

EN PASSANT

by Phaedra M. Weldon

Robinson***Draconis March, Federated Suns*****7 October 3065**

The click of Päl Wyndham-Sandoval's polished boots echoed off the corridor walls leading from Duke Sandoval's library and study. The braid from his top-knot swung around to brush his cheek. He moved it away with an impatient hand. The sword, which went with his dress uniform, bumped against his left thigh, and with every determined step he ground another piece of his own frustrations beneath a heel. Within an hour of his arrival on Robinson the world had turned one-hundred and eighty degrees.



Servants stood aside in the wide hall to let him pass. He acknowledged them with barely a nod. Broad events preoccupied his thoughts: James Sandoval no longer directed the course of the family dynasty. Mai Fortuna no longer led the Robinson Rangers. Tancred Sandoval now bore the ducal title, and he had shifted Robinson's support in the ongoing civil war away from Katrina Steiner-Davion to her brother, Victor.

Päl's life had been altered by events beyond his control. Just as it had when Arthur Steiner-Davion was assassinated. Päl had been in that stadium, listening to Arthur's address, seated with other cadets of the Battle Academy when explosions rocked the proceedings. Events born of that calamity played out at an alarming speed, enveloping him each time he caught his breath. Then-Duke James Sandoval, blaming the attack on the Draconis Combine. Tancred, choosing not to rejoin with the Rangers. Päl had been tapped to take his place, promoted to Lieutenant. The young scion, feeling like a chess piece being shifted about a board.

Returning to his family's estates on Exeter, saying goodbye to his wife and newborn son, and leaving to join the First Rangers for their ill-fated assault on House Kurita.

However, no matter the whys or the what-happeneds since his last visit to Robinson; Päl was excited to see his parents. They had been in the room earlier, when Tancred arrived to accept the mantle of dynasty leadership, but not for the military planning session that followed. Päl had so far managed only a handful of words with them.

Turning a corner in the spacious Sandoval Castle, he found them waiting just inside the foyer doors. His father, a roundish man of medium height and receding hairline, had once served with the Rangers. Päl had grown up on his father's stories of 'Mech battles, and considered it destiny that had stepped in to make of the Baron's son a MechWarrior and an officer.

The Baron Exeter took a few steps toward Päl, his expression dark and his mouth open to speak, but the Baroness stayed him with a hand on his left arm and a calm smile to her son.

Baroness Margarett Wyndham-Sandoval was a proud woman, rich in the heritage of the Sandoval family. Päl had always seen his mother as one of the braces of the family, the one whom others looked to for guidance. As her son, he had always done as she wished, and she had never guided him wrong. The Baroness was a strong and silent partner beside his father, and he loved them both. He only wished, at times, his mother's stolid and stoic appearance in court had not carried over into her duties as mother.

Päl pulled the dress-white gloves from his hands as his mother directed them with a nod to the doors, and beyond to the waiting Avanti stretch hover sedan. He opened the car's door for his mother and gave her his hand as she gracefully stepped in. His father gave him a tight smile, placed a hand on his son's arm, then bent down to enter as well.

After the doors were closed and the car was underway, the Baron could contain his curiosity no longer.

"Well?" He raised a graying eyebrow at his son.

Päl shrugged. Tancred's loyalties were no secret, although the particulars discussed behind closed doors might be. But Päl had never kept information from his father. In only a few sentences, he relayed the meeting's proceedings—including Tancred's plan to ease relations with Theodore Kurita.

His words garnered exactly the reaction he'd expected from his father.

"What?" the Baron's voice boomed inside the sedan's doors. "Is the man mad? How can he give up those worlds to the Dragon? This is outrageous." He traded a glance with his wife, who nodded. "Unacceptable!"

Päl was no longer so certain. He turned his attention to the passing scenery, considering.

It was early autumn on Robinson, and the display of browns, oranges, yellows and reds reminded him of fall evenings at home, spent with Khim. He missed her terribly after almost three years apart, and felt guilty for abandoning his son at such an early age. After the unit's disastrous retreat from Ashio, Päl had remained on Mallory's World with the rest of the regiment. He'd sent word to his mother, asking if he should request leave to return home until the First received new orders.

His mother advised him to remain on Mallory's World. She had taken a lead in his son's education, and Päl shouldn't worry himself with such details. According to the Baroness, Päl was where he needed to be, in support of the Duke's orders. And so he'd remained with his regiment, wrote letters to his wife Khim every day, and practiced with his knives.

Until Mai tapped him to accompany her here to Robinson for a meeting with the new Duke.

He sighed as he finally looked back at his father. "That's the way it is, father. And truthfully, I see no flaw in what Tancred proposes."

The Baron's eyes widened. "You support Tancred in this nonsense? Turning the loyalties of Robinson toward Victor."

"I support the decisions of my commander and Duke, sir, as any good soldier would. You taught me that." Päl clasped his hands in his lap. The filtered sun glinted off the gold of his Battle Academy ring. "Tancred feels our attentions are wasted attacking the Combine." He paused for a beat. "I agree."

"You can't be serious..." the Baron began. "James would never have allowed such a thing."

Päl kept silent. The young Wyndham-Sandoval knew not all decisions were the right decisions—and sometimes one had to make a choice on his own. That much he'd learned during the battle

on Ashio, when choices in battle saved or destroyed lives. Where officers played their soldiers and their regiments like pieces on a chess board. After the retreat, he had begun to see himself and his fellow soldiers as the pawns—those pushed out in front—expendable to protect those with the power.

And there might come a time when Päl would need to make a choice with his loyalties, but now wasn't it.

"Päl, answer me. Are you serious?"

Päl leaned forward. "Yes. I am. Father, I'm a MechWarrior, and a son of the Sandoval dynasty. I supported the former Duke in his decisions, and I will support Tancred's orders as well." He wanted to add how he knew that his cousin had warned Mai not to lead the Rangers into Combine territory. Tancred's reasons had been sound, and proven right in the end.

"In support of Victor? Päl, have you not been paying attention? He's in league with the Draconis Combine. Everyone knows he's sleeping with a snake. How can you trust a man who's in bed with the enemy? How can Tancred know Kurita will accept concessions and not wait until our forces are drawn elsewhere on foolish attacks against our own people then attack our worlds, murder our children and rape our worlds for their own—"

The Baroness calmly reached out and put a firm hand on her husband's knee. She gave no other sign, her gaze drawn out at the passing scenery as the Avanti stretch-sedan began its crawl along the drive to the Wyndham-Sandoval estates.

The Baron became silent.



Chill wind caressed the beaded sweat on Päl's forehead as he closed his eyes and opened wide his other senses. He smelled the crisp decay of autumn leaves, heard the soft, whispering shuffle as the wind tossed them about on the grounds of the gardens. He cocked his head to his right shoulder, felt the bite of steel between the index finger and thumb of both hands.

With a spin he directed and controlled the blade from his right hand to the top of the target, then followed the release of his left blade to the bottom, forming in the air a double-strike he'd perfected years ago. He saw in his mind's eye where the blades

would strike the target. That was the key—to know the direction and visualize it.

The spin completed, Päl came to land in a crouch, the thrown blades now replaced by new ones pulled from hidden sheaths beneath his clothing. The simultaneous *thwack* as the blades hit the tree twenty meters away brought a smile to his face. The first of the afternoon.

My son doesn't know me.

Again the realization yanked away his momentary glee and he lowered his arms and straightened. He recalled the young boy's formal bow—his son's dark, even gaze that measured and sized up the room, analyzed things in an almost combative style. Much as his mother did at times when she entered a room.

I don't know my son.

"Päl?"

The familiar voice of his wife brought his thoughts into a happier place as he turned to see Khim and Chauncy approaching. Khim held a large ceramic mug with the Wyndham-Sandoval crest painted on the side. She was just as beautiful now as the day he'd met her. Her dark, raven hair contrasted with his own blond tresses now held back in a single ponytail at the base of his top-knot. She was the night to his morning. She was his place to run to when the world turned chaotic and cruel.

And he loved her unconditionally.

Chauncy's stately form was the opposite of Khim's. She was a short elderly woman, rising to Päl's shoulders, with wiry gray hair and a cherub face. His former nanny and foster-mother had lost weight since he'd seen her, and her skin, though usually pale, seemed much more so in Robinson's evening light.

He retrieved and resheathed his knives and stepped toward them.

Other than Khim, Chauncy had been the only member of the house to greet him with a smile and a warm embrace. Just as she did now. "What are you two doing out here?" he took the offered mug from Khim and kissed her cheek. The cup warmed his fingers as he inhaled the aroma of spiced wine.

"Com'n to fetch you in to get ready. Guests are already arriving." Chauncy clasped her thick hands in front of her green skirts.

Päl had completely forgotten about his parent's social event to supposedly welcome their son home from the war.

He groaned.

"Forgot, didn't you?" Khim's voice wasn't as light as it had been earlier when he'd arrived home. They'd spent most of the first hours of his homecoming in private, rediscovering each other again.

Päl nodded. "This party is little more than an excuse for my mother and father to renew their presence within the family. It's all politics—in which I will never participate."

Chauncy gave him a light laugh. "You're a Sandoval, Päl. It will pull you in anyway."

"Not if I stay with the Rangers," he sipped the wine and felt its warmth spread through his extremities. It was indeed becoming colder in the advancing evening. "I've no time to worry about the larger picture there." He flashed back to the last battle on Ashio and then quickly tucked it away. *I can't think of fallen friends now.*

"And why the long face?"

He shrugged.

Chauncy put a hand on his shoulder. It felt warm and comforting. There was so little contact outside of private rooms in this house, or on his family's estates on Exeter.

Päl handed the mug to Chauncy. He absently pulled his knives from their sheaths and in unison began weaving their blades between his fingers. He looked at his wife, whose own gaze was locked on his hands and their movements. She looked extraordinarily pale in the waning light and her eyes were wide holes filled with shadows.

"Khim?"

She looked up into his eyes.

It was the knives. Khim had always hated his knives.

"I'm going in, Päl," she turned and then paused. "You need to get changed."

He watched her walk away as he continued to move the blades between his fingers.

"She's not much into your choice of weapon, is she?" Chauncy shifted her position and set the mug on a nearby garden bench.

He shook his head. "No. And with our earlier discussion of our son's education..." He let the sentence trail off as he turned and abruptly threw the knives into the dark. He spun, retrieved his second set in a fluid movement born of practice and control, and threw again.

Chauncy followed him to the tree and stood beside him as he judged their placement.

Four blades in a cross pattern. Shoulders, neck and lower abdomen. He pulled them from the tree and resheathed them before reaching deep into his trouser pocket to retrieve his Battle Academy ring.

"You still have that thing?"

Päl nodded. It had been a gift from his father. Päl's abrupt promotion and draft into service had precluded his official graduation, and so Marquin believed it was right he have one. "Yeah, but I learned knives from Master DeGigli before I had the ring. I can't wear it and throw. Disrupts my aim."

He gestured for her to step toward the house and he followed. "I'm sorry I've been away so long, Chauncy."

"If you're thinking of me in that, and hurting my feelings—please don't. You're my life's work, child. And even if I didn't give you life's first breath, I was there when you learned your greatest lessons." She gave him a sideways look. "But if you're fretting about your son, he's a Wyndham-Sandoval, Päl. Keep that knowledge close. He's the Baroness' pet project." Chauncy pursed her lips. "I think at times she sees him as her own."

Päl nodded as the two trudged up the hill and through the gardens to the estate. *Another pawn for the board.* And yet, as they walked, Päl didn't know where that thought had come from.



Khim's ire eased as she helped him get dressed. Layering on bit after bit of his dress uniform became almost a game between them, and Päl believed they might not make it to the party.

Khim left first, answering a summons from the Baroness. Päl finished the final touches and checked himself in the mirror. He looked presentable enough, an officer of House Davion.

Päl moved to the bed where his knives and their sheaths lay. He yearned to put them on, but did not want to anger Khim. If she saw them or suspected he wore them at a social event, his nights afterward could be...uncomfortable.

With a sigh, he wrapped them in their case of black velvet and placed them within the drawer of his nightstand.

The murmur of voices and laughter filtered up from the downstairs to the family's apartments. Päl left the suite and walked to the stairs.

A movement to his right stopped him at the first step. A figure in dark clothing stood near the door to his father's private study. The figure turned and froze when he saw Päl, then moved away from him and down the opposing hall. Päl chased after the man. He didn't know if the dark-clad figure belonged in the estates or if he was an intruder.

Although, guests usually didn't run away.

He rounded the corner of his father's study to face an empty corridor. The intruder had vanished.

Päl concentrated on the hallway, and pushed aside the ambient noise from the party below. He calmed his breathing and sought out each nearby sound.

A door opened behind him. Päl dodged back behind the bend in the hallway. He peered around the corner to see several courtly dignitaries, family and close friends, file into his father's study. Curious, the Baron's son tiptoed back down the hall to the side door he'd discovered as a child. It was hidden deep within the ornate decoration of the wall. He had found it once while following the Baroness about the halls. His mother had used the small door several times—yet its existence had never made him wonder why.

Until now.

Dust tickled his nose as he eased in, careful not to allow his sword to clang against the floor or walls. Gray smudged his white

dress-gloves and he brushed them on his pants. There was only a bench and when he sat, the walls pressed in on his knees and back. His dress sword made stealth difficult, but he managed to sit and look out through the room's peephole.

The study was filled with more than ten stately dressed men. Several women stood to the side, among them his mother the Baroness. The Baron stood at his desk and raised a hand. Quiet descended.

"I'm sure you've all heard of the new Duke's plan to pull troops from Combine space and move against Katrina in support of Victor."

Some of those in the audience nodded, others looked about with shocked faces.

The Baron nodded. "You that are gathered here are the few remaining that still support Duke James Sandoval's belief that the Draconis Combine is the enemy, not our sovereign. Word was given to me this morning by a reliable source that House Kurita will move against the Federated Suns. They will not accept the new Duke's offer of an accord, but will be swift in their revenge of our attacks on their worlds."

Päl frowned. What was his father talking about? That wasn't what was discussed in the meeting he'd attended that morning. Tancred had seemed confident that Theodore Kurita would agree to the terms set for a cease-fire. Päl had always believed the Duke's son a viable leader, not easily taken by rumor and innuendo.

Where had his father gleaned this information?

"Marquin," a man in a blue brocade coat raised his hand. "Are you saying we're all in danger?"

"I'm saying that the new Duke is making us vulnerable by pulling our troops away from the border." He shook his head. "I stand here before you to give warning. I myself fear for my family's safety. My own son participated in those attacks on House Kurita. My own family is at risk."

"They wouldn't dare!"

Päl didn't see who had spoken out. His own thoughts wrapped around what his father said. This is ridiculous—there had been no mention of any possible attacks of retribution.

"I'm afraid they might, Peter," the Baron put his hands on his desk, palms down, and leaned toward his audience for emphasis. "Tancred isn't thinking—he's too caught up in his friendship with Victor to see the truth. The Combine cannot be trusted. It will take a new assault on a Davion world by the Combine to prove we are right. I pray it doesn't come to that..."

The Baroness moved then, her eyes narrowed in his direction. Had he made a noise?

Once outside the hidden room, Päl straightened his uniform's vest and adjusted his sword as he turned back down the hall toward the grand staircase.

The Baroness Magarette Wyndham-Sandoval stood at the hall's end, her hands clasped together before her. Her face was composed and belied only a small amount of surprise. "Päl?"

"Mother," he increased his step, his heels clicking against the tiled floor.

"What were you doing back there?"

He furrowed his brow. "I thought I saw an intruder, earlier. I had been on my way downstairs to join Khim when I saw him." He shrugged. "I'm afraid he got away."

"An intruder?" Her expression changed little, but he did see her gaze flick downward, to his sword.

Päl glanced down at the dirt-smudged glove he rested on the sword's hilt.

He looked up at his mother. She gave him a smile that did not touch her eyes.

A chill traveled down his spine.



Päl and Khim stood in the dinner reception line for nearly half an hour, greeting guest upon guest. Faces blurred with names and Päl felt a dull pain creep along the base of his skull. The muscles around his mouth ached and he worked his jaw back and forth as he preceded his parents into the dining room.

Most of the conversation centered around the transfer of power to Tancred Sandoval, who had declined tonight's invitation, begging pardon and needing to attend to his own family.

Several guests asked him on occasion to retell the battle of Ashio—some wanting the bloody details of the Ranger's retreat while they ate. But the young MechWarrior wasn't ready to recount to strangers some of the more painful events of his life, and bowed out with grace and politeness most becoming a Baron's son.

As the meal ended he excused himself, pleading a headache, which was the truth. The Baron escorted Khim toward the veranda where he and the Baroness had planned an extravaganza of fireworks.

Päl went down into the kitchens in search of Chauncy. The house Mistress claimed no knowledge of where his nanny had gone. Remembering aspirin in the medicine cabinet of his and Khim's apartments, the Baron's son took the steps two at time, pausing only briefly at the top to cast a glance at the door of his father's study.

So much of what he'd heard earlier jumbled about in his head. He suspected his father had lied to those family members—for he doubted Tancred would have agreed to work with Theodore Kurita if he suspected sabotage. And Päl believed the lie was meant to turn their family's support away from Victor.

Political intrigue and posturing was what had killed Arthur. Päl wanted no part of it. In the field there was no place for such games, but here within the walls of the Sandoval family, that was all that seemed to exist.

Once inside his darkened bedroom, Päl pulled his sword from its sheath and set it on his bed. With a sigh he tucked his gloves into his belt and strode into the bathroom where he turned on a single light. Ignoring his tired reflection in the mirror, he found the aspirin and swallowed several without water.

An old familiar noise, one he'd not heard since childhood, came from the bedroom. It was the sound of the old service door beside his and Khim's bed. As a small boy Päl had often hidden inside that door, and sometimes traveled the tunnels behind it for adventure. But he'd sealed the door years ago.

He looked from the bathroom to his bedroom. He saw nothing at first and he feared the events of the day—especially spying the

intruder earlier—had him jumping at shadows. But since caution had often saved him in battle, he turned the bathroom's light off to shroud himself in darkness and then crouched behind the door's frame to peer out at the bedroom.

Light from the hall gave subtle illumination to a movement in the wall to the right of their bed. As he suspected, someone was opening the hidden door. From the secret entrance came a dark-clad figure that crouched once it gained admittance. The door closed with an audible click.

Päl couldn't be sure if this was the intruder from before. He couldn't see the figure's detail in the shadowy light. The figure stood and pulled something from within the folds of his garment.

Light glinted off metal. Recognition gave him pause. He had a Nakjima pistol.

An assassin.

Päl's sword lay on the bed, between himself and the intruder. His knives lay nestled within the drawer of his nightstand. He had no weapon readily available to him.

From the assassin's movements he read that his presence was still unknown. It was best to remain hidden, and to watch. The dark-clad figure crept to the bedroom door. With his free hand on the frame, he looked from the left to the right, as if checking for someone.

Once he was gone, Päl ran to the bed, grabbed his sword. He then pulled his knives from the drawer and tucked them, unsheathed, into the belt of his dress uniform. He then moved to the door and peered cautiously around. There was no sign of the assassin.

With the sword ready, Päl moved to the stairs and caught the fleeting glimpse of dark robes at the foot of the stairs as the figure turned to the right in the direction of the ballroom.

Once at the foot of the stairs, Päl told a guard of the intruder. "Gather the others and find him."

The guard gave the Baron's son a quick nod, then turned just as Päl's father and mother approached from the other direction.

"Päl, where have you—"

He put up a hand to silence Marquin. "I believe an assassin has entered the estate from the old door of my bedroom. I've alerted the guards."

"An assassin?" Marquin Wyndham-Sandoval's usually ruddy expression had gone quite pale. "In my home?"

"Where is Khim? I need you to take her out of here but don't panic the guests. I'll find him." He turned to go.

The Baroness pulled on Päl's arm as her son turned away. "Päl—Khim went to look in on your son. She's gone to the open nursery." The open nursery was on this floor—opposite the ballroom.

My son.

Päl ran as fast as he could toward the nursery wing. His feet pounded against the tiled floor as guests yelled after him, curious as to his alarm. He hoped none would follow. When he entered, the room was dark. Autumn moonlight filtered in through the open windows, casting shadows over the bed and crib. Päl held his sword ready. The light flashed off his blade as he crouched low and looked into the bed where his son should be sleeping.

It was empty.

In the dark he heard the familiar sound of a weapon powering up. He moved out of the way as a blast lit up the room, the weapon's energy discharge narrowly missing his head to splash off the far wall.

The assassin stood just inside the door. He held Khim in his arms, her windpipe cut off by his left hand. He held the pistol aimed at her temple.

Päl's heart froze.

"Drop your sword." The assassin's voice was deep, unassuming. The Baron's son found no accent, no place to claim the man's heritage. "Drop it."

"Where is my son?" Päl dropped the sword to the ground with a loud clanking.

"I don't know where your son is—he's not why I'm here."

"Then who is? My wife?"

The man's head moved back and forth slowly. Päl couldn't make out his features in the subdued light. The assassin turned the pistol on Päl and fired again.

A bright flash illuminated the room. Päl had anticipated such a move, though, and lunged for the safety of a nearby toy-chest. But

this time he hadn't moved fast enough, and as he landed, he realized the intruder's Nakjima had struck its target. His left shoulder burned with fire as if someone was holding a hot branding iron to his muscle and bone. He stifled a cry as he landed on the burned flesh and was able to right himself into a crouch.

Khim called out to him, but her voice was abruptly silenced. The assassin had closed his grip on her throat.

"Who sent you?" Päl reached down to his belt and pulled out a set of knives. Their cold steel blades felt good in his hands. He peered around the box. The assassin had pulled Khim back several meters, into the shadows.

The lack of light did nothing to sway Päl's confidence, but the injury to his arm did. The pain when he rotated it experimentally was solid, and it would grow more intense until it was treated. He felt the warm trickle of blood down his chest as he sized up the distance and speed he would need.

To compensate for his handicap, he needed an opportunity—a second when the assassin wouldn't be expecting an attack from the dark.

The assassin shifted.

That was the opportunity Päl needed.

Too late he realized he still wore his Battle Academy ring. He aimed, allowing his knowledge of position and skill to determine the best placement of his weapons. He might have made better aim if only his left shoulder hadn't protested with sharp fire, or his ring had not caught the knife's edge.

But fate was on his side and the right knife found purchase in the assassin's weapon hand, the blade piercing the palm. The assassin yelled and dropped the weapon.

His second knife shot wide to Päl's right, and embedded itself in his wife's side beneath her breast. Blood streamed down her milk-white dress.

"No!" Päl dove forward to catch his falling wife as the intruder released her and fell back into the corner's shadow. She clung to him, her eyes wide.

He lowered her to the floor as he realized the assassin moved toward the door.

Vengeance drove him as he pulled the second set of knives from his belt. He narrowed his eyes as he studied the shadows, turned a practiced ear to the sounds of footsteps and gauged their distance. Päl pulled his ring from his finger and set it on the floor with swift ease. The assassin stumbled near the nursery's entrance and Päl let fly his weapons, shutting out the fire that burned into his shoulder with the movement.

A cry of pain answered the Baron's son as he struck his target. The man collapsed in an untidy pile.

Khim was hurt badly, bleeding to death. He had to take care of his wife, but there were things that Päl had to know. Duty pulled him in two directions, and he was too-recently a soldier. With a glance at Khim, he moved across the floor to the felled enemy. The assassin lay on his side and Päl pulled him onto his back. Both knives had found a home in the man's neck, one to either side. Blood fountained over Päl's hands as he grabbed the man's collar and pulled him close.

"Who sent you?"

The assassin shook his head.

He pulled the attacker closer. The coppery smell of blood was everywhere. No time! Päl had to attack quickly and with ruthless strength. How his mother would handle it.

"I will know your name. Give over your employer, or I will see your family held accountable for your treachery this night."

The man shuddered in Päl's hands and he feared the assassin would expire before speaking. When the attacker opened his mouth, blood pooled over the sides as he whispered in a gurgled voice, "The Baroness Wyndham-Sandoval."

Päl released the man, and the assassin's head slapped against the floor. He was dead, his last breath uttering the one name Päl had never thought to hear. He stood on shaky legs and moved away as if afraid the man's body would ignite in flame. He stared at the dead man, his mind a jangle of unfocused thoughts.

He lied...it had to be a lie.

Chauncy came to the door at that moment, her arms filled with stacked blankets. She yelled out and dropped the blankets when she saw Päl standing over the dark-clad corpse. Her gaze traveled back to her charge and her hands flew to her mouth as she went to him, staring at his bloodied uniform. "Päl, you're..."

He put up a hand. "I'm fine." Though the pain from the assassin's weapon was now a debilitating vice around his shoulder. He turned and moved toward his wife, so still on the floor. He knelt beside her as Chauncy joined them, the house-mistress' hands gentle as she touched Khim's neck to find a pulse.

"She's alive," Chauncy said, then looked into the gaze of her grown charge. "What happened?"

"He came in through our rooms—the old door," Päl reached up and rubbed at his temple, unaware of the blood he smeared across his brow. "Mother said Khim had come here to check on our son."

The house-mistress' eyes narrowed in a confused expression. "Päl, your mother had me bring him into my apartments before the party started. Away from the noise...."

His gaze fixed on Chauncy's wizened face. Päl swallowed back the nausea that threatened to overwhelm him, though he was uncertain at that moment if it were a reaction to his injury, or the realization his mother had just attempted to have him assassinated.

"Päl?"

He blinked at the pommel of the knife protruding from his wife's chest. He knew better than to remove it. It would only hasten her bleeding. He saw the glint of his ring beside her and with a burst of anger he grabbed it and tossed it across the room. He hissed at the pain in his shoulder that threatened to pitch him into unconsciousness. He bent and kissed his wife tenderly on her cold cheek, then stood on uncertain legs. "Watch her, Chauncy. I'll send for a doctor."

Päl knelt beside the assassin and retrieved the Nakjima, then moved slowly out of the nursery toward the elevated voices below.

Guests had spilled out of the ballroom and were now creating a ring of enclosure about the Baron. Many had been muttering and whispering among themselves. As news spread, the crowd grew louder.

"It was as the Baron warned, the Dragon has come."

"The snakes have tried to kill the Baron's son!"

Someone else was more certain. "Dead. He must be dead!"

Päl stood in the shadows beneath the stairs, away from the

guests. His shoulder burned and again he felt himself grow light-headed. He watched with distant fascination as the panic spread. Simple words, spoken with just the proper emotion—and all of them would turn on Tancred. Realization of what his true standing was within the family did not come as a surprise, but more as a sad revelation. *I am a pawn. Nothing more. Nothing less.*

Carrying the Nakjima, Päl Wyndham-Sandoval stepped forward. Sharp intakes of breath greeted him as the crowd parted to allow him through. Many, seeing his bloodied uniform, gasped aloud. His father leaped forward, braced him with a hand on either shoulder, and then grabbed the weapon from his son.

“Nakjima.” He nearly spat out the name. “Combine manufacture.”

Neither Baron or Baroness appeared overly worried about Päl’s condition. But then his father was lost to his hatred for House Kurita. His mother, though, was calm. Far too calm. He found her eyes, and just below the surface of her calm, proud mask, he saw the truth of what the assassin said.

She wanted the family’s loyalties turned, as did his father. As did most of those here in this room. But she had been the one willing to sacrifice her only son to achieve it. And why not? She had a new son to raise.

The truth was there and then gone in an instant. As Margarete Wyndham-Sandoval stepped from behind her guests, a grand show of concern washed over her face toward her son. “Päl, was it the Dracs?”

He matched her gaze with his own and said simply, and quietly. “No.” He turned to the nearest guard. “Please, could you summon a doctor? My wife....”

But the Baroness wasn’t going to be ignored. She moved even closer to Päl, the flash of her eyes toward the crowd of guests making it obvious to her son that she knew she was on stage. It was time to call the play together. “But it has to be.” Her eyes narrowed. “How do you know it is not?”

Päl kept his voice even, though the fatigue he heard in his words was genuine. The pain in his shoulder was like a smoldering fire, constant and fierce. The loss of blood was making it difficult to stand. The guard hurried off to summon help for Khim, so Päl allowed himself a moment. “Because he told me,” he said.

"He told you?" The Baron stepped forward. "Tell us, Päl. I demand to know!" A murmur of assent swept the assembled nobles. When the baron looked to his wife for support in his demand, however, he found only stony silence. Frowning, glancing between his wife and son, the Baron fell back on the will of the crowd. "Who did this?" he asked.

A hush settled as all eyes turned to Päl. His own vision wavered, though nothing could erase the still image of his mother, standing close enough for assumed concern, yet far enough away should her son betray her to the assembly. He blinked several times, willing himself to stay conscious. Focused.

He narrowed his eyes at her. Their very way of life depended on his answer, and he knew the use of ruthlessness at that moment. Understood it, for like his mother who had wagered the life of her son on the turn of history, Päl too had put the assassin's family on the table to force the confession that now would change his life forever.

He swallowed, blinking with sluggish control as the world seemed to spin slower around him, and looked to his father, who stood within the nexus of this moment.

Päl saw the board clearly now—saw the position of the pieces. The game had just started. The Baroness held the kingdom in white—but it was Päl who now controlled the black. He saw the carefully placed moves that might have sent him and Khim to their deaths.

Two moves of a pawn across the board.

In truth, he knew she hadn't expected him to live.

But there was a little known move in chess called the en passant, where the first move of a pawn with two squares can be met and defeated by one move of the enemy's opposing pawn.

"Päl! Who has done this?"

With a sigh, the Baron's son moved his gaze from his father's red, flushed face, to rest it calmly upon the serene visage of his mother's composure.

"Katherine Steiner-Davion."