



Patrick Tilley

THE AMTRAK WARS: BLOOD RIVER



BLOOMSBURY READER

The Amtrak Wars Book 4: Blood River

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In loving memory of my mother

~~born Agnes Rose Lewer~~

July 22nd, 1904–December 1st, 1987

who gave me the priceless gift of education

but whose formidable personality

caused me to censor everything I wrote.

God bless you, Ma. Hang on to your halo.

This is where it starts to get interesting.

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THE AMTRAK FEDERATION & ITS ENEMIES - 2990 AD

Northern Limit of Mute Territory not yet established



Chapter One

If it had not been for the fact that his youngest son suddenly took it into his head to totter through the partially-open door while his mother's back was turned, Izo Wantanabe would not have leapt up from his writing table and stepped out onto the deck of the house-boat. Had he not done so, the winter months would have passed with their usual tranquil monotony and the lives of several hundred of his comrades in arms would have been spared or, at the very least, expended on a more profitable enterprise.

But it was not to be. Fate, in the guise of fatherly concern, compelled him to follow and, as he scooped up the infant and lifted him shoulder high, he saw something which took his breath away.

Two dark stiff-winged objects were moving across the sky on a line that would take them almost directly above the boat on which he stood. The objects were heading in a southwesterly direction along the ragged forward edge of a massive blanket of grey cloud now advancing over Lake Mi-shi-ga-ha from the north-west.

Oblivious of the wind-driven snow-flakes that were beginning to swirl round him, Izo Wantanabe stood there open-mouthed with his small son clutched to his breast and watched as the objects passed over the jetty to which the wheelboat was moored then grew smaller and were finally swallowed by the advancing snow-cloud.

And there he stayed, his dark button eyes fixed on the point where the two winged dots had vanished, oblivious of the tiny fingers that pulled playfully at his bottom lip. The questions raised by what he had just witnessed caused him to forget the original reason for being there and it took the shrill cries of his wife, Yumiko, to alert him to the fact that his son's unprotected head was now liberally coated with snow.

Wantanabe meekly allowed Tomo to be snatched from him and followed his wife inside.

By the traditional laws of domestic etiquette, a wife was not permitted to upbraid her husband but in practice, that convention was normally only observed when friends, relatives, servants or superiors were present. A wife was duty bound to respect and obey her husband but that did not stop the most spirited (or malicious) members of the female sex from giving their menfolk an earful in private – showing their displeasure in other, more subtle ways.

Wantanabe seated himself on the mat behind his writing desk and endured the inevitable blast of cold air endangering the health of his youngest child in dignified silence. He knew Yumiko's concern was well-founded but his mind was engaged on other, far more important matters which she, being a woman, could not be expected to understand.

He slowly twirled the point of his writing brush on the ink block and let her voice flow unheeded through his brain. Stripped of their meaning, the stream of words resembled the clucking of an irate hen driven from a newly-laid egg before she has had time to admire her handiwork.

Eventually, as the ten-month-old child was vigorously rubbed dry and his happy gurgles indicated that he was not about to expire, the reproachful clucking was replaced by the soft mothering sounds that humans and animals use when nurturing their young. And shortly afterwards, when he had been dressed in dry clean clothes, the glowing-cheeked child was presented to his father as a peace offering.

Musing upon the fact that his wife's moods were as predictable as night and day, Wantanabe gathered Tomo briefly in his arms, bestowed a kiss on his soft, downy skull then handed him back carefully. For Yumiko, the crisis was over, harmony was restored. Her husband's problems were only

just beginning.

Izo Wantanabe and his wife Yumiko came from a race of people known to their neighbours as Iron Masters; a stratified collection of asiatic bloodlines in which the Japanese formed the top layer followed by Chinese, Korean then the other ethnic groups in descending order. Each group's position related directly to the distance – in the World Before – of their ancestral lands from a sacred site known as Mount Fuji.

Successive waves of the Iron Masters' ancestors had landed on the north-eastern coast of North America between 2300 and 2400 A. D. Now, six centuries later, the seventeen domains that made up their nation state – known as Ne-Issan – stretched from the Atlantic to Lake Erie, and from the Lawrence Seaway to Cape Fear, in North Carolina.

Wantanabe's family owed its allegiance to the noble house of Yama-Shita, holder of the exclusive licence to trade with the grass-monkeys who roamed the endless Western Plains. Izo's family formed part of the Japanese ruling class but he himself was a love-child produced by one of his father's Chinese concubines.

The resulting social stigma, while not catastrophic, meant he was permanently barred from the high appointments open to his peer group and that his future wife – should he choose to marry – would have to be Chinese. This had led to his decision to enter commerce, for it was here that many Chinese families had flourished, and his father's connections had secured him a junior position in one of the rich trading houses with a string of depots from Bu-faro on Lake Iri to the Eastern Sea.

His alert intelligence, plus a head for figures and a flair for organisation, won him quick promotion and a fortunate introduction to Yumiko, the fourth daughter of a Chinese merchant who, with a shrewd eye to the main chance, provided her with a handsome dowry.

The father's gamble on Izo's family connections did not bring the hoped-for rewards. After Yumiko had given birth to a son and a daughter, and was carrying Tomo within her, the senior partner's latent disapproval of Izo's mixed parentage was finally revealed when he was twice passed over in the annual round of promotions, putting an end to his hopes of reaching the top echelons.

His despair, however, had been short-lived. Summoned to the palace at Sara-kusa, Izo Wantanabe had been met by an official of Lord Yama-Shita's court who offered him the post of Resident Agent to the Outlands.

He would, explained the trade-captain, be one of a trial batch of five appointees – the first to be stationed beyond the borders of Ne-Issan. Aware that this was a heaven-sent opportunity to get in on the ground floor of a pioneering enterprise and escape from the veiled but vengeful discrimination that continued to shadow his marriage and career, Izo accepted the offer without hesitation.

The wheelboats of the Yama-Shita had visited the two established trading posts at Bei-sita and Du-aruta once a year for several decades, but in the summer of 2990 Domain-Lord Hiro Yama-Shita had decided to set up a chain of resident commercial agents to develop regular contacts with the Mute clans in the hinterland.

Izo and the other four appointees were to be the first links in this chain which – if positive results were obtained – would eventually extend right around the southern shores of the four, interconnected lakes which formed the Western Sea; the vast body of water the Mutes called 'The Great River'.

Each resident would live with his family aboard a houseboat, smaller cousins of the three-storied steam-powered monsters that made the annual journey to Du-aruta. It was envisaged that the houseboats would be permanently moored to purpose-built jetties but, if the need arose, they could always cast off and put to sea. Domestic servants would be provided and the boats would be

maintained and, if need be, protected, by a small detachment of sea-soldiers.

For Izo, it meant assuming the leadership of an enclosed community of thirty-five souls. Food and other stores would be delivered by sea until adequate supplies could be obtained locally.

Yumiko had not been overjoyed at the prospect of an isolated existence in the back of beyond, but the chance to make a fresh start plus the generous lump sum payable on completion of a nine-year term and the promise of three months' paid home leave for every thirty-six served in the outlands had softened her protests.

The possibility that she and her family might not even survive three years, let alone nine, did not appear to have occurred to her and Izo had wisely kept silent about the possible dangers of living amongst a horde of unwashed, unfettered savages.

The first four residents were posted to Detroit, Saginaw Bay, Cheboygan, and Ludington. Izo Wantanabe, the last far-flung link in the chain, was anchored at a place once known as Benton Harbour, twenty miles north of the point where, on pre-Holocaust maps, the Indiana state line met the eastern shore of Lake Michigan.

Their primary task was to forge closer trade links, including the recruitment of more 'guest workers'. They were to achieve this by commercial and cultural 'counselling', the purpose of which was to change the Mutes' perception of the Iron Masters as cold and forbidding into something more ... paternal. Firm (the grass-monkeys despised weakness) yet benign.

That, in itself, was a job and a half but the residents had also been entrusted with an equally important, parallel assignment: the gathering of intelligence.

Following the first incursions by the Federation wagon-trains into Plainfolk territory in 2989, the conflict between Tracker and Mute had been drawing ever closer to the borders of Ne-Issan. Lord Yama-Shita had hit upon the idea of using the residents – Wantanabe in particular – as forward listening-posts. Their genuine effort to improve trade relations would provide both the cover and the opportunity to gather information about the Federation's war machine and its northward and eastward advance towards the Running Red Buffalo Hills – the Plainfolk's name for the Northern Appalachian

As point man, Izo Wantanabe was nearest the action. Up to now, the probing advances of the warriors from the Deserts of the South appeared to have stopped at the west bank of the wide meandering river the outlanders called the Miz-Hippy. The river had its source in a cluster of lakes to the north-west of Du-ruta. Wantanabe had only been on the ground for less than four months so much remained to be discovered, but according to his initial contacts, the iron snakes had never attempted to cross this waterway. Whether they could not, or did not wish to do so, remained to be seen.

The Plainfolk had said the iron snakes preferred to follow the lines of the ancient hard ways – most of which, outside Ne-Issan, had long since crumbled into dust. From a captured Federation machine acquired in exchange for six knives it was clear the iron snakes (which their owners called wagon-trains) would have to cross a number of smaller rivers to reach the Miz-Hippy.

Izo Wantanabe had not yet seen one of these much-feared killing machines for himself but perhaps because of their huge size or the manner of their construction they could not float across a river like a loaded cart drawn by oxen and supported on air-filled bags made from animal skins. So much the better. It meant that, until a bridge was built or suitable ferry craft were put in place, the iron snakes would be held at bay – perhaps indefinitely. Gangs of construction workers were a soft target and even if bridges and ferries were completed, they could still be attacked and burned by determined bands of men.

The Miz-Hippy was like the wide moats that surrounded the palace-castles of the domain-lords of Ne-Issan. It formed an almost endless defensive line which – as far as he knew – could only be turned

by journeying northwards around the Western Sea. Densely-forested hills pitted with lakes formed the first line of defence. If this was penetrated the iron snakes would be halted by the San-Oransa, the wide river that protected Ne-Issan's border domains. But not the skies above them. These marauding serpents carried winged chariots that could travel through the cloud world of the *kami*. Rivers and mountains were no barrier to them. The grass-monkeys called these charriots 'arrowheads', and the soldiers who rode in them were known as 'cloud-warriors'.

Up to this moment, all the stories about 'arrowheads' dropping fire-blossoms from the sky and killing people with long sharp iron were nothing more than hearsay. Exaggerated rumours. None of his informants had ever seen an 'arrowhead'. Neither had Izo Wantanabe until today – when he had seen two! Only these sky-chariots were not like the crafts his informants had described. Their wings were not triangular. They were stretched out on either side of their bodies like those of a gliding seabird. And they had a tail – not fan-shaped like that of a bird, but a tail nevertheless – attached by two beams to the plump body.

Their shape, in one sense, was immaterial. Izo Wantanabe was in no doubt that the sky-chariots were a product of the Federation. Merely to look upon them sent a chill down the spine. They were dark alien things whose form could not have been conceived in the soul of a noble samurai. But what were they doing in a sky filled with snow?

Lord Yama-Shita's trade captain had told him that the iron snakes retreated south to their underground lairs during the winter months and his own tame grass-monkeys had confirmed this was so. But ... if there were sky-chariots aloft, it meant that somewhere away to the south-west, an iron snake was lurking. Hiding perhaps in a forest, awaiting their return.

Yes ... News of its presence and its exact whereabouts would soon – if it was not already – become common knowledge among the locally-based Mute clans. And someone would bring the news to him in the hope of a reward. Izo had several trunkfuls of small gifts, some useful, some decorative, for such occasions.

Wantanabe gazed at the blank sheet of paper before him and continued to twirl his brush on the ink block even though it was now fully charged. It helped concentrate his mind on the circumstances surrounding the appearance of the sky-chariots. The air had been getting progressively colder over the past two weeks but the sky had been clear, or dotted with broken cloud. And that very morning, the rising sun had warmed an empty sky. It was only later that a line of grey cloud had appeared on the northern horizon.

The two sky-chariots had approached from the north-east and had flown over the mooring in a south-westerly direction – back towards the Miz-Hippy. Which meant they must have either circled round from the north or round from the south – driven back towards the ironsnake by the advancing snow-cloud. But before that, they would have been flying across a clear sky – so their course would have been observed by the sharp-eyed Mutes who occupied the lands around Lake Mi-shiga.

Perhaps his nearest neighbour, Saito Aichi, the resident agent at Ludington whose house-boat lay one hundred and twenty miles north of his own, had seen them crossing Lake Mi-shiga while the windswept blanket of snow was still beyond the far shore. *Hhhaaawww!* Cloud-warrior was an apt name for men bold enough to drive their winged chariots over such a huge expanse of water! But they were ever rash enough to invade the sacred sky-world above Ne-Issan, the *kami* who guarded the heavens would send them crashing to earth like birds struck by a hunter's arrows.

Izo decided to pen a message slip that would be delivered to his neighbour by carrier pigeon. He would have to wait for the snow storm to pass, but if the bird could be released by noon, he might have a reply the following day that could help him pinpoint the location of the wagon-train. On the other

hand, if the sky-chariots had circled round from the south, word of their sighting would take longer to reach him. But it would come – of that he had no doubt.

The high-born half-caste had made full use of his organizing skills since arriving in the outland, putting his greatest effort into the area south and west of Benton Harbour. As a result, there were few grass-monkeys within a hundred miles of where he now sat who did not know of the rewards to be gained by being the first to report the sighting of an ironsnake or an arrowhead.

Selecting a smaller, much finer brush, Izo Wantanabe took a narrow slip of thin paper from his leather folder and began to compose his message to Saito. A string of tiny ideograms – the symbols the Iron Masters used instead of the roman alphabet – flowed effortlessly from the tip of his brush.

For 'Buffalo Bill' Hartmann, commander of The Lady from Louisiana, the word came in the form of a coded radio signal at 0625 hours Mountain Standard Time, some ten minutes before sunrise on the 12th November 2990. Hartmann was just easing himself out of his bunk when the VidCommTech on the redeye shift triggered the soft alarm bleeper in the headboard by his pillow. He looked across at the VDU above the small desk built into a corner of his private quarters and saw the screen fill rapidly with line after line of five letter code-blocks.

Hartmann's wagon-train, which had halted overnight seventy-six miles south of the Pueblo way station, had been following a trail – once known as Highway 25 – that led down through Navajo Point, Trinidad and Raton, New Mexico and across the Canadian River before turning west to Roosevelt Field, the underground divisional base situated close to the long-vanished city of Santa Fe. Because the Federation maps of the overground were based on pre-Holocaust editions, urban areas, state lines and major highways had been retained as navigational reference points. So although the main part of the base was several hundred feet below ground, it was known by its composite title – Roosevelt/Santa Fe.

There were ten such bases buried deep within the earth shield under or near major cities of the southern mid-west, the majority named after past Presidents of the United States: the headquarters of the Federation, Washington/Houston – known informally as 'Grand Central' or Houston/GC, Johnson/Phoenix, Reagan/Lubbock, Nixon/Ft. Worth, Eisenhower/San Antonio, Truman/Lafayette, Lincoln/May/Jackson, Lincoln/Little Rock and Grant/Tulsa. The latest, still under construction, was Monroe/Wichita.

These cities had vanished too, leaving only their names on the maps stored in the Federation's computer archives. Names which helped to soften the grey anonymity of the massive slab-sided constructions that had taken their place. The bunkers, which hugged the earth like a cubist sculptor's vision of a beached jellyfish, were the interface between the underground world of the Federation and the Blue-Sky World above.

Like the network of smaller way-stations and work-camps, they were artefacts of the third millennium. Some dated back to the early part of the twenty-fourth century; beyond that very few traces of human habitation remained. All outward signs of the twentieth century had disappeared, vaporised by nuclear explosions or razed to the ground in the internecine struggles between crazed groups of survivors for control of uncontaminated resources in the immediate post-Holocaust period.

The shattered ruins, the ransacked shells and anything left standing by the gangs of looters had been slowly destroyed by wind and rain, storms and hurricanes and the relentless passage of time. But despite being dealt an almost mortal blow, the planet had endured; had begun to heal itself.

Unchecked for over nine hundred years, nature had reasserted its eternal supremacy over the transient, insubstantial works of humankind, grinding concrete into dust, and covering the piles of fallen bricks and forlorn debris with a shifting layer of sand or a carpet of red grass.

Like the Santa Fe interface towards which Commander Hartmann was travelling, the wagon-train under his command was also an artefact of the third millennium. Built in 2961, The Lady from Louisiana – known to its crew as The Lady – was an armoured land-train that stood over thirty feet high and measured a staggering nine hundred feet from end to end when fitted with its full complement of sixteen wagons.

This was the mobile home for a thousand Trail-Blazers – men and women who ate, showered, slept, fought and died alongside each other during the nine months of each year that the wagon-train spent on overground operations. They also used the same toilets, and it had been that way since the Holocaust. To date, the President-General had always been a man, and generations of women had served as guard-mothers to his children, but apart from these two immutable functions there was no discrimination on the basis of gender. In the Federation, men and women enjoyed total equality of status and opportunity from pipe-cleaning in the A-Level sewage farms to the top executive suite of the Black Tower and in front-line combat against the Mutes.

Each wagon, which was linked to its neighbour by a flexible passway, was fifty-five feet long by thirty feet wide, with room inside for three decks, and it was supported at each end by two pairs of giant drum-shaped low-pressure tyres, twelve feet high and twelve feet wide.

Hartmann sat in 'the saddle', the top deck of the forward command car. This was like the bridge of a pre-H naval frigate and below it was the wagon-train's version of the ship's fire/command control center. Hartmann's deputy, Lt. Commander Cooper had charge of a second duplicate command car at the tail of the wagon-train which meant that, in tactical terms, there was no front or rear. The Lady could go back and forwards with equal facility or split up into two independently manoeuvrable segments – a ploy that had often thrown attacking Mute clans into confusion.

The wagon mix could be modified depending on whether The Lady was on a supply run to war stations or on a fire-sweep. In combat configuration, the train would haul ten 'battle-wagons' equipped with multi-barrelled gun turrets along the top and sides, a 'blood-wagon' crewed by a team of combat medics headed by Surgeon-Captain Keever and a flight-car which housed the wagon-train's own airforce – ten Skyhawk Mark 1's, the single-seat delta-winged microlite whose production centenary had been celebrated in 2983.

The flight car had an extra-wide flat roof which acted as a mini-runway. With throttles wide open the Skyhawks were launched into the air from angled steam catapults and 'landed on' with the aid of an arrester hook just like the carrier planes of the twentieth century. Due to their interior layout, the flight-car and power-cars carried fewer guns than the others. It was the command cars and 'battle-wagons' that, quite literally, bristled with weaponry – body heat sensors, night-scopes and infra-red laser ranging devices.

Like the submarine and long-range bomber crews in the last big war of the pre-Holocaust era, Trail-Blazers lived surrounded by their equipment and weapons. Stores and ammunition were stowed in underfloor and overhead compartments, bunks folded down and were shared by day and night-duty personnel and, like the submarines of the Old Time, there were no portholes. Narrow vision-slits could be uncovered in an emergency but under normal conditions, batteries of video screens displayed what lay outside.

The wagon-train was a sealed environment, shielded against the radiation that still fouled the Blue Sky World, and the air that circulated inside them was carefully and constantly filtered. In the nine centuries since the Holocaust conditions had improved but Trail-Blazers were still pulling 'tricks' – slang term based on the acronym TRIC – Terminal Radiation-Induced Cancer.

According to the First Family, it was the sub-human Mutes who were responsible for the sickne

in the air. And everyone knew that to be true because they weren't affected by it. Mutes had poisonous skins which, if touched with bare hands, caused the flesh of ordinary human beings to rot, and they exuded noxious chemicals which contaminated the atmosphere.

Any Tracker breathing unfiltered air was at risk. Even if they were not killed in combat, Trail Blazers knew that a nine-month tour on overground operations could shorten their already brief lives by several years but that was a sacrifice they made without hesitation. 'They died so that others might live' was a phrase imprinted daily on every Tracker's consciousness from the age of two onwards, and the words were carved into the Memorial Walls to be seen in the central plazas of each divisional base. They could also be found painted in giant letters along corridors, galleries, the tunnel walls facing the platforms of subway stations, and the radials and ringways linking the network's most heavily accommodated deeps.

You had to be blind and deaf not to get the message for it was regularly screened during programme breaks on the nine tv channels piped through the Federation and was often included in the voice-over station identification announcements, along with a clutch of other homilies issued by the First Family.

'They died so that others might live'. *Yay, brother. Amen to that ...*

Although prolonged exposure to overground radiation was still regarded as life-threatening, the level had been falling at a steadily increasing rate over the last few decades. This was entirely due to the dramatic reduction in the numbers of Southern Mutes whose presence had infected the mid-western states now cleansed and reclaimed by the Federation – Texas, Arizona, New Mexico, Oklahoma, Arkansas, Louisiana and Mississippi, plus the New Territories of Colorado and Kansas. That was a big chunk of territory and required constant policing.

Most of the Southern Mutes who had not been killed or enslaved had been driven towards the east and west coasts and down into the desert wastes of Mexico. A few marauding bands roamed the Outer States looking for easy pickings like scavenging crows but they did their best to avoid contact with the patrolling wagon-trains and had become adept at concealing themselves from the circling Skyhawks whose presence announced the imminent arrival of one of the feared iron snakes.

The present threat to the Federation's plan to reconquer the Blue-Sky World was to be found in the New Territories and the vast rolling plains beyond. The Northern Mutes, who called themselves the Plainfolk, were proving a tougher proposition than their southern relatives. Raised to fight and die with the same dedication as the Trackers, they possessed animal cunning, incredible physical endurance and suicidal courage. Fortunately, they were illiterate savages locked into a nomadic, hand-to-mouth existence, and armed with primitive weapons – knives, clubbing axes and crossbows.

Welded into a cohesive force under a shrewd, informed leader, they might have found ways to neutralise the superior technology and fire-power of the wagon-trains but time and destiny were ranged against them. Despite their collective name, the Plainfolk clans had no sense of nationhood and were as keen to fight each other as they were to fight the Federation.

After rolling out of Nixon/Fort Worth in early March for a run of stateside patrols, The Lady had spent the summer roaming the central plains – Kansas, Nebraska and South Dakota where her crew had helped reduce the level of air pollution even further by racking up a body-count of seven hundred and twenty-nine lump-heads. Some were children but, as old Trail-Blazers were often heard to say: '... the little 'uns grow up to be as big, mean and bug-ugly as the bucks an' beavers who reared 'em ...' Harsh but plain commonsense. By taking out the young and the child-rearing females, you effectively neutered the clan. And more often than not, their deaths often goaded the surviving male and female warriors into launching suicidal attacks against Trail-Blazer combat squads sent out from the wagon

train.

Hartmann's crew had taken some casualties but, all in all, it had been a successful tour, in marked contrast to The Lady's first, catastrophic encounter with a strong force of Mutes in Wyoming, the previous year. On his return to the depot, Hartmann and his executive officers had been brought before a Board of Assessors to face a charge of recklessly endangering their train.

It was accepted that lump-heads might kill Trail-Blazers, but they were not supposed to damage wagon-trains or outwit their commanders. With only twenty-one currently in service and a present production rate of one a year the wagon-trains were the most precious item in the Federation inventory. The Lady's execs experienced a few bad moments, but in the end, everyone had gotten away with a severe reprimand and the loss of a year's seniority.

It could have been a lot worse. Hartmann had a shrewd idea why things had gone so wrong, but like all experienced hands, had not attempted to defend himself by telling the truth. To have suggested that the wagon-train and its crew had run up against the malevolent powers of a Mute summoner would have gotten him into *real* trouble. Mute magic – something which many overground veterans accepted as a proven fact – was a taboo subject within the Federation.

The Manual, the video-archive containing the received wisdom of the First Family and the Behavioural Codes which governed the lives of Trackers from cradle to grave contained a cryptic reference to past allegations of 'Mute magic' and the Family's final word on the subject. Officially, it did not exist. The mere mention of it was a Code One offence. If you were caught, or reported to the Provos and subsequently charged, no plea of mitigation could be allowed. Anyone found guilty of a Code One infraction was guaranteed a one-way ticket to the wall.

This time, the homecoming would be different. The Lady had fallen short of the 1000-kill target that would have earned it a unit citation but after subtracting the time wasted on supply runs, 729 was still a respectable total. And there was always the chance they might nail down the odd clutch of Mute escapees or raiders on the way back to Nixon/Fort Worth.

Despite their poisonous presence, a number of Mutes from the decimated southern clans were used in the overground work-camps. They were supposed to be chained down at night but sometimes through sloppy security or outside help, they went over the wire. Escapees were usually unarmed but always made the home run interesting and Hartmann sometimes sent his men out after 'phantom' targets to keep them on their toes. Experience had taught him that it was when you were rolling with the hatches battened down and your feet up that the unexpected happened.

And it was a bit like that today. When decoded and screened, the TAC-OPS signal from CINCOPAC TRAIN in Grand Central put an end to Hartmann's thoughts of celebrating New Year with his kinfolks in Eisenhower/San Antonio. The Lady was ordered to change course immediately and head east towards navref Kansas City.

After crossing the Missouri, he was to take the wagon-train north through Des Moines, Iowa then east along the old US Highway 80 to Cedar Rapids. The Lady was to make the 1200-mile journey without the customary night halts and he was to ignore any targets of opportunity en route. On arrival at Cedar Rapids, he was to launch his Skyhawks on a search and rescue mission across the Mississippi.

The order to head north so late in the year with snow already falling on the lower slopes of the Rockies came as an unwelcome surprise. Winter was the period set aside for rest and refit. Hartmann would not normally have expected to be called topside until March for supply runs and security sweeps inside the Federation. And when he got to the part of the signal which told him who he was supposed to be looking for, he got an even bigger surprise.

Hartmann keyed the signal into the Command Log – the hard disk whose memory could only hold

accessed by a combination of his own ID-card and voiceprint – then screened himself through to the Duty RadCommTech and told him to send the standard IMMEDIATE ACTION response to Fort Worth. Having received the signal, the radio operator knew its time and reference coordinates, but at this point, no one, apart from Hartmann, was aware of its contents.

Leaving his quarters, he roused his Navigation Exec and told him about the course change they were to make at Trinidad instead of rolling down to Santa Fe. Hartmann also told him he planned to wait until they had covered the ten miles to the turnoff point before breaking the news to the rest of the crew.

Leaving the NavExec to draw up a new route and schedule based on a three-shift roll, Hartmann returned to his own quarters. CINC-TRAIN'S message had contained a third surprise that would be greeted with equal dismay by The Lady's passengers – Colonel Marie Anderssen, commander of the Pueblo way-station, and sixty-four officers and men from her 1000-strong assault pioneer battalion who, prior to CINC-TRAIN'S signal, had been expecting to be off-loaded at the Santa Fe interface.

The steely-grey lady colonel, referred to by her subordinates as Mary-Ann, had been summoned to Grand Central to attend a Forward Planning Review Board. And travelling with her were a mixed batch of officers and other ranks; soldiers, technicians and construction workers heading south for their first stateside leave after two years up the line.

For some of her party, the journey home would have ended with the fifteen-hundred-foot ride down in the elevator to Level One-1 of Roosevelt Field and its centrepiece, New Deal Plaza; the remainder whose kinfolk were quartered in other divisional bases, were due to catch the shuttle at the subway station immediately below New Deal Plaza. After trading a few credits for a hot meal or a session of one of the range of video battle or proficiency quiz games in the Plaza's recreation arcade they would have trooped aboard the Trans-Am Express for a 120 mile an hour journey through the earth shield. A few hours later they too would have been home.

But now all that had changed. The digital wall clock was marking up the last seconds towards 0700 when Hartmann re-entered his private quarters. As commander of the wagon-train he was allocated more personal space than anybody else but it was still severely limited. Service protocol and simple courtesy required him to share his quarters with Colonel Anderssen and the designers had thoughtfully provided an extra fold-down bunk for such occasions.

Since there was only just enough room for one, it meant even less room for two. This called for a certain amount of coordination between host and guest, but on this trip it was not a problem. Hartmann and Anderssen were already well acquainted.

They had been classmates at the MacArthur Military Academy and had both graduated *summa cum laude*. Anderssen's posting to the Pioneer Corps who built and manned the way-stations caused them to lose touch for several years but both had moved with equal speed up the promotion ladder and with Hartmann's appointment as commander of a wagon-train it was only a matter of time before their paths crossed again.

In the intervening period, Hartmann had filed bond papers with Lauren, a young woman from a third generation Trail-Blazer family. A few months later, they were notified that she had been selected as a 'guard-mother'. They had gotten along fine from the moment they had been formally introduced and were looking forward to rearing the child but someone at the Life Institute had fouled up and Lauren had died two months after implantation of the microscopic embryo – the fruit of the President General's seed.

Trackers were conditioned from birth to accept the loss of their kinfolk with a fatalistic shrug. Grief was permissible and in extreme cases counselling was available but you were expected to pur-

it in private. Death was to be viewed as a victory, not a disaster, which meant Hartmann had received notification of the event but no explanation. His partner's death through negligence – for which no one was ever called to account – left a sour taste and discouraged him from entering into another official approved relationship.

Since he was not predisposed to jack up everything within sight Hartmann had opted for celibacy contenting himself in off-duty hours with advanced video study-programs and the fraternal company of his fellow-officers. But whenever The Lady had been detailed to make a supply run to Pueblo that entailed a night stop-over, he had quartered with his former class- and bunk-mate Mary-Ann.

And now and then, despite the tight-lipped disapproval of Mary-Ann's dark-haired sidekick, Major Jerri Hiller, they would cast aside the burden of command and put the horse between the shafts. They told each other it was just for old time's sake but they both knew there was more to it than that.

Anderssen poked her glistening head around the edge of the shower curtain as he came in. 'Hi ...' She watched him lock the door and switch on the 'DO NOT ENTER' sign. 'You look as if you've got something to tell me.'

'I have.' Hartmann screened himself through to his deputy.

Lt. Commander Cooper's face appeared on the VDU. 'Morning, skipper.'

'Morning, Coop. I've got some items that are going to keep me busy for the next twenty minutes so I'd be obliged if you'd get The Lady underway. CINC-TRAIN had ordered a course change and a three-shift roll. Tell Mr McDonnell to bring the section chiefs to the saddle at 0730. I want you and the rest of my staff there too.'

'Very good, skipper.' Cooper paused. 'Sounds serious.'

'Well, I don't think anyone's gonna feel like dancin' "Turkey in the Middle",' said Hartmann. 'But keep this under your hat till I go on the air – okay?'

'Will do ...'

Hartmann blanked the screen and put the VDU into text and sound mode. He then stripped off the olive-drab tee-shirt he wore when sleeping and approached the shower with his thumbs inside the waistband of his matching boxer shorts. 'Mind if I join you?'

Anderssen opened up the curtain, revealing the now familiar lines of her firm, thirty-six-year-old body. 'Be my guest...'

Hartmann stepped into the shower cubicle. There was no way two people could stand under the spray head without their bodies touching in several interesting places – but that was something they had long been accustomed to. At the Academy, male and female recruits shared the same sleeping quarters and bathroom facilities which included communal shower blocks with units that could house four at a time – or six good friends.

Hartmann pumped some soap out of the dispenser and worked up a lather. He hadn't joined Mary-Ann in the shower because he was feeling horny. When the water was running, it was the only place on the wagon-train you could talk without anyone being able to listen in. Hartmann had no firm proof that the train was bugged but he had not reached the rank of commander without discovering that careless talk could, on occasion, cost lives.

'Want me to scrub your back?'

'Yeah, why not ...,' Hartmann faced the wall. Anderssen went to work with both hands. 'It's my *back* you're supposed to be doing.'

'Don't worry, I'll get there. We usually manage this twice a year. Twice in one week arouses all kinds of unhealthy appetites.'

‘It’s the wrong time and the wrong place, honeybun. Listen. CINC-TRAIN just came through. The Iron Lady’s not going home. Not yet, anyway.’

Anderssen’s hands kept moving. ‘So how do I get to Santa Fe?’

‘We’re going to fly you there.’

‘Bill, be serious. I’ve never flown in one of those stick and string contraptions and I don’t intend to start now.’

‘Yeah, well, I’m under orders from CINC-TRAIN and while you’re on The Lady, you do as I say. Which means you’ve got about forty-three minutes to get used to the idea.’

‘Bastard ...’

Anderssen tweaked his buttocks with iron hard fingers but Hartmann, anticipating a revenge attack, had already firmed them up so it didn’t hurt too much.

‘C’mon, Mary-Ann. Ease up. A few puffs of the stuff you keep hidden away and you won’t feel anything.’

‘Great idea but I never carry it around – especially to Grand Central. But never mind that, just where the hell am I gonna sit? If you think I’m going to let myself be zipped into one of those buddy-buddy frames you can forget it!’ Anderssen’s voice softened as Hartmann eased himself around. She smiled up at him as their loins came into contact.

Hartmann made himself comfortable. ‘Don’t worry. CINC-TRAIN already thought of that. One of those two-seat Skyriders is coming out from Santa Fe.’

‘Oh, dandy ...’

‘Hey – snap to it! You got a reputation to keep up. Don’t they call you the Iron Lady?’

‘Yeah. But that’s when I’ve got my feet on the ground.’

‘Look, it’s a hundred and seventy-two miles by road. By air, it won’t take more than an hour and a half. All you’ve gotta do is hang tough for ninety minutes. You telling me you can’t handle that?’

‘How was it with you the first time?’

Hartmann responded, tongue-in-cheek. ‘I’m still waiting for someone to offer me a ride.’ He silenced her protest with a quick kiss. ‘Listen, if it starts getting to you, just close your eyes, lay back and think of—’

Anderssen’s firm thighs put the squeeze on his brace and bit. ‘Don’t say anything you might regret, Billy-boy ...’

Hartmann pinned her arms inside his and locked his wrists against the base of her spine. ‘You’re right,’ he said. ‘This is no time to be kidding around. Do you realize we’ve only six good years left, maybe eight, if we’re lucky?’ He sighed. ‘Wish I was going with you ...’

Anderssen didn’t resist as he pulled her even closer. She laid her head under his chin as they rocked gently from side to side under the raying jets of warm water. ‘Do you still miss Lauren?’

‘Not as much as I’m going to miss you.’

Anderssen slid her arms around his waist. ‘Where are you headed?’

‘Cedar Rapids, Iowa ...’

‘Never heard of it.’

‘It’s about twelve hundred miles north-west of here. On the same latitude as Chicago.’

‘Christo! Doesn’t it snow up there at this time of year?’

‘So they tell me.’

‘Must be pretty important for them to risk sending you that far north. Do you have any back-up?’

‘Not that I know of.’

‘So what’s the bottom line – or haven’t they told you yet?’

‘It’s a search and rescue mission. At least, that’s what CINC-TRAIN calls it. Five of our people have gone missing up there.’ He shrugged. ‘Houston want me to find them and ... bring ’em in.’

‘Feds...?’

‘If they are, they’re not going to tell *me*.’

‘Feds’ was the nickname applied to special undercover agents thought to be employed by the Fin Family. No one had ever come up with any hard evidence that such people existed but that had not dispelled the widespread belief that they did.

‘The only other kind of people roamin’ around out there are breakers. Apart from FINTEL, of course. But it’s the first time I ever heard of anyone operating east of the Mississippi.’

‘Yeah. The other odd thing is, two of them are wingmen from The Lady – Jodi Kazan, the flight section leader did five tours with me before disappearing over the side in a ball of flame. In that battle I told you about when we –’

‘Ran into some unexpected trouble ...’

‘Yeah, that one. The second was a new boy called Brickman. One of three we lost before we turned and ran south to lick our wounds. I’ve got nothing on the other three – apart from the fact one’s wingman – but everyone thought Kazan and Brickman were both posted KIA over Wyoming last June.’ Hartmann shrugged. ‘It seems we were mistaken.’

Anderssen leaned away from her shower-mate. ‘This guy Brickman ... would he happen to be 2102-8902 Steven *Roosevelt* Brickman?’

‘Yeah, that’s him. How d’you know his name and number?’

‘Because he’s the kind of guy you remember – for all kinds of reasons.’

‘But why in particular – and how come?’

‘He flew into Pueblo on a wing and a prayer almost a year ago today. Said he’d escaped after being shot down then captured and held prisoner by a clan of Mutes –’

Hartmann looked surprised. ‘Held *prisoner*?’

‘That’s what he said. We radioed The Lady to check that you had a crewman by that name. Your Signals Officer obviously didn’t tell you about our query. Anyway, he confirmed that Brickman was one of three wingmen listed PD/ET north-east of Cheyenne on June 12th – as the defaulter claimed.’

‘Defaulter?’

‘It’s SOP. Anyone who comes wandering in from the overground adrift from his unit and without an ID is automatically regarded as a potential code-breaker until proved otherwise. You know that.’

‘Sure,’ grunted Hartmann. ‘But up to now, the only breakers I’ve seen have been dead ones. So what was his story?’

‘I never got to hear it.’ Anderssen dropped her voice right down. ‘When we called up Brickman’s dope-sheet from Grand Central, it came prefixed with a Level Nine entry.’

‘Which only you could read.’

‘Lucky I did. Otherwise I might have got my buns roasted. Your Mr Brickman is on the Special Treatment List.’

The news caused Hartmann’s eyebrows to rise. ‘Is he? Well, well, well ... Thanks for telling me, although, to be honest, I can’t say it comes as a total surprise. I always have a one-to-one word with

new crewmen when they come aboard then compare notes with McDonnell my Trail Boss. We both had him down as someone who might go far.'

'I know what you mean,' said Anderssen. 'He has that ... look about him.'

Hartmann drew her to him. 'Yeah. It's the eyes.' He looked deep into hers.

'So, be careful, huh?'

'You too.' He planted a brotherly kiss on the tip of her nose. 'Okay, fun's over. Git outta here.'

'Sure ...' Anderssen pushed the curtain aside. 'Just out of interest – do you always wear socks in the shower?'

Hartmann looked down at his olive-drab feet. 'Awww, shee-utt! Y'see what happens when you're around?' he peeled off the socks and started to wring them out.

'It might help if you turned the water off.' Marie Anderssen stepped out of the cubicle and picked up a couple of towels. She threw one at Hartmann then started to give herself a vigorous rub-down. 'So what's the word on the rest of my party? Are they being flown to Santa Fe too? Or do they have to walk it?'

'Neither,' replied Hartmann. 'They're staying aboard.'

Mary-Ann stopped drying her hair with one end of the towel as the other end stalled between her thighs. 'But these guys are –'

'Due three months leave, yeah. It's been postponed. Tough, but that's the way it is. They'll go home when we do.'

'That is outrageous ...' Anderssen cast around for a solution. 'Can't you drop them off at Monroe/Wichita on your way through? I know the interface isn't operational yet but they could ride down the air shaft that was drilled through the floor of the old way-station.'

'We're not going through Wichita. We've been routed through Great Bend and Salina. The terrain is easier to navigate – which means we can maintain speed during our nighttime run.'

Anderssen swore violently then vented her frustration on her own body with an extra-punishing rub-down. 'There must be *something* we can do!'

'Uh-uh, not so much of the "we". This is your beef, hon.'

Her voice turned sour. 'Thanks, I'll remember that.'

'Listen, Marie, I've got my orders. If you don't like what's happening, take it up with CINC-TRAIN – when you get to Santa Fe.'

'Yeah, sure. It means going through channels. Any complaint I make has got to go all the way up to Pioneer Corps HQ before being sent over to CINC-TRAIN. By which time—'

'– assuming it ever gets that far –'

'– you'll be out of sight across the Missouri.'

'Exactly. You know the score – just like CINC-TRAIN knew your guys were hitching a ride home on The Lady. There was no order to off-load them because no one at Grand Central gives a shit whether they get home for New Year or not. All GC cares about is getting this wagon-train to Cedar Rapids. Pronto. So don't take it out on me.'

Anderssen turned away from him, sawed the towel rapidly across her buttocks and down the back of her legs.

Hartmann didn't need to see her face to know that she would have preferred to throttle him with it. Hanging his own towel round his neck, he fished a clean pair of socks and a set of underwear from one of the drawers in his clothes cupboard. He wasn't completely dry but he now only had four minutes

which to get dressed before he was due to break the bad news to his execs and section-chiefs – and he did not relish the prospect.

As a commander who had a genuine interest in the morale and general well-being of the men serving under him, he could understand Marie Anderssen being reluctant to abandon her soldiers but he was irritated to discover that she appeared to be more concerned about them than she was about him. In less than thirty minutes she would be flying out, leaving him with a glum-faced crew and the unwanted problem of coping for upwards of two months with an extra sixty-four disgruntled dog faces.

He zipped up his khaki fatigues and set a yellow baseball cap at the regulation angle on his head. Anderssen, now in briefs and T-shirt, was stuffing her belongings into a trail-bag. She still had her eyes back to him.

‘C’mon, Anderssen – spare me the fire and ice. This new assignment CINC-TRAIN has thrown at us is going to be tough on everybody.’

As she turned around, the tight line of her mouth twisted into a wry smile. ‘Everybody except me. You’re right. You’re the last person I should be dumping on. I’m sorry.’

‘Don’t say sorry. Just say goodbye.’

They hugged each other warmly. Anderssen raised her face to his. ‘Till whenever, huh?’

‘Sure. And don’t worry about your guys. It’s not going to be a joy-ride but I’ll do my best to look after ’em.’ Their lips met briefly then, as they disengaged reluctantly, Hartmann picked up her wristwatch. ‘Christo! I’m late!’ He buckled it on and gripped her shoulder, his voice now a whisper. ‘Listen, this guy Brickman. Where did he go after he left you?’

‘He was hooded and chained then flown to Santa Fe aboard a Skyrider from Big Red One and handed over to the Provost-Marshal of New Mexico for onward transmission to Grand Central. And GC also ordered us to erase his name from our station-log.’

Hartmann nodded. ‘That explains why we were never sent an up-date. We still have him listed as KIA.’

‘I don’t get it,’ breathed Anderssen. ‘If he was sent to GC as a defaulter last November, what the hell is he doing up to his ass in snow in Iowa?’

‘Good question,’ said Hartmann. ‘But even if I find him, you and I are never going to know the answer. Young Mr Brickman is on the Special Treatment List – remember?’

Chapter Two

For Steve Brickman, any advantages bestowed upon those selected for special treatment were, at the precise moment in time, fated to remain unspecified and dubious. He certainly had no reason to feel privileged, except in the negative sense that he and his four travelling companions had been chosen to be on the receiving end of a sudden run of bad luck. Once again, hasty, ill-considered action had placed him in a situation fraught with difficulty and danger.

Their arrival, before dawn that same day, on the wind-carved dunes of Long Point, on the western shore of Lake Erie, had marked the end of the first phase of a perilous escape from Ne-Issan, the eastern lands over which the Iron Masters held sway. The second phase, a fifteen-hundred-mile journey by air to Wyoming lay ahead. It was this journey which, after a tense but triumphant start, had gone disastrously wrong. Two and a half hours into the flight, Steve had discovered they were rapidly running out of fuel – and there was worse to come.

With the help of two Tracker renegades – Jodi Kazan and Dave Kelso – Steve had made good on his promise to rescue Cadillac and Clearwater, two gifted Plainfolk Mutes from the clan M'Call who had fallen into the hands of the Iron Masters. The promise had been made to Mr Snow, the clan's quirky, ageing wordsmith whose brain acted as the repository for nine hundred years of oral history. Mr Snow might be the guardian of the past and the clan's guiding intelligence but that did not stop him making mistakes. It was he who was responsible for sending Cadillac and Clearwater to Ne-Issan in the first place; a decision he had later come to regret and which Steve, in a rash moment, had offered to repair.

But as with most situations Steve found himself in, it was not as simple as that. Before making his promise to Mr Snow, Steve had been recruited into the ranks of AMEXICO – the AMtrak EXecutive Intelligence COMmando – a top-secret organisation working directly for the President-General of the Amtrak Federation. So secret that only a select handful of the First Family knew of its existence.

Trained as a wingman – the airborne elite of the Federation's overground strike-force, Steve was now a *mexican* – a generic term proudly adopted by AMEXICO operatives along with the use of words and phrases from the pre-Holo-caust language known as Spanish; the language of the long-vanished nation which had once bordered the southern edge of the Federation and was now the refuge for some of the displaced clans of Southern Mutes.

Steve's new boss, Commander-General Ben Karlstrom had given him the same assignment as Mr Snow. But since he didn't regard Mutes as people, he had referred to Cadillac and Clearwater as 'targets', and the word 'rescue' had been replaced by 'capture'.

Mr Snow had also been targeted – to paraphrase Karlstrom – 'for removal from the equation'. Steve's mission was to bring all three back to the Federation alive, or leave their bodies for the dead birds. Or else.

There had been a veiled threat of punitive sanctions that might be levied on Steve's kin-sister Roz and his guard-parents, Annie and Poppa Jack. The death or ill-treatment of his guard-parents would have caused him great distress but it was something he could have borne. It was the threats against Roz that could not be countenanced.

Steve had accepted the assignment because it offered a chance to get back into the Blue-Sky World where he had time to think and room to manoeuvre. Time to think how to rig the board so that everybody got what they wanted – or were fooled into thinking they had. He had the impression that Karlstrom didn't trust him completely. The feeling was mutual. In several action-packed months of

the overground, Steve had discovered that the First Family had been lying to their loyal troops for centuries – perhaps from the very beginning when the ash-clouds from the firestorms that had swept across America turned the sun into a chilling, crimson eye for more than three decades.

But it was not all threats and double-dealing. When the chips were down it was Karlstrom who had provided the vital back-up Steve had needed to blast his way to freedom. Part of that back-up had been a fellow-agent code-named Side-Winder disguised as a lump-head with the aid of plastic surgery.

Side-Winder, who claimed to have been working inside Ne-Issan for years, had been just part of a baffling set-up that had included some hard cases from one of the Iron Masters' own intelligence networks. Steve, unaware of this linkage, had done a separate deal with a highly-placed samurai from another network, and there were probably more. Layer upon layer of deceit and intrigue, like the blank protective coating that concealed the ultimate truths about the First Family, the Amtrak Federation and their hereditary enemies, the Mutes.

The task he had been given by Karlstrom – and had voluntarily undertaken for Mr Snow – was difficult enough in itself since the popular belief among Mutes was that no one ever returned from 'the Eastern Lands'. But it was made doubly difficult by his feelings for the people he had been ordered to betray. Cadillac and Clearwater had revealed themselves to be 'straight' Mutes, with perfectly formed bodies and clear, unblemished skins – just like real human beings – which had been skilfully camouflaged by vegetable dyes to blend with the multi-coloured hides of their clanfolk.

Mr Snow was afflicted with the characteristic skin and bone deformities that had caused all Mutes to be labelled 'lump-heads' but he had also been blessed with an encyclopaedic memory, a piercing intelligence and a fund of ageless wisdom spiced with his own engaging blend of mischievous good humour.

Steve's dilemma arose from the fact that he had – to use the time-worn pre-Holocaust phrase – fallen deeply in love with Clearwater and she had responded with equal passion.

Raised in the Federation where the word 'love' was not even part of the vocabulary, Steve had never experienced this depth of emotional involvement before. But he had been extremely close to his kin-sister – closer than two normal human beings can get. He and Roz shared a secret telepathic link of extraordinary intensity that had set them apart from other Trackers since early childhood and on reaching puberty, she had coaxed Steve into a covert sexual relationship.

With his posting to the Flight Academy at the age of fourteen this had gradually broken down due to the long periods of enforced separation. Roz still felt the same but Steve, the reluctant partner, had moved on. With his kin-sister, it was the mental bond that was paramount; his feelings for Clearwater – which had caused Roz such anguish – were of an entirely different order.

Those feelings had caused Steve a great deal of soul-searching too. From the very first days at school he had been taught to regard the malformed Mutes as repugnant, disease-ridden animals; a insult to Nature that had to be ruthlessly exterminated. It therefore followed that an intimate physical liaison between a Tracker and a Mute was an unthinkable aberration; the product of a sick mind. But the attraction he and Clearwater felt for each other had been instantaneous and irresistible and, for Steve, the desire to possess her body and soul had developed into a dangerous obsession.

His bond with Mr Snow and Cadillac was based on a debt of gratitude. Even though he had taken part in a murderous air raid against their clan, they had nursed him back to health after a near-fatal crash and later had saved him from certain death. Had they been captured by Trackers, they would have been killed out of hand but these two so-called savages had shown a degree of forbearance and forgiveness which he did not deserve. His feelings for Clearwater had led him to betray their trust but once again, there had been no recriminations and he could not bring himself to betray them a second

time.

The Manual made it clear that normal moral considerations did not enter into the relationships between Trackers and the Mutes. Despite the superficial resemblances they were not people, they were mentally-defective anthropoids whose place on the evolutionary tree was approximately halfway between human beings and the vanished apes. Karlstrom, the head of AMEXICO, had told him that 'promises to Mutes don't count'. One half of Steve knew that to be true but the other, newly-awakened half told him it wasn't so.

From the moment he had emerged to make his first solo flight above the overground a profound change had taken place within him. He had felt himself being torn in two. The solidarity he felt towards his fellow Trackers, the solemn oath of unswerving loyalty to the First Family conflicted with the growing feeling that he was not and had never truly been part of their underground empire. Entering the Blue-Sky World was like ... coming home. It defied all reason but every fibre of his being knew it to be true.

For the moment, however, the crushing burden of these emotional and mental pressures had been supplanted by the more urgent and fundamental problem of survival ...

Steve, Jodi and Dave Kelso were all skilled pilots but they had never flown anything as sophisticated as the Skyrider. The instrument panel was overloaded with switches, dials and radio navigation aids plus a video screen which showed the aircraft's position as a dot on a moving map which had to be programmed before take-off. They had been in too much of a hurry to discover how to do this, and they were also unfamiliar with the engine which was more powerful and operated on an entirely different principle to the battery-powered Skyhawks they were used to.

Steve had twice been a passenger aboard a Skyrider but the first time he had been too busy talking to the pilot – his late classmate Donna Monroe Lundkwist; on the second occasion, a night flight with a taciturn MX pilot who ignored most of his questions, he had spent the greater part of the trip gazing through the canopy at the star-filled sky.

Until that morning, Jodi and Kelso had never seen a Skyrider but, like Steve, they had enough basic savvy to get one off the ground and manoeuvre it through the air, flying it not with the aid of the overloaded instrument panel but by the seat of their pants. The chance of making a fatal error had been greatly reduced by the provision of an 'idiot board' – an abbreviated list covering the essential controls, checks and settings a pilot was required to implement on take-off and landing.

But the list did not tell them everything they needed to know before embarking on their journey. And since they had temporarily immobilized their guide, Side-Winder, and the two MX pilots sent to fly them back to the Federation, there was no one to tell them the planes were due to be refuelled for the return flight from a large storage tank buried in the sandy soil alongside the grass landing strip.

With Jodi's help, Kelso had filled two zipper-bags with food and other useful items from the beach store before leaving but if Side-Winder had not revealed its hiding place they would not have known such treasures lay buried beneath their feet. Similarly, it did not occur to them that there might also be a fuel dump. Even if it had, they would have been unlikely to discover its location. Like the beach store with its cunningly-arranged pebble lid, the access points to the fuel tank were hidden from unwelcome visitors beneath the weathered stump of a dead tree whose centre-section could not be unlocked without the aid of a special tool.

The truth was, they were so pleased at having outwitted the trio sent to bring them in, the idea that the planes might be short of gas never entered their heads. They had only one thought – to get the hell out of Long Point as fast as possible.

Steve was flying with Clearwater in the passenger seat and Jodi's haul from the beach store in the cargo bay; Jodi herself was riding with Kelso and they had Cadillac in the cargo hold plus the second bag of looted goodies.

Like Jodi and Kelso, Steve had checked the fuel state immediately after activating the batteries that powered the instrument panel and on-board systems. The visual display, which was graduated to show the fuel state as a percentage gave a reading of 75%. In the lower half of the dial there were four small rectangular windows set side by side. The first three were red and so was the bottom quarter of the fourth window; the upper part was white.

Since his mind's eye equated white as neutral and therefore representing nothingness, Steve assumed, not unreasonably that the three red markers matched the 75% reading, indicating three full tanks and one almost empty. There was a slight problem with the thin red strip in the bottom quarter of the fourth window but the fact that 3.25 did not divide neatly into 75% did not ring any alarm bells. He merely concluded that a zero per cent reading on the dial left the pilot with a quarter of a tank to cover those last few miles home before the engine went dead.

He was wrong all the way down the line. And Jodi and Kelso, by the same perverse logic, made the same mistake. It was almost as if their brains, not wishing to disappoint their owners, had obligingly interpreted the observable facts to fit their expectations.

The reverse was true. The red bar in each rectangle indicated an *empty* tank, and the percentage reading applied to the tank currently switched into the fuel supply system. The pilots of both Skyride had flown in using the fourth, reserve tank and had already used up a quarter of its contents.

It was only when they were in the air and had been heading west for an hour and a half that his euphoric mood started to evaporate. The red segment in the fourth window was creeping *upwards*, not downwards and the needle indicating the percentage of fuel remaining was dropping too fast. He said nothing to Clearwater or to Jodi and Kelso – now flying off his starboard side with their wing tip line up with his tail – but thirty minutes later, after checking every knob, switch and dial, his worse fears were confirmed. The other three fuel tanks were empty.

Shit, shit, and triple shit ...!

Steve selected the plane-to-plane channel. They had maintained radio silence since leaving Long Point to prevent any electronic eavesdroppers getting a fix on their position. With no word from Sid Winder or the two MX pilots for over two hours, alarm bells would be ringing all over Grand Central and once Karlstrom found out what had happened – if he didn't know already – the long knives would be out. Now was not the time to start broadcasting their predicament but Steve had no choice; this was a life-threatening emergency.

'Breaker One to Breaker Two. What's your fuel state, over?'

Kelso's voice came back through his headset. 'Funny you should ask. Kaz and I have been trying to work out why we were burning up so much fuel at the optimum cruising speed and altitude. We started off with 75% and now we're down to 30.'

'I got 37 on the dial,' said Steve. 'That's the good news. The bad news is that reading only applies to one tank. We've been flying on the reserve since take-off. The other three are empty.'

'Jeezuss!' Kelso cursed volubly. 'So how much does the tank hold? Hang on a minute – Jodi's tryin' to see if there's a vidifax version of the handling notes stashed somewhere. You got one?'

'Stay tuned ...' Steve told Clearwater what to look for. They searched the cockpit and drew a blank. 'No joy, Dave. Best thing we can do is throttle back. Be careful though. These things fall out of the sky below 65. But if we can burn off less fuel we can maybe extend the mileage.'

'By how much? We're burning it up faster than you are because we got a bigger load! Or have you

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