distrusted what his ears had just told him.

"It happened on the campus while enroute to their shuttle, Sire. The two security people are still unconscious from the sleep darts, there are marks on the lawn area that indicate another shuttle craft of some sort landed there."

"Shut down all of the space ports and search them, order all craft in orbit to hold their positions!" Daniel's thinking was automatic, the enormity of what had just happened hadn't really registered with him yet.

"That has already been done, Sire." Answered Colonel Murchison, the security watch officer.

Daniel just sat heavily on the ancient leather couch, his mind trying to take in this latest insult to his sanity.

"Who...who would do this?"

"We have no information as of yet, Sire. We do know that the Snakes are not responsible, they are in total disarray and do not have any human allies to aide them in this." Colonel Murchison knew that the hard questions were still to come.

Daniel's quite tone was a clear signal that there would be an accounting for this nightmare.

"I want the head of the Royal Security Services in front of me in one hour. I want those two guards in front of me at the same time and they had better be awake. Put everyone who's on the Imperial payroll on alert. I want every citizen who can dress and feed themselves searching for Ellen and Ian."

Jeremy and Alex were awake and whispering to each other.

"Something bad's happened to Ian and Ellen," Alex said.

"Tell Daniel," Jeremy replied.

"Don't know. Maybe we should just begood and obey."

"Let's wait then."

"kay."

On board CV Sunflower

The small cargo vessel had violated several traffic control procedures, its lack of any communications for over three hours had coded it as a possible distressed craft. An orbital patrol shuttle was in the process of closing with Sunflower when the cargo vessel blinked into non-space. The vessel had filed false voyage papers, false everything.

Besides the two sleeping Murphy twins there were four others who were quite willing to be passengers and were now also enroute to Temple. Three Falcon maintenance ratings, recently discharged from the navy, and one very disgruntled Falcon pilot.

If you have been paying any attention at all you know who that pilot was.

The Sun Palace

Marine Brigadier Manfred Hartz was perspiring as he entered the Emperor's private rooms. The two security agents who accompanied the general were awake only due to the high dosage of counteracting stimulants in their bloodstreams. Daniel was sitting quietly behind the massive desk in the dimly lit study, a by now very famous pistol lay glittering on the desktop. For some reason it occurred to the brigadier that the Emperor seemed smaller than the last time he had seen him. The three men bowed as one as they halted some distance from the desk, the two agents seemed a bit unsteady as they stood.

"Your Majesty, I..."

Daniel held up his hand to signal Hartz to remain silent, he then pointed a finger at the two wobbly agents. "Can you two offer Us a reason why We shouldn't simply shoot the both of you?" Daniel had briefly toyed with the idea but knew that he simply couldn't do it, these were decent men, they weren't slave masters or alien monsters. The presence of the revolver on the desk did nothing to help the spirits of the two agents.

"No, Your Majesty," answered Agent Bowers, "we let down our guard, we were sloppy...no excuse."

"And you, General Hartz, what do you have to offer now that two of the people We hold closest to Our heart have been taken as easily as plucking a flower from the garden?"

"There is a full investigation underway, Your Majesty. We feel that there is a fair chance..."

Daniel fairly screamed as he stood abruptly.

"A fair chance?"

"Your Majesty, I..."

"You are all three dismissed with dishonor from service to the Empire," Daniel's voice was under tight

control now, "get out of Our sight and be thankful you still have your heads."

Daniel sat for a long while in the silence of the room after the three disgraced men had left. What in the world was he going to tell Ellen and Ian's parents? What was he going to tell Jeremy and Alexandra who both loved Ian and Ellen so much? No one loved them more than himself, what would he do without them?

It was a very lonely night, dark and stormy even.

CV Sunflower

Starling was silently cursing that little Imperial Asshole Grayson, this pig of a vessel and his own stupidity for ever accepting this asinine assignment. The captain of Sunflower was a total religious nut, Starling's tiny cabin was indeed a rat hole, even the food tasted like war surplus. The only thing that provided any light in Starling's appraisal of his situation was the promise of "good things" coming his way if he ever pulled off this tiresome stunt.

Starling didn't know anything about the two young people in the locked equipment locker in the aft cargo hold.

"Ian! Wake up!" Ellen was still dizzy and a little nauseous from the effects of the sleep dart. Her pummeling of her brother finally had the desired effect.

"Unnh...what's going..?"

"Will you wake up? Shit!" Ellen's proper language was rapidly eroding.

After some time Ian at last managed to sit up and take some stock of his dark and dingy surroundings.

"What happened?" Not Ian's most intelligent of questions, but at least to the point.

"I think we've been kidnaped or something. I remember seeing the security guys falling down, then something stung my stomach."

"Me too," Ian agreed, "who would want to grab us?"

"Probably they wanted you, ninny. You're the one with all of the secrets stuffed between your ears."

"And you're the Emperor's girl. It's a toss up."

The Sun Palace

The entire Empire was by now in an uproar. Daniel was already by far the most popular and beloved of Emperor's in the last four hundred years. Ian was regarded as nothing less than the person who had delivered mankind's victory against it's hated foe. Ellen was the delightful young girl who had captured the Emperor's heart. In a way these were the Empire's children and you don't do harm to people's children without incurring a terrible wrath.

Ian and Ellen's parents had wanted to come immediately to Earth to be with Daniel, to be somehow nearer to their missing children. At Daniel's insistence the Murphy's instead found their farm and themselves guarded by enough Imperial Marines to hold half the planet. One of the seasonal employee's of the farm was returning from town late at night just after the marines had taken up their positions and was nearly blown out of the sky. He quit the next day.

Just before boarding the Sunflower, Starling had managed a quick message of his success to his controlling agent. For the time being the events on Temple were put on the back burner by the intelligence community, in due time they would again be on the front burner.

Two days after Ian and Ellen went missing there were a million false sightings and dead end clues to sift through, and nothing else. The Royal Physician had to almost call in the marine guards to get Daniel to agree to a sedative and sleep inducer.

"I'm all right!" Daniel snapped at the doctor.

"No Sire, you are not! You are not even close to all right! You cannot help Sir Ian and Miss Murphy in the condition you are in. You need a good rest, I am fully prepared to tackle you and inject this into your royal backside if necessary!"

Daniel sagged a little and glared at his doctor, he was indeed so very tired.

"Dangerous words, doctor."

"Yes Sire, they are indeed!"

"Very well, you win. See to it that Jeremy and Alex are...."

"They will be very well looked after, you know that Sire."

Daniel relented and did as he was told, he didn't even remember undressing and getting into bed.

CV Sunflower

"This is disgusting!" Ellen's opinion of the stockpiled food was shared by Ian.

"Eat it. Emergency rations are designed for their nutritional content and fiber bulk, flavor is not a primary consideration," Ian explained.

"I do wish you could for just once be a little less rational and logical!" Ellen's patience was wearing a bit thin after three days cooped up with her brother in the equipment locker. The girl desperately wanted a bath (and needed one), the portable toilet in the locker was starting to really smell (so was Ian). They had no privacy save for what they could afford one another when using the toilet, they were brother and sister but after all!

"Why are they keeping us in this awful place, surely there's a cabin or something better on this vessel?" Ellen had given up pounding on the door and yelling.

"I suspect they don't want everyone on this tub to know that we're on board," Ian replied.

"How do they even know we're still alive in here?"

"It stands to reason that there's an observation probe in here somewhere, they can be very, very small."

"What? Do you mean they've been watching us all of this time?" Ellen wasn't quite screaming this last question.

"Very probably."

Ellen's crude remarks at this revelation surprised even Ian.

Starling had gained some measure of trust with the vessel's captain, he had even endured one of the man's tedious sermons to the crew after the last evening meal. Boredom had lead Starling to occasionally wander about the vessel, the aft cargo hold was sealed and locked.

What did they have back there?

The Sun Palace

Daniel was obsessed with finding Ian and Ellen, something his COS delicately pointed out.

"Sire, everything that can be done is being done. The entire Empire is on alert and searching for Miss Ellen and Sir Ian. There are still other more routine matters for you to attend to, if I may say so."

"I...We feel so damned helpless!" Daniel said in disgust.

"Indeed Sire, everyone does. May we devote some time to other matters for a while? It will make the

waiting go faster and will get some useful work done at the same time."

Daniel nodded silently, perhaps it would be better than just running about in circles.

"There is the matter of naming a successor Sire, have you finished reviewing the list submitted by Fleet?"

"Yes. Everyone on the list seems a lot more qualified than Ourselves. We would like to meet with one of them, the marine lieutenant who took over the ground assault to retake Port Hammond."

"Very well Sire, do you wish him informed about the reason for the interview?"

"No. There's no sense in making the poor guy a nervous wreck."

"Yes Sire. There is also the matter of the discharged veteran's petition for hiring preferences."

And so it went, keeping busy would mean staying sane.

CV Sunflower

"We're grounding!" Ian knew what the low rumble and gravity shift meant.

"But where?" Ellen asked.

"It's only been five days, it has to be somewhere well inside the Empire. This tub is designed for hauling cargo, not speed."

"Who would do this? Why?" Ellen's questions went unanswered by her brother, it was something they had speculated about endlessly during the last five days.

Starling was glad to be anywhere, the last few days had been endless tedium broken only by endless sermons. He would have to somehow get a message to the Imperial Governor, not that he had a lot to report. Starling was beginning to wonder if this was just some sort of diabolical joke being played on him by Grayson.

When the door to the equipment locker finally opened both Ian and Ellen blinked at the bright light. The fresh air was wonderful after the stench of the poorly ventilated enclosed space.

"Get out here, now!" Erik Strome recoiled at the foul odor that wafted out of the locker.

Ian and Ellen held on to one another as they rather unsteadily complied with the barked order. Ian had told his sister to do whatever their captives wanted, he couldn't bear the thought of his nuisance of a sister being hurt.

"My, my! The famous Sir Ian Murphy and his slut of a sister! Welcome to Temple." Strome enjoyed his duties far too much.

"Why are we here?" Ian managed to ignore the insult to his sister, it was best not to provoke these bastards.

"Temple has need of your talents," Strome explained, "cooperate and you will come to no harm. If you cause us problems it will be your sister who suffers."

The taking of Ian's sister was considered a gift from God by The Named Priest, it would make Sir Ian so much more compliant.

"We need very much to bathe," Ian replied, "some clean clothing is not too much to ask for."

"Indeed so. As I said, you will come to no harm as long as you cooperate. You will be treated humanely and your needs will be seen to."

"What do you want of us?" Ian asked again.

"From your sister nothing. You, however, are going to build a planetary shield device for Temple."

"I can't do that." Ian knew what lay ahead for them if he refused, Strome confirmed his fears.

"Then your dear sister will come to know all of the many types and levels of pain that the human body can experience, while you watch."

The Sun Palace

Marine Lieutenant Jacob Asher was as nervous as a cat in a dog kennel. Why had the Emperor summoned him, especially now with all of the distraction of Sir Ian and his sister being abducted? The young marine had already been highly decorated for his actions in the war and was looking forward to a ground assignment on Earth where he could be with his new bride. Asher was just twenty four years old.

"If you will follow me, Lieutenant Asher, His Majesty is in the garden with the children." The COS could see that the marine was justifiably tense.

"Thank you sir, can you tell me why His Majesty wanted to see me of all people?"

"No. Try not to be too nervous, His Majesty is a very easy person to talk with. You are certainly not in any trouble."

"Yes sir, thank you for that." Asher still wasn't having much success with relaxing.

The Emperor was engaged in a small game of hide-and-seek with Alex and Jeremy when they were interrupted by the COS and the marine lieutenant. The game was good for the two children, they would now actually part with one another to hide during the play. Daniel took note of the visitor and his escort and called a halt to the horseplay, his heart wasn't really in the game anyway.

"You two run along with Mister Clarke," Daniel said, "you have your lessons to work on with Miss Arkins."

Miss Arkins was the teacher/nanny that Daniel had finally decided upon, she was rather stern and no-nonsense, just what was needed to offset the over indulgent Emperor.

At the COS direction the marine proceeded alone and approached the Emperor, bowing correctly at the proper distance.

"Lieutenant Asher, welcome. Be at ease, no ceremony."

"Thank you, Sire. I am very honored to meet you but I must confess I am at a loss as to why I am here."

Daniel shook the officer's hand with a firm grip and motioned Asher to walk along with him on the path through the vast and ancient garden.

"We apologize for the secrecy, if you knew why We wanted you to come here you might have headed for parts unknown."

"If I may ask then, Sire?"

"Let's talk for a while first, lieutenant. There's a lot to go over."

Temple

"Don't do what they say!" Ellen whispered to Ian as they were being herded out of the vessel and into a waiting shuttle.

"If I don't they'll hurt you, very bad." Ian answered.

"I'm tough, don't let them make you do this!" Ellen was indeed a tough little cookie, or at least she thought she was.

"Do you think of Daniel as being a 'tough' person?" Ian asked softly.

"Well sure he is!"

"When we were prisoners of the Snakes I had to watch while they beat him with a simple metal rod. He was very tough, he held on longer than I think most people could. In the end he was screaming and crying for mercy, he would have done anything to stop the pain. I will not see you put through that." Ellen was silent for a while, she had finally grasped just how desperate their situation was.

Starling was also leaving Sunflower. Bad timing by the vessel's captain allowed him to catch just a quick glimpse of the two people being rushed down the aft cargo ramp. Starling doubted his sanity, there was no way that the slim blonde boy he saw could be who thought he was, or the girl who was with him. "Fuck!" Starling now understood just how important his assignment was, why the Emperor himself had named him for this task. If these nuts on this planet would kidnap people so close to the Emperor they could be capable of anything. He had to get word to Temple's Imperial Governor somehow. He had to above all keep his own hide in one piece!

Starling had no chance at the present to get a message to anyone, he and the three ex-ratings were hustled down the forward ramp to a waiting shuttle. The shuttle's pilot was a tight-lipped bastard and simply ignored Starling's rather acrid opinion of things in general and also his requests to know just where the fuck they were going. The ex-fighter pilot was beginning to feel a bit like he also had been kidnaped, his fear was manifested in making him all the more unpleasant and nasty.

Ian and Ellen were also on board a shuttle. They were bound for a small but fully equipped laboratory and workshop deep in one of the forests that covered much of the largely undeveloped planet. Ian would have every material thing he needed to construct a planet shield, keeping Ellen safe would provide him the incentive.

"Where are they taking us?" Ellen asked in a whisper. Both of them were shackled at the wrist and feet.

"Probably to some sort of technical facility or something, probably someplace remote," Ian replied.

"Maybe we can manage to get away or something," Ellen was ever the optimist.

"Don't count on it, just look at that terrain down there, where would we run to?"

"We have to at least try!" Ellen whispered urgently.

"We have to stay alive. You do exactly as they say, don't make waves." Ian had seen what could happen to prisoners, his sister really didn't have a clue. That would soon change.

The Sun Palace

Daniel spent the rest of the day talking with Lieutenant Asher. The marine was by no means a dunce, it was slowly sinking in why he had been asked to meet with his Emperor. After dinner Daniel finally said the words that Asher had been dreading.

"I think you'll do just fine."

"Sire?"

"We are naming you as an heir to the throne. There will be others in the near future."

"Dear God...please no..." Asher was as pale as a ghost.

"Almost my very words when I was named," Daniel explained gently, "I wish there had been more time to do this. Recent events have shown a great need for a successor to be in the wings."

"But Sire... I'm just a marine ground pounder!"

"And I was a twelve-year old ensign who had never shaved. As a matter of fact I still haven't shaved."

"But my wife, she's pregnant with our first child!"

"Then she will have the very best care in the Empire, your child will never want for anything."

"Sire, I cannot do this!"

"Neither could I. In any event you have no choice in the matter. It is done, Your Highness."

Asher sat silent for some time trying to take in what had just happened to him.

"What will I tell Stephanie?" Asher asked rather absently, forgetting for the moment that he was talking with the Emperor.

"Considering her condition perhaps you should break it to her gently," Daniel suggested.

Later that evening after Asher had left, Daniel sat down to compose the simple hand written letter of succession. Official public notice of the naming of a Prince of The Empire would come in perhaps one week. Daniel had to start over on the letter three times, penmanship was never one of his strong points and he wanted the letter to look good for the historians. The Emperor sat for a while looking at the results of his decision, he wondered as always just how and why he had come to find himself in such a place and time. No human should have to bear as much responsibility as did the young boy who was trying to do right by mankind.

It was so very lonely in the palace after Alex and Jeremy had gone to bed. Where were Ian and Ellen this night?

Temple

The shuttle carrying Ian and his sister landed at dusk in a clear area between a collection of small warehouse-like buildings. There was a high fence circling the compound and it was obviously a powered fence. Erik Strome had said nothing to them during the long flight until now.

"All out. Home sweet home!"

Holding on to one another for balance, Ian and Ellen shuffled out of the craft and stood looking around them in the chill of the approaching night. The air seemed a bit thin, they must have been at a high altitude. Strome surprised them by unfastening their wrist and ankle shackles, he then gestured at the surrounding forest.

"The fence isn't there to keep you in, there's no need for that. The fence is there to keep the wolves out."

"Wolves?" Ian asked.

"We call them wolves, actually they're much worse than earthly wolves. Children of The Night might be a better description, most people call them that."

"From Dracula," Ellen added.

"Ah! I see you have paid close attention in ancient literature class, dear Ellen." Strome would have made a pretty good Transylvanian himself. "The 'wolves' here run in packs of about two dozen, they're five feet high at the shoulder. Don't bother climbing a tree to get away from them, they spend the daylight hours asleep in the larger trees of the forests."

"Wonderful," Ian said quietly.

"They are, aren't they?" Strome agreed.

A low, pulsing wail punctuated Strome's little talk about the native fauna. The 'wolves' were waking for the night's hunting.

Ian and Ellen were quite willing to follow Strome into the largest of the buildings.

Long hot showers were provided, it felt so good that Ellen could almost tolerate the lingering gaze of her guards as she bathed. Clothing was oversized work coveralls, but at least they were clean. Their own clothing was to be laundered for them later. So far they weren't really being mistreated at all, even the supper placed before them seemed quite edible.

"Maybe I can stretch things out, delay as much as possible," Ian whispered to his sister as they sat together eating the simple meal.

"Do you think they'll ever find us here?" Ellen asked.

"If I know Daniel they'll be looking under every rock in the Empire. If and when I ever put together a working shield for these creeps the Empire will definitely know where we are."

"But how can they get to us if the planet is shielded?"

"There is a way, I was just starting to work on it when they grabbed us. All I had was some rough notes and ideas that I recorded."

The whispered conversation was interrupted as the guards told them to stand.

"Come on, Strome has a small lesson for the two of you." The guard seemed to be enjoying his job entirely too much. Neither Ian nor his sister liked the idea of a "lesson," whatever it might be. As they entered Strome's office two guards grabbed and held Ian immobile, two more did the same with Ellen. On the desk in front of Strome was a thin metal ring perhaps eight or ten inches across. A small wand-like device with studs on it lay next to the ring. Ian knew what the ring was, Daniel had once worn one of them on the planet called Bones.

"Sir Ian, do you know what this is?" Strome held up the metal ring.

"Yes. It's an obedience collar, possessing them is an automatic death sentence."

"So is kidnaping the Emperor's playmates. In for a penny in for a dollar."

Strome got up and walked around the desk and before Ian could think or try to do anything the collar was snapped into place around his sister's neck.

"Stop it! You don't need to use that on her, I'll do whatever you ask!" Ian pleaded. He knew about the pain that Daniel had suffered from the hated devices.

"Release the girl," Strom ordered. Ellen stood uncertain about what to do, her fingers exploring the cold band around her soft neck.

"Please don't!" Ian was fairly begging now.

"I know that you will cooperate, Sir Ian. There are however degrees of cooperation. This little demonstration will insure that we will receive the highest degree of your cooperation."

"No...!"

Ian's plea went unheeded as Strome pressed one of the studs on the small wand. Ellen screamed like a wild animal and dropped heavily to the stone floor, her body contorting and twisting in agony. Her evening meal was vomited onto the floor, she lost control of her bladder. Strome released the pressure on the stud after only five seconds, Ian was yelling and trying to reach his sister, the two massive guards made that impossible.

"Let him go," Strom told Ian's guards. Ian dropped down on his hands and knees to try and comfort the weeping Ellen, she recoiled at his first touch. It took some time for the girl to respond and allow her brother to hold her in his arms.

"Hard lessons are learned the best," Strome chuckled.

Ian just glared up at the man, he would have gone for him save for the fact that the man still held the wand in his hand.

Chapter Six

Rebellion

Heywood Starling was more and more regretting his rash decision to play the heroic spy. He was nowhere close to getting near the leadership of Temple, so far he couldn't even get a simple message to the Imperial Governor. The isolated base where Starling found himself was cold and lacking any sort of civilized diversions. These tight assed psalm singers didn't even appreciate the simple benefits of grain alcohol!

The first shipments of Falcons were well underway to being restored to some sort of combat readiness when Starling arrived at the base. The fighters were still in pretty poor shape by navy standards.

"What a piece of dog shit!" Starling always came right to the point.

"The drives are sound, it's been through a lot of crap but it will get the job done." Ex-rating Denkins was a normal sort of person and took an immediate dislike to Starling.

"And what's the fucking job?" Starling asked.

"Damned if I know, maybe they want to start their own little war or something."

By now Starling was sure that they intended to do just that. They must know that they stood no chance against the forces the Empire could muster. If the Empire could get to them.

It came to Starling at last, at least he kept his thoughts to himself.

"Shit almighty! They mean to build their own shield!"

That was Sir Ian he saw and this was why they had him!

Starling really had to get a message out.

Ian was getting the workshop in order, the equipment and supplies he had asked for were due to be delivered later in the day. Ellen had regained her composure but not her self confidence. The girl was very quiet as she helped her brother where she could to get the workshop ready, she still could not put the awful pain she had experienced out of her mind.

"How are you doing?" Ian asked.

"I'm all right," Ellen replied, "it just.. It.."

"It hurt a lot," Ian finished her unspoken words.

"Yes. I thought I could be stronger, I thought we could.."

"We can't. Let's just do the very best job we can as fast as we can and then hope for the best."

If you are faulting Ian for cooperating so readily with his captors, do not. It is one thing to resist as best you can when you are the only one being hurt or abused, it is quite another thing to standby and watch someone whom you dearly love being subjected to unlimited pain.

Port Ayers Naval Base, Earth

The Emperor was being fitted for a new pressure suit. Daniel needed some release from the tension of not knowing what had happened to Ian and Ellen. Flying would help him to work off the pressure. There would soon be an N-Model Falcon sitting in what had been the horse stable at the Sun Palace. Daniel didn't care much for horses. The great beasts were too damned big, they smelled bad and were always craping all over the place.

Daniel's decision to return to flying had caused some considerable consternation between the palace staff and Fleet headquarters. Daniel ignored the fears for his safety, it was return to flying or go insane. Besides, there was a spare emperor now, the line would not be broken if Daniel flew into a mountain or something.

Port Ayers had gone into major flap mode when the Emperor's shuttle and escort craft had landed unannounced near the personal equipment building. Daniel preferred going about without notification, it saved endless hours reviewing personnel and listening to nervous officers giving rehearsed briefings. By now Daniel was well acquainted with the procedures involved in being fitted for a pressure suit, he sat patiently after the measurements were taken. It always took the better part of an hour, more if the nervous equipment specialists knew that the "God-Almighty Emperor Himself" was twiddling his thumbs in the fitting room.

Daniel's only specifications for the pressure suit were that it be plain black with no identifying insignia of any sort. Eventually it was time to actually try it on.

"Any tight spots, Sire?" Chief Heddings wasn't sure if actually touching the Emperor was allowed.

"No, it feels pretty good. The gloves feel pretty stiff."

"Yes Sire, that's normal until they've been worn for a few hours. The new flex material that we've started using will adapt to you and loosen up in short order, the fit will feel even better than it does now."

"Excellent job, Chief! Pass Our thanks along to your people."

"I will Sire, and thank you. We were wondering if...?" Chief Heddings motioned to a photograph of the Emperor on the equipment counter, a pen lay next to it.

"Our pleasure." Daniel signed the photograph with a flourish and added a "well done" message after his signature, he remembered doing this very thing once before.

Time to go pick up the new Falcon.

Temple

"This superconducting cable is very old and the insulation is oxidized, it could cause an arc to occur. If it shorts out the device will be just so much slag." Ian was trying to explain his very legitimate concerns to Strome.

"It had to be removed from a cargo vessel, there wasn't time for an off-planet order to be placed and delivered, it will have to do until new cable arrives."

"I don't want my sister punished is all, I'm just trying to do a proper job here."

"I can see that, you have nothing to fear as long as you do a "proper job. Use the material you have and let me worry about the rest."

Ian just nodded and got back to work. He would have to do a lot of improvising in the device's circuitry, Temple didn't have a very extensive technological base, the planet's economy was based mostly on forest products. How the leaders of such a planet could think to defy the entire Empire only spoke of their madness.

No effort was made to closely guard Ian and Ellen, there was literally no place to run to, at least not when the sun went down. The 'wolves' were very real, the second night of their captivity Ian and his sister were given a look at the beasts. The local pack had been lured near the hated fence by the smell of the fresh meat that had been set out for them. The animals were a nightmare of muscle, teeth and talons. Their feet were more like clawed hands, this explained how they were able to sleep in trees. The monster's only redeeming feature was the luxurious black fur that covered everything but their eyes and the sharp places. There were herds of deer-like herbivores that were the predator's main food supply, an ecological equilibrium kept both life form's numbers in check. The 'wolves' were the reason why there were no settlements on this small and isolated continent.

Starling finally did some flying, briefly. He barely got the malfunctioning Falcon back onto the tarmac before all drive power was lost. The ground crew was treated to a cursing out that was almost an art object for its complexity and colorful depth. Eventually the ranting ex-ensign caught the attention of the installation's 'commander'.

In orbit above the Western Pacific, Earth

HMS Saber was running some close-in defense drills while waiting for departure clearances, an attacker was needed and called for.

"Test Falcon Alpha, do you have time for an attack run on us?"

Daniel smiled for the first time in days before answering.

"Roger, Saber. Placing beam cannons on practice setting, repeat, practice setting." There had been several incidents during past training exercises when weapons were in the wrong mode, double caution was called for.

"Test Alpha, Saber's weapons are also in practice mode. Commence run at your convenience."
"Roger."

There were six Falcons in close patrol around the fast frigate, hull mounted beam weapons on the warship completed its defensive array. This exercise was simulating the loss of the vessel's defensive shield.

"Probably another greenie out of Ayers," observed the bridge watch officer, "I doubt if he'll get past the first of our birds."

"Perhaps," replied Captain Hooke, "run it by the book."

Saber's captain had learned never to be too smug about things. Just as well.

Daniel fairly pounced on the defending Falcons, he had lost none of his ferocious abilities as a pilot. Two passes later Saber was without fighter cover.

"Who the hell is that pilot?" Captain Hooke roared.

"He's turning for his run on us. God, he's all over the sky!"

Daniel was everywhere but where the hull cannons were firing. HMS Saber rattled from bow to stern as the light impacts of Daniel's beam cannons banged on the hull.

"Damage control reports simulated breaches at bulkheads three, six, nine and twelve!"

Saber was ripped open and spewing atmosphere (simulated).

"God-damn!" Hooke was not amused. He was also very impressed, so was everyone on the bridge. A word to the attacking Falcon was in order.

"Falcon Test, that was a very good run. Say pilot I.D."

"Grayson, Daniel, 19812267. You need to disperse your Falcons a bit wider and your rate of fire from your midships hull cannons was too slow. Good day, sir."

Daniel broke off in a bone crushing dive toward the earth below, it was very quiet on Saber's bridge for a few moments.

"Holy shit!" The watch officer voiced the consensus opinion, they had just been shot to bits by the Emperor. The stories of his piloting abilities were true. He was still the Fleet Ace, no one else was even close.

Daniel felt better than he had in a very long time.

Temple

"The power generator units here have only about half the power needed," Ian explained. The shield unit was three-fourths completed, power testing and calibration could commence in a few more days.

"Explain!" Strome hadn't anticipated this.

"It is a matter of power," Ian tried to keep it simple, "more power, bigger shield."

"Remember your sister." Strome's voice was very controlled.

"I do, sir! This is not something I have any control over. I will confess I did not think to ask about the generating capacity of this place when I started work, I should have. Please don't hurt Ellen again!"

Strome regarded the desperate Ian for a moment, it was obvious the young genius was telling the truth. No point in distracting the boy with further 'lessons' involving his sister.

"Very well. Additional power units will be delivered here. Keep in mind the collar your sister wears."

"I do, sir. Always."

Starling almost welcomed the chance to do something besides sit on his ass and curse at the maintenance crews. Flying a cargo shuttle to God knew where was better than nothing, barely.

"What's the load?"

"Two Sheffield mass converters. Power generators."

Edward Heinkle was in charge of the installation, a chance to send Starling elsewhere was too good to pass up. The surly ex-ensign didn't seem to be any sort of security risk, most of his invective was directed at the Emperor in particular and the navy in general.

Fleet Headquarters, Earth

Daniel had elected to come to naval headquarters for the intelligence briefing, it gave him an excuse to fly the new Falcon. The Emperor's escort craft had failed to keep pace during the flight. Naval captain Jason Evers was beginning the briefing on Temple.

"Ensign Starling managed to sign on with the recruiter from Temple, since his departure there has been no further contact."

"And the stolen weapons?" Daniel asked.

"They were delivered three days ago, Sire. Payment was deposited with Mister Bascom's bank at the same time. Plans were being prepared for a marine raid on the so-called flyer plant in one week's time, that may be changed now."

Daniel nodded his understanding. What had become of Starling?

"There is one more unusual item, Sire. It may be the key to everything."

"Go on." Daniel was all ears.

"A good quantity of superconducting cable has just been ordered for delivery to the flyer plant. The type is too heavy for Falcon drive coils."

"What else could it be for?" Daniel asked.

"A heavy vessel of some sort, or..."

"A shield device," Daniel finished the officer's thoughts.

"Exactly, Sire."

"Ian!" It was the only rational answer for Ian and Ellen's kidnapping.

"It is only speculation so far, but that is becoming the prevailing opinion at Intelligence Operations, Sire."

"How long have you known about this?" Daniel's question had a sharp edge to it, a trace of anger.

"Sire, the news of the cable purchase became known only earlier today. Since you would soon be here for this briefing we held off notifying you. Perhaps that was an bad judgment on our part, I do apologize." Daniel's brief anger cooled. "No apology needed, Captain. It's just that I... We are just so damned afraid for Sir Ian and Ellen!"

"We all are, Sire," added the Admiral of The Fleet, "the marine raid that was in the works will have to be greatly expanded. Sir Ian and Miss Ellen could be anywhere on that planet, if indeed that is where they are."

"They have to be there, it's the only thing that makes any sense!"

"Let us pray so, Your Majesty."

"Where the fuck is Starling?"

The Emperor's crude question went unanswered, where indeed was the obnoxious ensign?

"There is one very big potential problem, Sire," continued Captain Evers.

Daniel already knew what it was.

"What if they get an operational shield in place before we move?"

"Indeed, Sire. There is no known way to penetrate such a shield, the Snakes learned that the hard way."

"Then we have to move very fast indeed, we shall have to plan as we go. We want forces moving toward Temple this day! Prepare Thunder for immediate departure. We shall be accompanying the strike force."

The Fleet Admiral admired the Emperor's ability to move quickly and make sound decisions. It could also make life very hectic at times.

"Give us twelve hours, Sire."

"You have eight, We will return to the Sun Palace for a while, there are private arrangements to make there. We will rendezvous with Thunder in orbit."

The Sun Palace

"You have to be very grown up for a while," Daniel explained firmly, "I will be away for a time, Ian and Ellen are in trouble and need my help."

"Whydid... Why did they take them to the church place?" Alex asked.

"The church place?" Daniel had never mentioned Temple to the two children. What did Alex mean?

"A bad place. There are badanimals there."

"Temple?" Daniel asked in a whisper.

"Uh huh. Lots of bigtrees and badanimals."

Daniel picked up Alex and held her close to him, there was so very much more to this little girl than logic could always explain.

"Do you know how Ian is?" Daniel asked softly.

"He's tired, scared too. There's something in his working place, papers. Here."

Daniel glanced down at Jeremy, the boy was as close as he could get to Alex and her big brother.

"Lex always knows stuff," Jeremy explained matter-of-factly.

It was one of those moments of revelation that strikes without warning, a moment when a sudden truth is revealed about a person close and loved.

Daniel found himself in Ian's guarded workshop, Alex and Jeremy were close at his side.

"Overthere!" Alex pointed at Ian's cluttered desk.

The desk was a total mess, jotted notes and instrument printouts covered it's surface. Daniel stood trying to make any sense out of what he was looking at. A small voice recorder caught his attention first. Push the button.

"Note for later. Shield merge and penetration will probably depend on synchronizing both shield polarities and reversing same." There was more but it was all gibberish to Daniel.

Ian's voice sounded small and tinny, yet it fairly screamed at Daniel.

"Ian, you crazy shit!" Daniel fairly danced around the cluttered workshop. Alex and Jeremy just held onto each another and smiled.

"Are we going to go get IanandEllen now?" Alex asked.

"I am, you two will have to stay here," Daniel answered.

"But the manhurtEllen!"

Daniel felt suddenly cold as he looked down at the tears in Alex's eyes. "How do you know that?"

"Iseeit. He makes her wear a...neck thing. Ithurtsher."

"God, not a collar!" Daniel thought himself or Alex must be insane, maybe they both were. No, the little girl might be a, must be a Talent. Like Jeremy said, she "knows stuff."

"Let'sgogether! I know where she is!" Alex pleaded.

Daniel made a quick decision, they would all go find Ellen and Ian. Alex could probably lead them straight to wherever they were. Messages would have to be sent to the Hawkings Institute and to Fleet, this changed everything.

There were indeed individuals known as Talents, the real ones were few and very far between. Their abilities were real and verifiable and despite centuries of close study, no one had ever come up with a satisfactory explanation for what they could do. To have such a person at the side of the Emperor...

Jacob Asher's coronation as a Prince of The Empire would be delayed for a while, in the meantime he would be left to mind the store and learn the trade.

Temple

"Don't stay around after dark." The installation commander was smiling as he gave Starling the coordinates for the delivery.

"Why?"

"The Children of The Night might find you."

Starling only shook his head and turned to board the loaded shuttle.

"Now what the fuck did that asshole mean?" Starling asked himself.

The small continent was named Hades. Sinners were sometimes sent there to fend for themselves as a final judgement.

"Shit! Another asshole of the universe!" Starling's assessment of the small installation wasn't too far off the mark. The impressive powered fence caused Starling to remember some words about children and night time.

Starling put the shuttle down dead-center in the middle of the collection of buildings, his arrival was expected. Starling didn't expect the slim blonde boy he knew only too well to be among those who so urgently saw to unloading his cargo. Ian also took notice of the shuttle's pilot .

"You!" Ian could think of nothing more intelligent to say.

Starling did some very quick thinking.

"Yeah, me! You sorry piece of Snake shit!"

Strome moved close to the shuttle's pilot and asked some pointed questions.

"You know him?"

"All too well! He's the Emperor's little play friend, the two of them probably sleep in the same bed!"

Starling hoped he wasn't troweling it on too thick.

"You knew the Emperor?" Strome wasn't sure what to think about this at all.

"My bad luck! The little royal turd ruined my chances for promotions! He took credit for my actions during the Snake's attack on Britannia. I hate his stinking shit-filled guts!"

Strome nodded his head in understanding, he was all too ready to accept any words of antipathy regarding the Empire and it's ruler.

The unloading of the two power units only took a few minutes, the powered sleds they were on were easily guided across the open space to the power generation sled. Ian managed a quick look over his shoulder to where Starling stood beside the shuttle. Did Starling actually nod and wink at him? It must have been the fading light, Starling hated everyone.

Or did he?

HMS Thunder, in Earth orbit

The Emperor arrived in his own Falcon, moments later a shuttle carrying Alex and Jeremy along with the Royal Physician and Miss Arkins grounded on the hanger deck. This was not going to be anywhere close to a normal deployment for the flagship of the fleet.

"What other elements of the flotilla are ready?" Daniel was sitting at the briefing table listening to Thunder's commanding officer's briefing.

"Sire, six marine assault vessels are already underway and will arrive before we do. Four fighter carriers and six fast attack frigates will be in our formation. Temple has nothing of any consequence to oppose us."

"Except perhaps a planetary shield," Daniel observed.

"There is that, Sire."

"Are the people from the Hawkings Institute on board yet?"

"They are in transit, Sire. As soon as they arrive we shall make all speed to Temple."

"Has the Governor on Temple been notified of the new situation?"

"We have been sending regular updates, there have been power disruptions there, communications are rather dicey at the moment."

Daniel nodded and then stood, as the room snapped to attention he had some final words for the assembled officers.

"Our first priority is to safely secure Sir Ian and his sister Ellen, keep that in mind at all times. Well done, gentlemen."

Temple

During the flight back from Hades Starling was racking his devious brain as to what to do.

"I've got to get a fucking message out!"

Starling came to a painful decision, he was actually going to have to risk his hide. He would divert the cargo shuttle to the Governor's residence and cast his lot with them. It was a simple choice actually, spend the rest of his days with Temple's lunatics or perhaps earn the Emperor's gratitude.

The Governor's compound was almost in a state of total siege, daily church organized protests had caused a withdrawal of the security forces into a tight perimeter. The unannounced arrival after dark of a cargo shuttle next to the Governor's residence was not looked upon with very much humor. Starling was lucky not to have been shot as he emerged from the shuttle.

"Stand where you are!" The amplified voice caused Starling to obey to the letter.

"I need to speak with the Governor immediately! I am an agent for the Empire, I have urgent information!"

Trigger pressure on eight beam rifles eased at these words, a body search would confirm that the shuttle pilot was no physical threat. After some time and some indignities Starling found himself standing in front of the Governor.

"My name is Heywood Starling, Ensign, Imperial Navy, serial number 18726345E. The authentication phrase is Flexible Iron."

These last two words had the right effect.

"Ensign Starling, we have all been waiting for some word from you, where have you been?" Governor Vickers extended his hand to the perspiring pilot.

"That's not very fucking important right now! Get a message to Fleet right now, Sir Ian Murphy is at an installation on Hades! A planetary shield is very probably under construction there. Coordinates are 1245north, 4527west!"

The message would have been sent save for the efforts of one of the residence's civilian staff. The Governor residence jolted when a small explosive charge destroyed the remaining emergency non-space com link.

Starling's efforts had been a waste of time.

His cursing soared to new heights.

Chapter Seven

A State of Siege

HMS Thunder

The Fleet Admiral's words did nothing to help Daniel's mood.

"There have been no communications with our people on Temple for almost twenty-four hours now. Attempts to contact The Children of God have also failed, they do not even acknowledge receipt of our messages."

"Send out a general notice to all shipping," Daniel began, "all vessels are forbidden to make landfall on Temple due to the state of emergency there. Any vessel violating this order does so at their own peril and will be subject to seizure and confiscation by Imperial forces. Fix up the wording and such, send it out at once."

"Yes, Sire."

"How are the people from Hawkings doing?"

"It's hard to say, Sire. I for one cannot make a great deal of sense out of what they have to say about Sir Ian's notes."

"We shall go and talk with them, not that We will do any better."

"Indeed Sire, good luck."

They were four days out from Temple.

Temple

"The device is ready for testing," Ian explained, "any vessels in orbit will either have to come to ground or withdraw to a distance of three planet diameters. There will be fluctuations in the shield size and shape until the variations in the planet's gravity and magnetic fields can be compensated for. This is not something I can correct for until the unit is activated."

Ian's explanation sounded truthful and logical to Strome, indeed the boy had worn himself ragged over the past days to do his very best. Ian did love his sister.

"Very well. I shall have to inform the Named Priest before any action is taken. In the meantime get some rest."

Ian only nodded, saying thank you to Strome was something he wasn't ever prepared to do.

The situation at the Governor's compound was becoming desperate, mobs organized by the Church were probing and pressing ever forward. It was only a matter of hours before the security forces were overwhelmed. This did not sit at all well with Starling.

"There's room in the cargo shuttle to cram everyone on board! If we don't get out of here that mob out there will have us all for dinner!"

Starling's words made sense to the Governor, but where to go?

"This planet is mostly boondocks, we find a remote location and just lie low!" Personal safety was always one of Starling's prime concerns.

"What about the fighters the Church has? That shuttle is unarmed." The Governor also had some sense of self preservation.

"Most of them can't get off the ground yet, if we leave after dark and hug the ground we might get away undetected."

There was no real alternative, if they stayed where they were they would indeed be fodder for the mob at the gates.

Starling's simple escape plan relied on darkness and quick timing. The shuttle sat unlit but powered up in the main courtyard, its main ramp lowered and waiting for the remaining security people. The Governor and his staff were already on board, including three civilian workers who didn't want to face the mob either. One of the three civilians was the saboteur who destroyed the power generator.

"Give the signal!" Starling barked at the Governor with a complete lack of respect.

"Fall back! Repeat, fall back and board!" The Governor's order didn't need to be repeated, in the long tradition of angry mobs the one at the gates carried torches. The last act of the Imperial Governor was to activate the self destruct device to destroy the planet's shield, a moot point by now.

It was a tight fit in the cargo shuttle as Starling lifted the overloaded craft over the compound walls. Small arms fire banged on the hull as the shuttle accelerated to supersonic in the space of one mile. A good number of windows in Temple's capitol city of Grace lost all of their glass as the sonic shock wave hammered them. Starling changed course at random for ten minutes before lifting into a suborbital arc, identification transponders were already turned off. Temple didn't have a very sophisticated traffic control system, with luck the shuttle could make good its escape.

Starling had decided on a landing in the wilderness on the continent of Hades, perhaps ten miles from the installation where Ian and his sister were. Half formed ideas of a heroic rescue of the Emperor's adopted family members were in Starling's mind.

He would just do well not to be eaten by The Children of The Night.

While Starling's shuttle was making its escape, Ian was giving the go-ahead to activate the planetary shield.

"I want everyone well away from the unit," Ian explained with some force, "if the cables short out it will be very exciting around here!"

No one had to be told twice.

Ian pressed the relay switch. Megawatts of power flowed into the odd looking collection of coils and circuitry.

Temple had a working shield.

Ian only had to make a few minor adjustments to compensate for gravity and the planet's magnetic field.

"Well done, Sir Ian." Strome seemed almost human.

"Can you please take that collar off of my sister now? We will cause you no problems." Ellen stood quietly beside her brother, she still wasn't her old brash self. Would you be?

"Yes. But keep in mind how quickly the collar can be put back on, on both of you."

"We shall. This unit will need close monitoring, I am not at all confident about the coil winding's stability, the cables...."

"Understood. Begin immediate work on a duplicate unit, new cables will be arriving in two weeks."

Ian's shoulder's sagged at the new task ahead of him, but at least his sister was safe for the moment from the pain that Strome wielded in his right hand.

The new cables would never be arriving, the first advance Imperial vessels were already moving into position around Temple. Scanners developed by Ian and the people at the Hawkings Institute told the fast attack cruisers that there was now a shield in place around the planet called Temple. All of the combined warships in the Imperial Fleet could never penetrate the last two-thousand miles to Temple's surface.

The Named Priest made a planet-wide broadcast announcing that at last Temple was free of the Empire's contamination. A shield was in place that would forever hold the hated Emperor and his minions at bay.

While enroute to Hades this wonderful news was monitored by Starling and his passengers. More cursing ensued, not all of it was Starling's.

HMS Thunder

"Sire, excuse me!" Thunder's executive officer had been delegated to wake the Emperor, he had bad news to convey.

"Uh..what is it?" Daniel felt like he had only just fallen asleep.

"Sire, we have word from Harpoon, they are in position around Temple."

"And?" Daniel struggled to come fully awake.

"The planet is protected by a shield, Sire."

The Emperor said nothing for a few seconds, his deep sigh of resignation expressed his feelings.

"Please have the Fleet Admiral and the other senior officers assemble in the pilot's briefing room, we'll need the extra room. Also have all of the Hawkings people there, if there's any hope in this mess they will have to provide it."

The scientists did provide some hope, sort of.

"Sir Ian's notes were very preliminary," Professor Singh explained again, "he believed it was possible to merge two shields and move the smaller projection inside of the larger."

"Tell Us something We do not already know." Daniel's tone was not one of patience. "Can you accomplish what Ian proposed?"

"In time, Your Majesty. This will take some considerable...."

"We do not have "considerable" anything!" Daniel was on his feet and shouting at the pallid theoretician.

"Sire..."

"Sire my royal ass! Earn your pay for once! Sir ian has carried your moldy institution on his back for too long! Stop telling Us what is not possible and do what is possible!"

Daniel stalked out of the shocked assembly of scientists and senior naval officers, a furious Emperor was someone to be treated with great care or avoided if possible.

Temple

The sun was just setting on this part of the planet as Starling eased the overloaded cargo shuttle into the small clearing. They seemed to have escaped Temple's rudimentary military response, what lay ahead for them in this wilderness? As the Governor's security people fanned out around the shuttle a distant undulating wail told everyone that sleep would be a hard prize to win this night.

"What the jumping fuck was that?" You know by the language who asked that question.

"There are stories.. Tales about this part of the planet." Governor Colmes seemed to be looking off into the distance, he also seemed to be actually frightened.

"Stories about what?" Starling demanded.

"Animals. They are called the Children of The Night."

Starling remembered some words from the base commander when he had left on the initial shuttle flight.

"Keep your people close in, we may have to lift off at short notice."

Starling's for once quiet words had the desired effect on the Governor. Anyone too slow to board the shuttle might wind up as food for whatever was making that ungodly noise from deep in the woods.

The wolves were appallingly intelligent and hideously fast. As silent as smoke the pack of twenty-two carnivores ringed the rough encampment being set up by the Imperial Governor and his security people.

The beasts sat quietly studying the situation for nearly an hour before moving, then they all moved as one.

The incredible roar of the attacking animals was meant to paralyze with fright their intended prey, it worked very well indeed. The Children of The Night were enormously powerful, a single animal could carry off an adult human male with ease. Eight of the perimeter guards were indeed carried off, still screaming and still alive. No one had as much as scored one hit on the blindingly fast beasts who had by now disappeared back into the woods.

True to form, Starling had been safely in the shuttle when the attack came. He had the craft powered up and ready for lift off before the screaming ended. It didn't take an order to withdraw into the shuttle, no one wanted to be outside when the 'wolves' decided it was time for more grocery shopping. Starling lifted off as the last two people were still scrambling up the closing ramp. If some good came from the attack it was the fact that parts of the civilian saboteur were now being fought over and digested.

There were now thirty-six armed personnel in the shuttle and they had no place to go. Or did they? Starling had an idea that seemed totally out of character.

"We can take the installation where Sir Ian is, it's not heavily defended and has a powered perimeter fence!"

The Governor was skeptical of the idea until Starling pointed out the obvious.

"The shield generator is there. I know enough about shields to know that they can be changed in size. We take the installation, reduce the shield to protect just a small area around us and sit back and wait for help to arrive. We save our butts and let the Empire in the front door!"

Starling's idea wasn't out of character, he was also looking out for number one.

The Governor didn't need any further convincing, they were out of options.

"Then we had better do it now! That Installation is isolated and protected only by those monsters that attacked us, that will probably change in short order."

"Get your people ready," Starling banked the shuttle hard around and accelerated, "I'm going to put this thing down fast and hard with the ramp already open. Surprise is our best weapon!"

HMS Thunder

The scientists from the Hawkings institute were proving as useful as udders on a turnip, Daniel had to stay away from them lest he yield to the temptation to simply start shooting at them. Alex and Jeremy helped save the Emperor's sanity during this time, Daniel had started to accept his sister's remarkable abilities, perhaps his own inhuman reaction times as a pilot were somehow related to Alex's abilities.

"How is Ellen doing, can you see anything?"

"She's all right. They haven't hurt her again." Alex's simply answer had total truth in it, the small girl hadn't really learned much about lying yet.

"And Ian?"

"He's tired. They make him work a lot."

Daniel could only sit and hold the children close to him, he felt as powerless as he had ever felt in his entire life.

Temple

True to his word Starling came in fast and hard, in fact he took out two of the installation's slower guards who were promptly flattened under the unlit shuttle. The shield installation only had twenty personnel, including Strome. Hades was the best of all security for the site, no thought had been given to the possibility of an Imperial raiding party even knowing about this place.

The fire fight was short and brutal, lasting only about five minutes. Strome made an attempt to get to Ian and hold him hostage. The Named Priest's deputy succeeded only in grabbing Ian's left arm before Ellen got even with him. The girl had pretended terror as the armed Strome had rushed past her, a heavy titanium pry bar with a furious Ellen behind it ended her tormentor's days. There is no noise quite so hideous as the sound made by a skull shattering.

"Shit!" Ian was impressed.

"Is he.. Is he dead?" Ellen squeaked.

"Completely, unless his brains can function outside of his skull."

Ellen turned and promptly lost her dinner (again).

All was not well, however. Strome had managed to get off a message to the Church. Every Falcon and troop shuttle that could get off the ground was being dispatched to the Hades shield installation.

Ian soon found himself face to face with Ensign Heywood Starling, the reunion was short and to the point.

"You have to reset the field to a local defense shield! You need to do it now!"

"What...?"

"We're totally exposed here," Starling explained impatiently, "we have to let the Empire in but we also have to protect ourselves from those religious assholes!"

Ian grasped the obvious, forces from the Church would soon be here, the Fleet was probably close by already.

"I'll have to disconnect it completely for a few minutes to reposition the..."

Starling interrupted Ian and told him to just do it. Precious minutes were being wasted with words.

HMS Thunder

"Temple has dropped it's shield!"

Daniel was on Thunder's bridge making everyone nervous when the ensign monitoring the communication links had blurted out the good news. Thunder was now just hours from rendezvous with Temple.

"Move all of our forces around Temple down to minimum surface altitude, now!" Daniel's order made perfect sense, if the shield went back up the Empire would be on the inside and raising hell.

Temple

Ian had worked as fast as he could, he was almost finished with the shield generator when the first of Temple's Falcons flashed overhead. Starling had the ever present good sense to flee from the grounded shuttle before it was reduced to scrap by rail cannon fire. Whoever was flying the lead attacking Falcon knew his trade well.

It was apparent that the objective of the attacking force was to retake the installation rather than destroy it. If the shield stayed down the Empire would soon be kicking down a lot of doors. There was no place for Ian and Ellen to run and hide, but by now they were both armed with beam pistols. Ian continued his

furious work on the shield and hoped for the best. Ellen was close at her brother's side when the first of Temple's ground forces landed just inside the fence.

Imperial forces now in close orbit had activated the hidden transponders in the illegal Falcon weaponry. Tracking indicated all of Temple's war craft were now converging on the continent of Hades, it didn't take much military intelligence to figure out why. The Imperial Fighters would just about converge on Hades when Temple's forces did.

HMS Thunder

"Our forces are engaging, Sire!" Ensign Banks was having trouble controlling his excitement. Daniel was having trouble controlling his stomach.

"How much longer till normal space?" Daniel knew the answer but asked anyway.

"Thirty minutes, Sire." The Fleet Admiral replied.

It would seem like thirty years.

Hades

Starling had been in the lead (rear?) in the fall back to the shield building. Are you surprised? Imperial Falcons were by now making short work of Temple's airborne forces when the desperate Church ground forces started raking the shield building with everything they had left.

"Keep down!" Ian shouted at his sister as bits of wood and assorted electronics filled the air around them.

"Join me!" Ellen yanked her brother down beside her, she loved her loopy twin brother as much as he loved her. Several of the Governor's security people followed Starling into the large room holding the shield generator. Their safe haven was shattered when a good portion of the west wall blew out. More by chance than design Starling landed between Ian and his sister and the advancing Church forces. The rail rifle that the panicked 'ex-ensign' wielded was on full auto fire as he swept it across the gap in the wall at the advancing enemy. A final volley by the Church forces caught Starling in the chest and legs, Ellen caught a round in her left side just below her ribs.

Battle hardened Imperial Marines were by then landing and rapidly turning the inexperienced Church forces into landfill.

"Ellen!" Ian could only see one thing, the bright red mess covering his sister's left side. Ellen wasn't registering any pain yet, she seemed more confused than anything.

"Stay down, nitwit!" Ellen's voice had little strength behind it as she tried to once more pull her brother down out of harm's way.

Starling was in even worse shape and was not saying much of anything, he wasn't even cursing.

HMS Thunder

Alexandra was screaming and running toward the bridge of the Imperial flagship as it broke into normal space, Jeremy was close on her heels. Neither child had been to the bridge before but Alex knew the way because that was where Daniel was. The children's nanny, Miss Arkins, was left well behind. Along

the way Thunder's crewmen were startled by the small human siren that went wailing past them to the bridge.

"Ellens'hurt! Ellen'shurt!" The bridge was in a sudden uproar as Alex and Jeremy barreled in, the screaming little girl launched herself into Daniel's arms, almost knocking him to the deck.

"What are you saying? Slow down!" Daniel held the trembling girl tight until she could make some sense.

"Ellen'shurt! Ellen is hurt, something bad has happened. Big noises!"

A wave of cold panic swept over Daniel as he also listened to the first real-time reports coming over the com channels. There was fighting at the installation at the Hades installation. There were casualties.

Ellen and Ian were there.

Ellen was hurt.

The personnel on Thunder's bridge exchanged glances with one another. The legends and tales about Talents were well known, it would seem that the Emperor's small sister was one of those legends. Such a person at the side of an Emperor created a most formidable combination of powers.

Hades

Ellen was losing blood at a dangerous rate from a torn spleen, Ian held her in his arms and did what he could to stem the flow. Starling was unconscious by now in the middle of a pool of his own blood. Ian was yelling his lungs out for a medical team, one finally made it's way into the rubble strewn building.

"Sir Ian?" Corporal Blithe had a red cross emblem on his sleeve and carried a medical pack.

"Yes dammit! My sister, she's lost a lot of blood! Do something!"

There were tears in Ian's eyes as he pleaded for someone to help Ellen.

Blithe spoke for a few seconds into his small headset, the object of the landing force's search had been found.

"I need the medical shuttle down here right now," Blithe spoke once more on his comlink as he began his work, "Sir Ian seems uninjured, his sister is bleeding out from a left side upper abdominal wound! There are multiple other casualties, alert Haven to be ready to receive."

"I feel cold," Ellen whispered.

"That's just some shock setting in," Ian tried to sound confident, "stay awake! There's still a few shops left in Paris that you haven't looted!"

Ellen managed a weak smile and a half-hearted poke at her brother, then she passed out.

The circling medical craft was soon on the ground in what was left of the smoking compound. Even though it was still dark and the perimeter fence had lost power the Children of The Night decided on prudence. For once the hideous beasts just sat and watched from the depths of the woods. Even the deadly carnivores of Hades had some small sense of self preservation.

Corporal Blithe had injected an expanding foam solution into Ellen's gaping wound. The material had an almost intelligent affinity for finding torn tissue and then sealing it off. Ellen's life threatening bleeding was stopped but she was dangerously low in the blood department. Another medic was performing similar procedures on Starling but with less optimism about saving his life.

Temple, the Capitol City of Grace

The Named Priest was in a blind panic. The planet shield was down, Imperial forces had attacked and apparently taken the Hades installation. The Named Priest was soon going to be answering to the Emperor for high treason, kidnaping and crimes too numerous to list here, if he hung around. Elegant robes were traded for workmen's clothes before Wilfred Beemans slipped quietly out a side entrance of the High Cathedral. Maybe no one would recognize him.
Maybe.

HMS Thunder

"Deploy all forces, proceed with the occupation," Daniel ordered as he left the bridge. Ian and Ellen were now enroute to the medical vessel HMS Haven and the Emperor was going to be there when they arrived.

Alex and Jeremy trotted along with Daniel as he moved as fast as some semblance of dignity allowed.

"Can we..Can we come too?" Jeremy pleaded.

"A little later," Daniel explained, "I need to get to them really fast so I'm going to take the Falcon. You two and Miss Arkins can follow along in a shuttle."

"But..."

"No buts. You need to obey right now, will you?"

Alex and Jeremy's heads nodded solemnly in agreement, they didn't like it but life was often hard. They understood all about obedience.

In the pilot's equipment room Daniel fairly threw off his black uniform as he donned the pressure suit. Word had been passed and the Emperor's Falcon was already being powered up and prepped for a fast launch. On the fast walk to the fighter Daniel heard more than a few shouted "God bless you's" from the hanger crew. Falcon number one's crew chief snapped to attention as the Emperor approached, Daniel's offered hand was warmly taken.

"She's purring like a kitten, Sire. We're all praying for Miss Ellen and you, Sire."

The crew had been listening in on the com channels, they knew why their Emperor was in such a single minded hurry.

"Thank you very much for that, Chief. Please ask the men to keep praying."

"No need to Sire, they will be."

Daniel broke the regulation on launch velocity, Thunder was big enough to lose a little of it's atmosphere through the hanger field.

HMS Haven

Both Ellen and Ensign Starling had been started on artificial blood during the medical shuttle's flight up to Haven. The milky white fluid wasn't quite as efficient as the real thing and gave the recipient a false pallor. The fluid did save lives. Ellen was going to make it, Starling was still very much in doubt. The exhausted Ian was a mental and physical wreck, he too would make it.

Daniel's Falcon had closed on the large medical vessel at a speed that should have insured disaster, instead the Emperor flashed onto the hanger deck and did a neat parking maneuver. The fighter's canopy was open and Daniel was climbing out almost before the ladder was in place. The deck boss just managed to be present as Daniel handed him his suit helmet, they were joined quickly by Haven's out of breath captain

"Point me to my people!"

"Just follow me, Your Majesty," replied Captain Wynt.
Everyone got out of their way.

Ian had been sedated against his wishes and put in a hospital bed close to where his sister was being treated. The arrival in the ward of the Emperor still clad in his pressure suit raised the tension level for all concerned. The doctor in charge of Ellen stepped forward and bowed.

"Your Majesty, I'm Commander Estrada."

Daniel extended his hand to the nervous medical officer.

"Be at ease, how is Ellen, is she...?"

"Miss Murphy is stabilized in a regeneration unit, Sire. Her prognosis is excellent but she will be in the tank... excuse me Sire, the regeneration unit, for at least one week."

Daniel sagged with relief and seemed almost ready to pass out, Doctor Estrada quickly steered him to a chair.

"Are you unwell, Your Majesty?"

"Just very relieved. These past days have been a real bitch. Pardon my royal language."

"May I suggest, Sire, that you get out of that pressure suit and relax for a few moments before you visit with Sir Ian and then see Miss Murphy?"

Daniel nodded in agreement and did as the doctor suggested. Word was passed and one of Haven's midshipmen who was about Daniel's size broke speed records bringing one of his spare clean uniforms to the Emperor.

As Daniel was changing, he asked about Starling.

"It's still very much touch and go, Sire. Ensign Starling suffered severe damage to his right lung, his heart and aorta were also involved. Both of his legs sustained major trauma. His brain functions seem unimpaired so apparently there was no serious lack of oxygen."

Daniel found himself actually feeling real pity and concern for the obnoxious ensign, gratitude also.

"Do your very best for him."

"Of course, Sire. We do our best for all of our patients."

Doctor Estrada then offered some medication to the Emperor. The shot of naval issue brandy had the desired effect on Daniel, after he finished choking on it.

Chapter Eight

Going to Hell

Ellen was all tubes and ghostly pale flesh as she floated in the healing fluid of the regeneration tank. The numerous small automated micro-surgeon devices seemed to swarm over her awful wound like so many eager insects. Daniel almost passed out for a second time.

"She appears much worse than she is in fact, Sire," explained Doctor Estrada. "The projectile caused some considerable tissue damage and blood loss, but it can all be repaired quite nicely."

"You're sure?"

"Very sure, Sire."

"Thank God. And thank you, Doctor." Daniel lingered for a long while just staring at the girl he had come to love so much. Until now he hadn't really realized just how much he did love her.

The Emperor looked in on Starling next. The ensign was a total bloody mess compared with Ellen.

"Will he...?"

"He is beginning to show signs of stabilizing, Sire. It is looking better with each passing hour but we could still lose him."

"Don't lose him. We will be most displeased if you do."

Doctor Estrada felt a moment of apprehension until Daniel put a hand on the doctor's arm and looked at him with a bit of a smile on his face.

"If it is humanly possible, we will not lose him, Sire."

Daniel nodded his understanding and went off to wake up Ian.

Ian looked so very tired and pale as he lay curled up in the hospital bed. Daniel just sat for a time on the foot of the bed and watched his friend sleep. Jeremy and Alex poked their heads into the small hospital cabin, Daniel put a finger to his lips to keep them quiet.

"Shhh. Come here you two," Daniel whispered.

Serious hugging occurred, everyone would be together again.

Daniel decided to let Ian sleep and then went to send Ian and Ellen's parents a long message letting them know that if not sound, at least their children were now safe. Daniel felt some real guilt that harm had come to Ellen while her safety had been intrusted to him, he asked for her parents' forgiveness.

Temple

The city called Grace was not living up to it's name. All of the Church's centers of power were either occupied by Imperial Marines or were in the process of being occupied. There had been some sporadic resistance by the more zealous of the true believers, the Empire's marines were famous for their lack of patience with such people. There were a great many citizens who were more than pleased that the Empire had finally had enough of the Church's ways. A good part of the city seemed to be starting up an impromptu celebration.

Wilfred Beemens had made it into the surrounding rural area and had taken refuge in a farmer's equipment shed.

The refuge would only be temporary.

HMS Haven

Adjustments had been made in the ward where Ellen and Ensign Starling floated in unconscious bliss. Daniel had taken/been put in the cabin next to Ian's. A sedative and the two small warm bodies of Alex and Jeremy curled up next to him had put the Emperor into a much needed deep sleep. Ian woke up before Daniel did, once more the doctors assured him of his sister's mending condition. Starling was also making small progress back into the green zone on his medical chart, Ian found it very hard to continue despising his rescuer. Starling was quite likable when he was unconscious.

"Wake up!" Ian had finally decided to roust the Emperor out of his dreamless sleep, a sharp jab in the ribs did the job.

"Shit!" Daniel stirred and sat up. Alex and Jeremy also showed some signs of life but then just curled into tighter balls as Ian and Daniel spoke quietly.

"Hi," Ian said in greeting.

"Hi yourself. How's Ellen doing?"

"She looks like a harpooned fish but the doctors say she's doing good," Ian replied.

Daniel closed his eyes as if saying a silent prayer of thanks before speaking again to his friend.

"How are you doing?"

"I'm sorry for what I did, I couldn't help it."

"Huh?" Daniel focused in on his friend more closely.

"I'm sorry for building a shield, Strome put a collar on Ellen. I couldn't let him hurt her any more."

"I know that, Alex told me."

It was Ian's turn to be confused, Daniel explained why.

"Have you ever heard of people known as 'Talents'?"

"Sure. A lot of crap if you ask me."

"Alex knew when you were kidnaped, she knew where you were taken to. She knew when Ellen was hurt, both times."

Ian looked carefully at his 'brother' before replying.

"That's not possible." Ian knew physics and mathematics, what Daniel was telling him was outside of those two fields of knowledge.

"Very true, except it was possible, she did it."

Ian replied, maybe in time he would.

"Starling is here, did you...?" Ian started to ask.

"I recruited him as a spy," Daniel explained, "he went to Temple to help get information on those nuts. I recruited him before you and Ellen were kidnaped."

"I think he saved our lives, he led the Governor's people to us and got shot to shit in the fight with them." Starling would have loved to be listening in on this conversation, he had only been trying to save his own precious buttocks when things had gone so very wrong.

"He deserves some real recognition and rewards for what he did," Daniel couldn't believe who he was talking about.

"Any thoughts about what?" Ian asked.

"Promotion two ranks and an NC, his choice of assignments later on. I was toying with the idea of perhaps a knighthood, what do you think?"

"I can't see Starling as a Knight no matter if he did save mine and Ellen's butts. The guy would abuse the title in my opinion."

Daniel nodded and agreed with Ian, Starling would be insufferable enough with the Navy Cross, a knighthood could make him dangerous.

"It may be a moot point," Ian concluded, "I just looked in on him and I've seen better looking cat food."

"He is in a bad way," Daniel agreed, "I do hope he pulls through. I never thought I would ever feel that way about him."

"Me either."

Whether by design or accident Starling was in the very good graces of the Emperor, a position to be envied by anyone seeking to better their career.

Temple

Moderate chaos was now the order of the day in the city of Grace. The populace was of three basic camps. There were those who welcomed the Empire's intervention, these were in the overwhelming majority. There were those who truly believed, who followed the teachings of the Named Priest and the Church. The third and smallest group were those who were the Church elite, they were being summarily rounded up by Imperial forces and incarcerated for interrogation. The Named Priest was still unaccounted for, a large reward was posted for information as to his whereabouts. A poultry farmer with good eyes and a grudge against the Church would soon collect that reward.

HMS Thunder

Daniel had returned for a time to the flagship for a meeting with the naval and marine commanders. The former governor of Temple had not survived the raid on the Hades installation, Daniel was in the process of appointing a temporary military governor.

"We have no desire to punish anyone except those in the Church hierarchy who were responsible for this treason."

"I understand, Sire. What does Your Majesty wish for those found guilty of treason to the Empire?"

Marine Brigadier Hous'a was Daniel's choice for the temporary post of governor, he did not look to be a person to deal with enemies of the Empire very lightly.

"Send them to hell."

"Sire?"

"Hades, General Hous'a. Send them to the continent of Hades."

A few of the assembled officers felt a chill as they listened to the Emperor's words, they had heard about what lived in the forests of Hades. This young person in the black Imperial uniform had a core that could be as cold and unforgiving as a sharp blade.

"Very well, Sire. I shall begin work there on a prison installation..."

"No need, General. Just drop them off most anywhere during the daylight hours," Daniel explained.

"But Sire, they shouldn't be allowed to just go free." General Hous'a was unaware of what awaited the prisoners.

Daniel knew all about the small continent, Ian had told him about it.

"Trust me, General. There will be proper punishment there."

Eventually the General would be briefed about The Children of The Night and it would be his turn to feel a slight chill.

"One more item, general."

"Yes Sire?"

"When the Named Priest is run to ground We shall deal with him personally."

"Yes Sire, I will make it a first priority."

Temple

The Named Priest had used language one would not normally associate with the clergy when he was finally captured. Daniel decided to go down to the city of Grace. Wilfred Beemens was brought to the High Cathedral, the seat of the Church's power on the planet, or at least it used to be. The Emperor was sitting calmly near the ornate altar when Beemens was brought before him. Beemens looked a bit silly in the ill fitting work clothes, he was more than terrified of the icy look in the eyes of the Emperor as he bowed shakily before him. Daniel finally broke the absolute silence.

"Tell Us why?"

Beemens was confused at first by the simple question.

"Your Majesty... I was.."

"Why did you have Ellen Murphy subjected to a collar?"

"I had no part in that! Strome exceeded his.."

"But you did know about it?" Daniel interrupted softly.

"Afterwards, I didn't authorize such a thing!"

"Did you authorize the kidnaping of Sir Ian and his sister?"

Beemens' silence shouted 'yes'. Daniel stood and took two paces toward the sweating man. "It has come to Our attention that a large number of people who dared to defy the Church were sent to the continent of Hades, by your command."

"Sinners! They defiled all that we have worked for!" Beemens seemed to have found some of his

backbone as he barked his reply.

"Indeed." Daniel was not very impressed and had one more question for the Named Priest. "How fast can you run?"

"What?" Beemens' defiance was rapidly fading again.

"Sir Ian related to Us how very fast The Children of The Night are."

Beemens had fainted. When the Named Priest awoke he was on a fast shuttle to Hell. Four burly marines unceremoniously pushed him out of the craft after it had touched down in the middle of a very green and peaceful sunlit glade. It was a full six hours before the sun would set. Beemens searched frantically for two hours for a hiding place before finally settling on a tall tree, there was no other place. As the desperate man was just starting to climb the tree he caught a quick glimpse of two glittering black eyes staring down at him. There was only time for a glimpse, no time at all to do anything but scream and die. The Children of The Night are always very irritable when awakened during the daylight hours.

HMS Haven

Ian had met Daniel on his return to the medical vessel, he was almost sorry about his first question.

"What did you... Did the Named Priest fess up to what he did?"

"After a fashion," Daniel explained, "he was a bit defiant actually."

"What are you going to do with him, all of them?"

"Already taken care of."

"Well, what?"

"We sentenced them to go feed the animals."

"What?" Ian for all of his genius was sometimes a little slow.

"The animals on Hades."

"Oh. Shit." Ian now better appreciated the power his 'brother' held, it scared him some. It scared him a lot.

"How's Ellen doing?" Daniel changed subjects as they walked along toward the medical ward.

"Uh, she's looking better. The micro surgical units finished, her wound is closed up now." Ian was still trying to digest what Daniel had told him.

"Great! What about Starling?"

"They decided to stick in a heart assist so his own heart could heal faster, the doctors say he's doing better. He still looks like shit."

"He always looked like shit," Daniel grinned a little at his first memories of the pimply faced senior midshipman.

"True," Ian agreed.

The Emperor was braced fairly well when Alex and Jeremy intercepted them so he managed to mostly stay on his feet.

"Ellen's getting better!" Alex said in an excited blur.

"I know, Ian told me. Have you two stayed out of trouble?"

"Miss Arkins paddled Jeremy's butt!" Alex giggled.

"Slow down!" Daniel peered down at the embarrassed looking boy and asked the obvious. "What did you do?" Daniel couldn't imagine what would have pushed the proper Miss Arkins to use corporal punishment on one of the Emperor's 'children'.

"I... I tried some..." Jeremy mumbled something else that Daniel couldn't understand.

"Speak up," Daniel prompted, trying to act stern.

"I drank some of her port wine, it made me throw up."

"Hedrankalotofit!" Alex added in a rush.

It took more self control than you can imagine for Daniel to keep a straight face.

"Then she was right to spank your butt. You won't be doing that again, I suppose?"

"No. I'm sorry." Jeremy looked on the verge of tears which was entirely too much for Daniel. The Emperor then picked up the small boy and crushed his ribs with a major hug. Ian was less successful in controlling his emotions and broke out in laughter, it became contagious.

A small part of Daniel marveled at the abrupt change from dealing with matters on Temple to being with his family again. Over three hundred of the Church's higher-ups had been consigned to horrible deaths on Hades, Daniel had sent all of them there.

It didn't even seem to bother him very much.

That did bother him.

Chapter Nine

Harvest

Daniel opted to transfer over to HMS Haven for the return trip to Earth. Matters still required most of the flotilla to remain in orbit around Temple for a time but the Emperor's presence was no longer required. The temptation for Daniel was to proceed directly to New Albion with Ellen but there were many other wounded on Haven who did not deserve the delay. Haven was one day out from Earth when it was deemed time to decant Ellen. Ian and Daniel both knew what to expect when Ellen would return to consciousness, it was still a hard thing for both of them.

"She'll be totally nuts for a while," Ian spoke quietly as he and Daniel stood out of the way. Ellen was being bathed and put into a regular hospital bed, she was still very much asleep.

"I know all too well," Daniel replied.

"It may be hard to tell the difference, actually," Ian observed.

"True."

Doctor Estrada had tactfully requested that the Emperor and Sir Ian leave for a time until Ellen regained her wits, to no avail.

"We have both been through this sort of thing before, doctor. We wish to be at her side when she awakes."

There is a point at which one does not further argue with mankind's absolute ruler, Doctor Estrada knew that point had been reached.

"Very well, Sire. I must insist on being able to administer sedatives if needed."

"Of course, doctor. We respect your judgement. We just need to be here."

Ian and Daniel were sitting on opposite sides of Ellen when she began to react to the stimulant, then it got rather noisy.

"He doesn't even know where we are!"

Ellen was back in the cargo hold of the Sunflower, she sat up abruptly and looked around in sheer terror. For several moments the girl seemed not to recognize the two boys who sat beside her.

"You're safe, Ellen. We're both here with you." Daniel took her hands in his as he spoke to her while Ian leaned over and kissed his panicked sister on her cheek.

"Oh!" Ellen seemed to come into quick focus. She looked first at Ian and then at Daniel.

She chose Daniel and tightly embraced him while Ian grinned from ear to ear.

Ellen's reentry into the world had been a fairly easy one, she was in the arms of the one person in the universe she cared most for. Well, the one person she cared for enough to someday wed that is.

"How long... What's happened to me?" Ellen's words were already becoming rational
"Do you remember being shot, back on Temple?" Ian asked gently.
"Yes. Shit, it hurt like hell!"
Both Daniel and Ian grinned a little at her language which had suffered severely in recent weeks.
"You've been in a regeneration tank, there was a hole in you big enough to plant a tree in," Daniel explained.
Ellen rather immodestly opened her pajama top to examine the wound, there was only pink smooth skin where the injury used to be.
"Good! There's no scar or anything!" Ellen was all female, appearances were very important.
"Thank doctor Estrada here," Daniel said, "he does very good work."
The good doctor was rewarded with a kiss and a hug from Ellen, then the tears started.
"What's wrong?" Daniel asked.
"I'm just so happy that we're all safe and together again," Ellen sniffed, "let's all just go home to the farm. Can We?"
"Yes we can," Daniel answered, "but first we need to stop off for a while on Earth. There's a lot of other wounded on board, including Ensign Starling."
"Ian told me about him while we were on Temple, I guess he saved us," Ellen replied.
"He was mostly dead when they found you, he's still in a bad way but the doctors say he should make it now."
"Is he awake, can we...?"
"No, he's still in a tank like you were," Daniel explained, "they say he may be in there for a month yet."
"Oh dear. What about his family?"
"They live on Earth, England (there will always be). I sent them a personal message, they'll be waiting when we arrive at the Salisbury Naval Hospital facility."
Both Daniel and Ian wondered what Starling's parents might be like. Was a horrid personality a family trait?
"How are the kids, and mom and dad?" Ellen asked.
To answer half of the question two small flying objects were admitted to the room and were soon wriggling their way close to Ellen's side.
"Your folks are fine, just worried silly about you and Ian. I made them stay on New Albion with lots of security forces, it seemed safer for them and easier on them too."
"Good," Ellen agreed, "they needed to stay busy instead of standing around and worrying themselves sick."
"The harvest will be starting soon," Ian added, "we can all do some honest work when we get there."
The idea of working on the farm again felt really good to Daniel, it would be good for everybody.

Earth, Salisbury Naval Facility

When HMS Haven grounded Ellen was up and walking, albeit rather wobbly and weak from her time in regeneration. She insisted on being on hand and standing with Daniel and Ian when Starling's parents came on board to be greeted by the Emperor.
Starling's personality did run in the family.

Frederick and Elizabeth Starling properly bowed before their Emperor as he welcomed them on board Haven. Ian and his sister flanked Daniel as he moved forward to greet the middle-aged couple, they seemed to be dressed in the restrained elegance that suggested 'old money'.
"Welcome aboard Haven," Daniel began, "it's good to finally meet you. We wish the circumstances were better." The Emperor extended a hand to each of Starling's parents, they appeared very calm and collected and not too impressed with their surroundings or host.

"It's a great honor to meet you, Your Majesty." Frederick Starling's voice had a tone to it that seemed to convey some tinge of disdain.

"Indeed it is, Your Majesty," Elizabeth Starling added.

"Thank you both. The doctors say that your son will eventually make a full recovery, for now We must tell you that he is still in very serious condition. You need to prepare yourselves for that when you go in to see him."

"We understand, Your Majesty. We were told that Heywood was on some sort of 'task' for you when he met with his misfortune?" The elder Starling might have just as well have said "some sort of silly damned errand" by the tone he used. The restrained scorn in the man's voice wasn't lost on Daniel.

"He was doing some very important undercover work for the Empire, We asked for him to volunteer for the mission and he acquitted himself very well."

Never mind that not one word of intelligence was ever received from Starling during his assignment.

"I see. May we now look in upon our son, Your Majesty?"

"Of course, sir. Let me first introduce you to Sir Ian Murphy and his sister Ellen. Your son was instrumental in rescuing them."

The Starling's greeted Ian and Ellen with the thinly disguised attitude that one might have when being formally introduced to known criminals. Ellen had an instant dislike for the couple but managed to be as nice as she knew how to be. Ian was polite and smiled and was not at all surprised by Starling's parents. "He probably joined the navy just to get away from these two," Ian thought to himself as they walked along to the ward.

Doctor Estrada met the Emperor and the Starling's just outside the regeneration unit. Daniel, Ian and Ellen stayed back a way as Starling's parents went forward to view the remains, as it were. Everyone had already formed opinions of the elder Starling's, what happened next was almost expected.

"His skin seems to have cleared up," observed Starling's mother.

"Indeed," Frederick Starling agreed.

That was all they had to say. They might have been appraising a prospective pot roast for all of the emotion the ensign's parents showed. The couple turned away after less than a minute, it was a very awkward situation as hurried farewells were made. The Starling's even 'politely' declined the Emperor's invitation for dinner at the Sun Palace that evening.

"The missus isn't feeling too well, Your Majesty. May we beg off for this day?"

"Of course, sir. If We may do any service for you....?"

Everyone felt some real pity for Starling after his parents had left, it was amazing that he hadn't committed double patricide by now.

"What amazing assholes." Daniel's softly spoken appraisal of the departing Starling's was the consensus opinion. Even Ellen had a few unlady-like words for the world class snobs.

The Sun Palace

Lieutenant Jacob Asher, soon to be Prince Jacob, was giving his new assignment his best marine effort. Like Daniel before him the lieutenant had to call a halt now and then and get away from the endless instructional sessions. A young wife provided Asher a close confidant, someone to share all of the misgivings and fears. It was no cakewalk for Stephanie Asher either, she was extremely pregnant and dreaded the coming coronation. Trying to adjust to life in an enormous and opulent palace was bad enough, they both longed for their modest cottage in what was once Bavaria.

"Tell me about him again, what's he really like?" Stephanie Asher had yet to meet the Emperor and was nervous about his impending arrival.

"I barely got to know him before he left for Temple," Jacob began, "he didn't seem at all pretentious, more like a kid brother or something. He was very preoccupied with the mess on Temple and with getting Sir Ian and Ellen back. I liked him, I think you will too."

"I'm as big as a house!" Stephanie fretted about her appearance as most pregnant females tend to do.

"I do believe that His Majesty is acquainted with the knowledge of where babies come from," Jacob teased.

"I wonder what his girl.. Ellen?"

"We'll find out together, I expect she will be nice also."

They would both soon find out, the Imperial shuttle was due in one hour.

Daniel had made himself refrain from piloting the shuttle even though he always felt uncomfortable when he wasn't the one at the controls. Ellen was still weak and tired easily, she was napping against the Emperor's shoulder when the shuttle ever so softly grounded at the Sun Palace. Daniel had to concede that he couldn't have really done a much better job of piloting the craft.

"Wake up kid." Daniel gently shook Ellen as they touched down.

"Huh?"

"Honey, we're home!" Daniel teased.

"Just slap her a couple of times." Ian's advice stirred Ellen into motion, even in her weakened condition she managed a good whack to her brother's head.

"Shit!" Ian now knew that his sister was well into recovery.

Heir Designate Jacob Asher and his wife were in their proper place as the Emperor exited the shuttle, protocol dictated that Daniel be the first out of the craft. The Asher's bowed respectfully as Daniel approached them.

"Welcome back, Your Majesty," Asher began in greeting.

"Thank you, it's good to be back. Very good."

Asher introduced his wife, Daniel's warm smile and a gallant kiss to her hand put her more at ease.

"We apologize for not meeting with you before We left for Temple, time was very short."

"I understand completely, Your Majesty. It's a very great honor..."

"Let's all be at ease," Daniel interrupted, "call me Daniel when we are away from public ears."

By now the rest of Daniel's family had disembarked, the Emperor motioned them over and introductions were made all around. Alex and Jeremy approved of the soon to be Prince of The Empire and his pretty wife, everyone did.

"Ellen's still weak and your wife doesn't need to be kept standing around like this, let's all get inside and relax." Daniel's words to Lieutenant Asher were welcomed by all.

There was a mood of celebration in the Empire, the news of the rescue of Sir Ian and his sister had brought a collective sigh of relief from all. Accounts of events on Temple had featured Ensign Starling prominently, he was the hero of the day. Life on the Murphy farm on New Albion assumed more normalcy, Ellen and Ian's family had been through their own hell in the past weeks.

Ellen Murphy and Stephanie Asher had taken an immediate liking for one another, secrets great and small were soon being shared when they had some time together. The evening of their arrival back on Earth found the females (Alex too) off at one end of the Emperor's sitting room, the males at the other end. Plans for the coming days were being revised.

"My wife will be too close to her delivery date, can we possibly put off the coronation for a time?"

Jacob's request was fine with Daniel, he wanted some extended time on the farm with his adopted family.

"Yes," Daniel replied, "I want to be with Ian and Ellen on New Albion for the harvest and perhaps for the

Founders celebration that follows. How does a two month delay sound to you?"

"That sounds fine, Sire."

"Daniel," the Emperor corrected.

"Daniel." Jacob Asher was having some trouble addressing the Emperor by his first name, in time it would seem only natural. Daniel tended to be far less formal with close acquaintances than the previous emperor, it was all a matter of personality.

Daniel changed the subject to Ensign Starling.

"He's perhaps the biggest ass in the Empire but he did nearly die while rescuing Ian and Ellen, I would like you to see to his needs when he comes out of regeneration. His parents are worse than he is. If he wants to recuperate here at the palace rather than with his parents then see to it that he is well treated."

"I will S.. Daniel."

"He's impossible to like," Daniel explained, "he'll take advantage of you if you let him, don't let him. Keep him in his proper place."

"I shall. Why did you recruit him in the first place?"

"He seemed like a good choice at the time, perhaps not. In any event he has earned some respect and my gratitude, we're stuck with him."

"I will see to it that he is well treated," Jacob replied.

"You will do well not to simply not shoot him, just do your best." Daniel advised.

Church services were in order the following morning, services in a church that had not lost sight of its true purpose. Thanks to God needed to be made. The Reformed Church's cathedral in what was once Madrid had a full attendance, the Imperial pew was at capacity. The choir had the voices of angels, Jeremy was moved to add his voice to the rendition of the ageless Amazing Grace.

The boy had a voice like a crystal bell as he sang the words from the hymnal (he was a quick study and could read well enough by now). All heads within close hearing turned in amazement to watch Jeremy sing, the boy was heedless of everything except the hymn. Ellen and Daniel exchanged questioning looks, no one had ever heard Jeremy sing anything at all. Everyone has some hidden talent, Jeremy's had come to light and it was by no means a small talent.

"Have you ever..?" Ellen whispered.

"No," Daniel was as amazed as she was, "my Lord he can sing!"

"He must have voice and music lessons, he should be in the choir as first solo."

Ellen's assessment was on the mark, Jeremy's voice was a flawless boy soprano and he had an inborn perfect pitch.

Aboard HMS Viking, inbound to New Albion

It had taken the most of a week to get matters wound up before the Imperial yacht had departed Earth. The situation on Temple was stabilized, a civil governor had been decided upon, much to the relief of General Hous'a.

Miss Arkins was given a much needed vacation, she had worked tirelessly to bring human civilization to Alex and Jeremy and had succeeded for the most part. Jacob Asher was once more left to mind the store and to continue his preparations for his coronation as a Prince of The Empire.

Ellen was regaining her strength on a daily basis, Daniel and Ian once more gave her no quarter and received none in return when it came to practical jokes and general teasing. Everyone was catching up on needed rest and relaxation, there were no crises to deal with, no one was in peril, for once all was right in

the universe.

Until the great earthquake on Safe Harbor struck.

Safe Harbor was like New Albion, a fairly new colony and not yet very developed. The planet was more ocean than land, population centers tended to be on the coastlines. A vast subsidence fault shift had in the space of thirty seconds dropped over four-hundred miles of coastline below sea level, the ocean sought its own level and moved inland three-hundred miles in some places. Whole communities simply vanished, others were cut off and surrounded by the sea waters. The planet's capitol city ceased to exist, as did the Imperial Governor. Many isolated farms and villages were for the time being on their own. Safe Harbor's remaining emergency resources could not begin to cope with the disaster, a call for help went out to the Empire.

Daniel was engaged in a hopeless chess game with Ian when the watch midshipman approached them with a message form.

"Your Majesty, pardon the interruption but Captain Chavez asked me to give you this and to await your reply." Midshipman Bowman had by now learned not to fear his Emperor.

"What is it?" Daniel asked as he took the form.

"A general call for assistance from Safe Harbor, Your Majesty."

Ian and Daniel exchanged glances, now what? A quick scan of the message told Daniel that plans for time on New Albion would have to wait.

"Tell Captain Chavez that We shall come to the bridge presently."

"Yes Sire." Bowman left at a good speed for the bridge, Ian asked the obvious question.

"What's happened?"

"There's been an enormous earthquake on Safe Harbor, I'm going to divert Viking and it's escorts to help in rescue operations."

"Shit!"

"Yeah, shit indeed. We have to help, we can't go frolicking off on holiday when we could be saving some lives."

"I know that," Ian replied, "but it just seems like it's one fucking thing after another."

Ian seldom used serious profanity, there were exceptions.

Per Daniel's standing orders Viking's bridge was not called to attention when he appeared, Captain Chavez did brace to attention as he spoke to the Emperor.

"Sire?"

"Divert at once to Safe Harbor, all escort vessels are to prepare for search and rescue operations as needed. Notify Fleet to send whatever assistance that the situation requires."

"Yes Sire, at once."

"Please notify New Albion that we will be delayed and why."

"Yes Sire."

It was going to get very busy on Viking, everyone would be pressed into service.

Viking and its six escort vessels were the closest Imperial craft and would be the first to arrive. Communications with Safe Harbor were fragmented, there seemed to be no central authority left on the planet, no coordination of efforts. A meeting of Viking's officer's and the Emperor was held to form a plan of action.

"How long until substantial resources arrive?" Daniel asked.

"Perhaps five days, Sire. Until then we are just about it as far as outside help is concerned." Captain Chavez's answer meant a lot of lost sleep for all concerned.

Ian was sitting in on the meeting and raised his hand to ask a question.

"What I know about seismology makes for a very thin book, but I do know that heavy after shocks may continue for days, even weeks after a quake of this size. Is it wise to ground our main vessels near the

affected areas? They could be damaged or even rolled on their sides by a major shock."

Everyone had raised eyebrows, it was a point that hadn't been considered.

"I think you're very correct in that assessment, Sir Ian. We should have Viking and the rest of the formation hold a close hover for the time we are there," agreed Captain Chavez.

The great advantage of mass converters was that fuel was not a consideration, the power needed to keep the massive vessels at a dead hover was tiny compared to what the main drive coils drew.

"We would propose using the Falcons as reconnaissance craft," Daniel added, "they won't be of much use in rescue work. They can do the searching, the shuttles can do the rescuing."

There were a thousand details to consider and little time was left, Viking would move into orbit around Safe Harbor in nine hours.

There was time for a short 'family' meeting.

"I feel like I should be doing something useful," Ellen said.

"There will probably be many injured to take aboard, lost children and that sort of thing. If you feel up to it you might help out the crew where you can," Daniel explained. "In fact all of you must do what you can," Daniel pointed at Alex and Jeremy, "you two must behave properly and do as Ellen and Ian say, this is serious stuff."

Alex and Jeremy nodded in solemn agreement, they did understand what was occurring, they would be good.

Even Mister Bonk seemed to understand as she sat paying close attention to the human's discussion.

Safe Harbor

The blue ocean was turned to a muddy brown where the subsidence had occurred, it was clearly visible from orbit. A continent had been altered in the space of a few heartbeats, not even a mighty empire could hold back the forces that were at work here. An older and more established colony would have had an infrastructure of seismic monitors, warning would have been given, measures could have been taken.

"Begin transmitting the recording," Daniel ordered quietly.

"Yes, Sire." Chavez nodded toward the communications officer and everyone on Safe Harbor with a working vid set or audio link began receiving the Emperor's own words that help had arrived. At least some help, seven naval vessels were only a few drops in the proverbial bucket compared to what was really needed.

HMS Viking came in low over the oily looking waters, it was like a sea of chocolate with bits and pieces of wreckage in place of marshmallows. Daniel decided he would be the most use in his Falcon doing reconnaissance duty, Captain Chavez didn't approve but knew to hold his tongue. Viking was the largest of the Imperial yachts and carried a total of eight Falcons and six shuttle craft. Among the escort craft was a small assault carrier with five-hundred marines, along with all of the landing craft and shuttles to get them anywhere fast.

The sea had created a vast archipelago of instant islands large and small. There were people everywhere high ground could be reached, many still clung to debris floating in the water. The only bit of good luck was that it was summer when the quake hit, at least people weren't freezing to death. Captain Chavez picked a small town called Clover, about ten miles inland from the sea's new shore, most of the buildings seemed intact, there were people about. The town's constabulary made contact with the naval vessel's and directed them to land on the central commons field, or rather to hover just above it. A quick meeting with the mayor and a delegation of citizens was arranged, they hadn't expected the first help to arrive to be the Emperor himself. Viking's hanger deck served as a meeting hall.

Captain Chavez used a loud hailer to address the fifty or so people from the town, the Emperor stood modestly at his side as he spoke.

"Welcome, all of you. We apologize for the small amount of help that we have to offer for now, many more vessels are now enroute, but for now there is just what you see."

"We are most grateful Captain Chavez, and to you, Your Majesty." Clover's mayor was nervous, but like all politicians he was in his element for the moment as he continued. "Every flyer and anything else we have that can get airborne are out looking for survivors. The area effected is very large, if you could use your craft in that effort...?"

"Of course. We intend to set up a coordinated search and rescue center here. Some order needs to be established so that our resources are put to the best use."

Viking's Falcons flew as a formation for only a short while before they split up to cover as wide an area as their few numbers allowed. Daniel took his orders from Viking the same as the other pilots, he was assigned a sector on the far west side of the search pattern. Five minutes after he began searching, it became apparent that there would be more people in need than there were resources to help them. What had been an isolated hill top in a small farming town was now teeming with humanity, a good five-hundred people were clinging to the only dry refuge within ten miles.

"Viking control, this is Falcon One. I am orbiting a large number of survivors at coordinates 3256W, 6547E. With your permission I intend to land and assess the situation."

Viking of course gave it's permission, how could they not?

The sight of an Imperial fighter flashing overhead and then turning to circle around their oasis caused the hungry and thirsty refugees to cheer and wave. They weren't lost and doomed to a terrible fate after all.

"Shit! There's hardly anyplace to land!"

Daniel had to very slowly ease the Falcon down amid the crowd of bedraggled survivors. He had nothing to give them but hope, a Falcon had little room for anything but a pilot and its load of weapons. Even before the Falcon touched down, Daniel was back in contact with Viking.

"This is Falcon One, suggest that you dispatch one of the escort vessels to this location, there are too many people here for the shuttles."

Viking would send the Normandy, the assault carrier had an enormous ramp the survivors could use to quickly board. In the meantime Daniel had some reassuring to do with the stranded people.

After powering down the fighter and opening the canopy, Daniel took off his helmet and clambered down the now extended foot and handholds. As he turned to face the crowd, a small girl broke the silence.

"He's just a kid, mommy!"

This produced the first laughter the survivors had heard since the world went all to hell. Even Daniel had to smile some at the bit of humor. A large bearded man in work clothes moved forward to shake Daniel's hand.

"It's good to see you, lad! My name's Fred Heinkle, we'd just about given up hope here, there's no food and no water that isn't saltwater. A lot of the people are in a bad way."

"We just called in for a ship to pick you all up," Daniel explained, "they should be here within an hour at the most."

This most welcome news soon had everyone cheering who was able to cheer.

"I hope word has got back to that little fart of an Emperor about the mess we have here!" Fred replied, putting both feet in his mouth.

"It has sir, you're talking to him." Daniel couldn't help but grin when he said this. Fred just stood there as if frozen, the crowd became extremely quiet.

There was a red gryphon on the fighter's tail, "Grayson" was stenciled just below the cockpit. Fred felt

like a total ass.

"I... Your Majesty...sometimes I have more mouth than brains..." Fred bowed awkwardly as he said this, so did those in the surrounding crowd.

"Not to worry, sir. We have been called far worse at times and by far worse people than you."

Daniel did a small tour of the crowded bit of land, his suit power pack keeping the heat at bay. The people were indeed in a bad way, thirst was the worst problem. A small boy tugged at Daniel's arm and asked if he had any water. The four-year-old boy was rewarded with the flat suit flask of water clipped to Daniel's chest, it almost started a small riot. Fortunately, word came over his earpiece that the Normandy was just minutes away, thoughts of water were pushed back some when Daniel shouted this news to the people.

Whoever was conning the Normandy did a masterful job of easing the huge vessel alongside the islet, the vessel's wide ramp gently touched earth as the first marines stepped off to help people to board. Most of the survivors could walk, some had to be carried on litters, a few had to be placed in body containers. As Daniel was powering up the Falcon and the last of the survivors and marines were moving up the ramp the ground began to shake. Just as the Falcon lifted off and the Normandy moved away the shaking became intense, the muddy sea was in an instant chop. Daniel watched in horrified fascination as the small bit of land sank without any fuss beneath the boiling waters. It was going to be a very long day for the Emperor, for everyone.

The Emperor suggested over the com link with Viking that the Falcon utility pods be made ready and filled with water containers and first aid supplies. The externally carried pods were a good twenty feet long and could hold much needed water and emergency supplies for people who might have to wait some time for rescue. Captain Chavez had decided early on that priority would be given to the largest groups of survivors, you save as many people as you can first and then work to find the smaller more isolated groups of people.

Ian and Ellen pitched in when the first waves of survivors started to fill the temporary shelters on the ground at Clover. Armed with recording pads they set about taking down the names of the survivors and where they were from, it wasn't too physically demanding for Ellen but the job could break your heart. Whole families had been lost, others split up. The small children without parents were the hardest for Ellen and her brother to deal with. It didn't help much that the ground would move about at odd intervals with small tremors and some that weren't so small.

Daniel returned to Viking after four more hours of searching and locating survivors, he was hungry, tired and thirsty. He felt a bit guilty knowing that others were far worse off than he was, still you make for a better rescuer if you eat, drink and rest for a bit. Daniel managed a quick visit with Ian and Ellen as they too paused for some food and regrouping aboard Viking.

"This is a lot worse than I thought it would be," Daniel began.

"There's so many people with nothing left," Ellen added.

"How much help is Fleet sending?" Ian asked.

"Probably not enough," Daniel replied, "I'm going to send them word about how bad things are here before I take off again. It looks like at least a half million people were lost, perhaps more."

"What's it like, looking for the survivors?" Ellen asked.

"Awful. There's a lot of bodies just floating in the water, a lot of people who will soon be dead if we can't get to them in time. How are you holding up?"

"I'm okay," Ellen replied, "a bit tired is all."

Daniel looked pointedly at Ian, "don't let her overdo it, have some marines cart her off to her cabin if she gives you a bad time."

"No problem," Ian agreed, "I may do that anyway."

Ellen wasn't too tired to not whack her brother.

Alex and Jeremy had been left in the care of one of the civilian aides. They were alone for the moment in Emperor's quarters on Viking as the aide answered nature's call. Alex was frightened, there was an image in her mind that would not go away.

"You have to tell him," Jeremy urged quietly.

"I'm scared to!"

"Why?"

"He's really busy, he said to be good!"

Jeremy wasn't as timid as Alex was, he grabbed her by her hand and headed for the door, they were halfway to the hanger deck before the aide assigned to them came back into the sitting room.

"Oh crap!" Charles Pelton could just see himself explaining how he had managed to lose the Emperor's little sister.

Alex and Jeremy were intercepted by two ratings just as they reached the hanger deck.

"Hold on there, where are you two going in such a rush?" Rating Bradshaw snagged Alex, the other enlisted man halted Jeremy.

"Leggo! We have to see Daniel, it's 'portant!" Jeremy pleaded.

The two ratings looked at one another, unsure about what to do. Bradshaw could see that the two kids seemed desperate, and they were the Emperor's kids.

"Come on then, this had better be really important!"

They just missed Daniel's departure for more search duties. Ian and Ellen were just boarding a shuttle to return to the surface when Jeremy's shout reached them.

"Ian and Ellen! Wait!"

The pilot held the shuttle as Ian and his sister embraced Alex and Jeremy.

"What is it?" Ellen asked.

"The water's coming here!" Alex's blurred words were too fast.

"Say it again, say it slowly," Ian said firmly.

"The water... It's going to come here!"

"Sweetpie (Ian's nickname for the girl), the water is miles from here, you're safe here."

"It's going to come here. Tell Daniel!" Alex flashed a spark of anger in her eyes, something Ian had seen in Daniel's eyes before.

Ian and Ellen knew that Daniel believed that his sister was a Talent, she had seen things before that defied any logic. Ian made a quick decision.

"I'm going to the bridge to get in contact with Daniel, keep an eye on these two for now."

Ellen nodded in full agreement, she told the shuttle pilot to leave without them.

Ian's abrupt appearance on the bridge caught the watch officer and crew off guard. Lieutenant Commander Chou was sitting in the command chair and rose to greet the young Imperial Knight.

"Sir Ian, what is it?"

"Pardon my intrusion sir, I need a direct link with the Emperor's Falcon, at once. Forgive me if I seem abrupt."

"No problem, Sir Ian. One moment." Chou punched a couple of buttons on his console and spoke into the voice pickup.

"Falcon One, reply."

"Falcon One, go ahead." Daniel wasn't close to being asleep.

"Falcon One, standby for Sir Ian, if you please."

Chou motioned for Ian to take the command chair.

"Ian here. You put a lot of stock in what Alex can see, she says that the water is going to come here, to Clover."

"Good God." Daniel was silent for a moment, a lot was riding on the word of one very small girl with one very large talent. Her warning couldn't be ignored, the Emperor made a quick decision, in his mind there was no choice. "On my authority, begin evacuations to high ground, make it at least two-hundred miles away. Send out a general alarm to all areas close to the water, there's no telling how much more land may subside."

"If it subsides," Ian replied, still the doubter.

"Yes, if. See to it Ian, I'm depending on you. I'm on my way back."

"Yes Sire." Ian knew how to follow orders, so did Commander Chou and Captain Chavez.

The organized chaos of the survivor camps soon turned into just plain chaos. Many were reluctant to be moved again, others needed no persuasion at all. Those who were the most opposed to leaving were asked how far they could swim. No one would have to be moved by force. It was a full ten hours before the ground began to rumble without interruption, the thirty-foot wall of water arrived at Clover forty-three minutes later.

No one was left to get wet.

Viking's crew grew very quiet when Alex was in sight. How did she know?

New Albion

Ian and Ellen's parents had been through their own part of hell for the past many weeks, they had come to a hard decision about their two wandering children and mankind's Emperor. Parents are by nature very protective of their offspring, pure logic is not always what wins in the end.

"Daniel is like our own flesh and blood, can we really do this?" Elizabeth Murphy had been over this a dozen times with her husband.

"He is that," John Murphy agreed, "I love him too but he is also the Emperor, he is all of the power that there is in the Empire. That much power is dangerous to be around, look at what it has caused to happen to Ellen, and to Ian. Look at what it has caused to happen to us."

"But can we...Ellen won't abide by...."

"She's very young," John Murphy interrupted, "she will mend, she will find a good boy here on New Albion, someone she can have a normal life with."

"It will break both their hearts."

"Ellen went to Earth for a nice summer vacation with Daniel and Ian. She was kidnaped, tortured and then shot, she was very nearly killed. Ian has been in one close call after another ever since he met Daniel, he was nearly killed too. Pain and suffering follow Daniel like hounds from hell, I don't want that for any of my kids, not anymore!"

Elizabeth Murphy nodded in silent agreement but in her heart she felt that it would not be even close to that simple. And what of Daniel? The young boy that the Murphy's had come to care for as one of their own was not someone to be told that he must break with the one girl that he dearly loved. Daniel was mankind's absolute ruler, there was no one who could in actuality tell him to do anything, would he honor their wishes and just walk away from Ellen and his adopted family?

HMS Viking

They had been almost two weeks on Safe Harbor, Daniel had finally decided that things were well in hand. Fleet had sent everything that the Emperor had requested and more, there were now almost as

many rescuers as there were survivors. It was time to resume their voyage to New Albion, the harvest must be about over by now.

"Mother's going to love the things I got for her in Paris!" Ellen's purchases before she and her brother had been kidnaped had been wrapped and re-wrapped by the girl during the voyage from Earth.

"Paris certainly loved it," Daniel teased. He ducked in time, he was learning and had very fast reflexes.

"The Founder's Day dance will be the next day after we arrive," Ellen continued, "I have the perfect dress to wear!"

"So who are you paying to take you to the dance?" Daniel asked.

"Billy Jenkins! He's a lot more polite than you and much better looking!"

"Oh." Daniel pretended mortal heartbreak.

"If he's spoken for I suppose I can make do with you," Ellen conceded.

"Maybe I'll just have him beheaded," Daniel replied casually.

As usual Daniel and Ellen's mock argument ended in a kiss, they were getting very good at kissing. Ian was across the large day cabin and was trying to ignore them as he read an inscrutable paper on propulsion theory.

"Knock it off you two, you're making Mister Bonk nervous, me too."

Ian's rude remarks were added to by Jeremy and Alex as they aped Daniel and Ellen by kissing one another and then collapsing into hysterical giggles.

New Albion

Daniel and Company stood at the top of Viking's ramp and waved to the Murphy family, Alex tugged at her big brother's sleeve and whispered urgently to him.

"Something's wrong!"

Daniel bent down to listen better. "What is it, Pest?"

"Ellen'smommyandaddy. Something's not right!"

"Is there danger?" Daniel was getting alarmed by now.

"No. They feel bad about something."

Ellen was listening also, she exchanged a confused look with Daniel before they proceeded down the ramp.

"Come on, you and Jeremy be nice, we'll sort this out later." Daniel said.

"kay." Alex did as she was told, she didn't know how not to.

The reunion was warm, Ellen and Ian nearly had their ribs crushed. The Murphy's had bowed in respect at Daniel's approach, he and his two 'kids' had held back a little while Ian and his sister were being greeted. The Emperor was then in turned hugged and greeted warmly but there seemed to be just a little bit of something held back. Alex and Jeremy were introduced, they smiled and endured the kisses silently.

"I apologize for the delay in coming here sir," Daniel began, "we just couldn't bypass Safe Harbor when they needed our help."

"We understand, Daniel. First things first." John Murphy did understand, just one more disaster thrown in the poor boy's path. "Let's all go inside and talk, there's a million questions for everyone."

"Yes sir. Is there any spare room in the big barn? Ellen did some shopping in Paris."

"I'll clear a place."

There wouldn't be a lot more humor between John Murphy and the Emperor this day, or perhaps ever again.

After one of Elizabeth Murphy's amazing lunches Daniel was asked by John Murphy to go for a walk with him, an inspection of the new irrigation equipment was the excuse. Daniel sensed that something was very wrong, Alex had put him on edge before he had even stepped off of the royal yacht.

"What's bothering you, sir?" Daniel asked as they walked along the edge of the stubble covered north fields.

"Does it show that much?" John asked.

"Yes sir. Alex sensed it too before we even met today."

"She is indeed a Talent, then?"

"Yes sir, she's something very special."

"So are Ellen and Ian."

"Yes sir, of course they are."

The man stopped and looked directly at his Emperor before speaking again.

"You are going to hate me for what I have to say to you, but say it I must."

"Sir?"

"Ellen was nearly killed and Ian was placed again in mortal danger just because they were close to you."

"I... I feel awful about that sir. All I can do is apologize to you, I should have done more to see to their safety."

"You are not to blame, Your Majesty. It is your title and what fate seems to hand you at every turn. I am asking you to not see Ellen anymore, to let her have a normal and safe life her on New Albion apart from you. I want you to let Ian have that same sort of life."

If the man had suddenly driven his fist into Daniel's stomach the effect would have been no different. The Emperor just stood and stared blankly at Ellen's father, unable for a moment to even form a complete thought.

"I've always behaved properly toward Ellen, there has always been a chaperon. We never.." Daniel thought that perhaps the man believed he and Ellen were having sex or something, maybe that was why he was doing this.

"I know that, it's not your behavior. You are a white hot and dangerous flame, Ian and Ellen are flying too close to that fire."

Ellen's mother was at this same moment having a similar conversation with her, the girl's reaction was much the same, then it got very noisy.

"No! Never! Why the hell are you doing this to us?" Everyone in the house heard this, maybe everyone on the farm.

"Dear, we all love Daniel.." Elizabeth Murphy tried to explain, Ellen was having none of it.

"Kicking him out of the family is a damned strange way to say that you love him! Why don't you just take the both of us out behind the barn and shoot us?"

"Ellen, calm yourself, your language!"

"Bullshit! If you think that you're going to just snap your fingers and say no more Daniel you're crazy!

We're going to be married when we're older!" There were tears of fury and outrage in Ellen's eyes. Why was this happening? Had her mother and father gone insane?

Ian was off with his brother Freddie in new barn, it had been placed at the older brother's feet to tell Ian what had been decided.

"You've got to be kidding!" Ian knew his big brother was keen on practical jokes but this went far beyond being funny.

"I wish I was," Freddie explained. "Personally, I think mom and dad have gone 'round the bend on this, I sure don't agree with them. Don't be pissed off at me, Daniel's like my other brother as far as I'm concerned."

Ian nodded in understanding and held off on his impulse to try and break his brother's nose, Freddie was twice his size anyway.

"Ellen and Daniel won't agree to this, they would crawl through molten lava first."

"So what do we do, what do you do?" Freddie asked. He wanted no part of being between Daniel and his sister. In truth Freddie did love them both.

"My place is beside Daniel, maybe it always has been. I love mom and dad and I always will, they should come to their senses after a while."

"It's going to be really exciting in the meantime." Freddie's observation was the only thing that made much sense at the moment.

Daniel just glared at the elder Murphy, the man felt distinctly uncomfortable under that gaze.

"You are the...you are my Emperor. I cannot impose my will on you, I'm only trying to protect my daughter and son."

"I will never hate you sir, I never could, about that you were wrong. I know you mean only the best for Ellen and Ian, so do I. They are your son and daughter, I respect that. They are not your property though, they will choose what sort of life they want, you cannot choose for them, nor can I."

"I am their father!"

"Yes sir you are, and I am their Emperor. Neither one of us has the power to tell their hearts what to feel."

Daniel turned and walked away, he did not look back.

The Founders Day Dance would have to do without it's most anticipated guest of honor and his pretty escort.

For once Alex took the initiative and hurried Jeremy out of the unhappy home, they intercepted Daniel and avoided another major blowup in the house.

"Come on, you two. Let's go back to Viking for a while, people need to cool off, I know I do. I need to do some thinking."

"Ellenandhermommyelledalot!" Alex still tended to talk at about 8X speed.

"Yes well, there's been a lot of that today."

"Arewe... Are we going to leave IanandEllen here?"

"I don't think so. I hope not."

Daniel wondered for the first time if perhaps it would be better for Ellen and Ian if they were indeed away from him.

The Emperor's sudden return to Viking was unexpected, the vessel's captain barely managed to make it to the top of the ramp to greet him.

"Your Majesty....is anything wrong?" Chavez could plainly see that there was indeed something amiss.

"If you would Captain, have my Falcon prepped for launch. I need to be alone to think some things through."

"Yes, Your Majesty. May I be of any service, I don't mean to pry?"

"There are problems between Ourselves and the Murphy's of a personal nature. We appreciate your concern."

Chavez nodded his understanding but wondered just what had occurred in the distant white farmhouse.

Daniel escorted Alex and Jeremy to the Emperor's quarters on the vessel.

"Be good, I just need to be alone for a while to do some thinking, I'll be back by dinner time."

"Mister Murphy feelsbadtoo." Alex's voice was almost a whisper.

"I know, everyone does. I love you both, don't forget that."

"kay."

Daniel's Falcon departed the grounded Viking at a crushing acceleration, it's drive coils screaming in protest. The Murphy's home flashed underneath the fighter and disappeared from sight. Only Freddie was outside to see the Falcon pass overhead, he stood slack jawed as the craft then climbed straight up with visible shock waves trailing off it's wing tips. Freddie had become very good at piloting his own

small flyer, or at least he thought he was. The performance of the Falcon and the person who was flying it caused Freddie to reassess his own modest skills.

Falcon One flew without any real direction for over an hour, Daniel tried to sort out his emotions, tried to make some sense out of what had befallen him. He could understand why John Murphy had come to feel the way he did, it was dangerous to be around Daniel Grayson. Ellen and Ian did deserve better than what had happened to them since he had come into their lives. Could he bring himself to say goodbye to them? Should he say goodbye to them? The memory of Ellen floating in a regeneration unit finally pushed him to believe that her father might be right.

He knew that he could never part with Ian and Ellen if he had to face them, better to get it done with quickly.

"Viking Command, this is Falcon One."

"Go ahead Falcon One." Lieutenant Marks had the com duty.

"Give me a link to Captain Chavez."

"Standby, Falcon One."

It only took a few seconds, Chavez was only feet away.

"Captain Chavez here, Falcon One."

"If you please Captain, recall all of your people and proceed to departure orbit at your convenience. We shall rendezvous with you in orbit."

"At once Sire, shall I contact the Murphy's?"

"No. Please proceed at once." The Emperor's voice was calm, they couldn't see the tears on his face.

"Understood, Falcon One."

No one did understand but Viking lifted off thirty minutes later.

The slight vibration of the house brought the Murphy family outside, they knew by now what that the noise signified a large vessel underway. Ellen sank to her knees in utter despair, her mother moved to comfort her. "Don't you dare touch me!" Ellen's voice was almost a hiss.

Ian looked at his father, his calm and icy words cutting through the man like a knife.

"Well father, I hope you're fucking happy."

John Murphy drew back his hand to slap his son but did not follow through, perhaps he had caused enough pain for one day.

Ellen and Ian held a private conference that evening, they were both of similar minds.

"Pack a bag, a small one." Ian said quietly.

"When do we leave?" Ellen had already done some packing.

"Tonight, after everyone is asleep, I don't want a big fight scene. We'll just 'borrow' Freddie's flyer, he's on our side anyway."

"Then what?"

"Bakerstown. We book passage to Earth or sign on as crew to work our way, whichever is faster."

"Money?" Ellen had very little herself (except for her 'card').

"I have an unlimited Imperial Bank card, Daniel gave it to me a while back. He even apologized for not thinking to do it sooner."

"Oh! He gave me one too, he told me not to tell our folks. We can just buy passage!"

"Maybe. There aren't many passenger vessels that stop here, we might pay for space on a merchantman, or even sign on as crew."

"What about a naval vessel?" Ellen asked.

"I don't think so. It would put any naval captain in a very awkward position if we asked for help, even if I am a knight and you are the Emperor's girl we are still civilians. They have regulations to follow."

"Can't we just get a message to Daniel?"

"That would take time we don't have, I don't want to have to face father, he'll be heading for Bakerstown

as soon as he figures out what we're up to. Daniel might not want us to come, I think father really messed up his thinking about us."

"Better that we just show up on his doorstep?"

"Yes, he needs to be put straight, he's probably blaming himself for what happened to you and to me."

"What could I do as crew?" Ellen had endless questions.

"Bat your eyes at the vessel's captain and look sexy."

Whack!

"Just kidding, shit! We'll just have to wing it."

"What did father say to Daniel to make him leave like this? I can't believe he would go without talking to us first."

"Daniel probably thought he was doing what's best for us or something, he would die for either one of us if he had to."

"I would die for him." Ellen replied softly.

"That makes two of us."

It was one in the morning when Ian and his sister quietly made their way out to Freddie's prized possession. They both felt some serious remorse for sneaking away from their parents like this, obedience to one's parents was one of the pillars of the New Empire's civilization. Ian's piloting skills were as bad as ever, he almost took part of the new barn's roof off before he sorted out the flyer's touchy controls. Apparently Freddie fancied himself a fighter pilot and had modified the control input settings.

"Can you actually fly this thing?" Ellen squeaked, trying to control her stomach.

"Sort of. I never would have made it out of academy if Daniel hadn't lost a lot of sleep coaching me through small craft piloting."

"Freddie got his civil ticket on his first try."

"I'm not Freddie. Would you like to take over?"

"No, I'll just sit here and be quiet."

"That would be a first."

Ellen restrained from whacking her brother, he didn't need any further distractions right now.

Chapter Ten

Family

HMS Viking

Daniel's rendezvous with Viking took place four-hundred miles over Sergeant Boone's new ranch in Plainsland. Captain Chavez greeted the Emperor as he climbed down from the Falcon. Daniel was outwardly composed, in fact he was pretty much on autopilot.

"Viking is at your service, Your Majesty."

"Thank you. Make for Earth at your convenience."

"Yes Sire, at once."

"We would like to be left alone with Alex and Jeremy for now."

"You will not be disturbed, Sire."

And the Emperor was indeed left alone with what seemed to be his only remaining family. There was much quiet speculation between Viking's crew and officers. What had happened?

New Albion, Bakerstown

"Shit!" Ian had just finished scanning the port's shipping board.

"Double shit!" Ellen could read too.

There was at present exactly one interstellar vessel in orbit around New Albion, a Free Trader cargo vessel, the Maid of Avon. The vessel was at the moment finishing up off loading farm equipment at the port, it was due to leave orbit in two more hours for Eden Found. Ian had been around Daniel long enough to know what to do next.

"Come on! The port contracting office can get in touch with Avon's captain for us!"

Ellen had a thousand questions as she ran alongside her brother to the distant office.

"Do Free Traders take passengers?"

"Daniel once told me that they will do anything that's legal as long as the price is right." Ian explained.

"Then we make the price very right!" Ellen replied. "What about Freddie's flyer?"

"Father will find it, if not I'll buy Freddie a brand new one."

"You may have to anyway, I think you bent one of the landing struts when you crash landed here."

"I didn't crash land! I just misjudged our descent a little."

Ellen and Ian did have one very lucky break this late night (morning). FTV Avon's captain was in the contracting office finishing his paperwork for a load of refined titanium already ferried up to Avon.

"Are you two running from the constables or something?" Captain Harte peered with some suspicion at the two young people asking for passage to Earth.

"No sir, just bad family problems." Ian handed the man his unlimited bank card, it had his name on it.

"Sir Ian Murphy?" Harte's eyebrows merged with his hairline.

"Yes sir, this is my sister Ellen."

"Good God, it is you, both of you!" Harte, like everyone else, had closely followed the Emperor's short but exciting career. "Why are you....?"

"It's a long story sir, we have not much time to tell it right now. When things get sorted out His Majesty will be in your debt, so will we."

Harte paused for a moment before answering. "Avon's not going anywhere near Earth, you might get passage when we get to Eden-F."

"That will be fine, sir. We can pay whatever fare you think is proper."

Harte nodded his agreement. "Then let's go, my business is finished here. Don't expect elegant quarters on Avon, it's a family run ship and we don't waste money on gold trim and fancy food."

"That's the way Daniel described Gryphon," Ian replied.

"Daniel?"

"His Majesty," Ian added.

"Ah, yes. I met his father once years ago, he was a tight-fisted bastard who drove a hard bargain, but honest." A high compliment for any Free Trader.

Avon left orbit just as John Murphy and his wife arrived at Bakerstown. They did eventually find Freddie's flyer and it did have a slightly bent left landing strut. Freddie wouldn't really care.

HMS Viking

Alex knew that bad things were happening, you didn't need to be a Talent to understand that. Alex's big brother seemed to want to be close to her and Jeremy, they all sat nestled together in the sitting room of the Imperial quarters.

"Whydidiyou...why did we go away without IanandEllen?"

"I..I didn't want them hurt again. Bad things seem to happen to people around me." Daniel tried to make the small girl understand what even he did not really comprehend.

"Meand.. Me and Jeremy are around you. We love you."

"I love you too, Pest. I love both of you. I'll try to keep you both safe, I'll do my best."

"EllenandIan have run away. They want to be with you, with us."

"What?" Daniel sat more erect, what was it that Alex knew?

"They don't want to...they want to be with you, with us."

"Are you very sure about what you see?"

"Yes."

"Listen to Lex, she always knows stuff." Jeremy's words were all that Daniel needed to spur him into action.

"Intercom!" Daniel yelled.

"Message?" The wall unit had a soft female voice, you could have very intimate and prolonged conversations with it if you were bored.

"Bridge. Inquire New Albion's traffic control about all vessels departing within the last twelve hours. Correction, within the last twenty-four hours."

FTV Maid of Avon

Ian and Ellen had arrived aboard the Free Trader vessel just in time for breakfast. The food was as described and there was plenty of it.

All eyes at the massive breakfast table were on Avon's famous passengers, a great deal of whispering went on between the vessel's children. There were a lot of children and those out of diapers worked for their food. Ian attempted to break the ice.

"What sort of cargo are you carrying, Captain Harte?"

"On this leg mostly titanium ingots, from the new smelting complex on New Albion."

"And how many days until Eden Found?"

"Five days and some change. We have some of the last of the wheat harvest also."

"Is the Emperor nice?" This from a very small voice across the table from Ellen.

"Yes dear," Ellen replied, "he's a very nice person. What's your name?"

"Rebecca, everyone calls me Becky though."

For some reason Ian's ears turned a bit redder, they always did at the mention of that particular female name (Ellen had never been told). About five people asked at once what it was like at the Sun Palace, Ellen tried to answer.

"It's overwhelming at first, I take that back, it's always overwhelming. It's like a giant art museum, everything is either a thousand years old or completely priceless, usually both. I felt afraid to touch anything the first time I was there, or even to sit on anything. My bathtub was solid gold and almost big enough to swim in."

A number of the smaller mouths at the table made round O's at the thought of a solid gold bathtub.

The hard question came from Captain Harte's wife, Amanda.

"You don't have to answer, but why are you two here of all places?"

"My father... My father came to the decision that he didn't want myself and Ian to be around Daniel..the Emperor any longer. He somehow thinks it's too dangerous and such." Ellen explained.

"Because of the kidnaping and all?"

"Yes ma'am, I guess that was the final straw in his mind. Mother seemed to go along with him on this. His Majesty departed suddenly from new Albion, I think he felt guilty about what happened to us, father must have been just awful to him."

"So you two sort of ran away, then?"

"That we did, ma'am. We love our parents but they are very wrong about Daniel, the Emperor that is."

"Can we do anything useful while we're aboard, sir?" Ian asked of the captain.

"You're not obligated, I charged a good price to the cards you both have."

"I have my master's rating in propulsion and navigation, sir. Maybe I can be of some use to you, better than just sitting around idle."

"I don't have a master's rating in anything," Ellen added, "but I have two working hands and we both come from a farm family. Keeping busy is better than not keeping busy."

Angus Harte and his wife looked at each other and nodded, it would seem that the Emperor knew how to pick good friends.

"Then we'll put you both to work. Mind you though, there will be no fare cut."

Everyone at the table laughed, even so Harte was telling the truth. Free Traders were indeed a tight-fisted bunch of bastards.

HMS Viking

"One vessel, Your Majesty." Captain Chavez reported in person, one does not simply call The Emperor on the intercom. "A Free Trader, the Maid of Avon, bound for Eden Found."

"Manifest?" Daniel was all ears.

"Titanium and wheat Sire, we are expecting further information momentarily on any possible passengers, the local Imperial Agents are undertaking a discreet investigation."

"Free Traders rarely carry passengers," Daniel observed with some disappointment.

As if on cue Midshipman Watts entered the royal quarters with a message form in hand. Chavez took the sheet from the smiling middle, it was indeed the news they wanted.

"Sir Ian and Miss Ellen were observed in conversation with Avon's master, one Angus Harte. The three of them left the port offices together, Sire. Mister and Misses Murphy later appeared at the port inquiring about Sir Ian and Miss Ellen."

Daniel smiled for the first time since leaving New Albion, Ellen and Ian were safe, they wanted to be with him!

Daniel wanted to be with them. What had he been thinking to just leave them like that?

"Alter course for Eden Found, if you please."

"At once, Your Majesty. Shall we attempt to contact and intercept the Avon?"

"No. No point in that, if they're with Free Traders they will be safe. We'll just be there to meet them when they arrive."

"Very good, Sire."

Viking was a far faster craft than any Free Trader cargo vessel, Avon would have a most unusual welcoming committee.

FTV Maid of Avon

Ellen wound up helping in Avon's hydroponics unit, she was learning about farming without soil and thoroughly enjoyed the work. Dorothy Harte was about Ellen's age and needless to say much of their conversation in hydroponics centered about boys and one certain boy in particular.

"What's he really like?" Dorothy (Dot) asked.

"He has to be two people really," Ellen explained, "when he's the Emperor he can be as hard as diamond and cold as ice if need be. When he's just 'Daniel' he's a total sweetie, me and Alex can wrap him around

our little fingers."

"Alex, his little sister?"

"Yes. She's amazing, an actual Talent. Alex and Jeremy suffered so horribly when the Snakes had them."

"Isn't that sort of spooky, being around someone like her?" Dot asked.

"No, not at all. She's like her big brother, sweet to the bone."

"Do you and Daniel.... His Majesty, do you...?"

"No we don't. We kiss and cuddle lot, he's so damned honorable it gets a little frustrating at times. We do intend to marry when we're older."

"How old?" Dot asked, all eyes and ears by now.

This caught Ellen a bit off guard, how old indeed?

"You know, I'm not too sure. I hope not very much longer."

Ian very naturally migrated to the vessel's engineering section, Captain Harte's brother Michael was in charge there.

"From what I have heard about you Sir Ian, there probably isn't much I can teach you about propulsion systems and engineering."

"Please just call me Ian, and yes there is always something new to be learned about engineering."

"All right, Ian. As you can see Avon's an old lady but she's been kept in good shape. We spend what's needed on things that matter, polish and spit comes if and when it's possible."

"Yes sir. I see that the main coils have been rewound with the new Barkins super-c wire."

"Indeed they have. Angus nearly cried when we paid for that but the new windings will last ten times longer than conventional superconductors. It will save money in the long run."

"Have you considered cross linking the transition circuits?" Ian's casual inspection of the obsolete propulsion layout had already found something that could be made better.

"Beg pardon?" Michael Harte was already the one doing the learning, he had never heard of such a thing. Ian explained.

Michael got a headache.

Avon's re-entries into normal space would be smoother after Ian and his new friend made some modifications. Angus still wouldn't cut the passage fare.

Eden Found

The unannounced arrival of the Imperial yacht and the small flotilla of escorting war craft was the talk of the entire planet, it had been over two-hundred years since an Emperor had visited the sleepy planet. Eden Found had a reputation for being rather laid back, no one seemed to work much harder than was needed to maintain a comfortable existence. Every colony had it's own quirks, it made for an interesting Empire.

Daniel debated whether or not to go down to the surface for an informal visit with the planetary governor. "We may as well," Daniel decided, "Avon won't show up for another forty hours or so." Besides, it would keep his mind occupied.

Governor Alfred Winslow was in a blind panic trying to arrange some sort of suitable welcome for the Emperor. On a regular basis he was heard to shout at no one in particular, "Why is he here with no notice?" No one had any answer that made any sense. When the Emperor's shuttle finally grounded in front of the Governor's mansion Winslow had managed to assemble a presentable honor guard and most of the planet's regional administrators. A crowd of perhaps one hundred thousand curious citizens of the city of Selwyn had gathered to perhaps catch a glimpse of their Emperor.

"Welcome to Eden Found, Your Majesty." Winslow had bowed as required. "We apologize for this

poor welcome, if we had known..."

"We are the one to apologize, Governor. Matters of a personal nature required Us to be here to meet an arriving vessel. We thought it proper in the meantime to come and pay Our respects, so to speak."

Winslow breathed a sigh of relief before responding.

"In any event you are most welcome, Your Majesty. If I may be of any service at all."

"Introduce Us to your people here, then let's have lunch, We're starved."

In keeping with the traditions of the planet it was a very low key visit, Daniel didn't even have to sit through any tedious display of native dances and traditions, the planet didn't really have any.

"I could grow to like this place," Daniel thought.

FTV Maid of Avon

The elderly cargo vessel moved into orbit around Eden Found expecting to do nothing more than off load it's wheat and part of it's titanium consignment. Captain Harte was more than a little put off when a flotilla of Imperial war craft closed on him and took up surrounding positions. It seemed as if every view screen had a naval vessel in it.

"What the flaming shit is this?" Harte growled.

"It seems that His Majesty was expecting us." Ian replied as he stood beside the irate Harte on Avon's bridge.

"The Emperor?" Harte croaked.

"Apparently. That big cruiser is the Viking, the Imperial yacht."

The com link on Avon's bridge came to life, the Imperial Navy wanted to chat.

"Maid of Avon, this is His Majesty's Starship Viking, please respond."

Harte found his voice again. "Go ahead Viking, Angus Harte commanding Avon."

"Avon, please confirm that Sir Ian Murphy and Miss Ellen Murphy are passengers on your vessel."

"They are aboard as legal paying passengers, Viking."

"Very good, Avon. Standby to receive His Majesty on board, if you please sir."

Harte nearly froze up entirely but managed to finally reply. "Understood, Viking. Give us thirty minutes to make room on our hanger deck, we were not expecting visitors. His Majesty will be most welcome."

"Thank you, Avon. Thirty minutes."

Harte started bellowing orders to shift the cargo shuttles out of the way. General confusion prevailed throughout the Free Trader vessel as everyone tried to make themselves and the vessel presentable for the Emperor, a hopeless task for the time they had.

After exactly thirty minutes had elapsed one of Viking's smaller shuttles made gentle contact with Avon's crowded hanger deck. The gleaming black shuttle with the golden Imperial crest on its side looked very out of place amid the work worn cargo shuttles and lashed down wheat containers. Avon's Captain and family crew were assembled and as neat and clean as circumstances allowed. Ian and Ellen stood as nervous as everyone else but not as nervous as Daniel was.

"Walk beside me when we get on the deck," Daniel instructed Alex and Jeremy, "act properly, everyone will be watching."

"kay." Both children were practically spit shined, so was Daniel.

Two Imperial Marines proceeded the Emperor and stood to attention on the deck to each side of the short ramp. As Daniel appeared Avon's people bowed in respect, so did Ian and Ellen. Captain Harte moved forward and bowed once more as he welcomed the Emperor.

"Welcome aboard The Maid of Avon, Your Majesty."

"Thank you, sir. Our apologies for this sudden intrusion, two people We care a very great deal for are

your passengers." Daniel extended his hand to Harte, the man accepted this most singular honor in good form. Harte turned and gestured to Ian and his sister, no more words were needed. Alex, Jeremy and The Emperor cast formality aside and merged in a tangle of hugs and kisses with the two 'runaways'. Avon's crew smiled and broke into some small applause.

"Don't you ever do that again!" Ellen looked Daniel in the eye and shook him by his shoulders.

"I... I thought it was like your father said..." Daniel stammered, not really knowing how to respond.

"Father means well but sometimes he can be a total ass about things." Ellen replied.

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry you had to run off like you did, I guess I wasn't thinking too clearly."

"It's all history now," Ian added, "if nothing else you've learned how hard it is to be rid of us."

"Practically impossible, it would seem." Daniel grinned as he tried to rid his cheeks of moisture with his sleeve.

Avon hosted His Majesty for lunch, it was like coming home to be at the large communal table of a Free Trader vessel. Daniel signed the vessel's ancient leather bound log book and penned his appreciation for the service that Avon had done. Ian and Ellen still didn't get a fare cut.

And then Daniel and his family went home. To Earth.

North American Continent, The Summer Palace

Senior Flight Lieutenant Heywood Starling was convalescing nicely as a guest of the Emperor, true to form he was being a total pain in the ass. The Palace staff drew lots for who had to be at Starling's service. He required a lot of service.

Daniel had earlier managed to be on hand when Starling came out of regeneration, an event that Starling's parents managed to miss. Most people awake from regeneration frightened and confused, Starling just started cursing nonstop until serious sedation gave the medical staff some needed relief. It's difficult to make a nurse or doctor blush but it is possible. The Emperor had just wandered off shaking his head and wondering why he had been so damned concerned about Starling in the first place.

"He's as fit as I am," Ian complained, "he'll be here till winter if you let him!"

Ellen was also present, a 'family' conference was underway. It was time to ease their guest out the door.

"I'll have Fleet cut him some orders today, the expedition to N35467 leaves in four days. They can use another Falcon pilot for air cover."

Ian shuddered at the idea of going back to that place, not that he was mind you. Daniel could see his friend's discomfort.

"Don't worry about Starling, worry about those poor creatures who will be on the same planet with him."

