



CHUNG KUO

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THE

BROKEN WHEEL

DAVID WINGROVE

THE BROKEN WHEEL

DAVID WINGROVE is the Hugo Award-winning co-author (with Brian Aldiss) of *Trillion Year Spree: The History of Science Fiction*. He is also the co-author of the first three MYST books, novelizations of one of the world's bestselling computer games. He lives in north London with his wife and four daughters.



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To Lily Jackson
from your grandson David on the occasion of
your ninety-fifth birthday
with a lifetime's love



THE BROKEN WHEEL

Book Seven

The way never acts yet nothing is left undone.
Should lords and princes be able to hold fast to it,
The myriad creatures will be transformed of their own accord.
After they are transformed, should desire raise its head,
I shall press it down with the weight of the nameless uncarved block.
The nameless uncarved block
Is but freedom from desire,
And if I cease to desire and remain still,
The empire will be at peace of its own accord.
— Lao Tzu, *Tao Te Ching*, Book One, XXXVII (sixth century BC)



INTRODUCTION

C *hung Kuo*. The words mean 'Middle Kingdom' and since 221BC, when the First Emperor Ch'in Shih Huang-ti, unified the seven Warring States, it is what the 'black-haired people' the Han, or Chinese, have called their great country. The Middle Kingdom – for them it was the whole world; a world bounded by great mountain chains to the north and west, by the sea to east and south. Beyond was only desert and barbarism. So it was for two thousand years.

By the turn of the twenty-second century, however, Chung Kuo had come to mean much more. For more than a century, the Empire of the Han had encompassed the world, the Earth's bloated population of forty billion contained in vast, hive-like cities that spanned whole continents. The Council of Seven – Han lords, T'ang, each more powerful than the greatest of the ancient emperors, ruled Chung Kuo with an iron authority, their boast that they had ended Change and stopped the Great Wheel turning. But Change was coming.

It had begun twelve years before, when a new generation of powerful young merchants, Dispersionists, formed mainly of *Hung Mao*, or Westerners – had challenged the authority of the Seven, demanding an end to the Edict of Technological Control, the cornerstone of Han stability, and a return to the Western ideal of unfettered progress. In the spate of assassination and counter-assassination that followed, something had to give, and the destruction of the Dispersionist starship *The New Hope*, signalled the beginning of the 'War-that-wasn't-a-War', an incestuous power struggle fought within the City's levels. The Seven won that War, but at a price they could ill afford. Suddenly they were weak – weaker than they had been in their entire history. The new T'ang were young and inexperienced. Worse than that, they were divided against themselves.

But the War was only the first small sign of greater disturbances to come, for down in the lower levels of the City, in the lawless regions 'below the Net' and in the overcrowded decks just above, new currents of unrest have awoken. In the years since the War, *Ko Ming* – revolutionary – groups have proliferated, and none more powerful or deadly than the *Ping Tiao*, or Levellers. The War was no longer a struggle for power, but for survival...

PROLOGUE

FALLEN PETALS

Summer 2207

The guests are gone from the pavilion high,
In the small garden flowers are whirling around.
Along the winding path the petals lie;
To greet the setting sun, they drift up from the ground.

Heartbroken, I cannot bear to sweep them away;
From my eager eyes, spring soon disappears.
I pine with passing, heart's desire lost for aye;
Nothing is left but a robe stained with tears.
— Li Shangyin, *Falling Flowers* (ninth century AD)



Li Yuan reined in his horse and looked up. On the far side of the valley, beyond the tall, narrow spire of Three Swallows Mount, a transporter was banking, heading for the palace, two miles distant. As it turned he saw the crest of the *Ywe Lung* emblazoned on its fuselage and frowned, wondering who it was. As far as he knew, his father was expecting no one.

He turned in his saddle, looking about him. The grassy slope led down to a dirt track that followed the stream for a short way then crossed a narrow wooden bridge and snaked south towards Tongjian. He could follow that path back to the palace or he could finish the ride he had planned, up to the old monastery then south to the beacon. For a moment longer he hesitated, caught in two minds. It was a beautiful morning, the sky a perfect, cloudless blue; the kind of morning when one felt like riding on and on for ever, but he had been out three hours already, so maybe it was best if he got back. Besides, maybe his father needed him. Things had been quiet recently. Too quiet. Maybe something had come up.

He tugged at the reins gently, turning the Arab's head, then spurred her on with his heels, leading her carefully down the slope and along the path, breaking into a canter as he crossed the bridge. He was crossing the long meadow, the palace just ahead of him, when a second transporter passed overhead, the insignia of the Marshal clearly displayed on the undersides of its stubby wings. Yuan slowed, watching as it turned and landed on the far side of the palace, a cold certainty forming in his guts.

It had begun again.

At the stables he all but jumped from the saddle, leaving the groom to skitter about the horse, trying to catch hold of the reins, while he ran on, along the red-tiled path and into the eastern palace.

He stopped, breathless, at the door to his father's suite of rooms, taking the time to calm himself, run his fingers quickly through his unruly hair, but even as he made to knock, Chung Hu-yan, his father's Chancellor, drew the door of the ante-room open and stepped out, as if expecting him.

'Forgive me, Prince Yuan,' he began, without preamble, 'but your father has asked me if you would excuse him for an hour or so. A small matter has arisen, inconsequential in itself yet urgent.' Yuan hesitated, wondering how far he could push Hu-yan on this, but again Hu-yan pre-empted him.

'It is nothing you can help him with, Prince Yuan. I assure you of that. It is a... *personal* matter, let us say. No one has died, neither is the peace of Chung Kuo threatened, yet the matter is of some delicacy. In view of special circumstances your father thought it best that he consult his cousin, Tsung Ma, and the Marshal. You understand, I hope?'

Yuan stood there a moment longer, trying to read something in Chung Hu-yan's deeply creased face, but the old man's expression was like a wall, shutting him out. He laughed, then nodded.

'I am relieved, Hu-yan. I had thought...'

But he had no need to say. It had been on all their minds these past few months. Where would the enemies strike next? Who would they kill? In many respects this peace was worse than the War that had preceded it; a tenuous, uncertain peace that stretched the nerves almost to breaking point.

He smiled tightly then turned away, hearing the door pulled closed behind him. But even as he walked back he was beginning to wonder what it was that might have brought Tsu Ma so urgently to his father's summons. *A personal matter...* He turned, looking back thoughtfully, then shrugged and turned round, making his way past bowing servants and kneeling maids, hurrying now.

Maybe Fei Yen knew something. She was always hearing snippets of rumour that his own ears hadn't caught, so maybe she knew what this was. And even if she didn't, she had ways of finding such things out. Women's ways.

He laughed and broke into a run. And then maybe he would take her out in the palanquin. One last time before she was too far advanced in her pregnancy. Up to the monastery, perhaps. Or to the beacon.

Yes, they could make a picnic of it. And maybe, afterwards, he would make love to her, gently and carefully, there on the grassy hillside, beneath the big open sky of northern China. One last memorable time before the child came.

He stopped before her door, hammering at it and calling her name, laughing, all of his earlier fears forgotten, his head filled with the thought of the afternoon ahead.

'What is it, Yuan?' she asked, opening the door to him almost timidly, her smile uncertain. 'Are you drunk?'

In answer he drew her to him, more roughly than he had meant, and lifted her up, crushing her lips with his own. 'Not drunk, my love. But happy...'

Li Shai Tung had taken his guests through to the Summer House. Servants had brought *ch'a* and sweetmeats and then departed, leaving the three men alone. Tolonen stood by the window, looking down the steep slope towards the ornamental lake, while Tsu Ma and Li Shai Tung sat, facing each other, on the far side of the room. So far they had said nothing of importance, but now Li Shai Tung looked up at Tsu Ma and cleared his throat.

'Do you remember the first time you came here? That day you went riding with Yuan and the Lady Fei?'

Tsu Ma met his gaze unflinchingly. 'That was a good day. And the evening that followed, out on the lake.'

Li Shai Tung looked down. 'Ah, yes, Yuan told me of that...'

He smiled – sourly, Tsu Ma thought, fearing the worst.

The old T'ang raised his head again, the smile fading altogether. 'And you recall what we spoke of that day?'

Tsu Ma nodded, his mouth dry, wishing the old man would be more direct. If he knew, why didn't he say something? Why this torment of indirectness? 'We spoke of Yuan's Project, if I remember accurately,' he said, looking across at Tolonen momentarily, recalling that they had appointed the old man to oversee the whole business. But what had this to do with him and Fei Yen? For surely that was why he had been summoned here this morning at such short notice. He looked down, filled with shame for what he had done. 'I am sorry, Shai Tung, I –'

But Li Shai Tung seemed not to have heard. He carried on, as if Tsu Ma had said nothing.

'We spoke afterwards, too, didn't we? A week or so later, if I recall. At which time I made you a party to my thoughts.'

Tsu Ma looked up, frowning. He had heard of indirection, but this... Then he understood. This had nothing to do with Fei Yen and him. Nothing at all. He laughed, relief washing through him.

Li Shai Tung stared at him, astonished. 'I am afraid I find it no laughing matter, cousin.' He had turned, looking at the Marshal. 'Show him the file, Knut.'

Tsu Ma felt himself go cold again. He took the file and opened it, the faintest tremor in his hands. A moment later he looked up, his face a picture of incomprehension.

‘What in Hell’s name is all this?’

The old T’ang held his head stiffly, his anger barely controlled. ‘Inventions. Machines. Devices that would be the ruin of Chung Kuo. Every last one of them breaking the Edict in a dozen, maybe twenty different ways.’

Tsu Ma glanced through the file, amazed by what he saw, then shook his head. ‘But where did they come from? Who invented them? And why?’

Tolonen spoke up for the first time. ‘They’re SimFic mainly. From the traitor Berdichev’s papers. We saw them long ago – three, maybe even four years ago – but in a different form from this. Li Shai Tung ordered them destroyed. But here they are again, the same things but better than before.’

‘Better?’

Li Shai Tung nodded. ‘You recall that we talked of a young boy. A clever one, by the name of Kiril Ward. Well, this is his work. Somehow he got hold of these papers and worked on them. The improvements are his. In one sense it’s quite amazing, in another horrifying. But the fault does not lie with the boy.’

Tsu Ma shook his head, still not understanding how all of this connected, or why Li Shai Tung should consult him on the matter. ‘But if not the boy, then who?’

‘That’s exactly what I asked the Marshal to find out. He came upon these files by accident, you understand. Six months had passed and I wanted to know what was happening with Yuan’s Project. So secretly, without the Project Director’s knowledge, the Marshal trawled the Project’s files.’

Tsu Ma leaned back in his chair. ‘I see. And you didn’t want Yuan to know that you were checking up on him?’

Li Shai Tung nodded. ‘It seemed best. It was not that I felt he would lie to me, just that he might act as... a filter, let’s say. But this shocked me.’

‘Then Li Yuan is responsible for this file? It was he who gave the originals to the boy to work on?’

‘Yes...’ Bitterness and anger were etched starkly in the old man’s face.

‘I see...’

He understood. Li Shai Tung had asked for him because he alone could be trusted, for he alone among the Seven knew of the existence of the Project. Even Wu Shih was under the impression that Li Shai Tung was only considering matters. Yes, and he understood the necessity for that, for were it to become common knowledge it could only do them harm. Wang Sauleyan, certainly, could be counted on to use it to foment trouble in Council and try to break the power of the Li family.

But that was not really the issue. No. The real problem was that Li Shai Tung felt himself affronted. His son had not acted as a son should act. He had lied and cheated, no matter the good intent that lay behind the act. Indeed, to the old man that was probably the worst of it. Not that these things existed for they could be destroyed as easily as if they had never been, but that Li Yuan had sought to conceal them from him. It was this part of it on which he sought Tsu Ma’s advice. For who was closer to his son than Tsu Ma? As close, almost, as a brother...

Li Shai Tung leaned closer. ‘What should I do, Tsu Ma? Should I confront him with these things?’

‘No...’ Tsu Ma took a breath. ‘I would say nothing.’

‘Nothing?’

He nodded, holding the old man’s eyes. ‘What good would it do? Yuan acted in your best interest. Or so he believes. So I’m sure he believes. There was no desire to harm you, only... an eagerness, let us call it, an impatience in him, that can be set down to his youthfulness. Look upon these as follies. Arrange an accident and have all record of these things destroyed. The Marshal could arrange

something for you, I'm certain. But say nothing. Do not damage what is between you and your son, Shai Tung.'

The old man shook his head, momentarily in pain. 'But he has lied to me. Deceived me.'

'No... Forgive me, Shai Tung, but your words are too strong.'

'It is unfilial...'

Tsu Ma swallowed, thinking of his own far greater deceit, then shook his head again. 'He loves you, Shai Tung. He works hard for you. Unstintingly hard. There is nothing he would not do for you. In that sense, he is anything but unfilial. So let things be. After all, no real harm is done.'

His words came strong and heartfelt, as if it were himself he was pleading for, and when Li Shai Tung looked up at him again there were tears in the old man's eyes.

'Maybe you are right, Tsu Ma. Maybe I am being too harsh.' He sighed. 'You are a good friend to me, and to him. I hope, for his sake, you are ever so.' He turned, looking at the Marshal. 'And you, Knut? What do you say?'

Tolonen hesitated, then lowered his head. 'Tsu Ma is right. I had come here ready to argue with you, otherwise, but having heard him I am inclined to agree. Say nothing. The rest I will arrange.'

'And the boy?'

Tolonen looked briefly at Tsu Ma, then met his master's eyes again. 'I would leave the boy for now. Let Chieh Hsia. Li Yuan will discover for himself how dangerous the boy is. And who knows, that may prove the most important thing to come from all of this, neh? To learn that knowledge is a two-edged sword?'

Li Shai Tung laughed; but it was an unhealthy, humourless sound. 'Then it will be as you say, good friends. It will be as you say.'

Fei Yen had been quiet for some while, staring out across the circular pool towards the distant mountains. Now she turned, looking back at him.

'Why did you bring me here?'

Li Yuan met her eyes, smiling vaguely, unconscious, it seemed, of the slight edge to her voice.

'Because it's beautiful. And...'

He hesitated, a strange, fleeting expression crossing his features, then he looked down. 'I haven't said before, but Han and I used to come here as boys. We would spend whole afternoons here, playing among the ruins. Long ago, it seems now. Long, long ago.' He looked up at her again, searching her eyes, as if for understanding. 'When I rode out this morning, I knew I had to come here. It was as if something called me.'

She turned, shivering, wondering still if he was playing with her. If, despite everything, he knew. Behind him the ancient Buddhist stupa stood out against the blue of the sky, its squat base and ungainly spire something alien in that rugged landscape. To its left rested the green silk palanquin he had insisted she be carried in, its long poles hidden in the waist-length grass, the six runners squatting nearby, talking quietly among themselves, their eyes averted. Further up the hillside she could see the entrance to the ruined monastery where she had come so often with Tsu Ma.

It had all come flooding back to her, all the old feelings reawakened, as sharp as ever. *Why now?* she had asked herself, horrified. *Why, when I have finally found peace, does it return to torment me?* She had listened to Yuan abstractedly, knowing Tsu Ma was once more in the palace, and had found herself wanting to run to him and throw herself upon his mercy. But it could not be. She was the man's wife. This *boy's* wife. So she had chosen. And now it could not be undone. Unless that was what the old man had summoned Tsu Ma.

For one brief, dreadful moment she imagined it undone. Imagined herself cast off, free to marry Tsu Ma, and saw the tiny movement of denial he would make. As he had done that time, here, beside the

pool. She caught her breath, the pain of that moment returned to her.

I should have been your wife, Tsu Ma. Your strength. Your second self.

Aiya, but it was not to be. It was not her fault that she had fallen for Tsu Ma. No. That had been her fate. But this too was her fate. To be denied him. To be kept from him for ever. To be married to the child. She looked down, swallowing back the bitterness.

‘What is it, my love?’

She looked at him, for the moment seeing nothing but his youth, his naivety – those and that awful old-man certainty of his. Then she relented. It was not his fault. He had not chosen to fall in love with her. He had shown nothing but kindness to her. Even so, her heart bled that it was he and not Tsu Ma who had brought her here today.

‘It’s nothing,’ she answered. ‘Only the sickness.’

He stared at her, concerned, real sympathy in his expression as he struggled to understand her. But he would never understand her.

‘Should we go back?’ he asked softly, but she shook her head.

‘No. It’s all right. It’ll pass in a while.’

She looked away again, staring out towards the south and the distant beacon, imagining him there waiting for her, even now. But there were only ghosts. Distant memories. Those and the pain.

She sighed. Was it always so? Did fate never grant a full measure? Was it the lot of everyone to have this lesser satisfaction – this pale shadow of passion?

And was she to cast that to the winds? To choose nothing rather than this sometimes-bitter compromise? She shook her head, anguished. Oh, she had often thought of telling him; had had the urge to let the words float free from her, like acids, eating into the soft dream of love he had built about him. And what had kept her from that? Was it pity for him? A desire not to be cruel? Or was it simple self-interest?

She turned, looking at him again. Did she love him? *Did* she?

No. But neither did she hate him. It was as she’d said so often to herself. He was a good man. A good husband. But beyond that...

She closed her eyes, imagining herself in Tsu Ma’s arms again, the sheer physical strength of him thrilling beyond words, the strange, mysterious power of him enfolding her until her mind went dark and her nerve ends sang with the sweetness of his touch.

And could Li Yuan do that for her? She shuddered. No. Not in ten thousand years.

‘If you would wait here a brief moment, *Shih* Nan, I will let my master know you are here.’

Nan Ho, Li Yuan’s Master of the Inner Chambers, returned the First Steward’s bow, then, when the man had left, turned, looking about him. It was not often that he found himself in one of the mansions of the Minor Families and he was not going to miss this opportunity of seeing how they lived. He had seen the balcony on his way in; now he crossed the room quickly and stood there just inside the window, looking out across the grounds. Down below the *chao tai hui* – the entertainment – was in full swing, more than a thousand guests filling the space between the old stone walls.

He took a step further, out on to the balcony itself, fascinated by the range of outlandish fashions on display, amused by the exaggerated gestures of some of the more garishly dressed males, then froze hearing voices in the gallery behind him. He drew in closer to the upright, drawing the long silk curtain across a fraction to conceal himself. It would not do to be seen to be so curious, even if he was here on the Prince’s business.

At first he was unaware of the import of what was being said, then a single phrase made him jerk his head about, suddenly attending.

He listened, horrified, the laughter that followed the words chilling him. And as their footsteps went away down the stairs, he came out and, tiptoeing quietly across the tiled floor, leaned over the stairway to catch a sight of the men who had been talking, drawing his head back sharply as they turned on the landing below.

Gods! he thought, all consideration of the business he had come for gone from his mind. He must do something, and immediately, for this matter would not wait. He must nip it in the bud at once.

He was still standing there, his hands gripping the marble of the balustrade, when Pei Ro-han entered the gallery from the far end.

‘Master Nan? Is that you?’

He turned, flustered, bowing twice, then hurried forward, kissing Pei’s offered ring hand. He straightened up and, after the briefest pause to collect his thoughts, came directly to the point.

‘Forgive me, my lord, but something has just happened that I must attend to at once. I was waiting here, just by the window there, when four men entered the gallery, talking among themselves. Not wishing to disturb them, I took a step outside, on to the balcony, yet what I overheard is of the grave importance. Indeed, I would go so far as to say that it threatens the security of our masters.’

Pei Ro-han had gone very still. There was a small movement in his normally placid face, then he nodded. ‘I see. And what do you wish to do, Master Nan?’

In answer Nan Ho went to the balcony again, his head bowed, waiting for Pei to come across. When the old man stood beside him, he pointed out across the heads of the crowd to four men who were making their way to one of the refreshment tents on the far side of the walled garden.

‘Those are the men. The two in red silks and the others in lilac and green. If you could detain them on some pretext for an hour or two, I will see if I can bring the Marshal here. He will know best how to deal with this matter.’

‘Are you sure that is wise, Master Nan? Should we not, perhaps, simply keep an eye on them and prevent them from leaving?’

Nan Ho shook his head vigorously. ‘Forgive me, but, no, my lord. They must be isolated at the earliest opportunity, for what they know is dangerous. I cannot say more, but the safety of my master is at stake here and I would be failing in my duty if I did not act.’

Pei smiled, immensely pleased by this show of loyalty. ‘I understand, Nan Ho. Then go at once and bring Marshal Tolonen. I, meanwhile, will act my part in this.’

Kim sat there in the semi-darkness, the room lights doused, the soft, pearly glow of the screen casting a faint, silvered radiance over his face and upper arms. He had worked through the night though he slept, waking only an hour past, entranced, fearful, filled with the dream he’d had.

Her eyes. He had dreamed of Jelka Tolonen’s eyes. Of eyes so blue that he could see the blackness beyond them; could see the stars winking through, each fastened on its silver, silken thread to where he stood, looking through her at the universe. He had woken, shivering, the intensity of the vision scaring him. What did it mean? Why was she there, suddenly, between him and the stars? Why could he not see them clearly, but through the startling blueness of her eyes?

He had lain there a while, open-mouthed with astonishment, then had come and sat here, toying with the comset’s graphics, trying to re-create the vision he had had.

A spider. As so often he had been a spider in his dream; a tiny, silvered, dark-eyed creature throwing out his web, letting the threads fly outward to the stars on tiny spinners that caught the distant sunlight and converted it to silk, flying onward, faster and ever faster to their various destinations. But this time it had been as if a great wind was blowing, gathering all of the threads into a single twisted trunk, drawing them up into the blueness of those eyes that floated like twin planets

above where he crouched. Only on the far side of those eyes, where the blue shaded into black, did the trunk seem to blossom, like the branches of a tree, a million tiny threads spreading out like the fine capillaries of a root system, thrust deep into the earth of the universe.

Kim shivered, staring down at the thing he had made, first in his dreams and then here in the flatness of the screen. So it had always been for him: first he would see something and then he would act on what he'd seen. But this? How could he act on this? How could he pass his web through the young girl's eyes?

Or was that what it meant? Was he being too literal? Did this vision have a meaning other than a those that had preceded it?

He shook his head then cleared the screen, only now realizing how fast his heart was beating, how hard it seemed suddenly to breathe. Why was that? What did it mean?

He stood, angry with himself. It was only a dream after all. It didn't *have* to mean anything, surely. He was better off concentrating on finishing off the work for Prince Yuan. Another two, maybe three days should see that done. Then he could send it through. He would ask Barycz for the favour.

He leaned forward, about to bring up the lights, when the screen came alive again. A message was coming through. He leaned back, waiting, one hand touching the keyboard lightly, killing the hardprint facility.

The words appeared in the official Project typescript, headed by the symbol of a skull surrounded by a tiny nimbus of broken lines. It was an instruction for him to go to the medical centre at once for his three-monthly check-up.

Kim sat back thoughtfully. It was too early. He wasn't due his next medical for another ten days. Still, that wasn't so unusual. Not everyone was as punctilious as he. Even so, he would make sure it wasn't one of Spatz's tricks.

He tapped out the locking combination, then put in the code, touching Cap A to scramble it. Cap would unscramble it when the time came to unlock, but until then Prince Yuan's files would be safe from prying eyes. Yes, they could take the comset apart, component by component, and never find it.

He looked up at the watching camera and smiled, then, going across to the corner, poured water from the jug into the bowl and began to wash.

Tolonen stood and came round his desk, greeting Prince Yuan's Master of the Inner Chambers.

'Master Nan, how pleasant to see you here. What can I do for you?'

Nan Ho bowed low. 'Forgive me, Marshal. I realize how busy you are, but this is a matter of the most extreme urgency.'

'So my equerry leads me to believe. But tell me, what has happened, Master Nan? Is the T'ang life in danger?'

Nan Ho shook his head. 'It is young Prince Yuan who is threatened by this matter. Neither is it a matter of life but of reputation.'

The old man frowned. 'I don't understand. You mean Prince Yuan's reputation is threatened?'

'I do. I was at Pei Ro-han's mansion on my master's business, when I overheard something. A rumour. A most vile rumour, which, if it were to become common knowledge, might do irreparable damage not only to my master but to the Seven. Such damage might well have political consequences.'

Tolonen was watching him, his lips slightly parted. 'Could you be more specific, Master Nan? What do you mean, what kind of rumour is this we're talking of?'

Nan Ho lowered his eyes. 'Forgive me, Marshal, but I would rather not say. All I know is that there are no grounds whatsoever for such a rumour and that the perpetrators have but one purpose, to create

a most vile nuisance for the Family that you and I deem it an honour to serve.'

He glanced up, seeing that his words had done the trick. At the thought of the Li Clan being harmed in any way, Tolonen had bristled. There was a distinct colour at his neck, and his grey eyes bulged with anger.

'Then what are we to do, Master Nan? What steps might we take to eradicate this vileness?'

Nan Ho smiled inwardly, knowing he had been right to come direct to Tolonen. 'Pei Ro-han has detained the men concerned before they could spread their wicked rumour. He is holding them until our return. If, through them, we can trace the source of these rumours, then we might yet stand a chance of crushing this abomination before it takes root.'

Tolonen gave a terse nod, then went back to his desk, giving brief instructions into his desk-telephone before he turned back.

'The way is cleared for us. We can be at Lord Pei's mansion in half an hour. One of my crack teams will meet us there. Let us hope we are not too late, neh, Master Nan?'

Yes, thought Nan Ho, the tightness at the pit of his stomach returning. *For all our sakes, let us hope we can stop this thing before it spreads.*

*

The two men stood at the barrier, waiting while the Marshal's party passed through on the down-transit. When it had gone they turned, their eyes meeting briefly, a strange look passing between them.

'Passes...' the guard seated beyond the barrier said, waving them on with one hand.

Mach flipped open the tiny warrant card he was carrying in his left hand and offered it to the guard. The guard took it without looking at him. 'Face up to the camera,' he said tonelessly.

Mach did as he was told, staring up into the artificial eye. Somewhere in central records it would be matching his retinal prints to his service record. A moment later a green light flashed on the board in front of the guard. He handed the card back, again without looking at Mach, then held out his hand again.

Lehmann came forward a pace and placed his card into the guard's hand. This time the guard's eyes came up lazily, then took a second look as he noted the pallor of the man.

'You sick or something?'

Mach laughed. 'So would you be if you'd been posted to the Net for four years.'

The guard eyed Lehmann with new respect. 'That so, friend?'

Lehmann nodded, tilting his face up to stare at the camera.

'Four years?'

'Three years eight months,' Lehmann corrected him, knowing what was in the false record DeVore had prepared for him.

The guard nodded, reading from the screen in front of him. 'Says here you were decorated, too. What was that for?'

'Some bastard Triad runner got too nosy,' Lehmann said, staring back at him menacingly. 'I broke his jaw.'

The guard laughed uncomfortably and handed back the card. 'Okay. You can go through. Any thanks ...'

Out of earshot Mach leaned close. 'Not so heavy, friend.'

Lehmann simply looked at him.

Mach shrugged. 'Okay. Let's get on with this. We'll start with the boxes at the top of the deck.'

They took the deck-lift up, passing through a second checkpoint, then sought out the maintenance shaft that led to the first of the eighteen communications boxes that serviced this deck.

Crouched in the narrow tunnel above the floor-mounted box, Lehmann took a small cloth bag from the pocket of his tunic. Tilting his head forward, he tapped first one and then the other of the false lenses out into his hand, placing them into the bag.

Mach was already unscrewing the first of the four restraining bolts. He looked up at Lehmann, noting what he was doing. 'Are you sure you ought to do that? There are cameras in these tunnels too.'

Lehmann tucked the bag away. 'It'll be okay. Besides, I can't focus properly with those false retinas in place.'

Mach laughed. 'So DeVore doesn't think of everything.'

Lehmann shook his head. 'Not at all. He's very thorough. Whose man do you think is in charge of the tunnel cameras?'

Mach slowed, then nodded thoughtfully. 'Uhuh? And how do you think he does that? I mean, he's got a lot of friends, your man DeVore. It seems odd, don't you think? How long is it since he quit Security? Eight years now? Ten?'

'It's called loyalty,' Lehmann said coldly. 'I thought you understood that. Besides, there are many who feel as you and I. Many who'd like to see things change.'

Mach shook his head slowly, as if he still didn't understand, then got to work on the second of the bolts.

'You think that's strange, don't you?' Lehmann said after a moment. 'You think that only you low-level types should want to change how things are, but you're wrong. You don't have to be on the bottom of this shit-heap to see how fuck-awful things are. Take me. From birth I was set to inherit riches beyond your imagination. But it was never enough. I never wanted to be rich. I wanted to be free. Free of all the restraints this world of ours sets upon us. Chains they are. It's a prison, this world of ours, boxing us in, and I hate that. I've always hated it.'

Mach stared up at him, surprised and, to a small degree, amused. He had never suspected that the albino had so much feeling in him. He had always thought him cold, like a dead thing. This hatred was unexpected. It hinted at a side to him that even DeVore knew nothing of.

The second bolt came free. He set to work on the third.

'I bet you hated your parents, too, didn't you?'

Lehmann knelt, watching Mach's hands as they turned the bolt. 'I never knew them. My father never came to see me. My mother... well, I killed my mother.'

'You...?' Mach looked back at him, roaring with laughter, then fell silent. 'You mean, you really did? You *killed* her?'

Lehmann nodded. 'She was a rich Han's concubine. An arfidis addict too. She disgusted me. She was like the rest of them, soft, corrupt. Like this world. I set fire to her, in her rooms. I'd like to do the same to all of them. To burn the whole thing to a shell and pull it down.'

Mach took a deep breath through his nose, then set to work again. 'I see. And DeVore knows this, does he?'

'No. He thinks I'm someone else, *something* else.'

'I see. But why tell me?'

'Because you're not what he thinks you are either.' Lehmann reached across him, beginning to unscrew the final bolt. 'DeVore sees only enemies or pale shadows of himself. That's how he thinks. Black and white. As if this were all one great big game of *wei chi*.'

Mach laughed. 'You surprise me. I'd have thought...' Then he laughed again. 'I'm sorry. I'm doing what you said he does, aren't I? Assuming you're something that you're not.'

The last screw came loose. Between them they gently lifted the plate from the connecting pins and set it to one side. Beneath the plate was a panel, inset with tiny slip-in instruction cards. At the base of

the panel was a keyboard. Lehmann tapped in the cut-out code he'd memorized then leaned close, studying the panel. His pale, thin fingers searched the board, then plucked five of the translucent cards from different locations. He slipped them into the pouch at his waist, then reached into his jacket and took out the first of the eighteen tiny sealed packets. When a certain signal was routed through the board, these five would be triggered, forming a circuit that overrode the standard instruction codes. To the back-up system it would seem as if the panel was functioning normally, but to all intents and purposes it would be dead. And with all eighteen boxes triggered in this way, communications to the deck would be effectively cut off.

He slotted the five wafer-thin cards into place, reset the cut-out code, then, with Mach's help, lowered the plate back on to the connecting pins.

'There,' Mach said. 'One down, seventeen to go. Pretty easy, huh?'

'Easy enough,' Lehmann said, taking one of the restraining bolts and beginning to screw it down. 'But only if you've the nerve, the vision and the intelligence to plan it properly.'

Mach laughed. 'And a few old friends, turning a blind eye.'

Lehmann turned his head slightly, meeting Mach's eyes. 'Maybe. And a reason for doing it, neh?'

Kim had heard the alarm from three decks down but made nothing of it, yet coming out of the transit he remembered it again. Pulse quickening, he began to run towards his room.

Even before he turned the corner into his corridor he saw signs of what had happened. A long snake of hose ran from the corner hydrant, flaccid now. On the far side of it, water had pooled. But that was not what had alerted him. It was the scent of burning plastics.

He leapt the hose, took three small, splashing steps, then stopped. The door to his room was open, the fire-hose curving inside. Even from where he stood he could see how charred the lintel was, could see the ashy residue of sludge littering the floor outside.

'What in the gods' names...?'

T'ai Cho jerked his head round the door. 'Kim!' he cried, coming out into the corridor, and his face lit up. 'Oh, thank the gods you're safe. I thought...'

He let himself be embraced, then went inside, facing the worst. It was gone. All of it. His command console was unrecognizable, fused into the worktop as if the whole were some strange, smooth sculpture of twisted black marble. The walls were black, as was the ceiling. The floor was awash with the same dark sludge that had oozed into the corridor.

'What happened?' he asked, looking about him, the extent of his loss – his books, his clothes, the tiny things he'd called his own – slowly sinking in. 'I thought this kind of thing couldn't happen here. There are sprinklers, aren't there? And air-seals.'

T'ai Cho glanced at one of the maintenance men who were standing around, then looked back at Kim. 'They failed, it seems. Faulty wiring.'

Kim laughed sourly, the irony not lost on him. 'Faulty wiring? But I thought the boxes used instruction cards.'

One of the men spoke up. 'That's right. But two of the cards were wrongly encoded. It happens sometimes. It's something we can't check up on. A mistake at the factory... You know how it is.'

Only too well, Kim thought. *But who did this? Who ordered it done? Spatz? Or someone higher than him? Not Prince Yuan, anyway, because he wanted what was destroyed here today.*

He sighed, then shook his head. It would take weeks, months perhaps, to put it all together again. And if he did? Well, maybe it would be for nothing after all. Maybe they would strike again, just as he had come to the end of his task, making sure nothing ever got to Li Yuan.

He turned, looking at his old friend. 'You shouldn't have worried, T'ai Cho. But I'm glad you did.'

was having my three-monthly medical. They say I'm fine. A slight vitamin C deficiency, but otherwise...' He laughed. 'It was fortunate, neh? I could have been sleeping.'

'Yes,' T'ai Cho said, holding the boy to him again. 'We should thank the gods, neh?'

Yes, thought Kim. *Or whoever it was decided I was not as disposable as my work.*

Nan Ho stood in the cool of the passageway outside the room, mopping his brow, the feeling of nausea passing slowly from him. Though ten minutes had passed, his hands still trembled and his clothes were soaked with his own sweat. In all his forty years he had seen nothing like it. The man's screams had been bad enough, but the look in his eyes, that expression of sheer terror and hopelessness, had been too much to bear.

If he closed his eyes he could still see it. Could see the echoing kitchen all about him, the prisoner tied naked to the table, his hands and feet bound tight with cords that bruised and cut the flesh. He bared his teeth, remembering the way the masked man had turned, the oiled muscles of his upper arm flexing effortlessly as he lifted the tongs from the red-hot brazier and turned them in the half-light. He could see the faint wisp of smoke that rose towards the ceiling, could hear the faint crackle as the coal was lifted into the cooler air, even before he saw the glowing coal itself. But most of all he could see the panic in the young man's eyes and recalled what he had thought.

Forgive me, Fan Ming-yu, but I had to do this. For my master.

The man had begun to babble, to refute all he had been saying only a moment before, but the torturer's movements seemed inexorable. The coal came down, slowly, ever so slowly it seemed, and the man's words melted into shrieks of fearful protest. His body lifted, squirming, desperate, but all his attempts to escape only brought it closer to the implement of its suffering.

The torturer held back a moment. One leather-gloved hand pushed the man's hip down, gently, almost tenderly it seemed. Then, with the kind of care one might see from a craftsman, tracing fine patterns on to silver, he brought the coal down delicately, pressing it tightly against the man's left testicle.

Nan Ho had shuddered and stepped back, swallowing bile. He had glanced, horrified, at Tolonen seeing how the old man looked on impassively, then had looked back at the man, unable to believe what he had seen, appalled and yet fascinated by the damage the coal had done. Then, turning away, he had staggered out, his legs almost giving way under him, the screams of the man filling his head, the smell of charred flesh making him want to retch.

He stood there a moment longer, calming himself, trying to fit what he had just witnessed into the tightly ordered pattern of the world he knew, then shook his head. It was not his fault. He had had no choice in the matter. If his master had been any other man, or if the Lady Fei had chosen any other man but Tsu Ma to be her lover. But... as it was, this had to be. To let the truth be known, that was unthinkable.

Tolonen came outside. He stood there, staring at Nan Ho a moment, then reached out and held his shoulder. 'I am sorry, Master Nan. I didn't mean it to upset you. It's just that I felt you ought to be there, to hear the man's confession for yourself.' He let his hand fall, then shrugged. 'There are more efficient ways of inflicting pain, of course, but none as effective in loosening a tongue. The more barbaric the means of torture, we find, the quicker the man will talk.'

Nan Ho swallowed, then found his voice again. 'And what did you discover?'

'I have a list of all those he spoke to. Few, fortunately. And his source.'

'His source?'

'It seems you acted not a moment too soon, Master Nan. Fan Ming-yu had just come from his lover. A young man named Yen Shih-fa.'

Nan Ho's eyes widened. 'I know the man. He is a groom at the stables.'

'Yes,' Tolonen smiled grimly. 'I have contacted Tongjiang already and had the man arrested. With the very minimum of fuss, you understand. They are bringing him here even now.'

Nan Ho nodded abstractedly. 'And what will you do?'

The Marshal swallowed, a momentary bitterness clouding his features. 'What can I do? It is as you said, Master Nan. This rumour cannot be allowed to spread. But how to prevent that? Normally I would trust to the word of such *ch'un tzu*, but in a matter of this seriousness it would not be enough to trust to their silence. A man's word is one thing, but the security of the State is another. No, neither would it serve to demote them below the Net. These four are men of influence. Small influence admittedly, but their absence would be noticed and commented upon. No, in the circumstances we must act boldly, I'm afraid.'

Nan Ho shuddered. 'You mean they must die.'

Tolonen smiled. 'Nothing quite so drastic, Master Nan. It is a matter of a small operation.' He traced a tiny line across the side of his skull. 'An incision here, another there...'

'And their families?'

'Their families will be told that they took an overdose of something illicit. Pei Ro-han's surgeon had to operate to save them, but unfortunately there was damage – serious damage – to those parts of the brain that control speech and memory. Most unfortunate, neh? But the T'ang, in his generosity will offer compensation.'

Nan Ho stared at the Marshal, surprised. 'You know this?'

'I have already written the memorandum. It will be on Li Shai Tung's desk this evening.'

'Ah, then the matter is concluded?'

'Yes. I think we can safely say that.'

'And the groom? Yen Shih-fa?'

Tolonen looked down, clearly angry. 'Yen Shih-fa will die. After we have made sure he has done no further mischief.'

Nan Ho bowed his head. 'I understand...' Yet he felt no satisfaction, only a sense of dread and necessity; that, and a slowly mounting anger at his young master's wife. This was *her* fault, the worthless bitch. This was the price of *her* selfishness, *her* wantonness.

Tolonen was watching him sympathetically. 'You have served your master well, Nan Ho. You were right. If this rumour *had* taken root...'

Nan Ho gave the slightest nod. He had hoped to keep the details from Tolonen, but it had not proved possible. Even so, no harm had been done. Fang Ming-yu's insistence on the truth of what he had said – that Tsu Ma *had* slept with the Lady Fei – had shocked and outraged the old man. Nan Ho had seen for himself the fury in Tolonen's face as he leaned over the man, spittle flecking his lips as he called him a liar and a filthy scandal-monger. And thank the gods for that. No. Not for one moment had the Marshal believed it could be true. Tsu Ma and the Lady Fei. No. It was unthinkable!

And so it must remain. For a lifetime, if necessary. But how long would it be before another whispered the secret to one they trusted? How long before the rumour trickled out again, flowing from ear to ear like the tributaries of a great river?

And then?

'I am pleased that it has all worked out so well, Marshal,' he said, meeting the old man's eyes briefly. 'But now, if you need me no longer, I must see Pei Ro-han. I have yet to complete the business I came here for.'

'Of course. You have done all that needs to be done here, Master Nan. For which I thank you. I can deal with the rest.'

'Good. Then you'll excuse me.'

He bowed and was beginning to turn away when Tolonen called him back.

‘Forgive me, Master Nan, but one small thing. This morning, as I understand it, was the first time Tsu Ma had visited Tongjiang for three, almost four months. Now, without saying for a moment that I believe it to be true, such rumours have no credibility – even among such carrion as these – unless there are some few small circumstances to back them up. What crossed my mind, therefore, was that this was possibly some old tale, renewed, perhaps, by Tsu Ma’s visit this morning. I wondered...’ He hesitated, clearly embarrassed by what he was about to say. ‘Well, to be frank, I wondered if you had heard any whisper of this rumour before today, Master Nan. Whether...’

But Nan Ho was shaking his head. ‘Personally I think it more likely that the T’ang’s visit put the idea into the young groom’s head. Dig a little and I’m sure you’ll find a reason for his malice. It would not be the first time that such mischief has come from personal disappointment.’

Tolonen considered that, then nodded, satisfied. ‘Well, it was just a passing thought. Go now, Master Nan. And may the gods reward you for what you have done here today.’

It had taken the best part of six hours to work their way down through the deck, but now they had only this last box to deal with and they were done. Both men had been quiet for some time, but now Mach looked across at his pale companion and laughed.

‘What is it?’ Lehmann asked tonelessly, concentrating on unscrewing the last of the restraining bolts.

‘I was just thinking...’

Again he laughed. This time Lehmann raised his eyes, searching his face. ‘Thinking what?’

‘Just about what you might have become. With your father’s money, I mean. You could have been a right bastard, neh? Beating them at their own game. Making deals. Controlling the market. Undercutting your competitors or stealing their patents. Did that never appeal to you?’

Lehmann looked down again. ‘I considered it. But, then, I considered a lot of things. But to answer you, *Shih Mach*. No, it never appealed to me. But this...’ He eased the bolt out and set it down. ‘That is what I’ve always wanted to do.’

‘Always?’ Mach helped him remove the plate, then sat back on his haunches, watching.

‘Since I can remember,’ Lehmann went on, tapping the cut-out code into the keyboard, ‘I’ve always fought against the system. Ever since I knew I could. In small ways at first. And later...’

Mach waited, but Lehmann seemed to have finished.

‘Are you really as nihilistic as you seem, Stefan Lehmann? Is there nothing you believe in?’

Lehmann’s pale, thin fingers hovered over the panel a moment, then quickly plucked the five tiny cards from their slots. Mach had watched Lehmann do this eighteen times now, noting how he took his time, double-checking, making absolutely sure he took the right ones. It was impressive in a way, that kind of obsessive care. And necessary in this case, because the configuration of each panel was different. But there was also something machine-like about the way Lehmann went about it.

He waited, knowing the albino would answer him when he was good and ready; watching him take out the tiny sealed packet and break it open then slip the replacement cards into their respective slots.

‘There,’ Lehmann said. ‘That’s all of them. Do you want to test the circuit out?’

Mach was about to answer when there was a banging on the tunnel wall beneath them.

‘Shit!’ Mach hissed between his teeth. ‘What the fuck is that?’

Lehmann had turned at the noise, now he waited, perfectly still, like a lizard about to take its prey. ‘Wait,’ he mouthed. ‘It may be nothing.’

There was silence. Mach counted. He had got to eight when the banging came again, louder than before and closer, almost beneath their feet. Moments later a head appeared at the hatchway further

along.

‘Hey!’ the guard said, turning to face them. ‘Are you authorized to be in there?’

Mach laughed. ‘Well, if we’re not we’re in trouble, aren’t we?’

The guard was pulling himself up into the tunnel, hissing with the effort. Mach looked at Lehmann quickly, indicating that he should do nothing. With the barest nod Lehmann leaned back, resting his head against the tunnel wall, his eyes closed.

The guard scrambled up, then came closer, his body hunched up in the narrow space. He was young, dark-haired officer with the kind of bearing that suggested he had come out of cadet-training only months before. ‘What are you doing here?’ he asked officiously, one hand resting lightly on his sidearm.

Mach smiled, shaking his head. ‘Don’t you read your sheets?’

The young guard bristled, offended by Mach’s offhand manner. ‘That’s precisely why I’m here. I’ve already checked. There’s no mention of any maintenance work on the sheets.’

Mach shrugged. ‘And that’s our fault? You should get on to Admin and find out what arseholes fucked things up, but don’t get on our backs. Here.’ He reached inside his tunic and pulled out the papers DeVore had had forged for them.

He watched the guard’s face; saw how the sight of something official-looking mollified him.

‘Well? Are you satisfied?’ Mach asked, putting out his hand to take the papers back.

The guard drew back a step, his eyes taking in the open box, the exposed panel. ‘I still don’t understand. What exactly are you doing there? It says here that you’re supposed to be testing the ComNet, but you can do that without looking at the boxes, surely?’

Mach stared back at him, his lips parted, momentarily at a loss, but Lehmann came to the rescue. He leaned forward casually and plucked one of the tiny cards from the panel in front of him, handing it to the guard.

‘Have you ever seen one of these?’

The guard studied the clear plastic of the card then looked back at Lehmann. ‘Yes, I –’

‘And you know how they function?’

‘Vaguely, yes, I –’

Lehmann laughed. Cold, scathing laughter. ‘You don’t know a fucking thing, do you, soldier boy? For instance, did you know that if even a single one of these instruction cards gets put in the wrong slot then the whole net can be fucked up. Urgent information can be misrouted, emergency calls never get to their destinations. That’s why we take such pains. That’s why we look at every box. Carefully. Meticulously. To make sure it doesn’t happen. Understand me?’ He looked up at the guard savagely. ‘Okay, you’ve been a good boy and done all your checking, now just piss off and let us get on with the job, neh? Before we register a complaint to your superior officer for harassment.’

Mach saw the anger in the young guard’s face, the swallowed retort. Then the papers were thrust back into his hand and the guard was backing away down the tunnel.

‘That was good,’ Mach said quietly when he was gone. ‘He’ll be no more trouble, that’s for sure.’

Lehmann looked at him, then shook his head. ‘Here,’ he said, handing him the plate. ‘You finish this. I’m going after our friend.’

Mach narrowed his eyes. ‘Are you sure that’s wise? I mean, he seemed satisfied with your explanation. And if you were to kill him...’

Lehmann turned, his face for that brief moment very close to Mach’s, his pink eyes searching the *Ping Tiao* leader’s.

‘You asked if I believed in anything, Mach. Well, there’s one thing I do believe in – I believe in making sure.’

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