

VERSION HISTORY

SMOKE ON THE WATER

**GAMMALAW
BOOK I**

BRIAN DALEY

DEL REY

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SYNOPSIS

Though they contemplated a final suicide mission of blood, guts, and glory, the Exts knew their warrior superskills were no match for the LAW—Legal Annexation of Worlds—who were sent into space by the mighty Periapt potentates to colonize new populations against the evil, alien Roke.

Among the Ext draftees bound for Periapt were Allgrave Burning, his technowizard cousin Lod, and beautiful, death-scarred Ghost, all sworn to a greater purpose, destined to fight in a star-torn war like none other. For a mysterious, danger-shrouded planet beckoned them—along with a disgraced starship captain and a powerful high priestess—for the greatest battles of their lives...

*In memory of my father, Charles Joseph Daley, and of meteor watching
on warm August nights*

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Some features of the LAW 'chetterguns are drawn from the research and recommendations of Lt Col. Morris J. Herbert, formerly Assistant Professor of Ballistics and Associate Professor, Department of Ordnance, U.S. Military Academy, West Point.

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SMOKE ON THE WATER

CONCORDANCE

CHAPTER ONE

Digging his own grave was the most peaceful thing he'd done in a long time. Past exhaustion, past any hope of survival, Burning engaged the hard mountaintop soil of Anvil Tor with his entrenching tool. Better to die in a shallow fighting hole, he had decided, than in some dark muddy corner of the command bunker. He labored with an exactitude born of the Exts' war against the forces of LAW. Once ingrained, the Skills kept a hand-eye vigilance of their own.

Burning already had his field of fire marked out, the scrub cleared away with measured whacks of the e-tool's machete edge. The hum was still in his ears despite the fact that his helmet phone's gain was turned down and the lapped neck-shirt was open so that he could hear what was going on around him.

The hum had followed him around for weeks, building steadily in the background since he had faced the reality of their situation. There was simply no way the Exts could survive, much

less prevail against the Periapt forces. When the last Ext fell dead, the LAW moguls and the proxy detachments that had been bribed or pummeled into shifting allegiance would control every square centimeter of Concordance.

The hum was like the vague precursor of a quake or an incoming tidal wave; it coursed in his ears all the time now, waking and sleeping.

The mindless exertion of digging in made it less painful to contemplate the string of disasters that had driven the Exts onto Anvil Tor for a last stand; it dulled Burning's awareness of his own culpability in the whole sickening business and helped shut out the heartrending sounds from the plain below.

The winds that scoured Anvil Tor's cliff face carried shrieks and screams and the din of turncoat mop-up weaponry. Occasional major detonations punctuated the white noise as fuel reservoirs and missiles in wrecked Ext armor exploded.

A string of three blasts made Burning pause for a moment. They couldn't have come from his men and women—any that had been left behind were surely dead by their own hands. Shortly he began to hear the far-off jubilee of victorious First Lands Alliance and Concordance Liberation Army units as they sounded sirens and vehicle horns and fired delirious volleys into the air.

Burning grunted as he pitched a bit more of the hard-baked dirt aside, then stopped to check the sky. The clouds were continuing to close in, and so LAW airpower might be hampered a bit. He doubted that the Periapts would screw up their courage for a nighttime ground assault, though a clash in the dark, perhaps in driving rain, would certainly suit the Exts.

His drill instructor in the student reserves would have approved. *Damn fine infantry weather!* she might have said.

But Burning was not about to applaud a couple of clouds. To hell with the everlasting glory of the infantry, he told himself. That day alone he'd had to give two good people the knife—people who had been relying on him to supply another glorious Ext victory. A few of the survivors were so far gone that they *still* expected it.

"Burning!" a voice called.

He glanced up and immediately returned to digging.

"Allgrave Orman," the voice drawled, mocking the name and the title. "It's about your sister. Seems she's wandered off from the operations bunker."

Burning—born Emmett Orman, the tenth and current All-grave of the Exts—planted the e-tool. On Anvil Tor it was not especially bizarre to see Zone wearing a major's trefoils instead of a lieutenant's stars or, for that matter, a sergeant's stripes. As Ext units were attrited, field promotions had become daily, even hourly commonplaces. Hell, what would it matter now if General Delecado bucked the patho bastard to field marshal? When one came right down to it, Zone's new rank was no more unmerited than Burning's being named All-grave, which he owed to a chance of lineage and had been granted against his will.

"I gave word that Fiona was to be watched," he said at last. Sucking at his teeth, Zone offered a languid salute. His raw-boned muscular body never even approximated the position of attention, but almost nobody else's did anymore, either.

"Sweetmeat was doing just that, sir, till he stumbled into a LAW recon floater packing a coilgun."

"How long has Fiona been gone?"

"Excuse me, Allgrave, but I've had better things to do than watch over her. She hasn't passed through the perimeter, if that's any consolation to you."

Zone's hollow-eyed stare was different from the thousand-meter gaze so many Exts wore those days; Zone's was more daring. And he had always had a special bad eye for Burning, one that said, Yeah, you're *right* to be afraid of me, and we both know why. Only I'm not gonna put it into words just yet, and you're too rule-bent to.

Burning stepped out of the fighting hole, adjusting his battle suit and then taking up his boomer. The heft of the big battle rifle gave him pause for just a moment. Why not just toad-crank Zone now, square away accounts while he had the chance?

Two years earlier the idea would have appalled him, but the LAW conquest had changed that. In any case, it wouldn't be the first time Burning had boomed another Ext as a matter of wartime necessity. But Zone was staring straight at him, maybe expecting it. Then, too, Zone was the best fighter on Anvil Tor, perhaps in all the Broken Country, and he was going to be needed soon.

Burning slung arms. "Where are the Discards?"

Zone nodded toward the cliff face. "Over that way, maybe."

"Fiona's probably with them, but I'll check it out. If anybody needs me—"

"In fact, Allgrave, Daddy D's been yelling for you in the bunker."

"Tell General Delecado that whatever it is will have to wait."

"Don't think so," Zone said, shaking his head. "Somebody's out across the perimeter, asking to summit with you."

"Who?"

"That's the mystery of it"

The muscles in Burning's jaw bunched. "We all dug in?"

Zone spit on the ground. "Getting there. Fireball mortars, triple-A batteries, rest of the crew-served weapons. Counter-sonics and ECM are in place. Ran outta landline fiber, but we've got runners set up. Daddy D's got everybody consolidated, chain of command patched—half-assed, anyways."

They headed for the operations bunker, passing small groups of Ext soldiers hastily preparing fighting positions, all of them descended from the exteroceptive implant-controlled slaves who had claimed a bloody freedom when the Cyber-plagues had reached Concordance and had gone on to forge themselves into the planet's most stoic and fearless guerrillas. Filthy, damaged battlesuits showed patches and unit flashes from all across the Broken Country: the Gray Flats Gang, Murderers' Col Heavy Arty,

Riyoko's Ronin...

As they passed, a catapult paratrooper from the Rumpstake Glacier Airmphib muttered, "We get 'em at close quarters tonight, and we'll baste 'em all. Santeria Corners all over again, you just watch."

It had been the only clear Ext victory in the latter part of the war—Murphy's Law at critical mass. All Concordance and Periapt warwares had malfunctioned or canceled each other out: SAT/counterSAT systemry, airpower, anti-aircraft weapons. Command and coordination nets had failed, rain had set in, and the brutal terrain around Santeria Corners had become the scene of a far-flung two-day-long gutter fight.

Even so, Burning faked agreement whenever Exts cited the battle to bolster themselves and modesty when they commended him for it. He and the command staff had been powerless to direct strategy. It had been Ext company commanders, platoon and squad leaders, and linedog privates who had given LAW a savage mauling.

The memory did nothing for Burning's morale, however. He hadn't been truly glad or grief-stricken for some time, and he often wondered if he had dissociated completely from what was going on around him. He no longer felt anything like what he presumed he was supposed to feel when friends, comrades, and kin met their end. He suspected that he was an unwell man.

"Heard some sniper rounds a couple of minutes back," Zone said casually. "Zazzing through the bushes whistling, 'Where's Burning? Where's Burning?'"

"Why don't you take the knife now, Zone, and save us the trouble of giving it to you later?" Burning kept walking. There was no reply.

A square pit ten paces on a side, the Exts' operation bunker wasn't much to look at. It was roofed with hastily felled logs and polymer sheeting and covered with mounded soil and rock. The only openings were blackout-draped observation and firing slits and two small entryways.

As Burning approached, the rain began as a light drizzle, scarcely more than a mist. The mountaintop chilled, but few of the subcommanders, runners, and others marking time near the bunker bothered to close their battlesuit collars. Without interrupting what they were saying or doing, they just shifted their boomers to sling them muzzle-down on the weak-side shoulder. Keeping moisture out of the barrels was more a reflex than a reasoned response.

General "Daddy D" Delecado was outside looking at the sky, his Adam's apple bobbing. He was a tall, stoop-shouldered man with a head of thinned-out white hair. The war had taken a lot out of him, and his battlesuit fit him like a clown costume.

"This rain'll give their pilots something extra to reckon with," he remarked to Burning.

Burning nodded out of respect. If the Periapts chose to make air strikes with all-weather fighter-bombers, a little rain wasn't

going to thwart them. The enemy was just as capable of marching an artillery unit up the slopes and pasting the whole mountain for hours or days or, for that matter, employing orbital kinetic or directed-energy weapons. That was what Burning would have done in their place.

Only Bigtimers were unlikely—for the moment, at least. Ensnared by Concordance-wide intrigues, civic affairs considerations, and political priorities, LAW had to make a pretense of using measured force against the Exts. Mass surrender would have made AlphaLAW Commissioner Renquald look good, but no Ext would be taken alive, knowing what LAW had planned for them.

Daddy D motioned Burning through a blackout drape. Zone followed without waiting to be invited. Inside, the general fingered an A/V touchpad, bringing up a holo, while Burning leaned in close to the display field.

"Recon team's got a contact at a hundred meters south of LP niner."

That was well in front of the projected forward edge of the battle area, practically at the foot of Anvil Tor. "They're trying to sneak recondos past us?" Burning asked in surprise.

"Not hardly," Delecado said.

Burning was confused, and the hum in his ears was bothering him again. He wanted to locate Fiona before the whistle blew and the shit flew, and now there was this. Over the holo's shielded hardwire line came a blurry image from the recon detail. It was foggy down below, but the infrared and lightamp showed a lone figure sitting on a boulder as big as a tank.

"The contact came in waving a white bicycle flag and singing," Delecado explained. "I think you'll recognize the voice."

Audio pickup was only fair, but Burning instantly recognized the words to "I'm a Decent Extian Girl, So Get Your Finger out of That."

"Lod!" he said in greater surprise.

"The little cumwad," Zone muttered.

Burning had liked his puckish cousin well enough when they were growing up, but Lod had long since quit resisting LAW unto the death. Burning opened a mike to the recon team leader and said, "Fetch him up."

At the same time Daddy D instructed all other elements in the area to stand fast at full alert. What could it be, after all, but some kind of 'scatbrained diversion?

But when LP niner's team spread out to move in on him,

Lod scrambled down behind cover. "You cannot touch me, who do not love me!" Over the A/V his tenor voice sounded even thinner than usual. "Be good enough to tell the Allgrave of the Exts that his kinsman's come to talk sense with him. Burning! Are you listening?"

"He's working some angle of his own," Delecado said. Given that they were talking about Lod, that was like predicting the direction of sunrise.

"Burning, you don't have to die up there!" Lod added. "Cousin—can you see this?"

Burning squinted at the holo display as Lod came out from behind the boulder, holding something high.

"Romola asked me to show it to you. She apparently doesn't want you dead, either."

"Close-up, zoom in!" Burning grated over the hardwire. The recce leader's boomer-mounted optical pickup showed Lod's extended hand in the crosshairs. The thing he was holding was the engagement bracelet Burning had given Romola forever ago. "Bring him here, *now!*"

But Lod skipped back from the scouts. "My tailor won't tolerate my being manhandled! I talk to Burning down here or not at all."

"Trap." Daddy D made the call flatly.

"Hold position; don't let him leave," Burning said to the recce detail. He enhanced the image of the bracelet as well as he could; if it wasn't his fiancée's, it was a perfect copy. "Make sure he's alone. I'll be right down."

CHAPTER **TWO**

The wealthiest and most populous of Concordance's score of nation-states, the First Lands had once lorded it over the entire planet, especially over the Broken Country, whose citizens had been pacified by means of drugs and turned into ex-teroeceptive chipslaves. But the reign of the First Lands had endured for less than a century when the Cyberplagues found their way across the stars to Concordance and swept away the old order.

Of unknown origin, the Cyberplagues had liberated the chipslaves from their behavior-modification implants, killing countless thousands in the process, but the survivors had dug in wherever their labor units had been deployed—typically in the planet's harshest and most unforgiving terrains. Military esprit became the social value essential to survival, and in defending their newfound autonomy, the Exts had evolved quickly into ferocious, disciplined fighters. They probed the Flowstate and used it to arm themselves with the Skills—an array of mind-body disciplines that were unique to them.

Bitterly vengeful, they had gradually reclaimed the Broken Country, and for some fifty years after the Cyberplagues an uneasy coexistence had prevailed between the Broken Country and the First Lands nations.

Until the coming of the LAW starship *Sword of Damocles*.

The military wing of the Hierarchate of Periapt—a world distant from Concordance but at the very center of things nonetheless—LAW was short for the Legal Annexation of

Worlds, dispatched across the reaches of space to restore unity in the wake of the Cyberplagues and enlist new populations in the centuries-old conflict against the Roke, an alien species whose unprovoked assaults on human-colonized worlds had left millions dead.

Subjugation was LAW's first order of business, but there were many in the First Lands who had made their peace with the annexation mission for personal advantage. The lure of Periapt's wealth and the threat of its power had co-opted one nation-state after the next, until at last the Broken Country stood alone against the interstellar conquerors.

But even the Skills were not enough to offset the might of allied Concordance foes backed by LAW military technologies. Eventually even some Ext clan bastions and polities began to sue for peace with AlphaLAW Commissioner Ren-quald. Those who refused to lay down their arms were threatened with the unthinkable: renewed chipslavery. The threat violated certain unspoken principles of the Post-Cyberplague epoch, but LAW felt free to teach that kind of object lesson.

Even so, the threat had proved a gross miscalculation. Many who had already made a separate peace and been disarmed made preparations for suicide, and the Exts in the Broken Country vowed to hurl the LAWs from Concordance or die trying. What had been localized resistance to the annexation escalated into the most bitterly fought conventional war in LAW history.

In a way, each became the enemy the other side had not counted on.

The Exts had their' porcupine strategy, curling up and releasing deadly quills until the foe got tired and went away; LAW, by contrast, accustomed to bringing small powers to heel with nuclear strikes, found itself faced with an allied population that had had an ingrained loathing of nukeweps since the Cyberplague known as HorrOrgasm had detonated four hydrogen Bigtimers on Concordance seventy-five years earlier.

Rather than risk wide-scale rebellion, LAW had gone in on the ground, using First Lands forces as proxies. And since almost every weapon system on the one side had had its countersystem on the other, finally it had come down to artillery and armor and infantry units slowly and deliberately grinding each other to bits in mud, swamp, and snow. And in the end the last of the Exts had taken to Anvil Tor to make it their funeral bier.

* * * *

Daddy D knew better than to try to dissuade Burning from having a face-to-face with Lod. But when he began to call for an escort to see his Allgrave down the mountain, Burning countermanded him.

"Fiona is the only one I want in on this." The career Lothario Lod had always had an oddly chaste affection for Burning's sister, and she had maintained a filial fondness for him. Burning felt that Fiona's presence could help pry the truth from the family

scapegrace.

He ducked through the blackout curtain, flipping back the cheek pieces of his helmet and half opening the articulated neck guard, which reshaped to cup the sides of his head. By gathering and concentrating the sounds around him, the helmet could provide rough source bearings.

He made his way through a copse of trees that had been stripped bare and partially flattened by a heavy explosives hit before enemy fire had ceased around noon. The air was thick with the smell of sweet heartwood sap. In a clearing beyond he skirted Daddy D's outdated hardcorps Hellhog assault chopper, which had managed to convey the general, Burning, and several officers to Anvil Tor. A few other grounded aircraft and a number of surface vehicles dotted the mountaintop, but none offered escape. All had been stripped of weapons for the coming Gotterdammerung.

He passed the rain tarp that served as a MASH, telling himself not to look in but doing so anyway. Warm blood met chilly air and steam curled from open wounds, as if the rent bodies were steam tables in a field kitchen.

With whole and artificial blood stocks gone, the meds were draining the dead to keep the more hopeful cases on the effectives list. The Exts had had to resort to that before, but on Anvil Tor casualties with E's jetpenned on their foreheads by triage sorters—for "expectants"—were being harvested as well. Much of the blood would transfer diseases, parasites, and other contaminants, but nobody on the Tor was expecting to live long enough for any of that to matter.

He came close to stumbling over an improvised litter where a woman wearing the patch of the Pissant Estates Bon Vivants lay propped up. The sapper's battlesuit was rashed with bloody punctures, and her nose had been shot away. Burning realized that he was looking through the orifice in her nasal bone into the back of her throat. Blood frothed from the exposed gap as she swallowed and spit to keep her air passage clear. She came around long enough to recognize him, flash a woozy thumbs-up, and mouth something that did not sound human, though it eventually dawned on him that she was saying "Stay staunch."

He didn't know how to answer but was spared having to when two aides who were themselves wounded came to move her inside for treatment or, more likely, a jetpenned E.

The gray drizzle turned colder as he double-timed on, certain that his sister had returned to the Discards, who had adopted her as their surrogate matriarch. No other adult was truly safe among them, but Fiona was as secure there as she could be anywhere in the world. Daddy D was holding the kids in reserve for whenever their feral murderousness would be needed.

Just now two dozen of them, ranging in age from twelve down to eight, were lying doggo in a boscage west of the MASH. They were passing canteens around, along with a sipflask of gin. Some wore wraparounds to hide their eyes; others, war paint.

There were necklaces of human ears, ratty dress wigs, and wildchild fetishes of bones, feathers, empty styrettes, and hand grenade pins. Many had fingers that had been gnawed down a knuckle or two, chewed off to kill the raving hunger that had been a near constant in the First Lands POW/concentration camps. The weapons they carried looked far too big for the Discards, but they were cradled lovingly and expertly. Even Daddy D refused to run the risk of forcing these true children of war to strac up.

They made Burning uneasy. Some commanders had handed captives over to the Discards for interrogation. The kids might have learned the art from the wrong side, but they had learned it well.

When Burning asked after Fiona, he got little more than blank stares. Eventually, however, a few put their helmets together and spoke in voices too low for Burning to hear, then pointed to the nearby Scrim, Anvil Tor's wind-blasted cliff face.

He shagged on and finally spied her framed against the darkening gray sky, standing on a rocky prominence that resembled the pulpit of a ship. She had her back to him, and her helmet and boomer were on the ground. Her elbows were clasped in the opposite palms, and she was gazing down at the plain. Even in a battlesuit her carriage was graceful, more like that of a Periapt fashion model or an improbably tall ballerina than like that of an Ext. The winds moaning up from below fluttered her fine blue-black locks and warrior's plaits.

Fiona heard him and turned just enough to show a quarter profile of her celebrated face and a curve of long, slender neck. "I wonder if the LAWs know the significance of this place."

From behind her Burning saw flashes through the rain and fog—turncoat railgun artillery being fired from sheer exuberance. "I imagine the Cottswolds or someone would've mentioned it," he answered. "But the LAWs care about Periapt empire, not Ext history."

From the Scrim, nearly two hundred years earlier, another group of Broken Country holdouts had leapt to avoid capture by allied First Lands armies.

"I'm glad we won't live to see what becomes of the Broken Country now," Fiona added. "What becomes of Concordance." Her voice was throaty but expressionless.

"That's what we've got to talk about," Burning said. "Now, come away from there before LAW starts lobbing harassment rounds at you." As he reached for the sleeve of her battle-suit, Fiona turned to him, wearing a tranquil smile. The gloaming offered just enough light for him to see her sloe-brown eyes, extreme cheekbones, purple-red lips, and slight overbite. But when he got a better look, he almost lost his grip on her. Her face was a swirly mask of scars that stood out like raised arabesques, scabbed and already swelling with fibrous tissue.

"What've you done to yourself?" he blurted out.

"I couldn't give them the satisfaction of killing me. So I've

beaten them to it, Emmett."

Her using his birth name put him off his guard. His first thought was that she had gone tripwire and retreated into some fantasy of the past.

Then all he felt was weary bitterness. "Fiona—"

"*Ghost!*" she said, cutting him off. "You see the scars. I'm Ghost now." Her expression was serene behind the veil of incisions. She had come away from the long drop, but only a step.

She had voided her living name and marked herself dead for all to see, Burning realized. Her scars said that she considered herself to be beyond grief, pain, fear, or any enemy's ability to harm her. As far as he knew, no one had performed the ritual in three centuries. Studying her face, he recognized Ext ceremonial patterns from the history books: the Talons, Hermes's Footprints, the Strength That Lives in the Flames, Kali Weeps... Judging by the scabbing she had to have dosed her wounds with growth factor like the old-timers used, though where she'd gotten it on Anvil Tor, he couldn't imagine.

"*Ghost*, then." He pulled her gently from the edge.

She had always nursed her private sorrows—both of them had—despite being raised in bastion privilege. Early on Fiona had blossomed into a blithe, witty beauty with a glow to her face and a willowy figure, as different in personality as in looks from her shambling, bookish older brother. Drawing stares wherever she went, she had become the toast of the Broken Country and—for a brief, bright season—a rising star in the Concordance social firmament. About the same time the *Sword of Damocles* had arrived in-system.

With LAW had come renewed warfare, and for Fiona the detention camps, where every dignity and decency had been methodically stripped away. She had helped the younger ones—the Discards—stay alive, and they had helped her—but only at the cost of her humanity.

Liberated, she had refused noncombatant status, and

Burning—Allgrave by then, part warlord, part political leader—had been, as ever, helpless to dissuade her. She and the Discards had become a detachment unto themselves. And now, mere she stood, watching him through her death scars as he guided her to safety.

"Lod's at the foot of the Tor," he said in a soft voice. "He claims to have a message from Romola. Hear him out with me."

Her lips curved sweetly, her angular beauty showing eerily through the self-mutilation. "Why not?" She shrugged out of his hold and went to where her helmet and boomer lay, pausing to search a sleeve pocket. "But this first"

She brought out a tight, thin braid of tar-black hair interwoven with twists of glittery filament—one of her Hussar Plaits from the palisade of them that hung under the outer layers of her curtain of hair.

She extended the lock to Burning. "Fiona left this behind for you to let you know she loved you."

He unsealed and removed his gauntlet to take it. "Then accept a lock of mine to give to Fiona if you see her before I do. And tell her I love her all the more."

He hit the releases on his collar, lifted his helmet free, and tucked it under his left arm. Then he unclipped his hair and shook loose the copper-red ringlets and Hussar Plaits. By that time she'd pulled her knife—a soot-black dagger that had been their mother's, one of their few mementos of her.

Burning watched it come to his throat. "Can I still call you sister?"

The jet blade veered slightly. Fiona barely had to flick her wrist, high up where his plaits were only hair, for a braid to fall into her gloved palm. She opened the torso seam of her battle-suit enough to slip it into a pocket next to her heart.

"Of course."

After they had pulled their bone-domes back on, slung the heavy battle rifles, and moved out, it occurred to Burning that the Discards had stood witness to her death name ceremony.

They were almost back to the C&C bunker when Zone stepped from behind a shot-up weapons carrier and joined them. His gimlet eyes recced Ghost from helmet to toecaps and back. Burning bristled fleetingly but said nothing. Fiona's death scars didn't seem to surprise Zone.

"They were all you needed to make you perfect," he said.

CHAPTER **THREE**

The way Zone took up rote-step alongside Burning and Ghost left no doubt that he was accompanying them to the foot of Anvil Tor.

Burning didn't object; the guy was a limbic case, but he could smell a midnight ambush coming at reveille. He tried to keep from fruitless agonizing over Romola's safety. Bastion Gilead—one of the clans that had gone over to LAW—had given its word that it would protect Romola when the Exts had elected to continue the fight. Please don't let them have bio-chipped her, he said to himself, almost in prayer. If that was the threat, he would kill her before he himself could be killed.

With darkness coming on and the rain thickening, the three of them set the battlesuits' phase-change skin to ambient temperature to avoid being picked up by enemy thermal sensors. They kept their visors transparent and, like everyone else on the Tor, used passive detectors and targeting equipment only; nobody wanted to be the juiciest return on the enemy's scopes. The antilaser aerosols had thinned for the time being, and so they left their breathers open. That was fine with Burning, since his had ulcerated the bridge of his nose.

Employing aloud passwords, field signals, and comms authenticators, they made their way past defensive pozzes and observation posts that camouflage and gathering gloom had melded into the landscape. Zone, on point, wove a path through temporarily deactivated minefields and other kill boxes. If a drone or SAT picked up their movement and the advancing foe used their route as an avenue of attack, there would be some surprises for the turncoats.

Fiona—Ghost—with her runner's physique had always been a fair hand at fieldcraft, but now she moved with a new assuredness. Any Ext would spot it right away as a heightened affinity for Flowstate. Burning guessed that it stemmed from the death scar ceremony; ritual was a potent avenue of access to the Skills. He accepted her way of ending the anguish, perhaps even envied her a bit.

They held up in a culvert off the main road to receive a sitrep from the bunker. Opposition forces were moving into new positions around Anvil Tor, but there was no sign of an assault in the making. Enemy surveillance drones had been recalled, which made no sense; remotes were cheap and expendable.

"Perhaps they've lost their taste for attrition," Ghost speculated. "They'll use standoff weapons or a Bigtimer."

Burning shook his head. "LAW understands that the rest of Concordance is watching."

Zone nodded in agreement. He would have relished discomfiting LAW and its client states that way, even if he had to flashfry for it. "Renquald cuts just one tactical nuke fart, all his proxies'll have to be pulled home for riot control."

Ghost sighed. "How I wish *we* had even a single little half-K party popper."

But the Exts didn't. A year before, the Cottswolds had launched a futile Bigtimer attack on the *Sword of Damocles*. The Periaps not only had knocked out the MIRVed missiles but also had utilized conventional weapons to take out every threat stockpiled on Concordance—if LAW's superconducting superstorage warheads could be said to count as "conventional weapons."

When they took up their way again, Burning heard the tweedles and wonks of two surviving Wheel Weevils at their training farm a klick or so to the southeast. The owner, jockeys, grooms, and the rest were long gone. A few Exts who were accustomed to handling the giant myriapods had talked of turning them loose, but Daddy D had forbidden it. Better for the time being to leave the native beasts to blunder around the stables—the only home they knew—than to have them tripping booby traps and ambushes.

For Burning, the plaintive sounds of the animals brought to mind the carefree derby days of his youth, before his life had started going wrong. It was a pity that he was probably going to have to order the Weevils shot

Turncoat searchlights had come on, sweeping the mountain

from all sides. What with the jamming and other kinds of electronic warfare, hardwire comms lines to the listening and observation posts had been a must. The one that led to Lod served an additional function as a guideline. Burning, Ghost, and Zone followed it to where the two-person recon team that initially had spotted Lod was holding its position.

The reconners were a man and a woman from the Lightning Flats Wetworkers, a SEAL outfit. Reservists, both looked to be in their late twenties, he a sergeant first class and she a lieutenant. They had holed up behind some rocks from which they could keep an eye on Lod and pass the time. And to do that they had made creative use of an enemy KIA.

It was a LAW shocktrooper lieutenant colonel in exoarmor, pintle-mounted steadygun still attached to his torso module. An observer, Burning assumed, who had gotten too close to the action—far too close, because the top of his head had been sheared off by a boomer round.

The Wetworkers had propped the corpse against a boulder where rainwater had filled and overflowed the open skull and now made tiny splashes on the water and floating brain tissue there. Droplets ran down the cracked face bowl past eyeballs that still bulged in the aftermath of the fearsome hydropressure shock wave the impact had sent through the gray matter.

Between glances at Lod, the reservists were taking turns winging playing cards at the open-top helmet and the colonel's flooded brainpan. Burning noticed that they were using a dog-eared deck bearing the LAW logo—it had to be the shocktrooper's.

The Wetworkers put the cards down, and the lieutenant claimed the sergeant's stakes, a pair of dry—albeit filthy—socks. They crawled and duckwalked over to the new arrivals and pointed to the big rock Burning had seen in the holofield at the C&C bunker. Lod had planned ahead. Lod always did.

He was sitting on a collapsible camp stool, his white bicycle flag stuck into the mud to one side. He held over him a double-size luminous orange umbrella, probably intended to keep the Exts from mistaking him for an infiltrator and, Burning imagined, as a precaution against getting shot by turncoat troops. The bumbershoot explained the Wetworkers' sour expressions: no true reconner would feel easy around a light source like that.

But it was keeping Lod so comfortably dry that he could enjoy a perfumed Periapt cigarette in a long gold-plated holder. His mirror-polished knee boots somehow shed the rain and mud completely, and he was wearing a saucer cap with a heavily braided brim and a splendidly tailored dress uniform trench coat lined with phase-change silk, with a white ascot showing from it.

Burning didn't recognize the trappings, but they were quite a sight on the only man he knew who had been discharged from the student cadet corps on grounds of sexual profligacy. Nevertheless, when war had come, Lod had somehow wangled an Allgrave's direct commission and had served honorably until

the Gileads and other bastions had begun suing for a separate peace. Using the technicality of holding a Gilead commission, Lod had soon loopholed himself out of the Ext coalition forces.

The Wetworkers and other recon teams confirmed that Lod had come alone. Burning told the others to hold fast while he dealt with Lod. The face-to-face had to do with Romola, after all.

"SOP says we check him out first," Zone said, and before Burning could stop him, he stepped out from behind cover, leveling his boomer at Lod. "On your feet and make an angel, you little suck-ass! Delta-V!"

Lod hastened as ordered, eyes wide not because of the big battle rifle but because it was Zone drawing dead aim on him. Dropping the umbrella and cigarette holder, he placed both hands behind his head.

"That'll do," Burning said as he forced the boomer's barrel aside, heading for Lod. "Everybody stand fast."

He moved into the clear with the rifle slung, raising his helmet visor. Recovering his dignity, Lod retrieved the umbrella, tossed the soggy cigarette aside, and pocketed the muddy holder.

"How now, Cousin?"

His looks had not changed in the year or so since Burning had last seen him. Diminutive and blond, he was as neotenic as a ten-year-old, with a head seemingly too big for his body. As for the cousin part, he was distant to Burning and Ghost at best, having more Gilead than Orman in him. Like them, he had spent his youth at Bastion Orman as a peripheral—a dweller by sufferance amid the affluence and the conspicuous pecking order.

Burning indicated the cap and trench coat, the decorations and aiguillettes. "What's the unit?"

"Concordance Interplanetary Defense Forces, actually. Diplomatic liaison staff attached to Commissioner Renquald's AlphaLAW headquarters." Lod hurried to change the subject. "Not a very pleasant bivouac spot, eh?"

Burning exhaled through his teeth. "Love it. Wouldn't swap it for another ten centimeters of dick. Is that all you wanted to know?"

Lod's expression changed. "Not quite. I'm here to help, and you look to me as if you could use it"

The hum had arisen in Burning's ears again, and while he couldn't quite tell what expression his face held, he supposed Lod was referring to his NoMan stare. "I've seen people die out here who wanted to live. And I've seen people live who wanted to die."

"Which do you want?"

Without warning, Burning's bitterness rose up, and he was too tired to control it. Lod didn't even have time to move as Burning brought the boomer up from where it rested at sling-arms, left hand grabbing the barrel shroud, pulling it forward, and swinging the piece up, right hand to the pistol grip, thumb flicking the selector to semiautomatic. The sling was made taut against his upper left arm—a programmed infantry drill executed with the

speed and precision of the Skills.

The suppressed muzzle pointed between Lod's huge eyes.

"I might want to bring some scorch on a cousin who's wearing the other side's uniform. Unless he tells me what he's doing with Romola's bracelet."

Lod held very still.

"Where is she, Lod?"

"Not six klicks from here, Allgrave. At LAW field headquarters with Renquald, along with Tonne-Head and some of the other Gileads, a few Cottswolds—"

"Why didn't she come herself? Have they hurt her?"

"Upon my mother's soul, no! But there's a new proposal on the table, something no one would tell me about She's unharmed, but they wouldn't let her come here." Lod held up the bracelet again. "It's a sign of good faith—safe passage there and back again if you choose."

Burning drew closer and worked a release on the boomer's stock. A bayonet that was as nonreflective as lampblack sprang out of the front end to one side of Lod's neck. "And what's in it for you, turncoat?"

"Personal advantage, what else? MeoTheos, it's the end of an age, only you're too blind to see it LAW's going to take dominion over Concordance, and half the world welcomes it! For me it's just a change of masters, so yes, I look to my own survival. Who else ever has? Now, I've delivered my message, and I need to dry off and seek out a drop of absinthe. My jump-jeep's five hundred meters that way." He pointed east "You can return with me if you like."

Burning felt muddled. When he'd been e-tooling his grave, he'd had no misgivings left. If it was a trap, surely Renquald and the rest knew that the capture of the Allgrave would not force an Ext surrender. And if it was an assassination plot it was resoundingly unnecessary.

Through the trees the hoot of a Wheel Weevil drifted down Anvil Tor. What would there be for Renquald to talk about at that late hour with LAW already holding all the cards? Or did it?

Lod turned away from the bayonet with a swirl of the magnificent trench coat. "If you want to stab me, here's my back."

Out of curiosity Burning stamped after him by the numbers in the cadence of the drill. Lod stopped but didn't turn or plead; he just stood with his epauleted shoulders up around his ears, nearly lifting his saucer cap off.

There were other footsteps in the mud; Ghost was advancing from cover. "Allgrave, you call that an interrogation?" she said with a dark chuckle.

Hearing her voice, Lod swung around with a look of delight. "No, it's just hard to overcome a polite upbringing—"

He cut himself off and stared at her. The sight of her death scars broke his composure in a way that threats on his life had not. He knocked Burning's bayonet aside and went to lay one hand on her cheek, something she would have suffered no one else

alive to do but her brother.

"You foolish... this is desecration!" He was almost in tears. "Fiona, you had no *right*—"

"Fiona's passed away, Lod. I'm Ghost."

He glared at Burning. "Go on showing how *staunch* you are, Allgrave, but even the noblest defeats don't keep history at bay."

Lod set off for his jumpjeep as the Weevil hooted again, and the sound seemed to flick a switch in Burning's head, causing the hum to die away. He caught his cousin by the shoulder and held him while he got Daddy D on the command push.

"Get some experienced hands over to the training farm to rig one of the Weevils with the biggest saddle they can find." He smiled at Lod. "I'm late for a meeting, and I'll be carrying a passenger."

"Oh, dear me," Lod said.

CHAPTER **FOUR**

"If someone down there goes trigger-happy," Lod insisted, "what chance will we have? We'll last about as long as a PFC's re-up bonus in a Costa Hedonia bordello."

"At least I'll know they don't want me alive as much as you claim they do," Burning pointed out. He'd let his cousin chirp Commissioner Renquald's HQ to say only that he and Burning would be arriving by the Allgrave's preferred means of transportation.

Burning put his hand out. "Give me the bracelet." Lod handed it over, and Burning slipped it into his pocket alongside the Hussar Plait of Ghost's hair.

Lod looked at the Weevil that was to bear them. "I've always detested these hideous-smelling hoop snakes."

Standing outside the training farm paddock on the northeast side of Anvil Tor with Lod and Ghost—Zone having returned to the operations bunker—Burning found that the smells, sights, and sounds of the place were setting off charge after charge of remembrance in him.

Some of his earliest memories were of the racecourses and the great beasts that rolled across them, memories that included his parents and sister, among others. The odors of the Weevil wallows and the sight of handlers had Burning half expecting his father, Dunhill Orman, to emerge from the jockeys' dressing room in racing colors. Turned out in silk blouse, jodhpurs, riding boots, and helmet, he would cut a dashing figure surrounded by admiring men and women. He would smell of leather, expensive cologne, blowbacco smoke, amp brandy, and traces of one woman or another's perfume. He'd had the size and red hair Burning had inherited but also enough physical courage and brash joie de

vivre for three Exts. His field name, Hipshot, had been as well known in casinos and cabarets as on the military freqs.

He had been a minor Orman peer, but his renown as soldier, sportsman, and rake had drawn him the acquaintance of wealthier and higher-born Exts, women such as Siri Mahfouz Orman, who'd won distinctions of her own in military service. Siri was every bit as breathtaking as her daughter Fiona was to become, though that had not kept Dunhill from a string of infidelities.

Nor had common sense freed him from the definitive Ext vice, gambling. He'd won and lost fortunes on anything and everything. In the end his luck had gone bad, putting him so heavily in debt that he had lost face and several friends. Yet even those losses hadn't kept him from using his celebrity to front an investment fraud. Dread of dishonor—his greatest fear—had eventually driven him to blow out his own brains with a .50 'baller.

The Weevil Burning had selected for the trip to AlphaLAW HQ was finally responding to the handlers' stim impulses and shockprods. To him, the creatures had always looked like rows of immense, many-legged stone vertebrae come to life. This one moved with abrupt speed, wrapping herself belly-out around the ring cockpit like a myriapod tire mounting itself on a rim. She clamped hold of her own head with specialized tail grippers, firmly but carefully encircling what her gulled senses informed her was her own egg.

Her name was Artemis.

"Burning, there'll be hell to pay," Lod said.

Burning shrugged and handed his boomer to Ghost. "I've got unlimited credit on hell to pay, Cousin."

He hadn't been in the saddle in years. Even so, it was liberating to step onto a foot peg and swing aboard. He hoped that by surprising the enemy he could get Renquald to reveal his motives.

Artemis's banks of closely set, bowed, and immensely strong legs ruffled a bit as Burning's battlesuited leg brushed one of them. Because the Weevil's responses were inhibited by the stim circuitry, she didn't reach out to tear him apart.

The cockpit scarcely resembled one of the giant eggs. It was a narrow, minimal seat with armrest- and footrest-mounted controls affixed to a circular frame that rode ball-bearing tracks within an outer frame. The frame was greasy with brood secretion that had been loosed when the annuloid had clenched its dorsal suckers. The cockpit's gyros, inner race bearings, and track cogwheels kept it relatively upright, while the outer rails turned with the Weevil's minor shifting steps.

Burning adjusted the seat harness for maximum slack. "Sit right up here in front of me, Lod, where your new friends can get a good look at you."

Glumly, Lod accepted the inevitable. It was clear to him, in any case, that the Weevil handlers would have relished an opportunity to rough him up and bundle him aboard.