

CHAPTER EIGHT

Hedrona's Sled

The *Seven of Cups* looked like any sled other except for the bright color scheme: the royal blue HEDRONA BHLON painted along the stern, and her personal blue, yellow, and red Tarot card across the top surface of the sled. The sled was a flat slab of metal seven feet wide, eleven feet long, but just six inches thick. The twelve thrusters, each a four-inch circle, were recessed into the aft panel. Likewise the two-inch maneuvering thrusters along the sides and top and bottom corners of the craft were flush with the surface to keep the aesthetic impression of a cold hard rectangle.

The interior of the slab consisted entirely of a HtkARR 658 Prime Antimatter engine, except for the volume required for a thousand rounds of two-inch explosive shells and a feeding mechanism up to the gun mount.

Phil looked away from the creepy image on the surface. She'd deliberately chosen that damn Tarot card to gall him. He should never have admitted it scared him. Did she really want to take advantage of any weakness she could find? The card was *human pollution*, just one more infiltration of the Centaurian system. It was killing them.

He had to calm down. Nothing was killing them, nothing was killing their dear Emperor, all was well, didn't they all know that down deep?

No, *that* was the illusion. They were *dying*. The Tarot card was real and they knew it.

Phil couldn't stop the accelerating anxiety. Since all events throughout Alpha Centauri were instantly known by all citizens, as mediated by the wisdom of the Emperor, the Alpha Centaurians had never worried or speculated about the future. But ever since the Martian Emperor Dar had broadcast relevant portions of his Amplified Thought proofs that the Empire would cease to exist on May 14, 2053, something evil had found its way into the Grid.

They'd never needed fortune-telling, but now it was everywhere, imported from Sol. Tarot and I Ching and Ouija boards and God knew what else had all leaked in. Everyone was using it. They knew it was blasphemous, but they had to have *something* to combat Dar's goddamn astrology, didn't they? To combat *today*, May 14, 2053?

Phil was ashamed that each time he came to Cissarr he made Hedrona sit with him over his own Tarot deck. On every reading she insisted that the cards spelled doom on May 14, 2053, and Phil heatedly offered a counter-interpretation based on the same cards. But even as the *Alpha Centaurian citizen* knew perfectly well he was right, the human being still within him knew he was blowing smoke.

It was the Seven of Cups that came up, every time, whether Phil asked the Tarot about himself or the Empire. It was the Waite deck image, the man shocked to confront seven cups floating in the clouds, each holding a promise: love, sex, fame, riches, power, even mystical revelation. They were all so obviously *illusions*. And they annihilated Phil even as he wanted them so badly.

And Hedrona would laugh. As he shivered and babbled all his fears about the Seven of Cups, she'd cackle with delight. She'd painted the card on her sled to tell the entire Empire that Phil's whole life was an illusion. He was deluded, the Empire was deluded, and everything was *collapsing*.