

**This is the unedited, uncorrected first chapter from  
*A Confusion of Princes* by Garth Nix**

**One**

There were three of them in the secret underground chamber, two women and a technologically-sustained relict of a human being, who had once been a man. For better or worse, they were the leaders of their world, and they had come together to debate their response to the ultimatum from Prince Saraken of the Empire.

They weren't expecting me, not in that top secret enclave at the end of a 12 kilometre tunnel of which every centimeter was guarded by the best troops of all three leaders, plus assorted technological and biological defences that they thought were pretty hot stuff.

In fact, not only were they not expecting me, for the first minute they didn't even register that I was there, so I let them talk while I hummed around their chairs and brushed away some biscuit crumbs.

"Is she actually able to do what she claims?" asked the senior of the three. Her name was Javane, and she was the elected leader of perhaps ninety per cent of the communities on this benighted planet. "She only has one ship."

"One ship that is not only the size of a mountain, it actually appears to be a mountain, torn off a planet and sent into space," said the cyborg. He was a couple of centuries old and a lot of the stuff that sustained Goffrey was obsolete Imperial bitek and mektek, not that he'd mentioned that to the others. He was their senior military officer, though they only had a citizen-based militia. "Inside some kind of field that has defied our sensors and is likely to be even more impervious to our weapons."

"But an unconditional surrender . . . anything could happen," said Vikiki. We hadn't exactly pinned down her role in the government. Probably internal security, spying on their own. "We cannot fight the ship, that's true, but a guerilla war on the ground, coupled with civilian passive resistance —"

“You’d get a lot of people killed,” I interrupted, as I told Uncle Azim and Auntie Loop to stop the mental rerouting that was making the councillors think I was a cleaning robot that was supposed to be there.

Goffrey was the first to recover and predictably he went for his sidearm, which was more to the credit of his systems than any native ability in the meat part of the old guy. But a 300 year-old cyborg is no match for a fully-augmented Prince of the Empire running on combat time. I stepped forward, gave him a little shock to temporarily take out his motor functions and directed Azim and Loop to use me as a channel to drop a pacification haze on the other two.

“Like I said, you’d get a lot of people killed. Probably pretty much everyone,” I said. “The fact is, Prince Saraken is hoping you’ll fight. She’s fresh out of battle school and your little world is basically a graduation exercise.”

The three of them sat there, staring.

“Permission to speak,” I told them, as I sat on the table and crossed my legs. This might have appeared a little cavalier, but I had six other priests in addition to Azim and Loop (not my real uncle and aunt, of course, that’s just the polite way of referring to senior servitors of the Imperial Incarnations, otherwise known as priests) laying down the sleepy all is well mojo on the closer security forces in the tunnel. Not to mention that old Hardred, my master of assassins, was somewhere in the air conditioning with several of his apprentices and a couple of thousand Bitek crawlscuts.

I also had a ship, though if we got to the formal combat stage it would be no match for Saraken’s space mountain. Not that it was actually hers. She wasn’t senior enough in the Navy to command that, which meant that some other prince was present, though he or she would not interfere unless there was a question of Imperial security or dignity at stake.

“The Prince gave us until midnight to respond,” said Javane. “This earlier interference is not—”

“That’d be midnight your time, or Core time?” I interrupted. “Because midnight Core time is pretty much whenever she feels like it, since I doubt you guys have any real-time interstellar communication.”

The three of them looked at each other. I yawned and wondered which one was going to pop the standard question.

"Who are you?" asked Javane.

"Prince Khemri Achmir of the Empire," I said.

Goffrey's head twitched forward, which was not a sign of my nerve-block wearing off his arms. Just confirmation that at some time, probably several centuries ago, he had been a loyal servant of the Empire, and the conditioning hadn't totally worn off despite a lack of annual reinforcement.

"Goffrey," I said. "Let me guess. Imperial Survey, solo far reach scout, had a ship malfunction or disaster, stranded here since?"

"Yes, Highness," said Goffrey. "I tried to return, but the ship . . ."

I waved my hand in dismissal.

"Ancient history, of no account now. The thing is—"

*::PAS Gullane launching wasp cloud.*

That was Azim talking in my head, relaying from his acolytes in my ship. Planetary Assault Ship Gullane was the space mountain, and wasp cloud meant mekbi drop troopers.

"I guess it is midnight," I continued. "Saraken has begun her assault. We've got about nineteen minutes before the first wave storms this installation. Lucky she didn't feel a preliminary bombardment was required. Anyway, I suggest that you immediately surrender your planet to me instead."

"What?" shrieked Javane, and I felt Loop increase the pacification effect to counter her agitation.

"How will that help us?" asked Vikiki.

"What service?" asked Goffrey.

"Colonial Government," I replied, which was not exactly true, but it would certainly be presented as such to both Saraken and the locals. "If you surrender to me, your planet becomes a protectorate under the Colonial Service. You'll still be basically in charge, with a colonial governor over you, of course. You have one minute to decide."

"How can we surrender our world to you?" asked Javane desperately. "You don't look old enough to —."

"I'm a Prince of the Empire," I interrupted. "Goffrey knows. Thirty seconds."

"Goffrey?"

“He is what he says. I urge our surrender. I do not know Saraken’s service —”

“She’s Navy, through and through,” I said. “Like I said, straight out of battle school. Ten seconds.”

“Ah . . . we surrender to you . . .” gabbled Javane. “We surrender.”

“Your surrender is accepted,” I said. “Welcome to the Empire. We’ll get around to the formal pledge of allegiance and the conditioning and so forth in due course. Now just sit quietly while I sort matters out with my charming fellow prince.”

*::Uncle Azim? You got that?*

*::Yes, Highness.*

*::Flash to Core then, World Kwaxro/Pezezh/Garakm/Rizekm IV surrendered to Prince Khemri Achmir, Adjuster One presenting as Colonial Governor One at datetimestamp and copy that to Saraken personally and to PAS Gullane and put it through the locals’ comm systems in five*

*::Yes, Highness. Core confirmation received. No reply from Saraken or Gullane.*

*::Hardred Priority Interrupt*

*::What is it Hardred?*

*::Highness. Stand by for extraction. Activate capsule.*

*:: What’s happening, Az?*

*:: Gullane is prepping a sliver. Wasp cloud is holding at 25K.*

*:: She’s going for the “accident” just like you expected, Hardred. Log and copy to Core. Send protest to Saraken and Gullane and mark attention Prince in command Gullane so whatever oily weasel is back of Saraken can’t say s/he didn’t know*

“Well it seems we’ll have to blow this clambake,” I said.

They looked at me as if I was raving, which I might as well have been. A fondness for archaic idiom might be considered fashionable at Core, but it’s just a barrier to communication out in the great big galaxy.

“As in we have to evacuate immediately, there’s a kinetic strike on the way. I can take you three, but if there’s a button to push that says ‘everyone get out and run away’ then push it now.”

Goffrey flexed a finger and klaxons began to do their up and down screechy thing. My priests retuned the comfort field to an oscillating “we gotta get out of this place” sensation that even I caught a little backwash from and made the three leaders get up out of their chairs as if they’d suddenly felt a kinetic strike in their nether regions.

A second later the far wall, made of the finest reinforced steel and concrete this world could provide turned a nice shade of violet and crumbled into small, slightly damp crumbs that spread over the floor in a slow wave.

One of Hardrad’s apprentices opened the door to my little phased-field runabout and moving almost but not quite as fast as I could, disarmed the three leaders. Another apprentice glued their hands to the back of their heads and hobbled them with a spray of the same stuff.

Hardrad himself came out of the ceiling, descending in a cloud of dissolved armour plate. He took my arm, a touch only allowed to my Master of Assassins, and hustled me inside the runabout.

*::Mektek sliver strike at 1:12 mark stressed field wrapped yttronia sliver accelerating will make 0.02 light at point of impact no interception possible emergency all aspects focus on HH*

I lay back on my favourite red velvet Varangdt dynasty chaise longue, the others piled into their seats, the runabout kicked into high gear and I felt a sudden pressure inside my head that I’ve been told is like having a bad cold. That’s not something I’ve ever experienced of course, but the mind likes to re-map sensations. For me, this pressure meant that almost all my priests were focusing defensive measures upon my person, which also meant that they didn’t expect we’d get out of the blast area of the strike.

*::Sliver strike at 0:57 mark*

“You know the problem with having all this Imperial super-tek and apparently limitless power?” I asked conversationally as the countdown to the strike droned on in the back of my mind and the runabout gave a kind of little raspy screech as the Nonspace field flattened and the hull made nanosecond contact with the actual rock we were boring through.

*::Sliver strike at 0:34 mark*

“What?” asked Vikiki shakily. She was exhibiting several of the symptoms of shock.

“Well, there’s no problem of itself,” I said. “It’s just when the other guys are also Imperials with all the same shit, it kinda sucks.”

*::Sliver strike at 0:20 mark*

“Cocoon now!” ordered Hardred. Vikiki and Javane screamed as what appeared to be a giant slug suddenly dropped from a hatch in the ceiling, lobbed down next to them and started vomiting bubbly green goo everywhere.

“BiTek safety,” gasped Joffrey to calm them, before he disappeared under the rising surge of gunk.

*::Sliver strike at 0:12 mark*

I held my breath. You *can* breathe BiTek crash foam but it tastes horrible and the aftertaste lingers for days.

*:: Azim, probability of transport survival?*

I had to ask.

*:: Future modeling suggests 1 in 7 full survival scenarios. Apologies, Highness. Regret failure.*

Sometimes it’s better not to know, of course.

*::Sliver strike at 0:05 mark*

*::Four*

*::Three*

*::Two*

*::One*

*::Mark*

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