

Praise for *Ninefox Gambit*

‘Beautiful, brutal and full of the kind of off-hand inventiveness that the best SF trades in, *Ninefox Gambit* is an effortlessly accomplished SF novel. Yoon Ha Lee has arrived in spectacular fashion.’

– *Alastair Reynolds*

‘I love Yoon’s work! *Ninefox Gambit* is solidly and satisfyingly full of battles and political intrigue, in a beautifully built far-future that manages to be human and alien at the same time. It should be a treat for readers already familiar with Yoon’s excellent short fiction, and an extra treat for readers finding Yoon’s work for the first time.’

– *Ann Leckie*

‘*Starship Troopers* meets *Apocalypse Now* – and they’ve put Kurtz in charge... Mind-blistering military space opera, but with a density of ideas and strangeness that recalls the works of Hannu Rajaniemi, even Cordwainer Smith. An unmissable debut.’

– *Stephen Baxter*

‘A dizzying composite of military space opera and sheer poetry. Every word, name and concept in Lee’s unique world is imbued with a sense of wonder.’

– *Hannu Rajaniemi*

‘A striking space opera by a bright new talent.’

– *Elizabeth Bear*

‘For sixteen years Yoon Ha Lee has been the shadow general of science fiction, the calculating tactician behind victory after victory. Now he launches his great manoeuvre. Origami elegant, fox-sly, defiantly and ferociously *new*, this book will burn your brain.

Axiomatically brilliant. Heretically good.’

– *Seth Dickinson*

‘A high-octane ride through an endlessly inventive world, where calendars are weapons of war and dead soldiers can assist the living. Bold, fearlessly innovative and just a bit brutal, this is a book that deserves to be on every awards list.’

– *Aliette de Bodard*

‘Daring, original and compulsive. As if Cordwainer Smith had written a Warhammer novel.’

– *Gareth L. Powell*



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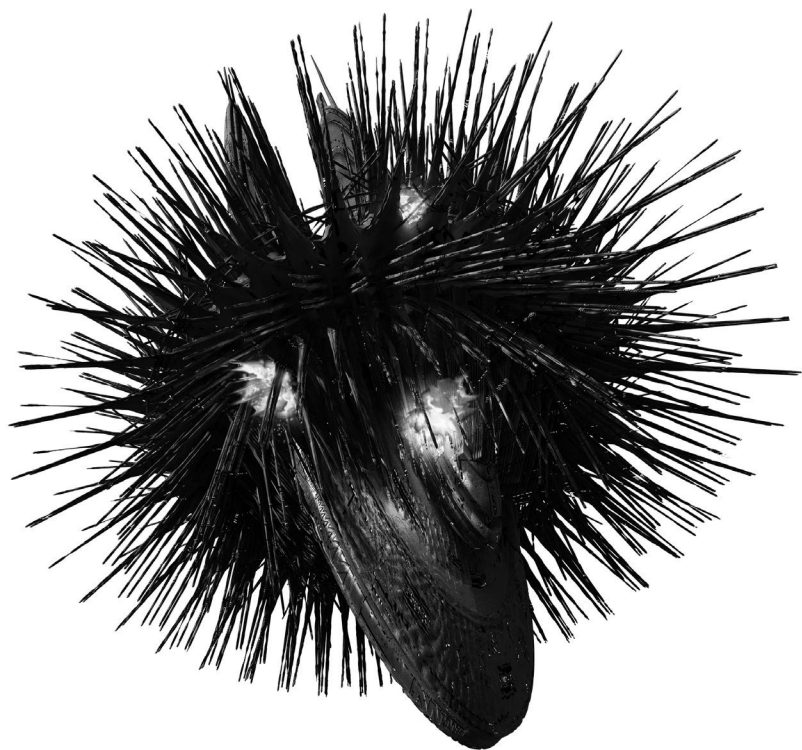
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N I N E F O X
GAMBIT



Y O O N H A L E E



SOLARIS



CHAPTER ONE

AT KEL ACADEMY, an instructor had explained to Cheri's class that the threshold winnow was a weapon of last resort, and not just for its notorious connotations. Said instructor had once witnessed a winnow in use. The detail that stuck in Cheri's head wasn't the part where every door in the besieged city exhaled radiation that baked the inhabitants dead. It wasn't the weapon's governing equations or even the instructor's left eye, damaged during the attack, from which ghostlight glimmered.

What Cheri remembered most was the instructor's aside: that returning to corpses that were only corpses, rather than radiation gates contorted against black-blasted walls and glassy rubble, eyes ruptured open, was one of the best moments of her life.

Five years, five months, and sixteen days later, surrounded by smashed tanks and smoking pits on the heretic Eels' outpost world of Dredge, Captain Kel Cheri of Heron Company, 109-229th Battalion, had come to the conclusion that her instructor was full of shit. There was no comfort to be extracted from the dead, from flesh evaporated from bones. Nothing but numbers snipped short.

According to the briefing, the Eels had a directional storm generator. The storms scrambled vectors. The effect was localized, but it was troublesome when parallel columns ended up at opposite ends of a road a hundred kays apart, and fatal when movement along the planetary surface sent you underground instead. Too close and the storms might disintegrate your component atoms entirely.

Cheris and the other captains had been assured that the weather-eaters would keep the storms contained, and that all the Kel infantry had to do was walk in and seize the generator.

That had been eighteen hours ago. It wasn't that anyone was surprised by the plan's failure. It was the carnage.

Heron Company had left the cover of the southwestern woods a scant eighty-three minutes ago. The intent was to advance in a tedious snaking curve east and then north around Hill 117 because intelligence had indicated that the Eels' vanguard would occupy the ridge nearer the woods and leave the hill route open. It was as Cheris's company made it out of the woods that they saw what had happened to the Kel who had preceded them.

Cheris was unable to organize her first heart-stop impressions of what had been the rest of the battalion. Feet scraped inside-out next to unblemished boots. Black-and-gold Kel uniforms braided into cracked rib cages. Gape-jawed, twisted skulls with eye sockets staring out of their sides and strands of tendon knotted through crumbling teeth. A book of profanities written in every futile shade of red the human body had ever devised, its pages upended over the battlefield from horizon to horizon.

Her company had survived thanks to dumb luck. A field grid error had delayed their advance, so they had missed the brunt of the attack. She didn't know if any other companies, or the other battalions, had made it. Her inability to raise regimental headquarters didn't come as a surprise. Communications going down was nothing new. Orders were orders, however, and it was best to move forward. Once they got close enough, the main body of the Eels would no longer be able to deploy the storms against them, lest they, too, be caught in their area of effect.

Pulses of heat in her left arm alerted her of contacts. Servitor Sparrow 3 reported the coordinates of an incoming Eel battalion, arrival estimated in two hours. The transmission ended in a burst of pain: the servitor had been detected. It was too much to hope that the Eels hadn't recognized it as a Kel servitor, and worrisome that they had let it know that it had been compromised before destroying it.

There was no time to mourn Sparrow 3, who had been fond of Kel music; that would have to come later.

“Anything from the other servitors?” Cheris asked her communications officer, Lieutenant-engineer Dineng, over the subvocal relay.

A pause. “Nothing, sir,” Dineng said. “Sparrow 8 is investigating the storm ahead.”

Cheris frowned at the periodic flickers of reports in the form of visual overlays. If anything, they obfuscated her picture of the situation, but she was used to that.

She monitored relay chatter with half an ear as she compared old maps and new reconnaissance. Certain words crackled out of the soundstream again and again: *Eels. Sleep. Storm, fractal coefficient, can't the weather-eaters hurry up.* And, for pity's sake, was Kel Inoe going on about his sex life again?

For her part, Cheris wouldn't have minded holing up in the shadow of a rock and sleeping for a week. The week was one of the few time measures the hexarchate didn't regulate. In her old home, the City of Ravens Feasting, they used the eight-day week. When she was tired, it was easy to lapse out of the military ten-day week into the eight. In the furtive tradition of her mother's people, today would be Carrion Day, a reminder of the importance of scavengers. It was difficult to agree.

“Sir.” Her senior lieutenant, Kel Verab, brought her out of her reverie. “I don't like the look of the silhouettes on Hill 119.” It was southwest of 117. She brought it up on her display and frowned at the complicated silhouette. “Probably an installation of some sort and I bet it's got eyes. I give you odds the Eels will call in the artillery the second they think they can get all of us. Maybe we should keep heading east.”

“We can't avoid the heretics forever,” Cheris said. “We're going to have to hope that formation defenses hold for us if they start lobbing shells.” She addressed the company. “Formation,” she said, “Pir's Fan.” It had a longer name, but nobody had time for the full names on the battlefield.

Pir's Fan was one of the simpler formations. As its name suggested, it resembled a wedge. It was easiest for Cheri: she held the primary pivot at the van, and everyone adjusted their position relative to hers.

The Kel specialty was formation fighting. The combination of formation geometry and Kel discipline allowed them to channel exotic effects, from heat lances to force shields. Unfortunately, like all exotics, this ability depended on the local society's adherence to the hexarchate's high calendar. And the high calendar wasn't just a system of timekeeping. It encompassed the feasts, the remembrances with their ritual torture of heretics, the entire precarious social order.

Cheri knew the formation's effect had begun to propagate when the world shifted blue and the blacks bent gray. Pir's Fan offered protection against the weather. It was usually better to rely on the weather-eaters, but Cheri had lost any faith that they would be effective on this mission. Unfortunately, the formation wouldn't shield the unit from a direct hit. She hoped to close with the generator before that became an issue.

If the situation changed, there were other formations. The Kel infantry library included thousands, although only a hundred or so were taught as part of Lexicon Primary. You also had to allow for transition time in modulation, especially between less familiar formations. Cheri could feed her soldiers the information through the grid, but it was no substitute for drill.

The march as they swung north steadied Cheri. Here stubby succulents, too low to be credible cover, grew only to be crushed underfoot. The plants gave off a stinging fragrance that attenuated into a watery, cloying sweetness. The regional survey hadn't flagged it as a toxic. Whether the plants had any meaning to the Eels, Cheri didn't know. She would probably leave Dredge, if she left Dredge, without finding out.

Lieutenant Verab alerted her of the enemy sighting via heat pulse. Over the relay, Cheri heard a junior sergeant shouting at someone who had dropped his rifle, a recent recruit who had a talent for botching things.

The Eels' field fortifications, which commanded one of the larger hills, looked like a rough shore in a sea of dust, and their patrols carried themselves with a certain sloppiness. But the distant figures stirred in agitation: Cheris was betting they had thought themselves safe.

Of momentary interest was the Eels' banner, which was of green fire and grim shadow with a twisting motif. The Eels called themselves the Society of the Flourish, although the hexarchate didn't use this name. Taking away people's names denied their power, a lesson Cheris tried not to think about.

Cheris snapped, "Unfurl Kel banner. Advance and fire. I want anything that twitches to die."

The banner-bearers ignited the generator, and fire blazed in the sky. At the heart of the golden flames was the Kel ashhawk, the black bird that burned in its own glory, and beneath it their general's emblem, the Chain of Thorns. Despite Cheris's amusement at Kel design sensibilities – of course the emblem was the flamboyant ashhawk, of course it involved fire – she felt a stinging in her secret heart at the sight of it.

Several green soldiers in Verab's platoon were shooting too rapidly at the guards and not very well. A sergeant, distracted by some other matter, was slow to direct their efforts more usefully, but Verab was already dealing with the issue. Still, better to be shooting than not to be shooting.

The storm started up around them, avoiding the Eel fortifications with dismaying precision. The world became a tumult of silhouettes. The smell of the earth was pungent, salt-grit-sweet. In the back of her head she realized that the sweetness came from the succulents flowering awake.

They were going to have to wade through the encampment before they could count on safety from the weather. Cheris wondered if the Eels would sacrifice their own so they could direct the storm's full fury against the Kel.

"Lieutenant, have you got your platoon in hand?" Cheris asked Verab.

For formation fighting, each soldier's state of mind mattered, or else the exotic effects would falter. It was a microcosm of the importance of Doctrine in hexarchate society. Formation instinct, which every Kel was programmed with during academy, was supposed to ensure the necessary cohesion. In practice, it worked better with some than others.

"They'll serve, sir," Verab said, biting off each word.

"See that they do," Cheris said.

The display showed that the other platoons were holding steady. Bullets hit the formation's protection zone and ricocheted at absurd angles. The rain pelted down around them, yet none of it touched Cheris or the soldiers standing near her.

Strangely, however, the rain was scattering into snow, the snow into crystal. She had Sparrow 14 bring her a captured crystal. It was a shining sliver, fracturing the light into rainbows if rainbows only knew the cold, sad hues of blue and violet. She didn't touch the crystal even though she was wearing Kel gloves. The Sparrow was already starting to corrode, and she expressed her regrets to it. It made a resigned chirping noise.

Pir's Fan should have shed the storm without additional transformative effects. Cheris frowned. She had spent a good portion of her five-year academy stint examining the mathematics of formation mechanics. When she chose a formation, she did so with a full understanding of its particular weaknesses.

The problem was that her analyses depended on the high calendar's consensus mechanics. She now had indication that the directional storm generator worked the way it did because it relied on a radically heretical calendar, with the attendant heretical mechanics, which were interfering with the formation's proper function. She was angry at herself for not anticipating this. Most of the time heretics used technology that was compatible with the high calendar, but the development of purely heretical technology was always possible.

Her superiors had to have known, but she didn't expect them to tell a low officer about matters that involved heresy. Still, the other

Kel companies hadn't had to die the way they had, smeared into irrelevance. Like Cheris, their captains had relied on the weather-eaters, on their formations, on the exotics that their civilization had become dependent on since their discovery. Cheris didn't despise many things, but needless waste was one of them.

The deviation from the high calendar could be measured, and her unit gave her an instrument with which to perform the measurement. She sucked in a breath, listening to relay chatter. *Storm and death and the color of the sky and blisters. Contacts contacts contacts and fucking crystals. Just a scratch, no – Chrif is down.* That would be Chriferafa, who always got teased because her name was unpronounceable.

Bullets and Elfire came at them like part of the storm. Cheris flinched in spite of herself as a tendril of fire hissed past, deflected by the formation.

Her soldiers weren't going to like her, but that didn't matter as long as they lived. "Formation override," Cheris said into the relay. Her breath was silver-white in the air. She barely felt the cold, bad sign. "Squadrons Three through Six, adjust formation." She wrote the equations on one hand with the other, letting the kinetic sensors pick them up for transmission.

A minor test first. Then, based on the results, additional tests to see what the deviations were and whether they admitted any good options. There was a certain amount of heresy in working with heretical mechanics, but her orders told her to work with the resources she had, so she was going to do exactly that.

The formation staggered. She couldn't see it clearly from her position, but the formation icon came up bright and prickly, warning her that the formation's integrity was failing. The grating tone in her head suggested that she order a retreat or have her soldiers modulate into an alternate formation, something, anything to conform with Doctrine. Her vision was reddening at the edges.

"It's part of the *plan*," she said in vexation, and overrode the warnings.

That wasn't the real problem. The real problem was her soldiers'

hesitation. Squadrons Three, Five, and Six were following orders, although Six was having difficulty adjusting around the fallen. Cheris relented enough to request a snapshot from the sergeant. The directional storm had cut a gash through the squadron, leaving greasy stains and partial corpses in a growing pinkish puddle. Cheris suggested an alteration, but the sergeant was going to have to deal with the rest herself.

Squadron Four was resisting the order. Pir's Fan was something they knew and understood. The modifications she had sent them were not. The sergeant protested formulaically, all but quoting the Kel code of conduct. The formation didn't belong to the Kel lexicons. Unconventional thinking was a danger to a well-tested hierarchical system. Her orders did not advance the best interests of the hexarchate. And so on.

The storm fell in sheets of undulating light, snake-sharp and acrid. Cheris had Dineng send for another Sparrow to verify that the light was fatal. The Sparrow dodged a ribbon of light too late and was transformed into a mass of parallel slices and metal shrieks. It fell unmoving to the ground, where the light rearranged it again and again until it was nothing but an accretion of truncated cubes. Cheris winced, but there was nothing to be done now.

Cheris opened the relay and said to the recalcitrant sergeant, with great leniency, "Reconsider." It would be preferable to secure his cooperation. She would have to adjust the formation otherwise, with uncertain results.

She had eaten with him at high table for years, listened to his anecdotes of service in the Drowned March and at the Feathered Bridge between the two great continents of the world Makhtu. She knew that he liked to drink two sips from his own cup after the communal cup went around, and then to arrange his pickles or sesame spinach on top of his rice. She knew that he cared about putting things in their proper place. It was an understandable impulse. It was also going to get him killed.

Already she was rewriting the equations because she knew what his answer would be.

The sergeant reiterated his protest, stopping short of accusing her of heresy herself. Formation instinct should have forced him to obey her, but the fact that he considered her actions deeply un-Kel was enabling him to resist.

Cheris cut contact and sent another override. Lieutenant Verab's acknowledgment sounded grim. Cheris marked Squadron Four outcasts, Kel no longer. They had failed to obey her, and that was that.

Disjointedly, the new formation pieced itself together and pressed forward. They were taking heavier fire now. Two trees exploded at the touch of Eelfire as Squadron Five passed them. A corporal was stapled to a hillside by the resultant lash of splinters. A soldier three paces to Cheris's left fell out of formation and vanished in a vapor of blood and tatters. Kel Nikara, who had sung so well.

Squadron Four was already dissolving, but she had no attention to spare for it.

Cheris guided the advance from point to point. She adjusted the formation again by sending orders to individual soldiers, solving for intermediate forms in her head to keep the geometry within the necessary error bounds. The storm was dissipating: they were too close to the Eels. The next question was whether she could devise a formation that would give them better protection against the Eels' invariant weapons, which would work in any calendar, now that the storm was no longer a factor.

They were outnumbered five to one, but the Eels didn't have access to formations, so the Kel had a chance. Cheris was in a hurry, so a straightforward force multiplier was her best bet. More modifications. Her remaining soldiers knew to trust her. The soundstream reflected this. *Eels, the stink of corpses, heavy fire from that copse, drumbeats.* They were paying attention to the important things again.

To her relief, the force multiplier, adapted from One Thorn Poisons a Thousand Hands, could be linearized for use with her ad hoc formation. She and her soldiers were equipped with calendrical swords, ordinarily used for duels. Not her weapon of choice, but they were near the storm generator, which they were to take intact, and

the general's orders had been clear. The swords shouldn't damage unliving objects, which was the primary consideration.

"Swords, now," Cheris said.

The Kel unsheathed their swords, each tinted differently, blank bars of light. Cheris's ran from blue near the hilt to red at the tip. As they closed with the enemy, numbers blazed to life along the lengths of the blades: *the day and the hour of your death*, as the Kel liked to say.

Except the date and time on Cheris's sword was wrong. She wasn't the only one who was dismayed. *Maintenance, rather use my rifle*, the dreaded *calendrical rot*. Not only were the numbers wrong, they jittered and sparked, snapping in and out of focus. A quick survey of her company indicated that everyone's swords were having the same problem. That would have been bad enough, but the swords weren't even synchronized.

"Sir, maybe another weapon –" Lieutenant Verab said.

"Continue the advance," Cheris said. "No guns." If the swords proved ineffectual, they would have to try something different, but the swords hadn't sputtered out entirely. That gave her hope, if you could call it that.

At first it went well. For every sword-stroke, tens of Eels went down as lines of force scythed through their ranks. Cheris's own swordwork was methodical, businesslike, the same way she dueled. One of her lunges pierced eight soldiers in the Eels' ranks. She had always been good at angles.

The Kel formation held as they butchered their way through the Eels. The hills' residual mist had a ruddy tint. Cheris made a point of noticing the Eels' faces. They weren't much different from the faces of her own soldiers: younger and older, dark skin and pale, eyes mostly brown or sometimes gray. One of them might have been Dineng's brother, if not for the pale eyes. But the calendrical light made them alien, washed in shadows of indefinite color slowly becoming more definite.

They hit an unexpected snag as the storm generator came into view. It crouched on the rise of a stubby hill, visible through a

transparent palisade. The generator resembled nothing so much as a small, deformed tank. Cheris asked for, and got, an assay of its approximate mass from one of the Sparrows. The answer made her bite her lip. Well, that was what the floaters were for.

More bizarre was the fact that the generator was undefended except by four Eel servitors. They were armed with lasers, but so far their fire hadn't penetrated Kel defenses.

Cheris knew the current formation was losing effectiveness when the air went cold and gray. She was having difficulty breathing, and while she had an emergency air supply, they all did, she suspected this was just the beginning. Sure enough, it also became harder and harder to move.

Her first attempts at repairing the formation only resulted in a colder wind, a grayer world. Gritting her teeth – *winter, entropy*, it was time to *get out* but they were *so close* – she tried another configuration. It was hard to think, hard to make herself breathe. She thought she heard the song of snow.

"I need your computational allocations," Cheris told her lieutenants. They were so close to the weather generator, and the Eels were broken and peeling away behind them. They just had to grab the wretched thing and hold on until pickup arrived. But to hold it they had to have a working formation. It was enough to make her long for the days of straightforward bullets and bombs.

She liked the thought of stripping her soldiers' computational resources as much as they did, which was to say not at all. But they weren't in camp, where they could instantiate a more powerful grid. They had no access to the larger, more powerful grid of a friendly voidmoth transport or a military base. She had to use the field grid because it was all they had.

Cheris gave her company a second to understand what was going to happen, then diverted their allocated resources to herself. She ignored the protests, most reflexive, some less so: *can't see, lost coordinates*, it was so *cold*, a scatter of profanities. Verab was saying something to the other lieutenants, but hadn't flagged the conversation for her attention, so she assumed he'd take care of it.

She formulated her question so a computational attack might give her an answer in a reasonable amount of time. The company's grid was not sentient in the way of military-grade servitors, but if you knew how to talk to the system, it was capable of nuanced responses. As the world faded toward black, the grid informed her that she should proceed by a particular series of approximations. She authorized the computation and added some constraints designed to speed the exploration of likely solutions.

The problem was easy to see: not only did the storm generator rely on heretical mechanics, which also explained the weather-eaters' difficulties, it was itself a disruption to the high calendar. Cheris wasn't looking forward to reporting this to her superiors.

Green-black fire washed around them, the dregs of Eel resistance. Cheris silently entreated the formation to hold long enough for the field grid to chew through the computations. *Faster*, she thought, feeling so cold that she was certain that her teeth were icicles and that her fingers had frozen into arthritic twigs.

"The generator's ours, sir!" Verab cried as his platoon took out a last sputtering knot of Eels. They were clear for the moment.

"Well done," she said, meaning it. "Now we have to hang on."

The computations were taking their toll. Through the relay, Cheris discovered that Kel Zro in Squadron Three had offloaded more of her situational awareness functions into the relay than was strictly advisable, and was paying for it now. The soldier to Zro's right shouted a warning, and she corrected her position barely in time to avoid being splashed by Eelfire. Zro wasn't the only one having difficulties. Even people who used their relays with the usual precautions were desynchronizing.

Cheris asked the grid for a summary of preliminary results and skimmed through them. Nothing, nothing, nothing – aha. As the sky waned, she tapped in her suggestions and waited some more.

"Sir," Lieutenant Ankat from Platoon Three said, "I have this hunch someone's rallying the Eels to rush us. You know, the smart thing for them to do."

"I can't make the grid compute faster," Cheris said. "We're Kel.

They're not. If we have to bite them off our heels with our teeth, we'll do it that way."

At last the system came up with a working model of the conditions they were suffering. She swallowed an involuntary hiss of relief and rapped out the orders with a tongue that might have been a lump of coal after the last spark's dying.

Like a machine dismembered into creaking components, the company moved in response. Cheris adjusted in response to the paths of Platoons One and Two, and had the rear platoons change front to deal with the Eel remnants. Gradually, as they found their proper positions, the last of the entropic cold summered away. Being able to breathe normally again was a relief.

Cheris allowed herself a second to contemplate the corpses of the Eels nearest them. Some had weathered into statues of murky ice. Others were puddling into mysterious colors, forgetting the proper hues of flesh, eyes, hair. She estimated casualties and recorded it for later comparison with the Sparrows' observations. It was important to acknowledge numbers, especially when the dead were dead by your doing.

She and the lieutenants reorganized the company to better defend the storm generator, using a formation that bore a disturbing resemblance to the Pyre Burns Inward, which was on the proscribed list. Then she sent a burst transmission informing orbital command that they had gained a tenuous foothold in Eel territory. With any luck it would go through.

For a moment she didn't recognize the command signature on the incoming call because she wasn't expecting it, not so soon after the transmission.

The voice was shockingly clear and biting after the buzzing haze of relay chatter. "Captain Kel Cheris, Heron Company, 109-229th Battalion, acknowledge," it said. She recognized the voice as belonging to Brigadier General Kel Farosh, who was in charge of the expedition.

Keeping an eye on the situation, Cheris responded on the same channel using the appropriate key. "Captain Cheris, General. We're securing the objective."

“Immaterial,” Farosh said: not the response Cheris had expected. “Prepare for extraction in twenty-six minutes. You’ll be leaving the generator. We’ve knocked out the Eels’ local air defenses for the moment.”

Cheris glanced over her shoulder at the generator, not sure she had heard correctly. The generator was surrounded by a coruscating knot of blue-violet light. The sight of it made her bones ache with remembered chill. “The generator, sir?”

“It’s a job well-done,” Farosh said, “but it’s someone else’s problem now. Leave it where you found it.” She clicked out.

Cheris passed along the notification.

“You’ve got to be kidding, sir,” was Verab’s response. “We’re here right now, let us finish the job.”

“We could always volunteer to stay,” Ankat said dryly. “You know how much Kel Command loves volunteers.”

“It was clear that they want us out of here,” Cheris said. But she shared their frustration. They had expected to drive the Eels out of their hiding places so the hexarchate’s enforcers could reprogram the survivors to rejoin civilization. It was peculiar for the expedition to be cut short like this. Why send them to retrieve the storm generator if they weren’t going to take it with them after all?

The youngest soldier – Kel Dezken, scarcely out of academy – slipped out of position trying to share a bad joke with a comrade, and died to a last Eel bullet. Cheris noted it in passing. Terrible timing, but Kel luck was frequently bad.

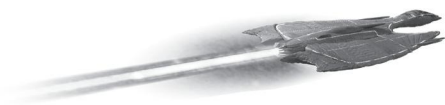
By the time the hoppers and medic teams came to ferry them into orbit, escorted by Guardhawk servitors and – of dubious utility – weather-eaters, Cheris was disappointed to abandon the battlefield. In a way each battle was home: a wretched home, where small mistakes were punished and great virtues went unnoticed, but a home nonetheless. She didn’t know what it said about her that her duty suited her so well, but so long as it was her duty, it didn’t matter what she thought about it.

The Guardhawks, angular birdforms, laid down covering fire so the company could board safely. They seemed to take a certain

serene joy in their work, weaving up and down, back and forth. No formations; Kel servitors were formation-neutral.

Dredge's sun was bright in the sky. Its light caught on weapons fallen from broken hands, ribs cracked and gleaming with blood and yellowy fluid, the needle-remnants of storm crystals. Cheris boarded last. She fixed the battlefield in her memory as though she were scratching it into the sutures of her skull.

The hopper was crowded and stank of sweat and exhaustion. Cheris sat a little way apart from the other soldiers. She was looking out of the window as they arced into the sky, so she saw the waiting Kel bannermoth drop two bombs, neat and precise, on the site they had just left. A day's worth of hard battle and the entire objective rendered irrelevant by high explosives. She kept watching until the explosions' bright flowers dwindled into specks just large enough to trouble the eye.



CHAPTER TWO

HEXARCH SHUOS MIKODEZ wasn't sure which was worse: the flickering readouts that updated him on the crisis at the Fortress of Scattered Needles, or the fact that Hexarch Nirai Kujen's silver voidmoth call indicator had been blinking at him nonstop for the past four hours and twelve minutes. Kujen was a talkative bastard to begin with – not that Mikodez should be one to criticize – and the worst part was, he had legitimate reason to want to get in touch with Mikodez about the danger the hexarchate was in.

Shuos headquarters was at the Citadel of Eyes, a star fortress in the Stabglass March. A simple fact of astrography, except it put the Citadel uncomfortably close to the Fortress of Scattered Needles in the adjacent Entangled March, where the recent trouble was going on. Calendrical currents could be surprisingly far-reaching, star-spanning distances or not, and it made him especially appreciative of the trouble they were in. A little heresy went a long way, unfortunately. But he was certain that their best candidate for dealing with the matter was the best candidate for being authorized to use a certain Shuos weapon, the *oldest* Shuos weapon, especially since said weapon was in the Kel Arsenal. Heptarch Shuos Khiaz, who had signed it (or him, take your pick) over to Kel control 398 years ago, in a fit of towering spite, had a lot to answer for.

In any case, Mikodez didn't like stalling, but he needed to buy time while his mathematicians did the final checks on the Kel candidate that he'd been saving up, based on what she had just

pulled at Dredge. He had multiple offices at the Citadel of Eyes, and today he had holed himself up in the one he used for getting work done rather than scaring impressionable interlocutors. Nothing he kept in the office would intimidate Kujen, anyway, not the paintings of ninefoxes with their staring tails, not the lack of visible weapons, or the pattern-stones board with its halfway game, or the randomly selected images of still lifes. Mikodez considered it important to look at things that had nothing to do with his job. (Mostly. He was as susceptible as the next Shuos to thinking up ways to assassinate people with unlikely objects.)

He had selected today's image specifically to put Kujen on edge: a spectacular piece of architecture, composed of wild curves and tessellated facets, that had existed during Kujen's distant childhood. Kujen couldn't be bothered to care about people, unless the people could keep up with him on things like number theory – something that described vanishingly few people in the hexarchate, the current candidate being one of them – but he liked architecture, and engines, and the machinery of empire.

Mikodez looked again at the candidate's portrait and frowned. He knew her psych profile well. One of his agents had flagged her extraordinary math scores back when she was a lieutenant, and they'd kept an eye on her, in the hopes that she wouldn't get herself shot in some stupid mission guarding a shipment of cabbages. (Cabbages were a Kel idiosyncrasy. They were adamant about their spiced cabbage pickles.) Appearance-wise she was nothing special: black-haired and brown-eyed like almost everyone in the hexarchate, with ivory-tinged skin much lighter than his own. Attractive in a somber way, but not so that she'd turn heads coming into a room, and with a mouth that made him wonder if she smiled much. Probably not, and even then only around her friends, or when she needed to reassure some green soldier. The profile indicated a strong sense of duty, however; that would be useful.

How long could he keep putting off Kujen? He considered paging the mathematicians, but sticking a blinking amber eye on *their* communications panels would just make them grouchy, and he

needed them in a good mood since he couldn't do this himself. He'd done well at math as a cadet, but that had been decades ago. It didn't make him a mathematician, let alone one specializing in calendrical techniques, let alone one trained in this kind of evaluation.

Technically, as Shuos hexarch, Mikodez outranked Kujen, because he led a high faction and Kujen led a low one. But not only was Kujen the senior hexarch at 864 years old, he was also, in a distressingly real sense, responsible for the hexarchate's dominance. He'd invented the mothdrive in its first form, enabling the original heptarchate's rapid expansion, and pioneered a whole field of mathematics that resulted in modern calendrical mechanics. Mikodez was keenly aware that when you got right down to it, he was an expendable bureaucrat in charge of a bunch of cantankerous spies, analysts, and assassins, albeit one who had done rather well over the past four decades considering a Shuos hexarch's lifespan was usually measured in the single digits. In contrast, Kujen was irreplaceable – at least until Mikodez could figure out a better alternative.

Kujen's immortality was tied to certain protections, which Mikodez hadn't figured out a way around. It wasn't just Kujen's age, although no one else had found a reasonable method of living past 140 or 150. The other four hexarchs had a keen interest in cracking Kujen's secret. The first person the existing immortality device had been tried on had gone crazy. The third had started that way. Kujen, the second, had emerged perfectly functional. He liked to hint that he knew how not to go crazy, but he refused to share. Typical.

If anyone ever asked Mikodez, immortality was like sex: it made idiots of otherwise rational people. The other hexarchs never asked, though. Instead, they assumed he wanted it as badly as they did.

The Fortress readout flickered again. Gray rot, like tendrils, the color of death and dust and cold rain. Mikodez frowned, then typed in a query. He could work that much of the analysis for himself. The numbers came right up. The matrices' most problematic entries blinked. There were a lot of them.

The Rahal, who oversaw the normal functioning of the calendar, had put in place their countermeasures; but their countermeasures weren't adequate to deal with a heresy of this magnitude. It was going to have to be military action, no matter how much everyone (except the Kel) wished otherwise.

Mikodez looked again at the voidmoth, then queried his assistant. Maybe something had turned up in the last sixteen minutes. If not, he was going to talk to Kujen anyway and see if the usual pretense of high-wire distractibility would buy him the necessary extra minutes. Likely not, given how well Kujen knew him, but worth a try.

His assistant, Shuos Zehun, responded with an unusually blunt note: *You can stop dithering, Mikodez. This one's sane and suitable.* They appended the mathematicians' assessments. Agreement all down the line that the candidate was as good as everyone thought, at least in this one area.

All right, then. "Line 1-1," Mikodez said. "Put Kujen on."

The video placed itself to the right of a set of indices that let Mikodez keep an eye on just how bad the calendrical rot had gotten in the Entangled March, as opposed to the numbers for the Fortress's immediate surrounds. At the moment the aggregate figures were holding steady, but they were unlikely to stay that way.

The man in the video was slender and dark-haired and very pale, with wickedly gorgeous eyes. For someone who headed the technical faction, not the cultural one, Nirai Kujen would have made a credible Andan: he was never less than beautiful. Right now he was wearing a smoke-colored scarf with iridescent strands in it, and his black-and-gray shirt had buttons of mother-of-pearl carved in the shape of leaves. Kujen could probably fund a whole research department out of his wardrobe. On the other hand, there was no denying he got results. The Kel had him to thank for most of their weapons.

"How good to see you haven't been assassinated," Kujen said drily. Shuos philosophy was that the hexarch's seat was yours if you could hold onto it. Fighting over the hexarch's seat was a popular

Shuos pastime. “If you were any other Shuos, I would accuse you of avoiding my calls by going out to shoot or seduce or spy on someone, but in your case I honestly think you got behind on paperwork.”

Mikodez shrugged. Ordinarily they agreed on the importance of a functioning bureaucracy. “I don’t care what candidates you’ve scared up,” Mikodez said, “I have a better one for you.” He sent the file over.

This time, when Mikodez looked at the photo of the candidate, Captain Kel Cheris, his gaze went to her signifier, which showed beneath the portrait: Ashhawk Sheathed Wings. A good sign for the stability it implied, although the Kel had an unreasonable prejudice against it. Kujen wasn’t going to think highly of it either, but no one expected a sociopath to care about sanity.

“You know,” Kujen was saying, “I wish the Kel would devise more reliable tactical ability batteries. I’m going to let Jedao figure out the – fuck me sideways with a drill press, is that a Kel with decent math scores?”

“You always make it sound like Kel-shopping is such a chore,” Mikodez said, “so I thought I’d present you with someone more up your alley.”

Cheris wasn’t just good at math. She was possibly good enough to compete with Kujen, although the fact that she hadn’t gone into research mathematics made it hard to tell for certain. Just as importantly, she was good enough to make up for Jedao’s – the weapon’s – deficiencies in that area.

“Where on earth did you find her? No, don’t answer that. It’s charming to think that there’s a Kel who might understand some higher math. Too bad I can’t yell at the Kel recruiters for not sending her my way.”

“Be fair,” Mikodez said. “They tried to redirect her to the Nirai, but she insisted that she wanted to be a Kel. She was attractive enough as an officer candidate that they relented.”

Something flickered at the corner of his eye. Kujen frowned and said, “Take a look at the composite indices for the Fortress readings,

Mikodez. Whatever they're doing in there hit all the wards at once. We just had to luck out with intelligent heretics instead of the usual stupid kind, so we need to settle on a candidate to deal with them. That's hard to do when you're dickering around avoiding me."

"I wanted just the right one," Mikodez said.

"She looks pretty good," Kujen conceded, "but that commander with the beautiful hands also looked pretty good. And don't roll your eyes at me, I'm talking about his qualifications, not his aesthetics. Honestly, Mikodez, don't you ever take anything seriously? The commander at least has experience in space warfare, which your infantry captain doesn't."

"I take the situation at the Fortress very seriously," Mikodez said. "Besides, the fact that Cheris specialized in mathematics might enable her to better deal with calendrical warfare." Still, he smiled lazily at Kujen because it was best not to be seen to care too much.

The Fortress of Scattered Needles was located at a nexus point in a stretch of empty space and was nearest the Footbreak system. The Rahal had already stationed a lensmoth there, but all it could do was staunch the bleeding as long as the Fortress itself was afflicted.

The Fortress was also divided into six wards, one for each faction, although the boundaries weren't as strictly enforced as they had been in the old days. There had once been a seventh ward for the seventh faction, the Liozh. The Fortress's interior had been demolished and rebuilt to remove the seventh ward, at staggering expense, after the Liozh heresy was put down.

Whoever had infected the Fortress with rot had taken down all six wards at the same time. The degree of coordination implied would have been enough of a problem, but Mikodez had reason to believe that the particular form the rot had taken was the result of heretics taking advantage of an experiment being run by Hexarch Rahal Iruja and the false hexarch Nirai Faian. Faian was supposed to run the Nirai in public so Kujen could amuse himself with whatever research caught his fancy, but Iruja had suborned her almost from the beginning. A nexus fortress made an ideal proving ground for their work because it represented the hexarchate in miniature. What

Mikodez didn't understand was why they hadn't used one of the smaller fortresses instead.

As to why Iruja and Faian were experimenting with the calendar, that was obvious. All the hexarchs knew, and even Kujen, who hadn't been told, could guess. They wanted a better form of immortality. There was a comprehensive body of work suggesting that you couldn't do better than Kujen had under the existing calendar. Mikodez wouldn't have minded asking Kujen about it outright, but he was supposed to be keeping an eye on Kujen for the other hexarchs. Iruja would have disapproved of him tipping their hand, even about something so easy to figure out.

Kujen, for his part, tolerated the other hexarchs because his immortality relied on the high calendar in its present form, and the high calendar didn't just include the numbers and measures of time, but the associated social system. In this case, that meant the six factions. If Kujen came up with a viable alternative that eliminated the competition, he would become a real threat to the system. The fact that he hadn't already done away with everyone else strongly suggested that it was unlikely that such an alternative existed.

At some point, Rahal Iruja was going to ask Mikodez to remove Kujen for real. Mikodez already had files detailing possible ways to do it, which he updated twice a month (more often when he got bored), although he wasn't going to unless it became necessary. True, Kujen's taste in hobbies made him an annoying transaction cost, but he was good at his job and he represented a certain amount of stability. Of course, Mikodez had plans for how to deal with the inevitable transition after Kujen's death, just in case.

Kujen had sent Mikodez his projections of possible heretical calendars. "I've sorted them by likelihood," Kujen said. "That first one is bad news, especially if they're fixated on seven as their central integer. And here I thought nobody paid attention to the past anymore." He was one of two people who still remembered what life had been like under seven factions, not six.

"You've been hanging out with too many Kel," Mikodez said, although it wasn't entirely true that the Kel disdained history.

Nevertheless, the prospect of a Liozh revival – of a time when the hexarchate was a heptarchate – did concern him. The Liozh had been the philosophers and ethicists of the heptarchate, and some evidence suggested that they had been destroyed when they attempted to do away with the remembrances, which Kujen was fond of. Mikodez didn't like the thought of Kujen becoming more personally invested in the matter, given his proclivities. Besides, it was hard to tell without more data, but if the Liozh had failed with their heresy the first time around, why would any sane heretic pick them to emulate?

"You're stooping to making Kel jokes?" Kujen said. The corner of his mouth lifted.

"Someone has to," Mikodez said. The Kel hexarch was known to make them herself.

Kujen fiddled with something off-screen. "Anyway, all those calendars are compatible with the Fortress's shields. I have advised Kel Command that they might as well just say how to take the shields out since it's not like it'll stay a secret, but they are proving resistant."

"Never give information away if you don't have to," Mikodez said. If the shields went down, the Fortress was dangerously vulnerable.

"Yes, but your own side?"

"Own side" was putting it a bit strongly. "They won't like it if you say anything about it," Mikodez said, as if Kujen needed the warning. Kujen shouldn't have a say in a military decision anyway, except no one else was capable of overseeing the particular weapon Kel Command wanted to deploy.

"I can keep my mouth shut," Kujen said irritably. "You've made no secret of the fact that you have the usual Shuos prejudices, but I suppose you have your reasons for authorizing the mission."

It had been a sore point with Shuos leaders for almost four centuries that the Kel had snatched away their last general, even if the Shuos still had to approve Kel operations involving his use. "Anyway," Mikodez said after a pause to see if Kujen was going

to add anything, “you haven’t told me if you think the candidate’s acceptable.”

“You really like the Sheathed Wings, don’t you? Aren’t you afraid she’s going to put Jedao to sleep?”

It was entirely in character for Kujen to think psychological stability was dull. “I’m sure the general will bring some excitement into her life,” Mikodez said.

“She’s wasted on him,” Kujen said. “I still think that commander would be a better fit. And I could get more use out of the Sheathed Wings if Kel Command doesn’t want her anymore.”

Sometimes Mikodez thought Kujen would benefit from having his knuckles rapped. “Don’t get greedy,” he said. “You’ll have plenty of time to see if she can tell you anything about the latest cryptology conjectures after the Fortress has been dealt with.” Although whether she would prefer dealing with the Fortress or a sociopathic hexarch was an open question.

“Killjoy,” Kujen said. “You’re not going to fold on this one, are you?”

Mikodez smiled at him. “You wanted more funding for research on that latest jamming system, didn’t you?”

“It’s unlike you to resort to naked bribery,” Kujen said, “not that I’m complaining.”

“I’m bored,” Mikodez said, “and if I don’t spend this money, one of my subordinates will put it into something wholesome, like algorithmic threat identification.” He cultivated a reputation for being erratic for occasions like this.

“All right, all right, I’ll put in the authorizations on my end,” Kujen said. “You think you have paperwork, you should see mine.”

You think I don’t? Mikodez thought, but he kept his expression bland. Kujen’s security wasn’t nearly as up-to-date as he thought it was.

“At least I’ll get a chance to say hello to her,” Kujen went on, “even though I’m sure she’ll be focused on her duty. Sometimes I think Visyas and I did too good a job designing formation instinct, but the results can be adorable.”

Mikodez would have felt sorry for Kel Cheris, but at the moment Kujen was unlikely to damage anyone who had a chance of entertaining him in matters related to number theory. Besides, the emergency was real. A shame that she had made herself a candidate for dealing with the calendrical rot, but someone had to do it, and she had a better chance of survival than most.

“I’ll set it up, then,” Mikodez said. “Depending on how hard I can lean on Kel Command, I can get her to you in eighteen days or so.”

“Splendid,” Kujen said. “In the future, do try to be less transparent about avoiding me. It’s embarrassing when a grown Shuos is so obvious.” He signed off without waiting for a response.

Embarrassing, but worth it to ensure that his preferred candidate was sent to deal with the calendrical rot. Mikodez spent several minutes composing his instructions to Kel Command, then sent them off.

Kel Cheris was sane, although the odds were that she wouldn’t stay that way. Still, Mikodez had to trade her welfare for the hexarchate’s. Someday someone might come up with a better government, one in which brainwashing and the remembrances’ ritual torture weren’t an unremarkable fact of life. Until then, he did what he could.

CHERIS SPENT THE flight back to the boxmoth infantry transport in silence. The boxmoth was like any other: walls painted solemn black and charcoal gray, with the occasional unsubtle touch of gold. Cheris reported to the commander’s executive officer, an unsmiling man with a scar over his right eye. She saluted him fist to shoulder, and he returned the salute. She passed over her company’s grid key so the data could be examined by her superiors at their leisure.

“Welcome back, Captain,” the executive officer said, eying her with a faint spark of curiosity.

This alarmed her – it never paid to stand out too much among the Kel – but no response seemed to be expected.

The mothgrid informed her of the vessel's current layout and where she might find the high halls, her quarters, the soldiers' barracks. In reality, no one was going to their assigned high hall without cleaning up first. Per protocol, she was told the status of those who had been taken to Medical for their injuries. She thought of the recalcitrant squadron that had died on Dredge before the evacuation.

Her quarters were next to her company's barracks. She had two small rooms and an adjoining bath. All her muscles ached, but she dug out a small box of personal items and pulled out the raven luckstone her mother had given her on her twenty-third birthday. It was a polished stone, drab gray, and the raven's silhouette was a welcome reminder of the home she visited so seldom.

There came a rapid series of taps at her door: three, one, four, one, five –

“Come in,” Cheris said, amused at the ritual. She put the luckstone away.

One of the boxmoth's birdform servitors came in bearing an arrangement of anodized wire flowers. There were twelve flowers, just as twelve servitors had fallen in action. They would never receive official acknowledgment of their service, but that wasn't any reason not to remember them.

“Thank you,” Cheris said to the birdform. “It was bad down there. I wish I could have done more.”

The birdform flashed a series of ironic golds and reds. Cheris had learned to read Simplified Machine Universal, and nodded her agreement. It added that it had been having trouble with one of its grippers, if she had a moment to adjust it?

“Of course,” Cheris said. She wasn't a technician, but some repair jobs were better handled by human hands, and she had learned the basics. As it turned out, all it took was a few moment's jiggering with some specially shaped pliers. The birdform made a pleased bell tone.

“I have to see to my duties now,” Cheris said. “I'll talk to you later?”

The birdform indicated its acquiescence, and headed out, leaving the flowers.

Cheris didn't know its name. The servitors had designations for human convenience, but she was certain that they had names of their own. She made a point of not asking.

Washing up didn't take long, and her uniform cleaned itself while she did so. The fabric smoothed itself of a last few creases as she picked it up. "Middle formal," she told it, which was not too different from battle dress, except for the cuffs and the brightness of the gold trim.

She had fourteen minutes before she ought to show up at the high hall to share the communal cup with her company, in celebration of their survival. The unscheduled time was a greater treasure than the bath. Alone, she eased herself into the chair and set her hands on the desk, taking comfort from the cool, solid glasswood. If she looked down she might have seen her dark-eyed reflection, crossed over with whorls and eddies like vagrant galaxies.

Her contemplation was broken by heat-pulses in her arm. They told her to report to a secured terminal for orders. The formal closing sequence told her she was dealing with someone high in the chain of command. When in combat, people only used the abbreviated closings. She couldn't imagine why dealing with her company was a matter of any urgency now that the Eels had been subdued.

Cheris had the feeling that she wasn't going to share this meal with her soldiers, but it couldn't be helped. The orders took precedence.

The terminal occupied the far end of the quarters they had put her in. It was a recessed plate of metal in the wall, matte black. Graven on the floor before it was the hexarchate's emblem of a wheel with six spokes. Capping each spoke was each faction's emblem, the high factions opposed by their corresponding low factions: the Shuos ninefox with its waving tails, each with a lidless eye, and the Kel ashhawk in flames; the Andan kniferose and the Vidona stingray; the Rahal scrywolf and the Nirai voidmoth scattered with stars.

She prompted her uniform to modify itself into full formal. The Kel ashhawk brightened and arched its neck, a gesture that the Kel jokingly called preening; subtle shades of turquoise and violet gave the fabric greater depth. The cuffs and collar lengthened and

developed a brocade texture. Her gloves remained the same, plain and functional. Only at funerals did the Kel wear more elaborate gloves.

“Captain Kel Cheris reporting as ordered,” she said.

The terminal showed her signifier, which was to say that it drew red-gold flames around an ashhawk’s silhouette. Unlike the emblem on her uniform, the signifier’s ashhawk was in the Sheathed Wings configuration.

Cheris didn’t attach too much importance to the signifier, although hers indicated that she was deliberate by nature. There were, however, historical examples of flagrantly incorrect signifiers. They were estimations, not scryings, in any case. The arch-traitor and madman Shuos Jedao had appeared as a Ninefox Crowned with Eyes, visionary and strategist, but had proved to be an Immolation Fox. The final Liozh heptarch, who had, to the last, been the Web of Worlds, unity of unities, had died broken before Shuos, Kel, and Rahal troops.

She was beginning to wonder if she should leave her apologies and try again later when the terminal’s signifier shattered and showed her her own face: the same neat dark hair, the same dark eyes. But the smile was not her own, and the stranger wore a high general’s flared wings and flame where Cheris had a captain’s talon with its pricked bead of blood.

“Captain,” the stranger said. It even had her voice. “This is Composite Subcommand Two of Kel Command. Acknowledge.”

Cheris started to sweat. The composites changed from task to task. There was no telling which high general she was dealing with, or how many had wired their minds together into a greater intelligence. But the designation Two indicated that at least one of the highest generals was in the composite. A bad sign. She made the correct salute, not too fast and not too slow.

“Now you understand,” Subcommand Two said, as though dropping back into a conversation they had left off last night over glasses of wine, “that your assignment was a terrible one. Frankly, it’s a waste of good officers.”

“I know my oath, sir,” Cheris said cautiously, but not too cautiously. The Kel didn’t favor caution, something her instructors had reminded her of time and again.

Subcommand Two ignored her, which was the best response she could have hoped for. “This is the context you weren’t given when you were sent down to Dredge. You figured out that the Eels built a weapon that took advantage of calendrical rot in order to function. Don’t deny it. Your actions against the heretics indicate your understanding of the situation.”

Cheris said, as steadily as she could, “I am prepared to be outprocessed.” It was not a fate any Kel wanted. She had not come from a family with a tradition of Kel service – any faction service. Despite her parents’ opposition, she had survived the tests and been admitted to Kel Academy Prime. She had honed her life for service, and it was bitter to have it terminated. Still, it was a fitting fate for a Kel: the bright upward trajectory, the sudden death.

Many people knew the ashhawk by its other name: suicide hawk.

Subcommand Two said, “Most of your soldiers will have to be processed by Doctrine, true. But it would be a waste of your improvisational abilities to send you with them.”

Cheris recognized a euphemism as well as the next Kel. They had something worse in mind for her, and they were going to split up her command. Still, she felt a wary relief. They wouldn’t bother briefing her unless they had some challenge in mind, and there were few wholly impossible challenges.

“The truth of the situation is worse than a handful of Eels in peripheral systems,” Subcommand Two said. “Calendrical rot has taken hold not only in Dredge but in several central marches of the hexarchate. It cannot be allowed to persist.”

“Sir,” Cheris said, “is this a task for a Kel rather than a Shuos?” The Rahal concerned themselves with Doctrine and justice, but they rarely dealt with full-fledged uprisings; the Vidona cleaned up the aftermath, although no one trusted them to put heresies down at the outset. The Shuos and the Kel were collectively regarded as the hexarchate’s sword, but the Kel specialized in kinetic operations and short-term goals while

the Shuos pursued information operations and long-term plans. No Kel liked fox games, but there was a place and time for every method.

For a moment the reflection wavered, and she saw amber staring out from the golden wings: a ninefox's knowing eye. Then Cheris knew that the composite included a Shuos, probably an envoy from the Shuos hexarch himself. Her dismay was immediate. Kel Command wouldn't consent to intimate Shuos oversight for anything less than a crisis.

"I'm listening, sir," Cheris said.

"We have six officers competing to deal with the heresy in the Fortress of Scattered Needles and its surrounds," the composite said. "The Shuos have requested to be represented by a seventh as their web piece." Cheris's face smiled at her with a momentary glint of teeth. "You."

She thought at first she had misheard. The high calendar was projected throughout the hexarchate by a series of nexus fortresses, and Scattered Needles was the most famed of them. How had it —? And why did the Shuos want her, of all people, as a web piece?

In the old days of the heptarchate, the Liozh faction had coordinated the government. In a Shuos training game from the post-Liozh period, the web piece had been named after their emblem, the mirrorweb. Cheris had only played once, but she remembered the basic rules. Players were divided up into several marches, and each march competed separately. Certain actions conferred great advantage, but also incremented a heresy clock. As the clock went up, the game's rules changed. The web piece interacted with the heresy clock and represented the weapon that saved you even as it poisoned your principles.

"I will serve, sir," Cheris said. As long as it was possible to be played as a web piece and survive, she meant to try.

Was that another glimpse of the fox's unwavering eye? "Do you know what your primary examiner said of you before approving you for service?" Subcommand Two said.

"As I recall, sir," Cheris said mildly, "I graduated in the top six percent that year from Academy Prime."

“He noted your conservatism and wondered what had driven you toward a faction full of people who take risks on command. Are we to interpret your continued service as evidence that you have a Kel’s heart after all?”

“I will serve, sir,” Cheris said again.

Subcommand Two could have demanded a more substantive response, and didn’t. Her face smiled again, this time with a fox’s patient pleasure, and winked out.

The two ways to win at gambling were to read the situation and know the odds. Cheris had calculated her situation already. She had only a single life to offer, and she was aware of the ugly deaths that awaited her should she fail, but at some point you had to trust yourself.

After Cheris was sure the meeting was over, she stared at her reflection in the terminal. It still displayed the Ashhawk Sheathed Wings. When she had been younger, she had hoped for it to change and show her something new about herself, but today as always, there was nothing new to show.

She would have to go to her soldiers and break the news to them. Aware of her duties, she submitted a very terse report and signed off on the casualty intake form, wincing at the numbers. She hoped she would have an opportunity to pay a call on the injured in Medical, but she doubted it.

“Medium formal,” she told the uniform, and it obliged her. Her hands were sweating inside the gloves.

The hall outside her quarters was quiet and almost chilly, and the slight curve intensified as she walked down its length. The curve was partly illusion, a topological trick to enable the voidmoth to hold more passengers, but her eye was fooled nonetheless.

It was only a single circuit to the high halls where the Kel infantry ate separately from the moth’s regular crew. There was a painting on the wall just before she reached the doors, on textured paper: the queen of birds holding court in a winterdrift forest, and to her side, a fox half-hidden and wholly smiling.

Their assigned high hall, when she entered it, was less full than it

should have been. The other halls, for the other companies that had not survived, would stand empty. The servitors had arranged the tables to make the place look less vast. Some of them hovered in the air as they made fussy adjustments to the furnishings: the ashhawk with wings outspread, Brightly Burning, bannered across the wall; the calligraphed motto that was found everywhere the Kel went, *from every spark a fire*; tapestries woven from the threads of dead soldiers' uniforms and embroidered with their names and the names and dates of the battlefields that had claimed their lives.

Every soldier rose at her entrance, spoons and chopsticks clinking as they set them down. Cheris paused long enough to return the honor, and smiled with her eyes. Lieutenant Verab was sober-faced as always, but Ankat returned the expression with a sardonic grin. Ready to tell the officers' table a brand-new Kel joke, no doubt. He had a better repertoire than anyone she'd ever met. Then she headed to her seat at the center of the officers' table, and indicated that they should sit again.

The communal cup was waiting for her. It was lacquered red and graven with maple leaves, and someone had refilled it nearly to the brim. Verab, who sat at her right, passed her the cup. He looked very tired, and she lifted an eyebrow at him. He shrugged slightly: nothing important. She didn't challenge the lie. Cheris felt tired herself, knowing the news she was going to have to break to him, and to the rest of her company. Schooling her expression to calm, she took one sip. The water was sweet and cool, yet she felt it ought to be bitter.

She had a bowl of rice, and the communal platters had familiar fare: fish fried in rice flour and egg and leaves of sage, pickled plums, quail eggs with sesame salt. Some fresh fruit had been saved for her. Verab was mindful of her love for tangerines, a sometime luxury; plus he didn't care for them himself. She looked at the food and thought about all the meals she had shared with these people, the times she had dragged herself out of a battle knowing that soon she would be able to sit down with them and eat the food they ate, and listen to the Kel jokes that she really wasn't offended by,

even though she sometimes pretended to be as a joke in itself, and comfort herself with the voices of those who had made it through. All of that was about to end.

“I have bad news,” Cheris said. “They’re breaking up the company.”

They were staring at her, even Verab, who should have guessed. “Doctrine,” he said. His voice cracked. Verab was fifth-generation Kel. His family would take it hard.

“You may be able to serve again, some of you,” Cheris said, aware of the inadequacy of her words, “but that depends on the magistrates’ assessments. I’m sorry. I don’t have details.”

“Kel luck is always bad,” Lieutenant Ankat said. He was about to make a joke of his own, she could tell, sheer anxiety. She looked at him, hard, and he swallowed whatever it had been.

“It’s duty,” Cheris said. Right now duty seemed arid. “I am not to go with you. They have another use for me.”

A murmur rippled up and down the table, quickly quelled. They knew the euphemisms, too.

They weren’t looking forward to the future. Most of them would lose Kel tradition and formation instinct. They might remember the mottoes and formations, but the mottoes would give them no more comfort, and the formations would no longer have any potency for them.

“Good luck where you’re going then, sir,” Ankat said, and Verab murmured his agreement. He didn’t believe this had just happened. She could tell by the stricken look in his eyes.

“I would hear your names and dates of service,” she said quietly. It would make all of this real, and the ceremony would give them something to hold onto, even if that something wasn’t precisely comfort. “All of you. Acknowledge.”

“Sir,” they said in one voice. Ankat looked down at his hands, then back at her.

It was not the formal roll call. They had no drum, no fire, no flute. She would have included those things if she could. But even the servitors had heard her. They stopped what they were doing and arranged themselves in a listening posture. She nodded at them.

They started with the most junior soldier – Kel Nirrio, now that Dezken was dead – and ascended the ladder of rank. Nobody ate during the recital. Cheris was hungry, but hunger could wait. She didn't need to commit the names to memory, as she had done that long ago, but she wanted to make sure she remembered what every intent face looked like, what every rough voice sounded like, so she could warm herself by them in the days to come.

She spoke her name last, as was proper. The hall was otherwise silent. And then, breaking the ritual: “Thank you,” she said. “I wish you well.”

For all that she was leaving them, she couldn't help feeling a guilty twinge of anticipation for the challenge to come; but it would not do to let on.

“Eat, sir,” Ankat said then, and she ate, not too fast and not too slow, making sure to finish with the two tangerines Verab had set aside for her.

