

ERUBUS TALES | BOOK TWO

NORMAN WESTHOFF
THE COLOR OF
GREED



Prologue - Charitable Donation

Fay Del Campo knew she was stepping into a trap. It might be fanged or it might be fur-lined, but when Sir Oscar Bailey summoned her, she guessed his intentions immediately and mustered her high cards.

She remembered this place oh-so-well. Two years past, at this very suite in the Matterhorn Hotel, she'd laid a trap of her own, bluffing Oscar into letting her be part of the first — and so far, only — mission he dispatched to Antarctica. It took a bit of cajoling — some called it blackmail — before he agreed to let her join his crew, to be his liaison for locals who might otherwise object to an alien race invading their land to haul away minerals.

After so long without contact, his phone call surprised her. In his masterly and disarmingly casual tone, he mentioned that he was in Zürich on business and felt like they needed to catch up. Would she care to renew their acquaintance? No hard feelings, etc., etc.

Fay checked her hand mirror, tucking a sprout of gray hair into the still-plentiful dark-red curls. She was not about to tint the gray. Not yet, anyway. She knocked.

Oscar opened the door and stood at attention, not one feature changed in the past fifteen months. The same piercing steel-gray eyes, pug nose, thin-set lips and prominent chin, offset by glossy white hair and clear smooth facial skin. His pores emitted the male scent of verbena. How sweet it would be to have Oscar's team working on her own body, forestalling the whole aging process.

His figure always reminded her of a bowling pin, solid but balanced. His casual uniform had not changed a bit: signature velvet robe, solid crimson except for a discreet white cross emblem sewn onto the left breast, cream-colored sash and matching scarf, anchored by a gold pin in the shape of a ring.

"Fay," beamed Sir Oscar. "So glad you could make it."

"Oscar. Thank you for the invitation. I was hoping that we could reconnect sometime."

"Of course. Let bygones be bygones." He drew back and gestured for her to sit, then glided across the room and opened a decanter. "A bit of Yukon Sherry?"

He still had a flair for the exotic. "Don't mind if I do. We hardly ever get Canadian imports in Switzerland anymore."

"A shame. I'll have to look into that. Do you think there's a market?"

"Among certain oenophiles, yes. Those who aren't troubled by their enlarged carbon footprint from consuming imported luxuries." She took a sip of the sherry and immediately regretted her judgmental display. This really was good stuff.

Oscar chuckled. "Just like the Orfea Del Campo we have come to know and love." He eyed her over the rim of his glass as he sipped. "One can hardly turn on the telly these days without encountering your charming persona. I was afraid you would be too busy for a chat."

If you only knew. All those public appearances, she was the person most qualified to make them. Yet they had come to serve another purpose: warding off the single-middle-aged-woman blues. She had become adept at dealing with velvet-sheathed daggers. "Never too busy to meet with you, Oscar."

"Excellent." He put the glass aside. "Look. I know you're still concerned that I might have designs on iridium rights in Antarctica."

"I should have been able to figure it from the get-go, but it was the Onwei tribe's old witch, Yoka Sutu, who put two and two together. The main reason you're so enthralled with big deposits of iridium is to put them to their main use."

"That use being...?" The bushy eyebrows rose.

"Coating ever-larger airships to navigate the caustic skies of the Earth's middle latitudes. This only makes sense if you wanted to ferry large quantities of something to, not from, Antarctica."

"I'm all ears."

"People, Oscar, farm families to till virgin soil that's been buried under ice for eons. Everyone knows that Canadian farmland is being swallowed up by rising sea levels. Another generation, you'll need to import food. The only country exporting meat or grain these days is China. Clearly this is a matter of national security." Fay felt the flush rising in her cheeks.

"Hear, hear," said Oscar.

She reached for her glass. "It won't hurt that you can turn a few bucks in the process."

Now Oscar turned mum, just a coy smile upon his lips.

Fay was quite sure that he had deliberated the whole scheme, and only refrained from a public announcement until he could line all of his ducks in a row. She aimed to flush him out. She tilted her head to study him. "Am I being overly alarmist?"

"I was naïve in my previous calculations. It seemed to make good business sense at the time. Now I realize that I need to factor in other variables."

"Such as?"

"Such as, number one: Is the stuff from down there really radioactive?" Oscar fixed his gimlet eyes on Fay as he posed the question.

"That was Keltyn SparrowHawk's conclusion," said Fay, hoping this would suffice. The truth wanted to surge out of her chest, but she was not inclined to break the bond of trust that the

critically wounded geologist had forged with her. The radioactivity ploy that so upset the Onwei tribe was a desperate attempt to safeguard the iris stone from being used to coat more airships, or any other industrial use that Oscar's engineers might think of.

Fay was the only person in the developed world who knew the truth of the Erebus stone, that it was the finest and purest iridium to be found anywhere, that its industrial potential was unmatched. She aimed to keep it that way, to protect the Onwei from Oscar's designs.

He shut his eyes briefly. "So it was, and I don't wish to disparage her judgment, especially if she is not alive to defend it."

Fay shut her eyes too, squeezing them to blot the tears that were sure to follow. No one on this end knew Keltyn's fate, but the odds were way against her surviving a gunshot wound to the chest. The memory haunted Fay daily: she, Harry and Buck, threatened by hostile gauchos, had been forced to abandon Keltyn to the mercy of those few Onwei who cared anything for her.

She opened her eyes to search Oscar's as he probed hers for the truth. She needed to meet his gaze unflinchingly. "And the other variables?"

He blinked. "Competition. We can't let the Chinese get ahead of us in iridium technology. They could dominate global air transportation."

"They must have their own sources."

Oscar leaned back and twirled the stem of the sherry glass between his palms. "Here's what we know. Savant Sparrowhawk spent time with their geologists as a graduate student. Her reports from China and Antarctica indicate that the ore from meteorite craters is less pure

than that from volcanoes. The Chinese have their own craters in Siberia, but likely haven't been able to tap any volcanic sites yet." His fingers beat a staccato rhythm on the arm of the chair.

"But if they could . . .?"

"A big if. There are several on Kamchatka Peninsula, but that's one of the most remote places on earth."

Where there was a will... Fay's gaze locked into Oscar's. There might be a downside from her acting pushy, but so far, he had been surprisingly frank. "Any other factors holding you back?"

"Finding another qualified geologist, but I'm working on that."

Fay waited. She knew there was more.

The color rose in Oscar's cheeks. "There is one other impedance, Savant Del Campo, which is why I thought we should have a chat."

Uh-oh. Brow raised, she pictured the dagger being drawn from its velvet sheath.

"This NPU league that you founded. Perhaps you could edify me on its purpose."

“Native Peoples United? It’s simply a cross-cultural consciousness-raising group. So many of the world’s Indigenous tribes are threatened with extinction from environmental degradation. As an anthropologist who happens to have a media presence, leading such an effort fell to me.”

“How noble an endeavor.” Oscar’s sarcasm dripped as thick as honey. “This all sounds quite straightforward as you describe it, so imagine my dismay to see recent advertisements threatening to boycott the Bailey line of consumer products.”

Aha. The cat was out of the bag. She had suspected as much when he phoned. “Naturally, we hope it won’t come to any measure so drastic.”

“Indeed. Wouldn’t you term it drastic to threaten a boycott for an act that hasn’t happened yet?”

“You realize it would be too late for a boycott if we were to wait until you colonized Antarctica.”

“Oh, here we go again. Savant Del Campo, you are the epitome of conjecture.”

“Deny it, then,” said Fay, her voice rising. “Go public and repudiate the whole idea once and for all.”

“The idea may have crossed my mind, but it’s a long way from clear. And if you know anything about Oscar Bailey, Savant, it’s that he doesn’t care to be bullied into making a decision.”

She felt the blood pounding her temples. “So, this grand scheme could very well be put into play. I knew it.” “You imagine a lot, Savant, but you know nothing. I’m a cautious man, despite your reckless image of me. ‘There’s many a slip twixt cup and lip.’ Which brings up another unpleasant matter.”

Another one? Fay was sure that Oscar had already dealt all his cards.

“Bailey Enterprises has suffered a spate of unexplained accidents over the last few months.”

Fay sat up. She had heard rumors from her own people.

“A boiler explosion here, a train derailment there. Broken windows, vehicles vandalized. Cyber-hacking activity has picked up significantly.” Oscar’s gimlet eyes pierced hers in the recounting. “None of these acts unique or even unusual, just more of them. Any idea why that might be, Savant?”

“How should I know, Oscar? Maybe your security needs beefing up.”

“It certainly does now, although it’s never been lax in the past. Actually, my people are pretty sure we’re dealing with eco-terrorists. The only question is whether they are isolated or organized. No one has taken responsibility for the incidents. Yet.”

“I see,” said Fay. “That does put you in a predicament of how to respond.”

“For now, but not for long. I’ve got an elite security detail analyzing the pattern of these ‘accidents.’ So.” Oscar cocked his head to study Fay from a different angle. “You weren’t aware of any of this?”

Fay jolted back. “Me? What makes you think that?”

“Just a wild guess, Savant.” He set down his glass and clasped his hands. “Some of your group’s ads have been rather inflammatory toward Bailey Enterprises. It occurred to me that perhaps certain segments of your membership might be less principled than yourself in achieving your goals.”

Fay’s mouth gaped open, but she recovered immediately. “Now, that *is* a wild guess, if I ever heard one.”

Oscar smiled. “I’m glad to know that my conjecture is far-fetched.” He tented his pudgy fingers. “On a more certain note, I happen to know that your group has fallen far short of its fund-raising goals.”

“Don’t you worry.” Her heart skipped a beat. How was he privy to their proprietary data? “We have enough to keep running the ads, and our members are committed to implementing a boycott, if it comes to that.”

“Perhaps yes, perhaps no. But you’ll never reach your ambitious main goal. It’s just a pipe dream.”

“You mean relocating threatened Indigenous Peoples to safety. Yes, that will be a huge project. What concern is that of yours?”

“Perhaps we can reach another detente, Fay. Something you want for something I want.” A gleam sparkled in those gimlet eyes.

Yes! He just took the bait. Fay could barely keep herself from gloating. The substantial time and effort that she had directed into threatening a boycott was about to pay off. Oscar was offering hush money. She tried to act shocked. “Are you trying to buy me off?”

“Goodness gracious.” Wrists flipped up; head arched back. “Attempted bribery. Where could I ever have gotten such an idea? Is it so different from blackmail, Fay? Think about it. Just another business proposition.”

Oscar had a point. Who was she to judge him, when she had resorted to the same tactics at their first meeting? She gathered herself. “What amount of a donation are we talking about?”

“Substantial, shall we say. It will have to come from one of my foundations, so as not to arouse suspicion. Let your people talk to mine. I’m sure we can work out something to everyone’s satisfaction.”

“I’m sure,” said Fay. So, this is what being bought off felt like. Not nearly as shameful as she had imagined. She raised her empty glass and he rose to fill it.

Oscar handed her the glass back and raised his own. He flashed a full but closed-lipped smile. “To collaboration.” “Collaboration,” said Fay. As the sherry tingled down her throat, she recalled the old saying – Machiavelli, was it? “Hold your friends close and your enemies closer.”

1 Brixa

Red, white, black and pale, four chariots race across the angry sky, pulled by steeds of matching color. They strain at their bridles and gasp for breath, eyes bulging with effort. Their masters, four ghostly wraiths, brandish whips. Crack, crack, crack, crack. In their eye sockets glow orange coals. Each phantom trails a cape flying behind in the wind. The chariots' wheels spew green fire.

Below these deathly winged messengers, the earth too is enraged. Grass fires billow mountains of acrid smoke. Two- and four-footed shapes flee in a futile effort to elude the flames, their wild screams drowned in the inferno's roar. Behind the advancing wall of fire, the bleak charred landscape is littered with corpses: cattle, horse, human and a multitude of smaller creatures unable to escape the conflagration. The stench of burnt flesh is visceral, overpowering.

Towering in the background, a great cone rises high above the flat terrain. The cone's point is severed, replaced by a gaping hole. Mirroring the destruction below, the great cauldron spews its own dark orange bile. It spills over the hole's rim and slides down the cone's edges like so many winding serpents, unhurried but unstoppable.

My eyes snapped open. I sat bolt upright, bathed in a cold sweat.

“Come in.” A croaky rasp greeted my knock. I opened the door with one hand, a pot of yesterday's stew cradled against my chest. The fetid twin odors of urine and decay wafted toward me. Labored breathing wheezed from the far corner of the hut's single room. By the light of a flickering candle, I could barely make out the shrunken figure of Yoka Sutu, propped on a stack of pillows. She was failing fast.

My heart, already laden with worry and self-doubt, sank at the sight of how much the crone had slipped in just two days since my last visit. I desperately needed Yoka's wise counsel. For weeks I'd been biding my time, hoping the crone would regain the strength to hear me out properly. Instead, her end seemed ever nearer. Best to speak up before it was too late.

The old woman was too weak to stand on her own anymore. On my last visit, she admitted to conversing with voices in her head. I didn't know whether to believe that, yet surely, she still kept a supply of her hallucinatory Venga nuggets handy. Perhaps the voices were tribal ancestors, channeled to console her.

"How are you feeling, *abela*?" I used the Onwei term for grandmother.

In response, Yoka lapsed into a spasm of coughs and gurgles, ending by spitting a large glob of mucus into a bucket by her bed. She lay panting and wiped her shriveled mouth. "I have been better." She turned toward me and nudged her head toward the pail. "Be so good as to empty this thing. It seems like my bodily wastes are all erupting from the wrong end."

Wincing, I held the pail at arm's length and took it to the larger water bucket to rinse out. I felt a twinge of resentment for having to deal with the excretions of this shriveled old woman. How easy it would be to nudge her that last step into the grave and be done with it.

With a shiver, the bitter feeling passed as quickly as it came. I could never do anything to hurt the person who nursed me around the clock for five days when I, myself, lay at death's door after a bullet ripped through my chest. Was it only a year and a half ago? Now the tables were turned.

I dished out the stew and pulled up a stool to feed Yoka. The crone puckered her shriveled grin and reached for my arm. "You are a sweet girl to look after a sick old woman, Keltyn. You are patient. Luz always seems in a hurry when it's her turn."

"She has lots on her mind these days," I responded. The truth, I knew, was that Luz Hogarth longed to be emancipated from her mother. She was ready to elope if Trieste did not acquiesce soon, and that would mean trouble for me. I doubted I could handle the role of Trieste's surrogate daughter. "Mama" could be demanding, fussy, self-pitying, overwrought or hypochondriacal, sometimes all at once. At other times she was the salt of the earth.

I watched Yoka dutifully slurp the stew broth and gum the vegetables. After five minutes, she lay her head back and waved off the spoon. "Done. All I need is enough fluid to keep up with this cursed phlegm." She stared at the ceiling. "Who would have thought that you could end by drowning in your own discharges?" She coughed up another gob and pulled the pail up to her mouth, eyeing me as she spat. "How can you bear to watch this? Disgusting." She used two fingers to wipe her mouth.

Good question, I wondered. After my time on the mountain with Luz, I was no rookie at caring for another person's bodily functions, but experience didn't make the task any easier.

"Abela, I need to ask you something."

Yoka raised her formerly bushy eyebrows, now wispy strands.

“Do you believe in premonitions?”

“Ha,” she barked. “You seem to forget my job, girl. For years, I alone guided this tribe’s fortunes, through the gift of prophecy.”

True enough, though the way she wielded this power gained her an ample share of skeptics and outright enemies. I focused on a spot on the wall behind Yoka. “No, I mean, should the average person put stock into their intuition?”

“Of course.” Yoka eyed me closely. “If your powers of reason can’t give you an answer, then you must listen to the quiet voice within.”

“The voice isn’t quiet, and it’s telling me something I really don’t want to hear.” I took a deep breath. As if dreams weren’t enough, badgering me on and off for almost the whole seventeen months I had lived among the Onwei, lately the visions appeared in front of my eyes during broad daylight.

I pressed a hand to my temple, caught in the memory of yesterday. I went to visit Efrain. We sat on the rug facing each other. He tried to purr a melancholy love song — his stock in trade — while strumming his guitar. He halted in its midst, staring at me. I saw herself in his eyes, pale and shaking. At that moment, I decided to seek help from Yoka, ill or not.

“Tell me,” said the crone.

“They’re coming back. Sir Oscar Bailey is plotting a return.”

Yoka’s watery eyes studied me. “I thought you managed to convince him that the stone is radioactive.”

“He didn’t buy it. He could see right through me. I was too nervous to carry off the bluff.”

“Ha.” The crone glowered now, struggling to sit up straight. “If your crazy plan brought all that chaos to our people with no benefit at all on your end, well then, you must be cursed.”

I must be. Yoka wasn’t acting as sympathetic as I hoped. “There’s more.”

“More conflict? I hope I’m gone before it hits us.” Yoka humphed and plopped her head back.

“Do you remember Buck Kranepool?”

“Your pilot? Oh, yes. He stuck out like a sore thumb at Aldo’s funeral, quite ill at ease.”

“When I first voiced an inclination to stay, Buck predicted I should help the Onwei negotiate mining rights. I accepted that, but now this forewarning raises the stakes. In these dreams, I am the one who leads the Onwei to resist an invasion.”

Yoka gaped as she turned to face me again. “Aha. A regular Joan of Arc. Say this for you, girl. You dream big. An invasion.”

“No, Yoka. I don’t want any of this. I’d rather leave things as they are. Sometimes I wish I were still a junior geologist in Ontario. But I fell for Bailey’s promise. When I returned, he was going to give me the cushiest gig that any scientist could ever get.”

“He cast his spell over you,” said Yoka.

“Exactly. It was the ambition of every researcher, too good to be true for a twenty-five-year-old nerd, especially for a Cree person, the first in her family ever to attend college.”

“‘Too good to be true’ means there is a catch,” she observed.

“I thought I had found the best outcome.” My jaw clenched. “I could be dead. I could be in prison in Canada. I could have been exiled to Chinese Siberia. But now, these premonitions tell me I need to prepare for another showdown. I can feel it, deep in my bones. Sir Oscar will send another mission to find iridium here, and this one will have higher stakes than the last.” My head rattled. “The only mystery is why he hasn’t moved yet.”

“So.” Yoka slumped back on her pillow. “Why do you disturb an old woman’s peace with these malicious hunches of yours?”

I chewed my lip. Yoka could be gratingly distant. “I...I hoped you could tell me whether there is any truth to them.”

She sniffled. “Truth? Truth is like history, defined by the winners. You won’t know it’s the truth until afterward. If you would act, you must do so before the truth becomes clear.” She lapsed into another coughing fit, managing only to croak, “Go now. Leave me.”

By the time I cleared the dishes, lit a fresh candle, and filled the water bucket from the rain barrel outside, the old woman had stopped coughing and pulled the blankets over her head.

The crone hadn’t offered consolation for my troubled musings. Indeed, she had only compounded them, but I knew Yoka better than to expect sympathy. It was not in her nature.

What I really craved was daylight to help me feel alive again, but that would be several weeks in coming. If, two years ago, someone had told me I was destined to live the rest of my life in Antarctica, I would have never been able to imagine such a scenario.

I desperately wished this cup would pass from me, knowing all the while it was not to be. My fate was sealed the moment four Onwei rode into our camp, the morning after Bailey Voyager crash-landed in a crater.

“Joan of Arc!” If Yoka’s analogy was correct, I would need a thick suit of armor.

I stumbled forth into the dark, into the series of ruts and mud-holes that passed for a lane. The storm gave no sign of letting up, the endless Antarctic winter’s night as dark and furious as

ever. Trieste had bid me stop at Nomidar's community vegetable bin on my way home. Now, hurrying back with my arms full, I stumbled and almost lost my balance. The driving rain whipped my face as I stopped to feel my ankle through the boot. I tested my full weight on the foot and winced before limping on.

From the sheaf of carrots atop the bag of produce, a ghost scolded me, braying Trieste's admonition: "Eat more carrots. They will help your night vision, Brixa." That, I now realized, proved essential to survival in a part of the world where darkness reigned supreme for three months a year.

I needed to escape the spray of water relentlessly pummeling my face. Out of the corner of my eye I caught the outline of a man some thirty feet behind. This wasn't the first time I'd been stalked during the Nomidar winter, but my shadow was becoming bolder and more frequent.

I'd gotten half a mind to wait it out, to call the man's bluff by standing my ground. Yet, between my bum ankle, my burden of vegetables, and the storm, I was in no mood for a face-off.

Hurrying around the last corner toward home, I pivoted too fast and felt a stronger stab of pain in the ankle. I jarred to a halt again. The sinister figure advanced closer.

I limped hurriedly down the lane, wincing with each step. At the lane's end, a light beckoned, a candle shining from the front window of the small stone cottage I shared with Trieste and Luz. Somehow, with the remainder of the path pitch black, the single candle pierced the driving rain. I measured the distance in my head. How much longer until I was safe? Suppose the stalker had a weapon?

Hobbling, grunting with each step, I spied an anxious face peering through the hut's candlelit window. The next moment the door swung open and a small but surprisingly strong hand grabbed me. I almost fell into Trieste, whose petite wiry figure was so much like my own.

My unlikely savior's face contorted into its default expression: frown, squint, knitted brow. "Yuk. I shouldn't have sent you out into this stuff. We could have gotten by until tomorrow." Trieste whisked the bag onto the table.

I plopped down onto a stool and struggled out of my soaking poncho, trying not to shake too much water onto the hut floor. "What would it matter?" I muttered. "The weather's been the same every day — rain and wind." I decided to keep mum about the stalker, yet now he knew where I lived.

Trieste, blissfully unaware of my dilemma, pawed busily through the bunch of mostly root vegetables. Culinary etiquette, it seemed to me, was one of many social graces dispelled by the endless dark Antarctic winter. Not that the long bright summers in dusty cattle camps called for

white gloves and tablecloths either. Yet, if you were stuck indoors for long stretches, you expected more amenities than when hoofing it on the trail.

“And dark. Did I mention dark?” I peeked at Trieste, hoping my black humor would register as intended.

Trieste’s eyes shot up to glare at me. “Take it or leave it, Brixia. No one is keeping you here.” She grabbed a sweet potato, still recognizable in shape, and vigorously scrubbed the dirt off in a bucket of water. “Go back to where everything is bright and shiny all the time. See if I...Ow!” She held up a bruised finger and sucked on it.

I turned to my throbbing ankle and tried to wrestle my boot off. So much for levity. The woman had never addressed me as Keltyn, not once. But “Brixia” was at least better than what I and my crewmates were tagged when first ushered into the Onwei camp: “Sky-Bornes,” like we were some kind of celestial aliens.

There! The boot finally gave way and slid off with a “thwop,” confronting me with a purple goose egg.

Was it a coincidence that the sound of “Brixia” called up “*bruxa*,” or “witch,” for those in this tribe — certain gauchos, mostly — who might still harbor resentment for an ex-Sky-Borne? If I had to guess, my stalker buddy was one of these.

Trieste finally looked up from scrubbing vegetables. “What happened to you?”

“I stepped in a hole down by the corner.” I felt like a rookie. It wasn’t the first time I’d injured myself in the dark.

Trieste huffed through pursed lips. “You need a poultice to take down that swelling, and where is my daughter when we need her? Off at a barn dance.”

“If you’ll bring me the curandero kit, I can take care of it,” I said. “She has shown me how to mix this kind before.”

Trieste lit another candle and stepped into the next room. I heard her rifle through scattered trinkets and accessories. She returned and dropped the kit into my lap, set the extra candle down, and held up a three-pronged carrot to scrub next. “This one is just for you and your mishaps in the dark, Brixia.”

“You got it, Mama,” I said. Trieste liked to be called “Mama.” Once she forgave me that disastrous attempt to hoodwink the tribe, she thawed. I figured that my own reticence and small physique made it easy for Trieste to regard me as family.

I unwrapped the burnished leather healer’s kit and studied its multiple pouches, each containing a unique ingredient. They never failed to fascinate me. Some were tiny gourds, sealed

with beeswax. Others were bone needles and horsehair thread, ready to sew a wound, packed neatly next to coca leaf to numb the pain and stanch the bleeding. Opposite were sewn pockets with hemp-wrapped dollops of salves. I was amused to learn that, even without labels in this illiterate culture but thanks to Aldo's tutoring via séance, Luz had learned to identify most of them by smell.

Now I took out a fresh piece of hemp gauze. Using a tiny spatula, the size of my little finger, I scooped out a thimbleful from each of three different wraps, blending aromas of mint, loam, and rotten eggs. I stirred them carefully and then slapped the gauze on my throbbing ankle. Within minutes came cool relief.

Trieste glanced back from her cooking. "Better? Good. I can't afford to have you laid up at home."

I tensed. Was I not earning my keep? "Why not?"

"You know. We discussed this. You must pay a visit to all the women who make tortillas, so we can finally put to rest those bad feelings from last year."

I sighed. Who would have guessed that the most pressing issue among these people had to do with tortillas? Being dragged into the ongoing petty squabbles that stemmed from banishing the khokri wasting disease made me wish I had never cracked its secret. It was like they were hazing me a second time around for my troubles. Yet, if I wished to become accepted into this tribe, I knew I must act the part.

"Yes, Mama."

Trieste removed the lid from the cook-pot simmering on the wood stove and began slicing in her vegetables. The smells of the poultice were drowned out by those of herbs, stew beef and bone marrow. The cooking odors swaddled me, transporting me back to my childhood home, to a time when my family was still intact, before I left for boarding school on a scholarship, before my father died of TB and my mother hit the sauce.

Now, my only home and family were here, on the other side of the world, but, if I believed these visions, all signs pointed toward another upheaval.

2 The Apprentice

When it came to a barn dance, Joaquin Beltran was always the first one there. Not just the first musician but the first person, period. It was wonderful, and scored him sincere thanks from the older folks, instead of those patronizing smiles that used to make him feel like a mascot.

He began by lighting the dozens of vanilla-scented candles that graced the cavernous walls of the old barn. Then he swept the musty, warped wooden floor and set out folding chairs for older

folks. The dancers would need them too, after working up a sweat. He filled the water pitchers from the rain barrel, and when the abelas showed up with spiced hooch and orange juice, they let him mix the punch.

It was good business to cultivate the old ladies, he discovered, as they would often invite him to visit their huts the next week to conduct a Venga session. For some, it became almost a sacrament to channel a departed spouse, or perhaps a long-lost lover. Now that Joaquin had, under Yoka Sutu's coaching, become reasonably adept in baking the nuggets and arranging the desired mood for séances, he had begun to earn a small but steady income.

Maybe this could become his full-time calling. It might have to. He had not tried to approach Ysidro, guessing that the new jeaf would have no spot for him to join the cattle migration with his band of gauchos. No matter. He knew that Ysidro had neither the interest nor the patience to mentor Joaquin as Aldo had. Besides, now with two gimpy limbs on his still-scrawny frame, Joaquin had come to accept what was long obvious to everyone else: he could never make it as a gaucho.

Perhaps the Venga gigs could become a sustainable trade, especially if he could develop a word-of-mouth business at the annual summer Rendezvous. Trieste had successfully cultivated her *joya clientele* and other Nomidar artisans had done the same. Still, even if he could pull that off, there was something mildly distasteful about taking advantage of lonely old women.

By contrast, the chance to play in the barn dance band thrilled him. Tonight would be his first chance to prove himself before the entire audience, and he intended to make the most of it. He alone would comprise the rhythm section. Matin, the tanner, had played percussion forever, but his gnarled hands could no longer keep up and he graciously ceded his drumsticks to Joaquin. He had practiced on a variety of Matin's percussion devices, everything from tambourine to booran to a cymbal activated by pedal and discovered he could make it work.

Dario, the butcher, who played fiddle for these dances, seemed convinced Joaquin could carry the beat. So did Efrain, who played guitar. Only Soriante, who played panpipes in between singing, yodeling and generally carousing, was skeptical. "You'll need more than two paws to carry your weight, gimp."

Behind the stage, Joaquin unlocked the chest that held his collection of noisemakers. Dario usually liked to start the first set with something up-tempo. Joaquin picked out the booran with its accompanying peg-like drumstick. Holding the large flat drum vertically, with his left hand splayed out behind the playing surface, he practiced a few riffs of the rat-a-tat beat using the peg, snub-nosed on each end.

Next, he pulled out the cymbal and its elaborate rigging. Matin had invented the contraption, including the foot pedal, and Joaquin admired how the man banged the cymbal for emphasis while his hands simultaneously drummed. Joaquin would just as soon leave the cymbal in storage, but that would only work if he came up with some other signature noisemaker to take its place. It would take inspiration, as well as Matin's help to build. All in good time. The idle thought flitted through his mind: was there some way he could ever make a living from playing music?

Efrain wandered in. He removed his guitar from its beat-up case and began tuning the strings by ear.

Joaquin eyed him. "How do you know when it's in tune, charro?"

The big gaucho winked at Joaquin. "My ear tells me." "What about the fiddle and the pipes?" "The pipes stay in tune by themselves, but you know

Soriante. We'll be lucky if he makes it up here on time. It will be too noisy to depend on him."

Indeed, people were already gathering. Other charros — he spied Gabino and wild-eyed Onofre — collected by the far wall, near the punch bowl. The wanton sisters Carmen and Pilar sidled in between the gauchos, ready, Joaquin knew, to ply their trade later in the evening. There at the refreshment table, with his back to the stage, stood Soriante, pouring a stiff shot. He already tapped his feet in time.

Older couples drifted in as well. Hortensio, the smith, who served as caller, ushered in his addled wife Char. Teenage girls and a few unattached young women drifted in as well, mostly in groups of three or four. Joaquin watched them out of the corner of his eye as he finished his preparations.

At one time, he expected just showing up for such an event would be enough to attract a girl's attention, that he could stand around, minding his own business, and a pretty young thing would come ask him to dance. Later he figured out that, with his clubfoot and splinted wrist, he could never impress a girl with his dancing. Anyway, girls expected boys to notice them and make the first move, not vice versa, and he had yet to get up the nerve.

In the meantime, so long as he could beat time, he could have fun with the musicians and share in some of their reflected glory. More than once at previous *bailas* he noticed a *chica bonita* steal a glance his way as she applauded.

Speaking of pretty girls, here came Luz, alone as usual. She flashed her bright smile at Joaquin. "Ooh, there's my little drummer boy."

“Yup, here I am.” Joaquin gave her the once over. Unlike most of her mates, Luz sprouted form-fitting black breeches tucked into lattice-stitched boots. “Where’s your dancing shoes, baby?”

Luz scanned the hall. “You know, I didn’t really come to dance, Joaquin. I just wanted to see who shows up and, honestly, to get out of the house for a while.”

Joaquin nodded. Claustrophobia was the Onwei’s winter nemesis. The rain and the ultra-long nights combined with the only show in town — you had to be too old to move, or too grouchy, to stay home tonight.

“Besides,” Luz continued, examining her freshly painted nails, “a lot of these girls I may not see again.” She lifted her eyes. “This is probably my last winter in Nomidar.”

“You mentioned that.” Now was not the moment to get sentimental, but he would miss her. Each of them was an only child. She never knew who her father was, while he still lived. He never knew either of his parents, period. Perhaps that explained the soft spot she had for him. She was like the older sister in the family he never had.

Dario jumped up on stage and began his warmup. He and Efrain faced each other. Dario barked something and they riffed through the first eight bars of a polka.

“Guess I better get ready,” said Joaquin. He felt vaguely annoyed in having to cut short the chat with Luz. Was she serious about leaving Nomidar? Despite the confidence she now radiated, Joaquin wondered if she was bluffing. He knew that her mother was still opposed.

“Don’t let your eyes wander,” laughed Luz. “Stay focused on the beat.” She waved and headed toward Marisol, another tall eighteen-year-old.

When he finished his warmup, Dario dropped his arms to his sides, fiddle in one hand, bow in the other. Joaquin watched him glower at Soriente, who blithely chatted up Carmen by the punch bowl and showed no inclination to make music. Finally, Dario turned to Hortensio. “Start us up a mixer.”

Hortensio’s strident voice announced the protocol for the first dance. Soriente gulped down the rest of his drink and elbowed his way through the crowd toward the stage. He looked shocked to see Joaquin sitting in Matin’s spot as drummer, and a sneer spread across his usually light-hearted face. “Oh, Lord. We must be scraping the bottom of the barrel.” Joaquin tried to ignore him and focused on adjusting his seat.

Soriente ducked behind to retrieve his instruments and pulled out three different sets of pipes, ranging between them over four octaves in pitch. He jumped onto the stage just as the first bars of the reel began.

Joaquin watched Efrain finger the chords to pick up his beat: steady but not fast. Hortensio pattered his instructions, nonstop at first, then dropping to a reminder phrase at the beginning of each new round of partners.

As he settled into his rhythm, Joaquin could observe the dance line form into thirty-some pairs of hands in a circle. The women wore white blouses, bright flouncy skirts and dancing slippers. Some of the men dressed up, others wore a cleaner version of the hemp tunic and breeches one might spy during the cattle drive. All the men wore boots, however, and the boots stomped the beat together, louder than anything Joaquin could muster on his drums. No matter, he knew his time would come later.

The women and men took turns weaving in and out, one group toward the center of the circle, the other away from it. They met again midway, where each man would pair off and swing the woman next to him. Then he would guide her down the line to her next partner, turn and meet a new partner of his own. A mixer meant that each man would get to dance at least once with each woman. Joaquin tried to picture himself in this line. The steps didn't look too hard. He could swing any number of chicas bonitas, but he'd have to take turns with the ugly ones too.

By the time they returned to their original partners, most dancers worked up a sweat. The hall was warming up quickly, no less so Joaquin. Starting with the tambourine, to be on the safe side, he chose to use the cymbal only for emphasis, at the end of each time through the tune, to signal a change of partners. It had all gone as well as could be expected, and Joaquin basked in hearty applause for the band.

Burly Hortensio barely had time to announce the next dance before Dario launched into a wild tune. Joaquin grabbed the booran and dove into the rhythm as if his life depended on it. Couples paired off and flung themselves counterclockwise, trying to stay in the dance floor's orbit, but whirling at such a speed as to threaten a launch out the door at any moment.

Both of Joaquin's wrists began to ache, the right from continuous rotation, the gimpy left one cramping from holding the booran steady. His arms were definitely not in shape. He had practiced polka and all of the other tempos on the drum before, but not for five minutes nonstop, and not in front of dozens of people. He gritted his teeth and soldiered on.

Dario and Soriente alternated taking the melody lead, which meant that each got a bit of rest. Efrain strummed like a madman while stomping his boot, but his three-chord progression was simple. He looked like he could keep doing this in his sleep; indeed, his eyes had closed.

Joaquin glanced up at Dario, hoping the fiddler would give some signal to end it, but one peek at the dancers told a different story. They were having altogether too much fun, the kind of thrill that small children get when swung in a circle by their outstretched arms.

He flashed back to the time he helped Aldo sew up Heriberto Paz's mare, gored by a crazy bull. Even sewing that wound, as painstaking as it had been, allowed him to rest for a moment now and then. Now, if Dario did not finish off the tune soon, Joaquin felt sure that he would faint from exhaustion.

Perhaps he could rest for just a moment. He tried again to catch Dario's eye, Hortensio's, anybody's, but each was enthralled in the same trance. Somehow, Joaquin had the premonition that, if he were to quit before the others, the spell would shatter into pieces, its magic charm broken.

A blister ached on the inside of his thumb, but he'd be damned if he would quit now. An extra shot of adrenaline surged through him. The muscles in his hands seemed to take over the operation of the booran; his brain no longer needed to will them to perform.

And then, finally, Dario stuck his foot out, the signal for the last round. At the very end, he flourished his bow, Efrain riffed the last chord, Soriente tweeted the last note, and Joaquin banged the cymbal. The dancers hooted and whistled with what little breath they had left and retreated toward the punch bowl.

Sweat dripping from his brow, Joaquin raised his water mug and took a deep swallow. He wished he had brought salve for the cursed blister on his palm, now the size of a grape. Reaching for his bandana, he tore off a strip and wound it around the base of his thumb as a cushion. That would need to get him through the rest of the evening. In time, though none too soon, his hands would become calloused. No pain, no gain.

When Joaquin scanned the audience once more, he spotted a late arrival. There was Ysidro, decked out in fringed leather. The gaucho chief caught Joaquin's eye and raised his mug in salute. Wow. That was a first. A flush of pride coursed through his exhausted body. He lifted his chin, squared his shoulders, and nodded to meet the jeaf's gaze. Perhaps, just perhaps, Ysidro's opinion of him might be softening, and that could pay off in the next few months.

3 Roots and Wings

Luz Hogarth stood at the edge of the crowd of dancers, one knee bent, the sole of her boot propped against the wall of the barn. Drumming her fingers on her thigh, she tapped the rhythm of the reel the band now played. In her other hand, she balanced a cup of punch, diluted with juice. No buzz needed tonight.

These dances were the high point of social life in Nomidar, really the only organized fun for people her age, luring anyone with a social bone in their body. This would be the memory of her hometown she took with her. Better some excitement than the stagnation of her mother's hut.

One of the young town boys— Faustino, a carpenter's apprentice, polite and well-scrubbed, but clueless — had, in a charming gesture, asked her for this dance. Her heart belonged to another boy, on the opposite side of the continent. Still, it felt good to be noticed. She had to flash her promise ring at him before he backed off and turned his attention to Marisol, who was, after all, more his match in looks and temperament.

Marisol, though every bit as tall as Luz, was lighter on her feet. Luz watched the two of them stumble and twist through the caller's elaborate figures. They could make a couple. Both were physically awkward but easily laughed off their missteps, whereas Luz knew that she herself would chafe at each blunder.

The reel ended with a sustained bout of swing-your- partner, round and round at least eight times. Big Hortensio announced a waltz, to be followed by a break for the band. A good share of the dancers, still catching their breath, already had enough. Marisol grinned, curtsied to Faustino and turned away before he had a chance to ask her to waltz. She staggered back toward her friend, grabbed Luz's cup of punch and took a deep draught. Her cheeks were flushed.

"Thanks." Marisol handed the near-empty cup back. "Looks like you had a good workout," said Luz.

The other girl glanced down and wiggled her toes. "I guess he didn't crack any little piggies. Faustino's a sweet boy, but he's got two left feet." They both giggled. "It's not fair for the guys to wear boots and we don't." She inspected Luz's footwear. "Except you."

"I already told you, I didn't come here to meet boys." "Doesn't mean you couldn't dance." Not much point in dancing except to meet a boy, Luz wanted to say.

Marisol inched closer with a conspiratorial look. "Is it true what I heard about you?"

"What did you hear?" She tensed. How much had gossip twisted the truth?

"That you're going off with a boy from a different tribe?"

"Partly true." Luz gazed at the ceiling. "Going off" made it sound like they planned to just wander about.

"Come on. Don't be coy. What's his name?"

"Ian Campbell."

"Campbell. Sounds like a Perth name."

"Good guess."

“What does his family do?”

“They raise horses.”

“Ooh. Now I get it.” Marisol jutted her lower lip and nodded.

Luz pictured Ian’s wavy blond hair, the ocean-blue eyes that hypnotized her whenever they were close. There was more to it than horses, but best not rub it in, especially for someone like Marisol who might well end up hitched to a carpenter’s apprentice with two left feet. She decided to play along with the horse angle. “I suppose I’ll never get over losing Quintara.”

Too late, she regretted the remark. Marisol, whose family struggled with a small dairy operation on the outskirts of town, never had the luxury of owning a horse. “Oh, you poor dear,” she sniffed. “I’m sure Ian Campbell can lessen the pain.”

Luz frowned. “What is that supposed to mean?”

Marisol shrugged and checked the sheen on her fingernails. “Forget it.” She looked up and cast a concerned sideways glance. “What about your poor mother?”

Just like the Nomidar matrons. This was their standard guilt trip: what decent girl would think of abandoning her fragile widowed mother to live hundreds of miles away on some other corner of the continent? Trieste used this tactic so often that Luz had become immune to her pleas. She simply could not stomach the thought of living out her days in this dull village.

Besides, her mother now had Keltyn to help her. The Brixia had taken a sincere interest in learning Trieste’s methods to smith the *piedra de yris*, something that Luz had not the patience for. The bond that developed between Keltyn and Trieste had not come easy — Trieste was superstitious and harbored grudges, the Brixia was beset with misgivings — but Luz hoped that it was now strong enough to support her planned exit.

“She will be well provided for.” Luz fixed Marisol with a stare.

“Oh, really?” A sneer broke out on the girl’s face. “Think about what you’re doing.” She spotted another friend and skipped off.

A twinge of jealousy coursed through Luz as she watched Marisol effortlessly break into giggles with her companion. Luz knew that, by spending summers away, she long ago forfeited any chance to find a confidante among her stay-at-home friends and neighbors. In six weeks or so, as soon as the cattle drive started, it would be goodbye to everyone in Nomidar. That part was no different than every other spring since she was a toddler, but this time there would be no coming back, not for a long time.

The matronly guilt trip had some effect, though. Luz frequently asked herself how she could sweeten the deal with her mother. The only enticement she could think of was to supply Trieste

with the high-grade *piedra de yris* from Mt. Erebus. The ore was now there in plain sight and easy pickings, thanks to the previous eruption that felled Quintara and almost took her own life.

A grandchild would also appease Trieste, but Luz wasn't ready for that yet. Ian's parents gave her a thorough once-over appraisal when he introduced her last summer, and registered an approving look, or so it seemed to Luz. Unlike her frail mother, she had a full figure, inherited from Aldo no doubt. Yoka, in one of her prophetic moods, promised that Luz would bear many children. All in good time. She was in no hurry.

Luz peered at the onyx on her finger. Ian, not yet brave or foolish enough to ask Trieste for her daughter's hand, had meant it only as a promise ring. Luz knew she needed her mother's consent to marry. Either that or be prepared to elope. She still had six months before the *Rendezvous*, six months to work on her.

She eyed the other matrons, mostly sitting along the sidelines and clapping time to the music. Many were friends of Trieste, and some had wayward children, but she could spot no one whose child had slammed the door shut on Nomidar as she proposed to do.

Rows of sparkling candles lining the four walls of the barn made the old hall appear festive. She wondered where Perth held their line dances. How could she win approval from her new Perth neighbors? Being an accomplished horsewoman in a village that boasted many would impress no one.

Another girl joined Marisol and her friend across the hall. They jabbered away, eyes rolling, occasionally sneaking a glance at Luz. Their giggles left no doubt: Marisol was mining Luz's revelations about Ian for all they were worth. What a fool I was to confide in her. Luz tried to hold her chin high, but at the moment she was on the verge of bolting from this dumb party. The commingled sweat of dozens of dancers was getting to her.

The band warmed up for their second set. Hortensio barked out for everyone to find a partner. Luz finished her drink and turned to leave. Then she heard Hortensio call her name. He stood beaming, his arm stretched out toward her. "Our own saddle princess, Luz Hogarth. Wouldn't it be wonderful to watch her kick up her heels again, ladies and gents? It's good to see you back, sweetheart."

He led a brief round of applause while Luz flushed and ducked her chin. Hortensio ambled over to her. "Luz, help me demonstrate the moves for this next piece."

She let out an expression of mock horror as the big smith took her hand, then glanced over at Char, who sat in a corner watching her husband. The feeble-minded woman nodded in approval.

Hortensio's lead was strong and sure. The manly scent he had slapped on reminded her of Aldo. After several go-rounds to exhibit the new steps to the other dancers, he signaled for the music to start. In all the previous dances of the evening, he moved back toward the stage and resorted to calling. This time, beaming down at Luz like a proud father, he continued to sashay her around the hall.

Within seconds, Luz felt herself transported. Even her boots, designed by her Uncle Ariel for a slow, stable gait, could not disguise the smooth, flowing steps. She relaxed and let herself sink into the milieu, oblivious to the curious gaze of other dancers.

Her feet found the right steps without any need to guide them. The twirls, the out-and-backs, the over-the-shoulder eye contact, all the moves seemed to spring with a life of their own. She felt scores of eyes fixed upon her, suddenly at the center of the limelight, and the feeling thrilled her, as if the onlookers were paying her homage.

How long was it since she had last partaken? At least five years, it must be. She reached her tall mature figure early on as a teen, but found her early attempts hampered by underdeveloped juvenile male age-mates or by older aspiring gauchos given to macho posturing. By contrast, Ian, despite his reticence, was polite and attentive. They had never danced, but she now imagined herself gliding effortlessly in his arms.

What had happened with her resolve to just stand and watch? Still, it was only a dance, and, partnering with a middle-aged man whose wife sat nearby, she could hardly be accused of cheating on her betrothed. Just before spinning herself into a giddy trance, one other question flitted through her mind. What if Marisol was right? Could she really leave all these people forever and start over again?

4 Hatchet Man

Helmut Ganz forced himself to sit up straight on the divan. He watched his boss a few feet away, leaning back in a plush leather recliner, looking uncharacteristically somber as he flipped through pages of Ganz's report.

Sir Oscar's big, polished walnut desk, sprawled across the other side of the room, seemed empty without his presence. Over the last year the two men had developed an informal relationship on Ganz's frequent jaunts from Zürich to Bailey HQ in Alberta. When Sir Oscar put his feet on the desk, it meant Ganz had a chance to stretch out his long legs.

Not today. This was not a normal meeting. Incidents — they were still officially “accidents” — throughout the Bailey empire were escalating, and the boss had summoned his division chiefs to

HQ, one at a time. Now it was Ganz's turn to be grilled, and he already felt the sweat inching down his armpits. His safest bet was to keep stroking the Chief's ego.

He finished Ganz's brief and tossed it aside. "Lots of speculation here, but not much for facts. I need names, contacts."

"Whoever they are, sir, they don't operate by any standard pattern."

Oscar's head slumped. "What did you nail down on that mine explosion?"

"It looks like someone shut the ventilation shaft damper."

"What? That's way deep inside. How could a saboteur sneak past, unless...?" His head shot up.

His boss paused, so Ganz completed the unwelcome deduction. "Unless it was an inside job."

Sir Oscar stared at the wall, his lips curling into a snarl. "Inside job. I hate to admit it, but that's the pattern emerging from our transportation and factory mishaps too. Our safety record slips, this could have all kinds of repercussions."

When he turned back to face him, Ganz detected an uncharacteristic gloom.

"Someone has it in for me."

In the thirteen years that Ganz had worked for Sir Oscar, he had never before sensed the least hint of paranoia or self-pity. He leaned forward to rest arms on knees. "What makes you say that, sir?"

"Someone who thinks I'm Satan for building an industrial empire. Someone who's determined, connected and organized."

Ganz felt a shiver. He could think of no single mortal capable of pulling off this score of incidents, scattered throughout Europe and Canada, all of which, if they were sabotage, required exquisite planning and technical expertise. "You have a person in mind, sir?"

Sir Oscar flashed a withering smile, of the type he favored when confronted by foolish questions, and Ganz immediately realized his faux pas.

"Not a person, Ganz, a ring, a gang."

This was all too mysterious. "Do they have a name?" "They go by the charming tag of Native Peoples United."

Ganz made a note on his pad. He would have to study up on this group. "At least you have a suspect, sir. That's always the first step." He took the liberty of leaning back on the divan.

"Not to worry, we'll bring them down in due course. First, my security boys have to recruit spies to infiltrate the group. Meanwhile," Sir Oscar slapped his palm on the armrest, "let's talk about something more upbeat. Are you ready to visit Antarctica, Ganz?"

“Absolutely, sir.”

Ganz allowed his legs to stretch out, but their length seemed to take Sir Oscar aback. “I didn’t factor in your height. How tall are you, anyway?”

“One point nine three meters, sir.” He involuntarily sat up straight again.

“You’re going to have a tight squeeze fitting into the back seat of Bailey Voyager.”

“On most trips other passengers defer to my need for extra leg room.”

“Sorry, Ganz. This isn’t ‘most trips.’ The pilot obviously needs one front seat, and Harry Ladou, who’s still the nominal chief of this mission, will need the other. The lines of authority have already been diluted too much. If I tell him he’s got to sit in back, he may just drop out altogether.”

Ganz clasped his hands snugly. “And what, if I may be so bold, would be so wrong with that?”

Oscar stared at him. “I detect a note of self-importance, Ganz. That’s the kind of mindset that could blunt your effectiveness.”

Ganz stiffened.

Oscar continued. “I still need Harry. He proved that on the last mission by keeping his head.”

Ganz raised his brows to inquire.

Oscar held up one finger. “First, despite a gear malfunction that forced them to put down way off target, and despite the pilot sustaining a concussion during a crash landing, Harry kept morale intact until Buck recovered sufficiently to fix the gear.”

Up came the second finger. “Next, despite meeting the local tribe under adverse conditions, he went out of his way to promote a cordial relationship, one that we should be able to build on this time.” Third finger. “Most importantly, he did everything possible to get the crew out alive. If Savant SparrowHawk was the exception, which we won’t know until we get back there, it was her own damn fault.” He slapped his hand on the armrest again.

The slapping noise jerked Ganz. He had not heard so many firsthand details before.

“I know what you’re thinking,” said Oscar. “If Harry Ladou is so competent and trustworthy, why do I need you along? God knows there are any number of important deals in Europe that may fall through during your absence.”

Ganz nodded. He wondered the same thing.

“The problem with Harry, as I see it, and this is in strict confidence between us two, understand?”

“Yes, sir.”

Sir Oscar gazed out the picture window across from Ganz. Outside, midsummer sunlight lit up the boreal forest. "The problem is that he shows signs of getting soft. I noticed it first when he tried to intercede on the side of Fay Del Campo toward the end of the previous mission. I'm keeping an eye out for his comings and goings, and I want you to do the same."

He whirled back to face Ganz, who nodded curtly.

"Harry already knows that your job is to seal the deal. And you hold the trump card in that respect. How are your Onwei studies going, Ganz?"

Ganz cleared his throat. "The lang-synch has proved very helpful, sir." It was true that he had a facility for languages, yet learning a completely foreign tongue with only the aid of a machine that translated simple phrases was like studying history by memorizing a bunch of dates. Context and nuance were everything. Still, he would have a leg up on the rest of the crew, and he intended to use it. "With whom will I be negotiating, sir?"

"Good question. Harry can fill you in about the tribe they encountered last time. I expect it will be with their new gaucho leader. Ha. The one who led the failed attempt to raid our camp."

"Won't this man still be hostile toward us?"

"Possible, entirely possible." Oscar drummed his fingers. "Don't worry. We're not going unarmed. And it may well be that we don't encounter anyone at this time of year in the Erebus region. The last mission took place in our spring, their fall; this time it will be just the opposite. These people are nomads, graze their herds over the same route each season." He stopped the drumming and flashed a thumbs-up sign. "So much the better if we don't run into them. We land right on target, harvest a big stash of the best ore, then goodbye, mission accomplished."

"So, my skills may not come into play at all," ventured Ganz.

"'Better safe than sorry' is my motto," said Oscar. "Plus, there is one other situation where you may be needed."

Ganz waited. A lot of 'ifs' were piling up.

"If there is any sign of Keltyn SparrowHawk still alive, I want her back." Oscar's lower lip jutted out in defiance. "She not only sabotaged the first mission, she tried to make a fool out of me. She needs to pay the price."

"What if she refuses to return willingly?"

"Ha! She would be more of a fool than I thought if she agreed to come willingly, but you certainly can make her any kind of offer that you think would entice her to do so, anything short of a promise of immunity from prosecution."

"So, if she refuses?"

“First you need to determine if she is involved in fomenting opposition to our ambitions. That would be my guess.”

Ganz was still unclear on this part of his mission. “So, if the tribal Chief is opposed to negotiations, and if I find that she is behind that opposition..”

“Then you are authorized to arrest and return her to Canada.”

Ganz cleared his throat. “Suppose the tribe tries to shield her?”

“If worse comes to worse,” Oscar said, gazing away once more, “you will need to neutralize her. I will leave the method to your discretion.”

Rising, he went over to his desk, pulled out some stationery, scribbled a few lines, and signed the note with a flourish. He sealed the note in an envelope and handed it to Ganz. “There, Herr Ganz. You have it on my personal authority. One more thing.”

“Yes?” It occurred to Ganz that he should still be taking notes. Sir Oscar’s shopping list was lengthening by the minute.

“You’ll be refueling at Chimera Space Station, an unavoidable detour, I’m afraid, thanks to the Hurricane Belt. I want you to interview a Chinese staffer who works there, name of Hunany Lin.”

“Does he know something?”

“Walt McAfee seems to think so.” Sir Oscar dug around in his files, pulled out a memo, and handed it to Ganz.

To: Chief of Security, Bailey Enterprises

From: Walter McAfee, Communications Technician First Class, Chimera Space Station

Date: 10 March 2315

Priority: SECRET

After today’s media briefing by three crew members of the Bailey Voyager mission to Antarctica, clandestine information passed between Chimera Systems Engineer Hunany ‘Huey’ Lin and Savant Keltyn SparrowHawk.

Despite a partition that separated me from the two of them, I am sure of their identities. I am familiar with Huey’s voice from daily collaboration on board Chimera, and I listened to Savant SparrowHawk’s comments at the press briefing just concluded.

The conversation in question lasted less than a minute, but several things about it struck me as odd. First, both participants spoke in Chinese, which was particularly surprising with regard to Savant SparrowHawk. Second, during the course of the conversation, it sounded like a message changed hands; one of the participants folded up a paper as he or she put it away. Lastly, the hushed tone of

both speakers suggested caution about being associated together, as well they might. Chimera protocol frowns on any such informal fraternization between Chinese and Western nationals. I draw no conclusions from the above observations, but I believe they need to reach the proper levels of authority.

Ganz looked up. "Sounds like a smoking gun."

Sir Oscar smiled. "It does indeed."

Ganz checked the date on the memo. "Of course, this happened almost a year and a half ago."

"Granted, but we need to know what was in that message. It could become evidence in Savant SparrowHawk's prosecution."

"Can I have a copy of this?"

"Better commit it to memory, Ganz. I don't want Huey to guess the source. He and McAfee still share duties every day on Chimera."

"Right." Ganz stood. "Anything else, sir?"

Sir Oscar sprang to his feet as well, rather gracefully for someone his age. "Your role on this mission will be the most delicate one of the four crew members, Ganz. All of your mates, but Harry Ladou in particular, will think that you're there as my informant. That's true to a degree, but you'll also be investigator, businessman and corporate security agent. If I didn't think you could handle it, I would never have called on you."

"I'll try to reward your confidence, sir."

As they shook hands, Ganz did as was taught in school when done being dismissed. He bowed his head and clicked his heels. Then he turned smartly and exited, fully aware of Sir Oscar's gaze following him.

Ganz had barely walked out the front door of Bailey HQ when a giant blast from behind sent him sprawling forward. He fell onto his face, stunned. His nose throbbed and dripped blood.

His dialups were gone. He groped blindly with both hands until he found them, still intact, thank God. Pulling out a handkerchief, he squeezed it tight on his nose and tried to sit up. His knee gave out a shot of pain.

Smoke billowed from the lobby, and along with it the almond odor of plastique explosive. Scores of people around him fled the building, shouting and screaming. A big husky young fellow staggered by, pale as a ghost, one arm propped by an escort. Most of his other arm was missing, a tourniquet knotted below the shoulder. The first fire truck pulled up, followed by ambulances.

Strange to have flashing lights without sirens, he thought, at which point he became aware of the deafening roar in his ears.

Ganz limped away until he found a spot on the grass, a safe distance from the rush of panicked humanity. He slumped down and watched the scene unfold. Then it hit him: but for ten seconds longer in the company of Sir Oscar — time enough to chat about the weather in Zürich, say — his own mangled body would be among those the medics now loaded. A deep shudder escaped him.

The rest of the building was still intact. Sir Oscar's corner office, on the far wing of the tenth floor, appeared pristine. Ganz wondered if his boss had even felt a tremor.

Who was behind this? He knew whom the Chief would finger with the blame, that Native Peoples United. Whoever these terrorists were, they had just upped the ante, striking the core of the Bailey empire. Now there could be no denying what the previous incidents had been — not accidents but sabotage.

Would this latest disaster change Sir Oscar's plans to launch the second Antarctic mission? If he postponed or cancelled, it wouldn't hurt Ganz's feelings one bit. Yet, bowing to any such pressure was not in the Chief's nature. More likely, he would expect Ganz to perform double duty, instituting greater surveillance for Bailey Europe operations, while still engaged in this cross-world rendezvous with Antarctic cowboys. Go figure.

Sitting on the grass, Ganz checked his legs ruefully. He could still click his heels. He slowly pushed himself up and limped back toward the building. He needed to find out Sir Oscar's new game plan, likely already reformulated in the brief moments since the explosion. Every crisis was an opportunity in disguise.