



Patrick Tilley

THE AMTRAK WARS: DEATH-BRINGER



BLOOMSBURY READER

The Amtrak Wars Book 5: Death-Bringer

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For
Patrick, Freddie and Sean
the next generation
who were into computers
before they were out of nappies
and have now come to grips with karate.
From the way things are shaping up
this looks like a good career move
for anyone with a ticket to the 21st Century.
Good luck, boys. Carry the torch. Hold it high.
Opa

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CHAPTER ONE

In the spring of 2991, Mr Snow, wordsmith of the Clan M'Call, faced a difficult decision. Should he accompany the clan's delegation to the trading post on the shores of the Great River – or should he stay behind in the hills of Wyoming in case the cloud-warrior returned with Cadillac and Clearwater?

Two winters had passed since his charges had flown into the Eastern Lands and it was almost a year since the cloud-warrior had gone in search of them. Brickman had promised to help them escape from the Iron Masters but that was easier said than done. The Dead-faces were a fearsome race who lived behind closed borders. No Plainfolk Mute taken away on the wheel-boats had ever regained his liberty. But Cadillac and Clearwater were no ordinary Mutes. They had been born in the shadow of Talisman and Brickman, the cloud-warrior, was also gifted and resourceful and as cunning as a coyote. And though he did not yet understand why, he too had been touched by Talisman.

If there was a chance to escape then these three would seize it, for between them they possessed the power to overturn nations. That had been their destiny from the day they had been born. But where were they? Day after day, Mr Snow had posted sentinels to keep a special watch over the eastern approaches to the settlement but the long-awaited travellers had failed to appear.

They were not dead. In an uncertain world, that was the only thing Mr Snow was sure of. Cadillac and Clearwater were the sword and shield of Talisman, saviour of the Plainfolk who – according to prophecy – was due to appear in human form. Cadillac was to use his great gifts to prepare the way for Talisman, and Clearwater was to use the immense forces at her command to protect the Thrice-Gifted One until his own powers were fully formed. Which, for instance, would be the case if he entered the world as a new-born child. On the other hand, if he was present in someone already alive, with his powers over heaven and earth lying dormant until the chosen moment, then her given task was to protect that individual until Talisman chose to reveal himself. She would do this instinctively, without necessarily understanding why, because Talisman would draw her to him.

Mr Snow had often wondered if Steve Brickman bore the Talisman within him. The cloud-warrior's descent from the sky into the hands of the M'Calls had been foretold by the Sky Voices. He and Clearwater had been destined to meet, and in giving herself to him body and soul she had broken the solemn vows that bound her to Cadillac – grievously wounding her former lover's pride in the process.

In time, Cadillac would get over it. It was he who had seen their separation in the stones. Clearwater was destined to journey into the dark world of the sand-burrowers that lay beneath the deserts of the south. Home of the iron-snakes that crawled through the land leaving a trail of devastation behind them, and the arrowheads which carried the cloud-warriors across the skies. Warriors armed with long sharp iron and fire-seeds which erupted into smoke and flame with the sound of earththunder. Not the pure flame that swept the tree-spirits up towards the heavens but an evil cousin conjured up by the sand-burrowers. A flame whose thirst could not be quenched by water, that clung to flesh and burned through to the bone.

Yes, these were dark days. The time known as The Great Dying had come. A time when the courage of the Plainfolk would be sorely tested. Mo-Town, the Great Sky-Mother had withdrawn into the Black Tower of Tamla to weep for her people. Many would perish but the Plainfolk would survive and become a great nation under the banner of Talisman. As a Mute, a revered sage and walking history book of the Clan M'Call, Mr Snow knew that the journey through the Valley of Death had to be undertaken with as much good grace as one could muster. The Wheel turned, The Path was drawn. Human beings could not change their destiny; it was the hubris of the unenlightened that fostered the

cruel illusion they could do so.

But meanwhile, three of the principal players were missing. Where in the name of Talisman were they? In a few days, the clan's trade delegation would be ready to leave for the annual gathering on the shores of the Great River. Mr Snow had two choices: to go with them, or stay behind. And the cloud-warrior had two ways to return with Cadillac and Clearwater: by smuggling themselves aboard one of the giant wheel-boats due to travel along the Great River to the trading post, or by a more direct overland route through the territory that had once belonged to the Io-Wa and Ne-Braska.

A year ago, Brickman had stolen aboard one of the wheel-boats at the trading post and had been carried away to the Fire-Pits of Beth-Lem. If he had managed to complete the journey without being discovered he might decide that this was the best way to return. In the bustle of trading activity, with the Mutes helping to load and unload the wheel-boats, they would have an excellent opportunity to steal ashore. Once there they could rejoin their clanfolk, becoming part of the delegation which would then travel home across the plains during the period of truce known as 'Walking on the Water'.

That was the sensible way, but the journey from Ne-Issan took many days – perhaps weeks. Finding a place on a wheel-boat where three people could remain undetected for days on end would not be easy. Mr Snow had been taken aboard one for a brief audience with Lord Yama-Shita. They were giant structures but they also carried a large crew who constantly swarmed back and forth like ants on a dunghill. And the wheel-boats only came to the trading post once a year. To return via this route meant boarding the right vessel at exactly the right moment. The cloud-warrior was resourceful enough to gather this information but what if they missed the boat? Or escaped much earlier and were unable to take the longer but safer way home?

Mr Snow's dilemma arose from his desire to be at the chosen point of arrival in case his powers were needed to fight off any pursuers. For they would be pursued. That was certain. Over the years of trading, he had come to understand the character of the Iron Masters and their obsession with 'face', what the Mutes called 'standing'. Because of the status accorded to warriors, it was a concept the two races shared, but not to the same degree. Mutes generally nursed their shattered pride then gave it another shot. To the Iron Masters, loss of face was an unbearable condition which, if the victim's sense of honour could not be regained, often led to suicide. This concern with honour, impeccable behaviour and faultless performance of one's duties only affected the pure-blood ruling classes; the lower orders – the inferior races – were not graced by such concerns. Which, according to his informant, explained why the gods had condemned them to a life of servitude.

Yes ... Given the nature of Cadillac's mission, their escape would cause a definite loss of face, and the authorities concerned would spare no effort to recapture them. Failure to do so would cause heads to roll. Mr Snow – who knew nothing of the mayhem the trio had caused at the Heron Pool – was unaware that in its bloody aftermath a great many already had. He only knew the Iron Masters were tenacious adversaries who did not admit defeat. That was why he had to be on hand in case they pursued his young charges into the heartland of the Plainfolk.

But he could not be in two places at once and he could no longer hesitate. He now had less than a week in which to make his decision. Perhaps the Sky Voices would consent to guide him. He had consulted them many times during the past year but they had greeted his questions about Clearwater, Cadillac and the cloud-warrior with a baffling silence. He clambered up to his favourite rock, sat down with his legs crossed, took several deep breaths while he admired the view, then raised his closed eyes and opened his mind to the sky.

For a long while it seemed as if the staff of this spiritual advice bureau was out to lunch but eventually a series of pictures appeared before his inner eye. Soul-searing images of death and destruction on an unparalleled scale; a grisly drama in which he had been given a starring role. No

Snow was renowned for his courage and resolution but even his indomitable heart quailed at this new burden that Fate had thrust upon him. And what made it worse was the knowledge that these fleeting images were merely a foretaste of what was to come. But there could be no turning back. The Shogun's Voices had spoken – and had left him in no doubt as to what he had to do.

Some two thousand miles to the east of the M'Call settlement, Ieyasu, Lord Chamberlain of the Inner Court, grand-uncle and principal advisor to the Shogun Yoritomo Toh-Yota, absolute ruler of Ne-Issan, was also beset by problems that demanded resolution.

If Mr Snow was old, Ieyasu was ancient, but they had many qualities in common including keen eyes and fire in their belly. Both were shrewd, highly intelligent and infinitely wise in the ways of the world even though the societies in which they lived were totally dissimilar except for their respect for physical courage and the code of honour which formed the basis of the warrior ethos.

Mr Snow could not read or write but possessed gifts of memory and magic: Ieyasu was literate, extremely well educated and although he was unable to summon earth and sky forces to his aid, the skill and cunning with which he outmanoeuvred all those who sought to remove him from power was little short of supernatural.

Before Yoritomo's accession to the throne at the tender age of twenty-three, Ieyasu had exercised absolute power in the name of the Shogun's dissolute father. Yoritomo, now twenty-nine, was made of different cloth. Restrained in his sexual appetites, something of an ascetic in his attitude to food and drink, overburdened with a tiresome morality and obsessed with traditional values, Yoritomo had proved particularly difficult to deal with. And the main source of difficulty was his determination to take sole charge of the nation's affairs and ignore the voice of experience. The voice, of course, being that of his grand-uncle.

It was hard enough trying to keep the government afloat and conspirators at bay without having to reeducate an aspiring saint who was trying to manoeuvre you out of office. In time, Yoritomo would learn. But he would learn a lot quicker and make life a lot easier for everyone by absorbing the distilled wisdom of his grand-uncle. Something he had done with the utmost reluctance.

In part, it was a natural reaction to the moral laxity which had pervaded the Inner Court during his father's reign. As a new broom, Yoritomo wanted to make a clean sweep. A perfectly laudable aim. The court was in need of a thorough spring cleaning. But in politics one never did anything to excess. Yoritomo did not understand the importance of leaving a little dirt in the corners. His puritanical streak – laudable in a monk but utterly depressing in a vigorous, intelligent young man holding the highest office in the land – was blinding him to the realities of power.

The young shogun had not yet grasped an essential truth: exploiting the weaknesses of powerful men – especially powerful opponents – was an important element in the art of statecraft. It was also true that a nation needed honest men of high principle and modest ambition. They made excellent civil servants. The government revenue and customs houses and the postal service were always crying out for more. Sinners, on the other hand, made better dinner companions. And they were a lot easier to do business with.

Ieyasu was also a traditionalist, as opposed to those who favoured progressive ideals – a group of domain-lords led by the Yama-Shita family. But the progress advocated by this cabal of entrepreneurs was restricted to the introduction of new industrial processes and manufacturing techniques. No one, however radical their ideas were in that direction, was in favour of modernising the feudal system on which Ne-Issan had been built.

The problem – in Ieyasu's eyes at least – was that you could not have one without undermining the other. And none of the seventeen ruling samurai families was prepared to surrender an ounce of power.

or privilege to the lower classes. It was the merchants who argued the case for an expanding economy and the benefits to be gained by increasing the purchasing power of the masses by – if you please – paying tradesmen and servants higher wages! Some had even suggested setting up trade links with the long-dogs inhabiting the buried cities beyond the Western Hills – but what else could one expect from chinamen who had an abacus where their brains should be?

The greatest bar to progress was the immutable edict which forbade, under pain of death, the re-introduction of the Dark Light. It was also a treasonable offence for lesser mortals to utter its name and such was the dread it inspired, even those at the pinnacle of power only did so with the greatest circumspection. According to the scrolls which chronicled the distant past, the creation of the Dark Light – electricity – had corrupted mankind and led the gods to destroy The World Before with a tidal wave of golden fire. A wave that had engulfed the ancient homeland of the Iron Masters, and which was so high, it had covered the peak of Fuji, the sacred mountain which contained the soul of Nippon. As a result, there was a deeply-held belief that to seek to resurrect the Dark Light would be an act of incredible folly which would once again place the world in mortal peril.

But, as Ieyasu knew, the world of Ne-Issan was bordered by the Appalachians and the Eastern Seaboard. There was another vaster world beyond the Western Hills, inhabited by grass-monkeys and long-dog Plainfolk Mutes and Trackers – the soldier-citizens of the Amtrak Federation. The Mutes were hairy savages, semi-nomadic hunters with no craft skills beyond those needed to support their simple mode of life. All their edged-weapons, crossbows and metal implements were supplied by the Iron Masters. But the Trackers were warriors who had no fear of the Dark Light. It was the life-force of the underground society. It enabled them to send images and voices through the air, it powered their weapons, their giant, caterpillar-like land-cruisers and their skychariots – war-machines which entered the cloud-realm of the *kami* with impunity *and were not cast down*.

Their presence posed a threat to the world of Ne-Issan yet Amaterasu-Omikami stood aside and did nothing. Their underground cities were not crushed, and the world beyond the Appalachians was not ravaged by heavenly fire – a theological conundrum that was studiously ignored by the leading sages of the *Shinto* priesthood.

Ieyasu knew the answer. The Dark Light was neither good nor bad. Electricity was a power that lay at the heart of the natural world. It could be captured by special, cunningly-wrought machines and conveyed along special threads from one place to another, or shot through the air like an invisible arrow that flew across plains, mountains and seas within the space of a single heartbeat.

Like all power, it could be used and abused. It could corrupt, in the same way that *sake* addled the brains of drunkards and opium destroyed the will of addicts. But in its pure state, it was not inherently evil. Electricity had been created to be the slave of man. Only if the man was weak could the slave become his master. Ieyasu had certain foibles but he was not a weak man. He enjoyed the attendant luxury his privileged birth and high rank afforded him but he was consumed by nothing except the desire to manipulate the reins of power to the ultimate benefit of the Toh-Yota family and the Shogun. In that order. Ieyasu ate well, drank judiciously, and kept his gaunt, aging body in trim by practising his swordsmanship. He enjoyed male *and* female company and could still produce a commendable erection which a select circle of court ladies – ever anxious to advance themselves or the careers of their husbands – accommodated by supplying him with a string of pubescent nymphets.

The Dark Light might kill him but it would never enslave him. Ieyasu knew this because it had served him well over many years. Key members of his private network of secret agents had been using high-powered radio transceivers and other electronic devices for the last ten years. The same type of equipment used by the secret agents of the Federation and which, after a series of stealthy contacts, had been supplied by them to Ieyasu's organization under the terms of a secret protocol signed by his

and Commander-General Karlstrom, the head of AMEXICO.

Among the items covered was the return of any *mexican* caught by the Plainfolk Mutes and sold to the Iron Masters. Other clauses outlined mutually-beneficial arrangements for the pooling of specific types of information, for example – the kinds of weapons the Iron Masters planned to supply to the Mutes by way of trade and, in return, any snippets of information which could help Ieyasu head off any bid to topple the Toh-Yota shogunate.

A final clause set out the arrangements for joint operations between the two spy networks. It was here that AMEXICO's help had proved invaluable. There were certain locations which, for various reasons, Ieyasu's home-grown agents were unable to penetrate or where they could not operate effectively. The wheel-boats operated by the Yama-Shita family were one example. The vetting procedures were so strict it was impossible to slip an outsider into the crew. The only alternative was to buy the allegiance of someone already serving the family but experience had shown this to be a costly and highly unreliable way of doing business.

Karlstrom had supplied the answer: the insertion of *mexicans*, disguised as Mute slaves, and armed with a working knowledge of Japanese and other Asiatic languages into sensitive locations. Ieyasu, after some initial misgivings, had accepted the offer. And it had worked. As non-persons, slaves were regarded as part of the brickwork, and since no outlander was permitted to utter a word of the Iron Master's sacred tongue, people talked in front of them without ever suspecting their conversation was being monitored. Disguised slaves could not, of course, penetrate the secret council chambers of high-ranking plotters but they were the source of a surprising amount of raw intelligence. And many of the council chambers were no longer secret thanks to the electronic bugging devices obligingly supplied by AMEXICO.

So far it had paid off, but it was a dangerous game. A balancing act which placed Ieyasu on a tightrope over a pool of hungry sharks. For not only had he approved the use of devices filled with the Dark Light, he had even sent some of his most trusted men to help perfect the language skills of Karlstrom's agents!

His opposite number, the head of AMEXICO – who also spoke fluent Japanese – had never sought to press for an advantage. The emphasis had always been on mutual cooperation but Ieyasu knew that if one of the two copies of the secret protocol with his name and seal attached ever reached the Shogun, his hold on the reins of power would be abruptly severed. And so would his head. His own death in the proper course of events did not concern him, but his precipitate departure from office followed by the elimination of his closest aides would leave a dangerous vacuum in the highest councils of the land. A vacuum that a host of undesirables would rush to fill.

In the few years left to him, Ieyasu had to make the best possible use of this unique contact with a potential enemy state without compromising the long-term interests of Ne-Issan or betraying its most cherished beliefs. A lesser wrong for a greater good.

As a pragmatist, Ieyasu had no problem with that. Like all aristocratic Iron Masters, conspiracy was in his blood. The history of Ne-Issan was a catalogue of internecine feuds and labyrinthine treachery. Even so, there were times when he found it difficult to reconcile his dual roles as master spy and Court Chamberlain of the Toh-Yota shogunate with his blood-ties to the entire Japanese ruling class. This was a primal allegiance that went beyond pure reason and, as such, could not be ignored. Up until now he had been able to override this inner conflict, but in the spring of 2991, he learned of an event which placed him in a considerable dilemma.

In the autumn of the previous year, *mexicans* disguised as slave workers had – with his tacit approval – sabotaged an attempt to build flying horses; a project masterminded by the Yama-Shita and

Min-Orota families who were also laying plans to overthrow the Toh-Yota Shogunate. The sabotage operation had been a remarkably bloody affair – and so had its aftermath. Hundreds had perished: foot-soldiers, cavalry, samurai, nobles from both families and Domain-Lord Hirohito Yama-Shita who, by all accounts, had died in a particularly gruesome manner.

Ieyasu's agents had been instrumental in helping the five saboteurs to leave the country but the departure had not been the end of the story. Judged guilty of seeking to resurrect the Dark Light, several leading members of the Yama-Shita family were given the chance to take their own lives; others, of lower rank, were executed, fines were levied and economic sanctions applied.

Armed resistance against the government was out of the question. The judgment against the family had been rendered by its peers; a committee of powerful domain-lords including several of its close allies – whose neutrality had been purchased by giving them valuable pieces of the Yama-Shita trading empire.

All this had been done yet it had not brought the Yama-Shita to heel. They wanted revenge. Not against the Toh-Yota. Without its two main allies, the Ko-Nikka and the Se-Iko – the beneficiaries of the Shogun's *largesse* – the shogunate and the traditionalists now held the balance of power. It would take years to win back its former supporters and longer still before they were ready to even the score. No ... the family's thirst for revenge was directed against the five assassins – the outlanders who had killed their domain-lord and brought the house of Yama-Shita to its knees. They could not have done their bloody work without highly-placed friends inside Ne-Issan. If this murderous gang could be captured alive, they would soon reveal the identity of their masters ...

Ieyasu did not need the bug planted inside the council chamber of the Yama-Shita's palace at Sarakusa to tell him how they had reasoned. He merely had to put himself in their place. The last-minute decision by the Shogun not to attend the flying display at the Heron Pool pointed to his complicity in the murderous onslaught unleashed by the assassins. An onslaught which – in the minds of the Yama-Shita family – had been stage-managed by Ieyasu.

Not exactly true, but close enough. Ieyasu had not known in detail what the saboteurs intended to do; he had merely allowed the operation to go ahead. Had he known more, he might have acted otherwise. Using communication devices and 'hired' agents was one thing; allowing those same agents and Mute witches to murder highborn Japanese citizens with impunity was something else entirely.

The events which had led to this indiscriminate killing were, arguably, an example of a delicate political problem that could not have been solved in any other way, and with such brutal swiftness. But there were limits beyond which Ieyasu was reluctant to go in his desire to preserve the shogunate. The Heron Pool incident marked the top of a slippery slope he had no wish to descend. And now, in the spring of 2991, the long-dogs had attacked again. Only this time, they had struck first and told him afterwards. A wheel-boat of the Yama-Shita family, carrying a large number of samurai and foot-soldiers towards the western shore of Lake Mi-shiga had been sunk with the loss of all hands.

Karlstrom, in sending his apologies, had explained that there had been no time to seek his approval. At the very last minute, AMEXICO had received news that the Yama-Shita intended to launch a military operation against a clan of Mutes that was sheltering the agents who had sabotaged the Heron Pool. No one could condemn the Yama-Shita family's desire for revenge, said Karlstrom, but it was against the laws of Ne-Issan, an illegal act of war.

True. But even so, regardless of the circumstances, the loss of 250 samurai, 300 red-stripes and 150 officers and crew was an act of violence that was difficult to condone: an affront to the pride of the entire nations. Had the attack gone ahead, it would have been a criminal act for which the Yama-Shita

would have been duly punished. But it was equally reprehensible for the long-dogs to take the law in their own hands. To engineer the death of over seven hundred soldiers of Ne-Issan in order to save five of their agents and a clan of grass-monkeys was a totally disproportionate response. Secret agents were treasured assets but their duties also included a readiness to die. AMEXICO's action against the wheel-boat had seriously damaged the existing relationship to the point where Ieyasu was beset with grave doubts about its future.

There was also another problem. Should he tell the Shogun about the illegal expedition mounted by the Yama-Shita? Or should he remain silent about the whole affair and accept the announcement from the palace at Sara-kusa that a wheel-boat supplying the new out-stations on Lake Mi-shiga had been lost with all hands during a violent storm? To reveal the truth – or part of it – would place Yoritomo under an obligation to impose further sanctions.

Ieyasu was reluctant to increase the pressure on the family. The death of Domain-Lord Yama-Shita and the exposure of the plot to resurrect the Dark Light had strengthened the position of the Toh-Yota. Its most powerful rival had been humbled, but they still commanded a great deal of covert support. Applying more sanctions would be seen as an attempt to completely destroy the family – a move that would arouse suspicion and resentment among the other domain-lords.

In their eyes, the deaths of the named conspirators and their closest relatives and the harsh fines had expunged the family's guilt. Any further attempt to crush the Yama-Shita would be seen as a threat to all those who supported its progressive ideals. No one wanted to create conditions that could lead to another civil war. As the first among equals, the Toh-Yota had to be strong but not too strong. And since it could not singlehandedly sweep all opposition aside, it had to maintain the balance of power by a mixture of skilful government and skulduggery – two areas in which Ieyasu was the acknowledged master.

After lengthy reflection, Ieyasu decided to say and do nothing. He would, for the moment at least, leave the dilemma posed by his relationship with Karlstrom unresolved. He had not lost all sense of honour. It was simply that his self-esteem was of minor importance compared with the maintenance of the Toh-Yota shogunate. As long as he, Ieyasu, was alive, Yoritomo could be left in charge of the moral high ground. His task was to underpin the succession by ensuring that the opposition remained fragmented. His legacy would be to imbue Yoritomo with the determination to gradually reduce the Yama-Shita to penury, redistribute their lands and drive them into political obscurity like the once-great Da-Tsuni.

To aid Yoritomo in this task, Ieyasu's successor needed to retain access to the same alien device that had enabled the present spy network to function so efficiently. The links with AMEXICO would not be severed but, equally, they would not be extended and the existing arrangements would have to be more tightly controlled. Karlstrom would have to understand that the indiscriminate killing of high-ranking Iron Masters by outlanders – no matter what the circumstances – could no longer be countenanced.

The presence of a Mute witch among the team of saboteurs at the Heron Pool and this latest action against the wheel-boat in defence of a clan of Mute fisherfolk were discordant notes in what until then had been a harmonious relationship. Similar, in many respects, to the trading contacts built up by Iron Master and Mute over several decades; contacts which had subsequently received the covert blessing of AMEXICO.

Having invested a great deal of time, money and effort, the Iron Masters regarded the Plainfolk Mutes as their own milch cow. These illiterate animals could never be allies but they had been accorded the status of auxiliaries. That was why they had been armed instead of being enslaved in the hope they could slow down the northwards advance of the Federation. But had the ground rule

changed? Were these two disquieting incidents the product of another 'understanding'? Another secret protocol signed by one or more of the competing Mute bloodlines and the smooth-tongued head AMEXICO?

Only time would tell.

In the palace-fortress of Sara-kusa, built on the site of the pre-Holocaust city of Syracuse, N. Y, Aishi Sakimoto, acting Regent of the Yama-Shita family, had been asking himself more or less the same question and believed he now knew the answer.

In the normal course of events, the domain-lord's eldest son would have assumed his father's title but on the orders of the Shogun, Hirohito's children had all died by their own hand, or had been killed by their mother before turning the knife upon herself.

In some families, blood-feuds erupted when competing branches disputed the succession but Domain-Lord Hirohito Yama-Shita had ruthlessly eliminated all potential rivals. He had ruled with a firm iron hand but under his leadership the family, already rich, had prospered even more. Only now, with most of his immediate relatives dead, had come the sombre realization that his murderous reign had eliminated most of the candidates with the necessary strength, ability and drive to take his place.

The qualities of leadership now displayed by Aishi Sakimoto had not escaped the notice of his late nephew but he had survived, partly because he was Hirohito's favourite uncle and a fairly ruthless character himself. But what had really saved him from assassination was the fact that he was old and without issue, and was therefore not regarded as a threat to the domain-lord's own family.

It was also the reason why the shaken survivors had appointed him to head the council now running the family's affairs until one of their number formally assumed the title. In the present climate, the chosen successor to Hirohito would not necessarily be the best man for the job. Ieyasu, the Lord Chamberlain had sent word that whoever was chosen could only become domain-lord with the approval of the Shogun. And everyone knew Yoritomo would not allow a strong candidate to take the helm.

It was a bitter pill. Never before had the family been forced to endure such interference with their affairs. The twin ancestors of the Yama-Shita, the Yama-Ha and the Matsu-Shita had helped the Toh-Yota defeat the Da-Tsuni. They had been allies. As part of the historic Seventh Wave, their blood had mingled on the shore of the Eastern Sea. But with the merger of the two families to form one of the biggest domains in Ne-Issan they had become rivals. And their differences had been aggravated by Hirohito's espousal of progressive ideals.

The domain formed by the merger was not significantly larger than the territory held by the Toh-Yota. The source of their unease lay in its unique geographical position which gave it access to the Great Lakes and the Eastern Sea, borders that could be easily defended and, above all, an enviable trading advantage. Even though the Toh-Yota had filled its own coffers by taxing the family revenues, the steadily increasing wealth and influence of the Yama-Shita had come to be viewed as a threat to the Shogunate.

Lord Hirohito's overconfidence had led him to act prematurely. He had been right about Yoritomo. Left to his own devices, the young Shogun would not have been a problem. He was his own worst enemy. But Hirohito had seriously underestimated Ieyasu's staying power. With Yoritomo's accession and his attempted clean sweep, Ieyasu's grip on the Inner Court had been seriously weakened. Many of his cronies had been ousted and his place-men in the *bakufu* had been demoted or pensioned off. Everyone had confidently expected Ieyasu to follow them out through the door to spend his last years pottering about the garden or the library of his large estate.

But the old fox had hung on, and six years later, the foothold he had managed to preserve had become a veritable stranglehold. It had been reported that he not only had the Shogun's ear, he had both ears pinned against the wall. The proof was there for all to see! Yoritomo's fleet-footed manoeuvres in the wake of the Heron Pool massacre bore all the hall-marks of the great conspirator.

Yes. More positive action should have been taken at the beginning. An overt assassination attempt was out of the question but Ieyasu's penchant for juveniles was no secret within court circles. Instead of gloating over the reports of his imminent removal from office on the grounds of galloping senility Hirohito should have slipped a couple of well-schooled 'spring blossoms' into the old bugger's bed with orders to stay on the job until they had fucked his brains out.

Well, it was too late now. Hirohito had paid dearly for his mistake and so had the family. The account would be settled – with interest. But it would be an uphill task. Ieyasu would not last for ever but it was clear that the young Shogun could no longer be written off. He had learned a great deal. The Yama-Shita would rise again but it would be many years before they would be strong enough to dislodge the Toh-Yota. He, Aishi Sakimoto, would play his part, but the sweet moment of victory would not come in his lifetime. For the moment, they would have to content themselves with punishing the clan M'Call and the rest of the She-Kargo bloodline.

Thanks to a message sent from the wheel-boat soon after the unmasking of the two Kojak 'guides' Sakimoto now knew that one of them was the cloud-warrior that the M'Calls had sent to Ne-Issan escorted by a female Mute. It was not clear whether this female – who had last been seen in the hands of the Min-Orota – was the unmarked white witch who had murdered Lord Hirohito with her fool magic, but there was a possibility they were one and the same.

When unmasked on the wheel-boat, the cloud-warrior had been disguised as Mute. His companion whose skin was similarly marked, had been identified as the grass-monkey who had become the cloud-warrior's personal servant and had flown the first rocket-powered prototype. In view of the expert work he had handled the craft he was probably another skilfully-disguised long-dog. As for the white witch her true identity remained problematical. Sakimoto knew of the rumours of Mute magic but he had discounted them as Lord Hirohito had. Now he was not so sure. If the witch was *not* a long-dog, then it meant that there were clear-skinned, smooth-boned Mutes who – on the outside at least – looked just like Trackers!

It was all very confusing.

There was, however, one aspect of this affair which was not bedevilled by doubt. A working connection between long-dog and grass-monkey had been clearly established. By piecing together the information gathered from the fisherfolk of Lake Mi-shiga by the agents now stationed on the eastern shore, Sakimoto knew the wheel-boat had been set afire and sunk by flying-horses which could only have come from the Federation. And the first two assassins had arrived in Ne-Issan as emissaries of the Clan M'Call. Under a deal struck by Lord Hirohito and a wordsmith called Mr Snow, the clan had agreed to deliver a cloud-warrior and his flying-horse in exchange for a hundred rifles!

Who could have guessed that this dull-eyed, oafish scum was capable of such duplicity? Never in his mind. It would not go unavenged, and nor would the crimes of the clan Kojak who – after the sinking of the wheel-boat – had massacred all those who reached the shore. But the first move would be against the M'Calls – the link between the Plainfolk and the Federation. And this time, the operation had to be mounted without any possibility of failure.

The family could expect no assistance from its few remaining friends in an act of war that did not have government approval. And in the present climate, that was unlikely to be obtained without being forced to hand over a large piece of the pie. The only way round the problem was to mask the attack

by using Mute clans from the D'Troit bloodline, the fiercest rivals of the She-Kargo.

Sakimoto was aware that slaughtering the She-Kargo trade delegations would net very few of the real offenders. The bulk of the clan M'Call was safely out of reach. But this attack was only the first step in a plan the family had been hatching for some considerable time. The harsh consequences of Lord Hirohito's misadventure had weakened the family's power-base and it could only be rebuilt by implementing the plan to expand its present boundaries.

Recruiting the D'Troit to do the spade work was part of that plan. The present fragmented nature of the Plainfolk which led to clans of the same blood-line fighting each other was pointless and unproductive. And the trading arrangements under which each clan annually supplied varying-sized groups of 'volunteer' slave-workers was an inefficient way of meeting the constant demand for labour.

They killed each other in the same haphazard way. There was no master plan. Warriors who triumphed in a clash of arms did not go on to plunder the settlement of the losers. The victorious clan did not occupy its rival's land or slaughter the survivors. It did not even attempt to enslave them. The winners simply went home and composed fire-songs which extolled their prowess!

Part of the problem was the vastness of the territory at their disposal. There was too much land and too few people. And because the inhabitants were savages with a simple life-style, they did not need to exploit the land's resources. There was enough room for everyone, an abundance of game and more raw material than anyone could possibly need. There was no need to conquer each other. Mutes fought each other because they were wedded to the warrior ethic. It was a test of courage, part of the process of natural selection. Very laudable. But all that ferocious energy should not be allowed to go to waste. It should be directed towards a loftier goal, not frittered away on inconsequential skirmishes.

The Yama-Shita planned to provide that sense of direction by unifying the disparate clans of the D'Troit and C'Natti bloodlines and creating two vassal states. Armed and advised by the Yama-Shita they would then subjugate their hated rivals, the She-Kargo, and the other lesser bloodlines. When that had been done, they would levy annual tributes in the form of raw materials and able-bodied males and females. Punitive tributes which would force this race of savages to toil from dawn till dusk instead of idling their days away with smoke-filled dreams. Work would be their saviour, not some invisible being called Talisman.

As patrons and protectors of the D'Troit and C'Natti, the Yama-Shita family would be the sole conduit for this new flow of materials and labour. It would generate unimaginable wealth – but only if each move was carefully planned. The treasonous acts of Lord Hirohito had robbed the family of its exclusive right to trade with the grass-monkeys. Licences had been awarded to its southern neighbours, the Ko-Nikka and Se-Iko but it was Yama-Shita who controlled the entrances to the Great Lakes and it was *their* navigators who knew what course to steer through the deeps and shallows. They had the know-how and the contacts, and their fleet of giant wheel-boats dwarfed the vessels owned by the Ko-Nikka. The Se-Iko, whose domain was land-locked, only possessed river craft. For this first trip they had been obliged to lease two boats and their crews from the Yama-Shita at exorbitant rates. Both families had placed orders for larger vessels but the Ko-Nikka's shipwrights – who lacked the expertise needed to construct such large vessels – were still wrestling with the problem of how to launch the bilges.

Sakimoto was content to let them stew in their own juice. The family's former allies had broken ranks in return for a share of the Great Lakes trade and now they were learning that there was more to it than a pretty piece of paper with the Shogun's seal on it. The Yama-Shita still had the edge on its new partners and they both knew that without its assistance their own crews might return empty handed.

From the signals coming into Sara-kusa, it appeared that some of the wiser heads in both domains were already regretting the hasty leap onto the Shogun's coattails. If these veiled contacts were inspired by feelings of guilt then he, Aishi Sakimoto, intended to exploit such sentiments to gain whatever advantage he could. Given their recent turn-about, he could not take them into his confidence and it was not necessary. They would serve his purpose better by remaining independent witnesses. They would be able to testify that the fighting at the trading post broke out between the rival Mute bloodlines and it was only when the conflict appeared to be getting out of hand that the Yama-Shita family felt obliged to intervene in order to separate the warring factions and protect the Iron Masters trapped on shore. And if, in the course of establishing a cease-fire, one faction suffered heavier casualties than the other then that would be regrettable but unavoidable.

This had been Lord Hirohito's plan, and it was a good one. In making it, he had not been inspired by any particular animosity towards the She-Kargo. On the contrary. Their pre-eminence was something to be admired. He had simply decided to back the D'Troit and the C'Natti because their burning desire to become the paramount bloodlines of the Plainfolk would tempt them into an alliance with the Yama-Shita.

But with his death at the hands of the white witch, the subjugation of the She-Kargo was no longer just the initial phase in the economic development of the Western Plains. It had become an act of vengeance.

And the first tribute to be exacted by the new vassal states on behalf of their master would be the heads of the Clan M'Call.

The M'Calls were also at the top of the hit-list drawn up by the leaders of the Amtrak Federation. Their narrow escape of the wagon-train known as The Lady from Louisiana in the Battle of the Now and Then River in June 2989, and the subsequent disastrous attack which destroyed a third of its wagon-train and crew in the November snows of 2990 had badly dented the Federation's image of invincibility.

It was a challenge that could not be ignored. Such spirited resistance by sub-human savages could not go unpunished. The Clan M'Call, the group responsible for this outrage, had to be crushed. Ground into dust as an example of what happened to those who resisted the might of the Federation.

The decision to annihilate the clan had been the easy part. The difficulties lay in its implementation. The M'Calls were led by an individual called Mr Snow – said to be one of the most powerful summoners ever born into the Plainfolk.

The ability to summon invisible forces present in the earth and sky – dynamic energy which flowed through their bodies and was shaped and directed by their minds – was one of three attributes possessed by certain 'gifted Mutes'. Their rarity was something to be thankful for; the ability to summon hurricane-force winds, 'sky-fire' and 'earth-thunder', and to levitate rocks weighing up to half-a-ton was the most spectacular and dangerous form of what had come to be known as 'Mute magic'.

Summoners, seers – those gifted with the power to read the past and foretell the future with the aid of seeing-stones – and wordsmiths – those born with prodigious memories – displayed mental abilities that belied their primitive appearance and life-style. They were highly intelligent, and the powers they possessed – or could call upon – defied all rational explanation.

In due course an answer would be found through the rigorous application of the recognized laws of physics, but in the meantime, faced with something they could not master or understand, the Firn Family had officially decreed that there was no such thing as Mute magic. Any public utterance to the contrary was a Code One offence – punishable by death, and any overground unit that found itself on the receiving end of Mute magic could not use it as an excuse for failing to achieve its operation.

objectives.

Draconian measures which had been ruthlessly enforced. And with good reason. Maintaining a high degree of motivation among units exposed to a hostile environment for months at a time in distant work-camps and way-stations was no easy task. And that included the elite troops known as Trail-Blazers who crewed the wagon-trains. Totally dedicated and highly disciplined, the Trail-Blazer Division was a cross between the battle-hardened WW2 generation of US Marines and the Waffen-SS of the same period. But even they had been known to lose their grip when confronted by the awesome powers unleashed by a summoner able to call upon the Seven Rings of Power.

Mr Snow, known as The Storm-Bringer, was one such individual – perhaps the only one of his kind among the Plainfolk. Thanks to the efforts of Steve and Roz Brickman, Mr Snow's protégé Clearwater, was now in the hands of the Federation. Well, almost. To be more precise, she was in the intensive care ward of the mobile field hospital hitched to the Red River wagon-train now heading south out of Nebraska.

Clearwater, on past form, was rated as potentially even more dangerous than Mr Snow, but after suffering massive wounding followed by major surgery she was now under continuous sedation and, in the short term, was not judged to be a threat while in transit aboard Red River or to the Federation where the research staff of the Life Institute were eagerly awaiting her arrival.

That left Mr Snow, summoner and wordsmith of the Clan M'Call, and his other young pupil Cadillac Deville, apprentice wordsmith and seer. Their capture (at planning level it was called 'the removal from the equation') was to be the final phase in OPERATION SQUARE-DANCE masterminded by Commander-General Ben Karlstrom.

Karlstrom, a close relative of the President-General, was the Operational Director of AMEXICO, the covert operations unit formed to carry out assignments initiated directly from the Oval Office and currently occupied by George Washington Jefferson the 31st.

In late 19th century terms, AMEXICO combined the functions of the American CIA, the Gestapo of Germany's Third Reich and the British SAS. Intelligence-gathering, state security, commando-style forays and 'judicial terminations' in parallel to, but without the knowledge of, the recognized military police and army intelligence units. Its agents – known as *mexicans* – operated within the subterranean nation-state ruled by the First Family and the blue-sky world above, and its existence was the best kept secret in the Federation.

The nine members of the Supreme Council were officially aware of the general nature of the organization but they did not know the manpower it employed, the resources it could call upon or the scope of its activities. Only Jefferson the 31st and Karlstrom knew the full score. Others could only speculate. AMEXICO was the President-General's private army and the impenetrable cloak of secrecy was essential because it was sometimes called upon to eliminate potentially troublesome members of the First Family.

To some readers, it may seem strange that disaffection of any sort could exist in an enclosed totalitarian state in which every aspect of the environment and its soldier-citizen's lives were controlled with military precision and computerized efficiency from Day One. But such was the case. Any reader with direct experience of the armed forces or the electronics industry will know that 'military precision' and 'computerized efficiency' are mythical states which bear little relation to what either system is able to deliver.

All monolithic power structures staffed by human beings are bound to be less than perfect, especially one reliant on advanced technology – and the Federation was no exception. Nine hundred years of relentless regimentation had failed to produce a First Family version of 'Soviet Man'. People

at every level of the command structure still screwed up and systems crashed with unfailing regularity. Depending on your attitude towards what the First Family was trying to achieve this was either a matter of grave concern or grounds for celebration. Proof of the indestructibility of the human spirit; a ray of hope for the future of mankind.

The founding Father, George Washington Jefferson the 1st, had known this basic truth when he laid the foundations on which his vision of the future was to be built. 'Only people fail, not the system' was one of his two Delphic utterances emblazoned on every available wallspace throughout the Federation and echoed daily on the nine public video channels. A phrase of cunning simplicity which had helped to preserve the status quo by deflecting the blame for any shortcomings in the system back onto the individual who raised his voice in protest against the measures taken in its name.

To prevent these isolated cranks spreading their disaffection like a virus through the body politic over which they presided, the First Family had installed a number of fail-safe systems. By the spring of 2991, these included an acoustic surveillance system code-named HYDRA under which their entire underground empire had been wired for sound.

Any location, at any level, could be monitored by keying its coordinates into a command console. It was possible for human operators to listen in to conversations but the sheer logistics made this impractical. Most of the eavesdropping was controlled by COLUMBUS using a given hit-list of suspects and hourly random samplings known as 'sound sweeps'. Ordinary conversations were monitored but not recorded: it was only when a speaker used a word or phrase listed in a 'subversive vocabulary' that the reels started turning. The taped conversations were then subjected to computer analysis, classified into various categories according to the nature of the conversation and graded in terms of 'arrestability'. It was only when this sifting process had been completed, that the daily residue of hard cases – known as the action list – was displayed on the screens of the operatives at HYDRA Central.

But the system, and its handlers, missed the big one.

Despite HYDRA and the nation-wide network of undercover agents the Family were caught totally off-guard by the protest strike mounted by the crews of the Federation's wagon-trains. Organized and led by their executive officers it had none of the characteristics of a popular uprising led by dissidents but it was, nevertheless, a rebellion; the first serious challenge to the authority and wisdom of the First Family for over six hundred years.

The protest, which was confined to Trail-Blazers on active duty aboard the trains, was disciplined and unpublicised and the divisions's so-called grievances were conveyed to CINC-TRAIN in a coded message signed by twenty wagon-masters and their executive officers out of the Federation's fleet of twenty-one. Only the name of Red River – Amtrak's flagship – was missing from the roll.

The protesters had two demands. First, official recognition of the existence of Mute magic. If, for reasons of state, this could not be made public then it was to be admitted in secret session to the wagon-train fraternity by representatives of the First Family. Second, the disciplinary charges brought against Commander Bill Hartmann and the executive officers of The Lady – which had arisen from their inability to combat the power of a Plainfolk summoner – were to be dropped. All crew members were to be fully exonerated and returned to active duty in their previous posts without loss of seniority or privileges.

There was no 'or else' but with 95% of its wagon-train force ranged solidly behind the protest, the White House decided to roll with the punch. In a hurriedly-prepared videocast beamed exclusively to the wagon-trains, Jefferson the 31st agreed to the rebel's requests within forty-eight hours of the receipt.

It was an unprecedented concession; the first time an organized protest had not been brutally crushed, but it was also a victory for both sides. The First Family had been wrestling with the problem of Mute magic for the last two hundred and fifty years.

The decision to deny its existence had been taken by a long-dead and buried Supreme Council. At the time, it had not been a problem. It was the Southern Mutes who had then been the enemy. The rumoured existence of summoners had been reported by FINTEL, but on the few occasions where their presence had been suspected, their intercession had failed to halt the advance of the Federation.

The Family had therefore concluded that the alleged power of these individuals did not pose a serious threat to future operations. The danger came from uncontrolled rumours and wild speculation about Mute magic within their own ranks. But instead of ending all ill-informed discussion of the subject, the imposition of sanctions had merely driven it underground.

With the move north into Plainfolk territory the nature of the conflict had changed. The days of easy victories were over and the earlier blanket denial of Mute magic had left the present leaders of the First Family on the hook. This was a chance to slide off it and score a few Brownie points in the process.

Given the latest situation reports from Wyoming and Nebraska, the call for the reinstatement of Commander Hartmann and his crew could not have come at a more opportune moment. Conceding the rebel's demands provided the First Family with an opportunity to bring its secret OPERATION SQUARE-DANCE to successful conclusion.

That fact would only become apparent with hindsight, but it did not mean that all would be forgiven and forgotten. Hartmann and his executives had been the catalyst which caused a simmering discontent to crystallize into open rebellion. The protest might have been restrained, short-lived and totally justified, but it was a direct challenge to the First Family's inalienable right to rule from the top down.

What made it worse was the fact that the rebellion had been well-organized and *had not been foreseen*. Such appalling laxity on the part of security services could not go unpunished. Sooner or later everyone concerned would be dealt with. No one got the better of the First Family and lived to tell the tale. And among the first to learn that harsh lesson would be the crew of *The Lady* from Louisiana.

CHAPTER TWO

Commander James Fargo, the wagon-master of Red River, had seen plenty of Mutes at close-quarter during his time on the overground but they had all been dead, dying, or framed in his gun sight. Killing Mutes was what he had been trained to do. He had never once imagined that a day would come when he was required to play host to two live lump-heads. But they were here. Cosseted aboard Red River.

It was a strange feeling. As far as he knew, this was the first time Mutes had ever sullied the interior of a wagon-train with their poisonous presence, and it was a dubious honour he would have preferred to do without. But orders were orders. Even so, he felt he should have been taken into the confidence of his other guests, a seven-man task-force from the White House complete with their own security lines of communications. From the moment the two Mutes had come aboard, it was clear they were not true lumpheads and – to judge from the flurry of coded signals flowing between the task force and Grand Central – might be something else entirely.

As the top-rated wagon-train in the Federation, Red River had, for many years, been involved in the delivery and collection of a number of individuals whose reason for being on the overground had never been fully explained but who were clearly engaged in some form of covert activity. Since the soldier-citizens of the Federation were members of one vast army whose chain of command led back to the White House, these individuals had to be working for the First Family but, to date, no one had ever discovered the name or the precise function of the unit they belonged to.

Fargo knew it was unwise to enquire further. No one reached the top spot on the Federation's premier wagon-train without learning that at a very early age. As an exemplary product of the system, Fargo believed that if a man wasn't party to secret information then he had no business prying into it. The First Family told you everything you needed to know when it was time for you to know it.

This unquestioning attitude did not mean that the commander of Red River was a colourless, mindless automaton. Initiative and intelligence were part of the job profile. Fargo's unswerving allegiance to the Federation was comparable to Reinhard Heydrich's total commitment to the genocidal policies of Hitler's Third Reich. And like the latter, he had a distinctive personality and mind of his own. But any reservations he had about the way the First Family ran things (and they were very few) was something he kept strictly to himself.

The first of his visitors had been flown in following a night pick-up by the White House task-force using Skyhawks supplied by Red River. One of their number was a 17-year-old Junior Medical Officer named on the detachment order as Roz Brickman. Since she had little experience of battle-field injuries, three members of Red River's own surgical team had flown out with her, riding the buddy frames attached to the fuselages of the five-plane formation.

The badly-wounded Mute had been brought back lashed to the spare berth and had undergone immediate surgery. In the only direct message he had received from CINC-TRAIN, Fargo had been instructed to put the crew and services of Red River at the disposal of the task-force. He had done so. The female Mute – logged aboard as ALPHA-BRAVO – was now in intensive care with the Brickman girl at her bedside. Mitch – Michelle French, Red River's immensely able CMO, who had performed the major part of the surgery rated her chances at no better than 50–50.

Some thirty-six hours after Red River's first unwelcome guest had flown in, the second had arrived under his own steam. Or, to be more precise, on the back of a four-legged animal that Fargo – like the

rest of his crew – had been told was extinct.

Code-named YANKEE-ZULU by the secretive task-force, the smooth-boned, fair-haired Mute had made his approach in broad daylight astride a horse, with two similar beasts in tow. Fargo had relayed the video pictures through the train so that his crew could share the experience of seeing these living relics of a bygone age. Since he was also required to take the horses on board, there was little point in trying to keep their presence secret. But as he watched them being led towards the train, Fargo could not help asking himself the inevitable question. If COLUMBUS held the wrong data on horses, what other errors had it made?

Fargo erased the question and its consequent uncertainties from his mind. COLUMBUS had not made a mistake. The First Family, in its wisdom, had instructed it to withhold the information. And there would be a good reason for doing so.

Although unhurt, YANKEE-ZULU was now in the blood-wagon – the fully-equipped field-hospital that was an integral part of each wagon-train. The medical staff was accommodated on the ground floor along with stores and small lab units. The second floor contained an operating theatre, pre- and post-op, IC, x-ray and ultra-sound units and a clinic for treating minor wounds and ailments. The top floor contained three medical wards, designed to be self-contained if the need arose. The task-force led by someone labelled as WALLIS, DONALD, E, had taken over aft-section, sealing itself off behind the sound-proofed partitions with its special radio equipment. ALPHA-BRAVO, still unconscious after her ordeal on the operating table, was in one of the cubicles of the intensive care unit on the floor below.

Fargo could not help wishing he knew what was being discussed behind those closed doors. He was too disciplined to display his feelings in front of his crew but he was more than a little put out by the thought that after eighteen years service in the field he was still denied knowledge of secret operations of which Red River was an integral part. And – as if to add insult to injury – the three horses he had obligingly taken on board were pissing buckets and dropping large steaming piles of crap all over one of his spit and polished cargo floors.

Steve gazed down at the sleeping figure inside the sterile plastic tent. A breathing tube that reached down into her larynx had been inserted between her pale lips. Her mouth and nose were covered by a clear oxygen mask. There were drip feeds in her arms, drainage tubes from internal organs, and wires linking her to electronic monitoring equipment. Clearwater was a long way from Mr Snow's herb and mash remedies. Another world ...

Her olive brown skin had taken on a deathly pallor. She had no head wounds but someone had cropped her long dark hair, and they'd done it badly, leaving it looking like a porcupine who had blundered into a chainsaw. But she still looked beautiful, her head and neck resting on a single pillow miraculously untouched by the hail of bullets.

Steve, who had kept vigil over her broken, bloodstained body, tried not to think of the splintered bones and ruptured flesh that lay beneath the covers. A body so fragile, a curved frame had been placed over it to support the weight of the top sheet.

He turned to Roz. The sides of their bodies came into contact as they gave each other a supporting hug. 'Is she going to make it, little sister?'

Roz grimaced. 'At the moment, her chances are no more than even. When the surgical team saw the state she was in they were amazed she'd survived for so long. In fact, there were a couple of times they nearly lost her on the table.'

'And all because of a stupid, fucking argument – that I provoked.' Steve broke away and raised his

hands in despair. 'Why?! Ohh, Roz! If she's crippled for life I'll never forgive myself!'

Roz flashed him a warning glance and touched her ear to remind him that someone might be listening to their conversation. 'Guilt is a recognized symptom of shock,' she said, adopting her bedside manner. 'After all you came close to getting killed yourself. It was a pilot from Red River who gunned her down. You and I just did what we had to do.'

'Yeah, you're right,' said Steve, cottoning on. He looked down at Clearwater then eyed the screen monitoring her weak heartbeat. 'Would it be all right if I just held her hand for a minute?'

'Yes, but very gently – okay?' Roz gathered up the side of the sterile tent and lifted the sheet. Clearwater's right hand lay palm up outside the metal frame.

Steve knelt down and sandwiched her hand between his own. The flesh was moist, the fingers limp. He pressed his palm against hers and tried to reach into her mind, tried to channel his life force into her body. He'd done the same thing in the deserted renegade camp in a desperate effort to infuse her with the will to live as they waited for Roz and the Red River medics to arrive.

'We've got to save her, Roz.'

'We will. Don't worry. Everything that can be done will be done.' Then, for the benefit of the hidden microphones she added: 'You and I aren't the only people with a vested interest in keeping her alive.'

'No ...'

Roz smiled. 'And if you think this happened just because you got into an argument with Cadillac, then I should take some of the blame. After all, the argument *was* over me.'

'That's true.' Steve laughed for the first time since they'd been reunited. 'You've been nothing but trouble ever since you were born!' He parried her playful punch and looked down at Clearwater's hand in time to see the fingertips twitch then curl slowly upwards against the side of his hand. 'Roz! See that?!'

'Yes. Take a look at the screen.'

The weak green trace of Clearwater's heartbeat had changed. Not dramatically, but every fourth pulse was a little deeper, a little stronger than the others.

Steve's spirits soared. 'D'you think she knows I'm here?!'

Roz caressed the back of his head. 'Yes, I'm sure she does.' *But not because you are holding her hand. She knows because I am within her as I am within you ...*

In the sealed ward above the intensive care unit, Don Wallis motioned Steve and Roz to take the facing seats in the middle of the table where they were sandwiched between the six-man team from AMEXICO. Wallis, the team leader, sat at the head of the table on Steve's right. Jake Nevill, his Number Two, was at the other end.

It was Nevill who had flown out with Roz zipped onto the buddy-frame of his Skyhawk. While Steve and the Red River medics were busy with Clearwater, he and Steve had given each other the buzz. Satisfied he was talking to the right man, Nevill told Steve he had been assigned the temporary code name of YANKEE-ZULU while on board the wagon-train: his AMEXICO code-name was never to be disclosed to anyone outside the organization. The task-force of mexicans was disguised as a special detachment from the White House, complete with fake ID-cards, name-tags and the distinctive blue and white badge on the shoulders of their camouflaged fatigues.

It was, explained Nevill, standard procedure when operating alongside regular army units.

As a JMO, Roz was wearing hospital whites with her name tag, surmounted by miniature

lieutenant's rank stripes, tacked onto a Velcro patch above her right breast pocket.

Steve, after a long, hot shower and a medical examination designed to make sure he had not contracted some unspeakable overground infection, had been given a set of Trail-Blazer fatigues with no name-tag or badges. Since he still had his long ragged hair, rat-tail plaits and multi-coloured skin markings, the effect was bizarre. The task-force's bewildered reaction on first seeing him in uniform reminded Steve of his painful encounter with Lt. Harmer at the Pueblo way-station. This time however, no one tried to pulverize his liver with the butt end of a rifle.

How much does Roz know about all this? he wondered. In the few brief moments they had spent together since boarding Red River he had been so concerned about Clearwater, he hadn't even asked Roz how she came to be on the wagon-train. He had just been thankful she'd been close at hand when he needed her. It was probably wiser to say nothing at this stage. Her silent reminder that Clearwater's cubicle might be bugged had jerked him back to the reality of the Federation. The fear that whatever you said might be recorded and used in evidence against you.

Maybe, when the time was right, she would come through on their private line. She was the expert. Steve, who had wilfully neglected his telepathic gifts, was still restricted to the channel used for broadcasting May-Day messages.

Wallis aligned his electronic memo-pad with the edge of the table, cleared his throat and began. 'Steve, ahh – this first session is essentially a debriefing. You've met Jake. I don't think we need formal introductions. The names are on the labels.'

Steve said hello to George Hannah and Cal Parsons who sat across the table on either side of Roz and to Daryl Coates and Tom Watkins who sat on his left and right respectively.

'They're all members of the organization, and in case you feel a little tongue-tied, Roz has been made an honorary member.'

Steve eyed Roz then looked blankly at Wallis.

'It means she doesn't have a code-name or a call-sign,' said Wallis. He fingered his left earlobe in a seemingly absent-minded gesture.

'Got it...' Steve smiled at Roz. 'I had no idea.'

'Well, you know what I'm like – always *dying* to know what you're up to.' Roz's face bore just the merest hint of a smile but Steve knew that inwardly she was savouring the exquisite irony of the situation.

'Hey! Come on, you two – snap out of it!' exclaimed Nevill.

Steve ignored him and turned to Wallis. 'You were saying?'

'I've been asked to congratulate you both,' said Wallis. 'That message comes jointly from the Operational Director and the Oval Office. Initially there was some concern that the goods had been damaged in transit but ALPHA-BRAVO's disablement probably makes the task of shipping her back to Grand Central a lot easier. As Roz has probably told you, it's early days yet, but given the level of medical support available here and down the line, I've been assured that if our target survives the next two weeks, she has every chance of making a full recovery.'

'Glad to hear my efforts weren't totally wasted,' said Steve.

'If she needs any other specialists, they can fly out and treat her on the return trip.'

Steve's eyes met Roz's briefly. With six people watching them they had to tread carefully. 'Return trip ...?'

'Yes,' said Wallis 'We were planning to airlift her into the Federation but Red River's CMO had advised against it. And I agree. We made that night pick-up because we were in a life-or-death

situation but it would be crazy to risk losing such a valuable asset between here and Grand Central. This is the safest way for her to travel. So as soon as we know what your plans are, we're going to run for home.'

Steve weighed up the other members of the task-force then came back to Wallis shaking his head. 'No. Sorry. You're going to have to call Mother and tell him you can't do that.'

'Oh? Why?'

'Because I need Red River to stay here with Clearwater on board. She's the bait that will lure the other two into the net.'

Wallis pursed his lips. 'You mean Cadillac and Mr Snow ...'

'Yes.' Steve looked at Roz, but apart from listening with interest, like everyone else, she did not respond.

'You had Cadillac – knocked out cold – and you let him go,' This was Nevill again.

'I let him go because he's the one who will bring Mr Snow to us,' said Steve patiently. 'I need a month to get things organized. Six weeks at the outside.'

'Six weeks?!' cried Nevill.

'That's not very long when you consider it's taken me a year to put this together.'

'Christo! Just to kidnap three lumpheads? If someone had given me the job I'd have winkled 'em out inside forty-eight hours.'

'With an airborne snatch-squad?'

'Yeah. They'd be back in Grand Central before they knew what hit 'em.'

Steve looked impressed. 'That certainly would have been a remarkable feat of logistics. One of the trio was in Wyoming, the others were in two separate locations in Ne-Issan – held by people opposed to our friends who run the local network.'

'Quite,' said Wallace hurriedly. He was the only person at the table who knew what Steve was alluding to and it was a subject he wanted to put a cap on. Attempting to be diplomatic he added: 'I don't think you've fully appreciated who it is we're dealing with, Jake.'

'Exactly,' said Steve, opting for a head-on collision instead of conciliation. 'Have you ever come up against a summoner? Actually *seen* them channelling earth magic through their bodies?'

'No, but –'

Steve cut across Nevill's reply and addressed the other Mexicans. 'Have any of you?'

They all shook their heads.

'Well, I have. I've been on the receiving end when I was on board The Lady from Louisiana in 2980 –'

'I think we've all read the report on that one,' said Wallis, trying to keep his team's end up.

'But I've also *seen* them make it happen. Seen 'em make rocks fly, blow away half a hillside, take control of someone's mind.'

Steve described the death of Lord Yama-Shita. How Clearwater had made him drive his sword repeatedly through his body. And each time, the blade had sunk in right up to the blood-drenched hilt. Eight killing strokes, one for each of the Mutes he had condemned to death on the giant iron-bound paddle of his wheel-boat.

Turning to Nevill, he said: 'Mr Snow's other name is the Storm-Bringer. That's not just a fanciful title. It means precisely what it says. He'd have blown your snatch-squad right out of the sky.'

'But you, of course, know how to handle him,' said Nevill.

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