

MISSION TO MIGHTADORE
(working title only)

Book 7 in the Jackelian series.

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CHAPTER ONE

Prequel

The Republic of Southern Texicana (26th century: Julian calendar).

Lieutenant Chalt Sambuchino halted the armoured car in the foothills of Del Rio. The hills ahead were crested with large, dense red oaks and there was far too high a chance of breaking an axle if he tried to push the boxy metal vehicle through the treeline. There wasn't any sizeable population in this part of the republic, no real towns or villages to speak of, so when news of the strange sighting came in, the Federal Army at Fort Padre had been the force that the local vaqueros had naturally turned to. Chalt rarely trusted the word of the vaqueros. He knew all-too well how superstitious these semi-itinerant shepherds who drove sheep and cattle from the back of their mules could act. Uneducated in the ways of book learning, the vaqueros loved getting roaring drunk on mescal to stay warm at night as they slept in their upland pastures. It didn't take much to set them off into fits of gullible tale-telling. The mere sight of a plane's contrail out of the Reindeer Empire would bring the herds-people tottering in with hungover tales of winged serpents threatening their living. Still, at least Chalt's reluctant investigation made a change from chasing bandits from the lawless Dukedom of Palacan back across the Rio Grande.

Chalt wasn't expecting much to come from this day's duty, which is why he had only taken one trooper with him, Corporal Sérgio Xavier, sweating as badly as the lieutenant in the summer heat inside his khaki fatigue blouse. The heat of the corporal's body in the passenger cabin combined with the shepherd in the back acting as their guide made the journey particularly unpleasant. After stopping the car, Chalt adjusted his black leather belt, a brass plate embossed with the number seven in the centre, bending the cartridge pouches on either side so he could slip out of their little sloped iron box on four rubber wheels. Chalt carried the weight of a seven-shot automatic in his leather holster, and Sérgio reached for his .45-caliber submachine gun as he clacked opened the door on his side of the car. The 7th Armored Cavalry Division of the Federal Army had recently been issued the gun because of its portability and size, the weapon nicknamed the *Grease Pump* by the troopers for its resemblance to the mechanic's tool.

'You think we will need that?'

'Better to have it and not need it.' Sérgio was an old hand in the Federal Army. He had no intention of being set upon by southern footpads and having his coming retirement plans fatally interrupted. Chalt and Sérgio didn't have much in common on the surface of it. Chalt a fresh-faced academy man from a privileged family, Sérgio a

bluff ranker of uncertain pedigree. However, Chalt respected the corporal's experience and knew he should use it to plaster over the gaps of his own inexperience.

'Maybe we will find a winged serpent to shoot?'

Chalt's joke brought a frown to the shepherd's face. The wizened old man crossed himself over his leather jerkin and indicated the wooded hills. 'You will see the truth. It is on the other side.'

'There is a lake over there,' stated Chalt, leaning into the armoured car's cabin to consult the map for a second. 'Lake Wise.'

'My people call it Aguas Oscuras,' said the shepherd. 'It is a haunted place.'

'Haunted by what?'

'Ghosts. The cannibal ghosts of the Roca Malo.'

Chalt groaned. *Bad Rock*. If the old goat-pusher's parents had bothered to pay for their peasant child to attend a school in the pueblo, he might have known that barely three percent of humanity's once-teeming masses had survived the ancient comet strike's blast and long protracted winter. By that measure, there wasn't a place in the world left unhaunted by the ghosts of the Great Dying. *A haunted world*, mused Chalt. *I have often found it so.*

Sérgio hung back to watch the shepherd walk ahead of them. 'Do you think there is anything to the colonel's fears?'

Chalt shrugged. 'Up ahead? I suspect not. But dangerous times lay ahead, that much I know.' It was natural for Sérgio to be worried. If fresh incursions by the Cals led to war, that was the one thing guaranteed to derail the coming end to Sérgio's service in the Federal Army. All military commissions would rapidly be extended, and it would not matter whether you were the son of an aristocrat or the son of a washerwoman. By all accounts, the bloody dynastic war between House Hamilton, House Zhu and House Salazar in the seven coastal kingdoms of Cal had been viciously settled in favour of the Zhus. For the first time in decades there was a single King of the Cals in the great Crystal Palace at Oxnard. *And their peace will be our strife*. 'There was a conjunction between Venus and Jupiter in the sky recently. I am willing to wager that what the vaqueros saw was that conjunction combined with a few too many bottles of mescal.'

Sérgio was not so easily convinced. 'The colonel told me that Cal airships have been sighted on our side of the border.'

'Airships drift all over the place,' said the lieutenant, 'that is their nature.'

'And we drift too,' muttered Sérgio, 'towards another war for brave Xavier.'

Chalt, Sérgio and the peasant marched up the slope and through the red oak trees' pleasant shade. On the other side of the fringe of woodland lay a reverse slope down towards Lake Wise, three acres of clear blue waters with banks of purple-flowered meadows stretching out to an extensive stretch of tall oak forest. It would have been a far more idyllic scene if the meadows hadn't been left smoking, blackened and cratered, the nearest line of oaks splintered and felled. Embedded into the ground was a central mass of black metal, etched hull plates cracked to reveal half-melted girders and decking, like a tidal wave had snapped the superstructure off some ugly nautical destroyer mid-

engagement and washed it inland to rest here. Stretched in rings around the otherworldly mass were smaller circles of devastation, torn-off metal fragments, corpses and smouldering wreckage.

‘So you see now. Not a winged serpent to shoot. All the serpents are dead.’ The shepherd indicated the blackened bodies dotting the meadow with a bitter hint of vindication in his voice.

The corporal stared with disbelief at the blackened landscape. ‘Surely this wreckage is too large to be the result of a plane crash?’

‘I don’t believe it was ever aerodynamic,’ said Chalt.

Sérgio coughed, as he often did to indicate mild displeasure. ‘I am a simple soldier. What does that *palabra* mean?’

‘It means those metal remains do not look like they were built to fly through the air,’ said Chalt, raising a hand towards the crash site. In fact, to Chalt’s eyes the debris looked like a cathedral built of dark steel had been ripped into pieces, with one corner of the structure cast angrily down here by the Redeemer. ‘There are no wings or tail or propellers that I can see.’

‘It arrived from somewhere, lieutenant.’ Sérgio looked at the shepherd. ‘Did you see it crash here, old vaquero?’

‘I am not old, only seventy-two. My mother lived to be eighty-one.’

‘Well done. Now, did you see this thing fall from the sky?’

‘Not from the sky, from *Hell*. It was expelled by El Diablo.’

‘Everything down there came out of the ground?’ asked Chalt, surprised.

‘From a gateway torn into Hell itself,’ said the old shepherd, his voice quivering with fear from the memory. He pointed to the far side of the lake. ‘We were camped over there for the evening when the land began to shake and tremble. I had warned my people not to let our cattle water by the Aguas Oscuras, to camp inside the shade of the forest instead. But who listens to a wise rider such as me? We woke in terror from the shaking, then watched a doorway into Hell crack open in the sky, a crevice of bright fire in the air twisting and dancing above the lake for many minutes. Soon after we fled to the top of the hill, this fiery metal altar of darkness was tossed through the crack by El Diablo, exploding and burning across the ground. A rain of devils and brimstone followed. Young Manjarrez’s mule died of shock. Three prize round-horns panicked and escaped to flee into the forest.’

‘Show us.’

‘I will not venture any closer. The lake’s bed is white with bones. Ancient bones. El Diablo drowns his enemies in the waters of the Aguas Oscuras, just as the lake’s hungry ghosts consume the souls of fools who wander these hills alone at night.’

‘But you are not alone. You have the lieutenant and brave Xavier.’ Sérgio reassuringly raised his submachine gun. ‘And I have this.’

‘Then I suppose you too will ignore this rider’s wisdom.’ The stubborn vaquero turned his back on them and hobbled through the trees, heading back towards where they had left the armoured car.

‘Old peasant,’ growled Sérgio. ‘If his prize cattle were fattening on the grass by the water he would be down there quick enough.’

‘Leave him be. He had the courage to bring us here. That is more than I can say for the rest of his clan.’

Sérgio sniffed the air, uneasily. ‘Maybe he’s the sensible one, lieutenant. Whatever happened here, it is wrong. I can feel it in my bones. That is mess down there is unnatural.’

‘At least is not the Cals, corporal. We have a report to file at Fort Padre. Unnatural by itself will hardly satisfy our superiors. Let us press on.’

They paced carefully down the hill towards the meadows and the lake. Trying not show his nerves, Chalt drew his pistol, taking comfort from its heft. Apart from the incongruous nature of the debris, much about the lake appeared normal. Bubbles of air broke the surface from bass and catfish, a blackbuck antelope dipped its neck at the edge of the distant forest, keeping a wary eye on the approaching humans. Clouds of insects danced above the meadows, attracted by the lake waters. As Chalt drew closer, he heard the ping of cooling metal from shards of blackened debris. When they reached the first of the corpses, matters did not improve. He fought down his fear. The body in front of Chalt wasn’t human – at best, humanoid – six-foot tall, naked with dark scaled skin like a salamander, a head that resembled an elongated bishop’s mitre, large bulbous eyes and a ridge of gills along the neck. What lingered longest in his memory was its hideous mouth. Almost human lips, but a serrated fanged mouth, grinning and leering in death.

‘Sweet Redeemer,’ whispered the corporal. He cautiously nudged the body with his boot but it remained still and dead. ‘The old vaquero wasn’t drunk. No Cal, this. Foul devils, truly!’

As a graduate of the Tal-Houston Military Academy, Chalt could read, and he favoured old classics in translation – the rare scattering of ancient novels that had survived being burnt for fuel in the Great Dying’s hundred-year winter, either tossed in the fire or lost as ephemeral records inside long rusted-away computer máquinas. Writers such as the bard Frank Herbert had much to say about the possible origins of creatures such as *this*. ‘No. Not devils. Visitors from somewhere very far away, I think.’

The corporal managed to stop himself from gagging. ‘Not so very far away for me. Brave Xavier has walked the aftermath of more than one battlefield in his time, but such a stench! Never anything like it. Those devils may resemble rotting fish, but they smell a thousand times worse.’

The two soldiers picked their way toward the wreckage’s central jagged mass, impaled still smoking into the ground. Chalt was again reminded of an ocean liner broken into fragments – and this wreck one of the pieces. He could see a hint of corridors and bulkheads through rents in the dark metal, but the whole structure had been melted beyond recovery and extreme waves of heat still throbbed deep within it, intense enough to keep them from trying to explore further.

‘Not many answers from this slag heap,’ said Chalt.

‘Be glad of it,’ said Sérgio. ‘Whatever those monsters had to say . . .’ His voice

trailed away. ‘Wait, something moving at five o’clock!’

A panel on the ground shoved to the side, revealing a figure trying to raise itself from the grass. Chalt felt a cold shiver of relief as he realised what they had spotted was every bit as human as the lieutenant was. A large dark-bearded man of late middle age wearing a torn blue jacket and waistcoat with a peaked naval-style captain’s cap shading cunning eyes. He seemed overdressed for the humble landscape, as though he had recently left a swish naval function at the Secretaría de Marina at Tal-Houston before having this mess of burning wreckage dropped down on his head. If he had simply been travelling past Lake Wise, he was surely the unluckiest sailor alive. His face was blackened with grime and smoke, bruised and cut too.

Sérgio advanced on the survivor. ‘Now there’s a funny sight among all this. You think he’s a crashed northern aviator?’

The survivor saw the two soldiers and tugged at a sabre belted to his side, but hardly possessed the strength to draw it. Sérgio flourished the snub little submachine gun and then lifted it to the side to indicate he did not intend to use the weapon unless provoked. ‘Don’t be foolish, big man. We’re not bandits here to strip you of your boots. We mean you no ill.’

The figure rolled to the side and flung his arms pleadingly towards the sky, groaning and raising his voice to jabber loudly and fast in a foreign language.

Sérgio knelt by the man and unhooked a water canteen from the back of his belt. He passed it into the survivor’s hands and watched as the stranger glugged madly at the liquid. The survivor coughed and made what sounded like another pleading lament in his strange language.

Sérgio shrugged. ‘What do you want from me? If it’s a shot of tequila you’re after, you’ll have to wait until we get back to the fort’s infirmary. Look at the anchor and trident symbol on his cap. A sea-dog. Is it possible he was fishing the lake when this wreck crashed on top of his boat?’

‘A face as pasty as his? Not nearly tanned enough. I think I prefer the crashed-aviator-from-the-Reindeer-Empire theory to that.’

‘You might be onto something, lieutenant. That gabber sounds familiar . . . like an Empire merchant? Is he speaking Reindeer?’

‘English-norte,’ said Chalt, wearing his aristocratic family’s education on his sleeve again. ‘The Reindeer Empire’s official language is English-norte. There is a little of that in his speech. But some of what this old dog is saying resembles High Hong, while other words sound almost like Länder-tongue.’ Faced with this unintelligible polyglot jumble, the lieutenant fell back on universal sign language, tapping his chest. ‘Chalt Sambuchino.’ He reached out to the corporal and tapped his shoulder. ‘Sérgio Xavier.’ Then Chalt reached out and rested his hand on the bearded man’s jacket. ‘And you are . . .?’

The survivor’s eyes widened in understanding. His fist weakly rapped against his chest. ‘Black. Jared Black.’

Sérgio wrapped his tongue around the strange name. ‘Jareed Blarck. Where do you

think he hails from with a name as odd as that?’

‘Also somewhere far away. I don’t think he’s any local fisherman,’ said Chalt. *Not even close.* A sudden cold shiver ran down the lieutenant’s spine. He glanced around at the field of rotting corpses. Hundreds of lifeless monsters. *How did they die? Did you kill them?* Murdered monsters scattered all around, and whom was this strange creature laying among the dead? *A bad omen or a good one?* His answer came in the swish of rotors approaching from the north. Chalt didn’t need to spy the white and green shield on the side of her dark black envelope with its rampant brown bear clutching seven crimson stars to know that she was a Cal frigate. Along with so much lost high science, only the rapacious Cals possessed the secret of constructing hybrid air vehicles.

‘War, then,’ whispered Chalt, as much to himself. *Damn.*

CHAPTER TWO

Six-ball

The Steamman Free State (Two million+ Years A.D: Julian calendar).

Fierce roaring broke out around the arena as the platform emerged into the open air, making Seline Templar even more nervous than she'd been a second before. *Don't look nervous. Don't appear afraid,* she willed herself. *You're here to take part and not make a complete fool of yourself. Avoid ending up as a smear on the wall.*

'They think we're going to lose,' whispered Adam, by her side as the elevator platform juddered to a halt. They stepped off its cold metal grating and onto the arena's sandy soil. Grit crunched under their heels. Seline's leather boots were laced every bit as tight as her gut. *Let's get on with this before I explode from anxiety.*

'More fool them,' said Seline, keeping a brave face for Adam. Reliable, shy Adam Creag came from a merchant family that made a good living by importing coal into the Steamman Free State. She gazed around. The Hanging Arena of the Free State was the biggest open space in the city, suspended in the void between two towering mountains on a dizzying web of steel cables; a long oval stadium with countless evil ways to cut your glory short. Thousands of eyes stared down at her from tiered seating. They sat in the distance, above the high wall ringing the oval floor, watching and gawking, but few of those eyes were remotely human. The arena was considered a rite of passage among the local youth. *But how could we not take part? Avoid participating and be thought cowards?*

Like Seline, her team was composed of the younger members of the city's tiny human community. She was friends with them all, though in truth, some she liked far more than others. As members of humanity, they were all bonded by the fact that in this foreign land they stood out as oddities and curiosities. Immigrants and strangers in a strange land. Creatures of flesh and blood in a nation of sentient, self-reproducing machines. Another elevator platform entered the arena with tall Scarlett Deller, the fast-talking daughter of an explorer whose father was absent from the city for large portions of the year. Lastly came refined, superior Sophie Fox, whose parents served as the Jackelian Kingdom's embassy staff. Adam was to ride with Sophie today and he left to walk beside her. Seline liked Adam more than she was willing to admit. Certainly not to the other girls in the city. A male their own age was a rare thing among these quick-witted machines of the mountains.

Seline took in the arena floor. Half the players had arrived before them, other elevators still worked, carrying the remaining participants into the arena. Many of the

early arrivals knelt praying to their pantheon of strange robot gods, the Steamo Loa. Seline's gaze passed over the chanting, nodding robots and stopped on her best friend among the steammen, Alios Hardcircuit. The young robot had a gentle nature that was unfortunately burdened with a warrior parentage. The pair of adults who had contributed most to his soul and programming, his *birth* in robot terms, ranked great among the Steamman Knights. But Alios would never be a fighter. Not if he lived a thousand years – which given he was a slow-aging sentient machine, he might very well do. Defying the course laid down for Alios by his race had won him few friends among the other steammen, and it was a symptom of this unpopularity that Alios had failed selection by every local side. No, Alios would be risking his metal neck on Seline's team this day. She went over to him.

'Aren't you praying for victory today, Alios?' asked Seline.

'It seems a base, unworthy thing,' said Alios Hardcircuit, 'to pray for personal glory. Besides, the spirits of the Loa only visit the mightiest of us, touching those that need guidance during times of great importance to our race. That is not I.'

'You're always worthy to me,' said Seline.

'That is kind of you to say so.'

'It's no kindness,' smiled Seline, 'it's the simple truth.'

'Is the truth ever simple?' The young steamman turned to look at their massive six-wheeled racer. 'Perhaps. We shall see.'

Given how fast Alios could speed around on his legs, it was an irony that the steamman would shortly be climbing up into the racer's cockpit alongside her. Like a good number of the Free State's warrior-born, his form resembled that of a centaur cast in steel. A four-legged main body with a two-armed humanoid torso at the front, a pair of short stacks arching out of his spine to act as exhaust pipes for his power system. The face at the front of Alios's round metal head resembled a rough approximation of a human male, with mouth, nose and cheeks cast like the mask on a knight's helmet. Instead of eyes he possessed a visor-like vision-plate that pulsed with crimson light. Sometimes the light slowed like the pupil on a Cyclops, before darting side to side. Seline had known the robot long enough to be able to interpret emotions just from the dance of light across his vision-plate.

'I'll tell you one truth,' said Seline. 'We're going to give everyone who turned you away from their team a really good reason to regret it.'

'Reasoned caution is required as well as wild courage inside the arena,' said Alios. 'Six-Ball is a game of strategy as much as it is a game of brute physical prowess.'

'You do the thinking,' said Seline. 'Let me handle the bruising.'

'Oh dear,' murmured Alios. 'That's what I was afraid of. Perhaps I should be praying after all. How do you feel about playing today?'

'I read of a human game called Polo that's similar to Six-ball. That means we probably invented it and your people copied it. Besides, this is the seventh game of the day,' said Seline. 'That's got to be lucky, right?'

'I believe seven to be just a simple odd number with no special statistical

significance.’

A disembodied mechanical voice rang loud and clear across the Hanging Arena. ‘Riders prepare to mount your racers.’

Sophie Fox came strolling past Seline with her co-rider, Adam. Adam almost looked as nervous as Seline felt. Sophie, of course, might have been taking a leisurely stroll around a park with a parasol to shield her from the sun. *As cool as the shade under the awnings.* ‘

I think my racer should take lead position,’ said Sophie, as though the thought had only just occurred to her. ‘Yes, that would be best.’

‘Alios is more skilled in that position,’ said Seline.

‘With you to drive him, naturally?’

‘I don’t think I can match Alios on point,’ coughed Adam.

Sophie shot him a withering look. ‘Of course you can.’

‘We agreed on our strategy.’ *We certainly argued about it long enough.* ‘The inverted pyramid with Alios as lead scout.’ This was to say three racers wide at the front, two hanging back mid-maze for word of a ball strike, and one in defence around the goal tunnel, protecting their end-zone.

‘Oh, the strategy is satisfactory,’ said Sophie. ‘Just not my role within it.’

Seline didn’t want to cast doubt on Adam’s abilities, which is no doubt what Sophie had been counting on. ‘There’s a lot of balls and a lot of directions to scout,’ said Seline. ‘Maybe we can share point.’

Sophie glanced at Adam, then more meaningfully at Seline. ‘I’m not terribly good at sharing.’

Yes, and didn’t you go to great lengths to get Adam in your cockpit as your co-rider. ‘Well, let’s try and share our victory with as much equanimity as we might share a defeat.’

‘I’m not terribly good at losing, either,’ said Sophie. ‘Thankfully, that’s nothing I intend becoming accustomed to.’

Somehow, I’m sure you won’t have to. Seline cast around for the rest of the team. Scarlett Deller was already half-way to her racer on the far side of the arena, passing three other vehicles waiting to be being mounted by Kingdom riders. Scarlett had paired with a caravaneer, a young man called Hamden, a likely lad visiting the Free State for trade who fancied his chances inside the Hanging Arena. He was used to horses and mules and had, he claimed, done well as a jockey in a stadium back home. Seline reckoned he was in for a disappointment as to how well a talent for horse racing would translate here.

Seline saw a slightly older male approaching. She could tell from the swagger it was Martin Rawstone, as cocky and full of himself as always. The boy had a good six years on the rest of them, along with fifty pound of muscle. *Most of it between his ears.* ‘I heard the rumours and I had to come and see for myself. You’re really leading a six-ball team out today?’

‘No, Rawstone, I’m here to polish the racers.’

‘At least that would be safer, princess.’

Princess, that was his teasing nickname for her. Of course, she was anything but. ‘You’re meant to be a guide, Rawstone. Haven’t you got anyone to lead down the mountains today? Or up? Or around.’

‘Hell, if I did, I would tell them to wait for tomorrow. This is going to be something worth seeing I reckon.’

‘Did you have to pay extra to come down to the arena and annoy me?’

‘I got friends in high places, princess. Of course, in the Mechancian Spine *all* the places are high.’

‘You want to play, Martin Rawstone? We could bump that caravaner from the team and you can ride shotgun with Scarlett.’

‘When I play I like to know I have a chance of winning.’

‘We don’t just have a chance,’ insisted Seline, ‘we *will* win.’

‘You want to make a wager on that?’

‘Name it!’ almost as soon as Seline had spoken, she regretted her words.

‘Well, neither one of us has got any money worth a spit,’ said Rawstone. ‘So let’s make the prize a favour. If I win, you have to do one for me, and vice versa.’

‘What on earth do you think I would ask you to do?’

‘I don’t know. Do a jig around the mountains when I next go down to the low country? You can name it. But don’t waste too much thought on it. Because this is one wager I reckon I’ll be collecting on.’

‘Prepare to be disappointed!’ Seline threw after him as he left.

‘Hmmm,’ hawed Alios.

Seline shot the steamman a look. ‘You have something to say?’

‘I believe that Mister Rawstone might know something you don’t.’

‘Like what?’

‘It would be speculation to say at this point,’ warned Alios. ‘But he is very well informed for a softbody.’

‘Then maybe somebody should have informed him that he’d be far better off backing the underdogs today,’ muttered Seline.

Arena crews came rushing forward towards the racers, each crew pushing a ramp so large it might have passed for a castle siege engine. Seline waved to her friends and mounted the ramp, climbing to her cockpit at the front of the six-wheeled machine. Like Seline’s racer, her friends’ machines were forty feet of burnished brass-coloured metal resting on six wheels, rings of hardened black rubber each standing taller than her. The racers looked like hulking wheeled beetles, living machines. Given that sentient robots had built these vehicles, their design shouldn’t have come as a surprise. Instead of pincers, the forward prow of each racer sported a folding segmented arm with a slab-like mallet end to hammer a ball. She would be controlling that arm. Her racer’s metal hull sported a lotus silhouette engraved on the side along with the number Two. Seline’s leg muscles twitched with nerves the higher she climbed. On top, she halted before the cockpit’s two open spaces. The cockpit’s forward position was known as the *Reins*. The

rear spot was known as the *Scout*. The bucket seats had been adjusted in advance for each pair of riders, but even given the extra space created by Seline's relatively slim young build, it was still a squeeze when Alios occupied the position behind her. As soon as they sat down equipment panels and instruments began to slide forward from either side, further cramping them. *It's a good thing I'm not claustrophobic.*

No sooner had Seline settled inside the racer than a loud voice sounded across the arena again, trembling speakers set along the wall. 'Seventh session. The Brass Lotus versus the Titanium Rose. Let both teams prepare. Take your positions. May the Loa and your ancestors preserve your lives.'

Seline tutted to herself. Six games a day; two teams facing off in each match. The traditional team names were allocated by lot and the *Brass Lotus* was considered the unluckiest team name among all of them. Few sides won games racing with it. *Plenty of luck – all of it bad, so far.* She watched the six racers comprising the *Titanium Rose's* team motor to the distant edge of the arena. The length of the arena floor stretched out divided into seven sectors: red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo and violet. Seline's team started at red. The opposing racers began from violet at the far end of the arena.

Seline slipped on her driving gloves and sat nervously flexing her fingers. Steel walls began to rise around the arena floor, turning the Hanging Arena into a randomly formed maze. It was the reason the spectator seats sat so high, so they could stare down onto the game's action and observe every piece of carnage caught between those walls without interruption of their view. The cockpit of Seline's racer started to vibrate, a bee-like drone, but this was nothing to do with the powerful engine throbbing under her racer's chassis. The noise screen was a clever technique of the Free State's engineers to mute the racket from the arena's crowds. The mob could view the racers' path through the maze, and when the maze changed at random as the game progressed, the arena adjudicators didn't want more popular teams receiving an unfair advantage through spectator-yelled cheats of which direction their favourites should head. Just to prove how smart they were, the engineers had rigged their clever little sonic disruptor to allow in the other sounds of the race. She could hear the throb of her racer's engine, the little hisses of super-compressed steam escaping from its boiler. Seline could just about hear the baying crowds . . . but hear them as she might a low, indistinct surf rolling across a beach. *They could be cheering me on or wishing for my death, all the same to me now.*

Seline could keep quiet no longer. 'Here we go,' she muttered. Seline restlessly tested the brake and accelerator pedal, holding the clutch in neutral as the racer trembled beneath her.

A voice from the adjudicator's stand sounded through the speaker on her dashboard, a little grey box shaking amidst the confusing riot of dials and knobs. 'Ball insertion in five seconds. Four. Three. Two. One. PLAY!'

On the last word, Seline shoved the gear into forward position and gunned the racer. This metal steed only had three gears. Neutral, forward and reverse. But Seline only planned to need one. *Forward . . . hard charging all the way.* She released the handbrake and the racer leapt forward, six wheels squealing in a cloud of dust.

‘Scouts launched,’ called Alios behind her. A pair of spider-like robots leapt from the side of their racer’s hull and scampered forward. They were what the steammen called mu-bodies – multiple units – simple drones controlled by Alios Hardcircuit. What they saw, Alios saw. What they felt, Alios felt. The scouts rushed ahead, scattering through the maze. There was a blast of compressed gas from below one of the scouts and Seline saw the drone hurtling skyward to land on top of a lower maze wall, scuttling along the metal ridge, its head turning as it – and Alios – hunted for one of the two randomly inserted balls blasted into the maze. As Seline rounded the first bend in the maze, she was nearly driven into the steel barrier wall by Scarlett Deller’s wildly swerving racer. Scarlett’s vehicle flew past, grabbing the lead. As always, the explorer’s daughter showed no caution in how she drove. Sadly, the two scout drones under the operation of her back seat caravaner were just as out of control, tumbling around in front of Seline’s racer like a pair of drunken sailors weaving down the street.

‘What’s the point of being lead outrider if you can’t scout properly?’ growled Seline, throwing the steering wheel to the side and narrowly avoided colliding with Scarlett’s madly dashing drones.

This isn’t starting well. Discipline in her team had gone to pieces. Rather than the tight pyramid formation Seline had been counting on, this was quickly degenerating into an uncoordinated free-for-all, with every racer out for their own glory. The steel section of maze ahead was broken into three corridors and Scarlett Deller hurtled through the leftmost, with Sophie and Adam’s racer cannoning down the middle passage. *I guess we’re going right then.* Seline accelerated as fast as she could while still making the third turning, tipping the racer on three wheels as they swept past, eliciting a worried yap from Alios. Her steamman co-rider recovered his composure and focused back on acting as scout. ‘Turn right in twenty yards, then forward thirty yards, passing two turnings on the left and entering the third passage.’

She trusted the young steamman’s directions implicitly. Alios rarely called them wrong. Of course, if either his scouts or route were out, they’d be leaving the racer and perhaps their bodies wrapped around a sheet of metal as thick as a warship’s bulkheads.

‘Balls?’ asked Seline.

‘Language, please,’ joked Alios.

‘If I run over a steamman sense of humour on the way to violet, you’ll be the first one to find out,’ said Seline.

‘Sadly, I have yet to locate a ball,’ said Alios. ‘Second on the right then first left.’

‘If you haven’t scouted us a ball, where are you pulling these directions from?’

‘I believe you’ll direct our racer more safely if you ride in ignorance,’ said Alios.

Now I can’t even tell if you’re joking. Seline followed the steamman’s urgings at high speed, taking out her frustrations about not encountering a ball yet. Briefly she wondered if Scarlett or Sophie had found one. They were meant to peel off a scout to locate their teammates and pass on word of a ball possession, but Seline wouldn’t put it past her friends to barrel forward and take on the opposition with only six wheels and a single crew. *It’s no wonder the bookies’ odds are so miserable for the Bronze Lotus. We’re not*

playing as a team.

Seline pushed ahead, swinging through the maze of steel barriers, sometimes scraping within inches of the walls. Little lights in the corner of the steel walls winked gold at her. *So, we're in yellow now, and still no ball.* No sight of the enemy, either. Until they appeared at last. Racer after racer shot past an opening in the vast steel wall to her left. Seline counted all six of the opposition side. Each roaring metal machine had the outline of a rose gilded in silver across their chassis. *At least now I know why we hadn't encountered them yet.*

'The Titanium Roses are playing the Spear,' noted Alios. Seline had to admire his composure under pressure. *So they are.* Two racers at the front, mallet arms swinging and driving the ball forward, a column of four racers behind. *The Spear.* An all or nothing play. It was the perfect strategy to choose when ball possession practically fell into your team's lap very early on in the scout. And with typical *Brass Lotus* luck, Seline's remaining ball was probably rattling around in some distant corner of the maze. The *Roses* had abandoned their end-zone, left it undefended, driving down through the maze like a hurled javelin, ready to rip through Seline's scattered pyramid formation and overwhelm the single *Brass Lotus* racer she'd left defending the goal tunnel.

'A high-risk strategy for them,' said Alios. 'If we locate the second ball between here and their end-zone, we can hammer a goal in completely unopposed.'

Anger boiled up inside Seline. *But they believe it isn't a risk. Because they think we're second rate amateurs who'll crumple at the first sight of a racer with a rose etched across its panelwork.* 'I'm in no mood for an extended maze tour.' She pushed the stick into reverse and stamped on the accelerator pedal like she was flattening a cobra. Seline ignored Alios's increasingly panicked cries as she crooked her neck around, steering and watching the maze walls while they hurtled back in full reverse.

'This is hasty!'

'Not hasty enough yet for *me*,' snarled Seline. *Time it. Time it.* Her racer reached another cut overlooking the *Titanium Rose's* route and just before they drove straight into the steel wall behind them she threw the steering wheel to the left, spinning them reversing directly into the course of the spear formation. Seline kept the angle of the arc, swinging them within inches of the lead racer. She caught a brief glimpse of two shocked steammen in the cockpit as she hurtled past at ramming speed, its rider attempting to avert a collision. Seline's mallet arm hammered the ball out of the rival racer's possession, ricocheting it off a maze wall. She attacked the ball, propelling it back further still, continuing in full reverse even as the *Titanium Rose's* column started braking, trying to find a suitable maze corridor for a fast u-turn.

At last a slice of luck in her favour, followed by a second . . . the steel maze began one of the game's periodic reconfigurations, walls sliding up, down, forward and back. One vast steel barrier came sliding in front of the broken spear formation, cutting the convoy in half. 'We only have three racers chasing us now!' she yelled back to Alios. She caught a glimpse of the steamman's two scouts dancing around ahead of them. 'Find me a fast route all the way to violet.'

‘Left, hard brake, right, then straight ahead for forty yards,’ called Alios.

Seline heeded the instructions, just about to gain the straight when another racer swerved wobbling behind her from out of an intersection, cutting her pursuit in two. Seline’s eyes widened as she saw who it was who’d swung in behind them. *Scarlett Deller!* And the girl had slid in between the lead *Titanium Rose* vehicle and the rear two racers. Scarlett played her hand admirably, slowing down and banking her racer left and right to stop the lagging pair of *Titanium Roses* from overtaking her. Beneath those brass-rimmed goggles there was an even more determined glint in Scarlett’s eyes than normal. It was one-on-one, now, and Seline was determined to make the opposition pay for underestimating her team. *You want to leave your tunnel undefended? Here comes our bill for your arrogance.* Alios’s two scouts had point, eyes ahead on the maze’s new layout. That meant the pursuit vehicle could only follow and copy what Seline’s racer did, trusting she wasn’t going to see them both smeared across the maze. Given how little the machine race truly trusted their organic allies, believing humanity one slice short of the full loaf of crazy; Seline just knew the pursuit was going to be hesitant. *Their hesitation, my advantage.*

Seline squeezed every second of lead from Scarlett running as rolling roadblock. Hurtling through the maze so fast that Alios’s leaping scouts found it hard to keep forward of them. Soon she had a lead over the sole pursuing *Titanium Rose*. Seline was passing through indigo when the maze reconfigured again, but this only made her job easier, wiping out whatever maze-map the desperately pursuing racer had scouted. She was closing in on the *Rose*’s goal tunnel. Seline heard the roar of an engine echoing between the steel walls. *My little Rose friend, no doubt.* Further away, a muted explosion could be heard, thuds of a blast wave bouncing around the maze. Someone had cornered too fast, misremembered the maze layout, slammed into the walls. *Please let that be one of theirs and not one of ours. And let them be able to walk away.* She saw an opening at the far end of the arena, the dark semi-circular cave of their foe’s goal tunnel sitting there, just begging her to tap the ball in and win the game. This was her destiny, now. She could feel it. *Nothing can stop us.* Until something did. A racer came seemingly out of nowhere, flying out of a gap in the steel wall behind them. It was Sophie and Adam’s vehicle, and Seline had to throw her racer to the side, the other vehicle swerving left and missing hers by the width of the gloss on their metal chassis. As Seline fought to regain control of their spinning vehicle, a third racer appeared. Not friendly. The same pursuing *Titanium Rose* racer who had been dogging her rear bumper every yard of the way.

Seline cursed and tried to brake to a halt. The near collision with Sophie and Adam had cost her the easy shot into the *Titanium Rose*’s goal tunnel. Seline and Sophie’s racers both spun about in the dust, attempting to point their machines back in the game. Meanwhile, the pursuing *Titanium Rose* vehicle tore between them and skidded to halt in front of the goal tunnel. It sat there, nose on, revving its engine, mallet arms flexing as the steamman rider prepared to act as goalkeeper. Seline cursed as she counted only ten feet of clear tunnel on either side of the racer’s chassis.

‘Miss Fox’s racer has the clearest shot,’ observed Alios.

Make a pass to her? Have Sophie Fox crowing about winning the game while making it sound as though we were back in red when it happened? Never going to happen! ‘Then it’s a pity Sophie didn’t bring a ball,’ growled Seline, slowly swinging her vehicle towards the sole defender.

Will he break left or break right, that’s the question? Only a second to decide. Which way would the *Titanium Rose* racer turn? Left arm would be the more difficult shot for Seline, given she was right-handed. The *Titanium Rose* racer would know that much about her, she reckoned. Logic and the law of averages dictated a right-arm shot angled towards the goal tunnel on the left. And the steammen *were* methodical in their strategies. Seline fingered the controls for her left-side mallet arm, then committed to the swing. Her mallet connected like thunder, sending the ball exploding towards the tunnel’s left-hand corner. Seline could hardly countenance what she saw. The enemy racer was in motion, so fast they must have started moving before her shot. The *Titanium Rose*’s mallet intercepted the ball before it could enter the goal tunnel, taking possession and almost contemptuously slapping it into the keeper’s capture net flapping on the racer’s roof. They had lost the game. *I’ve lost the game!*

‘How did he know?’ said Seline, half a sob.

‘You are human,’ sighed Alios from behind her. ‘He noted how you pushed your racer to its limits. Of course, you would favour the more difficult shot. That much he knew. Further reinforced as soon as you failed to pass the ball to Miss Fox.’

That much he knew. Seline sat back in her seat, weary and exhausted. *That much he knew.* And so, in hindsight, should she.

Seline stretched over a worn leather sofa alone in her lodgings, its rooms long and narrow like so many inside the city of Mechancia. They were well-warmed by radiators even at night, though this evening she barely felt it. That her friends and teammates had been so ready to forgive her for the defeat in the arena, as though their defeat had been inevitable, almost made her foul-up harder to bear. *What prejudices the steammen hold about us, hold about their wild organic cousins, I only confirmed.* If only Seline could take back time. Warn herself that she should make the winning shot as though she was a robot, rather than an irrational human. *Or pass the ball to Sophie and Adam,* nagged her conscience. How long Seline sat there, thinking about what she should have done, was hard to say, but eventually her brooding was interrupted by the bell-pull on her front door. She strained herself out of her sofa and walked down the corridor to see who it was. *Maybe Scarlett, Sophie and Adam have changed their minds about being good losers. Maybe I’d actually feel better if someone did shout at me.*

Seline opened the door to her lodgings. Cold air blew in at her, the sound of prayer flags flapping in the high mountain winds. She stared speechlessly at her visitor. Not one of the city’s humans after all. Professor Aliquot Coppertracks waited patiently, the steamman standing there as though he had never been away. The elderly scientist had

carried Seline here as a baby, braving the not entirely safe caravan trip from the Jackelian Kingdom to the towering mountains of the Mechancian Spine. Why Coppertracks had arranged the journey after her mother's disappearance, she had never discovered. *A whim? Why not simply keep Seline in Middlesteel, the capital city of the Kingdom? With my own kind. Was it too dangerous? Just how many enemies does my family have?* The scientist rolled up to greet her, twin tracks on either side of his body whining as wheels adapted to the stone doorstep, almost flowing. The metal body resting on his tracks was pitted and spotted with age. Not rust exactly, but centuries of life lived through the ages. The top of his body was mounted by a clear, transparent dome fizzing with the steamman's schemes and eccentric passions, his mind literarily an open book to anyone who cared to watch. Aliquot's segmented pipe-like arms reached out to hug her.

'Professor,' gasped Seline, excitement replacing her earlier despondency. 'I've been wondering when you would be visiting again. It's been over a year, hasn't it?'

'It has,' said Coppertracks, rolling back slightly. 'And so much has happened during that year.' His voice-box quavered with nervous anticipation. Something was clearly on the shrewd robot's all-too transparent mind.

'That sounds ominous,' said Seline. 'What is it, professor? Please, if there's bad news . . .'

'News I have. Though what is to be made of it remains to be seen. After all these years, I have finally found out where your mother is,' announced the elderly steamman.

Seline rocked with amazement at the completely unexpected news. 'My mother? How? Where?' So many old emotions rose inside Seline at once, clamouring for attention. Hope, worry about being disappointed again, anger at her abandonment so far from the country she'd been born to. A storm of questions erupted across her mind. *What reason could my mother have for leaving me for so long? For running away and disappearing? Beyond selfishness or disappointment in her only child?*

'Your mother Molly,' continued Coppertracks, 'is in Mightadore.'

Mightadore? What's he talking about? 'Where? I've never heard of such a place or seen it in an atlas?'

'Indeed, dear mammal, and that I must say is for an exceptionally good reason,' said the professor.

Seline tried to shrug off her creeping feeling of unease. 'What reason?'

A green crown of sparks circled inside the steamman's transparent domed head. 'An exceptionally long story, I fear. However, I will shortcut to the two most salient and pertinent points of the tale, dear mammal. First, your mother desperately needs our help to survive. Yours, mine, and a few others of stout heart and iron constitution we must convince to join the rescue expedition which needs mounting.'

'Of course!' *Just try keeping me out if it.* 'And the second point?'

'That this will very well prove a one-way trip for you, I, and anyone foolish enough to accompany us!'