

CHAPTER 3

THINK AND BE STILL

I did it.

I will not change my testimony. I did it without hesitation. You ask if I feel any remorse. I do. But not for anything that concerns this Tribunal.

-- Col Adrian, Commander, Altair Tribunal Court Martial.

Back in his suite and aching with tension, Col rose from his couch, to begin, as would have any other caged animal, an almost unconscious, repetitive pacing of the rooms.

Secured by the standard impenetrable input codes, the quarters were small in comparison to the more resplendent guest facilities offered at the Base. But to this man, so recently freed from confinement, they seemed vast, empty, threatening. His alarm at this unaccustomed void was only slightly dwarfed by sheer amazement – against all reason and expectation, he was once more at Altair Base, at the one place in the System where, by all rights, he should be least welcome.

Since that day when the Government's battle cruiser had recovered him from Sephis, he had been resolved in surrender, prepared for the worst. The morph was gone. Her creator and mentor equally lost in the fiery and utter destruction that he and his crew had unleashed on Carzon's hidden fortress laboratory on the Storm World – Sephis, the jungle planet whose fierce ion storms were renowned throughout the System. At his hands, the project that had created Gerda Tau had been destroyed. Without the morph and the ascendant vision of Dyle Carzon, a dynamic machine which had taken decades to prime and to bring to deadly efficacy, was now lost. Its decimated and blackened remnants lay strewn across a newborn meadow under the very eaves of the mysterious North Forest of Sephis.

The loss to the State was in the millions.

Primarily due to Col's adamant testimony that his crew's complicity was innocent, both Teng and his son Kaylin had been summarily freed. The State had no need of two Sephid warriors, however vehement in his defense. The fact that the Storm World had grown increasingly significant in potential as a future Homeworld base, and that diplomatic issues were at stake, had of course, nothing to do with the Tribunal's criminal focus on the Commander of the Phantom, instead of on her navigator and pilot.

Firing squad, Col had decided, as he had waited forlornly in his holding cell on the Altairan prison moon.

Or worse, if they could contrive it.

And it was this prospect of 'worse' -- of possible isolation and captivity, unending, until his last breath was drawn -- which he feared, much more than torment

or even death.

Here is your vengeance, Gerda Tau. For all the lies, all the good intentions gone horribly wrong. For what I did to you, in order to take you from Altair, to try and free you from the bondage of Dyle Carzon. To open that cage door, at last, and for always.

What did I accomplish?

I opened that door, freed you from that cell. Only to take your place in it, myself.

Only to lose you forever.

If only Carzon hadn't... Well. That remorseful thread led nowhere. It was hopeless, for the Government, and therefore, for him, as well.

For Carzon — with that painstaking foresight and terrifying brilliance that marked all his works — had encrypted, unfathomably, and in a novel, irresolvable code all that he had learned and devised to create the morphs in the project. Nothing that he did or made or planned — none of it — could be recovered. None of it used, ever again. It was hardly Col's fault that the Director had mistrusted his collaborators. Causal among all the others, the Military held supremacy. But during that mercifully short and predictable trial, it was this one inescapable fact, that of the absolute loss to the Government, that had been reiterated in the case against him and to the Tribunal of judicature. It was a loss that would inevitably cost them all in their ceaseless fight to hold a critical, suddenly narrowing, margin of supremacy against the hostile planets of the Out Worlds.

All this Col Adrian had done.

But he hadn't done it alone.

Col had wisely refrained from reminding the Tribunal of this. In a drumhead of this proportion, they would merely have accused him of dropping one too many peanuts as he had juggled the elephants. Yet, it was a regret, added to all the others, that had afflicted him, consuming the prisoner as he had waited, alone and unaided, for confirmation of how his life was likely to end. Inured to the last, he met the verdict with a veneer of calm that was as thin as it was admirable — imprisonment, with no definable end. The prison moon of Altair awaited. The addition of a man of Sephid blood, silent and seemingly as dour as himself, to the cell across from his served only to remind him painfully that he was to have no news of his crew. He could only hope that they had returned to the jungles of Sephis.

To freedom.

The weeks that passed saw the captive clinging ever more weakly to a diminishing hope and finally, to his acceptance of what promised to be a monotony of despair.

Then, one day, oppressive with dark cloud and darker thoughts, came a remarkable occurrence, as unaccountable as it was strange. Taking one of his all too infrequent, brief but savagely demanding exercise regimens, he had been abruptly called inside. Uncharacteristically, in this man who had faced death so many times

before, real fear struck him and he was momentarily paralysed with dread. Had they at last decided to end this sham existence for him? With no time left for reflection or preparation?

Or absolution.

Wet with exertion and nearly crippled by anxiety, Col found himself in the Warden's office, suddenly face to face with one to whom he owed as much in gratitude as in requital.

It was Doctor Stephen Weller.

And with fairly equal levels of dread, shock and hope, the renegade Captain left the moon for the first of many interviews with the famed behavioural modifier. And to his greater surprise those examinations, increasingly demanding, and ever more invasive, were now conducted without the use of the many devastating pharmaceutical treatments to which, unbeknownst to him, he had already been initially but cautiously exposed.

Time after time, it was the same.

Time after time, the pressure grew. Weller's ploys varied, from cajoling to pacifying to frankly threatening. And with each session, the prisoner grew weaker, more confounded, more agonised by what he could remember. And what he very clearly could not. And with each re-telling, it came again; ever more injurious, a wave of mounting grief, fear and desolation which threatened to unseat the man's already fragile self-command.

Is it to break me down? To make me...do what.? I've told them all I know. How can I tell what I don't know? What do they want?

What does he want?

Now, alone in rooms as threatening as any cell, he glanced around the suite. Cowed and miserable, he resumed his restless pacing. And as he passed near the desk, a glint of white caught his eye and he wondered that he hadn't marked its presence there before.

Because before -- it hadn't been.

Lured by sheer novelty, he drew up a chair, then set to studying the small anomaly.

Square, carefully folded into a complex form. Beautiful, intricate. Seemingly of some light fabric or paper.

A box.

Would it open?

For a moment, his fingers hovered over it. A cautious touch brought a gasp from him.

Before his eyes the colour of the paper, if paper it was, was changing.

Creeping over edges which rustled softly as they lifted, violet and golden hues surged rainbow-like over the box. His face drew closer as a delicate fragrance, familiar

yet unplaceable, rose from the thing.

Then he jerked his face to the side in fear as, with a loud hiss, the packet snapped open, unfolding completely. It was too late; before he could escape, the rustling layers had released a glittering cloud of pungent golden particles directly into his astounded face.

For two full heartbeats, his breath caught in a throat that tightened alarmingly. Choking, unable to speak, barely able to breathe, he stumbled up and away from the parchment that now trembled, curling back upon itself like a thing alive.

To the stricken man, the room and all its contents wavered madly. Furniture, walls, fixtures, all shimmered in his sight, their colours now shifting, simultaneously darkening and brightening in his tearing gaze. His breath came in ragged gasps, and a few halting steps brought him close to the windows, and the softly glowing array of security grids enforcing their suddenly mocking barricade. The roar of his own blood was still deafening in his ears, but his vision was clearing now and, steadying himself by the window – he looked out.

And much as had another unwilling tenant in a room so very like to this – he looked out over the jungles of Altair – tempting, close, unreachable, a green riot of peril, and of safety.

Of freedom.

And suddenly, like a dash of frigid water in his face, the Phantom's Commander was filled with rage.

Raw, powerful, insistent, flooding him and building with each passing breath. It was with mounting fury and piercing frustration that he glared out, at the unending expanse of emerald jungle, back at the rooms, now suffocating in their paucity, and then back once more – at the glowing grid.

With pulse racing and his blood now thrumming hotly in his veins – his lips drew back into a livid snarl of inarticulate hate.

And exactly as had another captive under the spell of precisely the same view, he slammed his tightly clenched fist hard, directly against the energy grid.

Anger now consumed him – real, welcome, wholesome – almost unknown to this man whom imprisonment and isolation had rendered nearly emotionless, dead to all but anguish and despair.

And he clung to it, as he would have clung to any woman, hungry with passion, desperate with need after long want. He stood by the window and his hand, bruised and reddening, throbbed deliciously with pain. And, laughing now, he raised the bloody knuckles to his lips, tasting the warm sweetness.

It was with a sense of wondrous expectation that he turned back toward the table, to see that the paper box was still curling with magical life. But now it was withering away, writhing smaller and smaller, until with a flash – the pale remnants, gossamer and fleeting, vanished utterly, dissolving from view.

And he laughed again, the sound loud and strange, echoing in his ears as he perceived, seemingly floating in the air above the table, in letters of now living fire, a symbol, glowing and iridescent. Hanging impossibly in air, in a language so ancient, so mysterious, that not one among thousands throughout the System might have recognised it, it shone out, defying the growing shadows in the now diminished and confining rooms.

Only a symbol – it was the *tchau*, the word for ‘breath’ – and on Sephis, the Storm World – the universal symbol for freedom.

And Col Adrian stared at it as it flamed once more and utterly vanished, stared wildly about him, at the grid and at his still bleeding hand and his laughter rang out strong and triumphant, more vibrant than before.

And he saw in his mind’s eye the scenes of months before, as clearly as they had just occurred: the Altairan battlecruiser descending on the meadow of the Storm World, merciless and inexorable, to take him back. And the figure of Teng, as the warrior stood over him, with *abrahmi*, the herb of forgetfulness, kindled and smoking in his powerful hands, releasing its potent fumes. And his navigator’s voice, as Teng spoke over and over to him, low and commanding, urging him to breathe, to breathe deep – *and to forget. Forget.*

Now, he remembered all.

The breath came out of him in one long fevered exhalation. The fullness of memory, the impact of what he had lost and now recovered spread through him to his very core. And he was once again able to say her name – joyously, with passion, without pain, without remorse, without anguish. Because, now, once more, he knew.

Tau.

And the tiny room became nothing more than a cage, a cage that he was determined to evade.

And at the height of this new found sense of sovereignty, of determination and of courage, his door chime sounded.

And Judith Temwold strode into the room.