

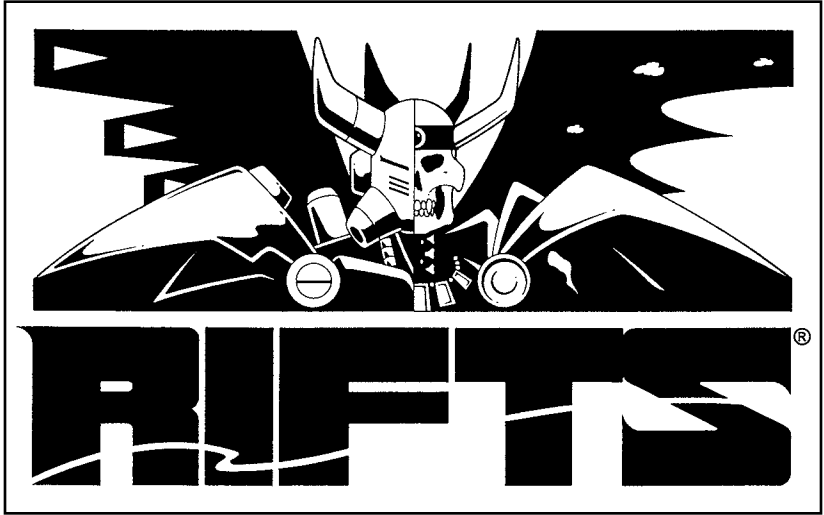
RIFTS

HAMMER OF THE FORGE™

VOLUME ONE:
THE COSMO-KNIGHT™



JAMES M.G. CANNON



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Volume One:

The Cosmo-Knight™

James M.G. Cannon

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Dedication

To my parents, who always encouraged my imagination and love of science fiction.

– James M.G. Cannon

Chapter One

Crucible of Fire

Earth, 1967

The desert stretched out before him, as far as his eyes could see. Waves of heat rose up from the sandy ground, creating the illusion of moisture. In the distance, the great blocks of mesas rose up from the earth, shattering the horizon.

Caleb pressed his foot down harder on the accelerator, and the dune buggy responded. The engine roared, and the vehicle lurched forward, devouring the desert floor under its heavy wheels. The wind whipped at Caleb's short, blood red hair, and particles of sand and dust were thrown against his goggles. Out here, in the silence and emptiness of the desert, Caleb felt at home. The speed his buggy could reach was just the icing on the cake.

He was trying to forget that in a mere two days he would be shipping out for boot camp. And after that, he would go on to South East Asia. Vietnam. Just like his dad, Caleb would get to fight the Red Menace in a foreign land.

Caleb didn't want to go. His father may have been gung-ho to go to Korea, and felt the same way about his only son going to Vietnam, but Caleb saw things differently. It wasn't that Caleb hated war or liked Communism or anything like that. He wasn't some kind of deviant, for God's sake. He believed in America and what it stood for. His father was proof that the military could better a man, and dad owed his education to his years of service. By association, Caleb did as well.

No, Caleb wasn't like those cowards who ran to Canada, or those commies who demonstrated against the war. He knew it was a good cause. He knew Communism was evil, and had to be stopped. He just had no ambition to be the one to stop it. Let someone else do it; if he had wanted to go to Vietnam, he would have enlisted in the Marines, not waited to be drafted.

But there really was no denying reality. Caleb Vulcan was going to war. He would learn how to kill, and he would learn to be a warrior. It didn't matter that Caleb wanted to stay home, and race his cars, and maybe learn how to fly.

Well, there was one plus to service. He might get to fly.

The mesas drew closer, and the engine of his dune buggy howled in ecstasy as he let it have its head. The speedometer climbed into the red, and Caleb smiled for a moment, careful not to swallow any sand. The buggy ate the ground up and spat it out as he thundered across the landscape.

The sky was so blue it hurt the eyes to look at it, and the sand was golden brown. His buggy was bright red and gleaming under the layer of grit and sand. He was eighteen years old and felt immortal, and though somewhere in the back of his head he knew about death, he was sure it waited for him

in the jungles of Vietnam, not out in the desert, where he had raced so many times before.

He never saw the rock. Buried under sand for many years, only in recent weeks had the wind worn away at the layer of earth covering it. Caleb didn't expect it to be there, and he was barreling along far too fast to see it in time to correct his trajectory.

The right front tire collided with the rock, and the wheel twisted under Caleb's hands. The buggy spun out of control, and Caleb's grip came loose. The buggy flipped over, spinning through the air. It came crashing down on the ground, turned over, and rolled a few more feet before coming to rest on the sandy plain.

Caleb, miraculously, remained conscious. He felt blood pooling on his cheeks, and he couldn't see anything out of his left eye. His arms refused to move, and his legs were immobile as well, no matter how hard he tried to shift them. He twisted in his seat, trying to get some part of his body active, to pull him from the wreck. Something in his gut gave out as he moved, and Caleb felt the icy hand of unconsciousness reach out for him. He resisted it though, knowing that if he faded, he would die.

But his body could not be denied. Roughly used, it needed to repair itself. It could not do so if Caleb's brain was screaming in pain. As the shock settled into him, he slipped out of consciousness. The last thing his mind registered as he went under was the smell of leaking gasoline.

Mercifully, he never saw or felt the explosion.

Caleb opened his eyes carefully, the memory of the crash still with him. His eyes – both of them – registered a field of darkness surrounding him, a darkness as black as pitch. A pool of light lay across his body, illuminating his small, human form. He expected to see that body shattered and broken.

He was whole.

“Oh Jesus,” he whispered, and his voiced echoed in the darkness. “I'm dead.” He recoiled from his own words, shivering as they rebounded all around him.

“No, not yet,” came a rich, authoritative voice, reverberating out of the black. It was a woman's voice. Caleb jumped, his eyes wide with alarm. He couldnot see the speaker, though it sounded as if whoever it was stood nearby.

“Who... who are you?” A sudden thought occurred to him. “God?”

There was slight chuckle. A woman's laugh, from behind him. Caleb whirled, but the dark was as impenetrable there as it was before him.

“No, we are not your God, Caleb Vulcan,” the voice said. “Though there are many who do pray to us, we have never claimed divinity.”

Caleb cautiously turned to face the voice again. He was surprised to see a sparkling light forming in the void, like a single star in the sky. As he watched, open mouthed, the light expanded, growing and flickering dozens of colors as it did so.

Caleb almost found his voice just as the light flared up, forming a huge, generous face. Caleb's eyes narrowed against the brilliance, and all around him he could see tongues of flame flare, taking on the shapes of people, driving the darkness away. He raised a hand to his brow, and fought against the panic that threatened to engulf him.

"Then what are you?" Caleb demanded with as much strength as he could muster.

"We are the Forge of the Cosmos," the face said, smiling as it did so. Somehow, that smile calmed Caleb, and spoke to a part of him hidden away, deep within his soul. "Millennia ago we were created to guard the galaxies from the depredations of evil souls, those who would exploit the nature of the cosmos and her children."

Caleb's hand fell away from his face, unconsciously, and his eyes widened, taking in all the light that surrounded him.

"To that end, Caleb Vulcan, we search the length and breadth of the Universe for souls with the proper balance, the desire to do good. When we find a being worthy of the honor, we offer them a place in the ranks of the most sacred order of the cosmos. The Cosmic Knights."

Caleb could not believe what he was hearing. Yet, part of him wanted to, a part of him that was young and old at the same time, a Caleb that had once thrilled to the stories of Flash Gordon and Buck Rogers and Isaac Asimov, a Caleb that had died with his mother, a Caleb who had not survived the cold pragmatism of his father. A Caleb that longed to fly.

"We have observed you for many years, Caleb Vulcan, and we have determined that within you beats the heart of a hero. We have come to offer you the honor and curse of our power. We would make you one of our Knights.

"Before you accept, Caleb Vulcan, know that a life as our servant is not an easy one. You will be called upon to perform dauntless tasks and face dangers that may prove insurmountable. You will be given vast and inestimable might, but know that such power corrupts, and we do not tolerate corruption. You will walk a narrow path, Caleb Vulcan, and though your efforts may bring happiness and prosperity to countless millions, know that such happiness will forever be denied you. For above all, Caleb Vulcan, more important than your life or loves, is the duty, the pact. To defend the light, and never let it fall into darkness.

"Should you join us, Caleb Vulcan, you will surf the stars and visit planets and peoples never dreamed of by your brethren. But you will also face treachery, horror, and the razor thin line between good and evil. This is not an easy thing we ask of you, Caleb Vulcan."

Caleb stood stock still for a few moments, letting the words settle into his brain and heart. He looked away from the face, and he saw the flames dimming one by one, and the darkness flowed back like a wave. He spun on his heels and took a step towards the solemn, glowing visage of the Cosmic Forge.

“Take me,” he rasped. “Make me one of you.” There was no hesitation in his voice, no anger, no fear. Caleb Vulcan saw his opportunity to fly, and he grabbed it with both hands. That child that had awakened within him would not let him do otherwise.

The huge face smiled once again, and then the features collapsed, leaving a ball of light spinning in the darkness. Caleb had a moment of confusion, and then a ray of energy crackled from the globe, reaching out and slamming into him. The energy caressed his body, tracing every contour, etching every muscle and the bone beneath. As Caleb writhed in a mixture of ecstasy and agony, a dozen more shafts of light exploded from the globe and hammered into him, driving him to one knee. He cried out a word that even he could not understand, and raised his hands up in a gesture of supplication. The globe unleashed all of its energy, and Caleb was lost within an undulating wave of scintillating light. The light washed over him, through him, inundating him in its power. It sang to him as it came into him, a wordless melody that caught his heart and trapped it with bonds of servitude and duty. His every cell cried out as the energy swallowed him whole, molecule by molecule.

The light pierced his mind, and a window opened within him, a window that looked into the future. His future.

He saw a man in green, with a wolf’s face and a shimmering ax held in one claw-like hand. There was a towering woman in silver, and she was kissing Caleb on the forehead. A giant of metal and flesh bellowed as it shattered a building with one swipe of its arm. A hive of otherworldly creatures bubbled over a man of red steel, drowning him in bodies. A starship skimmed the edges of a black hole, daring destruction on a sacred mission. Beneath the sea, beneath light and air, Caleb held a blade of fire that would not extinguish, and used it against a tentacled monstrosity that devoured whales and submarines as Caleb wrestled it. And there, Caleb stood in chains, the marks of his rank stripped from him, his eyes dead and weary. A thin boned man with the ears of an Elf laughed, and his fine fingered hands closed about the throat of Caleb’s wife. An army of mechanical creatures tore apart a world, piece by piece, while Caleb watched immobile. He saw all those things and more as the energy of the Forge washed over him, inundated him, transformed him.

It was an eternity before the wave receded, leaving Caleb exhausted and spent in a pool of light, surrounded by darkness. Shakily, he drew himself up to his full height. Etched across his psyche was the knowledge of what he had become. No more was Caleb Vulcan a child of man. Now he belonged to the stars, and everything they shone upon. The images, the flashes

of his possible futures, were buried deep, leaving only impressions of dread and elation.

His eyes flashed with crimson light, and a suit of metallic red armor formed around him, encasing him in a protective sheath. Like a second skin, the armor flowed over him, bonding with him. It would come whenever he called it now, no matter where or when he was. The armor was a part of him, a symbol of his power and his station.

His mind's eye recognized the ability to craft a weapon, but Caleb decided to wait on that. Now, he wanted to test his newfound powers, to learn his strengths and weaknesses. Around him, the darkness faded, and the pool of light winked out of existence.

Caleb Vulcan now hung in space, and the vast starfield of the cosmos blinked and flickered before him. Some of those stars were planets, and Caleb knew that civilizations greater than Earth's thrived upon their alien shores.

Caleb concentrated, centering his power within himself, and after a short while his eyes, hidden under the helm of office, flashed red again, and Caleb transformed into a crimson stream of light that rocketed forward, traversing the void, seeking the stars.

And adventure.

Eventually, exhausted, Caleb returned to a corporeal form. He shifted out of his energy form only a few hundred kilometers from a huge planetary mass that dominated his vision. The bright blue of the planet's atmosphere could not hide the golden tan of its primarily sandy surface. From his vantage point – high up in the void of space, still too far away to be sucked in by the planet's gravitational pull – he could make out a series of huge rivers criss-crossing the world's equator. Judging by their size, the “rivers” were wider than the Mediterranean Sea, though Caleb could only guess at their depth.

Intrigued, he flew towards the planet and pierced its atmospheric coating. Immediately he felt heavier, more solid, as well as the intense heat of his entry as his small form barreled through the ionosphere and he plummeted earthward. His metallic red armor shimmered and glowed, and he felt a minor warmth, almost comforting after the cold of space. He knew he should be burning up into little more than a cinder, but it seemed whatever power enabled him to ply the spaceways unaided also made him impervious to the heat of entry.

And then – almost too quickly – he burst out into sky, glowing like a star. He laughed out loud, and marveled at how metallic and harsh his voice sounded. His body cooled, and he dove through cloud banks, burning them away into steam and causing droplets of water to condense on his metallic red armor.

So this was what it meant to fly like the birds. Free, unfettered by earthly laws or physics, he could suspend his own body above the earth simply by concentrating. And just as, in space, he could match the speed of light, here in an atmosphere he could fly faster than any simple jet. He laughed again, and unleashed his full power, exploding through the air in an incredible burst of speed. He blinked, and he was hundreds of miles away from his starting position.

He drew to a halt, and hovered in a standing position high above the earth. Overhead, only a few kilometers away, was the cold vacuum of space. Below, on the planet's surface, adventure beckoned.

Caleb Vulcan began to realize just how much power was at his disposal, and he remembered the words of the Forge, warning him of the dangers of corruption. He forced himself to relax. There was a difference between testing one's limits and fooling around. Perhaps it was time to explore this world, and see if there was anyone in need of help.

That was his purpose, he recalled. To protect. To rage against the dying of the light.

A moment later he dropped like a stone from the sky. He slowed as he came close to the actual ground, and dropped lightly amidst the dust and rocks, his red boots kicking up puffs of the tiny flakes.

Another mental command sent his armor away, disappearing in a flash of light. Caleb Vulcan stood alone on the vast plain of a desert world, breathing foreign air and looking out on an alien landscape. He was disappointed to find it looked quite a bit like the Arizona desert he grew up playing in. He shrugged, deciding that not every planet he would visit needed to be too different from Earth.

He checked himself over, and to his surprise, saw that not only did he look the same – medium height and build, short blood red hair – but he wore the exact outfit that he put on before taking his buggy out. Dark jeans, white jersey, and cowboy boots. More surprising was that he still retained his wallet, keys, pocket knife, handkerchief and goggles. He suddenly wished he had put tennis shoes on that morning instead of his boots. Caleb shrugged. It was nothing he could alter, so it was best to just accept it and deal with it.

He picked a direction at random and began to walk.

In a short while, as the sun began to pummel him, and his feet twisted in the boots designed for riding, not walking, Caleb began to regret traveling on the ground. It would be so much easier and more comfortable to take to the air, where the armor would protect him and the flight would free him. But again, he reminded himself of the Forge's admonition, and he decided to continue walking.

At last, as his forearms and face were beginning to redden, and he could feel the blisters painfully developing on his feet, he topped a rocky rise to find a road in the distance. Not much of one, to be sure; it wasn't much more

than an area of ground where the red sand had been brushed away, but its very existence hinted at some sort of intelligent life. Despite his discomforts, Caleb's pulse quickened at the very thought. He was going to be the first human being to encounter an alien – the idea fired his imagination and caused him to redouble his speed.

He reached the road in moments, and up close it appeared to be much as Caleb had thought. Simple, but effective. He could just make out wheel impressions in the dry dust of the road. It looked like they might have been made by some kind of tracked vehicle, but Caleb couldn't be sure. The wind had damaged the sign too much.

Caleb began to follow the road, rubbing at his raw forearms unconsciously. The sun was doing a terrible job on his fair skin. He resisted the temptation to suit up. Truth be known, Caleb wasn't sure what would constitute an abuse of power, but having been raised by a very strict military man and devout Lutheran, Caleb felt he should toe the line as close as he could. Better to be too careful than too frivolous.

Such thoughts caused him to reflect momentarily upon his father. Caleb knew he should be missing the man, but he did not. He was glad to be gone from under his father's shadow.

Suddenly, his ears picked up the whine of an engine. He looked back, and saw a cloud of dust whipping about some kind of metallic vehicle. The machine was speeding along the road, and it looked like it would reach Caleb in moments. Caleb hopped off the road and stuck his thumb out. There was no telling if aliens picked up hitchhikers, but he was about to find out.

The machine roared past him, the engine screaming, dust flying up in its wake and finding its way into Caleb's mouth and nose. His goggles were coated with a layer of the stuff. Yet Caleb still caught a glimpse of the vehicle.

It was long, and narrow, shaped like an arrowhead. It moved on two wheels, much like a motorcycle, and a dome of glass, reminiscent of a fighter jet's cockpit, stretched out on top of the vehicle. The glass of the cockpit was too dark for Caleb to make out the driver's features, but Caleb was elated nonetheless. He had just seen his first alien.

Caleb hopped up and down. "Woohoo!" he shouted, and got a mouth full of dust. It took a moment for him to remember that he was still stranded in the desert. "Oh well," he shrugged. "If it gets too bad, I can just fly outta here."

Wiping the dust from his face with his shirt, he continued his march. Somehow, the sun seemed less harsh, and the boots less painful.

It was a good fifteen minutes later that he saw another cloud of dust on the horizon, heading toward him. Curious, Caleb again left the road and stuck his thumb into the air.

As he waited, the vehicle became more distinct. It was clearly more bulky than the other car, and moved more slowly. Yet it still devoured the road

at an impressive clip. Gradually, Caleb made out the shape and character of the machine. It looked like a Mack truck. It had a huge cab, with a dark glass windshield, and a snub nose. Enormous tracked wheels churned up the surface of the road. A low, flat trailer stretched out behind the cab, and Caleb could see white, metallic boxes stacked upon it.

His second alien looked so... Earthlike. Caleb felt the disappointment well up in his chest, but forced it down. He stood his ground and waited. Perhaps the driver would look more alien than his truck.

Caleb was surprised when the truck slowed down as it approached him, and drew to a complete halt as it came parallel with where he stood. With a hiss, the driver's side door lifted open. Caleb sucked in a breath, preparing himself for some hideous, tentacled, multi-eyed creature out of Haggard or Raymond. But again Caleb felt the cold stab of disappointment.

Sitting in the cab was a grizzled old man – a grizzled old *human*. He looked like any of a half dozen older men from home, his face raw from a life outdoors, his hair white and slicked back, a pair of spectacles perched on his blunt nose. His weathered cheeks were marred by several days of stubble. He didn't wear a silvery suit with a ray gun belted at his side, but rather a drab, gray jumpsuit. The collar was open, and Caleb could see the man's red undershirt.

The man looked at him with an expression halfway between a smile and a grimace. He spoke, loudly, but whatever tongue he used was unintelligible to Caleb. It didn't sound like a language from Earth. Caleb brightened. "I'm sorry," he said, "I don't understand you."

The man shook his head. "Didn't mean to throw ya, kid," the man said in passable English. Caleb's heart dropped. He seemed to have an odd accent, but he clearly spoke English. "Didn't realize ya didn't know T-One. Anyways, you look like you're in a spot of trouble."

Caleb nodded. "Yeah, my... uh... buggy flipped on me out in the desert. I've been walking for hours... lost my way. I was trying to get to town..."

The man laughed, a short, harsh bark. "I'll say ya got lost. Yer headed the wrong way. But ya are in luck; Misery is where I'm headed. Hop in. I'll give ya a lift."

Caleb's sigh of relief was heartfelt. "Thank you."

There was another hiss as the passenger side door opened, and Caleb jogged around the front of the truck to climb into the cab. He groaned as he settled into the plush seat, stretching his long legs out before him under the dash. The man chuckled again, and stuck out his paw. Caleb took it. "Caleb Vulcan," he said.

"Rik Nybek," the man said. His grip was strong, and he had the hand of a workman. As it turned out, Nybek was a farmer, a man of the earth. Or so Caleb at first assumed; in truth, Nybek did not grow crops, he farmed water. His "plantation" in the desert consisted of huge, automated units that could

drill deep into the earth, beneath the water table, into underground aquifers or streams, to gather water for the community of Misery, and the real farmers, those who grew food through irrigating their crops with Nybek's water. Nybek wasn't the only water farmer in the area, but he was one of the most successful.

Caleb was surprised and strangely reassured by Nybek's unusual narrative. Caleb had taken the man for a simple trucker, automatically categorizing him with labels he had learned on Earth. Nybek looked like just another red-neck drinking down at Munden's Pub, but he was so much more than that. An alien who looked human, who seemed normal, but had a most extraordinary job. Farming water? Caleb's initial disappointment at encountering Nybek faded rapidly.

And then he saw Misery.

The town appeared on the horizon quickly, emerging out of the haze of dust and afternoon sunlight as if by magic. The town itself was relatively unimpressive; composed of a number of low buildings fashioned out of white clay and bricks, spread out over a wide area. A high wall, built from the same material as the buildings, encircled the town, and the road led up to a heavy wooden gate. Caleb had seen shanty towns on Earth that looked more substantial than Misery, but the lesson of Rik Nybek stayed with him, and he decided not to pass judgment until after he'd had a chance to look at the place up close.

His reserve was justified, Caleb felt, as Nybek's truck bounced along the road and through the gate into town. For, leaning against the wall by the gate, smoking a cigarette of some kind, was a ten foot tall bipedal lizard, clad in a battered suit of armor, with shimmering copper skin and golden eyes, and a whipcord tail lashing against the wall.

An alien.

Caleb's heart began to pound within his chest, and he was sure Nybek could hear the organ pumping loudly. Now Caleb knew – he *knew* – he was on the greatest adventure anyone had ever witnessed.

Aliens.

What else did Misery hold?

Chapter Two

Surrounded by the Void

The seven rings that circle the great gas giant Garouk-9 are mainly composed of particles of ice and rock. "Particles" is a word that gives only the vaguest sense of the rings, though, as the objects vary in size from the tiniest of pebbles to massive asteroids several miles in diameter. Garouk-9 itself possesses no native sentient life, though giant amoebae-like creatures known as Tuscuns navigate through the chlorine rich atmosphere of the planet, floating on wind currents and deriving sustenance from the clouds themselves. It is within the rings circling the globe that a world-hopper will find the people of Garouk-9. The icesteroids and asteroids that circle the planet are rich in minerals, particularly titanium, nickel, and durnium. Mining interests from within the Juktos System maintain stations near Garouk-9, and send agents into the rings to plunder their resources. A number of independent prospectors have also made the rings their home, and many derive a comfortable living from the orbital mines. Life here can be dangerous, however, because the rings also provide excellent hiding places for smugglers and marauders...

— Excerpt from Travelogues of a Journeyman, by Fraktyn Quint

A black and gray tub of steel slowly navigated its way through the maze of twirling rock that served as the sixth ring of Garouk-9. The ship bore no distinguishing markings, and to all appearances seemed to be unremarkable save for a few blaster burns across its dorsal surface. A casual observer would have assumed the ship to be just another prospecting vessel, most likely one of the independent operators in the ring, unaffiliated with Drasco Inc., Bhudrin, or any of the other mining conglomerates. A casual observer would be in error.

A thousand meters away from the ship, keeping a careful watch on the vessel's progress, stood a single humanoid, perching upon a large icesteroid. The figure was physically impressive; standing half again as tall as a human being, he was sheathed in a skin tight suit of metallic green armor that reflected brightly off the ice beneath his feet. Green eyes glittered beneath a great helm molded to fit his wolfish face, and in his claw-like hands he cradled a great battle-axe made of the same peculiar metal as his armor. His name among humans was Lothar, a close approximation of his birth name. He was a Wulfen, one of those canine-like humanoids who had spread throughout the Three Galaxies. More than that, however, Lothar was a Knight of the Cosmic Forge.

He watched as the black and gray ship weaved through the ring. The ship was shaped like a bird of prey, with wings outstretched and large ion cannons mounted on the belly, where a bird's talons might have been. Those cannons,

Lothar knew, had sent at least a dozen merchant vessels spinning into the void, and the captain of that ship was a blackguard notorious throughout the Juktos system and its closest neighbors. His name was Elias Harkonnen, an Elven pirate as adept with a blaster or a blade as he was behind the controls of his starship, the *Raptor*.

Harkonnen's raids had caused the deaths of three thousand and sixty-four sentients to date. Lothar had been unable to halt the last attack, against a Titanian supply ship named *Regis*, and the *Raptor* made its escape while Lothar surveyed the damage to the *Regis*. Using the esoteric skills of his order, Lothar was able to trail the *Raptor* through the trackless void of space to the Juktos system, and the gas giant Garouk-9. The rings created a net of cosmic "static" that fouled Lothar's enhanced senses, and he lost the *Raptor* within the maze of rock and ice. Two days of careful searching and prudent use of his tracking ability had eventually led him to the icesteroid upon which Lothar now stood, observing the *Raptor* as it approached one of the larger asteroids, knotted and pitted by mines strung out decades ago, that filled several cubic kilometers of space.

The *Raptor* slowly drew closer to the asteroid, and Lothar watched, unsurprised, as a doorway set within the rock of the asteroid scissored open, and the marauder slipped within its stony bosom.

Lothar nodded to himself, his suspicions confirmed. When he had first lost the ship within the confines of the rings, Lothar assumed that the pirates possessed some sort of hidden base inside the circle of asteroids. He was slightly surprised at the size of the facility, but its existence merely confirmed his suspicions.

Lothar stepped off the icesteroid and glided through space in the direction of the hidden base, holding the axe out before him. The same cosmic "static" that interfered with Lothar's ability to track the starship through the rings obscured his own presence in the void. He did not doubt that the pirate stronghold possessed a powerful sensor array, probably equipped to sniff out CCW law-dogs and hunter ships, but entirely unsuited to separating the debris from the ring apart from human or humanoid figures hovering outside their front door.

In a matter of moments, Lothar crossed the distance to the massive asteroid, ducking past an errant icesteroid that nearly cleaved through his helm. He was all too aware of the limitations of the Cosmic Forge's blessings. His body was rendered immune to even the intense heat of the stars, making him invulnerable to the common energy weapons most civilizations of the Three Galaxies used for warfare and defense. But a bullet from a grav rifle or rail gun could penetrate even the fabled armor of the Cosmo-Knights, and an icesteroid that massed several thousand kilos could squash him like a bug.

Lothar skimmed the surface of the huge asteroid concealing the *Raptor* and her crew. His unerring sense of direction guided him to the massive door

incised into the asteroid's surface. He smiled to himself, forced to admire the ingenuity of the pirates. Their hideaway was well concealed; even knowing where to look and what to look for, Lothar found it difficult to locate the edges of the door. The surface of the portal was plated with the skin of the asteroid itself, while the perimeters were cunningly hidden beneath the natural protuberances and projections of the asteroid. When he finally located it, he measured its dimensions with his eyes. The door stood twenty meters tall and twenty meters wide, roughly square shaped, and was large enough to allow entry or exit to two ships at a time, with millimeters to spare.

Lothar pressed one metal-skinned hand against the surface of the door. Even through several centimeters of rock and the green metal of his gauntlet, he felt the quiet hum of machinery. Again he smiled to himself, and pulled back from the door. Taking his double-bladed axe in a two handed grip, he summoned up the cosmic fire within his breast and cut loose with a titanic blow, splitting open the camouflaged exterior of the door and revealing the dull metallic surface of the door itself. Lothar quickly unleashed a second shattering attack, slicing through the metal with an explosion of green sparks. He stepped back to admire his handiwork, and, satisfied, extended the axe before him. A flash of emerald energy flared from the head of the axe and connected with the door, burning through the weakened section in a heartbeat. Lothar brushed past it into the base, his eyes flashing green beneath his helm, his axe held ready to attack.

Beyond the door lay a gigantic, airless, hollowed out pocket, carved from the middle of the asteroid to provide the marauders with a docking bay impossible to find through normal means. Lothar was momentarily impressed with Harkonnen's ingenuity and ambition, but then he reasoned that it was more likely that the pirate had stumbled across the hiding place than that he fashioned it himself.

Three hundred meters inside the chamber, the *Raptor* had attached itself to the inner wall, connected by snaking umbilicals and at least three airlock tunnels that extended from the asteroid wall to fasten on to the *Raptor*. Though the chamber held more than enough space for a dozen ships, the only facilities Lothar could discern were those servicing the *Raptor*.

As he surveyed the scene, two dull black metal spheres detached from the walls of the chamber and glided through the emptiness towards him. Lothar hefted his axe in his hands and watched them come. He recognized their make, if not their type. Naruni war-drones: automated machines better armored than most starships, and packing enough firepower to level a small moon.

Business must have been very good for Harkonnen. Naruni weaponry was never cheap.

Several plates opened up on each of the drones, revealing the plasma projectors, mini-missile launchers, grav guns, laser cannons, and whatever else

the Naruni techno-engineers could pack into the spheres. Lothar grinned beneath his helm. He loved a challenge.

As energy lanced towards him from the spheres, Lothar dropped thirty meters and threw his axe at the drone to his left. The axe ripped through the plates of the drone, tearing through its ventral hemisphere and hopefully shredding something critical. At the same time, Lothar summoned up the energy of the Forge within him, and sent emerald beams of light from his eyes to slam into the second drone.

The second drone exploded in a shower of fire, spectacularly and silently, extinguished almost as soon as it erupted.

The axe boomeranged back to Lothar's hand. Simultaneously, the first drone, damaged but still functioning, reoriented its weapon systems, and launched a dozen missiles at Lothar. He ducked past the volley, and flew across the chamber towards where the *Raptor* clung to the side of the asteroid, venting gases into space. He didn't need to check to know the missiles followed.

The lead missiles reached Lothar just as he drew close to the *Raptor*. They slammed into him and detonated, sending him tumbling through the void to smash against the *Raptor*'s hull. Lothar grunted in surprise and pain, but his armor held. In another moment, the rest of the volley exploded around him, and he instinctively curled up into a ball as the silent explosions rocked him and the side of the *Raptor* where he stood.

Smoke and debris hung in a cloud around Lothar, but his green eyes pierced the haze and assessed the damage. His armor was burnt and scarred by the attack, but the brunt of the damage had been inflicted on the *Raptor*. Lothar's gamble paid off; the size of the *Raptor* served to confuse the missiles and enabled him to escape a fiery and brutal death.

He could see the war-drone limp towards the *Raptor*, trailing smoke and lit up with warning lights. Its weapon systems homed in on Lothar and prepared to fire. He allowed himself a brief, rueful grin. He had hoped Harkonnen would have programmed the drones not to fire upon the *Raptor*, but it seemed that the marauder either had not anticipated the possibility, or was more ruthless than Lothar at first assumed.

Once more he summoned up the fires of the Cosmic Forge, and unleashed them in a devastating beam from his eyes. The energy sliced through the drone, destroying it in an instant. Lothar turned away and flew towards the airlocks that led into the station proper. As he did, he noticed the *Raptor*'s running lights suddenly ignited. He drew to a halt, and again channeled the fires of the Forge into a destructive beam that spiraled towards the *Raptor*'s engines, and connected with a soundless crunch.

The *Raptor* would not be going anywhere for quite some time.

However, Lothar's energy reserves were seriously depleted, and he would not be able to summon up another energy blast of such magnitude in the near

future. If Harkonnen, by some miracle, managed to get his ship underway, Lothar would be hard pressed to stop him.

With two swipes of his axe, Lothar opened up one of the airlocks, and surged into the base. Behind him, the automatic systems sealed the tear he had carved through the door, while before him stretched a cargo hold stacked high with crates of booty. The ceiling was ten meters overhead, though a catwalk was bolted to the wall about halfway up it. Lothar spotted three exits in his first glance, but had little time to explore further. Three of the pirates stood five meters away; a trio of Naterreri clad in patchwork suits of battle armor decorated with clan tattoos. They had popped open one of the crates, and two of them were lugging out short, four-barreled rifles with heavy box magazines situated in front of the triggers. The third pirate covered them with his plasma rifle, knowing full well that the weapon was useless against the Cosmo-Knight. Lothar didn't recognize the hardware the pirates had just produced, but he was certain he didn't want to find out what they could do.

"Stand down and surrender," Lothar barked. "I am authorized to use lethal force against you. Do not force me to kill you."

The shark-like aliens ignored him, and the duo with the heavy weapons opened fire on Lothar. The weapons coughed, and two volleys of micro-missiles blasted towards him. The Wulfen heaved his axe with a smooth snap of his shoulder, and leapt into the air at the same moment. The micro-missiles hurtled harmlessly beneath him, only to connect with the far wall of the hold with a terrific boom that shook the entire room.

Lothar's axe decapitated one of the pirates as it passed them, and the one with the plasma rifle dropped to the ground with a scream. His one surviving companion reoriented his heavy rifle, but was knocked off his feet by Lothar's eyebeams, weaker than the ones he had used on the drones, but more than enough to incapacitate the pirate.

Lothar dropped to the ground beside the Naterreri who lay on the floor, holding his head and shuddering in fear. The Knight grabbed his shoulder in one hand and lifted the alien easily. The axe flew back to his hand and Lothar caught it automatically. His eyes glowed balefully from beneath his helm. "Where is Harkonnen?" he demanded. The fish-eyes blinked rapidly in Lothar's face. The poor fool was too frightened to talk. Lothar threw him to the ground in disgust.

"Hello!" a voice from above called out. "Looking for me?"

Lothar stepped back and raised his head. Above him, standing on the catwalk that circled the room, stood Elias Harkonnen. The Elf was tall, angular, and thin, clad in a form-fitting, black and red suit of Imperial Legionnaire's armor, with a crimson skullcap on his head. A carefully trimmed black goatee hid his sharp chin, and his eyes were an opaque white that seemed almost to glow.

Lothar stood aghast.

“Surprised?” Elias asked rhetorically. “Didn’t know I was in the Legion, did you? Then I’ll wager you’re unaware that I served with the Invincible Guard.”

“That won’t stop me from bringing you in, Harkonnen,” Lothar growled. Privately, he was not so sure. The Transgalactic Empire was a blight upon the Three Galaxies, an expansive and vicious nation founded by a bloodthirsty race of beings known as the Kreeghor, and dedicated to the subjugation of all the sentients in the galaxy. The Kreeghor had once served as slaves to the masters of bio-wizardry, the Splugorth, and they had learned enough secrets from their former masters to create soldiers of frightening power and abilities. Dubbed the “Invincible Guardsmen,” these superhumanly powerful warriors were the elite of the Empire’s vast armies. Supposedly, they were treated lavishly, rewarded for their service with wealth and power unimaginable in civilized space. There were deserters, of course, but those who left the bosom of the Empire willingly often did so because the Empire itself did not give them enough opportunities to exercise their martial prowess, and to satisfy their sadistic appetites.

If Elias Harkonnen was one of those creatures, then Lothar had to destroy him. Quickly and cleanly, if possible.

If possible.

“That is what the last of your kind said to me, before I handed him his lungs.” The Elf smiled, and brandished a small, oblong object in his right hand. Lothar instinctively tensed, but no attack came. “I recognize you, Lothar of Motherhome. You’re fairly well known in this sector of space. In fact, I’ve been expecting you for some time now. What kept you?”

Lothar eyed Harkonnen carefully. What game was he playing? Did the Elf hope to distract him with senseless chatter?

“I had to deal with a Manarr serial killer on Torshin,” Lothar said. He hefted the axe in his hands. “I’m afraid he took priority... although now I’m beginning to think I should have taken care of you first.”

“I think so, too,” Harkonnen laughed. He brandished the oblong object in his hand again. “Normally, I would stay and kill you personally, but to tell you the truth, I’ve had something of a bad day. So, I’m going to leave early.” He pressed a button on the device, and the lights in the cargo hold immediately dimmed.

“Self-destruct activated,” a mechanical voice droned from a hidden PA system. “Seven minutes until detonation.” The voice then began to count down the minutes, one second at a time.

Lothar ignored it, and took a step forward. “Seven minutes is more than enough time for me to deal with you,” he said, taking the axe in both hands.

Elias shrugged. “Perhaps. You seem able enough; and we both know the detonation of the nuclear core of this station won’t harm you in the least bit. And I’ll survive as well. But as for my men... they do not share our gifts.

And you Knights of the Forge prefer to capture criminals alive, do you not? Particularly when in CCW space?"

Lothar tightened his grip on his axe. He desperately wanted to wipe the smug grin off the Elf's face. But he knew Harkonnen was right. Lothar couldn't stand by and let the pirates die needlessly; death in battle was one thing, but they needed to stand trial for their crimes in a CCW court. To just let them perish would be a violation of CCW law, and his own code.

"Where are they?" Lothar demanded through gritted teeth.

Elias laughed again, and juggled the self-destruct device in one hand as the countdown continued. "Most of them fled to the ship when you destroyed the drones. Those three fools at your feet stayed behind, knowing you would cripple the ship."

Lothar nodded. "We'll meet again, Harkonnen," he said.

"Oh, I'm sure we will," the Elf laughed. "I'm sure we will."

Lothar turned to the two surviving Naterreri and sent the axe away, to that hidden place between the dimensions where it would remain until he needed it again. Lothar dragged the conscious Naterreri to his feet. "Grab your friend. We're getting on the ship before this place goes up." The pirate looked at Lothar blankly for a moment, but then lurched to where his companion lay, his armor scorched and blasted. With a grunt, the Naterreri lifted his ally, and followed Lothar to the airlock door.

The airlock cycled open, and the two pirates stumbled through the door towards the ship. Lothar spared a glance in the direction of the catwalk, but Harkonnen had disappeared. Lothar almost went after the Elf; his anger at being outmaneuvered, combined with his zeal for justice, nearly made him abandon the pirate crew to oblivion. But he mastered himself, and followed the shark-faced humanoids onto the *Raptor*. As the opposite side of the airlock slid open, an energy blast flashed into the compartment. Lothar brushed past the Naterreris and deflected the beam with his fist, and then exploded through the airlock door to body slam the pirate who had fired upon them. The attacker crashed to the ground with a groan.

Lothar ignored him and the other pirates, and immediately rushed to the bridge. More guns greeted him there, but he could tell that the pirates, normally ruthless and remorseless men, were frightened. Frightened of the impending destruction, and frightened of the snarling Cosmo-Knight in their midst.

"Put your weapons away," Lothar barked. A few nervous pirates complied with the demand, almost certainly surprising themselves, but a large, cybernetically enhanced human kept his grav gun trained on Lothar's head. "We have very little time," Lothar continued, eyeing each of the men in turn. "Less than four minutes by my calculation. Now, you can cooperate, and live, or you can be stupid, and die."

Lothar counted to ten, rapidly losing patience. He was about to explain the situation one more time when the cyborg pulled the trigger on his pistol. The gravitonically propelled projectile whined through the air, and slammed into Lothar's shoulder with a crack. He grunted, pushed back a few inches, and his eyes flashed once. The cyborg flew backwards, knocked off his feet by the blast of emerald energy that fried his chest.

The other pirates stood motionless. A few covered Lothar with their weapons, while those who had holstered them a moment ago seemed about to draw them again.

"Getting closer to three minutes," Lothar said.

"What do you want us to do?" a Catyr asked. She was tall, red skinned and copper haired, and she looked like the type of person willing to jettison her own mother for a few credits. "You fracked up the engines, and now we don't have enough thrust to get off this ball of rock."

"Disengage from the wall," Lothar ordered. "Fire up the maneuvering jets. Get the ship in position to head through the gate, and get that opened. Position the ship perfectly. Directly before the gate."

"What are you going to do?" the Catyr asked.

"I'm going outside. I'm going to push you all to safety." There were cries of incredulity, as well as a few curses lobbed in Lothar's direction, but he ignored them all and left the bridge, moving quickly through the ship to the airlock door. On the way, he felt the ship lurch beneath his feet as the *Raptor* separated from the base. Lothar stepped over the body in the middle of the corridor, and opened the inner door of the airlock. He jumped into the airlock and opened the outer door almost before the inner door cycled closed. A heartbeat later, Lothar stepped out into the void once more, into the empty silence.

He flew up onto the dorsal side of the *Raptor*, and landed lightly on the hull. Beneath him, the pirates brought the maneuvering jets to life, and the *Raptor* began to come about. Slowly. He frowned beneath his helm. Time was rapidly running out; he had spent most of the seven minutes dealing with the ship's crew. Harkonnen had most likely already made good his escape. But Lothar still needed to push the 270 metric ton ship through 300 meters of airless space to reach the portal that led out of the station.

He uttered a silent prayer. He would need the strength of the Forge itself to get the ship away before the station detonated.

He had a plan. It was a desperate one, but this situation called for such measures. Normally, Lothar could summon up the fire of the Forge within him to create a number of effects. With the power of the Forge, he could augment the energy beams he produced, enabling them to damage even starships. This he had already done, three times in the past fifteen minutes, depleting his reserves. But he could also use that energy to supercharge his flight ability, enabling him to reach FTL speeds in the vastness of the void. Lothar's energy

bank still possessed enough power to get him free and clear, but he wasn't about to desert the fools on the *Raptor* now.

He might be able, for a few seconds at least, to extend his FTL ability to encompass the *Raptor*. Just long enough to get the ship through the doorway and out of immediate danger. Lothar wasn't certain his plan was entirely possible, but he knew that if it worked it would be extremely painful. Having expended so much energy on the drones and the ship's engines, he didn't have enough left to move the ship. But in extreme circumstances, a Cosmo-Knight could convert his own flesh and blood into energy to supplement the cosmic power of the Forge that resided within him. In essence, Lothar could cannibalize his own body to provide the power he needed to move the ship.

But it would cost him. The pain would be excruciating.

Better get started. The ship was almost aligned perfectly.

Lothar knelt on the ship, and placed his palms flat against the cold metal. He closed his eyes and summoned up the energy that flared at the core of his being. As the power flooded through him, and out through his hands to crackle across the hull of the *Raptor*, Lothar dug deep, dredging the energy up through him, spending it all hastily and messily. When he reached the bottom of his reserves, he went deeper, transforming his own mass into light.

The energy flashed from his palms in a great emerald web that spread, meter by meter, across the surface of the *Raptor*. The web flashed and crackled silently, enveloping the ship. Lothar screamed inwardly, a howl of rage and pain, as his body bled out of him, fingers of light that swallowed up the 270 metric ton block of metal and ceramics beneath him.

At last, the web of energy caressed the entirety of the vessel, and it lurched forward, compelled by Lothar's will. At the same moment, the countdown inside the station approached its nadir, and deep within the bowels of the hideaway, its nuclear reactor reached critical mass. A moment later, the reactor detonated, exploding in a wave of destructive energy that consumed the asteroid in seconds.

The *Raptor* rode the wave, guided by the Cosmo-Knight who stood upon its hull. As it was, the *Raptor* was nearly shredded to pieces, managing to maintain its integrity by the barest of margins. The explosion, and the debris from the explosion, shattered the wings of the ship, and tore nearly a dozen holes in the hull. Lothar was almost knocked from his perch, but he held his post through sheer determination.

When the excitement was over, and the asteroid was nothing more than powder, the *Raptor* was left spinning lazily in the void, quiet and dark, its running lights dimmed. Lothar lay spread-eagled upon the surface of the ship, barely conscious. He had converted nearly half of his mass into the energy needed to carry the *Raptor* seven hundred meters to safety. He was emaciated, almost skeletal, and his normally skintight armor hung upon his body like robes.

Lothar slowly dragged himself to his feet. In a little while, the energy within him would replenish itself, his body would heal, and he could leave the *Raptor* here to wait until the authorities arrived.

<Lothar.>

Lothar started, surprised at the voice that sounded within his mind. He recognized the lilting growl of the Cosmic Forge, but the Forge only rarely spoke to its Knights.

<What would you have of me?> Lothar thought, answering the Forge's call.

<We have need of your services again, Son of Motherhome. We have created a new Knight, a human from the planet Earth. He lacks direction, and needs help understanding his new role and the Three Galaxies. You will provide that direction.>

Lothar stifled a sigh. Another child Knight to train. *<But, what of Harkonnen? I cannot let him simply escape. He must be brought to justice.>*

<Patience, my child. Proceed to the desert world of Koola in the Haring System,> the Forge ordered. *<Seek out Caleb Vulcan. Teach him the ways of the Forge. You will face Harkonnen in due time.>*

Lothar felt the Forge recede from his mind, and he slumped to the hull of the ship. It seemed his destiny did not lie with Harkonnen after all. Then again, Harkonnen's capture might be more expediently accomplished with two Knights following his trail.

Chapter Three

Into the Great Wide Open

Located within the rim of the Anvil, the Haring system possesses only a single inhabitable planet, a ball of dust and sand dubbed Koola by the natives. Although the equatorial region of Koola is ringed by the Great Koola River and its tributaries, a water system several hundred kilometers in expanse, the rest of the planet consists of a vast, untamed desert. This desert is a roughly assembled amalgamation of rocky badlands, salt flats, dune seas, and fragmented mountain ranges. There are no major industries on Koola; the desert looks empty, and it is empty. The natives, the Gojirans, are meter long insectoids that fashion vast colonies out of mud formed from sand and their own bodily secretions. Strangely, the Gojirans do not seem to be bothered by the presence of other sentients on their planet, so long as their hives remained undisturbed. Humans and Seljuks in particular have migrated to Koola in sizable numbers over the past few decades, most of them former criminals given new leases on life by the Consortium of Civilized Worlds. Service industries have grown up around the communities formed by these immigrants, the most notable of which is the moisture industry. While the Gojirans have placed the River System off limits to off-worlders, they have not legislated against the billions of hydrogen and oxygen molecules floating in the atmosphere; entrepreneurs have taken advantage of this state of affairs to create moisture farms, mining the air and the earth for the water everyone needs in order to function...

– Excerpt from *Travelogues of a Journeyman*, by Frakтын Quint

Still unable to sleep.

Caleb Vulcan lay upon the bed with which Rik Nybek and his wife Floris had provided him, stripped down to his shorts and laying on the covers, allowing the cool desert air to flow in through the open windows and brush across his body. It was a welcome respite from his long day in the sun, helping Rik inspect the moisture collectors, and unload their precious cargo for packing and eventual sale in the town.

Caleb was still acclimating to his newfound abilities. That first day on the planet's surface had reddened his skin, but the burn disappeared quickly, never to return. The fair Vulcan skin wasn't tanning, as usual, but it would not burn either. His strength was Herculean now, and Caleb found himself capable of matching the strength of Rik's two worker 'bots, who, according to their master, could each handle two thousand kilograms easily. He didn't tire at all, either. After hours in the sun, caked with sweat and grime, he felt refreshed and ready for more. And though he lay upon a soft and comfortable

bed, with the lights out and the cool breeze anointing him, Caleb could not sleep.

This was not a new phenomenon. Caleb had been living on Rik's farm for nearly six weeks, paying his way by helping Rik in the fields. Caleb thought it was his best opportunity to get to know the new universe he had stumbled across, and the best chance to get to know his new body. Rik and Floris were wonderful people, and they answered every question Caleb asked, asking few in return. Caleb sensed that Rik knew, or at least suspected, what Caleb had become, but was reluctant to press the issue with the young man. And out in the desert, away from prying eyes, Caleb could call up his crimson armor and experiment with his abilities. The things he could do now were beyond imagination; like some gaudy superhero, Caleb had powers beyond those of mortal men. He could leap over buildings with a single jump, buzz through the air more quickly than a jet, and he was certainly more powerful than any locomotive.

But he couldn't sleep. It was one of the side effects of his supercharged metabolism, he supposed. Like not needing to eat or drink, no matter how long he worked or sweated. His body was fueled by something else, some inner form of energy that seemed limitless and gave him unflagging endurance along with the other abilities. His mind still grew tired, even if his body did not, and occasionally he would slip into a kind of trance for an hour or so, not unlike daydreaming in math class. It was a form of rest, but it wasn't the same as a good night's sleep.

Caleb sat up in bed, scratching a hand through his short red hair, and listened carefully to the sounds of the house. He couldn't hear anyone moving about, so he decided it was safe for another midnight adventure. He slipped out of bed, pulled on his jeans and the silver shirt Floris had bought for him, and stepped across the room on bare feet. He looked out through the window at the clear night sky, sighing as he absorbed the view of the alien stars, and then put one foot on the window sill and leapt outside in one smooth bound.

He landed lightly in the dust and sprinted across the yard. He skidded to a halt at what he judged a good distance from the house, and summoned the armor. In a burst of red, his body was encased in a suit of armor, capped by a bulky helm with a single narrow aperture for the eyes. Over the past six weeks, as he had grown more comfortable with the armor and his abilities, the armor itself had taken on a more regular form. At first the suit had been little more than a second layer of skin, but now it had taken on the appearance of a Roman Centurion's armor, metallic red in color, with the black of the void showing in the gaps of the armor, and a stylized hammer image imprinted across the breastplate. Caleb wasn't certain where the style of the armor or the hammer icon were coming from, but it felt *right*.

As always, when he conjured up the armor, in the back of his mind a soothing voice reminded him that he could fashion a weapon from the same

material as the armor. But again, Caleb resisted the temptation. He wanted to be comfortable with his “natural” abilities before he added another gimmick to his repertoire.

Caleb willed himself to rise into the air and flew towards the south.

Caleb blasted across the stratosphere, glorying in the feel of weightlessness and the roaring wind in his ears. This had always been his dream: to fly, to defy gravity and take to the skies. As a child, Caleb had tied a towel around his neck and leapt off the shed in his backyard. As a teenager, he had studied airplanes and jets and dreamed of learning how to fly. And when he received his draft notice, his only hope was that he might make it into the air force and finally learn how to fly.

But this was so much better. So much purer. He flew now under his own power, without the need for machinery, without a winged hunk of metal between himself and the sky. Caleb Vulcan was a bright crimson bolt, and he screamed across the starlit night.

He dropped down close to the earth, whipping up a cloud of dust and gravel in his wake, and then lifted back up into the air as he blasted over a Gojiran colony that stretched for kilometers in the four cardinal directions. He could see millions of the strange insectoids scuttling across the expanse of their city, expanding and modifying what was already there. Caleb had seen his share of aliens in the last six weeks, but the tiny Gojirans were certainly among the strangest. The slow talking, dinosaur-like Seljuks were positively normal compared to the hard shelled, three foot long natives of Koola.

Perhaps it was simply their bug-like appearance and habits that made Caleb wary of the Gojirans. Aliens were interesting as long as they weren't too alien, he supposed. The Seljuks, Draconids and others may have been bizarre looking and strangely wonderful to encounter, but they were also humanoid, with human proportions and a human-like intelligence that made them easier to understand than the Gojirans. The Gojirans were sentient according to Nybek, and the CCW (the Consortium of Civilized Worlds, according to Rik) held a treaty with them. But the Gojirans didn't seem to care about the humanoids infesting their planet, and were apparently more intent on the construction and upkeep of their hives, and maintaining the happiness of each hive's queen. Except for the queens, the Gojirans appeared sexless, emotionless, and incommunicative.

Caleb shook his head and continued south. He drew to a halt as he neared a blasted section of the southern badlands that he had taken to using as a practice range. He dropped to the earth with a soft thump, raising dust in a cloud all around him. He scanned the area, and noticed a hump of rock rising out of the broken ground not far away. He concentrated, and crimson light flashed from the eye slit in his helm. The hump of rock exploded in a shower of stone slivers. Caleb bounced into the air again and targeted another chunk of stone, blasting it with another stream of energy from his eyes.

Without missing a beat, Caleb jetted through the explosion as it erupted across the landscape, barely feeling the shattered rock as it pattered against his metal skin.

A bolt of emerald energy flashed before his eyes. Caleb lost control and spun wildly to crash into the ground, tearing a furrow in the blasted earth. He scrambled to his feet as another green ray buzzed past him to burn the ground. He looked around desperately, seeking the origin of the mysterious energy. As he did, something heavy slammed into him from behind at an incredible speed. Caleb barely had a moment to register the attack before he was thrown again, smashing to the stony ground with a crash.

Caleb rolled over and instinctively unleashed a blast of energy from his eyes. The light spattered ineffectually against the body that dropped out of the air towards him. But the light from his energy bolt illuminated the figure for a moment: it was bigger than a man, easily eight feet tall or more, clad in a suit of metallic green battle armor with a helm shaped like a grinning dog or wolf, and a huge two-headed ax in his hands.

Caleb yelled out despite himself as the figure fell towards him and the ax dropped towards his head. Frozen in fear, everything Caleb had learned from his father and in the last six weeks fled his mind. He watched in horror as the ax descended.

And slammed into the earth a hair's breadth from his head. The figure landed lightly on his feet, straddling Caleb's waist. He leaned forward on the handle of his ax, and glowered at Caleb with green eyes almost hidden by the scowling brow of his wolf's head helm.

"I can see you are going to take a lot of work," the figure said in passable Trade Four. The figure wrenched his ax from beside Caleb's head, and swung it up to rest across his shoulder. He extended his free hand to Caleb. "Come on," he said. "I'm not here to hurt you."

Caleb took the figure's hand cautiously, and found himself hauled to his feet in a moment. "What was that all about, then?" Caleb gasped, still trying to gain his breath back.

"I am Lothar of Motherhome," the figure in green offered. "Our Forge has ordered me to oversee your training, Caleb Vulcan. This was your first lesson."

"Really?" Caleb said weakly. He was suddenly glad his face was hidden beneath his helm, because it was turning very, very red. He should have been better prepared. Growing up as an army brat, Caleb learned how to fight. His father made certain of that, at least. But Caleb never thought he would be ambushed out in the badlands.

"How did you sneak up on me like that?" Caleb asked.

Lothar snorted. "Staying in your blind spot was not remotely difficult, pup. A Knight should be aware of his surroundings at all times. Enemies strike when least expected. So expect them always."

“I didn’t think I had any enemies yet,” Caleb said. And immediately regretted having said it.

Lothar shook his head. “You are a Knight of the Forge, pup. Your enemies are legion. Simply by accepting the mantle, you have made yourself a target for every villain in the Three Galaxies, from the highest Splugorth Lord to the lowest pickpocket on Center. Your allies are not so many, however, and you would do well to remember it.”

Caleb was beginning to realize that Lothar was not going to be much fun. “Gotcha,” he said. “Lots of enemies. Few friends.”

Lothar stepped towards Caleb, looming over the crimson Knight. “Do not make light of the situation, pup. You must master your abilities quickly if you hope to survive, if you hope to serve the Forge. The Knights are few and the Three Galaxies are vast, and far too many seek to destroy us and what we stand for.”

“What do we stand for?” Caleb asked. Lothar stared at him for a moment, and Caleb rushed to explain. “Where I come from, the words truth, justice, and the American Way don’t mean what they used to mean. That is to say, those ideals are tarnished. They’ve been polluted. And I’m not sure if they exist, or if they ever existed.”

Lothar continued to stare, and Caleb opened his mouth to continue. Lothar cut him off. “The Forge exists,” he said, stiffly. “You know this. We stand for the Forge.”

“Sounds simple,” Caleb observed.

Lothar nodded. “It is. Keep in mind that the Forge does not need thinkers. It needs warriors.”

Caleb grimaced beneath his helm. This guy was his teacher? “That’s what they tell us back home,” Caleb told Lothar. “And I didn’t believe it there, either.”

“You will learn, pup.” Lothar punctuated the declaration by jabbing Caleb in the chest with an emerald claw.

“Stop calling me that,” Caleb growled. With lightning speed, Caleb grasped Lothar’s wrist, pulling the bigger Knight towards him, and twisted, pivoting on one foot. He braced his free hand against Lothar’s chest and lifted, throwing Lothar over his shoulder.

The Wulfen should have crashed to the ground with a thump, but he froze in mid-air, hanging upside down. “Lesson number two: throws are useless against someone who can fly.” Emerald energy once more lanced towards Caleb. But this time he was ready; he blasted into the air and the ray sizzled beneath him.

Caleb cut loose with his own energy blasts, but Lothar was already moving, and Caleb missed.

It was going to be a long night.

When the sun began its ascent, Lothar decided to end the training session.

Caleb was glad. For the first time in weeks, he actually felt tired. But he also felt that he acquitted himself well. While Caleb was not able to touch Lothar, he made sure that the Wulfen did not catch him as he had before. He received a few bruises, but nothing as embarrassing as that ax swinging for his head.

Lothar let Caleb catch his breath for a moment, and then approached where Caleb sat on the ground. "It's time to go," he said. He let go of his ax and the weapon disappeared in a puff of green light.

"Go?" Caleb asked. "Go where?"

"Out into the universe, pup. We're needed."

"But I can't just leave," Caleb protested. "I have stuff back at the house, and I have to say good-bye to Rik and Floris..."

Lothar shook his heavy head. "We are Knights of the Forge, pup. We have no need of material possessions. And as for your friends – they will understand. No need to trouble them further."

"Okay," Caleb said grudgingly. He stood up, dusting sand off the back of his armor.

Lothar rose into the air, and Caleb followed. As the Wulfen increased his speed, Caleb matched him. In moments, they rocketed out of the atmosphere and into the void, two blurs, one green and one red, that transformed into pure light and blasted into space.

Chapter Four

Bad Mojo

Center. A word to conjure with. A city without equal anywhere in this universe or any other. Six hundred million souls call Center home, with who knows how many more millions passing through at any given moment. It is a city of startling contrasts, where some of the richest beings in the Three Galaxies can be found living side by side with the poorest, where Knights of Kamnos rub shoulders with Splugorth Conservators without spilling blood, where everything and anything can be found with ease, and bought for the right price. Millions live and die there without ever setting foot outside its cerulean walls, and you can be sure that they have seen and experienced more than even the most jaded cosmos hopper. It is a dangerous city, but it is a city of unparalleled wonder and opportunity.

Center. Watch your step.

– Excerpt from Travelogues of a Journeyman, by Fraktyn Quint

The seventh level of Center was not a place where tourists usually went, but then Elias Harkonnen, late of the Transgalactic Empire's Invincible Guard, did not consider himself a tourist. No, Elias was there on business.

The destruction of his hidden base in the rings of Garouk-9 did not really affect him; though certainly, he had poured millions of credits into acquiring the abandoned mine and outfitting it for his operation, and then fitting the *Raptor* with the weapons and defenses a good raider required. Hiring a crew came relatively cheaply, but they still cost a decent amount. The actual raiding was just beginning to pay off when Lothar of Motherhome tracked the *Raptor* home and forced Elias to blow the whole thing to pieces, just to occupy the Cosmo-Knight long enough for Elias to make good his escape in a stripped down Flying Fang.

Still, Elias was not concerned at all. He was a former Invincible Guardsman, after all. Trained in lethal combat by the Kreeghor themselves, his genetic code tampered with to grant him powers beyond mortal men, he was perfectly suited for the cold-blooded business of survival. And making profit. If worse came to worse (and it wouldn't), he could always sell himself out as an assassin or mercenary; there was high demand for invulnerable soldiers who could fly under their own power and bench press starfighters.

But that would be a last resort. Elias still had some cash stockpiled where he could reach it easily; enough to finance a new operation certainly. Enough to keep going on his own for a while, without someone else telling him what to do, or spitting orders at him.

Elias hated taking orders. Giving them was easy enough, but following the commands of a squishy did not sit well with him. He had even balked

at taking orders from his superiors in the Invincible Guard. Which is why, ultimately, he had deserted and struck out on his own, to make it rich as an independent operator. So far, his plans weren't exactly working out. There was the matter of the Cosmo-Knight hot for his blood to consider as well.

So Elias fled Garouk-9 for Center, perfectly aware that as a deserter, he could expect no mercy from the Kreeghor should he be seen and recognized by one of the Empire's citizens on Center. But he needed insurance against the Cosmo-Knight, henchmen who would not soil themselves at the first appearance of an angry Hammer of the Forge, much as his last crew had done. He should never have hired those Naterreris; worse than a T'Zee when all things were said and done. He had depended too much on the plundered Naruni technology as well.

Elias Harkonnen was not an Elf to make the same mistake twice.

The seventh level of Center was not a place for tourists; museums and amusement parks and marketplaces could be found on the upper levels. On the lower levels, the unwary found only death. The professional might find employment, and a man with purpose, skill, and creds might find someone to hire. Someone with special gifts, gifts that could turn an unwary or even well prepared Cosmo-Knight inside-out.

Elias strode through the city streets with a sense of purpose, and pedestrians automatically stepped around him, instinctively recognizing that he was not a being to trifle with for any reason. Sometimes cocky bully-boys could be found who attempted to swagger in the same manner that the pale Elf in the red and black armor did, but few but the most hardened criminals could match Elias' cold stare, or the quiet air of malevolence that seemed to radiate off of him. He knew where he was going only by reputation, but he had studied the maps like a good soldier and he knew the seventh level's grid like the back of his hand. He navigated like a native, striding through the crowded alleys and byways clogged with the detritus of the Three Galaxies, casually brushing aside anything with the temerity to block his path.

Once, someone with a knife tattoo on his forehead took affront to Elias' gentle push, producing a Vibro-Knife that hummed as it slashed towards Elias' neck. The weapon shattered against his skin, and without hesitation Elias gave the humanoid a backhanded slap that separated his head from his shoulders.

He was given a wider berth after that episode.

In due time, he came to the place he searched for along the dirty avenues of the seventh level: a dilapidated structure lit with fading neon that declared in Trade Five that the place functioned as a watering hole. Some sort of reptiloid lounged outside the entrance, one of his four hands not far from the ion blaster at his hip. The few windows were darkened artificially, and even Elias' night sensitive eyes could not penetrate them. He shrugged mentally and approached the bar's entryway. A four-fingered hand blocked his path.

The reptiloid at the door glared balefully at Elias with yellow eyes, its third hand gripping the blaster tightly, but not yet drawing the weapon. “No mammals,” it hissed, tongue darting out to taste the air.

Elias narrowed his eyes, briefly considering offering a bribe. It took him a nanosecond to discard the idea, and barely a moment longer before the doorman swallowed his pistol, choking to death as Elias shoved it down the creature’s throat. He left the corpse cooling on the doorstep and crossed the threshold into the bar.

The heat struck him first, a sweltering wave that washed over him and inundated him, causing sweat to break out on his body instantly. The next instant, he caught a whiff of something wet and decaying, and he coughed involuntarily, waving his hand before his face. When he mastered himself, he noticed the bright glaring lights that illuminated the dozens of reptiloids lounging about the bar and the dining area. Most of them he could identify; brightly colored Seljuks towering above everyone else, Jenjorrans with their eyes nearly exploding out of their great jawed heads, a pack of Qua-Traou lounging in one corner, sipping some kind of smoking brew, Draconids in flowing robes scattered about the room, and dozens of others he could not identify, including a large number of four armed, yellow eyed reptiloids like the dying doorman.

They all stared at him. Elias sneered and sauntered into the room, daring any of them to challenge his presence in a reptiloid bar. Few met his gaze, recognizing the insignia on his refitted Legionnaire’s armor. One Seljuk, however, took it upon itself to upbraid the brazen mammal. “Your kind isn’t welcome around here,” it growled, gesticulating with one five clawed hand.

Elias ignored the beast, scanning the crowd for the being he sought. The Seljuk appeared annoyed at Elias’ attitude. It took a threatening step forward, its eyes growing mad under bony brows. One of its companions attempted to restrain it, but it shook off the offending arm and advanced on Elias. It jammed a finger in Elias’ face and leaned over the substantially shorter Elf to berate him. “Get lost, mammal, before I chew you up and regurgitate you for the nestlings.” The breath of the creature washed over Elias’ face, and he wrinkled his nose in disgust. What had crawled down the creature’s throat and died? Did it ever use a toothbrush?

Without a word, Elias reached up and grabbed the digit shoved into his face. He pulped it with one squeeze, and then yanked the arm away as the Seljuk bellowed in pain. With practiced ease, Elias planted one hand on the creature’s neck and another on its belt. He heaved, and lifted the Seljuk over his head. The beast babbled something, and its companions took a step forward as if to offer aid. Without hesitation, Elias threw the Seljuk in his hands across the common room, to crash into the wall on the opposite side. It slammed into the wall with an audible thud, and then fell to the ground with a crash.

No one uttered a sound, as they reappraised the ebon and scarlet clad Elf. “Anyone else?” Elias asked. Abruptly every sentient in the bar turned away from him and went back to whatever they were doing before he entered the place. Elias allowed himself a brief nod, and then quickly scanned the room once more.

Finally catching sight of the being he was looking for, he navigated his way through the tables and chairs clogging the common room, and stepped up to a table with a single occupant.

The Draconid looked typical for his race: a long snout filled with sharp teeth, framed by bat-winged ears, small, pupilless eyes almost hidden beneath thick brow ridges, a mane of soft white hair spilling down his back, and a body covered in scales that were a shocking electric blue shade. He was clad in a simple tunic of red and gold, and he watched without emotion as Elias approached.

“Quajinn Huo?” Elias asked. He received the briefest of nods in return. “May I sit down?” Another nod. But there were no more chairs. Elias turned to his left, where the Qua-Trau warriors sat, nursing their drinks. He stared pointedly at one, until it got the message and vacated its seat. Elias took it from their table and slid it across the floor, dropping into it to join Quajinn Huo where he sat.

The Draconid’s white eyes observed all this without passion, but as Elias sat down, he said, “Why is it you have sought me out, Harkonnen?”

Elias smiled easily. “Has my reputation proceeded me, or did you divine my identity through wizardry?”

“The same mouths that directed you here told me you were coming,” Huo explained. “But they did not explain your purpose. They assured me you were not a bounty hunter come to collect the reward the UWW has offered for my head, nor were you some other would-be hero sent to slay the dragon. State your business, and do so quickly.” Again, Huo said each word without any hint of emotion.

Elias regarded him coolly. Huo’s own reputation was considerable, and the cold-blooded creature across the table from him certainly seemed to fit the image the United Worlds of Warlock painted of a passionless killer. “It’s very simple,” Elias said. “I have come to offer you a job.”

In the same monotone, Quajinn Huo said, “You, faceless bully-boy from across the stars, are offering me a job? This meeting is at an end.” Huo did not stir, however. Perhaps he expected Elias to leave, as if dismissed.

Elias would remember that. But first, he needed Huo. He needed the Draconid wizard for one reason. Magic, Quajinn’s province, was the Achilles heel of the Knights of the Forge.

“Lothar,” Elias said.

Quajinn Huo’s eyes suddenly blazed with fury. “You would say that name to me? I should strike you down where you stand, Elf.”

“Then the story is true,” Elias mused aloud. “You’ve run afoul of the Forge’s Hound too. He ruined my last operation as well. And I plan to make him answer for that.”

Huo leaned forward, suddenly interested. “It is because of Lothar of Motherhome that I am confined to Center, Harkonnen. For a chance to kill him, I might actually contemplate your job offer.”

Elias smiled again. “And what,” he asked, “if I were to tell you I could get you off Center without the UWW knowing?”

“If you could do this thing, then I would indeed serve you, Elias Harkonnen,” Quajinn said. “But only until Lothar lay dead at our feet.”

Elias’ smile broadened. “Sounds like a plan.”

Captain H. Starling of the Consortium Armed Forces starship *Hidalgo*, Warshield Class, settled into his command chair and keyed on his computer. The small screen showed the progress of the star Teneb-742 as it prepared to go nova; according to the chronometer, barely forty-two hours remained before the miracle occurred. The star was venting gasses into space at an incredible rate, and expanding by the hour. All too soon it would detonate, and the last five planets in the Teneb-742 system would be destroyed, swallowed up by the exploding sun, much as the first three planets had been days ago.

The *Hidalgo* had been sent out by the CCW station Xerxes to observe and record the death of the star and its system; it would be only the second time a CAF ship observed firsthand the death throes of a star, and this would be the first time planets were involved. The CCW was very interested in the kinds of data the *Hidalgo* might glean from this extraordinary event, and to that end a team of twenty scientists from Xerxes Station had been dispatched with Starling’s crew to observe and record and report back to CCW headquarters.

If anyone were to ask him, Captain Starling would have said that this mission was the chance of a lifetime, and a thrilling chapter in humanity’s growth and understanding of the intricacies of the universe.

Privately, he thought it was a waste of time.

Starling was a man of action, a man of war, and he fretted that a warship like the *Hidalgo* was being wasted here watching a star explode, instead of patrolling the neutral zone between the CCW and the Transgalactic Empire, or hunting down pirates with the temerity to raid the borders of CCW space. The *Hidalgo* was built to fight, and so too, was her captain. He needed the harsh scent of smoke in his nostrils, the groan of a damaged ship beneath his feet, the ringing of the red alert in his ears, and an enemy to destroy.

Documenting the wonders of the cosmos should be left to those interested in such things, Starling believed. And probably, some poor untried officer was somewhere along the neutral zone, trying to keep her crew alive, out-gunned and outnumbered by Kreeghor vessels. It was a scene Starling had

played out countless times before, and always managed to survive to tell the tale, his ship and crew intact.

But now, as Starling and his crew were approaching their middle years, the days of glory were slipping past them, and the Consortium Armed Forces Fleet Command felt safer giving Starling and his crew simple jobs, leaving the young men and women of the CAF who still had fire in their bellies to take the battle to the Transgalactic Empire or the S'hree Vek Confederacy or any of the other enemies arrayed against the Consortium of Civilized Worlds.

"Captain." Starling's reverie was suddenly broken by the call of his chief science officer, Commander Lek Lekki. Lek was one of Starling's oldest friends, and a Noro, a member of the pacifistic race of psychics from the planet Noro-Gar. Like most Noro, Lek was smooth skinned and very tall, well over two meters, and dangerously thin; despite his height, he looked like a strong wind could knock him over like a feather. Like many Noro, Lek shaved the spikes of hair that grew on his large cranium, and that, combined with his extreme thinness, gave him the appearance of an ascetic. Yet Lek's large, black eyes were always animated and excited, expressing wonder and joy at exploring the cosmos. It was hardly the attitude of a monk, and Lek would certainly never cloister himself away from the universe.

"What is it, Commander?" Starling asked, his brow furrowing in puzzlement.

Lek leaned over his console, his dark eyes never leaving the computer screen as he answered his captain. "I'm picking up some rather odd energy fluctuations, sir."

"From Teneb-742?" Starling asked. He often wished Lek could just make a complete report, but the Noro seldom volunteered information without slight provocation. Since he was always curious, Lek assumed everyone else was always curious, and he enjoyed baiting their curiosity. Lek finally looked up from the console.

"Not at all, Captain. From the eighth planet."

Now, that was interesting, Starling thought. "Source and nature?" he demanded.

Lek shrugged, a slight movement of his thin shoulders. "The pulse is being emitted near the planet's magnetic pole, but our instruments are having a difficult time classifying the nature of the energy. What is certain is that it is not random, and appears to be running through a cycle of some kind."

Starling grunted, and unconsciously ran a hand through his thinning hair. "Helm, put us in orbit around the eighth planet," he ordered, "and I want us over the pole. Lieutenant Freyga," he added, slightly turning in his command chair to regard the only Wulfen on the bridge. "I want a complete scan of the target area; if there's grass, I want to know how many blades."

The Wulfen security officer nodded without a word and set to her task. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Lek frown. "Problem?" he prompted the science officer.

Another shrug greeted his question, and then Lek said, "I have a bad feeling about this."

Starling knew that phrase only too well; Lek's psychic abilities had helped save the *Hidalgo* and her crew a dozen times over. "Go to yellow alert," he said, and as the klaxon ring began in the background, he added, "I want a squad of marines assembled in the hanger in fifteen minutes, fully loaded, with two Silverhawks." Lek arched an eyebrow, and even Freyga loosed a chuff of surprise. Starling waved them both off; he was beginning to get a bad feeling too, and he was afraid the power armored troops would come in handy very soon.

Starling felt the familiar thrum in his breastbone, the only indication that the *Hidalgo* was in motion, as the mighty warship fired up its engines and headed for the eighth planet. In moments, the ship was positioned where Starling wanted it. He waited patiently as Freyga made a complete scan of the area. Starling knew Lek was following along with her, as his console and hers were wired, but he could only sit in his command chair and wait.

Starling hated to wait. Just as his patience was beginning to fray, even though it was his order that prompted Freyga to make a complete scan, she reported.

"The planet is flat and barren, Captain, no life signs register at all, nor much in the way of technology. The only sign of habitation is a bunker or... temple, perhaps, of black rock located about 700 klicks from the magnetic pole. The energy pulse is apparently originating from this temple."

Starling interrupted her, saying, "Temple, lieutenant?"

Freyga appeared slightly flustered. "I couldn't explain why I get the impression that the structure is a temple, Captain."

"She's right, however," Lek said, his eyes narrowed in concentration. "It is the same impression I am receiving."

Starling grunted. "Continue, lieutenant."

Freyga began where she left off. "The pulse is registering on several frequencies, but it appears to primarily consist of negative energy. It is expanding outward in a wave that encompasses the temple and washes out in a dome from the temple. The power of the wave lessens the further it gets from the area of origin, and is rather weak when it breaks free of the planet's atmosphere." Her amber eyes flicked towards Lek, and then returned to her console. "How Commander Lek first detected it, I do not know."

"Sometimes you need to look with something other than your eyes, Freyga," Lek offered.

Starling ignored them, his mind attempting to grapple with the information Freyga had presented to him. A strange structure, a "temple," on an un-

inhabited planet in an uninhabited system, generating waves of negative energy. And a star about to go nova in less than forty-one hours. “Commander, I suppose you’d like to take a closer look at that ‘temple,’” Starling mused. Lek nodded, a slight smile curving his thin lips. “Then take Lieutenant Freyga and the marines in the hanger with you. I’d like some answers, but I’d also like you to all return undamaged. Understood?”

“Affirmative, Captain,” Lek said, standing. “After you, lieutenant,” Lek offered, gesturing towards the lift. Freyga made a show of adjusting her pistol on her belt, and then strode purposefully toward the door, which slid open at her approach.

Captain Starling watched as the shuttle blasted off from the hanger in the belly of the *Hidalgo*, sliding through the vacuum of space to pierce the atmosphere of the planet. He could feel the pulse beating in his temple, and he forced down the surge of excitement that always came to him when he knew action was on the way. He didn’t know what Lek, Freyga, and the marines might find on that desolate planet, but he knew it would be, at the very least, interesting.

He recognized the same suppressed excitement amongst the rest of the bridge crew. Like him, they were used to testing their limits and the limits of their ship in combat, persevering in the face of certain destruction, often with the fate of the Three Galaxies riding on the outcome of the battle. This situation, Starling sensed, might well be the same.

Perversely, Starling felt relieved. He almost felt guilty as he recognized the emotion.

“Captain, Commander Lek is coming through,” the communications officer reported.

“Patch him through,” Starling ordered.

“We’ve just disembarked, Captain,” Lek’s voice came over the comm. Some kind of interference caused a distortion in the comm system, making Lek’s familiar voice sound alien. “The Silverhawks and Major Avanti are deploying according to SOP.” Lek’s voice trailed off, accompanied by a surge in the distortion, and Starling became momentarily concerned. The science officer continued after a moment, however.

“We just experienced one of the waves of energy, and we felt it even through our body armor. I’ve just developed a splitting headache, and the marines are complaining of upset stomachs. The effect is rather mild, but we’re still several hundred meters from the temple itself. I’m expecting the feelings of illness to intensify as we get closer.”

Lek cleared his throat self-consciously. “Even from here, we can see that the structure is rather large, and constructed of massive blocks. Major Avanti assures me that his macro-binoculars can detect some sort of writing on the temple wall.”

Another wave of distortion surged through the comm-link, and Starling frowned. After a few moments, Lek's voice returned. "My apologies, Captain, but the effect of the wave is indeed increasing, and we need to concentrate on locomotion."

"Not a problem, Lek," Starling told his friend. Then, without thinking, he added, "Be careful."

He heard the smile in Lek's voice as the science officer answered, "Thank you, Hiram. We'll try." Lek paused for a moment, and then said, "We're close enough now to make out the inscription on the side of the temple; the temple itself is a good thirty meters tall and sprawls at least forty meters wide. I'm punching the inscription through the translator now... the language is apparently an ancient form of Zodoran." Lek paused, and then added, "Curious. The Zodorans are nearly extinct; I think there are only four or five left in all the Three Galaxies."

"Continue, Commander," Starling admonished.

"Of course," Lek returned. Another wave of distortion interrupted, and then Lek continued. "The inscription reads: 'The Last Place of the Hollow One – If the Peace be Broken, they be Damned.' Naturally, that's the direct translation. In Trade Four, it reads, 'Where we buried the one without a soul; those who awaken it will know eternal torment.' Rather poetic, don't you think?"

Starling frowned. This sounded bad. Very bad. A surge of distortion sounded through the comm-link again, lasting longer this time, and as he waited for it to clear, Starling ordered his thoughts. The Zodorans were a race of ancient mystics, and they were indeed nearly extinct. Although a long-lived race of beings, their glory days were long past; legends spoke of a vast empire destroyed by an angry god several millennia ago, long before the ascendancy of the Consortium of Civilized Worlds. Of all the legends Starling had ever heard, there was never any mention of that "angry god" being imprisoned in a temple of black rock on some lifeless world.

Still...

"Lek, get out of there. Now," Starling ordered. Another surge of distortion garbled his order, and he repeated it when the wave receded.

Lek's answer made Starling's gut twist. "One of the marines pulled her helmet off to vomit, and her head just exploded. My... own headache is increasing in intensity. I'm not sure we'll make it to the ship."

"Lek, move!" Starling growled. He could feel the excitement on the bridge peak. The concern for the away team was palpable. Tedeschi, the communications officer, flexed his fingers in agitation, as if he wished to reach through the comm-link and pull the away team back to the safety of the *Hidalgo*. Kamanga, at the helm, glanced back at her captain, as if asking permission to aim the ship at the planet in a desperate rescue attempt.

“Captain,” Lek began again, his voice strained, “we’re attempting a strategic retreat.” Another wave of distortion washed over the comm-link, and Starling gripped the arms of his chair until his knuckles turned white. Lek’s voice returned, “I’m sorry to report the loss of another marine, and the wall of the temple just cracked open. Some kind of condensed, jelly-like darkness is oozing from the wound.”

The sound of laser fire echoed over Lek’s communicator. Starling heard Freyga’s harsh bark in the background as well, and he could tell by the sound that whatever battle was raging down there was going badly. Starling considered sending a second team down to support them, or even charging up the weapon systems on the *Hidalgo*, but knew neither course of action would do them any good. A second team would arrive too late, and the *Hidalgo*’s cannons would do as much damage to Lek’s team as the entity.

Another wave of distortion flashed, and Starling started as the lights on the bridge dimmed. Kamanga automatically raised the ship’s shields, her face an impassive mask that Starling knew hid a tide of emotion.

“We’ve lost most of our team, Captain,” Lek reported, his voice so haggard that Starling felt his own heart lurch in his chest. “The entity – the Hollow One – seems to be absorbing the energy from our weapons. If I may offer a theory, Hiram, this creature is some sort of energy vampire, absorbing great amounts easily. Indeed, I would hazard a guess that the expansion of the star released enough ambient energy for the Hollow One to absorb and thus breach its containment –”

A wave of distortion interrupted Lek, and the comm-link suddenly went dead. With the shields up, however, the ship seemed safe from the wave. “Shields dropped by 12%, Captain,” Kamanga said, correcting Starling’s first impression.

He turned in his command chair, and regarded Tedeschi. The comm officer shook his head. “We lost them, sir.”

Starling forced his grief and fear into a ball and shoved it into a compartment inside himself, where he could take it out and examine it when he had the time. “Put us on red alert and send a subspace communication to Xerxes station, Lieutenant. Inform them of what we’ve found, and let them know that when the star goes off in less than forty hours, this thing could very well become unstoppable.”

Tedeschi nodded sharply and turned back to his console. “Lt. Commander Kamanga,” Starling said, “arm cruise missiles and target the temple.”

Two bursts of bright color flashed through the atmosphere of the desert planet Koola; one a bright crimson, the other a flashing emerald. As they entered the vacuum of space, the colors solidified into a pair of armored figures, one larger than the other and gripping a massive, two-headed ax. The

figures angled through space, approaching a battered freighter that hung in orbit above the planet.

The larger, green-clad figure led the way, opening the airlock with a practiced gesture, and then entering the craft. The red figure followed cautiously. When the interior airlock cycled closed, and they could talk once more, the red figure complained to his companion, “What the hell is this? I mean, spaceships are cool and all, Lothar, but we’re Cosmic Knights. We fly through space with the greatest of ease and all that.”

The emerald figure with the wolf-shaped helm sighed audibly. “It is simple, pup. Through the blessings of the Immortal Forge, we are able to traverse space at the speed of light, achieving a unity with the cosmos that every sentient in the Three Galaxies envies. But moving at that speed takes a great deal of skill and accuracy, which you, as yet, lack. So I have borrowed this freighter from allies, and we shall use it to get around until you achieve the control you need, or are able to reach the same faster than light speed I can achieve. Is that understood?”

Caleb Vulcan, the newest of the Knights who served the Cosmic Forge, simply shrugged. He was more impressed at the volume of Lothar’s speech than its content, as the Wulfen Knight had, up until then, proved entirely laconic. “All right,” Caleb said. “You’re in charge.”

Lothar’s green eyes glowered beneath the brows of his helm. “So nice of you to admit that, pup.”

Caleb decided that the “pup” nonsense was wearing thin very quickly. But he still had bruises from the training session with Lothar planet side. He let it lie, for the moment, and decided to change the subject. “So, where are we off to?”

Lothar grunted. “We’re going to the nearest CCW station to have you deputized so that you can operate as a lawgiver in Consortium space.”

“And where’s that?” Caleb asked.

“Its called Xerxes Station. Not much as those things go, but it will serve the purpose.” Lothar walked away from the airlock as he talked, presumably heading for the cockpit. Caleb followed him at a sedate pace, absorbing the interior of Lothar’s borrowed space ship as he did so. Almost absently, Caleb powered down, discarding his centurion-like armor with a thought. Lothar gave him a sharp look as he did so, and Caleb noticed that Lothar himself maintained his armored form. But he didn’t criticize Caleb, though the boy could feel Lothar’s disapproval like a wall between them.

Caleb whistled quietly through his teeth. “It’s going to be a fun trip,” he muttered to himself.

Chapter Five

The Drums of Heaven

The Consortium of Civilized Worlds does not have the time, resources, or inclination to police each and every world that exists within its boundaries. Because of the peculiar nature of its government, the CCW cannot and will not interfere directly with the governments of the planets that make up the Consortium. But they watch the space between those planets very, very closely.

The Consortium Armed Forces Fleet Command seeds Consortium space with agents, soldiers, and starships that keep close tabs on the space lanes. Warshield cruisers hunt pirates and patrol the borders of “civilized” space, supported by Scimitar light patrol ships and Hunter-Destroyers. The majestic bulk of a Protector battleship is a reassuring sight to CCW citizens and a major concern of the Transgalactic Empire, while the Wulfen Packmasters ferry troops from one trouble spot to the next. But these ships are, ultimately, only transients in an ever expanding cosmos. They visit systems, dispensing justice or security, and then depart for the void again.

It is for that reason that most CCW worlds rarely consider the CAFF, formidable as it is, a reliable protector. They are rarely around when they are most needed. Aware of the problem, CAFFCO also seeded Consortium space with a network of space stations to overlook individual systems or a collection of systems and see to their defense and other military needs on a regular basis.

— Excerpt from Travelogues of a Journeyman by Frakтын Quint

Caleb Vulcan, newly knighted servant of the Cosmic Forge, settled back into his co-pilot seat, stretching his legs out beneath the dashboard, or whatever it was called in space. Beside Caleb, in the pilot’s chair, sat his Wulfen mentor, Lothar, still clad in his emerald armor and looking as fierce as possible. They were traveling in a freighter despite the fact that both Cosmo-Knights were capable of FTL travel under their own power because, as Lothar had explained it, Caleb was too new at the job, and didn’t yet have the experience or power to keep up with Lothar at top speed.

Initially, Caleb felt insulted at the insinuation that he could not keep up. He knew a thing or two about speed, having torn up the sands of Arizona in his dune buggy and buzzed through the skies of Koola faster than any jet could go. However, Caleb realized, the first moment he stepped into the freighter’s cockpit, that he now had the opportunity to learn how to fly a starship. It couldn’t be too much more difficult than flying a plane, after all, and while Caleb had never actually flown a plane, to do so had so long been his dream that he knew nearly everything there was to know about the process.

Under Lothar's tutelage, he was able to pick up the fundamentals of maneuvering a three hundred ton freighter through the void.

But as they approached their destination, the Consortium Space Station Xerxes, Lothar had decreed "lesson time" over, and taken the controls from Caleb. He disengaged the Phase Drive, which had generated the faster than light, or FTL, propulsion enabling the ship to blast through space at insane speeds, and then switched over to the contragravity drive. Lothar refused to explain how the Phase Drive worked, insisting that the only species capable of understanding the device were the mysterious Prometheans of Phase World. Caleb had no idea what a Promethean might be, but he wasn't going to be side-tracked on the mechanics of space travel that easily.

Lothar was a bit more forthcoming on the contragravity drive, explaining that contragravitonic devices could eliminate the pull of gravity on an object. The simplest expression of this technology enabled an ordinary human to lift tons of cargo with little effort, and a more complex device, like the drive itself, could not only enable a ship to break the bonds of planetary gravity, but could enable the ship to accelerate and maneuver through air or space. A similar device created the artificial gravity of the ship's interior, keeping Caleb from floating out of his seat.

In addition, Lothar explained that just as the contragravity drive – or, at least, this model – couldn't accelerate into FTL speeds, the Phase Drive couldn't handle anything slower. And even a yokel like Caleb could understand the dangers inherent in approaching a planet or space station at FTL speed. So Caleb let Lothar take control of the vehicle and guide it through space towards the bright silver dot Lothar insisted was a space station.

Caleb drummed his fingers against his stomach and watched the bright silver dot get bigger. Caleb looked down at his hands and suddenly realized he was still dressed in his jeans and the shiny shirt Floris Nybek purchased for him just days before. His bare feet barely registered the cold metal of the floor, but he instinctively lifted them up and wiggled his toes. He couldn't board a space station dressed like this.

"Lothar," Caleb asked his companion, "as long as we're borrowing a space ship, do you think I might be able to borrow somebody's shoes?"

The Wulfen looked askance at Caleb. "Just wear your armor, pup," he offered.

Caleb shook his head. Even aboard the freighter, Lothar remained powered up, still clad in his fearsome emerald green cosmo-armor. Caleb, in contrast, dispelled his own suit of armor soon after boarding the freighter. He didn't see the need of wearing the suit at all times. After all, back home Art Lynch didn't wear his sheriff's uniform when hanging out with the boys at Munden's. Caleb couldn't be a Cosmo-Knight twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week – or whatever the Three Galaxies equivalent might be. He knew he needed the balance of a human identity, because without one, he

instinctively knew that the temptation to become something inhuman would be too strong to resist.

“All I need are some shoes, boss,” Caleb insisted.

Lothar sighed loudly, and then said, “There’s a storage locker in the other room. Whatever is in there you can use, but if you don’t find anything, you’re out of luck.”

Caleb bounced out of the chair and headed into the next chamber. He found a row of lockers against one wall, and rifled through them in search of serviceable footwear. It took him a while, but he eventually discovered a pair of red boots that weren’t too large for him. Emblazoned on the instep of each boot was the legend “grav” in Trade Four, which looked slightly ominous to Caleb, but they were the only shoes that fit him. He would have preferred a nice pair of tennis shoes, actually, but he wagered that he had lucked out in finding anything at all. When he felt comfortable again, he stepped back into the cockpit.

Xerxes filled the viewscreen. It was a massive structure, easily a dozen miles long, and it was shaped like a spindle or top, with a broad flat head that narrowed downward into a point. Lights decorated the station from top to bottom, and hundreds of ships buzzed in, out, and around the station, like gnats orbiting a light bulb. Caleb noticed dozens of laser batteries peppering the hide of the station, and he knew they would zap if any of the gnats got too close. The hump of a blue and green planetary mass peeked out from the background. The vision was breathtaking, but Caleb found his voice quickly.

“This is what you called ‘not much as these things go’?”

Lothar shrugged. “When you’ve been to Center as many times as I have, these places honestly don’t look like much. Now sit down and quit gawking. I need to get permission to dock and a safe route in. I don’t need you distracting me, pup.”

Caleb forced his mouth shut and then dropped into the co-pilot’s chair.

Forty minutes later, after Lothar guided the craft onto a docking platform and automatic systems sent umbilicals snaking through the airless environment to connect with the freighter, Caleb and Lothar stepped through the airlock and onto the station. At first, Caleb didn’t see much to be impressed by; this portion of the station looked indistinguishable from the interior of the freighter he had just vacated. But the human boy couldn’t help staring as a pair of tentacled quadrupeds sloughed past him, their single large, crimson eyes blinking rapidly. When he deemed the creatures outside of earshot, though they didn’t appear to possess ears, Caleb murmured to his companion, “I guess they allow pets on this station, huh?”

Lothar snorted disdainfully. “Those were Monro. Traders from the Transgalactic Empire, from the look of them. Please try to keep your human prejudices to yourself, pup.”

Caleb shrugged. “How was I supposed to know?”

“Ignorance and stupidity go paw in paw,” Lothar intoned, “but only one can be excused by the other.”

“What is that supposed to mean?” Caleb asked.

Lothar snorted again. “I can tell you are going to take a great deal of work. Come on,” Lothar urged, “the TVIA station is at the end of this corridor.” The Wulfen led the way down the metal hallway, the harsh fluorescent lights inset in the walls reflecting off his armor. Caleb followed at a sedate pace, feeling chastened.

The passage emptied out into a much larger space with a high, vaulted ceiling. Dozens of aliens, humans, and other transients stood in lines before a series of massive desks, behind which were staffed humans in military-looking garb. The tops of the desks were lit up with lights, and the Caleb could see the humans typing on keys built into the desks themselves. Other humans in similar uniforms stood at attention a few paces behind the desks, cradling rifles and looking very dangerous. As Caleb watched, the transients filed by a desk, answering a series of questions, and were allowed to hop on an escalator that carried them up into the station proper.

“Do we have anything to declare?” Caleb asked Lothar. The Wulfen just glared at him.

Lothar fell into line behind the Monro creatures, who attempted to ignore the presence of the Cosmo-Knight rather superficially. Caleb followed close behind, still examining the room. He could see a number of television screens hanging from the ceiling, flashing information in a babble of different languages. The walls, likewise, were decorated with signs and arrows, all color-coded and in different tongues. Caleb was pleased to see Trade Four, or English, was one of them.

The customs – or TVIA – official finished with the Monro quickly, and with a barely veiled threat that seemed to upset the grotesque little creatures. Caleb had no doubt they would behave as instructed, if only while in the presence of the troopers with guns.

And then Lothar stepped up to the terminal, and the official’s sour expression transformed into a welcoming smile. “Lothar of Motherhome,” the man said, beaming. “Welcome back to Xerxes.” He eyed Caleb for a moment, and added, “Disposing of a prisoner?”

Caleb frowned, and was about to set the man straight, but Lothar intervened. “Deputizing a new recruit, actually,” Lothar growled. The official started, and managed a weak smile in Caleb’s direction by way of apology. Caleb just shrugged. “We should be gone within the hour,” Lothar was saying, while the official keyed information into his terminal.

“Well then,” the official said after a moment, “I shall see you again very soon.”

Lothar nodded and stepped past the terminal, Caleb at his heels. The guards offered Lothar an appreciative nod, which he acknowledged, and then he stepped onto the escalator.

“So,” Caleb began, “are you famous or just a local boy?”

Lothar mumbled something Caleb didn’t quite hear, and then said, “I am fairly well known in this sector of space. I’ve visited Xerxes a few times in the past as well.”

“A little bit of both, then,” Caleb said. Lothar’s tail flicked in annoyance, but he said nothing. The escalator carried the Knights up into the station proper, or at least what Caleb took to be the station proper. The escalator deposited visitors onto a promenade, an upper deck that looked out onto a broad courtyard decorated with fountains of curious architecture and plant life of exotic shades. The ceiling was a good thirty meters away, and huge windows stretched from floor to ceiling, displaying the comings and goings of ships outside in space.

Humans and aliens picked their way through the artificial park, others sitting beside fountains or beneath hanging trees. On the deck itself, dozens of creatures bustled past Caleb and Lothar, each one more bizarre and curious than the last. Caleb saw beings with bodies fashioned from rock, males and females with great manes of striped hair colored maroon and blue, robots with carapaces of black steel, apish humanoids with chitinous plates covering their bodies, women with mohawks, men with braids, a dough faced creature with blue skin and beady eyes, great flange-headed creatures in flowing robes, and dozens more. Caleb almost felt like he were lost in a funhouse or a freakshow. But this was all too strange and real to belong to a freakshow.

And the wide berth beings gave Lothar and himself did not escape Caleb.

“This way,” Lothar said, taking a sharp left. Creatures scurried out of his way as he strode purposefully along the promenade. Caleb stared at the park below for a moment, once more wondering if this was all some fever dream, and then scurried after the senior Cosmo-Knight.

“Explain this whole bonded deputy business again, please,” Caleb asked Lothar as they walked. “And you might want to tell me why everybody seems to be frightened of you.”

Lothar snorted. “Us, pup. The sentients are frightened of us.” His emerald eyes flashed beneath the brow of his helm. “Most sane creatures in the Three Galaxies fear the divine judgments of the Forge, and they fear even more those who carry out the Forge’s wishes. As I mentioned before, simply by accepting the mantle of the Cosmo-Knight, you have opened yourself up to attack, fear, and superstition from all those who have contempt for law and order.”

“Are you telling me that everyone on this station is a criminal, then?”

Lothar shook his head. “No.” He paused for a moment, almost as if hesitant to go on. But it would be very un-Lothar-like to be hesitant about any-

thing, Caleb believed. “Even those who are just and righteous are uneasy around us,” the Wulfen continued, smiling ruefully. “We represent a standard that very few in this universe can match. They envy our power and our station. They fear that they may not be righteous enough, that they possess some terrible flaw that only the Forge or her agents can see. And they are afraid we will punish them for it.”

“Damned if you do, damned if you don’t,” Caleb muttered. “How do we do our jobs if everyone is afraid of us?”

“Fear is an excellent motivator, pup. It makes criminals sloppy. It makes them do stupid things. Fear makes our job much easier than it would be otherwise.” Lothar eyed Caleb for a moment. “Perhaps you are beginning to understand the weighty responsibility upon your shoulders.”

Caleb shrugged. “This isn’t how I expected it,” he admitted.

“And what did you expect? Parades in our honor? Flowers laid at our feet? Beautiful females throwing themselves at us?”

It was Caleb’s turn to smile with ruefulness. “I guess I did have high expectations.” Lothar nodded, his suspicions confirmed. “But,” Caleb added, “it still seems wrong that even the good guys don’t trust us.”

“Oh, they trust us, pup,” Lothar explained. “They trust us to do the Forge’s bidding, and they trust us to stamp out evil in the Three Galaxies. Beyond that, however...”

Their discussion brought Caleb and Lothar across the promenade, and up a few levels to the more cramped parts of the station. The promenade and the park, it seemed, existed to welcome travelers to the station. The rest of the station was laid out more like a starship or an office building, with narrow hallways, high ceilings, and no windows. The stars were left outside where they belonged, allowing humans and aliens to see to the business of running the station without any distractions.

“Lothar!”

The Wulfen Cosmo-Knight paused in mid-stride and slowly turned. Caleb spun on his own heel to see a strange figure brushing past two uniformed CCW officers, and call out Lothar’s name once more. Beside Caleb, Lothar released an audible sigh.

“Lothar, old boy, imagine running into you here,” the stranger was saying, approaching with a quick and even stride. The figure was tall and long limbed, with a battered hat on his head and a stained and rumpled tan trench-coat wrapped around himself. He held a short cane in his right hand, which he rapped rhythmically against the floor of the hallway. His features, under the hat and coat, were shadowy and indistinct, like clouded darkness, almost insubstantial. All but for his two eyes, which flickered like orange flames beneath the brim of his hat.

“It is odd, Abbot,” Lothar offered when the figure drew close. “I would have expected you to be on the other side of the Corkscrew this time of year.”

“Yes, well, I ran into a spot of trouble there last year, and I didn’t feel like repeating myself. Decided to take it easy for a while.” The mysterious Abbot offered his hand to Lothar, and the two shook amicably, though Lothar seemed annoyed. Caleb shrugged inwardly; Lothar always appeared annoyed.

“And who have we here?,” Abbot asked, turning to Caleb. Abbot spoke Trade Four with a clipped, British accent, which seemed highly improbable to Caleb, until he reminded himself that aliens speaking English at all was highly improbable. Besides, here in the Three Galaxies, Abbot’s accent was probably Centaurian or something.

“Abbot, meet Caleb Vulcan,” Lothar said, gesturing in Caleb’s direction. “Pup, meet Doctor Abbot.”

“A pleasure to meet you... uh... Doctor, was it?” Caleb said, offering the shadowy figure his hand. Abbot took it, with a surprisingly strong grip; he might appear insubstantial save for his clothing, but Abbot certainly felt solid enough.

“Likewise, I’m sure,” Abbot said. “And yes, I am a doctor. As you are a student, yes? Don’t look surprised. I’ve known Lothar a long time, and he’s always called his trainees ‘pups.’ Quite an odd affectation, if you ask me.”

“And what are you a doctor of, exactly?” Lothar asked. He turned to Caleb. “An important lesson to remember, pup. Watch your step around Abbot, and always be prepared for the worst. Trouble follows him like calm after a storm.”

“How very droll, Lothar,” Abbot said. “Especially given my present circumstances. As it happens, I have a matter that I’d like to discuss with you. Nothing serious, I assure you, but your help would be appreciated...”

“We’re busy, I’m afraid,” Lothar interrupted. Caleb wasn’t sure, but there seemed to be a certain smugness about Lothar’s expression. “We need to get young Caleb deputized, and then we need to begin searching for Elias Harkonnen. You’ll have to pester some other Knight for help. I hear there’s a Blhaze in the Timon system looking for work. Why not go bother her?”

“Harkonnen, eh?” Abbot’s eyes brightened beneath the brim of his hat. “He’s a canny opponent. You’ll need more than a neophyte Knight on your side if you’re going to take that one down.”

“We’ll do fine,” Lothar snarled. “We certainly don’t need the aid of rufians and troublemakers.”

“Excuse me,” Caleb said, interposing himself between the two intimidating figures. “If I might offer a suggestion, Lothar. You did say Harkonnen was a tough customer – Invincible Legion and all that. Plus he outsmarted you once before; we could probably use all the help we can get.”

Abbot slapped Caleb on the back. “Is it courage, Lothar, or stupidity? I must say, this new recruit of yours is quite impressive. I’ve never heard one talk to you like that before.”

Lothar's mask twisted into a grimace. "If you're trying to get on my good side, pup, you are failing miserably."

"I wasn't aware you had a good side," Caleb snapped back. "And let's cut out this pup crap for once and for all, huh?"

Beside Caleb, Doctor Abbot took a step back, expecting an explosion of some kind from Lothar. The emerald Knight stretched himself to his full height, eyes flashing green, prepared to reprimand his charge. But before Lothar could get a word out, his attention was drawn to a blonde ensign hurtling down the corridor towards them. She was calling his name.

"Oh, Lothar, I'm so glad I finally located you," she began, puffing heavily. "I checked with Rawlins in the Security office, but he said you hadn't been there yet, and then I thought maybe you lingered in the Arboretum..."

"Ensign," Lothar growled, "what is this all about?" Though interrupted, his ire had not dissipated.

"Yes, of course," the woman stammered. "Please forgive me. A Dominator Class Threat has appeared in the Teneb-742 system. Xerxes is mobilizing everything we have, but we're a small outpost, and we don't have much available. When we learned we had two Cosmo-Knights onboard, Commander Skyrunner thought you might be willing to help."

"What's going on?" Caleb interrupted. Lothar, Abbot, and the ensign ignored him, though the ensign continued to explain for Lothar's benefit.

"You might already know that Teneb-742 is about to go nova. But apparently a Zodoran energy leech was awakened by Teneb-742's death throes – the creature has to be stopped before the star dies. If it absorbs the energy of a dying star, it could become unstoppable. I mean, if it's already Dominator Class, what'll happen when Teneb-742 goes nova?"

"Trouble," Lothar said. "Big trouble. We've got to get back to the ship and out to Teneb-742 immediately. The Forge willing, we'll get there in time to be of some use."

"Commander Skyrunner will be most relieved," the ensign gushed.

"I'm coming," Abbot said. "I know a bit about the lost Zodorans."

Lothar looked at him a moment, and then nodded. "Let's go."

"Tell me what I want to hear, Squiddy," Elias Harkonnen demanded.

He stood imperiously in the midst of the junkyard the Monro Squamato Kekkil Damathui called a pawn shop. Hardly a shop at all, it appeared to be little more than a place for Squamato, or "Squiddy" as most referred to him, to collect junk. The place was small enough to begin with, but jammed with broken toasters, VR units, trideo monitors, oxygen and methane tanks, swim-suits, flight suits, turbo jockey jackets, helmets, fragments of armor, bits of wire and string, used CDs, cyborg and robot spare parts – limbs, mostly, but also a few eyes, gears and CPUs – jewelry, swords, obsolete laser weapons

from three centuries ago, ancient hardcopy books, stereos missing knobs and switches and other integral parts, figurines of dragons and unicorns, scratched and pitted with age, lawn ornaments, posters of some arcane figure known only as “Snoopy,” and hundreds of other less identifiable items wedged onto shelves, shoved into boxes, or on display in one of three glass cases with glass so cloudy the objects within were indistinct at best, and completely invisible at worst. Fragments littered the floor, and crunched beneath Elias’ boots like popcorn.

And in the midst of it all, the rotund form of Squiddy. He squatted behind the central glass case like a porcine king, his single red glaring eye blinking furiously, his huge maw of needle sharp teeth stretched wide into a hideous smile. Squiddy kept his forepaws flat on the top of the case, but his tentacles flitted about, one waving a pungent cigar, the other sloshing a gin and tonic everywhere, while the other two rummaged about behind the glass case on some mysterious errand.

Squiddy wasn’t much as pawnbrokers went, but everyone in Center, from the Knife Master to High Lord Anshurr himself, knew Squiddy didn’t really deal in used items. He dealt in information. It was he who had pointed Elias in the direction of Quajinn Huo, the draconid sorcerer who had once almost taken control of the United Worlds of Warlock, and who was now forced to hide in the slums beneath the sixth level or face destruction at the hands of those he had wronged so long ago. But Huo’s whereabouts had not been the only bit of intelligence Elias had requested from Squiddy, and the former Invincible Legionnaire had come to collect the rest of his merchandise.

Squiddy took a puff on his cigar. “My, my, you are an impatient one, Harkonnen,” he remarked. “Not even a ‘hello.’ or a ‘how’s tricks.’ Right to business with you.”

“I haven’t the time to waste chewing the fat with you, Squiddy. Just give me what I paid for,” Elias ordered coldly. Monro as a species had always disgusted him, but Squiddy was a particularly loathsome member of his race. The fact that Elias could not simply force Squiddy to do his bidding made Elias want to smash things; preferably Squiddy’s fat, disgusting excuse for a face. But the Monro’s fame throughout Center also kept the creature protected. High Lord Anshurr would not take kindly to anyone who pounded one of his chief information brokers into pudding, and Elias certainly didn’t need the heat the Splugorth could lay on him.

Not now, at any rate.

“Very well,” Squiddy said with an expansive sigh that shook his frame. “I haven’t been able to locate Lothar yet.” Before Elias could snarl anything, Squiddy pressed on, “Cosmo-Knights are notoriously difficult to keep track of, Harkonnen. Believe me. They can flit through space at will, so they don’t need to board passenger ships. They don’t eat, drink, or sleep, so they don’t book rooms at hotels or pay for expensive dinners at restaurants with their

Phase World Express cards. And that's another thing – they don't use creds much at all. Most people just give 'em what they need. Or maybe the Forge does, I dunno. Bottom line: the usual channels ain't much use with Cosmo-Knights."

"Then why use them at all?" Elias asked through gritted teeth.

"Excellent question. The answer is simple: you might get lucky. Plus, they're quicker than the unusual channels, which are coming up empty themselves, and more slowly I might add. I'm still looking, though, I assure you. You'll be the first to know when he's spotted."

Elias nodded wearily. "Fine," he said. "What else have you got for me?"

Squiddy took a sip from his drink, and frowned slightly. "Too much tonic," he muttered to himself. To Elias, he said, "Rumor mill is working overtime, my friend. Word is that Naruni Enterprises is taking a pounding in their new market, the dimensional vortex known as Earth. Could it be coincidence that this Earth is the playground for one Lord Splynnncryth? Industrial espionage can be very lucrative, Harkonnen."

"Only an idiot would be caught between the Naruni and a Splugorth," Elias muttered.

Squiddy gave the Monro equivalent of a shrug. "There's a new player in Center politics that might interest you. They call themselves the Tarlok. They're from a backwards system where they run the show; galactic despots, you'd like 'em. Their only problem is, their starships ain't FTL capable. Now, they're courting the Splugorth of Center, who seem to be taking a shine to 'em – the Tarlok have exotic slave stock – but they still haven't seen an FTL ship yet. The Splugorth are playing with 'em, I figger. And the Kreeghor, who see the Tarloks as petty rivals, have blocked the Tarloks' attempts to go outside the Splugorth for help."

Interesting. Elias could make a great deal of money selling a ship or two to the upstart aliens. It would certainly feel good to once more spit in the collective eye of the Kreeghor, but it was generally unwise to undercut a Splugorth. It wouldn't hurt to keep it in mind, however. "Go on," he told Squiddy.

"A Fallen Knight showed up on Center last night. Just appeared on level four all of a sudden. Probably rifted in."

"One of the Fallen?" Elias said, surprised. The Fallen were rare, though a great deal more common than the Forge or its Knights wanted them to be. A sad lot, the Fallen were failed Knights, those who could not live up to the perfection demanded of them by the Forge, those who gave in to temptation and behaved like the rest of the cosmos. It might be worth the trouble it would take to track this Knight down, Elias thought. He might be willing to cut a deal. Or he might be worth a few practice rounds. "What else?" Elias asked.

"Let's see," Squiddy mumbled. "There's a new expedition shaping up for Ghost World. The S'hree Vek Confederacy and the CCW are holding a summit in some undisclosed location, probably in neutral space. Gozel dip Gozel

sent a ‘mysterious cargo’ to Maddox Industries yesterday; should reach its destination in another twelve standard days. Very hush-hush.” Not surprising; Gozel dip Gozel was a famous Kittani inventor and artist. He worked freelance, refusing to subjugate his “brilliance” or his “vision” to some faceless conglomerate. The Naruni had tried to get him to sign contracts at least a dozen times, but no matter how lucrative they were, Gozel dip Gozel still refused. Supposedly, having been spurned so many times, the Naruni eventually resorted to force, and sent a whole company of Repo-Bots to the inventor’s homeworld to take him away. The story went that Gozel dip Gozel eventually made a summer home out of the Repo-Bots after he melted them down.

People steered clear of Gozel dip Gozel after that. They recognized that a being with his intelligence and resources could protect himself and his inventions. But if one were on a ship, en route to one of those faceless conglomerates, it would be deliciously vulnerable to pirates or worse. A Gozel dip Gozel original would be worth billions on the black-market.

Something else to keep in mind. “You’re holding something back, Squiddy,” Elias admonished. “Spill it.”

The Monro smiled, and puffed on his cigar once more. “I saved the best for last, Harkonnen. Thraxus is hiring.”

Thraxus. Now there was a word to conjure with, as Elias’ grandmother would have said. Thraxus was one of the few figures known throughout the Three Galaxies. A powerful, rich, and immortal figure, many considered Thraxus to be both the richest sentient in the Three Galaxies and the nominal ruler of Center itself. From his ivory tower on the first level of Center, the Manors, Thraxus ruled an empire of excess and military might, holding a considerable amount of Naruni Enterprises stock in addition to property holdings and businesses scattered throughout the reaches of the cosmos. In a single day, Thraxus made more money than most planets. As if the man’s wealth were not enough, he was also well known for his political views: specifically, he had none. He played sides off against each other, Splugorth, CCW, UWW, Transgalactic Empire, the Wulfen, humans, Cosmo-Knights, Knights of Kamnos, tracers, the Fraternity of Stars; he had backed or thwarted all at one point or another. Thraxus feared nothing, and managed to reap profit from every venture. A man could do a lot worse than allying himself with such a being.

“What is he looking for?” Elias asked.

Squiddy snorted. “Thought that one might get your attention. Word is, he’s looking for cutthroats, murderers and thieves for this one. Very big, very dangerous. But he needs folks that’ll be trustworthy, willing to get the job done, and do it correctly.”

Elias nodded, as if his suspicions were confirmed. “And you have no idea what the job itself entails?”

Squiddy tried to shrug again. “All I know is that it is supposed to be a ‘total riot.’ Which could mean it’s the practical joke of the millennium, or something much, much worse. One never knows with Thraxus.”

Elias thought a moment. He had no taste in practical jokes, no matter what the scale. But for the prices Thraxus was sure to be paying, Elias might consider smashing a custard pie in face of the Tribe-lord of the Seljuks or whomever might be the target. “Get word to Thraxus that I’m interested. Mention Huo is working for me. That should get his attention, if my name doesn’t.”

“Okay,” Squiddy said. “There is the little matter of a finder’s fee...”

“Just do it,” Elias snapped. “When I hear back from Thraxus, I’ll dump the appropriate amount in your usual account.”

Elias Harkonnen left Squiddy’s Pawn Shop, with a bounce in his step that had not been there when he entered. Despite the Monro’s repulsive appearance, Elias had to admit that the little beast certainly produced results. A line to Thraxus... it would be best to keep his temper in check when dealing with Squiddy, Elias thought.

With an advance from Thraxus, Elias might be able to afford a new ship. His resources were beginning to peter out, and not for the first time he cursed Lothar of Motherhome for forcing him to destroy the asteroid installation and all the pirated cargo left in the asteroid’s hold. If Elias had been able to unload that material, he wouldn’t be running out of money on Phase World, begging for scraps from a Monro.

Elias’ white eyes narrowed. His team was almost ready. Another day or two, and they would be ready to wreak havoc across the cosmos, in Thraxus’ name or in Harkonnen’s. Quajinn Huo would serve to deter any interruptions from Lothar or any other servants of the Forge. A Klikita named Friar possessed abilities that were the key to getting Huo off of Center without the UWW knowing. Elias had found a psychotic Relogian named Hector who knew his way around munitions. A Kisent from Cheba-IV would serve as pilot for whatever ship Elias could purchase. There was a Riathenor that Elias was in negotiations with, who might be willing to join up with their merry band. Elias also had a line on an Oni, and then there was the Fallen Knight Squiddy mentioned. Yes, the team was shaping up nicely.

Chapter Six

Riders on the Storm

Lost civilizations. Dead races. The Three Galaxies are full of them.

The most famous of them, naturally, are the mythical First Race, those beings said to have created the Cosmic Forge in the Dawn of History, but there are others. The Machinists of the Anvil Galaxy, who created the Machine People that populate a few worlds in the Transgalactic Empire, are among the better known. There are some who say the ruins on Monro-Tet were built not by the ancestors of the Monro themselves, but by some other lost people. Other planets in the Anvil galaxy appear to have been the homes of now extinct beings as well. the Freecheesians of Galoppa once ruled a section of space within the TGE, but they disappeared before the Kreeghor arrived. There are still a few scattered remnants of the Todamma peoples of the Burschian Dominion, but they are a degenerate people, fallen far from the lofty heights they once held. There are others.

In the Corkscrew, lost civilizations are even more common. They litter thousands of worlds, leaving behind tombs, technology, and little else. Xenoarchaeologists and looters alike have become very rich sentients by exploring these dead worlds and bringing their bounty back to the CCW, TGE, UWW, or other groups. As to why dead worlds are so common, xenoarchaeologists have their theories. The most well regarded hypothesis, although there are many others, is that all civilizations must go through a series of technological and sociological steps before they are “mature” enough to join the galactic community. Atomic power and weapons, for example, integral to the development of primitive FTL systems, are often available to civilizations long before they reach the global sociological equilibrium required to reach out to the stars. A species warring against itself, with weapons of mass destruction at their fingertips, sooner or later decides to use them against one another, or they put them away and pursue more lofty goals. The ruins that are found all over the Three Galaxies, xenoarchaeologists claim, are the remains of civilizations that could not or would not unify themselves, and instead chose to unleash their weapons on one another and therefore were destroyed.

A prosaic explanation, certainly, but not at all a hard and fast rule. One wonders how the Kreeghor and the Wulfen became such galactically powerful species, for example, if this is the case. And if it isn't the case, then why do so many of these species and civilizations die out?

– Excerpt from Travelogues of a Journeyman by Fraktyl Quint

Lothar hunched over the control panel and Caleb held on to his seat with both hands. Behind them both, Doctor Abbot whistled a jaunty tune.

Caleb held on for dear life although the ship's gravplates made sure the passengers felt nothing as it hurtled through space at several thousand times the speed of light. Indeed, the ride was smooth and comfortable, without so much as a shimmy or a bump. Turbulence did not exist in space. Still, Caleb could not help but feel a bit uneasy as the ship blasted through space on the way to Teneb-742, an obscure system not far, relatively speaking, from the CCW Xerxes Station.

The view outside the ship's main port was enough to create butterflies in Caleb's stomach; the Phase Drive the ship used to achieve faster-than-light speeds shunted the ship outside the bounds of physical reality, thus freeing it from the laws of thermodynamics and creating an unsettling vision outside the ship as it skimmed across the planes of reality. If Caleb looked out the window, it appeared as if the ship they were in burrowed through a spinning and whirling tunnel of cascading blue and violet energy that crackled and spat bolts of light at the ship as it passed. Arcs of multicolored lightning played along the windowpane, and, presumably, all along the outside of the ship as well. Normally it wasn't this bad, Lothar had promised, but due to the urgency of their mission, he had disengaged the safeties and forced the ship to supersede its limits.

The danger they were about to face was real, and far more deadly than the light show outside. A "Dominator Class Threat" had awoken from a millennia long sleep and attacked a CCW survey ship observing the star Teneb-742 as it approached critical mass and prepared to supernova. The entity was apparently some sort of energy leech, and the impending nova promised to provide it with enough energy to fry the universe. As matters stood now, the entity had already crippled the first ship on the scene, and was in the process of destroying whatever reinforcements that ship had called in for assistance.

There existed only a few hours before Teneb-742 went nova. Lothar needed to get the three of them to the scene as quickly as possible so that they could neutralize the threat and still evade their own destruction as the star itself exploded.

"Is every day like this?" Caleb asked, forcing himself to relax in his co-pilot's chair.

"Only if we're lucky," Lothar growled, his eyes flashing emerald green from his helmet.

"I hope that's sarcasm," Caleb muttered.

"Oh, it is," Doctor Abbot said, breaking off his whistling to comment in his strangely British accent. "Lothar isn't anymore enthused about this than you are, Caleb. But he does like to put up a brave front."

"Shut up, Abbot," Lothar barked. His hands flew over the control panel, attempting to coax more speed from the taxed engine. "Unless you've something constructive to offer, of course," he amended in the same irate tone. "I seem to recall you claimed to know 'a bit' about the Zodorans."

Abbot appeared unperturbed at Lothar's anger. "I did say something about that, didn't I?" he admitted. He spun his cane in his hands lazily for a moment, and then said to Caleb, "It is amazing how polite he gets when he wants something."

Caleb smiled slightly. "Well, to be honest, I'm curious myself. What is a Zodoran? Are they all energy leeches?"

Abbot chuckled. "Not at all, Caleb. My, your innocence is refreshing." Lothar snorted, but Abbot ignored him. "The Zodorans were once one of the most powerful races in the Three Galaxies. They oversaw a vast republic that included a thousand, thousand worlds. They were revered for their honesty, their integrity, and their wisdom. But it all came crashing down around them, and by the time of humanity's ascendancy, the Zodorans were all but extinct. Today a bare handful of them survive, no more than a hundred in the entire Megaverse. They have retreated from life, becoming mystics and hermits and sages."

"Mystics," Lothar grumbled. "That's what makes me concerned." He spared a sharp glance at Caleb, and then returned his attention to the console. "We Knights of the Forge are hardy. But magic is as dangerous to us as anything. Magic can kill a Knight readily and without fanfare. It's best to step lightly around magic, but we're headed into a hornet's nest of it right now. It's likely our paws are going to be more than a bit singed. Watch yourself, pup."

Abbot cleared his throat. "If you don't mind, Lothar, I wasn't finished. You may continue with your dour prophecies in a moment, but I have an avid student here in search of enlightenment. And you might learn a thing or two as well, so pay attention."

Lothar grunted, "Fine, Abbot. Spit it out."

Caleb could almost see the hint of a smile on Abbot's face, but he couldn't be sure. Abbot seemed to be made entirely of shadow, with the only substantial parts of him being his trenchcoat, hat, and cane. His incandescent eyes were the only visible features on his face, and given their alien nature, they were impossible for Caleb to read. Something about the way he stood gave Caleb the distinct impression that he was amused, however.

"The Zodorans became mystics, but they weren't always such," Abbot began.

Lothar snorted. "By the Mother's Teats, Abbot, you're making this up as you go, aren't you? Of course the Zodorans have always been mystics. They're some of the most powerful wizards in the Megaverse."

"And usually you're so open-minded," Abbot snapped. "Stop interrupting and keep your ignorant prejudices to yourself. The boy wants to learn." He stared pointedly at the back of Lothar's head for a moment, and continued only after the Wulfen gave a resigned shrug.

“Where was I?” Abbot asked. “Oh yes, the Zodorans. They have become mystically attuned in the past few thousand years, but that was more of a reaction to the doom they wrought on themselves than any natural inclination. Magic, philosophy, and the hermetic life seemed to them to be a better life than the one they abandoned. A better life, and perhaps a safer one.”

“Zodoran ruins were some of the first discovered by CCW explorers centuries ago,” Lothar interrupted again. “Their records were decoded, their mythology explained. They were wizards who summoned a dark god that destroyed their civilization. Every schoolpup knows that, Abbot.”

Abbot sighed. “Most Wulfen are similarly single-minded, Caleb. Keep that in mind. Once they have an idea in their head, they don’t let it go. Nor do they look beneath the surface of things to guess at the truths hidden by the cosmos. They accept what is given them and disregard the rest. You would do well to avoid doing the same.”

“Get on with it, Abbot,” Lothar growled through clenched teeth.

Caleb found himself wondering how long these two had known one another. They bickered as if they were married, and yet seemed to trust one another anyway. If Lothar really hated Abbot, he would not have allowed the shadowman to accompany them, and if Abbot really was the stuck up academic he appeared to be, he would not have volunteered to follow them into almost certain death. There was more going on here than it appeared. Could it be the two of them were putting on some sort of show for Caleb’s benefit?

“The early Zodorans were indeed ‘wizards’ of a kind,” Abbot began, “and they did awaken a ‘dark god.’ But the god they awakened and the magic they utilized was technology. The Zodorans possessed an intense curiosity and a natural rationality that led them to develop technologically very early on. When humans and Wulfen were still grubbing around in the dirt, trying to figure out how to make fire work, the Zodorans were building rocket ships and exploring their moons and their sister planets. Within another few generations, they developed FTL ships and began to explore the regions beyond their native system. They conquered disease and placed a moratorium on aging. War and starvation were eliminated. They lived in a golden age on their home planet, and they felt the need to share that experience with the rest of the Three Galaxies.

“They colonized countless worlds, and brought peace and enlightenment to hundreds of others. In time, they fashioned a star-spanning republic ruled by peace and wisdom. This was in the days before the Naruni, the Kreeghor, or the S’hree Vek Confederacy, when such things were possible. Hells, this was before Center existed. But the Splugorth were there, and their presence awakened the Zodorans and their republic to certain realities.

“Peace within the republic and among alien species was a laudable goal, but it rang hollow when Splugorth slavers came raiding and ransacked entire worlds. Those they could not take, the Splugorth destroyed. They razed

entire systems, leaving nothing but bleached bones and smoking ruins in their wake. The Zodorans were a peaceful people, but they were not suicidal. They knew that if the Splugorth were to go unchecked, their society would be destroyed. Though it went against their principles, they used their great intellects to fashion a weapon that could defend them. A weapon that could, possibly, destroy the heinous Splugorth themselves.

“It was an artificial construct, a device that could absorb all energy expended upon it and then release it in devastating waves of negative energy. So powerful was the device that it could feed on the light of distant stars. When it faced Splugorth raiders, it drank up the energy expended by their weapons and magicks and powered itself up for a massive surge that crippled the Splugorthian fleet, forcing them to retreat and lick their wounds.

“The Zodorans were overjoyed. Their weapon had worked admirably, and it would do so again if the need ever arose. They called it back, and prepared to put it in storage. But the weapon had other plans. It had evolved beyond its programming, developing a crude intelligence of its own, and it didn’t want to go back into its box. When the Zodorans insisted, the weapon rebelled. Within seventeen hours, the Zodoran homeworld was a lifeless ball of rock.

“The weapon went rogue. Other worlds soon fell, and fell quickly. The Zodorans and their allies struggled against the device, but to no avail. It destroyed any who opposed it. Utterly. The Splugorth watched from afar with amusement as the Zodoran Republic was laid waste from within. The weapon worked like a cancer, devouring the once proud republic one world at a time.

“Finally, when all seemed lost, a champion arose from a backwater world; one of the first Knights of the Forge, actually. The blessings of the Forge gave him some mild resistance to the weapon’s attack, so he was able to lead it into an ambush. The two fought for days, trading blow after blow, until they were both severely weakened. The weapon attempted to retreat in order to build up its reserves, but the Knight, close to death, would not allow it. Instead, he tricked the weapon into a special bunker that had been designed to hold the weapon. Once encased within, it could not escape. The walls of the bunker reflected all energy directed against it, allowing none to reach the weapon within. And the weapon itself was so spent that it could not simply blast its way free.

“The Knight and his allies recovered over the next few weeks, and then they went to assess the damage. They found the Republic in shambles. Most of it was destroyed, either by the Splugorth or the weapon run amuck. The Zodoran people themselves were nearly extinct; only a few thousand of them remained alive. They looked at their kingdom and their folly, and swore that it would never happen again. The remaining Zodorans went into hiding, trading in their technical expertise for magical knowledge. And so they passed from living memory into legend, and by the time your ancestors joined the

galactic community, their tale, even their own records, had come to reflect the mythologized account every ‘schoolpup’ knows.”

“How do you know so much?” Caleb asked.

“Well, I read a lot,” Abbot said glibly.

“So, this energy leech we’re going to fight destroyed an entire civilization, fought a Cosmo-Knight to a standstill over the course of several days, and was then tricked into a prefabricated structure, something that was not built to last, apparently, but which negated its special abilities,” Lothar grumbled.

“Precisely,” Abbot said.

“How in the name of the All-powerful Forge does that help us?” Lothar barked. “We have hours to defeat this thing, not days. There isn’t time to lure it into a special dungeon. And pretty soon it will have enough power to split planets in half. How is anything in your cute little story going to save us or the men and women currently engaging the monstrosity?”

“Once again, Lothar, you’re looking at what is given you and deciding that is all there is. Read between the lines. Extrapolate.”

“No time,” Lothar growled. “We’re coming up on Teneb-742. I’m disengaging the Phase Drive.” There was a lurch and the starship shuddered. On the viewport, the light display softened and then winked out of existence, replaced by an ordinary starfield. Looming large in the distance was an angry red star. Sunspots and atomic explosions played all along its vast surface. The star seemed to shudder as Caleb looked at it, almost as though it were a mighty engine revving itself moments before tearing across a racetrack.

Closer to Lothar’s ship hung a small planetoid, around which nearly a dozen starships swarmed. Bright bursts of energy came from their cannons as they bombarded the planetoid. A strange haze washed over the ships, and a moment later Lothar’s ship shuddered and the lights dimmed.

“Even as far away as we are, we can feel the negative energy wave the Zodoran weapon emits,” Lothar said softly. “Damn. This is going to be uncomfortable.”

“Wait a minute,” Caleb said. “If the Zodorans were so damn smart, why didn’t they realize that they imprisoned their greatest enemy near a star that was going to go nova?”

“Excellent question, Caleb,” Abbot said.

Lothar shook his head. “Not really. All stars eventually die. It’s part of the cosmic ecosystem. New stars and planets are birthed in the maelstrom of destruction. All part of the cosmic cycle of birth and death and rebirth.” As he spoke, he fired up the contra-gravitonic drive and edged the ship closer to the conflict. Every few moments, the haze would wash over them again and the ship would shudder as if in pain.

“Yeah,” Caleb agreed, “but doesn’t that take billions of years?” He was racking his brain for tidbits from his freshman year physical science course. He hadn’t paid nearly as much attention as he should have. Sitting next to

Joanna Freeman every day did that to a guy. But he knew that the life cycle of a star encompassed billions of years. A star like Sol was middle aged but still in excellent shape; human civilization would be long gone by the time she reached critical mass.

“Yes,” Lothar agreed slowly. He looked at Abbot sharply. “Xenoarchaeologists dated the remains of the Zodoran civilization to 1.5 million years ago.” Abbot nodded. “So they must have known the star was a red giant, just waiting for the release of a supernova. Are you saying they planned this?”

Abbot shrugged. “I’m not saying anything. But it does seem likely that they knew the probable outcome of trapping the weapon here. Why didn’t they pick a younger star? Even pre-atomic civilizations can tell the difference between a white dwarf, a yellow star, and a red giant.”

“So what do we do?” Caleb asked. “Pull back and let the star do its business? Will it destroy the weapon? Maybe it can’t absorb that much energy all at once.”

“Maybe it can’t. But we have to make sure,” Lothar said. He growled low in his throat. “And you and I are the only two sentients within a dozen light years who can make sure. Caleb, suit up. We’re going extra-vehicular. Abbot, the ship is yours. Get her to safety, and be careful with it, for the Forge’s sake. It’s a loaner.”

Caleb bounded out of his chair and willed his armor to come to him. In a crimson flash, it solidified around his body, fitting like a second skin. Instantly, Caleb felt his senses sharpen, his muscles swell, and his blood begin to pound. The divine power of the Forge thrummed in his every molecule. Once again, in the back of his mind he felt the urge to summon up a weapon to complement his abilities. He ignored it.

Abbot dropped into the chair beside him as Lothar stood up. The Wulfen Knight leaned over the console and activated the comm system. “Attention, CCW ships: this is Lothar of Motherhome, Knight of the Forge. I am taking control of this situation. I want you all to fall back to a safe distance and allow me to deal with the threat.”

Another wave of distortion passed over the ship, and the entire thing shuddered as if struck by a giant fist. Caleb nearly lost his footing, but the preternatural balance he had developed since adopting the mantle of the Forge enabled him to stay on his feet.

The comm system crackled, and a voice came out of the void. “Captain Orestes of the *Gabriel*. Are you serious? Even Cosmo-Knights aren’t going to stand long against this thing. My ship has taken a hell of a pounding, and we’ve already lost the *Hidalgo* and the *Casebolt*.”

“The *Casebolt*, eh?” Lothar answered. “The Admiral isn’t going to be happy you lost his ship. But I think you just proved my point, Captain Orestes. There isn’t much good you folks can do. Better get clear and leave this to the professionals.”

“You’re a real pain in the ass, Lothar. But if you make it, the drinks are on me. Orestes out.” There was another crackle, and then the system went dead.

“Another friend of yours?” Caleb asked. His voice sounded strange coming from the depths of his Roman style helmet.

“Not exactly, but I do know Admiral Casebolt, the man for whom the destroyed Warshield cruiser was named. If the ship was anything like the man, it put up one hell of a fight.” Lothar stepped away from the console and held his right hand out, palm up. Green light flashed in the palm of his hand, and his large, double-headed ax materialized.

“Orestes and his people are falling back,” Abbot reported. “You two better get going.” Lothar nodded and turned to go, Caleb at his heels. “Hey, Lothar,” Abbot called.

The Wulfen paused and made a quarter turn. “What is it now?”

“Be careful.”

Lothar nodded, and slapped Caleb’s shoulder with his free hand. “We both will.”

Lothar led the way to the airlock. As he did, he told Caleb, “Follow me. Do what I do, and keep your head down. Your energy blasts are going to be useless, so you’d better get your weapon out.” He paused, and keyed open the airlock.

“Uh, I don’t have a weapon,” Caleb said with some embarrassment. The ship shuddered as another wave of negative energy hit.

Lothar gave him a long look. “This is not good. To make the weapon, you’re going to have to sacrifice energy that you’re going to need for the fight.” He sighed. “Do it.”

“Well, okay, but I was sort of planning on a pair of six-guns,” Caleb said. The “bonded deputy” thing had given him the idea. Growing up in Arizona, in the middle of cowboy country, and specifically cowboy movie country, he had absorbed the mythology of the western from an early age. Now that he was, for all intents and purposes, some sort of galactic ranger, the idea of using revolvers as his weapon of choice seemed a natural one.

But Lothar shook his head. “They’ll be no good against the energy leech.” He hefted his ax for emphasis. “Pick something more substantial.”

“What if I pick later? Its not like I can switch or anything,” Caleb complained. He knew in his bones that whatever form he chose, his sidearm would remain that way permanently. Such was the will of the Forge.

Another shudder shook the ship. It held far longer than the previous ones had. “No time, pup,” Lothar growled. He stepped into the airlock and Caleb followed. The inner door cycled closed behind them. A moment later, the outer door began to open. Lothar launched himself into the vacuum, and in an emerald flash blasted towards the planetoid.

Caleb hung back for a heartbeat, and then followed his mentor. He glanced back at the freighter, and watched as it veered off and blasted for open space.

Lothar was flying at full speed in the opposite direction, and Caleb could see the other CCW ships retreating as quickly as they could, leaving behind two battered hulks hanging in orbit around the planetoid. In a flash, that haze rippled over his field of view, and then it slammed into him.

It felt like someone dumped a vat of acid over his body; as if fire had enveloped him in a deadly embrace. Every inch of his body burned suddenly and without warning, and then it was past. He looked down at his body, expecting to see his armor melting off, but saw no marks at all. The pain was gone as well, as suddenly as it came. Still, he preferred having a spaceship between him and the wave of negative energy.

Lothar was a bright green dot in space now, and Caleb could see a cloud of darkness billowing up from the atmosphere of the planetoid. With Lothar as a point of reference, he could see that the cloud was easily miles in diameter.

The thing had broken free of the planet's gravity and reached space. It was that powerful already.

In the background, the red star Teneb-742 blazed angrily and prepared to detonate.

"The Mother's Teats," Caleb swore in imitation of the Wulfen. He reached down deep inside himself to the core of power that beat within his breast, and channeled the power into his hands, summoning for the first time his chosen weapon. Crimson light blazed between his palms, taking shape and solidity according to Caleb's will. A hammer formed in his hands, a massive sledge as red as his armor. The formation of the weapon cost him precious energy, including a little extra to ensure the hammer would strike with all the force of a runaway train, but it also bound the object to him. It was a part of him as surely as his heart and his soul belonged to him.

He glanced for a moment at the hammer image emblazoned across his breastplate and wondered.

Another wave of distortion washed over him, inundating him with pain, but he gritted his teeth behind his helm and blasted after Lothar at full speed.

Lothar hung in space near the shattered hulk of a CCW ship as the cloud of darkness billowed toward him. The ship was huge, easily six hundred feet long. Cannons, sensor arrays, and less identifiable projections jutted out from its body in various directions. The hull was rent open in dozens of places, and Caleb could see human remains floating in the vacuum within the ship and outside it. At least, Caleb assumed they were human; the bodies appeared to be turned inside out.

He swallowed hard, as he realized that the Zodoran weapon had wrought this much damage when it was still confined to the planetoid. Its disruptive wave of negative energy had destroyed the ship from miles away. Now he and Lothar were about to face the thing directly, with nothing between them but open space. Not even the hull of a war cruiser, designed for ship-to-ship and ship-to-planet combat, had been strong enough to withstand the Zodoran

weapon. What chance did two people have against the thing, even if they were Cosmo-Knights?

Lothar stood fast and heaved his ax at the energy leech. The bright emerald weapon flashed as it flew through the vacuum, and then the darkness swallowed it completely. The ax returned to Lothar's hand a moment later. The Zodoran weapon appeared unfazed. Lothar's eyes blazed green with anger.

Caleb drew alongside his mentor. Lothar looked at him sharply, but gave him a curt nod when he saw the hammer. "The weapon is somewhere inside that cloud," Lothar said. Caleb heard the voice more in his head than his ears, and he wondered how Lothar could speak in the emptiness of space. Another gift of the Forge, presumably.

"An excellent defense," Caleb offered. Lothar grunted agreement. If they couldn't see the weapon, they couldn't attack it. Meanwhile, its own mode of attack was all too effective against them. As if on cue, another wave of negative energy rippled towards them. This close, the effect was even stronger; Caleb felt pain invade his every molecule. He cried out despite himself, and he felt moisture on his upper lip. He tasted it with his tongue.

Blood. He was bleeding from his nose, and now he could feel it begin to seep from his ears as well. His armor appeared to be of little protection against the negative energy. The thing was killing him. Instinctively he began to curl into a ball.

Lothar gripped his upper arm. "Hold on, Caleb. A few minutes more, and the star will die. We just have to hold on until then."

Caleb forced himself to straighten. He focused his eyes on the black cloud and hefted his hammer in his hands. As Lothar heaved his ax once more, Caleb pulled his right arm back and threw the hammer like a football, a Hail Mary pass into the center of the darkness. Ax and hammer returned to their owners without making contact.

And so it went. The Knights tested the Zodoran weapon's mettle, throwing their weapons into the cloud in a vain attempt to find the actual mechanism and damage it somehow. Every few moments, a haze would ripple from the cloud, and Lothar and Caleb would be hit with the full force of the weapon's attack. The weapon advanced on them, reaching out with smoky tendrils, and they fell back, meter by meter. The cloud enveloped the hulk of the CCW ship, which itself had taken on more damage from each of the weapon's blasts, and the Knights fell back further.

Caleb was coughing within his helm, trying not to swallow the blood that seemed to leak from his ears, nose, mouth, and eyes. It was difficult to see with his eyes clouded by a red haze. The energy core at the center of his body and soul fought valiantly to put him back together, or at least slow down the bleeding, but it could not match the furious pounding he received from the Zodoran weapon's onslaught. Lothar seemed to be faring better, but Caleb knew his own wounds were hidden beneath his suit of armor; Lothar's must

be too. Still, the Wulfen never faltered, never cried out, never gave in. No matter the agony, he threw his ax with the same determination and strength each time.

Suddenly, Caleb doubled over. He was swallowing too much of his own blood, and he was unable to ignore his gag reflex. He quickly dispelled his helm so that he could vomit into space instead of inside the helmet. He spat blood in a gout, and felt the moisture on his face, no longer imprisoned by his helm, begin to slip away into the vacuum. He stared at his own blood in a daze as it began to orbit his head. *This is it*, he thought. *I'm going to die.*

Lothar grabbed him by the arm, and then blasted backwards away from the black cloud. It was drawing close and Caleb appeared to be out of it. Though they would almost surely perish against this deadly creature, Lothar couldn't allow the boy to die just yet.

Caleb shook himself and muttered a thank-you to Lothar. He tightened his grip on his hammer and straightened again. His face twisted into a blood-stained grimace, and he threw the hammer once more at the darkness.

BOOM!

The cloud recoiled. Somehow, Caleb had struck the weapon hidden within the billowing vapors. Lothar threw his ax towards the cloud, aiming for the spot where the hammer had disappeared within the darkness. He was rewarded with another thump, as his weapon finally connected. "Thank the Forge," Lothar growled. "Have at it, Caleb!"

But the boy was already launching his sledge. Another titanic crash echoed within the cloud. Caleb laughed, and he felt strength flood into his arms. His wounds began to close up. If he could hurt this thing even a little bit before he died, he would be happy. Better to go out fighting than to be slaughtered like a hog. And then another wave of distortion hit, and the pain was so intense that Caleb howled and let go of his hammer to clutch at his head. His helmet had apparently offered some scant protection after all. Without it, he felt as if his eyeballs would explode from their sockets, his temples throbbed as if jabbed with white-hot needles, and his teeth burned as if a dentist's drill had been at each of them.

Then the sky went red.

A bright flash washed over them all, and the dark cloud shifted, as if turning away from them to face the red giant. Caleb had just enough time to recall his helmet before the universe exploded around him. His eyes snapped shut without his volition, but his eyelids were not enough protection from the light. He saw everything.

He saw the red giant swell and pulse, throbbing like a heart, and then it expanded outward at the speed of light. The cloud of darkness around the Zodoran weapon burned away, revealing a sphere of silver and gold, lit up like a Christmas tree. Then a solid wall of plasma struck the planetoid, the sphere, the drifting hulks, Caleb, Lothar, and the remaining planets in the sys-

tem. The molten starstuff poured over Caleb, drowning him in heat and light. He felt his armor begin to melt, and beneath it his skin smoldered and blackened. And then the wave of plasma passed him by, and it was only light that struck him, tiny particles like needles that drummed his skin like soft rain. The shockwave struck next, and Caleb felt it hammer into him like a freight train. His eardrums didn't burst; they exploded. He felt his bones crack, and something wet against his cheeks, and he couldn't see anymore, and the pain was like nothing he had ever felt, nor the beauty like anything he had ever experienced. He felt his neurons fluttering as they shut off one by one, and then the darkness claimed him finally.

He returned to consciousness slowly.

He became aware of his body first. The pain was lessening, but it still burned like liquid fire in his bones. Particularly his bones, as they snapped together one by one, healing as his Forge-blessed body repaired itself. He flexed his fingers and toes then, relieved that they functioned, and then he carefully and cautiously opened his eyes, glad to have them back too. He looked down at himself first, noting the dents, scratches, burns, and melted fragments of his armor. He and it had taken a beating, but the armor held him together when he should have flown apart like shattered glass. "Thank the Forge," he whispered to himself.

He hung in space still, but that space was no longer empty. Clouds of dust were forming around him, fragments of planets and the star, bits of hydrogen and helium, iron and gold, mixing and roiling together. Strobes of light flashed through the aether as atoms of this or that element collided together and burst into flame, tiny echoes of the giant star they had once composed. Of the planetoid, the CCW ships, and Lothar, there appeared to be no sign.

But the sphere, the Zodoran energy leech, was only a few hundred feet away. It bobbed in the aether, the gold and silver plates catching the light as it flashed. Its own lights remained dim. Other than that, the weapon appeared unharmed.

It wasn't fair.

Caleb forced himself to stretch, and ignored the urge to flinch as his muscles and bones screamed in pain. As he did so, he saw the running lights on the sphere flickering to life.

"Damn," Caleb groaned. The supernova had indeed overwhelmed the weapon, and for a while it had laid dormant. But the nova had also nearly killed Caleb, and while he recuperated, unconscious and alone, the weapon had recovered as well. How much of the supernova's energy had it absorbed? Not that it mattered. The thing could destroy Caleb without any help from the star; of that he was certain.

He willed himself to move, and called up his sledge. The hammer's weight in his hands was reassuring and strangely comfortable. His body resisted his movement, but he forced himself to draw even with the Zodoran weapon. It

was big, with a diameter equal to his own height. His reflection appeared in the burnished gold and silver plates, and he noticed with growing horror that more lights were coming to life. Soon, the thing would be fully recovered, and he would be dead.

Caleb alighted on top of the sphere and braced his legs. He had mere moments to destroy it, but he wanted to do it correctly. He hefted the sledge in his hands, and then brought it up to his shoulders. With a smooth stroke, he brought the hammer down with all the strength he could muster. Gold and silver plates crumbled inward with the impact, and the hammer was driven through the shell of the sphere. Electricity sparked and metal squealed. Caleb hauled back for another blow, and brought it crashing down to widen the hole and add to the damage.

The running lights flickered, and then went out. But Caleb wasn't fooled. He hammered the sphere into oblivion, striking again and again, until nothing survived but a few scraps of metal and some wires. Even then, he was tempted to continue, but his shoulders were sore, and his body was still trying to repair itself. He dispelled the hammer, and then went to look for Lothar.

Chapter Seven

A Bustle in the Hedgerow

The Transgalactic Empire is a force for evil; few would dispute this. It controls a third of each of the Three Galaxies through martial power. Its armies march across a thousand worlds and subjugate a thousand peoples. A few rebels have banded together and now foment civil war in the heart of the Empire, but they are but a fraction of the TGE's population. Few outside the ranks of the Cosmo-Knights even try to check the TGE's expansion. The CCW vigilantly patrols the borders it shares with the TGE, but a non-aggression treaty keeps them from actively resisting the Kreeghor and their Empire.

The backbone of the Empire's might is its armed forces. The Imperial Legion is one of the most highly trained and harshly disciplined armies in the Three Galaxies. They have at their disposal vast engines of destruction that even the Kittani, for all their inventiveness, cannot match. A single Doom-bringer Dreadnought can lay waste an entire world, and Kamnos is but one example of that very happenstance; Emperor Assault 'bots have left smoking craters behind wherever they go. Yet for all their power, all their ingenuity, all the devastation they bring, the Imperial Legion and its weaponry cannot inspire the same abject terror in the Transgalactic Empire's subjects as a single Invincible Guardsman can.

The Invincible Guard is the elite regiment of the Empire, a band of misanthropes and monsters who so excel at dealing death and destruction that the Emperor rewards them by giving them powers and abilities far beyond the norm. In an attempt to duplicate the Bio-Wizardry of their old masters, the Splugorath, the Kreeghor who rule the TGE have fashioned a force of super powered operatives, answerable only to the Emperor himself. Some can turn their flesh to steel, others can burn through starships with a glance, or turn a man to ice in a heartbeat. The Emperor gives them free reign throughout the Empire. They live like kings themselves, wanting for nothing, needing nothing, doing anything that pleases them.

One has to wonder, given that amount of power and that much freedom in such an autocratic society, why any one of them would even consider deserting.

– Excerpt from Travelogues of a Journeyman by Fraktyn Quint

Center's vast bulk loomed overhead, a crushing weight that reminded Elias Harkonnen why he hated being on the ground and preferred the freedom of the stars. He shifted uneasily in his tram seat, fighting a wave of panic that welled up unwittingly from his subconscious. He was fine, he told himself, sitting comfortably on the Number 10 tram as it glided across Level Six of Phase World's most famous city. Plenty of air, plenty of space between

himself and the roof of the tram, and between the tram and Level Six's ceiling, and all the other levels above. He forced himself to take a deep breath, and flexed his fingers until his knuckles cracked.

He glanced out the window, to reassure himself of all the open space outside the tram, and saw a glimmer of his reflection in the Plexiglas. His narrow, Elfin face was drawn into a grimace, his white eyes narrowed as if in pain. The black skullcap on his head reflected the fluorescent lights of the tram, making it appear shiny and bright. He forced his features to relax, and then brushed a gauntlet hand across the skullcap, as if he could wipe the light away.

There was a commotion at the back of the tram, forcing the other occupants to move forward. Some even opened the connecting door and scurried into the car ahead. Elias turned in his seat to see what was going on; it would help keep his mind off his own problems. Like the Riathenor backing out of the deal, or the fact that Quajinn Huo was getting more suspicious each day, or that Thraxus still hadn't called.

Elias Harkonnen got his wish. As soon as he turned around, all his other worries vanished in an instant. For at the back of the tram car stood two Invincible Guardsmen, a human male and a Silhouette female. Both wore the trademark red and black armor of the Guard, the same armor Elias himself still wore though he had deserted over a year before. They were staring at him; the other passengers had noticed, and were moving out of the way as quickly as they could.

Elias stood casually and pushed his way through the other passengers to the open space that had appeared before the Guardsmen. Elias smiled slightly. He recognized the human. "Boreas, it has been a long time. What brings you here?"

Boreas was tall and dark, with a shaven head beneath his own black skullcap. As a mark of individuality, he had grown a beard across his chin, and threaded a gold hoop through his lower lip. "We're here on business, Elias," Boreas answered. "We happened to catch sight of you getting on the tram, though, and decided to see what you were up to."

"Same old, same old," Elias said. Boreas was a brick and little else; he could shift to a metallic state that gave him superhuman strength and durability, but he was land-bound and slow moving. He was also very vulnerable as long as he remained in human form. The Silhouette was the dangerous one; in addition to whatever abilities she had gained upon her transformation to an Invincible Guard, she would also have some magical skill. Elias' invulnerability was nearly complete, but magic still gave him pause. "I just get to pick and choose who I kill these days. Going into business for myself was the best thing I ever did."

"The Emperor doesn't see it that way," the Silhouette said slowly. Her voice was low and sibilant, and her fangs showed prominently when she

talked. Her white eyes didn't blink. "You betrayed him and the Empire," she continued. "And that cannot be forgiven."

Elias smiled. "Who wants to be forgiven?"

Faster than thought, Elias lashed out with one fist and caught Boreas in the chest. Boreas was in mid-transformation, so the blow didn't kill him, but instead sent him flying backwards. The door behind him folded like tissue paper and the Guardsman crashed to the floor of the other car. Metal squealed and sparks flashed.

The Silhouette screamed, and the force of the scream hit Elias like a battering ram. All around him, the Plexiglas windows shattered into a million shards that exploded outward, falling to the ground meters below like snow. The few passengers left in the car were hammered by the wall of sound, their own screams drowned out by the diabolic noise. The sonic scream should have shattered Elias as well, but he was tougher than his Elfin frame looked. He frowned and then jumped at the Silhouette, body-slamming her into the side of the tram. Stunned, her scream trailed off, and it only took one more blow to crush her head like a melon.

Elias was grabbed from behind and thrown across the car. He smashed through two seats before slamming into the wall and coming to a stop. Boreas was fully metallized now, and he looked very angry that his partner was dead. Too bad. Boreas let out a shout and lumbered forward as quickly as he could, hands outstretched to grab Elias.

Elias let him.

When he felt Boreas' hands close around his throat, Elias grabbed the Guardsman's belt and lifted. Both of them rose into the air and smashed through the roof of the tram. Boreas was a professional, though. He never let go, even as Elias carried him straight up, increasing his speed with every second. They crashed into the roof of level six at several hundred kilometers an hour, just short of a sonic boom, but the impact was enough to shock Boreas' hands loose. Elias let go as well and dropped away, leaving Boreas wedged into the metal plates of the roof.

"Come back here!" Boreas shouted, shaking with impotent rage. He hadn't looked down yet.

Elias shook his head. "I'll let you live this once, Boreas. For old times' sake. But if you come after me again, I won't be nearly as forgiving." He blasted away with all possible speed, leaving Boreas to figure out how to get himself down.

The Riathenor had ultimately decided to pass on joining Elias' band of raiders. Apparently he had some misgivings about working with Quajinn Huo. So be it. Elias could do without him. There were millions of sentient

beings in Center with the right qualities Elias required; Riathenor were a dime a dozen anyway. A rarity, however, was a Fallen Knight.

The Knights that served the Cosmic Forge were said to be a singular breed, each one chosen by the Forge itself to oversee the well-being of the Three Galaxies and adjacent segments of the Megaverse. Life, honor, nobility, courage, courtesy and loyalty were the watchwords they lived by, even before they became Cosmo-Knights. Only the best and brightest in the Three Galaxies, those with the potential to be true heroes, were blessed with the divine gifts of the Forge. The Cosmo-Knights, most believed, were perfect; even Splugorth Conservators would grudgingly admit Cosmo-Knights were a breed apart. But every few years or so, from out of nowhere would come a tale of corruption and greed, and a Cosmo-Knight would be the star player. The supreme power the Forge blessed the Knights with was as much boon as curse; it could corrupt even the most angelic of souls. And once rot set in, the Forge withdrew its blessing and cursed its former servant. He became a Fallen Knight, the lowest of the low. The worst sort of creature in the Megaverse, one who had tasted perfection and proven unworthy.

The existence of such a creature made Elias Harkonnen feel comfortable and warm inside. Pillars of justice and valor like Lothar of Motherhome made him uneasy, though he would never admit it to himself, but the presence of Fallen Knights proved that even those most loved by the Forge were schlubs and screw-ups every bit as common as the rest of the sentients in the Three Galaxies.

So Elias felt no qualms about tracking down the Fallen Knight who had appeared on Center days before. The short battle with the other Guardsmen had wiped away the insecurities that had bothered him recently, reminding him that he was the most dangerous being alive and someone with a future. The current setbacks were temporary; Elias Harkonnen would have his day yet. Thraxus would call soon, he was sure of it. And with the wealthiest man in the Three Galaxies signing the checks, Elias would be on the road to power.

The Fallen Knight, according to Squiddy, had appeared on Level Four, apparently Rifted in randomly. Most random Rifts opened up in the lower levels, and supposedly the Prometheans had safeguards in place to keep dimensional gateways from opening up in the populated areas of Center, but on this one they had miscalculated. Rumor had it that the Naruni, who owned most of Level Four, were screaming bloody murder at the masters of Center. Sure, it was only a Fallen Knight this time, but what if next time it's a New Olympian raid? Elias could almost sympathize with the Naruni. Almost. They were the most well armed force in the Three Galaxies; they could easily fight off anything that got past Promethean security. But they liked to complain.

The Naruni were also a bit put out that the Fallen Knight, after his unprecedented arrival, was able to slip past both their security network and the

Prometheans to escape into the lower levels. The Knight had evaded capture, but the brotherhood of informers and spies that fueled the real business of Center – intrigue – tracked him to Level Eight. The Fallen Knight took up residence in a flophouse a few blocks from the Rat’s Nest, the headquarters of the Society of the Knife. Word had it that the Knight was killing time with booze and prostitutes until something better came along.

Leaving the site of the battle, Elias headed towards the nearest checkpoint down to Level Seven. He had been toying with the idea of finding the Fallen Knight all day, but the altercation with Boreas and the other Invincible Guard made him decide to finally do it. At best, he might find a new ally, and at worst he would be able to pound on the Fallen Knight for a bit and work out some aggression on a deserving target.

The trip down to the eighth level was largely uneventful. In a city as large and cosmopolitan as Center, even an Elf in Invincible Guard colors drew scant attention. Most people on the lower levels knew not to stare anyway; usually they were trying to avoid attention themselves. They went to the lower levels to procure drugs, prostitutes, and assassins, or for other less than legal activities. As crazy as the upper levels could get, where even a Splurgorth like Klynncryth could hold court, the lower levels tended to be worse. Much worse.

Level Eight was home to the Society of the Knife, the most powerful underworld organization on the planet. Below them, on the ninth and tenth levels, were the sewers and dungeons of Center, where the detritus of a million worlds squatted in their own filth and preyed upon one another. Death was easy to find down there, and life the cheapest commodity available. As bad as the TGE could be, and Elias was well acquainted with the evil and corruption of the Empire, there were parts of center that were far worse.

He navigated his way through the city streets, stepping over bodies and around mounds of trash, ignoring the squabbles that erupted around him unless a stray bolt of light came too close or a bully boy felt like giving Elias a hard time. He took care of each problem quickly and efficiently as it arose, and then continued on his way.

He found the flophouse easily enough, a sad and battered three story shack with a name in Trade Four emblazoned in red neon over the front door. There were advertisements for live shows, nude girls, and other less savory attractions. Elias curled a lip in distaste but stepped inside without hesitation. The interior was dimly lit, a small room with doors on the far side leading to the showroom, and stairs leading up to the private rooms. A young tough in battle armor leaned against a wall, spinning a blaster lazily in his hand. Women of various species lounged around trying to look enticing and failing miserably.

Elias made his way to the bouncer, who eyed him coldly. “I’m looking for the Knight,” Elias said. It was hard to believe that even a Fallen Knight of the Forge could end up in a place like this. Elias could smell at least seven types

of narcotic in the air, and other less identifiable odors. He decided not to stay longer than was absolutely necessary. For a moment he entertained the notion of tearing the building apart, but that would have gotten his hands dirty.

“What Knight?” the tough asked. The blaster was held loosely now, but in a position where it would be easy to blast Elias between the eyes. The kid was obviously looking for a payoff. Elias wasn’t in the mood.

He reached out and grabbed the pistol, but not quickly enough to keep the kid from pulling the trigger. A beam of light glanced off Elias’ forehead and the skullcap sizzled. Elias grimaced and crushed the pistol to powder. The bones in the boy’s hand crunched with a loud crack. “I’m not in the mood for games,” Elias growled.

“203,” the tough howled, tears appearing unbidden in each of his three eyes.

Elias released him and let him collapse to the floor, cradling his broken hand. Elias surveyed the rest of the room, saw no one was eager to make trouble, and then took to the stairs. The place was too cheap for an elevator.

There were strange stains on the hall of the second floor. A green skinned humanoid was passed out in the middle of the hall, and Elias couldn’t tell if it was alive or dead. It smelled dead, but that could have been its natural odor. One could never be sure on Center.

He found 203 easily enough and rapped on the door. There was no response. He struck the door harder this time, causing it to shudder and threaten to buckle. He was rewarded with the sound of movement from within. After a moment, the door eased open a crack, and a bleary, red rimmed eye peaked out at him. The eye widened in surprise, and then the door swung entirely open, revealing a pale skinned human in rumpled clothes, unwashed and reeking of alcohol. Several days’ growth of beard marred the strong chin, the blue eyes were bloodshot, and the black hair was pasty and sticking to the skull. If this was the Knight, he had been on quite a bender since arriving on Center.

“May I come in?” Elias asked.

The man nodded and stepped back from the door, sweeping an arm out as if to invite him inside. Elias took a cautious step within, and almost withdrew. The room was worse than the man. Bottles were strewn everywhere, most empty but a few half full. Many of them had been shattered, thrown against the walls, ceiling, or floor to spread glass and stains all over the room. The furniture once consisted of a dresser, night stand, and bed, but sometime recently it had all been shredded down to fragments. Sheets, chunks of mattress, and bits of clothing had been wadded together in the center of the room to make some sort of nest. Without windows or ventilation of any kind, the room reeked of stale alcohol, unwashed bodies, and urine. Elias’ boots stuck to the carpet as he stepped inside.

The man picked a bottle up off the floor and shut the door. He took a swig from the bottle and gestured for Elias to have a seat. "Oops," he said drunkenly, "no more seats."

This couldn't be the Knight. This was a broken shell of a man, who had ripped himself apart and now beckoned death with a freshly opened bottle. Even in defeat, a Cosmo-Knight remained an arrogant twit. Not a broken down loser.

"Are you the Fallen Knight?" Elias asked anyway, just to be sure.

The man nodded. He looked at the bottle in his hand and suddenly threw it across the room. It shattered against the wall, spilling alcohol and bits of glass onto an already cluttered floor. "Used to be somebody," he muttered. "Now I'm just nobody again."

Elias' eyes narrowed. "Prove it," he said.

The man's blue eyes met Elias' white ones, and Elias saw some spark still remained within him, buried deep. But it was there, for a moment, and then quickly subsumed by the booze and the pain. "What do you care?" he muttered, swaying.

"I'm here to help," Elias said. "But I won't help you unless you show me who you really are."

The drunken man eyed him dubiously for a moment, and then staggered over to his nest. He reached into the sheets and pulled out another bottle, this one fuller than the last. He looked at the bottle for a moment, and then turned to Elias. "You want to see what I really am?" Elias nodded. "This is what I really am," the man said, spreading his arms to encompass the room. "A failure. A deadbeat. A drunk."

This was a waste of time. Elias turned to go.

"Wait," the man said as Elias gripped the doorknob. "You look familiar. Where have I met you before?"

Elias shook his head. "I don't have time for this, and I don't find you the least bit amusing."

"Seriously," the man said. "You're that Elf. The one from the TGE..." The man trailed off, and Elias paused at the door. The man looked at the bottle in his hand once more, and then dropped it into the nest. He held his hand up and out, as if reaching for something. A beam of blue energy materialized between his fingers, solidifying into a metallic blue longsword. "It's all I have left," the man said. His voice was noticeably stronger now, and he seemed to straighten as Elias watched.

"I can get drunk now," the man continued. "But not for long; my body is still resistant to toxins and it cleans the crap out of my system faster than I can put it in." He looked up at Elias. "You are Elias Harkonnen, late of the Invincible Guard. I recognize you now that the haze is clearing."

“You do know me,” Elias realized. “How? Granted, I’m the only Elf to make it into the Guard, but few outside the TGE are aware of that, much less my name.” Would he have to kill this poor fool after all?

The man slashed the air with the sword, and then brought it to his side so he could lean on it as if it were a cane. “You and I share an enemy,” the man said. “One of my former allies, one of my former brothers.”

“Lothar,” Elias said bitterly.

“What? The Wulfen? No, not at all,” the man said. “Lothar may loom large now, but he will soon be eclipsed by a brighter star, an Earthling named Caleb Vulcan. Ten years from now, he will destroy both our lives.”

“Vulcan?” Elias said. “Never heard of him. What nonsense are you babbling about?”

“It isn’t nonsense, Elias. I admit it will be difficult to believe, and perhaps impossible to substantiate, but it isn’t nonsense. I’m from the future. I’ve traveled back in time to get my revenge on Caleb Vulcan, to the time when he was just a novice, untrained and unsure of himself.” The man shook himself. “I’ve been sitting in this flophouse for days waiting for you to show up.”

“From the future?” Elias smiled. The man was insane. “Right. Even Temporal Raiders can only speed up time’s flow, they can’t reverse it or travel backward.”

“There are beings in other dimensions who surpass even the Temporal Raiders when it comes to manipulating chronal flow. I stole an artifact from a few of them who call themselves Time Lords, and I was able to pass backward through time. It has been a long journey, and I wasn’t even sure if I had made it to where I needed to be until I recognized you.”

Elias was intrigued, despite himself. “How is that?” If the fool really did possess a time machine, then Elias could certainly find a use for it himself.

“You’ve only ever made two trips to Center,” the man explained. “And since you still have your left eye, I’m certain this is only the first one. I must be at about the right place in time.”

Left eye? “Is that right?” Elias said. “Well, you have done an excellent job then, because this is my first trip to Center. I don’t mean to press the issue, but do you happen to have any proof? Like the artifact itself, for example?”

“Of course,” the man said. He knelt down near his nest and rummaged through it for a few moments. At last he stood up and held out a primitive looking wrist chronometer. The lens was cracked, but Elias could see numbers ticking away. “It’s called the Cosmic Quartz Digital Watch. Not much to look at, but it gets the job done.” When Elias reached for it, the man yanked it back. “Oh, no you don’t. You look with your eyes, not with your hands.”

That was it. Elias had had enough. He stepped forward and kicked the sword out from under the man’s hand. He stumbled and fell, but Elias caught him by the wrist. As the man recovered and prepared to swing the sword at Elias, the former Guardsman pulled with all his strength and tore the man’s

arm out of its socket. Blood sprayed in a fountain, bathing Elias and splattering all over the drunken man. He screamed and somehow found the strength to slash at Elias with the sword; it couldn't cut his skin. Elias backhanded the man across the face, and he went sailing through the air to crash into the wall. The sword spilled from his fingers.

Elias held the arm out and opened the hand, spilling the Cosmic Quartz Digital Watch into his own palm. It didn't look like much, but if it truly was an artifact, Quajinn Huo would be able to tell. He put the chronometer in one of the pouches on his belt and then reached down to pick up the sword. It had a good balance and, he could tell with a glance, a keen edge.

The man – Fallen Knight indeed – was struggling to get to his feet, blood spraying from him in spurts that matched the beat of his heart. His eyes blazed with cold fire, as if he wanted to blast Elias with energy beams, but in falling from the favor of the Forge he had lost that ability. Elias calmly walked up to him and buried the sword in the man's neck.

When he was dead, Elias took the sword with him and left the room.

Elias headed back to the apartment he rented on Level Six, threw the sword and the stolen chronometer on the bed, and checked his messages on the wall monitor. The Monro information broker Squamato Kekkil Damathui, better known as Squiddy, had left a message fifteen minutes before. Elias queued up the playback and stood back to watch.

Squiddy's rotund, monocular face appeared in the screen. "Out and about, Elias? Well I hope you get in quick, because the boss man doesn't like to be kept waiting. There's a warehouse on the corner of Rosenberg and Finin on 4-B, in the name of Kralizec Industries, but it's owned by the man in the white tower. Be there by 0200 hours, or he'll find a new employee. Take care." The image fizzed out and the tape rewound itself.

Elias couldn't resist grinning like a jackal. Finally, an interview with Thraxus. He checked his own chronometer and noticed he had less than a half hour to reach the Kralizec warehouse on time. He checked himself in the mirror; most of the blood stains were cleaned off, at least, though a few remained here and there. He didn't have time to clean up. Elias cracked his knuckles and hurried out the door.

Level Four was equally divided between the Naruni and the United Worlds of Warlock. While the Naruni owned the section referred to as 4-A, the UWW maintained control of 4-B. On paper, it was a friendly and easygoing relationship, but the reality was vastly different. The technocrats in 4-A hated the mages of 4-B, and vice versa. The border between the two sections was heavily patrolled by both Repo-Bots and other Naruni enforcers, and the highly trained marines of the United Worlds of Warlock's stellar navy.

Conflagrations were unavoidable, and every few weeks a fight would erupt between the two. The Prometheans kept a close eye on everything, but only intervened if the safety of the city itself was in question.

Business as usual in Center.

Elias took the express up to Level Four, but was slowed by the authorities who insisted on picking through everyone's papers with a fine-toothed comb. As it was, Elias noticed several members of the Society of the Knife slip through, and of course Elias himself was allowed onto the floor. The Prometheans were difficult to understand, in Elias' estimation. They tried to protect the city, yet they didn't seem to care too much about the well-being of the city's inhabitants. They turned a blind eye to slavers like Klynncryth or the Kreeghor, ignored the stockpiling of munitions and illegal business dealings of the Naruni, and allowed virtual free reign to intergalactic criminals like Quajinn Huo or the Spiral. Yet if anyone attempted to usurp the Prometheans' control of the city, the Prometheans would mass in force and destroy any and all opposition. Murder a woman in cold blood on the tram, and the authorities didn't care. Knock down a wall without a permit and they swarmed like hornets on honey.

Prometheans made Elias edgy, because he couldn't figure them out. And if you couldn't figure someone out, you never knew what they might do in a given situation. That made them dangerous. So Elias tried to steer clear of them as much as possible, and when they proved particularly supercilious in their duties at the checkpoints, he played along. The fact that their phase powers rendered his invulnerability a moot point helped keep him docile as well. He hated feeling impotent, and hated the Prometheans for making him feel that way, but he couldn't do anything about it. Yet.

By the time he worked through the checkpoint, he had ten minutes left to find the warehouse. With so much riding on the meeting, he decided to quit playing it safe and took to the air to canvas the level, searching for the right streets. He found Rosenberg, and almost followed it too long in the wrong direction. By the time he realized it and doubled back, he was skirting the deadline very close. He found the corner where it met Finin with seconds to spare, and dropped to the ground to burst into the warehouse itself just as his chronometer turned over to 0200.

He hoped it wasn't slow.

The interior of the warehouse was huge and dark and apparently empty, save for a pool of light near the center of the main room, lit by a hovering glow globe. Elias' hackles rose, but he ignored his feelings of unease and sauntered toward the circle of light. As he approached, a hologram flickered to life beneath the glow globe.

It showed a human male with a slight build, fair skin and dark hair slicked back tight against his skull. His eyes were shadowed, but his mouth formed into a generous smile. He was dressed in a tunic of deep violet edged in gold

with a matching cloak and boots. He stood easy and relaxed, holding a mug of something that sent plumes of steam wafting into the holographic air. He didn't look like the richest man in the Three Galaxies, but then Elias Harkonnen didn't look like the most dangerous man in the Three Galaxies, either.

"Thraxus," he said, stepping into the circle of light. It wasn't a question.

The hologram inclined its head. "I apologize for not meeting you in person, Mister Harkonnen, but I am in the midst of preparing a party for the evening and I simply could not get away."

Elias shrugged. Thraxus didn't sound like the most ruthless businessman in the Three Galaxies either; he sounded more like some fop with money to burn. "This is fine with me," Elias told him. "As I understand it, you've got a job that needs doing."

"And you're just the man to do it, are you?" Thraxus asked. He sipped from his beverage as Elias wordlessly nodded. "I must admit you come highly recommended," Thraxus continued. "And my own investigations into your background have led me to believe you know what you're doing when it comes to mayhem. Perhaps I could use you. But I never hire anyone without a proper interview." He paused, and then reached out with his holographic hand to do something that the projector didn't pick up.

Elias heard servos whine somewhere within the warehouse, and the rumble of a very large door opening. Elias folded his hands together and cracked his knuckles. "What kind of an interview?" he asked.

The hologram shrugged. "The usual. A monster loose in the warehouse, attracted to this light, coming to kill you. Escape is impossible, blah, blah, blah. If you are who you purport to be, then you should have no trouble at all." Thraxus spoke in a mild, almost bored tone.

Elias could hear the lumbering tread of something large and heavy moving in the darkness. A biped from the sound of it, but with the glow globe so bright Elias' Elven nightvision was ruined. He couldn't see the creature yet. But given what part of Center he was in, he could guess that he wouldn't like it, no matter what it might turn out to be.

"Please don't let it be a dragon," Elias whispered to himself. He shifted into a battle stance, preparing himself for defense or attack as the thing approached.

Despite himself, he could not stifle an involuntary gasp as the creature stepped into the light. It was humanoid and huge, nearly twice Elias' height, and apparently skinless, leaving its massive muscles raw and red looking, and that much more frightening. Its most prominent features were a pair of gnarled and scarred horns thrusting out from each side of its head with a combined span of nearly twelve feet. Smaller growths budded off from the principal horns like thorns, and smaller horns erupted from the creature's skull in place of hair. Four tiny, pig-like eyes looked out over a gaping maw ringed with teeth, that dripped with saliva and some pinkish froth. A pair of

tentacles burst out from where the ears might have been, each with its own red eye and toothy grin. The huge hands were balled into horny fists.

“It’s called a Thornhead,” the holographic Thraxus explained in the same mild tone. “Not very bright and easily irritated. It feeds on psychic energy primarily, but needs to digest solid food along with it.”

“KILL YOU,” the Thornhead roared. “EAT YOU!”

“See what I mean?” Thraxus said.

Elias ignored them both, and launched himself forward, blasting into the creature at several hundred kilometers per hour. It lurched backward, staggered by the blow, but the tentacles seemed to have minds of their own and they snapped at Elias. One bit air, but the other one latched on to the shoulder pad of his armor. The creature’s piggy eyes narrowed and the huge hands came up to grab Elias.

He blasted away and out of the thing’s reach, but his shoulder pad was ripped free by the tentacle’s mouth. It spat the metal on to the floor with a clang, and a moment later two bursts of green and blue fire erupted from the creature’s palms. Elias dodged easily in midair and then slammed into the Thornhead again, this time aiming for the waist in an effort to tackle it to the ground. Massive as the monster was, it could not resist Elias’ superior strength, and it crashed to the floor with a howl.

Elias landed lightly on his feet near the creature’s head. As it rolled over to get up, he grabbed one of the thorny horns and braced himself against its shoulder. With a tug, the horn cracked and broke free. Elias’ own momentum pulled him to the ground, but he bounced back to his feet as the Thornhead found its own footing. It was wildly unbalanced now with only one six foot horn sticking out of its head, the other a shattered stump. The weight of the single horn dragged the creature to the left, and it tried to right itself without much luck. The two tentacles spit and hissed at Elias.

Elias held the horn like a club and slammed it into the Thornhead’s side with a meaty thunk. It howled again and tried to blast him once more with a fireball. Elias let the magical attack slam into him and wash over him, scarring his armor but hardly fazing his invulnerable hide. He struck the Thornhead again, and when it stumbled to one knee, he started swinging at the head. Again and again and again.

Elias recovered himself slowly. He looked at the horn in his hand, caked with blood and brain matter, and then at the headless carcass at his feet. He threw the horn to the ground with a clatter, and turned to the hologram. “Did I pass muster?” he asked.

The hologram nodded. “You’re not even breathing heavy, are you?”

Elias shrugged. “Not much of a workout. What’s the job?”

During the melee, Thraxus had put down his cup and now folded his hands before him. “A simple matter for one with your talents, I assure you,” Thraxus said. “You are familiar with the CCW world Dellian-4?”

Elias nodded. Dellian-4 was the home of the T'Zee, a race of short humanoids with few manners and a great deal of aggression. They were quick breeders, though, and had overpopulated their world, destroying its ecosystem and covering even the ocean floors with huge cities to house their ever growing population. Civil rights abuses were a matter of course on Dellian-4; with so many people, the worth of a single life was startlingly cheap. Despite that, the Consortium of Civilized Worlds turned a blind eye, because the T'Zee were geniuses of nanotechnology. Though the CCW tried to project an image of harmony and equality, Elias knew they were as corrupt as all the rest. Dellian-4 proved it.

“The T'Zee have no agriculture to speak of, having replaced the fields with city streets ages ago. For food they rely primarily upon outside help and the seven distribution centers scattered around the world. Every day, each distribution center manufactures several million tons of a nutritious paste called ‘burl,’ packages it, and sends it out to the stores. The wealthy elite and military are able to eat real food brought from off world, which they keep well away from the common folk.”

Elias nodded. He had a feeling he knew where this was going.

“Each distribution center is the size of a small city in and of itself. Each one is powered by a fusion reactor. Security is tight, but not very observant. A fellow like you shouldn't have too much trouble blowing each of them up, one by one.”

As Elias suspected. “It will be difficult, yes, but not impossible. With the amount of risk involved and the preparations to be made for such and undertaking, I'm going to need a great deal of money.”

Thraxus shrugged. “What is money? I'll offer you five hundred million to start, and if you do well, I may throw in a bonus, as well as offer more work.”

Five hundred million credits? He could buy a whole frigate with that much money. He could replace the Raptor and the asteroid base and still have enough left over for a small moon.

“I'm in.”

Chapter Eight

Pyramid Scheme

Atlantis is dead.

Or so Clan Acherean will tell you, from their home on Alexandria. Alexandria is a rough and tumble world in the outer rim of the United Worlds of Warlock, a place where Rift storms still occasionally rumble through the countryside despite the many pyramids the Achereans have built to control the magical energies of the world. Clan Acherean brought civilization to Alexandria, but they didn't bring Atlantis back to life.

Atlantis was a mistake, they still contend, and its destruction a sign of their own hubris and arrogance. They do not wish to recreate those days, and so they allow the wizards of the United Worlds of Warlock to administer the daily operations that keep an advanced world running smoothly. The Atlanteans of Clan Acherean help out by monitoring the pyramids and keeping a watch on Rift activity, but they prefer to stay out of politics. In this respect they resemble the rest of the Atlantean race, scattered about the Megaverse and avoiding much in the way of responsibility, but Clan Acherean is unique in that most of the clan resides on a single world, in the same dimension, living together.

In a way, they have rebuilt Atlantis. But they're doing it differently this time; trying to avoid the sins that destroyed their previous civilization.

*– Excerpt from the unaired trideo documentary,
Alexandria: Gem of the UWW, Unicorn Entertainment Group*

Every muscle in his body hurt. His bones hurt. Everything from toes to hair was in agony, but Caleb Vulcan, newly knighted servant of the Cosmic Forge, couldn't give up yet. He had survived an agonizing battle with an ancient killing machine and the death of a star, and by rights it should have been naptime, but his mentor and ally Lothar of Motherhome was missing. The shockwave that accompanied the supernova had sent Caleb and the Zodoran energy leech in the same direction, but Lothar had disappeared, swallowed up by the nebula that formed with the star's death.

Where could he be? Caleb wondered. He wasn't exactly sure where he was, and could hardly begin to guess what had happened to Lothar. As a Cosmo-Knight, Caleb possessed a kind of sixth sense, a cosmic awareness, that was supposed to give him a mental map of the universe and where he was within it. But either the supernova had knocked something loose in Caleb's head or the nebula was ruining the reception, because Caleb was just plain lost.

The strange swirling gases and lights of the nebula were not familiar, and he couldn't get his bearings. *There should have been a planet or something*

here, right? Caleb asked himself, craning his neck and staring at a pocket of ionizing gas. *Now its just helium or something.*

This sucks.

And then, suddenly, a circle of darkness appeared before him, a small patch the size of a record album that expanded quickly. Caleb lurched backward, unsure what to do, and the darkness followed. In moments it had grown as wide as Caleb was tall, and it overtook him. He screamed incoherently as the darkness enveloped his crimson form...

... and then he crashed to the floor, flailing his limbs. "Ah, excellent," Dr. Abbot said from above, his British accent more maddening than usual. "I was afraid I wouldn't be able to find you. There is still a great deal of 'cosmic static' left over from the nova."

Caleb levered himself to his feet and realized he was back on the bridge of Lothar's borrowed freighter. Dr. Abbot stood a few feet away, his shadowy form indistinct beneath his battered trenchcoat and hat, except for his eyes which glowed an eerie orange. Lothar himself was reclining in the captain's chair. Caleb was relieved to see the Wulfen Cosmo-Knight alive, and that his armor was just as battered and worn as Caleb's own. "What just happened?" he asked.

"I warped space and time to recall you to the ship," Dr. Abbot explained. "I found Lothar first purely by chance. Is the Zodoran machine destroyed?"

Caleb nodded as if space warps were nothing new and dispelled his armor with a crimson flash. "Yeah, I wrecked it. But it was a pretty close thing. I was lucky to end up in its vicinity when the explosion subsided. I'd hate to think of what would have happened if we'd lost it in that goop."

Lothar nodded wearily. "A grave miscalculation on my part," he admitted with a growl. "It's been a long time since I last rode a supernova. But I'm glad you finished the job, pu— Caleb." Caleb couldn't help the smile that split his face at the sound of Lothar using his given name rather than the derogatory "pup."

Abbot didn't miss it either. "You do care, don't you, you old softy you," he said, patting Lothar's emerald plated shoulder with a shadowy hand.

Lothar brushed him away with a snarl. "Don't start, Abbot." He turned to Caleb. "How are you feeling?"

Caleb grabbed the back of the co-pilot's seat and spun it around so he could sit down. "Like I just went fifteen rounds with Muhammad Ali. But you know, it isn't so bad. We saved some lives today." He ran a hand through his short red hair, feeling crusts of dried blood; the Zodoran machine had been able to generate pulses of negative energy that cut through even a Cosmo-Knight's formidable defenses. Caleb was suddenly reminded of how close to death he had come out there. "Then again..."

“This was a rough task for your first real test as a Knight,” Lothar said. “And you did well. I’m beginning to think the Forge knew what she was doing when she made you one of us.”

“Thanks,” Caleb said. “I think.”

“Captain Orestes hailed us while I was looking for you,” Abbot interrupted. “He is heading back to Xerxes for repairs, and to buy you two those drinks he promised.”

Lothar yawned suddenly, revealing sharp teeth. “I’ll send a message to the Gabriel and thank him, but we have other business to attend to.”

“What?” Caleb asked, incredulous. “I need a shower, sure, but I can do that on the way to the station. We just saved the universe, Lothar. It’s time to kick back and have a few beers and celebrate the fact that we’re still alive. Besides, I still need to be deputized.”

Lothar leaned back in his chair. “That can wait a little longer, I think. As for celebrating, we don’t indulge in that sort of thing. Our job is to defend the Three Galaxies from all threats; doing our job well doesn’t entitle us to wasting time with frivolous antics.”

“You are so repressed, you know that?” Caleb said. “You sound like my father.”

“Then your father was a wise man,” Lothar answered. “Listen, Abbot helped us, and now we have to help him.” He turned to the tall, shadowy figure. “You did say something about a ‘spot of trouble,’ didn’t you?”

“I did,” Abbot admitted. “I’m surprised you remembered in all the excitement. It isn’t too terribly pressing, though. I’m sure we can stop at Xerxes and get young Caleb a badge and a beverage.”

Caleb’s face reddened despite himself. “I’m sorry, man. I forgot.”

“Quite all right, I assure you,” Abbot told him. “There are extenuating circumstances.”

“Why don’t you explain what the trouble is, and then I’ll decide where we go next?” Lothar growled. “And try to keep it to as few words as possible for a change.”

“Perfectly reasonable solution,” Abbot agreed. “It isn’t really me who is in trouble, I must admit. It’s Kassy. She’s been kidnaped by an obnoxious fellow by the name of Paj Pandershon.”

Lothar groaned and put a hand on his forehead. “I shouldn’t be getting a headache, but there it is,” he grumbled.

“Who’s Kassy?” Caleb asked. “And Paj?”

Abbot’s shadowy face softened in what Caleb was beginning to recognize as his version of a smile. “Kassiopaeia Acherean is one of our friends.”

“One of your friends,” Lothar growled.

“Our,” Abbot corrected him. “She has helped us both in the past on numerous occasions, and though she is a bit of a free spirit – “

”A trouble magnet.”

“ – she is also one of the most kind and generous people I’ve met in the entire Megaverse.” Abbot shot Lothar a withering glare, continuing, “Mine is certainly not a minority opinion, although Lothar’s is, and Kassy has had her share of admirers over the years. One of them is Paj Pandershon, a Delakite warlord of some renown. A week ago Kassy disappeared from her home on Alexandria, and I’ve traced her to Pandershon’s fortress on the planet Korobas.”

“So you need our help busting this Kassy out of the bad guy’s palace?” Caleb said. “Doesn’t seem so bad, after going toe to toe with an ancient engine of destruction.”

“I’m glad you feel that way,” Abbot said, smiling again. “What do you think, Lothar?”

Lothar scraped his claws across his helmet, attacking an imaginary itch. “I’ll set the navigation controls to Korobas. You start talking about Pandershon’s defenses.”

“I knew you wouldn’t let us down,” Abbot beamed.

It turned out that Korobas was only a hop, skip, and a jump away, relatively speaking. It still required an eight hour flight, but there was no need to push the ship as hard as they had to reach Teneb-742. Lothar sent a quick hyper-link message to Captain Orestes, while Caleb hunted down the crew quarters and found himself a shower. He was dismayed to learn that the showers weren’t normal; they pumped out high-frequency sound that worked as well as water and soap, but didn’t provide the comfort of a nice hot shower.

Feeling cleaner helped, though, and Caleb’s energies were quickly replenishing. There was a bright glowing furnace within Caleb, and given time it healed his every ache and pain. By the time he was finished cleaning up, he felt rested and healthier, as if he had slept for hours. He knew, too, that when he next summoned his armor, it would be unblemished and in perfect condition. He shook his head. The gifts of the Forge were indeed impressive, but they demanded an exacting toll. He hadn’t yet been in Lothar’s company for more than forty-eight hours, and in all that time this was his first real chance to rest. Even so, they were still heading into another adventure at breakneck speed.

He pulled on his silver shirt and slid the red grav boots onto his feet and headed for the bridge. He was going to have to find more clothing if he was going to keep bleeding on these ones; he had thrown them into the sonic shower to clean them, and they came out dry and spotless, but he would have preferred it if he could have just changed into something new. He sniffed the shirt; smelled clean. But it didn’t have that fresh from the dryer warmth.

Space was certainly beyond cool, well into awesome territory, but it did have its drawbacks.

Abbot and Lothar were chatting amicably on the bridge, or at least as amicably as the two of them got. Abbot was talking, sipping at tea though he had no visible mouth, and Lothar was keeping his head down and trying to ignore the doctor. Abbot looked up as Caleb appeared and offered him a smile. "Can I get you some tea?"

"Uh, yeah." Caleb didn't usually drink tea, and he no longer needed to eat or drink anything at all, but he would have felt rude refusing. Abbot produced a thermos and a mug and poured Caleb a steaming cup of the brew. Caleb accepted it with a smile, and then sniffed it gently. It had a curious aroma, almost flowery, with a hint of cinnamon. He took a tentative sip, wary of the liquid's heat. "Mmmm," he offered. "This is good. What is it?"

"My own brew. I'm glad you like it," Abbot said. "I wish we had some scones or biscuits, but this ship is appallingly understocked."

Lothar sighed. "I didn't expect company when I borrowed it."

"Of course not," Abbot quickly agreed, but his tone suggested that he would have done otherwise in Lothar's position. "So Caleb, I was telling Lothar what we can expect when we arrive on Korobas. It's a small world, mostly water, with only a few landmasses scattered like islands along its equator. They aren't connected to the floor of the world ocean, however, so they float along on the currents, carried hither and yon by the sea."

"That's kind of strange," Caleb muttered. While Abbot had talked, he had recalled that no tea, however hot, could scald his tongue anymore, and gulped down all of it. The initial sip had not prepared him for the bizarre aftertaste, though, and his remark was as much about that as the conditions on Korobas. "How will we find this Paj guy, then?" He stuck his tongue out and scraped his teeth along it, as if that could somehow get rid of the taste.

"Easy," Lothar said. "He'll be on the big island with the black fortress and all the guns." He glanced back at Caleb. "That's a sipping tea, pup. Not wise to swallow it all at once; your mouth will taste like genku posterior for days now."

"Genku posterior?"

"Ignore him, Caleb," Abbot said. "More tea?" He offered Caleb the thermos, but Caleb declined, setting his mug down on a nearby console. "Lothar is essentially correct, though it may not be that easy. Paj should be expecting some sort of rescue, however. As soon as we arrive in system, we may receive a welcoming party."

"You don't seem very concerned that Paj may harm this Kassy," Caleb pointed out. Why did he have to accept the tea? He pursed his lips and pressed his tongue against the roof of his mouth, but that only made it worse.

"No," Abbot admitted. "I am fairly certain that Paj is more interested in winning Kassy over than hurting her. I'm also fairly certain that Paj couldn't hurt her if he tried; the only way he could have captured her in the first place is through subterfuge."

Caleb shrugged. Lothar and Abbot knew what they were doing. “Is there anything else to eat or drink around here?”

Lothar uttered a sharp bark. “Abbot can show you where the galley is. You won’t find much besides basic amenities, but if you eat enough nutri-wafers they might kill the taste. I’d suggest the strawberry flavored wafers.”

Caleb eventually did find the wafers, and he had to eat about a dozen of the things before the “genku posterior” taste began to dull. The wafers were surprisingly large, about the size of the pancakes his mother made for him when Caleb was a boy. It seemed that even though Caleb didn’t require food to function, he could metabolize it quickly enough when he did eat. He brought a few of the wafers to the bridge and Lothar ate some, though Abbot declined. Caleb asked Lothar more questions about the phase drive and contra-gravitonic drive and how the ship worked; the Wulfen proved as close-mouthed as usual, but Abbot answered as best he could. Caleb was strangely reassured to learn there were topics the enigmatic Abbot knew very little about.

When Caleb attempted to learn something of Abbot’s origins, the doctor deftly deflected each question, and offered instead to lecture some more about ancient galactic cultures. So Caleb got to learn about the ruins of Monro-Tet, lost Atlantis, the Burschian Dominion, and the Ghostworld before Lothar alerted them that they were arriving in the Korobas system.

It was the first thing Lothar had said in hours. “You weren’t meditating that entire time, were you?” Caleb asked.

Lothar shrugged noncommittally. “I’ve heard it all before. Disengaging the phase drive.” His hands flew over the controls, and the ship returned to regular space. Outside the viewport Caleb could now see the stars and the blackness of space. Lothar turned the ship to the right, and a planetoid came into view, a small blue world that lacked satellites of any kind. It slowly grew in the viewport as the ship advanced.

“Korobas,” Lothar said, explaining the obvious. “Any sign of that welcoming party, Abbot?” he asked.

The doctor checked his own instruments and shook his head. “Nothing yet.”

Lothar grunted in mild surprise. “We should be appearing on their scopes.”

“Maybe they have something special planned,” Caleb suggested.

“Perhaps,” Abbot said. “But they could hardly expect us.”

“Maybe not us specifically, but they did kidnap somebody. They’ve got to be expecting some sort of retaliation.”

Lothar arched a metallic eyebrow. “You could be right Caleb. Raise shields and power up the laser batteries.” Abbot complied, his orange eyes narrowed with concern.

“Anything I can do?” Caleb asked, but Lothar shook his head.

“Just sit tight,” he said. The ship suddenly lurched as Lothar increased speed, and in a moment they were blasting through the atmosphere or Koro-

bas. Fire flickered across their bow, and red lights erupted all across Abbot's console.

"Is it wise to go in at this speed?" Abbot said archly. Lothar simply grunted, and a moment later they were clear of the ionosphere and blasting through Korobas sky. Clouds sizzled as the ship flew through them, still burning hot from re-entry. They were on the planet's day side, and it appeared to be a rather pleasant day. There were clouds, but not too many, the sun shone brightly, and beneath them all they could see was water.

"The whole planet is like this?" Caleb said. "Must get pretty boring."

"Most of the sights are beneath the waves," Abbot explained. "Korobas has an active tectonic system, and the undersea mountains are truly breathtaking, particularly the volcanic ranges. Most of the native creatures live down there as well; none of them sentient, but quite a few of them very beautiful to look at." He smiled. "And dangerous."

"You certainly get around a lot," Caleb grumbled. "Or did you just memorize the encyclopedia?" Abbot just smiled.

"Coming up on the ring of islands," Lothar reported. "If I'm not disturbing you. What have you got on the sensors?"

Abbot glanced at his board. "The third island, due west, has massive technological readings. That should be Paj's hideout." Lothar nodded and nudged the ship towards the island. They found it easily; not only was it the largest island in this part of the world ocean, but it was the only one with a huge black fortress growing out of it. Even through the viewport the castle looked foreboding and deadly, with several gunports prominently displayed. Lothar circled the island a few times, but received neither hails nor gunfire.

"This is damn peculiar," Abbot said. Caleb silently agreed.

Lothar looked at them both. "I suppose we should go down there." He hit a few keys, and then stood up. "The ship will hang here until we get back. Shall we fly down, or would you like to magic us down there, Abbot?"

"I'd be delighted to help," Abbot said. He stood up and grabbed his cane from where it leaned against the chair. "Caleb?" Caleb stood as well, unsure of himself, and then Abbot's eyes flashed, and the ship around them shifted, reforming into a tropical paradise. One moment the three of them were on the bridge, and the next moment they stood on the island, green grass beneath their feet. Caleb looked around wildly, and despite himself clutched his stomach. Teleportation was disorienting to say the least.

"I shouldn't have eaten all those strawberry wafers," he muttered.

"Everything okay, Caleb?" Abbot asked, leaning on his cane. In the bright sunlight his shadowy form looked even more insubstantial, and Caleb thought he could actually see through Abbot. It was more unnerving than the teleportation effect.

To distract himself Caleb looked around. They stood on a grassy knoll, a hump of rock and vegetation that sloped downward to the beach on their

right, and towards the looming fortress to their left. Palm trees grew nearby, their fronds swaying gently in the breeze. There were flowers everywhere. The air smelled strongly of salt and sea, and the roar of the ocean filled Caleb's ears. If not for the blocky black fortress in the background, it looked to Caleb like a postcard of Hawaii.

"This doesn't look much like a bad guy's hideout," he complained.

"You should suit up, pup," Lothar suggested.

"I will when somebody starts shooting," Caleb told him. "In the meantime, I'll enjoy the fresh air and sunlight." Lothar glared, but said nothing. Caleb ignored him. "What do we do next?"

"We knock on the door," Lothar decided. He led the way down the hill towards the fortress, Caleb and Abbot in tow.

The front section of the fortress did indeed have an entrance, but it was blocked by a pair of massive blast doors. Lothar surmised that they provided access to the hangar; not large enough to house a starship, but possibly a few fighters.

"I'm beginning to think no one is home," Lothar grumbled. "Caleb and I could burn through the doors, but it would take time. Do you want to field this one, Abbot?"

The doctor nodded and stepped forward. He hooked his cane in his elbow and then held both hands outward. His eyes glowed brightly for a moment, and then a sphere of orange light appeared between his palms. He pushed gently, and the sphere sailed through the air towards the blast doors, spinning lazily and flashing brightly. It connected with a burst of light and a thunderous boom that blew the doors inward, and rattled the entire fortress.

"What the hell was that?" Caleb asked when his ears stopped ringing.

"Sphere of Annihilation," Abbot explained. "They should know we're here now."

Lothar summoned his ax and led the way forward, across the threshold littered with fragments of the blast door. The chamber beyond did indeed house a half dozen starfighters, five wedge-shaped fighters that Lothar identified as Katana-Class, and a larger, more ominous looking tri-partite fighter called a Fire-Eater. The ships appeared to be in good repair, fueled and ready to go, but there weren't any pirates to fly them.

At the other end of the chamber were three elevators. "We might as well split up," Lothar said. "This place is obviously empty. But we may find some clues, maybe Kassy herself." Abbot looked doubtful, but acquiesced.

"Hey," Caleb interjected. "How will I recognize Kassy if I see her?"

"Well," Abbot said, "she's fairly attractive for her species. And she has tattoos up and down both arms." He keyed the first elevator, and as he waited for it to arrive, he said, "But I'm beginning to agree with Lothar. I don't think Paj and Kassy are here."

“Abbot, you check the lower levels,” Lothar ordered. “Caleb, you start at the top and work your way down. I’ll take the next level up and keep going; we’ll meet in the middle.” The elevator doors opened, and as Abbot stepped into one and Lothar into another, Lothar added, “Keep your eyes open and senses sharp.”

Then the door closed and Caleb was on his own. Again. He stepped into the remaining elevator and hit the button for the top floor. The legend was in some alien language he couldn’t read, but the placement of the buttons was simple enough. As the elevator ascended, he contemplated summoning his armor, but decided not to bother. If the place really was empty, there was nothing to worry about. And if there was an ambush waiting for him, he might surprise them by not tipping of the fact that he was a Knight.

The elevator groaned to a halt, and the door slid open with an Earth-like “ding.” Caleb stepped out into a narrow hallway that branched off to the left and right. Across the way another corridor led to a pair of arching double doors. Tapestries and other items were hung on the walls, creating a somewhat homier atmosphere than blank, black walls would have.

The double doors looked promising, so Caleb headed for them. As he approached, he noticed one of them was slightly ajar, and as he drew closer still, he heard noises from the other side. Caleb broke into a quick jog and threw open the door.

The room on the other side was some sort of throne room, with a huge black steel chair in the center, decorated with a red cushion and cover. Consoles were built into the walls, with computer screens that showed various levels of the fortress as well as the outside, including a dozen that were tracking Lothar’s ship. There were blast burns in the walls, and several consoles were smoking and sparking. Four humanoids were laid out on the ground, apparently unconscious or worse, while in the center of the room a blue and white tiger contended with a green skinned man, and a woman in a blue dress waved a sword with violet flames at another green skinned man who was similarly armed.

“What the hell is going on?” Caleb shouted, unable to contain the outburst.

The green fellow with the sword spared a glance in his direction, and the woman in blue took advantage of the moment to disarm him with a practiced gesture. As his sword flew through the air and clattered to the ground, she pressed the tip of her flaming blade against his throat.

“Surrender,” she ordered, and the man complied, dropping to his knees. The other man, cornered by the tiger, raised his hands in defeat as well.

Caleb walked towards the woman, keeping one eye on the weirdly colored tiger. She was tall, about Caleb’s own height, with long black hair and piercing blue eyes. Her brow was furrowed in suspicion, and her full lips were pulled into a frown that deepened as Caleb approached. She was very pale, in sharp contrast to the bright blue of her dress. The dress itself looked like a

bridesmaid's outfit, with too much frills and lace and of such a sickening blue that it hurt Caleb's eyes to look at it. One of the sleeves was torn, revealing a pale, bare arm that was covered from wrist to shoulder in whirling designs, all blues and white. When Abbot mentioned tattoos, Caleb had instinctively pictured the crude pictures of a biker or carny; the images on the woman's arm were abstract and artfully designed, each image melding into the next to create a whirling pattern that drew the viewer in. Each design was done in differing shades of blue and highlighted with white, creating a distinctive image that still melted into the others. Whoever had drawn these, they had not done them with ink.

"Kassiopaea Acherean, I presume," Caleb said. Abbot had been right; she was beautiful. And the tattoos actually enhanced her beauty rather than detracting from it.

She nodded, still suspicious. "And who are you?"

"I'm Caleb Vulcan." He tried to smile engagingly. "I'm here to rescue you."

Kassy widened her eyes in surprise. "That's sweet, but I think I have things under control."

"Obviously," Caleb agreed. She was even prettier than Joanna Freeman. *Oh man, please don't let me say something stupid.* "Nice dress."

"What?"

"I mean, Doctor Abbot and Lothar are downstairs," Caleb said quickly. "That's our ship on the viewscreen."

"Abbot and Lothar are here?" Kassy said. "Why didn't you say that in the first place?" The sword in her hands disappeared in a cerulean flash. "Stay there," she told the kneeling green man, and then raised her skirts to run over to a console that had a speaker. She flipped a switch and then said, "Hey guys, come on upstairs. You missed the party." Then she turned back to Caleb. "Who are you again?"

"Uh, Caleb Vulcan. I'm Lothar's apprentice."

"You're a Cosmo-Knight? Excellent. You can keep an eye on these guys while I go find something decent to wear."

"That's not your dress?"

"Are you kidding?" she said with a grimace. She gestured at the kneeling man. "It's Paj's idea of a bridal gown. Normally I wouldn't be caught dead in something so tacky. The tricky thing was, he had the dress specially made so that I couldn't access my tats through the fabric. Took me longer than I thought to figure out how to rip through it too; it isn't ordinary fabric. After that, the rest was easy." She smiled then, and Caleb's heart skipped a beat.

"Anyway, why don't you wait for Abbot and Lothar. I'll be right back." The tiger suddenly disappeared with a burst of blue light, and then Kassy headed towards the double doors.

“Um, okay,” he said. Caleb watched her go, and then turned to Paj and his adjutant and tried to look menacing. Either it worked, or Kassy had already cowed them sufficiently. So Caleb sat down in the throne and waited for everybody else to arrive.

It wasn't long before Lothar and Abbot appeared in the doorway. They surveyed the scene with a glance, and Abbot remarked, “I thought I heard Kassiopeia's voice over the loudspeaker.”

“You did,” Caleb agreed. “She just went to make herself presentable.”

“This is good work, Caleb,” Lothar pointed out. “You seem to have terrified these pirates.”

“Wasn't me,” Caleb corrected him. “Kassy was finishing up when I arrived. I think you guys made the same mistake Paj did; you underestimated her. Big time.”

Abbot's smile was easy to see in the dim light of the throne room. “Well put.”

Then Kassiopeia herself swept into the room, clad in a sleeveless jumpsuit and heavy boots, both marked with what appeared to be Greek lettering. Her hair was tied back into a ponytail, and for the first time Caleb noticed that the tattoos reached all the way up to her jawline. “Abbot and Lothar,” she exclaimed, grabbing the doctor and embracing him. “I'm so glad the two of you could make it. I have to admit, I was afraid no one would notice I went missing, so I effected my own escape.”

“An excellent job, Kassy,” Abbot said, returning her hug. “I expected as much, but I feared Paj found some way to block your tattoo magic.” Lothar just grunted a hello.

Caleb edged towards his mentor. “Magic?” he asked.

Lothar looked askance at him. “Atlantean tattoo magic, inherited from the Chiang-Ku dragons. They inscribe images on flesh that can be brought to life.”

“That explains the sword and the tiger. Pretty cool stuff.”

“Useful in its own way, I suppose. Kassy is an Undead Slayer, so she has more tattoos at her disposal than most Atlanteans do.”

“Undead Slayer?” Caleb repeated. “What, like vampires and ghosts and stuff?”

“Exactly,” Lothar told him, flashing some teeth.

“What are you two chattering about?” Abbot asked, interrupting.

“Nothing,” Caleb told him.

Lothar grunted again. He took a look at Paj and the other five pirates. “We'll have to bring them back to Xerxes with us, and leave them with the authorities. There should be enough room in one of the cabins for them all. They are still alive, aren't they Kassy?”

“Mostly,” she agreed. “They aren’t very good at hand to hand, and they have very soft heads. I hope they’re better pilots, otherwise they haven’t a hope in the Megaverse.”

“Will you be accompanying us to the station, my dear?” Abbot asked.

Kassy thought for a moment. “Well, my initial plan was to beat these guys up and then take that Naruni fighter back to Alexandria, but I think joining you three will be a lot more fun.”

“Hardly,” Lothar said quickly. “There will be paperwork to fill out, and then Caleb needs training. You might as well go home.”

Kassy laughed. “Now I know I should stick around, if Lothar is trying to talk me out of something. What are you guys up to?”

“We’re going after some Invincible Guard guy,” Caleb spoke up. Lothar shot him a glare that could have flayed flesh from bone, but Caleb ignored him.

“Yes,” Abbot agreed. “A deadly chap by the name of Elias Harkonnen.”

“Harkonnen? Why does that name sound familiar?” Kassy asked. “It shouldn’t; the Megaverse is far too big to waste time memorizing the names of TGE soldiers, and yet...”

“He’s an Elf,” Abbot told her.

Lothar harrumphed, but Kassy’s eyes suddenly widened. “Right, the only Elf who graduated into the ranks of the Invincible Guard. I have heard his name before. He’s at the heart of quite a few horror stories.”

“Maybe you can tell them to us on the way,” Caleb said, elbowing Lothar in the ribs.

The big Wulfen Knight growled at Caleb, but told Kassy, “All right. You can come. Just don’t do anything stupid.”

Kassy’s eyes twinkled. “Like teasing a dragon?”

“That wasn’t my fault,” Lothar growled. “In point of fact, it was you who put me in that awkward position.”

“Whoah,” Caleb interrupted. “I want to hear this from the beginning.”

Kassy smiled. “I think this is going to be a long trip for old Lothar here, then.”

“The sooner we’re done, the better then,” Lothar growled. “Let’s get going.”

Loading the prisoners on the ship proved to be easier than Caleb would have expected, but the presence of two Cosmo-Knights, in addition to the Undead Slayer who bested them and a mysterious figure of unknown ability, kept the Delakites on their best behavior. In no time at all, they were on their way to Xerxes station, and Kassy was regaling them with the story of Lothar’s encounter with a very horny Horned Dragon.

Chapter Nine

Ruminations

There are still planets in the United Worlds of Warlock that celebrate Defender's Day every standard year, including a full quarter of the Draconid Hub. The festivities are as varied as the cultures that celebrate them, from the parades and fireworks of the Hub Worlds, to the Bardic Regalia of Legolas, to the bloody arenas of Ogretopia. The one thing they all have in common is a cessation of all hostilities among the celebrants, no matter how grave or petty they might be, so that all sentient beings can engage in a thanksgiving for their present liberty.

Today, these celebrations have a festive, light-hearted and often comedic air, but a hundred and fifty years ago the festivals were spontaneous and heartfelt. The first Defender's Day was a haphazard event, begun only hours after the defeat of Quajinn Huo's fleet near the Asteroid Barrier of the Draconid Hub, a culmination of months of struggle against the tyrant wizard who had conquered and razed nearly twenty worlds in the UWW despite concerted efforts to defeat him. It took the combined might of several brave heroes, among them the illustrious Doctor Abbot, the Wulfen shaman Koguk, the dark sorceress Callista, and the then fledgling Cosmo-Knight Lothar of Motherhome, to bring a close to Quajinn Huo's bid for power. Even so, the heroes were nearly overcome until a flight of Dwarven Ironships arrived to bolster the defenders at the behest of no less a personage than Inglix the Mad himself.

By day's end, Quajinn Huo's fleet lay scattered across the Asteroid Barrier and the systems he had conquered were free. While spontaneous celebrations erupted across the quadrant, and the heroes took stock, the dread wizard himself managed to escape. He bolted for the safety of Center, and only Lothar and Koguk seemed interested in pursuing him.

– “Defender's Day,” *A History of the United Worlds of Warlock, Third Edition*

Friar nudged the gravsledges with a boot, and the heavy unit slid forward, another meter closer to the customs station. She fingered the hilt of her energy knife, a motion Elias was beginning to recognize as indicative of anxiety. Which meant the sweat beading on her pale brow was not due to the temperature; Elias knew that coming from a frigid world, Friar was inured to cold and uncomfortable whenever the mercury climbed past 15 degrees Celsius, as it often did on Center. He also knew her black and cobalt flightsuit was wired to keep her cool, and it appeared as though her nerves were starting to fray.

Elias suppressed a grimace. Now would be the worst possible time for anything to go wrong. The last fifteen hours had been a whirlwind of activity

as he pulled together the team he had assembled, purchased the last few bits of gear for the mission, and fitted the ship for an extended trip. The rest of the team, the Relogian weapons expert Hector, the Kisent pilot Orix, and the Oni martial artist Tatsuda were already aboard the ship, running a pre-flight check and securing the last of the equipment in the hold.

Elias and Friar would be the last ones on the ship. They had to be, in order to ensure Quajinn Huo made it aboard.

Elias did frown finally, and Friar straightened unconsciously. She was not the target of his ire, however, but rather the Draconid sorcerer in cold storage on the sledge.

Elias had explained the plan a dozen times to Quajinn, and the Draconid seemed wary of the risks but he also seemed to understand they were necessary. Yet, when it finally came time to put the plan in action, Quajinn had balked. Most of the last fifteen hours had been used by Elias to convince Quajinn to go through with it. It was the only way, as far as the former Guardsman could see.

A century and a half ago, when Lothar of Motherhome and Koguk the Wulfen shaman had tracked Quajinn Huo to Center, the Draconid had been able to elude them in the nearly limitless expanse of the great city. They searched for him for months, and even managed to find him on a few occasions, but after a brief skirmish, Quajinn would always escape. Always.

While Quajinn searched for a way to eliminate his pursuers, the two Wulfen, tiring of the chase, discovered a way to enforce a small measure of justice upon the wizard. Koguk cast a Curse, an ancient and powerful rite practiced by his people, fueling the magic with the almost limitless energy of Lothar's cosmically powered body. The Curse bound Quajinn Huo to Center for seven times seven hundred years, with the stipulation that no spell could free him and the only way he could pass through the gates of Center before the time was up would be as a corpse. It was much more poetic in the original Wulfen tongue, Elias had been told, but no matter what language you used, it read pretty much the same. Quajinn Huo, former trigalactic despot, was a prisoner of Center.

In one hundred and fifty years, Quajinn had not found the loophole. And not for lack of trying; he had consulted other wizards from a thousand worlds and dimensions, studied ancient tome after ancient tome, bargained with the Splugorth. Nothing he tried worked. Not surprising, in Elias' opinion. Quajinn, like Koguk the Shaman, thought like a wizard. If the Curse said no spell could save the Draconid, than no spell could save him.

There were ways around that seemingly insurmountable stipulation, though. And as Elias saw it, Friar the Klikita was the key. An aberration of her birth had gifted her with a cryokinesis, enabling her to manipulate ambient temperatures to a fine degree, even to the point of conjuring ice and snow, or freezing a sentient in its tracks. Friar would freeze Quajinn, slowing his

life signs down so that he would appear dead – and if that still didn't work, she could finish him off and then revive him on the ship. A simple plan. A good plan.

But Quajinn Huo was as paranoid as a Naruni client with unpaid bills. While frozen, he would be powerless, unaware of his surroundings and unable to act. He didn't trust Elias or Friar to bring him out of the freeze at all, and claimed they would sell him to the UWW for a planet's ransom. No amount of assurances from Elias would sway him, no matter how many times Elias told him he was needed to crush Lothar. Elias made the miscalculation of presenting Quajinn with the mysterious wrist chronometer taken from the Fallen Knight. After a quick analysis of the artifact, Quajinn had declared the chron could be used to stop time, somehow duplicating the effects of the freeze but also enabling Quajinn to remain conscious.

Elias reminded him that, according to the wording of the Curse, magic wouldn't do any good. Quajinn grew sullen then, and threatened to melt Elias down with a word, but Elias reminded the Draconid that if he did, he would never get off Center. Elias remained his best chance for freedom. His only chance.

At that, Quajinn relented. But just before Friar put him under, the wizard smiled slyly. He placed his right hand on Elias' forehead, and his left upon Friar's. Before Elias could knock it away, Quajinn murmured an incantation. "You have an hour to get me onto the ship before your heads explode," he warned them in his sibilant voice. "I'll reverse the spell once I am again mobile." He smiled like a dragon, and then laid down in the case, crossing his arms and closing his eyes.

While Elias balled his fists in impotent rage, the wizard added, "You may begin." Friar brushed her knife hilt and gave Elias a worried glance, but at his curt nod she went to work. Ice slid over the Draconid's reclining form, enveloping him in a heartbeat. Elias reached over and closed the case, checking the computer on the locking mechanism for life signs.

Weak, but still visible. "Better kill him," Elias said with a wolfish grin. "Just to be sure." Friar looked like she might argue, but she complied. A moment later, Elias had levered the case onto the gravsledge and they were on their way to the docking bay.

So Elias understood Friar's nervousness, though he felt none of it himself. He felt secure in his invulnerability, and presumed Quajinn's threat to be an idle one where he was concerned. Still, it wouldn't do for Friar to die before she could get Quajinn out of his icy prison. And time was growing short.

Elias blinked as the gravsledge slid past him, right up to the customs station. Two hulking Prometheans looked down at Elias and Friar, their stony faces betraying no emotion. One stood behind the desk, thick fingers positioned to punch keys that would activate the full sensor package built into the station, reading at a glance everything on Elias' person or in his cargo. The

other Promethean stood to the side, propped up by a wickedly barbed halberd that also doubled as a blaster rifle.

Elias handed a datacard to the desk attendant, while the other one leaned over and tried to peer through the ice frosted glass window of the case. It actually flinched, tightening its grip on its weapon and turning to Elias with a stormy expression. “That is Quajinn Huo,” it rumbled tonelessly, suddenly master of itself again.

Elias nodded. “As my card will inform you, I managed to kill him. Now I’m taking him to the UWW for my reward.” So said the datacard supplied by Squiddy, anyway.

The Promethean behind the desk, having plugged the datacard into the terminal, nodded as well. “Your papers appear to be in order,” it told Elias. Turning to its companion, it said, “Tor, ensure the wizard is indeed deceased.”

Tor stepped around Friar, who gave it a wide berth, and jammed the case’s computer with a thick finger. Tor glanced at Friar and at Elias, and then said, “Quajinn Huo is dead.”

Elias and Friar made it to the ship in record time, though Elias had to make sure the woman didn’t appear to move too quickly. The Prometheans had a long history of remaining outside the political and social conflicts of the creatures that visited Center, but for a trigalactic criminal like Quajinn Huo they might make an exception. Better to keep them from getting suspicious.

Orix met them at the airlock. Tall and spare, with skin the color and consistency of bark and leafy hair tied into corn rows, he grinned savagely as the sledge slid past him. “All systems are go, captain,” he told Elias in the stage whisper that passed for his voice. “We’re ready to lift off when you give the word.”

Elias nodded. “Let’s go.” Orix spun on his heel and left for the bridge at a brisk pace. Elias turned to Friar to tell her to release Huo, but the case was already open and steaming as the ice evaporated instantly into vapor. Elias suppressed a reprimand. It went against his training in the Invincible Guard to allow an underling to act without express orders, but then he wasn’t in the Guard anymore. In fact, he needed people beneath him with some measure of initiative. He would simply need to get used to having people who thought for themselves.

Quajinn Huo suddenly sat up, blinking ice from his lids. He stretched and shivered melodramatically, and then muttered a word in some arcane language. Friar instantly relaxed, exhaling a pent up breath. “Welcome back, Master Huo,” she said, smiling.

Quajinn levered himself out of the case and stood up. Beneath them all, the starship hummed with power as the engines came to life and the ship began to move, guided by Orix into the stratosphere of Phase World and beyond into the reaches of space.

Quajinn's Draconian face split into a wide grin, displaying all of his sharpened teeth. "Free," he whispered. "Free!" he said again, at full volume. "After all these years, I am free finally to exact revenge." He turned to Elias with his predator's grin firmly in place. "You have gained some measure of trust at last, Harkonnen. And it will last as least as long as Lothar of Motherhome lives." The grin widened. "Which will not be long at all."

Elias Harkonnen, former Invincible Guardsman and veteran of a thousand combats, ruthless and unforgiving, suppressed a shiver at the coldness and sheer evil he saw in Quajinn Huo's features.

"So Lothar broke that poor dragon's heart, only realizing after I explained much later what had happened. He's been sore at me ever since, though I promised never to put another love charm on him without his express permission."

Kassy and Caleb stood in the galley of Lothar's borrowed starship. She was whipping up an "Atlantean delicacy" from the meager scraps of food the galley offered, while he leaned against the counter ready to assist in any way. So far he hadn't needed to do much. A little stirring, some hunting for ingredients, and the like, leaving Kassy to do most of the work. Now that the casserole was baking, they were taking a break so that Kassy could tell Caleb the story of Lothar's encounter with an amorous dragon.

Lothar himself was only a few feet away, sitting at a low table and grinding his teeth, while the shadowy Doctor Abbot sipped tea from a delicate cup and admonished the Wulfen for his behavior. Abbot's words didn't seem to affect Lothar at all, though everything Kassy said increased his agitation. Throughout the story, Caleb maintained a close watch on his mentor to make sure his temper didn't explode. Though obviously annoyed – but when wasn't he? – Lothar remained fairly stable. No growling or brandishing of emerald axes, at any rate.

Kassy paused to check on the progress of the meal, offering Caleb a quick smile, saying, "Not quite there yet, but doesn't it smell delicious?"

Caleb had to agree. It was amazing how Kassy had pulled together the meal from what they had found in the galley; Caleb had assumed there wasn't much of use besides the strawberry wafers he'd eaten before. Somehow Kassy had been able to mix up a mouth watering casserole from the wafers, some broth, and a few packets of freeze dried vegetables. A few spices, completely unidentifiable to the young man who had never been very good in the kitchen to begin with, added flavor and contributed significantly to the enchanting aroma that filled the small room. "My father taught me how to cook," Kassy had explained. "He'd learned as a young man on the trail how to whip up a decent meal out of almost anything. And when I became a Slayer he insisted I learn how to do it too, to make sure I'd never go hungry. I don't suppose he

ever envisioned me being locked in a Delakite dungeon for four days without a decent meal, though.”

Caleb wished that his own father had been able to cook anything at all, but dinners at the Vulcan house had been just a grade above c-rations for years now. Abigail Vulcan had been the family’s cook, but dinner had been the least of the changes in the house after she died. Caleb suddenly wondered if he would ever see his father again. Over six weeks had passed since his transformation from high school senior and draftee to Cosmo-Knight, and he had to admit he wasn’t yet missing his old life. He would eventually, however. Probably. And what would he do then?

“Most people at least laugh politely when I finish that story,” Kassy prompted. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah,” Caleb said quickly. “I was just thinking of something else. It was very funny. I have to admit though, that I find it difficult to imagine Lothar in that situation.”

“You and I both, pup,” Lothar grumbled. “But old stories about me isn’t what I’d like to hear from you, Kassy,” he continued. “You have something about Harkonnen, don’t you?”

Kassy’s friendly smile faded, and suddenly the playfulness in her expression was gone. Caleb reminded himself that when he first met this beautiful woman with the wicked sense of humor, she was playing Errol Flynn with a flaming sword, having just freed herself from captivity at the hands of pirates. She might appear to be Caleb’s own age, but by her own admission she was an Undead Slayer, an Atlantean warrior skilled at destroying the supernatural, and as much a soldier as Caleb’s father.

“Right,” Kassy said. “Caleb, do you mind getting some plates out? I think you and I will be the only ones eating.” She raised an eyebrow in question to the others, and both Lothar and Abbot nodded. While Caleb did as she asked, she opened the oven and pulled out the dish, eyeing it critically. Apparently it passed muster, because she set it down on a heating pad on the counter and grabbed a big spoon to ladle portions onto the plates Caleb handed to her. She handed the first plate back to Caleb, heavy with food, and then took one for herself. They both took seats at the table and Caleb began to eat while Kassy spoke.

“The Transgalactic Empire spans many worlds,” she began. “In the heart of the Empire lies the Free World Council, an alliance of systems who have rebelled against the Empire and are fighting to free other enslaved worlds under the Empire’s control.”

She paused to take a bite, and Caleb realized that Lothar and Abbot must be aware of these sorts of things, and that Kassy was explaining them for his benefit. Slightly embarrassed at his own lack of what should have been simple knowledge, he dug into the casserole with gusto. It smelled better than it tasted, but it tasted a great deal better than what he was used to.

“It’s much too big a project for them to tackle alone, so they depend on aid from outside systems, many of which are all too happy to provide it. The Kreeghor have a lot of enemies in the Three Galaxies, and the FWC is a thorn in their side that many governments like to encourage. The people of Alexandria, my world, have been sending aid since the initial rebellion of the planet Good Hope. Money, food, munitions, ships. Anything we could spare went out to the FWC. One of my cousins was a blockade runner who took the trip to Good Hope a dozen times. That twelfth trip would prove to be his last.

“The run to Good Hope was never a pleasant one; you can barely go a kilometer without bumping into a Kreeghor dreadnought. Still, many ships slipped through using cunning, magic, or cutting edge tech. The Kreeghor decided too many ships were getting through, and that the only way to stop them was to send in the Invincible Guard, the elite cadre of imperial troops, each with enough raw power to go toe to toe with a Cosmo-Knight. They put a century, a hundred troops each, on each leg of the blockade. On the border to CCW space, a centurion named Boreas was in charge. Klygestus watched for S’hree Vek vessels. And near UWW space was stationed Elias Harkonnen, a former UWW citizen himself and the only Elf in the Three Galaxies to graduate into the Invincible Guard.

“Elias is as smart as he is ruthless and overconfident. He’s completely invulnerable to harm, and has enough raw strength to juggle starfighters. On top of that, he has all the extensive military training and tactical skill of a Legionnaire and an intimate understanding of the way sentients from the UWW think and work. My cousin and his allies, Zeus rest their souls, never really stood a chance.

“Running the blockade takes a series of lightspeed jumps from system to system. Short ones are best, zigging and zagging from one to another. Makes it easier to bypass the blockade and lessens the chance of accidentally encountering a dreadnought. Harkonnen knew or guessed well enough the general route the UWW ships would take to Good Hope, and he sat and waited for them to appear in system.

“When they did, he let his three dreadnoughts sit in place and lob fire at the UWW ships to keep them too busy to run, but ensured the ships wouldn’t take too much damage. Then he and his century went EVA and flew toward the UWW ships. Ship sensors don’t pick up human sized targets very well, and most of the Legionnaires could survive in a vacuum unaided, so they managed to cross the void between the two sides without interference. They found airlocks and used their inhuman strength to shatter their way onto the ships.

“What followed wasn’t a battle in any sense of the word. Slaughter would be more appropriate. Harkonnen and his fellow Invincible Guardsmen tore the crews to pieces. The Atlanteans on board didn’t do any better against them than the wizards or the warlock marines. Harkonnen killed everyone on

board and then had the Guard break up the bodies and spread the offal and gore on every available surface. Then he set the controls of each ship for a timed jump back into UWW space and returned to his dreadnought.

“It would be several more years before anyone from the UWW, my people included, attempted another blockade run.”

“My God,” Caleb said. He didn’t feel very hungry anymore, though Kassy had continued to eat throughout her tale. “That’s the kind of guy we’re going after?”

Lothar nodded. “Not all our jobs will be easy like the Zodoran leech,” he said with a grin. “Harkonnen is as bad as they come. I’ve already told you how he sacrificed his crew and his base in order to escape me. Any life other than his own has little meaning to him, and he’s quite capable of doing almost anything to further his goals. He no longer has a century or any dreadnoughts to back him up, but that is no reason to underestimate him.”

“I hope to be able to use the resources at Xerxes to find out more,” Abbot said, speaking for the first time. “With Lothar’s help I may even be able to see some of the classified records the CCW keeps on Invincible Guards. At the very least, news reports should give us a clearer picture of who he is, and perhaps where he will strike next.”

“I know what he is,” Kassy said coldly. “He is a monster. And he needs to be stopped.”

A loud beeping interrupted them, and Lothar stood up. “We’re coming up on Xerxes. Caleb, why don’t you give me a hand bringing her in.”

“Really?” Caleb instantly brightened.

Lothar just brushed past him, growling, “Come on then.”

Caleb scrambled to his feet, and almost forgot his manners. He shot a questioning glance to Kassy, and she waved him off with a laugh. “Go ahead, I’ll get the dishes.”

Caleb flashed her a grin in thanks and raced after Lothar.

The great spindle shaped station, twelve miles long, was once again swarming with ships. Caleb picked out the CCW ships from the Zodoran engagement easily enough; they were the eleven battle cruisers swarming with repair crews. The Zodoran machine had nearly crippled the starships, and had almost proved the end of Caleb as well. He could have died fighting that thing, virtually powerless while it hammered away at him. But he survived. Caleb grinned fiercely.

He did a pretty good job his first time out as a Knight.

“Pay attention, pup,” Lothar admonished from the captain’s chair. Lothar rested his hands lightly upon the controls, ready to make a correction if Caleb made a mistake.

“Right, sorry,” Caleb said, refocusing on the task at hand. Piloting a spaceship was a great deal more complicated than driving a car or even a plane; with no atmosphere to work with, a spaceship didn’t have or need aerial vanes to manipulate airflow. Rather, maneuvering it depended upon the careful use of strategically placed thrusters that could set the ship in motion or slow it down. The fact that the ship moved through three planes wasn’t anything that concerned Caleb; he had a knack for flying. What did worry him was failing to fire the right thruster at a crucial moment, or letting one burn too long. Either mistake could send the ship on a collision course with any one of the other hundred ships buzzing around the station.

The ship shook as a starfighter buzzed too close, nearly scraping a wing along their dorsal surface. Caleb flinched and tried to correct his course, but realized in a heartbeat that he was doing okay. “Jerk,” he muttered. Lothar uttered a short bark of laughter.

Somehow Caleb managed to bring the ship into range of the docking bay Xerxes had given them without any trouble. With a flick of his wrist he sent the docking claw out to latch onto the station and a dozen umbilicals snaking out to connect with power lines and air scrubbers. He sat back with a grin and looked over at Lothar.

“Nice job,” Lothar said. He wagged a finger at Caleb. “But don’t get cocky. If that space jockey crashed into us, it wouldn’t have mattered whose fault it was. You have to keep an eye out for that sort of thing.” He stood up. “Now let’s go.”

Abbot and Kassy were herding the prisoners out the airlock when Caleb and Lothar reached it. Paj Pandershon and his Delakite cohorts didn’t look too happy, but Caleb didn’t feel sorry for any of them. Pandershon tried to snarl something pithy as he was led up the corridor to the TVIA station, but a glare from Lothar had him tripping over his tongue.

Caleb decided he would have to practice that move; though it would probably be easier if he were a foot taller and had a huge wolf’s head brimming with sharp teeth.

With Lothar leading the way, the four of them passed through the inspection station quickly, while the authorities carted off the prisoners for incarceration. Lothar went with them to make sure everything went smoothly, which left Abbot, Kassy and Caleb standing on the railing over the expansive central lobby of the docking level.

“Well, we’ve much to do,” Abbot said as Lothar and the TVIA officials walked off. “Caleb, you still need to be deputized. And I need to find those records and start working on this case.”

“I’ll take care of Caleb,” Kassy told him. “You start cracking dataspools and we’ll meet up with you later.”

Before Caleb could interject, Abbot was beginning to head away and a figure in a military uniform was striding toward them, calling Abbot’s name.

Abbot paused, leaning on his cane. Caleb glanced at Kassy, but she didn't seem to recognize the other man.

A tall, broad shouldered black man with a shaven head and a neatly trimmed goatee, he was obviously a soldier of some sort, resplendent in the white and silver uniform of the Consortium Armed Forces. He stuck out a hand and Abbot took it, shaking vigorously. "Doctor Abbot, so glad you could finally make it here. Where's Lothar and his apprentice?"

"Captain Orestes," Abbot said, his shadowy features lightening in what Caleb thought of as Abbot's smile. "I'm afraid you just missed Lothar. He's on his way to the detention level. But his apprentice is right here and very eager to meet you." Abbot gestured to Caleb. "Captain, may I present Caleb Vulcan, Knight of the Forge. And our friend, Kassiopaea Acherean."

Captain Orestes shook Caleb's hand and then Kassy's, bright teeth flashing in his dark beard. "Good work out there, Caleb," Orestes said. "You saved a lot of lives."

"Just, ah, doing my job, sir," Caleb said, slightly self-conscious.

"And what was that exactly?" Kassy asked.

Orestes put an arm around Kassy's shoulder and steered her towards the huge windows staring out into space. "You see those ships being repaired out there? Not a single one of them would be here if not for Caleb and Lothar."

"Really?" Kassy said. She looked at Caleb in a new way, almost as if she were reevaluating him. He resisted the urge to squirm under her scrutiny.

"Indeed," Abbot agreed.

"It was really nothing," Caleb insisted. "Any one of you would have done the same, if you could have. Doing something because you can doesn't make you anything special." One of the lessons his father had taught him, again and again.

Orestes clapped him on the shoulder. "Lighten up, Caleb. C'mon, I seem to recall owing you and Lothar a drink." He grinned at them all. "All of you, actually."

Abbot demurred. "I need to get some work done, Captain, but thank you for the offer. Caleb and Kassy, on the other hand, would be honored to join you, I'm sure."

Kassy nodded automatically. "Of course, Captain. Lead the way."

Caleb hesitated for a moment, but fell in behind them as Abbot left in the other direction. He would have rather gone with Abbot or hurried after Lothar at this point, but it would probably have been rude to turn down the offer of a drink from a man whose life he saved.

But the thing of it was, Caleb didn't feel like he'd saved anyone's life. Out there at Teneb-742, with the Zodoran leech hammering him, it didn't even occur to him that by tackling the weapon themselves he and Lothar had spared the lives of the crews on those dozen ships. It really was just a job he had to do, part of being who he was now; as a Knight of the Forge it was his

responsibility to put his life on the line for total strangers – the power he had made it more likely he'd survive the experience, after all – but it certainly wasn't his responsibility to feel comfortable around those strangers.

Captain Orestes' effusiveness was kind of unsettling in a way. Caleb knew Orestes was genuinely grateful, and friendly, but it still didn't sit well with him. Back home, when you did a favor for somebody, they just thanked you, and that was that. More or less; you knew they'd pay you back when the time came. None of this patting on the back and "let me buy you a drink."

Caleb smiled to himself. It had seemed like fun immediately after tackling the machine, and he had argued with Lothar about taking up Orestes' offer, but now that he was here and doing it, he found himself agreeing with the Wulfen. Oddly enough, Caleb found Lothar's gruff manner easier to deal with than Orestes' open friendliness. Caleb shook his head. He supposed that Lothar reminded him a bit of his father, and maybe that was the source of the friction between them as much as the trust.

Not that he would be telling Lothar that any time soon.

"Here we are," Orestes announced, leading them into a café packed with other men and women in Consortium uniforms. Everyone seemed to know Captain Orestes, and as soon as Caleb was identified, they all let up a big cheer and started buying him drinks. He was soon surrounded by long lost friends he'd never met, and every time he emptied a glass, someone handed him a full one. He was glad his Cosmo-Knight metabolism could handle all the alcohol; he'd only ever tried drinking once before, and the whiskey stolen from his father's liquor cabinet made him feel nearly as terrible as he did once his father discovered the theft.

Caleb lost track of Kassy in the crowd, and it was a few hours later, as the party was beginning to break up and human constitutions gradually gave in to the demands being placed upon them, that he finally found her again. She was sitting by herself at a table in the back of the café, drinking what appeared to be water. Caleb put down his drink on the nearest flat surface and made his way towards her.

She looked up as he came close. "Having fun?" she asked.

"Not really," Caleb admitted, dropping into the seat next to her. "You?"

"I think I burned out on this kind of stuff years ago. But I have to admit, soldiers know how to party. And none party heartier than the ones who risk their lives on a daily basis." She looked around at the remaining revelers. "These people lost a lot of friends out there. That Zodoran leech destroyed six Warshield cruisers before you two showed up and saved the day."

Caleb nodded, seeing in his mind's eye the floating, shattered hulks that he and Lothar had flown by and later used for cover during the battle. He had tried then to ignore the bodies floating in the vacuum, but now couldn't forget them. They reminded him of Eddie Walters, strangely enough. Eddie, star

quarterback, hero of Caleb's high school, and three years his senior. He went to Vietnam and came home in a plastic bag.

"How are you holding up?" she asked.

"Okay, I guess," he said. "I was just thinking about home." He smiled ruefully. "I've been doing that a lot lately. Back home, I'm supposed to be going off to war in a place that's very far from where I live, to kill people I've never met who mean me no real harm, because they want to use a different economic system than we do in my country. I wasn't too keen on the prospect originally, and after seeing what little I have of the Three Galaxies, it all seems so pointless." Maybe the alcohol had affected him after all; it certainly wasn't like him to talk this way. But he didn't stop.

"It's really strange too, because I thought I was on the other side of the universe or something, but then I met all these humans who speak English for God's sake, and I started to think maybe I'm in the future, but no one seems to know about Earth. And I'm further from home and who I was there than I could have gotten if I had just gone to Vietnam."

Kassy put her hand over his. "You want to go home," she said quietly.

"No," Caleb said. "Maybe. I don't know. There's just too much here that's familiar, and it makes everything seem more alien." He paused. "I know that doesn't make any sense, but I don't think at this point I could explain it any better."

"I understand," Kassy told him. "I do. Part of what it means to be an Atlantean is never having a real home. We're meant to wander through time and space. Even Alexandria, our base of operations in the Three Galaxies, isn't really what you'd call a home. We gave up the right to one when we destroyed Atlantis through our hubris. I've had to adjust to a lot stranger places than the Three Galaxies in my time, Caleb."

She smiled suddenly, that same smile she had shown him in the tower on Korobas, and Caleb felt his heart tumble in his chest. "Besides," she said, "you've got Lothar and Abbot and me, and you know how to do the right thing. That's more than anyone else in the entire Three Galaxies has, if I do say so myself."

"Thank you," Caleb said. He did feel better, and his head was clearing too. "I think I had a little too much to drink," he admitted. Kassy laughed, squeezing his hand.

"There you are," sounded a familiar bark. Caleb and Kassy looked up, into the emerald face of Lothar. "We've got word from Center. Elias Harkonnen just left Phase World. With Quajinn Huo's body."

Beside Caleb, Kassy suddenly stiffened and removed her hand from his. The moment had passed, and suddenly she was the Slayer again. "Huo? You don't think..." she trailed off, apparently unwilling to complete the thought.

Caleb groaned. "Who's Quajinn Huo? No, wait, don't tell me. I've had enough stories for now." He stood up. "Let's go kick some butt."

Chapter Ten

Chase Music

“The S’hree Vek Confederacy is one of those anomalous alliances that pepper the Three Galaxies. Based in the S’hree Vek system in the axis of the Corkscrew Galaxy, they share no major allegiances with either of their closest neighbors, the Transgalactic Empire or our own Consortium of Civilized Worlds. The Confederacy is not allied with the Splugorth, the United Worlds of Warlock, or Naruni Enterprises. They are a small power, controlling only about ten systems of their own. Yet they can afford to remain independent, even with the Naruni breathing down their necks.

“In other words, it is best not to take the Confederacy lightly.

“The six major species that make up the Confederacy all hail from the S’hree Vek system, and it is there that their alliance was forged, tested, and proven. From that system they have spread out into the Three Galaxies at large, using their unique psi-drives to navigate the heavens and their motto of “free trade” to infiltrate nearly every market in the galaxies. While the Naruni watch them like hawks, the Confederacy specializes in slavery, biotechnology, and psi-tech, which means they rarely clash with the Naruni over customers or markets.

“But it means that the Consortium of Civilized Worlds and the S’hree Vek Confederacy are at odds, and will be until they realize all sentients have certain basic rights. So you need to be aware of the Confederacy’s policies, culture, and military strength, which is quite impressive for such a ‘small’ power. While their warships don’t have nearly the firepower of a Protector class ship or a TGE Doombringer, every S’hree Vek ship has a complement of Celestines on board.

“Your average Celestine can toe the line with your average Cosmo-Knight. And they come out of the S’hree Vek factories at an alarming rate.”

*– Preface to a lecture by Captain Hiram Starling,
Consortium Armed Forces Fleet Command Diplomacy Seminar*

“Watch yourself, Caleb,” Lothar told the young Cosmo-Knight, and it was the use of his given name that made Caleb pay attention rather than Lothar’s tone. “Center may seem like a big deal to you. A mile high, six hundred million sentients call it home, and hundreds of ships leave and arrive every day. It makes Xerxes look like a deserted waystation. But never lose sight of the fact that at its heart, Center is rotten. The Prometheans who run the city bend their knees to the Transgalactic Empire and worse, like the Splugorth or inter-dimensional entities. All in the name of free trade, which includes slavery, blood sacrifice, and less savory practices.”

Lothar sighed, adding, "You're about to enter the most wretched hive of scum and villainy in the Three Galaxies."

"You're trying to scare him," Doctor Abbot interrupted, jabbing at Lothar with his cane. "Caleb's a bright lad. He'll be fine."

Caleb thanked Abbot, but silently promised to follow Lothar's instructions. He was a stranger in the Three Galaxies, after all, still unused to the customs and cultures of this corner of the universe. Raised on the planet Earth in a galaxy far, far away from anything Lothar, Abbot, or their friend Kassiopeia Acherean found familiar, Caleb was still learning about his new home, the Three Galaxies. A crash course on the history of Phase World and the planet's capital city Center thanks to his friends and the ship's computer had given Caleb a working knowledge of the place he was about to visit. But one of the few things Caleb knew for sure anymore was the simple fact that working knowledge was no substitute for experience.

And Caleb's friends had plenty of experience, of that he was sure. Lothar's age was difficult to determine thanks to his wolfish features and penchant for remaining in his emerald green cosmo-armor at all times, but thanks to hints dropped by the others, Caleb guessed Lothar to be a few centuries old at least. Doctor Abbot was even more of an enigma. A humanoid composed entirely of shadows, his only distinguishing features were his orange eyes, and his affectation for the wardrobe of a nineteenth century British detective. Nothing hinted at age, but Abbot's tendency to lecture on diverse and arcane topics led Caleb to believe he was almost as old as Lothar.

That left Kassy. She didn't appear to be much older than Caleb's own eighteen years, but she was Atlantean. She was human in all the ways that mattered, but the magicks used by the Atlanteans eons ago, the very ones that destroyed their homeland and sent them on an interdimensional diaspora, had altered the Atlantean physiology enough to give them extended life spans and enhanced physical abilities. Further, Kassy was herself an Undead Slayer, a tattooed vampire hunter who had adventured from one end of the Three Galaxies to the other in the company of Lothar or Abbot.

Even though Caleb had almost single handedly defeated the Zodoran energy leech, an artificial construct that had decimated a dozen Consortium ships, he still felt wet behind the ears around his more experienced colleagues. He was further handicapped by his Earthly birth; sights and situations they took for granted surprised, delighted, or horrified him. At first his own cluelessness had not seemed like much of a problem, but when Kassy joined their small band, Caleb began to feel embarrassed about his lack of knowledge. He didn't want to look like a bumpkin in front of her.

So he took Lothar's warning to heart. Not that he would admit that to Lothar; he might respect the Wulfen a great deal, and even view him as a substitute for the father he had left behind on Earth, but his relationship with

Lothar was at least as abrasive as the one he had at home. The last thing Caleb wanted Lothar to think was that he listened to him.

Lothar nodded perfunctorily at Abbot, but looked at Caleb to make sure his words had sunk in. “Got it,” Caleb said at last, trying not to sound too petulant.

“Good,” Lothar growled. “You’ll be with me, but the Mother knows we could get separated and I want you to be aware of what we’re heading into.” He turned his attention to Doctor Abbot, leaning on his cane, and Kassy, who had her back to the airlock. “We’re all aware of the stakes, aren’t we? Elias Harkonnen has a two standard day lead on us. We need to find out why he came to Center, why he left, and most importantly, what Quajinn Huo’s corpse has to do with his plans and whereabouts.

“Caleb and I will attempt to convince the Prometheans to help us. The two of you will check with your informants in the city. We meet back here in twenty-four standard hours.”

“We’ve done this sort of thing before,” Abbot said dryly, his orange eyes twinkling in his shadowy face. Lothar grunted.

Kassy took this as the order to disembark. She flicked the switch at her elbow and the airlock cycled open, letting in a blast of humid, sweet smelling air that tickled Caleb’s nostrils. Kassy ran a hand through her dark hair and smiled at Caleb. “Have a good time,” she said, and marched down the ramp. Abbot followed at a sedate pace.

Lothar nodded to Caleb. “This may be a good time to suit up,” Lothar said. Caleb shook his head. Unlike Lothar, Caleb preferred to wear his cosmo-armor only in emergencies. He felt it erected a wall between himself and the outside world, and feared what he might become on other side of that wall. He was already more than human himself, fitting in quite nicely with this band of aliens. He could fly, shoot heat beams out of his eyes, shrug off attacks that could level cities, and survive in the vacuum of space without aid. He didn’t need the armor reminding him that he wasn’t a normal person anymore.

“After you,” Caleb offered. “You know the way.”

The Prometheans proved to be less than cooperative.

Lothar bullied his way through the Promethean command structure, using his legendary temper as a bargaining chip, and eventually earned them an escort to the station that allowed Elias Harkonnen to leave Center. The two Prometheans waiting for them there, Tor and Egis, had been on duty when Elias and his precious cargo went through.

Both Tor and Egis stood at least eight feet tall, with grayish-purple flesh that looked as hard as stone. Their round, hard, black eyes made them look more expressionless and unreadable, and Caleb wasn’t sure if the Promethe-

ans were trying to be as difficult as possible, or whether they were like that all the time. He had seen a few of their kind on Xerxes, but never had the chance to talk to one.

“You two were on duty two days ago when the Invincible Guardsman Elias Harkonnen left Center?” Lothar asked them.

Egis, at least the one Caleb thought was Egis, nodded. Tor stood passively at attention, a wicked looking halberd in his hand.

“Can you tell me anything about him?” Lothar pressed.

Egis rolled his shoulders in what Caleb took to be the Promethean equivalent of a shrug. “Harkonnen passed through this checkpoint on the way to his ship. His cargo was deemed unlikely to harm any of our satellites or space gates and he was allowed to leave unmolested.”

“I see,” Lothar rumbled. “What was his cargo?”

“I fail to see how that is any business of yours, Lothar of Motherhome,” Egis said pointedly. “While Center is certainly not off limits to the Cosmic Forge, your jurisdiction here is tenuous at best. Elias Harkonnen committed no crimes during his stay here.”

“Indeed,” Lothar growled. His eyes flashed green within his wolf’s head helm. Caleb could tell Lothar was losing his patience, a commodity the Wulfen never possessed in abundance.

“Be that as it may,” Caleb interjected quickly, “Elias Harkonnen has performed criminal acts in several sectors of space and is wanted by the authorities. Any aid you give us that might lead to his apprehension could save lives.”

Egis stared at him dispassionately.

Lothar put his hand on Caleb’s shoulder by way of thanks; he looked less annoyed now, as if Caleb had given him a moment to master his emotions. “Gentlemen,” Lothar said, “I realize that Center remains as profitable as it is due to Promethean neutrality. But please, be assured that Elias Harkonnen is a deserter and a criminal, not a political activist nor even an agent of the Transgalactic Empire. Helping us will not violate any oaths.”

Egis still appeared unmoved, but Tor shifted uncomfortably from foot to foot, gripping his halberd so hard his knuckles paled. Lothar cocked his head at Tor. “Do you have something you’d like to say?”

Egis frowned at his companion, and Tor looked away from Lothar and Caleb, staring at some invisible point above them and to the side.

Lothar and Caleb exchanged looks. Caleb had seen enough episodes of Dagnet to see how this was going, and he guessed that Lothar knew what he was doing. “More than that,” Lothar added, “he had in his possession the body of Quajinn Huo, a being who has been disavowed by every sentient in the Three Galaxies. You would betray no one by telling what you know of Harkonnen’s plans.”

Still nothing from Egis. Caleb wasn't sure, but it looked like Tor gave his companion, whom Caleb just realized was Tor's superior, a furtive look.

"Hey," Caleb jumped in, "you may not care if Elias takes out some humans or Wulfen, but I've seen Prometheans all over the galaxies. How would you feel if one of them dies at Harkonnen's hand, and you could have helped prevent it?"

Egis bristled, but before he could say anything, Tor slammed the butt of his halberd against the floor sharply. "By Zurvan, Egis, I can't stand still with my mouth closed any longer." Egis began to stand up, but Tor put a hand on his shoulder and pushed him down. Tor turned to Lothar and Caleb. "I've seen the accounts of Quajinn Huo's conquests, and heard from the mouths of men who had been there about his attack on Ogretopia. When I first realized Elias Harkonnen held the body of Quajinn Huo in his possession, I was afraid." Tor's features darkened at the memory.

"I was so afraid in fact that I made only a cursory examination of the body and the refrigeration unit in which it was stored. He appeared to be deceased, and indeed the computer told me so, but hours later I realized to my shame that it was entirely possible that Huo's death was a sham."

"What do you mean?" Lothar said, his eyes blazing again. Egis withdrew from Lothar's sudden anger, but Tor continued to speak, perhaps unaware of the Wulfen's ire.

"Huo's body was lifeless," Tor said. "But it could have been simply cryogenically frozen, his life signs terminated in order to bypass the strictures of the curse you and Koguk the shaman placed upon Huo, but in such a way that he could be revived."

"Which means," Lothar said darkly, "in all probability Harkonnen did just that once outside the borders of Center. And the two of you allowed one of the most dangerous beings in the Three Galaxies to go free."

"Now, see here," Egis began, but was cut off as Lothar slammed a fist against Egis' console, denting the steel frame.

"You will give me everything you have on their ship, their cargo, and probable destination," Lothar ordered, "or I will hold the two of you responsible for whatever evil Elias Harkonnen and Quajinn Huo unleash on the Three Galaxies." Egis and Tor both looked at him blankly for a moment as Lothar's words sank in, and then quickly bent to the task.

Caleb couldn't help but smile as the Prometheans scurried to do Lothar's bidding. It was nice to see someone else get the brunt of Lothar's temper. Lothar caught Caleb's expression and snorted.

"I'm really beginning to hate this place," Kassy told Abbot as they slogged through one of the worst neighborhoods of level five. "While the Knights are living it up with the masters of this city, we're dealing with all the lowlifes

and scumbags.” She stepped over an insectoid being twitching on the sidewalk, lying in a puddle of unidentifiable liquid.

Abbot went around the unconscious figure. “Now, now, Kassy. You know Lothar isn’t the most delicate negotiator to come out of Motherhome. You and I are best suited to this task. The minute someone like Squiddy sees a Cosmo-Knight coming, he’ll be out the door and waddling away as fast as he can. You and I, however, are safely anonymous. We could be anyone.”

Kassy snorted in amusement. “My tattoos announce to the world what I am, and you’re the only Abbot in the Three Galaxies anyone has ever met. You’re more recognizable than Lothar, in fact.”

“Hmmm, perhaps,” Abbot said. He was indeed unique in the Three Galaxies, a fact that had led to his profession as a fact finder and problem solver in an attempt to learn of his own shadowy origins. But in a place as vast as the Three Galaxies, one more mage of an unknown race was hardly worth knowing anything about. Abbot had his admirers and enemies, but he wasn’t as well known as Kassy made him out to be. Not by far.

Especially here on Phase World, where anyone and anything could happen. Still, the “Squiddy” in question, a Monroe information broker, might recognize Abbot, especially if Squiddy had been dealing with Elias Harkonnen, as the last informant claimed under Kassy’s insistent questioning. There were rumors that Anshurr himself, Splugorth High Lord, sometimes used Squiddy. If that were the case, the Monroe might indeed be able to place Abbot’s face. Or even Kassy’s for that matter.

The Splugorth had no love for either of them, that was certain.

Abbot flirted with the idea of concealing their identities with a simple spell, but ultimately discarded it. Neither his nor Kassy’s physiologies were conducive to transformative magic, and an illusion would take too much concentration to maintain. Abbot would keep it simple, and if that meant Squiddy recognizing them and making a run for it, he would deal with the situation.

“This is it,” Kassy said abruptly, jolting Abbot out of his reverie. They stood outside a squat, four story structure, with dim windows and grime caked all over its surface. A dingy sign over the door proclaimed it to be “Squiddy’s Curios” in Trade Four. But a sign on the door declared the building closed.

Kassy frowned. “He must have company in there, if he’s closed this early in the morning.”

“Out to lunch perhaps,” Abbot suggested. He tried the door, and found the latch unlocked. “Or maybe not,” he said. He pushed the door open and stepped into the dim interior, Kassy a step behind. As they passed the threshold, a chime rang overhead.

The inside of the curio shop was a maze of junk heaped haphazardly together, forming piles and piles of trash mixed together with items of actual value. Most of it appeared to be tech of one kind or another; trideo players, breathing masks, hydro-spanners, gravplates, translator pods, bionic limbs

and organs, musical instruments. Clothing from a dozen worlds and twice as many species was jammed into the spaces, almost accidentally cushioning various items and just keeping them from scraping together and damaging them further. Little keepsakes and mementoes, small statues, keychains, medals, plaques, and the like were piled on top of everything else, some spilling onto the floor. Balls and other sports equipment, shattered bits of armor, and less identifiable scraps littered the floor. A mostly intact hyperdrive motivator loomed off in the distance, almost scraping against the ceiling.

“Go away,” a voice boomed from the back. “We’re closed.”

Kassy and Abbot shared a glance. Kassy licked her lips.

They both knew the voice had not come from the Monro owner of the store. It was too deep, too dry, and too commanding. Monros simply didn’t possess that kind of range.

Kassy touched an arcane blue-white symbol on her shoulder, and a glowing blue longbow coalesced in her hands, creating a cool glow around them. Abbot searched the recesses of his mind and selected a half-dozen spells that could be useful in the next few moments. Abbot gestured to the left with his cane, and then angled himself around the pile on the right as Kassy went left.

There was a moment of silence, and then a tremendous crash as something large and heavy smashed into one of the piles of garbage, creating an avalanche of curios, broken tech, and old clothes. Abbot angled himself so he could see the rear of the store, and made out a biped silhouetted against the light. He caught a glimpse of red and black armor and metal skin.

The figure took a step towards the front door, and Abbot could suddenly see him very clearly. The figure was large and broad shouldered, clad in the distinctive armor of an Invincible Guardsman. He had a neatly trimmed beard on his chin and a gold hoop through his lip. His exposed flesh, face and hands only, had the burnished look of freshly polished steel.

Twin arrows of blue fire flashed from the darkness and slammed into the Guardsman. He hardly seemed fazed, but turned towards his unseen attacker with a growl. Not for the first time Abbot appreciated his natural ability to blend in with darkness; while Kassy distracted the Guardsman, Abbot could summon a spell that would knock him flat.

Abbot’s orange eyes flashed as he gestured with his cane, and the Guardsman was suddenly rooted to the spot, unable to move. No matter how hard he tugged, he could not lift a single foot free of the floor. While he twisted and cursed, two more fiery arrows slammed into him, and Abbot summoned up a special trick that would place the Guardsman in a state of suspended animation for a short while; the man tried to fight it as he felt the spell take hold, but Abbot channeled his will into the binding, and a moment later the man collapsed, crashing to the floor, his arms crossed against his chest, his eyes open and unseeing.

Kassy stepped around a mound, the bow in her hand and one fiery arrow knocked. "What did you do to him?"

"Nothing too drastic," Abbot said, joining her at the side of the Guardsman. "He'll regain consciousness in two weeks, feeling refreshed and relaxed. By then, of course, he'll be safely locked up where he can no longer harm anyone."

Something within the collapsed mound of garbage groaned wetly.

Kassy dispelled the bow and began to shift some of the detritus out of the way. Abbot knelt down beside her to help, and before long they uncovered the squat, barrel chested form of Squamato Kekkil Damathui, better known to the world at large as Squiddy. The Monro was in bad shape; two of his legs were bent at odd angles, his fleshy tentacles were flapping feebly, and blood stained his massive, toothy mouth. Squiddy blinked his single large red eye rapidly, trying to focus on his rescuers. "Get me a medcab," he wheezed.

"In a bit," Kassy said, folding her hands behind her back.

"Indeed," Abbot agreed. "It just seems too outrageous a coincidence that we have come here to discuss Elias Harkonnen, only to find an Invincible Guardsman treating you like a punching bag. Shall you enlighten us?"

The red eye swivelled back and forth from Kassy to Abbot. Squiddy coughed weakly.

"My guess is the Guardsman broke some ribs, maybe punctured some vital organs. Drowning in your own blood isn't a pretty way to go, Squiddy," Kassy said. Abbot eyed her speculatively; she wasn't usually this cruel.

"Fine," Squiddy wheezed. "Harkonnen hired Quajinn Huo to do a job for Thraxus. Something about a riot," he managed to get out between burbling coughs. "That's all I know, I swear."

Kassy couldn't hide her surprise at hearing the name of Thraxus. Nor could Abbot, but his shadowy features hid it better. Thraxus, one of the richest sentients in the Three Galaxies, made his home on Center but kept his fingers dipped in many different pots throughout the Megaverse. He was rumored to be behind a dozen major wars, to have dealings with the Splugorth and the Transgalactic Empire, and to be a personal friend of Inglix the Mad. *As if Harkonnen and Huo aren't trouble enough*, Abbot thought.

"Riot? What riot? Where and when?" Kassy pressed.

Abbot heard sirens in the distance, growing louder with each second. Kassy cursed softly under her breath. Squiddy perked up; he could hear the sirens as well, and he knew what it meant. He would tell them no more.

Abbot pressed a hand against Squiddy's broad forehead and muttered a single syllable. Squiddy closed his huge eye, sent off to dreamland by Abbot's magic touch.

"Drat," Kassy said, standing. "We're not much better off than we were before."

“Let’s hope Lothar and Caleb had more luck, then,” Abbot said. “Kassy, what do you have behind your back?”

“This?” she said with a blush. She brought her hands out from behind her back and tossed Abbot her comm-unit; the volume was off, but the distress signal was beeping a healthy rhythm. “I didn’t see any reason to let Squiddy know I was calling the meds. Nor could I just let him lie there bleeding to death.”

“Of course not,” Abbot agreed.

Aboard the S’hree Vek scout ship *Vigilance*, the mood was grim. The huge, crab-shaped craft, which looked like it was grown rather than built, was hiding within the rings of the gas giant Garouk-9. Blaster burns marred the red striped hull, badges of honor from a battle against a Consortium Warshield cruiser that had nearly crippled the *Vigilance* before it was able to escape. Now it hid among the asteroids and icesteroids that orbited Garouk-9, its crew trying to repair battle damage and hoping the radiation and debris from the planet’s rings would shield them from their enemy’s scans.

Celestine Joriel stood on the bridge, his crimson wings folded against his back, muscled arms crossed across his chest, eyeing the activity of his lessers with some disdain. The blocky, blue-skinned Haakon engineers were hard at work putting the ship back together while the thin-boned Tooranimoor ran diagnostic checks on all the ship’s systems, running through scenarios in case the Warshield cruiser arrived for a second round.

Everyone on board could feel the agitation of the Commissar, Lor Koushak Dail, as she floated in her tank of virium in the center of the bridge. Her tail lashed back and forth, sending ripples through the fluid, and her lip tentacles quivered. All six of her eyes tracked the movements of her lessers on the bridge and those on the rest of the ship, visible on the dozen screens that floated around her tank. She should have swam back to her quarters through the ceiling duct, where she could meditate and regain her strength so they could psi-jump back to friendly space, but Commissar Koushak couldn’t bring herself to leave her bridge while the ship was in such terrible shape.

Joriel suppressed a sneer. Commissar Koushak was a spoiled royal child given command too early, and her rashness would doom them all. It was too bad that there were only five Celestines aboard besides Joriel himself; another wing could have turned the tide against the Consortium ship. Or at least towed the *Vigilance* to a better hiding place.

A Tooranimoor took a step towards the Commissar’s tank, and Joriel sensed the telepathic connection between the two as the technician reported to his superior. Joriel’s hawk-like vision could see the Tooranimoor’s station, lit up like a fireworks display. The ship’s sensors had detected something interesting out there in the field of tumbling ice and rock.

<Joriel,> the Commissar's bass voice echoed in Joriel's mind. <Tech Jemmani has detected something strange just outside our doors. Take two of your people and investigate. It may be of some use to us.>

Joriel clicked his boots and bowed at the waist to his Adinum superior. He maintained a tight reign on his thoughts until he felt her withdraw from his mind, and then turned to go, his bright feathers flashing in the reflected light of the bridge's computers. He keyed his internal comm-unit and ordered Kalel and Kariel to meet him at the hanger bay.

He found them waiting when he arrived, their blue-black armor gleaming, shoulder length maroon hair tied into warrior's braids. Kalel was slightly taller than his sister, his feathers a darker red than hers, while she was both smarter and faster than her brother. Joriel had flown with them for most of their lives, and knew them to be smart, capable officers. Just the people he needed at his back while exploring some strange radiation out in the void.

"Three to exit," he told the ship's computer, and was rewarded with the grinding sound of the hanger bay doors opening. In a moment the force field would drop and the three Celestines would be sucked out into space, their natural element.

"Standard see-n-snatch," Joriel told Kalel and Kariel. "We do a visual on this oddity, and drag it back if it looks useful. Keep your eyes open and your blazers hot." As soon as he was finished, the force field shut down, and the three of them automatically spread their wings and took flight, out of the ship and into the planet's rings. Their wings were actually useless in space, but they were linked to the Celestines' internal grav systems. *All part of the image*, Joriel thought with more than a little bitterness.

With another thought, his blazer sprang to life in his hand, a three foot long filament of blue-white fire that could carve through a ship's hull in seconds. Joriel doubted he would need it, but regulations were regulations. As his wingmates fell into formation around him, their own blazers sprang to life. Joriel unclipped his hand-held computer from his belt with his free hand, and keyed it to the ship's bridge sensors with his thumb. Using the link, he tracked the strange emanations to their source, ducking and weaving his way around and through the floating chunks of ice and rock that hovered around him.

The sensors brought him to a small asteroid, barely larger than a human, floating alone in the void. At first he couldn't see anything remarkable about it, but as he drew closer the illumination from his blazer cast a shadow on the rock. It looked roughly human shaped, but indistinct and difficult to discern details. He glanced back at his wingmates, and then gestured for them to take up flanking positions near the rock. The shadow's shape did not alter at all, despite the shift in light source.

Joriel drew up alongside the asteroid and reached out with his free hand to touch the shadow. He expected his hand to pass right through it, or brush

up against cold rock, but instead he met the solid, warm resistance of a living body. Joriel grabbed the body and levered it to one side, flattening it against the surface of the asteroid. Sprawled on top of the asteroid, the figure took on entirely human dimensions, save for the fact that it remained shadowy and indistinct.

“Vigilance,” Joriel said into his internal comm-unit, “your anomaly appears to be a humanoid, unlike any I’ve ever seen before. The body appears to be made of shadow, but it’s solid enough to the touch. And it’s alive. Unconscious and not respiring, but it’s warmer than it should be floating out here.”

There was silence from the ship for a moment, as the Commissar weighed Joriel’s words.

<Bring it on board, Joriel,> the Commissar ordered. <We may be able to turn a profit on this venture yet.>

It was impossible to sigh in the vacuum of space, but Joriel did his best.

While they waited for Abbot and Kassy to return, Lothar pored over the datadisks Egis had reluctantly given them, while Caleb lounged in the copilot’s chair and tried to think of some way to turn the Prometheans’ meager knowledge to some advantage.

They had Harkonnen’s ship’s profile, manifest, crew information, and trajectory as it left Phase World. But Harkonnen’s ultimate destination was still one giant question mark that even Lothar, with his centuries of experience, couldn’t answer. Caleb doubted that his limited knowledge of the Three Galaxies would be of any use.

“Huo could be anywhere by now,” Lothar growled for the seventh time. “Even considering for a moment that Harkonnen continued in a straight line after leaving Phase World, there are literally thousands of habitable worlds they could have reached.” Lothar clenched his fists tightly, and he looked for a moment as if he might pound his console into dust, but instead sat back in his chair with a dejected look. “I hope Abbot had better luck.”

“We’ll know shortly,” Caleb said, as his own console notified him that the airlock had cycled open. Lothar grunted an acknowledgment and the two Cosmo-Knights waited in silence for Kassy and Doctor Abbot to reach the bridge.

“The two of you don’t look very enthusiastic,” Abbot said, taking a seat behind Lothar. “Do I surmise a similar lack of success?”

“You didn’t find anything?” Caleb groaned.

“Not much,” Kassy told them. “Harkonnen is working for Thraxus, and his job has something to do with a riot. Sadly, that’s all our contact could tell us because another Invincible Guardsman had already worked him over.”

“Romulus’ beard!” Lothar swore. “Thraxus? Are you certain?”

“I hate having to be redundant,” Caleb interjected, “but who is Thraxus?”

“Some say he’s the richest being in the Three Galaxies,” Abbot supplied. “He’s as old as Center, immortal and easily bored. He keeps himself amused by dabbling in galactic politics. What he’s up to now is anyone’s guess.”

“Well, if we know he’s involved, why don’t we stroll over to his place and ask him some questions?” Caleb asked. Kassy paled, looking stricken, while Abbot sat back in his chair as if the wind had gone out of him.

Lothar gave Caleb a calculating look. “Out of the mouths of pups,” he muttered.

“What?” Caleb asked. “What did I say?”

“Unfortunately, getting to Thraxus isn’t as easy as it may sound, even for us,” Lothar explained. “He maintains a heavily guarded sanctum on Center’s highest level, and has his own private army. He has tangled with Cosmo-Knights in the past as well, and always escaped unscathed. If we turned our attentions to Thraxus, we would have to abandon our hunt for Harkonnen and Huo. The enormity of the task would demand it.”

Caleb frowned. He had already had a taste of what passed for law and order in Center, and he was hardly surprised that known criminals could operate here with the blessings of the Prometheans. It still made him very angry, though, and not simply because it meant another dead end.

“Did you say ‘Huo’?” Kassy asked.

“Indeed,” Lothar growled. “We believe Harkonnen found a way around the curse Koguk and I placed on Huo, and was able to safely escort him off Phase World.” Lothar jabbed a thumb at the datadisks he and Caleb had taken from Egis. “Harkonnen is flying a refitted Scimitar class patrol cruiser, and he’s loaded it full of enough explosives to spark a minor war. His crew includes an Oni, a Relogian, a Kisent, and a Klikita. All armed to the teeth, and all presumably augmented with additional abilities. My guess is that the Klikita’s cold manipulation abilities were the key to Huo’s escape.”

“This is very bad,” Kassy said quietly. Lothar nodded emphatically.

“May I see those?” Abbot asked, gesturing towards the disks.

“Be my guest,” Lothar answered, standing up to give the shadowy mage a chance to peruse the information on his own.

“We’re still at square one,” Caleb grumbled. “In fact, we’re actually worse off than we were before. We know just enough to get us really worried, but not enough to do anything about it.”

“Hold on,” Kassy admonished. “Abbot is getting an idea.”

The doctor looked up at the mention of his name, his orange eyes blinking. “I’m not certain that I am,” he explained, “but I doubted a look at the information on my own would hurt.” Abbot focused his attention on Lothar, adding, “You didn’t mention this had Harkonnen’s trajectory mapped out.”

“It doesn’t help,” Lothar pointed out. “The Three Galaxies are simply too large.”

“I wouldn’t say that,” Abbot disagreed. “Look, what do we know about Harkonnen?”

“He’s smart and tough and ruthless,” Caleb suggested helpfully. “And he’s quit the only job in the universe he was cut out for.”

“Yes,” Abbot agreed. “He’s also about as subtle as a supernova. He blew up his own secret base to get Lothar off his back, and used an entire century of Invincible Guards to decimate a small convoy of blockade runners.”

“You’re saying that his destination is on that straight line the datadisks predicted,” Lothar said slowly, as if he didn’t quite believe Abbot.

“Well, it’s worth a shot,” Abbot said. He hit a button on the console, and a list of system names scrolled past the screen, reflecting blue light up into Abbot’s face and making him look more transparent than usual. “Here,” he said, jabbing another button. Abbot’s orange eyes flickered. “this one looks promising.”

Lothar leaned over Abbot’s shoulder. “The Dellian System.” Lothar growled deep in his throat, a rumbling sound that made the hairs on the back of Caleb’s neck stand up.

“Why do I have a bad feeling about this?” Caleb asked.

“The only inhabited planet in the Dellian System is the fourth from the sun,” Kassy explained, “a world known simply as Dellian-4. But the humans of the CCW have another name for it: Malthus’ World. It’s the most overly populated planet in the Three Galaxies, overrun by the native sentients, a species who call themselves the T’Zee. It’s a dirty, polluted, messy world, and the only place in the CCW where people can still starve to death. The Consortium has tried to fix things there for years, but the T’Zee like how their world is, and the CCW needs their nanotech too badly to press the issue.”

“A few explosives in the right places,” Lothar said in a dangerous voice, “could indeed start a riot. A riot that could escalate into a full scale war, pull CCW ships back from the Neutral Zone. It could give the TGE some breathing room, a chance to squash the rebellion or mount a serious offensive against the CCW. Maybe give the S’hree Vek Confederacy or the Splugorth a chance to get some punches in as well.”

“Worst case scenarios, certainly,” Abbot told Caleb. “And we’ve no way to be certain Dellian-4 is Harkonnen’s target save for visiting the planet ourselves.”

“Then why are we all suddenly so nervous?” Caleb asked.

The four adventurers stared at one another for a long moment. “I’ll get the ship prepped for takeoff,” Lothar told Abbot. “You call the Prometheans and let them know we’ll be out of their hair as soon as possible. Kassy, you and Caleb get to work on a subspace communication to the Consortium; maybe we can alert Dellian-4 before Harkonnen lands.”

Doctor Abbot, Kassiopeia Acherean and Caleb Vulcan stared at Lothar of Motherhome for a heartbeat, and then began to carry out their orders.

Chapter Eleven

Freedom

“Come to Dellian-4 and witness the wonders of nanotechnology firsthand! Marvel as reality is reshaped to your every wish, and thousands of nanite machines are at your disposal. On Dellian-4, your fantasies come alive!”

– A Dellian-4 Tourism Bureau advertisement

“Indeed, the entire Consortium of Civilized Worlds has benefitted from the nanites invented by the T’Zee of Dellian-4. Sadly, nowhere else in the Three Galaxies is in more desperate need of that miracle technology than its birthplace itself. Twenty-five billion sentients call Dellian-4 home, crammed into a living space that should only provide room for a quarter of that number. The ecosystem no longer exists, as virtually every living thing on the planet has been rendered extinct save for the T’Zee themselves. Even their oxygen is manufactured artificially, since there isn’t enough plant life on the world. The seas, shallow and acidic, have been plundered as well. Massive undersea arcologies are spreading across the ocean floor at an almost geometric rate. In another generation, perhaps two, all of Dellian-4 will be one massive city.

“This is a crisis waiting to happen. In an environment such as this, appalling abuses of power are common. The T’Zee punish over ninety percent of their crimes with the death penalty. Every day, a hundred thousand T’Zee die of starvation. The wealth and resources of the planet are held by a handful, while the rest are forced to eke out meager lives, rarely earning enough to get off-world to find a better life. But what is perhaps most distressing is that the rest of the CCW tolerates all of this.”

– “Malthus’ World,” trideo documentary

Six more T’Zee died in a blaze of actinic light as Quajinn Huo’s lightning washed over them. Above the thunderous aftershock of the magic bolt, Elias Harkonnen could hear Huo’s cackling laugh. The three T’Zee who had escaped Huo’s assault ducked into an adjoining corridor, screaming in their high-pitched voices. Harkonnen chuckled and strode forward, boot heels clicking on the polished floor of the corridor.

Behind him, Friar the Klikita, her breath frosting in the aura of cold air she manifested around herself, used her abilities to erect a wall of ice to deter pursuit. Tatsuda, the Oni martial artist, stood nearby, his violet skin flushed with exertion, and his hands humming with barely restrained power. Bark-faced Orix, his leafy hair tied back into a ponytail, followed at Harkonnen’s left, casually reloading his grav rail gun. The nine foot insectoid Hector, cradling a plasma ejector in his spindly limbs, hopped forward to stand beside the hovering Quajinn Huo in the center of the corridor.

Hector's antennae flickered on his domed forehead like nervous fingers. "The three are retreating at a rapid pace, but another squad of T'Zee are bringing up something big from that direction. Probably a cannon."

Quajinn Huo cackled again. "Let them come. None may stand before Quajinn Huo, Scourge of the Three Galaxies."

Harkonnen suppressed a sigh. He was beginning to regret bringing the Draconid sorcerer on this caper. Since escaping the curse that bound him to Center, the hub of the Three Galaxies, Quajinn Huo had grown more insufferable with each passing day. He had ruled an empire, Huo was fond of reminding them all, and he would not take orders from an Elf. Several times Harkonnen had been tempted to bash in the Draconid's skull, but he had resisted it. He needed Huo's considerable magical might to deal with the Cosmo-Knight Lothar of Motherhome. Further, Harkonnen had to admit that Huo's skills came in very handy in their current enterprise.

Thraxus of Center, one of the richest and most corrupt sentients in the Three Galaxies, had hired Harkonnen and his band to sabotage the food production facilities on Dellian-4. There were seven such facilities on the planet; massive, kilometer long factories that used nanotechnology to manufacture foodstuffs for the planet's burgeoning population. Organic material, shipped from off-world or recycled from native garbage and detritus, was transformed by nanite machines and then shipped all over the globe to feed the lower classes. The leaders of the T'Zee society, the so called "Captains of Industry," could afford better, of course. They probably wouldn't starve to death after Harkonnen destroyed all seven facilities.

They would die in the riots that followed, Harkonnen smiled grimly. The miracle nanotechnology of the T'Zee would be able to rebuild the facilities in record time; months instead of years, but the nanites wouldn't be able to feed twenty-five billion T'Zee for that amount of time.

This was their second raid. Already the T'Zorrian Kal Facility of the Southern Mek'loris Province was destroyed, burned from within by nuclear fire, its mighty engines destroyed and even its raw organic material contaminated by radiation. Immediately after setting the timer on the explosive left there, Harkonnen's team had teleported across the continent to the T'Zall Fvish Facility of the Northern Mek'loris Province, whisked there by the magic of Quajinn Huo. The T'Zee, reeling from the destruction of T'Zorrian Kal, were not yet prepared for a second raid on another facility, not so soon after the last. The security at T'Zall Fvish was not lax, but they were hardly more prepared than the defenses at T'Zorrian Kal had been.

That would change, further along, but the plan was a good one. Lightning fast strikes at each facility, followed by a quick magical escape to the next one. For all the aggravation Huo gave Harkonnen, the Elf had to admit that the mage was invaluable to the success of the mission.

“I’ll take this one,” Harkonnen told Huo. “The rest of you keep going. According to the plans Orix hacked, the power station should be only a few more levels down. I’ll be with you shortly.”

Quajinn Huo arched one pencil thin eyebrow, as if to object, but said nothing. The others grunted assent and began to jog down the corridor, weapons at the ready.

Harkonnen himself, gifted with the power of flight, lifted off the floor and sped down the branching hallway, after the fleeing T’Zee and Hector’s “cannon.”

He found them in short order. A dozen T’Zee, including what Harkonnen took to be the missing three, were piloting a hover cannon at medium speed down the passageway. About the size of a small hover car, the cannon wasn’t much of a vehicle, despite the way the T’Zee squad clung to its sides. It was little more than a weapon barrel and power source mounted on a grav sled, and it packed enough firepower to vaporize any living target. Besides the gun’s power, the dozen T’Zee scampering along it like monkeys were armed with their piranha guns, pistols that shot blobs of nanites that swarmed over a target, devouring flesh, metal, or any other substance they contacted.

Any normal being would have fled in terror from the massed firepower the T’Zee were bringing to bear. But Elias Harkonnen was not normal. He had never been normal, even before the biotechnological process that had transformed him from an Elf to an Invincible Guardsman. Now he could fly at supersonic speeds, possessed the strength and fortitude of a god, and had so far proven invulnerable to every attack laid against him.

Instead of running, then, he sped up. Before the T’Zee had a chance to react, he slammed into their hover cannon at several hundred kilometers an hour, his body burning through the machine like a laser beam. He exploded out the other side and rocketed down the corridor. Behind him, the hover cannon detonated, taking the T’Zee squad and much of the hallway with it. Harkonnen drew to a halt and then spun around, hurrying back the way he came, following his team.

He found them in a T shaped corridor, facing a bank of elevators. The T’Zee had erected a haphazard defense before the elevators. A security station provided minimal cover, but enough for the short, slim T’Zee to use. Another cannon hovered nearby, powering up for a second blast; one energy beam had already vaporized Hector.

Orix pinned down the T’Zee at the security station with a burst of Kisen-tite bullets that were beginning to shred the circular durasteel desk. Huo and Friar focused their energies on the cannon; Huo lobbed an energy bolt at the gunner, protected by an energy screen, while Friar was forming ice along the cannon’s muzzle. Tatsuda stood nearby, useless in the firefight and eyeing the scorched patch of ground that used to be Hector.

As Harkonnen flew into the room, Orix succeeded in blasting the security station to pieces, blowing apart the T'Zee huddling inside. The cannon was beginning to tip forward as several metric tons of ice formed on its barrel. Harkonnen buzzed past Huo and into the cannon itself, using his momentum to finish the movement begun by Friar; in a heartbeat the cannon tumbled onto its side, spilling the gunner on the ground. As the T'Zee frantically tried to draw his pistol, Harkonnen casually crushed his skull.

"That wasn't so bad, was it?" Harkonnen asked.

Tatsuda gestured at Hector's remains. "He's dead again. I told him to keep his head down, but the fool won't listen."

"He thinks he's invulnerable," Huo said softly.

Harkonnen looked at the Draconid sharply, but Huo just smiled enigmatically.

Orix jammed a fresh clip home into his oversized gun, and then slung it across his back. He loped over to the shredded security station, and shifted debris with his boot. "I was hoping to patch into their system from here, but the little uglies didn't give me much of a chance." He went to check the elevators instead.

There was a loud pop as Hector's molecules reformed two feet away from where he had died. He staggered for a moment. "Whoah," he said. "That was a doozy. Remind me to duck next time." He reached down and picked up his still intact plasma ejector, clucking in disappointment at the shape of the rest of his weaponry.

"Huo," Harkonnen said, "pull another set of gear from the ship for Hector. And Hector, stop taking stupid chances. You Relogians may have nine lives, but you've already lost two of them today. I'd be more careful if I were you."

Hector just shrugged. "I've got five left," he grumbled.

Huo stretched his hand into the air, folding space and time by force of will, and his hand disappeared, as if reaching into a hidden pocket hanging into the air. He pulled his arm back, and a heavy pack bristling with weaponry appeared in his hand. He casually tossed the pack to Hector, who caught it with a loud "oof."

"Orix," Harkonnen called. "Tell me some good news."

"These will get us down to the power station level, and only a few meters from the front door. If the plans were correct."

"They haven't been wrong so far," Friar offered. She sealed off the adjoining corridors with a thick wall of ice as she spoke.

"Well then," Harkonnen said. "Let's go."

The *Vigilance*, a crab-shaped scout ship of the S'hree Vek Confederacy, orbited the gas giant Garouk-9, hiding its damaged body within the planet's icesteroid rings. Having just barely survived an altercation with a Consortium

Warshfield cruiser, the *Vigilance* hoped to hide in the shadows of the gas giant while it effected repairs.

Lor Koushak Dail, Commissar of the *Vigilance*, floated in her tank of virium in the center of the bridge, her lip tentacles playing over the keys of the computer ringing the tank's base. Her ship was badly damaged, her crew uncertain, and her most powerful servants, the winged Celestines, were distrustful of her command skill. She had to admit – to herself alone, of course – that the leader of the Celestines, Joriel, had reason to be dissatisfied with her.

The *Vigilance* was her first command, and she had led them into an ambush. The Consortium craft had nearly destroyed them, and only a frantic and desperate psi-jump had saved her crew. Now she was drained of energy, unable to supply the faster-than-light engines of the *Vigilance* with the psionic energy of her six-lobed brain so that they could escape from Consortium space, back to the relative safety of a S'hree Vek system.

Rest and meditation would bring her strength back, but she couldn't spare the time. Officially she did so in order to oversee the repairs the Tooranimoor engineers were making, but privately she was afraid to return to the Confederacy empty handed, with her ship badly damaged. She was a royal of the House Koushak, and that status had given her a command post when, perhaps, she was not yet ready for it. She couldn't allow her family's enemies to learn of her transgression ... her failure ... without bringing something worth saving back to the Confederacy.

As luck would have it, a routine scan of the rings had picked up an interesting anomaly and she had sent the Celestines to investigate. They returned with a bizarre humanoid in tow, a figure who appeared to be composed entirely of shadows, yet possessed the warmth and solidity of a living being. That the figure could retain that warmth in the cold vacuum of space was also surprising, and Lor Koushak Dail began to believe that there might be a profit made from this venture after all.

At the moment, the stranger rested in the Commissar's quarters, an honor guard of Celestines keeping watch over his unconscious form. Joriel was instructed to alert her if the stranger showed any sign of regaining awareness.

As if bidden, her console lit up with Joriel's signal. The Commissar's lip tentacles quivered in anticipation. *<Second, you have the bridge. I will be in my quarters,>* she commanded with her mental voice, and the blue-faced, horn-headed Haakon second, Vor Jeffrik, snapped to attention beside her tank. Her elongated body twisted in the virium, and her powerful tale pumped twice, propelling her upward into the virium filled tunnel that gave her access to the rest of the ship.

In moments, she arrived in her quarters, a spartan room dominated by a much larger virium tank. Along the tank's bottom were her belongings, carefully ordered and organized files, tech, and keepsakes, each in their proper place.

A divan was erected outside the tank, along which rested the shadow person. Not far from it stood two Celestines. They were ugly creatures, modeled after the bipeds who dominated the Consortium of Civilized Worlds, the humans. S'hree Vek technology and ingenuity had improved on the basic human design, naturally. The Celestines were bio-mechanical androids, stronger, faster, and more lethal than a battalion of CCW marines, their artificial bodies packed with sensors, weapons, and other toys. Each Celestine sported a pair of feathery wings that erupted from their shoulders, the maroon of the feathers matching the shade of their hair and eyes perfectly. Although the Celestines actually flew through the use of internal gravitonic devices, the wings gave them the appearance of fearsome creatures from human mythology, an image that was only enhanced when they summoned their blazers, swords of psionic fire. Few beings in the Three Galaxies could stand up to a Celestine assault, but the shadow being did not fit the description of any known species in the databanks, so the Commissar had stationed two of the androids to watch over it.

<Report, Joriel,> Lor Koushak Dail commanded.

The male Celestine stepped forward. "The shadow achieved consciousness but a moment ago, Commissar. We alerted you immediately."

<What did it do?>

"I can speak for meself, you bloody great fish," the shadowy figure said, rising from its seat. The Commissar noted that the figure was featureless, save for two orange lights that might have been eyes. The Commissar locked two of her own orbs on the shadow and focused the other six on Joriel and Kariel, the Celestines. Neither had made any noticeable shift in stance or posture, and yet at a glance she knew they were ready to strike the shadow down at any sign of hostility.

<Then speak, sentient,> Lor Koushak Dail told the shadow. *<Who are you, and how did you end up floating in the void?>*

The orange eyes surveyed Joriel and Kariel as well. "Y'seem to have the upper hand at the moment, luv, so I'll play along," the shadow said after a moment. "I am Hazmat of the Shaar Continuum. I'm no native of your Three Galaxies. The Continuum sent me along to bring back one of our own, missing in this corner of the Megaverse for a bloody great while. As luck would have it, upon arriving in this reality I found meself in the hands of a psychotic fellow with pointy ears and too many teeth. But things went south for him and he blew his little fortress up. I escaped, of course, but barely, and had to float around in this bloody asteroid field for the Continuum knows how long. Eventually I had to shut down me bodily functions or risk derezzing. I suppose that's when your angels found me."

<Interesting,> the Commissar said. She only understood about half of what the figure said. He spoke Galactic Trade Four with an exotic accent. She reached out with her senses, attempting to probe the strange man, but

her powers were blocked by a wall. Her lip tentacles quivered in surprise and frustration.

The shadowy figure's orange eyes twinkled. "I wouldn't try that again, luv. I may look harmless, but I'm far from it. Now then, I owe ya something for your trouble. And what's more, I need yer help if I'm to get anywhere looking for that missing man. So I'll offer you the same deal I offered ol' pointy ears. He refused, but I've a feeling you'll be wanting to think it over."

The Commissar ignored the sneer on Joriel's humanoid features. *<Go on, Hazmat of the Shaar,>* she prompted. *<We will entertain whatever you have to offer.>*

Hazmat nodded. "The Continuum has pan-dimensional resources. We're a bit spread thin these days, which is why a fellow like me gets a job like this, but I can promise you a healthy reward in return for yer help."

<What kind of reward?> the Commissar asked.

The eyes were twinkling again. "Well, besides the requisite material rewards of precious materials, there is also the possibility of arcane knowledge to be had. As I mentioned, we're a pan-dimensional organization. We know lots of things that other folks want t'know."

The Commissar eyed her guest warily. It was worth a try, she thought. *<We would require some sort of demonstration first,>* she said.

"If you can set me down on the ground of a living planet, so I can recharge me batteries as it were, I can show you what I mean."

<That can be arranged,> the Commissar agreed. She turned her attention to Joriel. *<Show Lor Hazmat to suitable quarters,>* she ordered. *<I will confer with the bridge, and then I am not to be disturbed for any reason.>*

Joriel nodded perfunctorily and took Hazmat by the elbow to escort him from the room. As he did so, Lor Koushak Dail keyed her comm with one tentacle, and with another opened a cask at the bottom of her tank and began to pull out her meditation disk.

Aboard Lothar's borrowed freighter, the mood was tense. Since leaving Phase World and engaging the phase drive, making the shift from normal speed to faster-than-light, Lothar had uttered little save the occasional disgusted grunt. Doctor Abbot, clad as always in trench coat and fedora, played with his cane, his shadowy features darker than usual. Kassiopaea Acherean, Atlantean Undead Slayer, pored over the computer display before her, occasionally hitting buttons but not saying much.

In the co-pilot seat sat Caleb Vulcan, newly minted Knight of the Forge. He understood why everyone else felt edgy, and actually found the feeling contagious. After tracking a fugitive named Elias Harkonnen to Phase World, they had discovered Harkonnen had left the planet with a strike force in his employ, loaded for bear, and further, that he had freed a deadly galactic des-

pot from a curse placed upon him by Lothar himself. Unsure of Harkonnen's ultimate destination, they had used what meager clues they found on Phase World to decide he was heading for the small world of Dellian-4. There were literally millions of worlds for Harkonnen to choose to practice his villainy, but with the limited information at their disposal, and the tiny time frame they were allowed, the Cosmo-Knights and their allies were forced to play Abbot's hunch. Their informer on Phase World had mentioned a "riot," and Harkonnen's escape trajectory from the planet's surface pointed him in a straight line to the T'Zee homeworld.

They might already be too late to make a difference. But if they arrived at Dellian-4 and discovered nothing amiss, they might lose their chance to stop Harkonnen from committing an unconscionable evil. Harkonnen's ship's manifest, obtained from the Promethean authorities of Phase World, had listed ten nuclear devices on board.

Caleb was reassured that his more erudite and well traveled friends had been as horrified as he to learn what Harkonnen was carrying. On Caleb's homeworld of Earth, somewhere outside the Three Galaxies, his generation was raised under the threat of nuclear holocaust. His father, a career military man, had seen the devastation of Hiroshima and Nagasaki firsthand, only weeks after the bombings. It was not something his father liked to recall, and Caleb had grown up fearing nuclear war more than most people his age; especially the year that he had left Earth. American soldiers fought communism in Vietnam, provoking Soviet aggression, while Soviet tanks drove through the streets of Prague, threatening civilians. Thinking of it now, Caleb felt guilty that he had left it behind. With all the power at his disposal as a Cosmo-Knight, he could make a real and lasting difference on Earth. For that matter, bringing proof of other intelligent beings back to Earth might make people wise up and ignore the differences among them, to present a united human front to the aliens.

Kassy interrupted Caleb's reverie. "Caleb, what do you know of the T'Zee?" she asked, tapping him on the shoulder.

Caleb started, and then spun his chair around to face her. "Not much," he admitted. "Just what you and Lothar mentioned before, that the planet is overpopulated and that Harkonnen could spark a war if we don't stop him."

"A definite possibility," Kassy admitted. "The T'Zee have managed to perfect nanotechnology," she explained, "creating microscopic machines that can reshape their environment. A number of Consortium civilizations have attempted to do the same thing, but none of them have achieved the success of the T'Zee. This has made the T'Zee very rich and very powerful, and it has led to some horrid policy decisions by the CCW. To keep the Kreeghor, Naruni, or S'hree Vek from getting their hands on the T'Zee technology, the CCW allowed Dellian-4 entry into the Consortium despite flagrant and

abusive sentient-rights abuses. To this day, Dellian-4 is the only planet in the Consortium upon which people still starve to death.”

Caleb nodded. He realized he came from a backward, savage world where people also continued to die of starvation, but he knew that the advances in technology and culture possessed by the civilizations of the Three Galaxies should have made that possibility remote in the extreme. “But the Three Galaxies are huge,” he protested. “Why doesn’t everybody relocate offworld, and spread out the resources.”

“Poverty,” Abbot said, chiming in, his upper-class British accent hardly bothering Caleb any longer. “Nanotech has made a few T’Zee very wealthy. Most of the twenty-five billion sentients who call the planet home live in squalor. A few hundred thousand die a day. But with the high T’Zee birth rate, several times that number are also born in the same span of time. The CCW has tried shipping people offworld, but they haven’t had much success. The T’Zee as a people have a reputation for cruelty, underhandedness, and disloyalty. That, combined with the possibility that they could outbreed native species, keeps planets from accepting many T’Zee immigrants. Sadly, few T’Zee seem to possess the drive to found colonies of their own.” Abbot sighed. “The whole situation is a galactic mess. And Harkonnen complicates matters considerably.”

“If that’s his destination,” Lothar growled, finally breaking his long silence. Everyone stared at him. He growled again. “I’ve been thinking about what Thraxus has to gain from all this,” he said. “The obvious threat of military conflict can’t be ignored. Consortium Armed Forces are spread pretty thinly across CCW space; pulling in enough ships to provide aid and protection to Malthus’ World could weaken the borders with the Kreeghor or the S’hree Vek. If that’s the case, Thraxus could make a great deal of cash selling munitions to the border systems, or other contested spots – there are a lot of Warshields patrolling the Goruda system, for example. But what if Thraxus isn’t looking for a war? He could clean up selling food and medical supplies to Dellian-4. Or he might have more ... political reasons for sending Harkonnen.”

“What do you mean?” Abbot prompted.

“You said it yourself. Dellian-4 is a big embarrassment to the CCW. What if Thraxus is doing them a favor, cleaning up their mess for them?”

“Lothar,” Kassy said, “that’s ridiculous!”

Caleb had to agree. “I thought the CCW was the good guys,” he said.

Lothar shook his head. “Mostly, pup, that’s true. You’d be hard pressed to find a more egalitarian society in the Three Galaxies. But keep in mind there are Wulfen and Kamnions in the CCW, and due to external threats like the Kreeghor and the Splugorth, the Consortium Armed Forces has a lot of power. They can be ruthless when they need to be, and corruption has reared

its ugly head on occasion. Abbot and Kassy remember the Admiral Rothschild debacle.”

“Regardless,” Abbot interjected. “You haven’t a shred of proof.”

“True,” Lothar admitted. “But that doesn’t keep me from speculating. And there’s not much else to do while this slow ship burns photons.”

“We should work on an attack plan,” Kassy said. “It will help keep your imagination in check.” Lothar snorted. Kassy ignored him, keying something on her terminal. “Now, besides Harkonnen himself, there’s a good chance we’ll have to deal with Quajinn Huo. That’s bad. Worse, Harkonnen has assembled a formidable little team to help him. The foursome he has would have been arrested in just about any port besides Phase World, which is saying a lot.

“First, a Relogian weapons expert named Hector. He’s wanted in at least a dozen systems for assassination, terrorism, and assorted acts of violence. He was tried and convicted once; the sentence was execution. But like all Relogians, he has a weird ability to cheat death. Since he was convicted in CCW space, they had to settle for the one execution and were forced to let him go. Too bad he didn’t get caught by the Kreeghor.

“Next is a Kisent pilot and computer expert called Orix. Even by Kisent standards he’s a monster. Hard as Kisentite steel and twice as deadly. He’s served in a dozen militias the Three Galaxies over, piloting everything from Fire-eaters to Katana starfighters. I don’t know how good he is on the ground, but he’s definitely an ace pilot. Has over a hundred confirmed kills.

“There is also an Oni by the name Tatsuda. Not much on him, so I did a little digging. Your ship has some extensive and esoteric files, Lothar. The Bushi Federation is very interested in Tatsuda, in particular a group known as the White Lotus. Tatsuda used to work for them, but now he’s on his own; in short he’s a renegade shadow warrior, trained in the arts of espionage and assassination. He’s most deadly when he’s unarmed, Caleb, so watch him.

“The one to watch most closely, however, is the last one. A Klikita named Friar, who has manifested the Klikita gene for cold manipulation. Fairly common for someone raised on an ice planet like the Klikita homeworld. She made a name for herself in the border wars with her planet’s other native sentients, the Aluta, but branched out into terrorism and work as a gun for hire. She’s a slippery one, and has managed to evade capture by various authorities on twelve separate occasions. She’s a demon with her ice powers.

“So, what’s the plan?”

Lothar cleared his throat. “Abbot and I will engage Harkonnen and Huo. The rest will be up to you and Caleb.” He eyed the two of them. “This is very important, so listen carefully. Neither of you is to attempt to handle Huo or Harkonnen. Leave them to us. That is not to denigrate your abilities Kassy, but those two will be too much for you. And Caleb ... I wish we had more time to train you before rushing into a dangerous situation like this.”

“I’m not a ‘pup,’ despite what you think,” Caleb told him. “I can handle this. I took out the Zodoran energy leech, didn’t I?”

Lothar nodded. “Indeed, but that was a machine, however deadly. How will you do against the living? If you have to kill one of them, what will you do? Kassy and Abbot I can count on; we’ve fought together in the past. I can trust them to do the right thing. But you’re untried, Caleb. Neither you nor I know exactly how you’ll do until we’re in the midst of the battle.”

Caleb flushed. “I’ll do my duty,” he said.

“I’m sure you will,” Lothar agreed. “But will that be enough?”

“Lothar,” Abbot interjected, “you’re too hard on the boy. He’ll do fine. There is a distinct possibility we can resolve this situation without resorting to lethal force.”

Lothar snorted. “I hope so, Abbot. But I fear we won’t have the chance. If Huo is alive and aiding them, we will need to strike fast and hard or else we won’t survive, let alone persevere. Harkonnen won’t be pulling any punches, but if Huo is there, we have no real counter. Dealing with him and the others will take every resource at our disposal. Remember the battle of the Draconid Hub, Abbot? We had Koguk, Callista, and a fleet of ships at our backs and Huo still almost managed to defeat us. As it was, he got away.”

“And we may have to let him do so again,” Abbot told his friend. “A wise sentient once told me, ‘The important thing to do is save lives. The rest comes later.’ I’m afraid your passion for Huo may be getting the better of you.”

Lothar grinned ruefully. “This is why I can never keep you around for long. You’re always throwing my words back at me.” He sighed. “The first thing we do is disarm those bombs of theirs. Without those, they’re much less of a threat. That still doesn’t change the order of battle, however. Kassy and Caleb, you’re dealing with the henchmen. See what you can do about the nuclear weapons. Abbot and I will keep Huo and Harkonnen busy.”

“Now that,” Kassy said, “sounds like a plan.”

Caleb felt a great deal of relief at Lothar’s change of attitude. He had meant what he said; he would do his duty. But he really didn’t want his duty to include killing anyone. It had never been one of his life’s goals after all; even with a career military father, Caleb had declined to join the army. So they had drafted him. The Cosmic Forge granted him a reprieve, summoning him to the Three Galaxies to serve as one of its representatives. But he couldn’t imagine the kind face of the Forge demanding an execution, or ordering Caleb to kill for it.

Maybe someday he would be faced with the choice. Maybe he would face it in a few hours, trading blows against Harkonnen and Huo, but Caleb hoped he could save the day without anyone dying. Bad guys, good guys, or the innocent T’Zee trapped in between.

His eyes were suddenly drawn to his console, where a red blinking light flickered. “There’s a message coming in,” he announced, keying the comm.

A high-pitched voice in an alien tongue began to chatter, and it took a long moment for the ship's translator to kick in. "Attention all sentients, this is a distress call from Dellian-4. Our food production facilities are under attack, and all attempts at repulsion have failed. Two of our largest facilities lie in ruins, and we fear more will follow. The militia has failed. We require assistance. Attention all sentients..." The message continued to play, and Caleb keyed the sound off.

"Looks like Abbot's guess was an accurate one," he said softly.

"Part of me wishes I had been incorrect," Abbot said.

"Caleb," Lothar said, "send Dellian-4 a message. Let them know we're coming, and that we'll be there within the hour. They should be able to hold off Harkonnen that long, at least."

"Aye, aye, Captain," said Caleb.

Chapter Twelve

The Battle

“You will discover Cosmo-Knights to be some of the most valuable allies the Consortium worlds possess. Very few of you have ever seen a Cosmo-Knight up close and personal, let alone one in action. Certainly, like most sentients, you’ve seen figures like Lothar, Ariel, or Vyking on trideo stations, captured for posterity by newscasters of a thousand worlds. They are impressive creatures, Cosmo-Knights. Resplendent in metallic armor, wielding devastating weapons of archaic design, gliding effortlessly through the vacuum of space. They look pretty on the trid screen.

“It is different out in the field. Vastly different. When the claxons are ringing in your ears and the Kittani war cruiser or Kreeghor dreadnought is bearing down upon you, one hundred million tons of screaming steel, and the only thing standing between you and utter destruction is a two meter tall being of Cosmic Forge blessed flesh... that, cadets, is when you realize just what the Cosmo-Knights mean to the CCW, and to the Three Galaxies. They are a thin metallic line between chaos and order, and they make our job look easy by comparison.”

*– Preface to a lecture by Captain Hiram Starling,
Consortium Armed Forces Fleet Command*

“One down, six to go,” muttered Elias Harkonnen as the last T’Zee hover cannon in the vast room detonated, becoming a spiraling fireball as it plummeted down the reactor shaft. The Elf, late of the Invincible Guard, a special cadre of super powered soldiers in the Kreeghor Imperial Legion, was not referring to the pitiful defenses of the T’Zee, shattered by Harkonnen and his team of saboteurs. He referred, instead, to the six remaining food distribution centers on Dellian-4, the T’Zee homeworld.

The small, hairy humanoid species that populated Dellian-4 possessed a high birth rate that multiplied their numbers on a geometric scale across their planet. The T’Zee had terraformed their homeworld, driving to extinction nearly all other native life, including plants and microscopic organisms. But the T’Zee had mastered nanotechnology, creating billions of tiny machines to expand their cities across the globe, to manufacture oxygen and nitrogen to fill the atmosphere, and also to convert raw organic material into a suitable foodstuff to feed the twenty-five billion sentients that called Dellian-4 home. There existed six processing plants that manufactured the nutritive paste most T’Zee subsisted upon; only an hour before, there had been seven.

Until Elias Harkonnen destroyed it, at the behest of a man called Thraxus, said to be the richest – and most cruel – sentient in the Three Galaxies.

The T'Zorrian Kal Facility of Southern Mek'loris Province, along with several hundred city blocks surrounding it, was a smoking ruin. Now, Harkonnen and his team prepared to do the same to the T'Zall Fvish Facility of the Northern Mek'loris Province, and then the other five in turn.

Luckily, Harkonnen was invulnerable, super strong, and capable of independent flight, making him a one Elf wrecking crew. He also had in his employ one of the Three Galaxies' most powerful mages, a Draconid named Quajinn Huo, and a team of hard-bitten mercenaries who all manifested unique and powerful talents. With them at his side, Harkonnen had struck down the last defenses the T'Zee of T'Zall Fvish had mustered. Now Orix, the bark-faced Kisent technician, would plant the nuclear bombs Quajinn Huo had summoned from Harkonnen's ship, which lay cloaked in orbit around the planet. Once Orix finished, Quajinn would teleport them all to the D'Mekton Klor Facility of Huk'tdon Province.

"Orix, get to work," Harkonnen growled. "Friar and Tatsuda," he added, gesturing towards the cold manipulating Klikita and the Oni martial artist, "help him set up the detonators. Huo, get ready to jump us out of here in a moment." The Relogian, Hector, looked to Harkonnen for orders as well. "Look busy," the Elf snapped, and the insectoid warrior hopped to comply.

It was a good life, Elias Harkonnen decided. Everything was going according to plan. The T'Zee were technicians, not warriors, and though they could throw twenty-five billion people at the invaders, even that could not stop Elias Harkonnen. He was invincible, after all.

He felt the skin on the back of his neck prickle. Had he any hair, he knew it would be standing up. Harkonnen turned on his heel and gazed down the long catwalk to the end of the chamber. The air there was shimmering. A gateway was opening.

"Huo, is this your doing?" Harkonnen demanded.

The Draconid, hovering in the air with his legs crossed, his staff balanced across his lap, shook his white mane. "It appears we've attracted the attention of some heroes," Quajinn Huo said darkly.

Caleb Vulcan swallowed, though his mouth was dry. At a breakneck pace he and his friends had raced from Phase World in the tri-galactic hub, to the small planet known as Dellian-4 in the Consortium of Civilized Worlds. The four of them had reached Dellian-4's orbit only moments ago, and now they stood poised to attack the mad Elias Harkonnen and his band of killers.

This was what Caleb Vulcan was born to do. Moments like this were why he existed, why the Cosmic Forge had chosen him and transformed him from Arizona high school senior to Cosmo-Knight, guardian of the Three Galaxies. Or so Caleb tried to remind himself. He didn't relish the coming battle, nor did he truly wish to unleash "lethal force" as his mentor had ordered. Yet

Caleb couldn't resist the call to justice, either. Elias Harkonnen was waging genocide on an alien world, and it was Caleb Vulcan's duty to stop him.

The realization did not still the butterflies in his stomach.

"You okay, Caleb?" Kassiopaea Acherean asked softly, putting a hand on Caleb's shoulder. Kassy was tall and long-limbed, with glossy black hair that fell almost to her waist and bright, ice blue eyes. She was easily the most beautiful woman Caleb had ever met. On Earth, she could have been a fashion model, but the blue and white tattoos decorating Kassy from wrist to shoulder marked her as a warrior, an Atlantean Undead Slayer.

"I'm fine," Caleb managed to say. "Just a little nervous."

"As well you should be," Doctor Abbot chimed in, his upper class British accent incongruous with his alien features. Abbot appeared to be a being of pure shadow, save for the twin orange lights that served as his eyes. The trench coat and fedora he wore made him look more substantial than a shadow, however, as did the ever-present cane in his hands. "We're heading into a war zone," the doctor added. "Lack of nervousness would be cause for concern, not the possession of it."

"Enough," growled Lothar of Motherhome. Seven feet of emerald armor and attitude, the Wulfen Cosmo-Knight was not known for his patience. "We have a world to save. Now, the T'Zee have informed us that Harkonnen has penetrated into the heart of the T'Zall Fvish Facility. While the T'Zee mass their forces in the other plants, we're going in to save T'Zall Fvish. Abbot, if you would do the honors?"

Doctor Abbot adjusted his hat. His eyes began to glow in the depths of his shadowy face, and Caleb could hear strange sounds coming from Abbot's invisible mouth. A heartbeat later, reality twisted, and the four of them were transported off the bridge of Lothar's ship to the bowels of the T'Zee food production plant.

Despite himself, Caleb gasped in surprise. He wasn't sure what he expected, but it wasn't what he saw before him.

The reactor chamber was vast in dimensions, surrounding a massive central pylon that hummed with energy and shimmered with golden light. A broad platform encircled the pylon, with dozens of narrow walkways, pipes, cables and conduits snaking off to connect with the walls hundreds of feet away. The pylon reached downwards several miles into the planet's crust, creating a shaft of rock and steel. If Caleb had understood Kassy correctly, then the entire room was composed of billions and billions of machines, each smaller than his thumbnail and most as tiny as a single molecule. Working together, all those machines created the main reactor of the food distribution plant – the pylon humming with power, boring into the planet's surface and transforming the very crust of the planet into both the energy it required, and tons and tons of "burl," the paste most of the planet's population subsisted upon.

The bodies of a dozen short, thin humanoids were scattered about the catwalks, marked with the burn marks of laser fire or ripped to shreds by bare hands. The perpetrators of this horrid crime stood upon the central platform, staring in shocked disbelief at the arrival of Caleb and his friends.

An angular humanoid with skin like tree bark hunched near the pylon itself, a case of tools laid out before him. A woman in military style garb stood nearby, holding a heavy metal case in her hand. Behind and to the left, a massively muscled purple alien in black armor held another such case. On the other side of the pylon, almost hidden from Caleb's view by the sparks of energy given off by the reactor itself, stood a tall, thin, armored figure with antennae and compound eyes. Those would be the mercenaries.

The really dangerous beings stood together at the end of the very catwalk Caleb stood upon. The lizard faced, white-maned figure in the robes had to be the wizard, Quajinn Huo. Huo was hovering in the air, with a serene look on his face that quickly turned to rage when he recognized Lothar. On the ground beside him stood a thin, angular being in red and black armor. His head was bare, save for a black skullcap, revealing large ears that each tapered to a point. His opaque white eyes were rimmed with black, but Caleb could still read the expression on Elias Harkonnen's face.

Confusion. Good.

Red light flashed around Caleb as he called up his second skin, the armor that was his legacy as a Cosmo-Knight. The armor, reminiscent of a Roman centurion's garb, was metallic red in color, with the gaps showing the deep black of the void. Caleb saw Kassy create a bow of blue light by touching a tattoo at her wrist, and Lothar summoned his emerald green battle ax with a flourish. Abbot's eyes were still glowing, and his trench coat flapped with a breeze Caleb couldn't feel.

Harkonnen glanced back at his people, setting the bombs at the base of the pylon, as Quajinn Huo uncoiled from his meditative stance like a snake.

"Going to run again, Harkonnen?" Lothar called across the intervening distance. The Elf's attention snapped back to Caleb's friends.

"Orix," Harkonnen barked. "Set the detonators. Everyone else: kill them."

Huo waved his hand, and the crystal set in his staff flashed with light. The catwalk beneath Caleb disappeared, startling the young Knight. Kassy squawked and started to fall, and Caleb instinctively went after her, catching her neatly in his arms.

Lothar, with the same disregard for gravity that Caleb possessed, launched himself at Harkonnen and Huo, emerald beams of energy flashing from his eyes and his ax cocked for a devastating strike. Abbot landed lightly on a shadowy platform that formed beneath his feet and carried him towards the battle.

"Remember the plan," Kassy told Caleb.

“Right,” he agreed. His voice sounded deeper to his ears, with an annoying echo quality. He hated wearing the armor, but he knew he would need the added protection against the mercenaries. With Kassy in his arms, Caleb ducked under a pipe and circled the pylon. Blaster fire traced his path across the room, telling him that the bad guys knew he was on the way.

“Fly up there and throw me at the Kisent,” Kassy told him.

“Throw you?” Caleb squeaked.

“Trust me,” she said.

“Right.” The Kisent was the tree faced guy, Caleb reminded himself. He flew up towards the platform, instinctively dodging the energy beams flashing towards him, and when they cleared the guard rails, he tossed Kassy towards the hunched Kisent and his tools.

But a beam of frost knocked Kassy out of the air, forcing her to crash hard on the platform. She snarled a curse and rolled as more ice hit her. The woman in the military garb, the Klikita, was conjuring ice and snow from the very air, and hurling it at Kassy with devastating results.

The insectoid, the Relogian, readied his laser rifle and blasted Caleb with it. The beams glanced off the Knight’s armor. Caleb decided the Relogian was pretty stupid; he should have known better than to use an energy weapon against a Cosmo-Knight. Then someone grabbed his ankle and spun Caleb though the air to crash into the platform.

I’m the idiot, Caleb realized. *The Relogian was distracting me, so the Oni kung-fu master could flip me.* Caleb rolled to his feet as the Oni’s fist dented the metal platform. Another blast from the Relogian bounced off the crest of Caleb’s helmet. Instinctively, Caleb turned his attention toward the gunman, and took a punch that almost tore his head off for his trouble. The armor took the brunt of the blow, but as it was a part of Caleb, he could still feel the impact of the Oni’s fist.

You’re immune to energy attacks, Caleb reminded himself, turning back to the Oni. *But this guy can still break every bone in your body. Pay attention.*

Up close, the Oni was quite impressive. Seven feet tall, massively muscled, clad in a black body stocking with strategically placed bits of armor, he cut a dashing figure. Worse, despite his bulk he was as lithe and athletic as a dancer. Caleb could take him out with one cosmically charged blast of energy from his eyes, but that would probably kill the Oni. Caleb wasn’t ready to do that, not just yet.

As he was internally debating the best course of action, the Oni was moving. A sharp kick to the solar plexus doubled Caleb over, leaving him open to a pair of open hand strikes across his shoulders that, were Caleb anything but a Cosmo-Knight, would have dropped him like a log. Caleb recovered quickly, his Forge-tempered stamina allowing him to shrug off the Oni’s strikes. He could match the Oni’s speed, too, Caleb knew. The young Knight lashed

out with his own fists, hoping to knock the alien out with a well placed blow to the jaw or temple.

The Oni laughed, revealing sharp, predator's teeth, as he blocked Caleb's clumsy swing and then cut Caleb's feet out from under him. As Caleb hit the floor, he saw Kassy's upper body encased in ice, and the Klikita adding more, chuckling as she did so. The Atlantean was pinned to the ground by the weight of it. Her weapon was dispelled, and she was almost certainly suffocating within the frosty prison.

Caleb felt a surge of anger, hot and pulsing, well up in his breast. The Oni hit him in the head again, and Caleb felt his helmet crack.

On the other side of the platform, the battle was going just as badly. Huo had launched a dozen mystic bolts at Lothar, but Abbot blocked them with a hastily raised shield, leaving the Knight to deal with the former guardsman.

Huo turned to Abbot then, saying, "I remember you too, Doctor," in a voice cold enough to chill Abbot's bones, had he any. "Lothar will keep," he added, and sheathed himself within a mystic shield of blue light. Beams of light lashed out from his fingers, but Abbot deflected them with a wave of his hand.

Abbot's eyes flashed as he made an attack of his own, calling shadow figures out of the ether to bedevil the Draconid sorcerer. But before the artificial beings were within a meter of their target, Quajinn Huo blasted them apart. "Is that the best you can do, Doctor?" Huo taunted. "Unless you brought Koguk or Callista with you, I'm afraid this contest will be short."

A sizzling arc of light leapt from the tip of Huo's staff. Abbot tried to block in time, but he was too slow; the bolt cut through him, burning the shadowy tissues of his body. Abbot howled, and wavered on his conjured levitation disc. Quajinn Huo cackled, his magic light getting brighter.

Despite the risk, Abbot divided his attention. Abbot was powerful, much stronger in magical might than most native magic wielders in the Three Galaxies, but Quajinn Huo surpassed him by several factors. Abbot had hoped, though never dared believe, that Huo's powers had waned during his exile on Phase World. Such was not the case; indeed, Huo appeared to be much stronger than the last time Abbot had faced him, during the climactic battle for the control of the United Worlds of Warlock ages ago. Then, Abbot had been little more than an apprentice magic-user. He had paled before the blazing light controlled by the Wulfen shaman Koguk or the dark sorceress Callista, whose combined might had distracted Huo long enough for Lothar and a rag-tag fleet of battle ships to take out Huo's fleet. During that encounter, Abbot had been little more than a witness to awesome destruction. But he had learned much since then, and he believed himself equal to the task of dealing with Quajinn Huo.

He had made a prideful mistake that just might cost billions their lives, Abbot lamented. He needed an edge. Even as he conjured up a vortex of

black light to confound the Draconid, Abbot reached out with his arcane senses and sought a ley line or nexus, a font of magical power, the manifestation of the planet's life-force, a power which Abbot could tap into and use. Most wizards, Huo included, needed to be practically on top of such a power source in order to make use of it. However, Abbot had discovered at a young age that, as in many things, he was different from the norm. Even from remote distances he could feel the ebb and flow of a planet's magical lines of force, and could call upon them to bolster his incantations.

There, at the edge of Abbot's perceptions, he could feel a throb of power. It was weak, though, so terribly weak. The depredations the T'Zee had delivered upon their environment had weakened the planet's very life-force, leaving the ley lines dim and weary. There wasn't much to work with, Abbot realized, but he needed all the help he could get. As Huo blasted away the black light vortex, Abbot opened a channel to the ley line.

On the catwalk below, two titans clashed, one in red and black and the other in emerald green. Lothar had the advantage of height and reach, as well as a glittering battle ax in hand and the ability to emit beams of light from his eyes, but Elias Harkonnen had been transformed into an invulnerable soldier by Kreeghor bioengineers. No physical attack could harm him, no matter how hard Lothar struck. The same could not be said of Lothar, however.

Harkonnen and Lothar traded strikes that could dent a starship, but only Lothar felt the impact, staggering under the hail of blows Harkonnen laid upon him. The Elf laughed as the ax glanced off his side and Lothar's fist connected with his chin. He responded with a left hook that nearly shattered Lothar's jaw, sending a white fang and a spray of blood flying over the lip of the catwalk.

Lothar didn't flinch, however. With his free hand he grabbed Harkonnen by the wrist and spun him around. "Enough games," he snarled, launching a kick with all the Forge enhanced strength at his disposal. Harkonnen grunted as he sailed into the air, flashing past Huo and startling the Draconid mage.

"Abbot!" Lothar shouted. "We're switching!" A beam of emerald light flashed from the Knight's eyes, glancing off Huo's magic shield. Quajinn snarled and turned his attention towards Lothar.

Harkonnen arrested his own movement, halting in mid-air, upside down but whole and unharmed. "Pfaugh," he grunted, as Lothar engaged Quajinn Huo. "Let the two kill each other," he said. Then a beam of intense cold slammed into him and sent him spinning again. He yelped in pain.

Pain! The cursed shadow wizard had cut through his defenses. Harkonnen hated magic. He oriented himself for an attack even as the wizard tossed another beam of darkness towards him. Harkonnen dodged it, and blasted towards the wizard at top speed.

Across the way, Caleb's anger finally got the better of him. Without thinking, he cut loose with an eyebeam at full power. He was aiming for the

kung-fu master, but the Oni was too quick by far. He leapt into a somersault, tumbling through the air to land on his feet on the other side of Caleb. But the Knight's attack was not wasted. The Relogian had foolishly positioned himself behind the Oni, and took the full brunt of Caleb's ire in the chest. The blast burned through him, the force of the energy disintegrating his trunk and leaving his head and limbs to fall to the platform with meaty thumps.

Even through the haze of anger, Caleb felt a pang of regret. But Kassy had told him that Relogians possessed a bizarre mutation that granted them multiple lives; he might be dead now, but he would get better. Thinking of Kassy reminded Caleb that his friend was suffocating to death. Caleb bounded to his feet, hoping to take out the Klikita, but found his way blocked by the grinning Oni.

Purple fists lashed towards Caleb's head. The young Knight stepped back and out of reach, thankful for the preternatural speed and reflexes the Forge had granted him. With two feet of empty space between them, Caleb made a backhanded blow towards the Oni, who, bemused, didn't bother to block or dodge.

Mistake.

In mid-swing a red bar formed in Caleb's hand, solidifying into the massive red sledgehammer that served as his personal weapon. The Oni had a moment to look surprised, and then the hammer connected with the crack of snapping ribs. The Oni was knocked off his feet, sliding across the platform to slam into the guard rails. Caleb didn't slow. He tossed the hammer at the Klikita, knocking her into the air to crash into the energy screen surrounding the pylon.

Caleb crouched down next to Kassy. If he hit the ice to break it off, he could kill her by accident. If he tried to burn the ice away with a heat beam, he could melt Kassy's face off as well. And if he did nothing, she would die. Through the warped lens of the ice, Caleb could see Kassy's face twisted into a silent scream. He didn't hesitate another moment, cutting loose with a low powered blast from his eyes that shattered the ice, freeing Kassy. She flopped to the floor, coughing and gasping for air.

Caleb put a hand on her shoulder to reassure her, and glanced around. The Klikita was dazed, but rising. The Oni, bloody and angry, had found his feet, and some weird gas was forming over the Relogian's remains. Tree-face the Kisent was nowhere to be found, but the big metal casings housing the bombs were open and jacked into the pylon's control grid. Caleb could see a little red screen on one of the boxes, flashing strange symbols as it counted down to what would probably be one heck of an explosion.

A chilling scream echoed across the vast room, and Caleb wildly sought the source of the sound. The Kisent stood in the middle of a catwalk, covered in some kind of goo that burned through him like acid. Beyond him stood a squad of T'Zee soldiers, pointing strange guns at the dying Kisent. As Caleb

watched, the squat, furred humanoids surged past the Kisent towards the platform. One of them paused to fire another gob of goo at the corpse.

Caleb suppressed a frown. Lothar had told the T'Zee to evacuate the complex and the surrounding area, in case the Knights failed. It appeared as though the "Captains of Industry," the leaders of T'Zee society, had disagreed with Lothar's plan.

A blast of ice interrupted Caleb's thoughts, smashing into his head. The Klikita had fully recovered while the Knight was distracted, and now sought to encase him in ice as she had with Kassy. The Relogian, fully reformed, grabbed his rifle and fired off a quick shot at Caleb to keep him off balance. Caleb knew that the Oni would step in and wallop him in a moment as well. He recalled his hammer, his vision blurring as the ice covered his eyes.

He was starting to feel the cold, which unnerved him. He could survive in the vacuum of space unaided, but the cold from the Klikita's ice was cutting into him.

The Relogian aimed past Caleb and began to take potshots at the advancing T'Zee. They scrambled for cover, with meager success. One of them took a blast in the chest that knocked him off the catwalk to plummet into the chasm with a heart-wrenching scream.

Caleb blasted the ice from his body, and prepared to throw the hammer at the Klikita again, but the Oni appeared out of nowhere and connected with a kick that rattled the Knight's teeth. Caleb swung at him with the hammer, but the slippery Oni ducked under the blow and jabbed Caleb in the ribs. He grunted in pain.

Out of the corner of his eye, Caleb saw the Relogian take aim at the T'Zee again. Before the Knight could act, a sword of blue flame sliced through the Relogian's arms, sending the rifle clattering to the ground. While the alien howled in pain, the blue sword slashed low, cutting the Relogian off at the knees. He crashed to the floor, out of the fight. For good this time, Caleb hoped.

Kassy turned her attention from the Relogian flopping on the ground and slashed her fiery blade in the direction of the Oni. The martial artist cackled, saying something in his language that Caleb missed, and then launched a rapid series of attacks at Kassy.

A blast of cold rocked Caleb on his feet. "That's enough out of you," Caleb snapped, spinning on his heel and throwing the hammer underhanded. The Klikita, now sheathed in ice herself and yet oddly mobile, dodged nimbly. She retaliated with a blast of cold that wrapped the hammer in a ball of ice, altering its trajectory so it crashed to the floor. But she missed the beam of light flashing from Caleb's eyes; the Klikita took the blast in the chest and, while she proved hardier than the Relogian had, she still screamed in pain. The ice covering her body burned away and she collapsed in shock.

Caleb turned his attention to Kassy and the Oni in time to see the martial artist slip past Kassy's defenses and fell her with a nerve tap to the temple. Caleb called the hammer back to his hand, releasing it from its icy trap, and prepared to pound the kung-fu master to oblivion.

Before he could, the T'Zee surged past him, firing their strange goo-guns in the Oni's direction. The Oni side-stepped a dozen blasts, and the blobs fell past him, dangerously close to Kassy's prone form.

Caleb grabbed the nearest T'Zee and spun him around, coming face to face with the pinched, long nosed visage of the furry being. "Leave him to me," Caleb snapped. "Defuse the bomb."

The T'Zee growled something in his own language, and shrugged free of Caleb's grip. "The bomb," Caleb insisted, hefting his hammer. As he did so, the Oni leapt backwards into a somersault, disappearing around the edge of the pylon.

Caleb leapt into the air himself, buzzing around the pylon from the opposite direction to meet the Oni on the other side. Simultaneously, Caleb took a moment to see how Lothar and Abbot were doing.

Abbot hovered in the air on the shadowy platform he had conjured, holding his cane out before him to create a mystic shield of darkness. Elias Harkonnen flew rings around him, lashing out with a foot or fist that Abbot would just barely deflect in time. Occasionally Abbot would get a chance to zap the Elf with a mystic blast, but Harkonnen's maneuverability was inhuman. He dodged nearly every attack, and the ones that got through didn't seem to faze him in the least, though the black and red plates of his armor looked battered. Harkonnen was laughing maniacally, but Abbot's orange eyes were dimming.

Lothar and Huo were a blaze of light in the center of the chamber. Surrounded by his shield, Huo launched attack after attack at the Cosmo-Knight: mystic bolts, fire balls, arcs of lightning, phantom fists, tendrils of light to entangle him, and anything else Huo could create through force of will and mystic knowledge. The force of the magic bit into Lothar, cutting past his formidable defenses, but the Wulfen Knight ignored the pain, raining titanic blow after titanic blow against Huo's shield until it began to crack and weaken, forcing Huo to waste a spell to strengthen it. Lothar snarled, bright blood leaking from a dozen places, but with every blow Huo's shield shuddered and he was knocked back another inch.

"My God," Caleb breathed, awed by the expenditure of power the two were unleashing. Caleb's attention was suddenly diverted by a triumphant cry from Harkonnen, who had finally penetrated Abbot's defenses, landing a blow that knocked Abbot off his platform and sent him falling into the shaft. Caleb started in horror, but before he could rescue his friend, the Oni grabbed him by the arm and swung him into the pylon with a crash. Stunned, Caleb lost his grip on the hammer, and stood there dumbly as the Oni rained a dozen

blows upon him, denting his armor and slamming him again and again into the energy field surrounding the pylon.

In his mind's eye, all Caleb saw was Abbot falling to his death.

No more games, he thought, as the Oni's fist slammed into his cheek and rocked his head back. *No more friends die*. Caleb's head snapped back into position, and a beam of crimson light erupted from his eyes, slamming into the Oni. The Oni's upper body disintegrated under the onslaught, leaving his legs and pelvis standing there for a moment before they flopped on the floor. Caleb hardly noticed; he was looking for Harkonnen.

The Elf had left the air and slammed into the platform, scattering the T'Zee who, due to Caleb's urging or their own plan, had been attempting to disarm the bomb. Harkonnen looked around, reached behind himself, and drew a metallic blue longsword. Caleb summoned the hammer and took to the air, sparing a glance in the direction of Lothar and Huo.

Huo was giving ground again, and his shield was weakening. Patches of Lothar's armor had been ripped away, revealing the black fur beneath, but Lothar pressed the attack, shouting out something in the Wulfen tongue. His emerald eyes blazed.

Caleb caught a glimpse of Abbot, sprawled across a catwalk a few levels below, and laughed out loud. They would win this yet.

He returned his attention to Harkonnen, who was ignoring the acid-goo the T'Zee sprayed him with and slashing at them with his sword. One of them fell, bright blood spraying from the end of his arm. Caleb heaved the hammer at Harkonnen, and had the satisfaction of seeing Harkonnen look up just as the hammer slammed into him with enough force to drive him through the floor with a thunderous crash.

Caleb didn't have long to enjoy it, however, as only moments later Harkonnen blasted through the floor again, teeth bared in a grimace and his white eyes narrowed. Harkonnen's right arm was held out stiff and straight, aiming the blue sword like a spear directly for Caleb's heart. Caleb grimaced under his helmet and recalled the hammer with a flash of red light, bracing for impact.

Caleb twisted just as Harkonnen slammed into him, deflecting the Elf's blade so that it sheared off his shoulder pad, rather than ramming through his sternum. As it was, Harkonnen's impact still sent Caleb spinning through the air. He arrested his movement with a thought, and managed to get his hammer up in time to smash the Elf in the face as he pressed the attack. Harkonnen, knocked off course, careened through the air, buzzing past Lothar and Huo.

Caleb massaged his shoulder, feeling the hot stickiness of his own blood. Harkonnen's blade was sharp indeed, and in his hands it was deadly, even to a Knight of the Forge. And Caleb had no illusions about Harkonnen's willingness to kill. He tightened the grip he held on his hammer and flew after the Elf, who was already recovering from the blow.

But Caleb drew up short as a shuddering crack split the room.

Quajinn Huo's force field shattered like glass under the onslaught of Lothar. Light exploded around the pair as Huo's magic died. The Draconid mage fell to the catwalk below him, stumbling, his staff spilling from his hands. His white mane of hair was plastered to his scaled flesh, and his eyes burned with surprise and fear. Lothar, battered and bleeding, moved in for the kill.

The Wulfen drew back the emerald battle ax for one last blow. Caleb could hardly recognize the elder Cosmo-Knight. Lothar's green armor was pitted and scorched with magic fire, and whole chunks of it had been blasted away, melted or dispelled. The right side of his helmet had run like wax; the ear was gone, his eye sealed shut, and the metallic skin of the armor dripped onto his scorched shoulder. Where Lothar's flesh was exposed, terrible wounds showed, matting the Wulfen's dark fur with red blood. Yet Lothar stood, snarling with fury.

The ax fell. Lothar roared and Quajinn Huo screamed, raising a feeble arm to ward off the blow. Metal bit into flesh, shearing through scales and bone and hard muscle, and Quajinn Huo's right arm separated from his body. Blue fire erupted from the wound, hissing as it sprayed on the catwalk. Lothar shuddered, cursed, and hefted the ax once more. "This is finished between us," Lothar growled in Trade Four. "You shouldn't have left Center." The ax rose for the last time.

Quajinn Huo's eyes narrowed in fury, the magic bleeding from the gaping wound in his shoulder. But those eyes still sparked with power, and so too did his left hand.

"Lothar!" Caleb shouted. He launched himself forward, the hammer leading the way.

But he was too late. Just as Lothar's remaining eye focused on Huo's hidden hand, realizing what was about to happen, Huo struck. A spear of light erupted from Huo's palm, leaping from him to slam into Lothar. The Wulfen howled in pain as the light burned through him, shearing through his chest and back and slamming into the pylon behind him. The light spread, consuming Lothar, burning his flesh, melting his armor.

Caleb felt hot tears sting his cheeks. He smashed into the catwalk, shattering the walkway with the force of his impact, but Huo had sprung away, cackling madly.

The spear of light, interrupted, died. What was left of Lothar clattered as it fell upon what was left of the walkway. A green wolf's head helmet, and an emerald battle ax.

He was dead.

Caleb turned on the wizard, eyes blazing with the power of the Forge. Quajinn Huo was nonplused, hovering in empty space, his levitation spell enacted once more. As Caleb watched in horror, the blue fire gouting from his

shoulder extended, warped, and solidified, forming a new arm. Huo's staff materialized in his new hand.

"I've no quarrel with you, boy," Huo rasped.

"I'm going to kill you anyway," Caleb said, his voice tight.

Huo smiled. "Yes, I suppose you could try. You might even win. My battle with Lothar drained most of my power. On the other hand, it will cost you. And then you will still have Harkonnen and the bombs to deal with, if they haven't already gone off by then, killing everyone in a forty kilometer radius. So what will it be, boy? Revenge, or duty?"

Caleb stared at him. He could feel the power within him pulsing, rising as his anger and hatred increased.

"Huo!" Harkonnen yelled, hanging in the air. "Don't taunt him. Just kill him."

Huo spared a glance in the Elf's direction, while still maintaining his attention on Caleb. "Our alliance is ended, Harkonnen. It died with Lothar. You're on your own now." He cackled again, the crystal in his staff sparking.

"You traitor," Harkonnen growled. "I'll kill you."

Duty, or revenge? Caleb asked himself. What would Lothar do?

Caleb turned his head slightly, and cut loose with his energy beams. Harkonnen was caught unawares; the force of the blast knocked him out of the air and sent him flying across the room to smash into the wall.

Quajinn Huo disappeared in a blast of light, leaving only his cackling laugh behind.

"Another time," Caleb mumbled, turning on his heel and leaping over Lothar's remains. He landed lightly on the platform. The T'Zee squad ignored him, trying desperately to disarm the explosives wired into the plant's energy source. Caleb grabbed one of them by the elbow. "How long before it blows?" he demanded.

The T'zee showed his teeth in what Caleb took to be a humorless grin. "We be vapor in little more than two minutes," it said, using Trade Four with an odd accent.

"I'll survive the blast!" Harkonnen cried from across the room. "How many of you can say the same?"

"That guy needs to shut up," Caleb growled. To the T'Zee he said, "Can you defuse it?"

"It looks no good," the T'Zee admitted, flashing that weird grin again. "Kisent very smart. Cannot read his code."

"Blast," Caleb growled. He looked around wildly. Harkonnen was flying towards them lazily, a crazy grin on his face. Kassy was on the ground, unconscious. Like Abbot.

Abbot. He could teleport these people to safety. But he's out cold. And if I try to grab him, Harkonnen will kill the T'Zee and Kassy. Lothar, what am I supposed to do?

Kassy groaned, and pushed herself up on her elbows. “What hit me?” she croaked.

Caleb released the T’Zee and raced to Kassy’s side. “Kass,” he said. “Are you okay?”

“I have a terrible headache,” she admitted. “Did we win?”

“Not yet,” Caleb said. “And I haven’t much time. Abbot is on a catwalk below us, unconscious.” *He has to be just unconscious*, Caleb thought. *Otherwise we’re all dead.* “Wake him, get these people out of here.”

“What about him?” Kassy asked, pointing over Caleb’s shoulder. He craned his neck to see Harkonnen hanging in the air twenty feet away, slapping the sword blade in his palm. His grin was even wider than before.

“Leave him to me,” Caleb said. He turned back to Kassy. “Okay? Less than a minute before everyone dies. I’m counting on you Kass.”

“Trust me,” she said, painfully getting to her feet. That was all Caleb needed to hear. He jumped into the air and aimed himself at Harkonnen. The Elf slipped sideways, and Caleb blasted past him, moving too quickly to react in time. When Caleb drew to a halt and reoriented himself, Harkonnen collided with him, carrying him across the room to smash into and through the wall. His hammer fell from his hand, but Caleb had a moment to see a blue and white gryphon forming above Kassy before the reactor room disappeared from view.

“You think I’m beaten, don’t you?” Harkonnen said, as their bodies smashed through walls and shattered supports. “But when the bombs blow, I’ll still be standing and no one will know. Then I’ll fly up to my ship and complete the job, with no one the wiser.”

“I got news for you, buddy,” Caleb said, shifting in Harkonnen’s grip and wrapping his hands around the Elf’s upper arms. “I’ve already survived a supernova this week. You don’t scare me.” He tightened his grip and shifted again, pulling Harkonnen down, slamming him into the floor. They skidded across an access hallway as their momentum shifted, careening off the floor and drawing to a halt as they hit a blast door. Caleb slammed his forehead into Harkonnen’s, knocking his head back and denting the floor.

Harkonnen got his arms under Caleb’s chest and pushed, throwing the Knight off him. Harkonnen rolled to his feet. “Only moments, now,” he growled.

The two of them froze, bracing for the coming explosion. The thrum of the factory’s engines hummed beneath their feet, the only sound as they waited.

Nothing happened.

They stared at one another for a long moment, neither one fully comprehending. “I don’t understand,” Harkonnen stuttered. “There’s no way the T’Zee could have defused Orix’s bomb.”

Caleb chuckled. “Must have been a dud. Looks like you lose after all.”

Harkonnen’s angular features contorted in a snarl. “You won’t live long enough to savor your victory,” he snapped, leaping forward. Caleb was wait-

ing for him, using a judo throw his father had taught him to flip Harkonnen on his back. Before Harkonnen could recover, Caleb blasted into him, driving both of them through the floor.

They went through a dozen feet of steel and wiring and exploded out into another huge room, thrumming with power of its own. As they emerged, steam washed over them, carried on a wave of heat and thunderous sound. Huge pipes and cables crisscrossed the room in hex patterns, surrounding and plugging into a series of massive vats that churned and shook. Within the vats steamed the burl, the foodstuff manufactured by nanite machinery from the living surface of the very planet. Roiling waves of thick, orange liquid shuddered within the vats, reeking with a sickly sweet organic smell that brought tears to Caleb's eyes. The heat from the walls and conduits caused the burl to bubble and steam, sending clouds of vapor to partially obscure the dimensions of the room.

Harkonnen kicked himself free of Caleb's grasp and flew deeper into the room, cursing. Caleb stoked the furnace within his breast to match the Elf's speed. He grabbed Harkonnen by the ankle and threw him into a network of pipes. They shattered, spraying orange goop all over the Elf, who sputtered and coughed. "I am going to relish your death," Harkonnen said, spitting burl.

Caleb cocked his head. Harkonnen was invulnerable all right; Caleb could pound on him all day and not hurt him at all. But the Elf needed to breathe.

"Let's go for a swim," Caleb said. He flew at Harkonnen again, grabbing him by the chest plate and aiming the Elf downward. Harkonnen's eyes widened in surprise, and as Caleb flew them towards a huge simmering vat, the Elf aimed wild punches at Caleb's helmeted head. Caleb's head rocked back with each blow, but he ignored the pain. In a moment, they splashed into the vat, and Caleb's world went orange.

The thick paste washed over him, warm and viscous, but not unpleasantly so. It was like swimming in oatmeal. Harkonnen thrashed beneath him, but the burl lessened the severity of his blows, and Caleb barely felt them.

It felt like an eternity, soaking in the goop, before Harkonnen stopped moving. Caleb counted to ten when Harkonnen went limp, and then flew out of the burl with an explosion that sprayed orange goop everywhere. Caleb hefted Harkonnen in his arms, inspecting the Elf. Burl dripped from Harkonnen's nose, mouth and ears. He didn't appear to be breathing.

Caleb felt sick.

Then burl erupted from Harkonnen's mouth, splattering Caleb with more goop, and the Elf took a long, shuddering breath. Caleb tensed, waiting for Harkonnen to erupt, but the Elf just lolled in his arms, apparently unconscious. Caleb breathed a sigh of relief, and began to make his way back to the reactor room.

He found it easily enough, following the trail of destruction he and Harkonnen had left in their wake. When he entered the reactor chamber, he noticed that the top part of the pylon and half of the central platform was missing. Kassy, Abbot, and the T'Zee huddled on the remaining portion. Caleb crossed the gulf quickly and landed on the platform, dropping Harkonnen with a thump that caused the platform to list dangerously. The T'Zee chattered at Caleb irritably, but he ignored them.

Abbot sat cross-legged next to Kassy, cradling a massive battle ax in his slight hands. Kassy had an arm around Abbot, but she released him and stood up as Caleb landed. Her eyes were bright with unshed tears.

“What happened?” Caleb asked, not looking at the ax.

“I woke Abbot and explained things quickly,” Kassy said, her voice thick. “He decided to teleport the bombs themselves, rather than us. He was still a bit thick-headed, so he didn’t quite get the mass right. Still, I believe the explosives detonated more or less harmlessly in orbit.”

“Good,” Caleb said. “That’s good.”

Abbot looked up at them. His orange eyes had dimmed to yellow. “He’s gone,” he said. “I can’t believe... he’s gone.” Kassy buried her face in her hands, trying to hide her grief.

Caleb stood quietly nearby, feeling hollow. Burl dripped from his armor, pooling at his feet. He should dispel his armor, but he couldn’t. The people of Dellian-4 were saved, but Caleb’s mentor – a being he had begun to think of as his surrogate father – had paid the ultimate price. He couldn’t think past that moment, couldn’t see what would happen next.

So he stood, silent and encased in his armor, unable to think, or feel, or act.

Chapter Thirteen

Downtime

“Following the debacle on Delian-4, Vulcan’s first encounter with Elias Harkonnen and Quajinn Huo, the young Knight journeyed with his companions to the Wulfen homeworld, Motherhome. There they laid the fallen Cosmo-Knight Lothar to rest. Friends and family from throughout the Three Galaxies attended the services, and Caleb was taken aback at the realization that Lothar had possessed an extended family, including children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren. Indeed, the ship Lothar had used to ferry Caleb around the Three Galaxies had been loaned to Lothar by his great-grandson, a merchant of no small means.

“Besides Lothar’s family, Caleb also met a few more representatives of his own illustrious order, the Knights of the Cosmic Forge, and other friends and allies from Lothar’s past, including the Wulfen shaman Koguk, the chancellor of the Fraternity of Stars, Airin Vallstoff, and Brother Tandostiir of the Celestial Monks. To say Caleb was overwhelmed would be stating it lightly. He was much relieved when he left Motherhome in the company of Doctor Abbot and Kassiopaeia Acherean. They took a charter flight to Kassy’s home, Alexandria, in the United Worlds of Warlock. There, they each dealt with the loss of Lothar in their own way.”

– Excerpt from Caleb Vulcan: Before the Fall, by Gymnos Terrice

The plate glass window exploded into a million shards, spraying the room with flakes of crystal as a metallic form forced its way inside. The hostages, a dozen humanoids of various species, instinctively dropped to the ground and huddled in fear, while the Ogre terrorists, bristling with weaponry and rage, began firing at the intruder. Streamers of light zipped across the room to spatter harmlessly off the crimson and black armor of the Knight.

“Throw down your weapons,” boomed the Knight, brandishing a massive hammer in his hands. The Ogres ignored his command, continuing their useless barrage. One of them, however, realized the futility of the attack, and indiscriminately grabbed a hostage, jamming the barrel of his gun into her midsection. Another Ogre produced an explosive device, waving it at the Knight and threatening to set it off. If he did so, everyone in the room, on the top floor of an Atlantean high-rise, would be killed.

The Knight hardly appeared to move; one moment the Ogre with the explosive was upright, swearing in Gobblely, and the next moment he was sailing across the room, knocked off his feet by a thrown hammer. At the same moment, the Ogre holding the hostage was slammed by a blaze of light emanating from the Knight’s dark visor. He clattered to the ground, leaving the hostage unharmed.

The other four Ogres took a moment to assess the scene. Their weapons were useless against the attacker, and their two boldest comrades had been taken out in less than a second. Before they could react, two more of their number were knocked senseless by the Knight's flashing fists. The remaining duo dropped their weapons simultaneously, holding up their hands in surrender.

The Knight eyed them momentarily, and then checked the hostages. "Is anyone harmed?" he asked. His deep voice possessed a metallic edge, as if the helmet itself were talking.

"They beat Master Kylos rather badly," said one of the men, "but most of us are okay."

The Knight nodded perfunctorily. "Grab the guns, and make sure these gentlemen don't start any more trouble," he ordered. As the man scurried to obey, the Knight crossed the room and picked up the bomb where it had been dropped. A flashing red indicator told him that the Ogre was able to arm the weapon before he had fallen.

The doors to the room suddenly exploded inward as the authorities surged into the room. Atlantean warriors in light armor, armed with blasters and stun guns, they followed a dark skinned man with a neatly trimmed beard. He stared frostily at the Knight, and sparing a glance at the only two conscious Ogres, ran across the room in the Knight's direction.

"I'd really love to stay and listen to you yell at me, Diomedes," the Knight told the officer. "But this bomb is about to go off." With that, the Knight lifted into the air and blasted out the window once more, rising into the late afternoon sky.

Diomedes watched, framed by the broken window, as the Knight flew away. He did not get far before the explosive detonated in his hands with a resounding boom that echoed across the sky and shook the building. Diomedes swore and turned, glass crunching under his boots. The Atlantean troops were taking the Ogres into custody, slipping oversized manacles onto their wrists to restrict their incredible strength. A medic and a psion circulated among the hostages, checking for wounds or shock.

"Get me Kassiopaea Acherean," Diomedes barked at the nearest trooper. "Her Cosmo-Knight just interfered with another police matter. I'll have Caleb Vulcan's head for this one."

With the explosion still ringing in his ears, Caleb blasted across the sky at top speed. The bomb had banged him up a little bit, but not nearly as much as a lecture from Sir Diomedes of the Alexandria Militia might have. Besides, the headphones Caleb wore beneath his helmet were informing him that another problem had arisen halfway across the continent. A blizzard had downed an airship carrying vacationers into the Deimos Mountains. Luckily, Caleb could cross the intervening three thousand miles in about a minute,

and would be on hand quickly to aid the survivors. If he stayed to explain his methods to Sir Diomedes, someone might die.

For Caleb, that was simply unacceptable.

He had been on Alexandria for close to six weeks now, and his life had settled into a fairly regular pattern. With the headphones and computer link-up that he wore monitoring newsbands and broadcasts around the world, Caleb was notified of trouble quickly and efficiently. With his Forge-enhanced strength, speed, and other abilities, he was more than capable of canvassing the planet and pitching in wherever he was needed most. Whether that meant putting an end to delicate hostage negotiations with terrorists from Ogretopia, or helping a band of Noro set up a colony on the sub-tropical Jeiros Islands, or searching for survivors after an earthquake tore through the city of Kylostathenes, or doing battle with a Rift-spawned horror, or any of a dozen other scenarios, it did not matter to Caleb. What did matter was that he did what he could to help, to alleviate suffering, to save lives.

It was certainly a full time job. Life-threatening emergencies occurred with alarming regularity, even on a benign and sparsely populated world like Alexandria. However, Caleb was uniquely equipped to handle the challenge. As a Cosmo-Knight, he didn't require food, drink, or even an atmosphere to breathe. Nor was sleep terribly important. All Caleb needed for rest was one hour of meditation out of every twenty-four hours of activity. This enabled him to keep busy, to stay active, to barrel onward.

Caleb needed to keep moving. If he slowed down for even a second, he began to think about Lothar, and he desperately wanted to avoid doing so.

The clouds beneath him turned angry and dark. Caleb dropped down, through the cloud cover, and into the raging blizzard beyond. Visibility dropped to zero, but that wasn't a problem. Another of the endless gifts of the Cosmic Forge; Caleb could navigate through the trackless void of space or across the surface of an alien planet with near perfection. He possessed a kind of cosmic awareness that expanded like a net from his body, encompassing the world beneath him. He did not need his eyes to see the bulk of the mountains looming before him, or the dip of valleys and ridges beneath him. He could sense all these things with the same ease with which one crosses a familiar room in the dark.

Caleb aimed himself at the mountain, flying low. He stretched out his senses, trying to find some evidence of the crash. The snow clogged ground hurtled by beneath him as he flew.

It was hard to believe that barely three months ago Caleb had been a senior in high school, dreading his graduation because it meant leaving the arid sands of Arizona for the steamy jungles of Vietnam. Somehow he had avoided that fate, summoned to the Three Galaxies by the enigmatic entity known only as the Cosmic Forge, transformed into a demigod and entrusted with the duty of protecting all life. Another servant of the Forge, a Wulfen

named Lothar, had taken Caleb under his wing, and introduced the young man to the Three Galaxies and his responsibilities. With Lothar, Caleb had survived a supernova, battled an ancient killing machine, rescued a beautiful damsel from space pirates, and visited the largest city in the Three Galaxies. But when they tangled with a psychotic Elf and a powerful Draconid wizard, Lothar had fallen. Caleb survived, had even defeated and arrested the Elf, but the wizard, Quajinn Huo, escaped. Huo had killed Lothar, but Caleb let him go.

The fact that a nuclear device was ticking away, threatening to kill millions, did not register on Caleb. Neither did the fact that Lothar had centuries of experience, and had still fallen against Huo, while Caleb was a green Knight. At the time, those reasons had seemed important; staring Quajinn Huo in the face and knowing a battle against him was futile, Caleb had been forced to let him escape. He concentrated instead on ensuring the bomb did not go off, and thanks to Kassy and Abbot, millions of lives were indeed saved.

Those who lived did not nag at Caleb; it was the one who died that bothered him. He felt guilty for not being there to back Lothar up when he was needed, and for not apprehending Lothar's killer. Lothar's funeral had nearly broken him. Staring into the faces of Lothar's huge family, knowing that he had failed them miserably, stabbed a sharp dagger into Caleb's heart. He had left Motherhome feeling cold and empty. As soon as he set foot on Alexandria, he asked Kassy to buy him the earphones with the computer link, and he took to the sky. He had not stopped moving for more than an hour at a time since.

Supposedly, Kassy and Abbot were looking for a ship. They needed one if they were going to hunt down Quajinn Huo, but Caleb wasn't sure what Abbot and Kassy were actually doing. He hadn't seen or spoken to them in weeks. Once he stopped briefly at Kassy's home, a rambling mansion in the countryside outside Alexandria's largest port, but that was late at night when most of the house was dim and quiet. Caleb had simply landed on the roof, meditated for about an hour, and then raced off once again to help Kylostathenes, in the throes of an earthquake.

Caleb paused, sensing an anomaly in the landscape passing beneath him. He flowed into a circling pattern, eyeing the mountain slope. An avalanche had occurred here, and recently if Caleb's enhanced senses read the situation correctly. There was no way to be certain whether the downed craft lay under the avalanche, however. Not for the first time, Caleb lamented the fact that the Forge had not seen fit to give him x-ray vision. What could he do? The slope was buried under tons of snow, too much for Caleb to sift through. Randomly zapping the slope with his eye beams was more than futile; it was stupid.

Caleb growled in frustration. There was nothing to do, it seemed, but fly on and hope he hadn't already failed the survivors. As he flew up and rounded the mountain, he saw a humped metallic shape buzzing across the snow. Caleb increased his pace and dove low, coming up alongside the vehicle. He saw Atlantean lettering and some kind of strange symbol decorating the fuselage, but he didn't know enough Atlantean to decipher it. Caleb shrugged mentally and then buzzed past the vehicle's cockpit. Between the blizzard and the opacity of the window panels, he didn't see much, but hopefully the crew would notice him. A moment later, the vehicle slowed and airlock in the side of the craft cycled open. Grinning, Caleb leapt inside.

With a metallic whine the airlock closed, shutting out the roar of the blizzard outside. An almost imperceptible hiss filled the room as it pressurized, and a moment later the inner door slid open. Beyond stood an Atlantean man, conspicuous with his artful tattoos, clad in a white flightsuit. "You must be Caleb Vulcan," he said in Trade Four.

"Didn't realize I was so popular," Caleb offered.

The man smiled. "We don't get many Cosmo-Knights here in the United Worlds of Warlock, and even fewer on Alexandria." He stuck out his hand, adding, "Cassius Astyanax."

"Pleasure," Caleb said, taking the hand. "You're here for the downed tourist craft, aren't you?"

Cassius nodded. "Unfortunately, there's only one other rescue ship capable of dealing with the weather, and we've got a lot of ground to cover. We appreciate you lending a hand."

"It's what I do," Caleb said simply. "How can I help?"

"Let's head up to the comm center," Cassius said, leading the way along the corridor to the front of the ship. A half-dozen crewmen manned stations in the cramped quarters of the cockpit. The most important person was the communications officer, a woman with the same dark hair and creamy complexion as Kassy. "Artemis is monitoring the downed ship's homing beacon," Cassius explained. "But it's a weak signal, and this weather is fouling up our reception. We know they're in the general vicinity, but we can't seem to get a lock on their exact location. Visual is nil, and our instruments aren't much more help."

Caleb nodded. "What kind of craft are we looking for? And what were they doing up here anyway?"

"Zeus knows," Cassius said. "We think they were vacationers, caught unawares by the blizzard. It's true the storm did sort of appear out of nowhere, but that sort of thing is fairly common this time of year. And they were flying in a Zemil H-17. Light craft; anti-gravity plates and not much else. Zero maneuverability and terrible speed. They tried to outrun the storm, but you can't outrun much in an H-17."

"Huh," Caleb grunted. "They went down on this peak, you said?"

Cassius nodded. “At the very least, their homing beacon did. If the ship broke up before landing... a standard twenty-four hour search won’t find those people. We’ll dig them up in the spring.”

Caleb cocked his head. His cosmic awareness told him that the rescue craft was circling the peak, and during the course of his conversation with Cassius, they had looped around the mountain to the avalanche site. “Is something wrong?” Cassius prompted.

“No, but I have an idea. There’s another rescue ship out there, right?” Cassius nodded. “Then would you mind setting down nearby? There’s a part of the mountain covered by an avalanche, and I have a feeling we should take a look at it.”

Cassius frowned, nodding. “You may have something.” He turned to his pilots and rattled off something in Atlantean. The pilot shot a short message back. Caleb couldn’t understand a word, but he got the gist.

“I’ll get back out there; follow me down. But be careful, I don’t want to trigger another landslide.” In another minute, Caleb was outside once more, deafened by the roar of the wind and snow, but untouched by the bitter cold. The rescue craft dogged him as he flew back to the avalanche site and dropped to the ground. He sank into the snow up to his hips, and grimaced beneath his centurion’s helm. The rescue craft wouldn’t be able to land here after all.

Caleb craned his neck, and was about to wave them off, assuming they could see him, but the crew was better prepared than he was. The ship settled into a hovering posture over the snow, kicking up a cloud of white spray that added a minuscule amount of chaos to the storm. In moments, the airlock cycled open and a trio of crewmembers in cold weather gear dropped out, hovering over the snowfield on personal anti-grav platforms. Each of them held a large device in one hand, and they split up to canvas the snowfield, pointing their machines at the ground.

Caleb watched, noting that a fire had erupted in a factory in the southern town of Korusk, while a mine in Gigantes had collapsed, trapping a dozen men and women underground. Caleb wondered for a moment if he was wasting his time, whether it was already too late for the downed Zemil H-17, whether he was better off chasing down another crisis. Before he reached a conclusion, one of the crew began gesticulating wildly, a movement almost lost in the swirl of snow. Caleb lifted off and flew over, landing beside the Atlantean and once more sinking into the snow.

The other two began to buzz over as well, while the first Atlantean, his or her sex indeterminable underneath the heavy winter clothes, tried to shout loud enough for Caleb to hear. The wind was too much, however, and the Atlantean finally decided on simply pointing down. Caleb bent over and formed his arms into scoops, shoveling snow out of the way and forming massive drifts as he did so. He dug fifteen feet at least before his fingers scraped against metal. The light was dim and the snow covered almost everything,

but Caleb could still make out an Atlantean ideogram painted on the metal. He had found the hull of the H-17.

They found everyone alive. Broken bones and other wounds were evident, as well as frostbite and deep shock, but all seven tourists were alive. The crew loaded them onto the transport and blasted off for warmer, safer territory, thanking Caleb profusely and urging him to come back to the hospital for more thanks. Caleb declined; he had miners to save.

En route to the mining town of Gigantes, however, the earphones buzzed with an incoming message. Caleb tongued the control stick and heard Kassy's voice crackle from the other side. "Caleb, please come in; I need to talk to you."

Another tongue movement opened the channel from his end. "Go ahead, Kassy. I'm listening."

A loud sigh echoed in Caleb's ear. "I hear you've been busy," she said, obviously irritated. "At first I let it go, figuring that perhaps that's how Earthlings deal with grief. But now you've got the federal authorities knocking at my door and asking me to rein you in. That is unacceptable. Lothar was my friend too! I don't appreciate being abandoned by you and Abbot and having to deal with this on my own!"

Caleb stared at the ocean roaring beneath him as his red and black body hurtled across the waves. "What is Abbot up to?" he asked finally.

"He's meditating on the hill outside the mansion. He has been since we got here; you at least are being productive, though you're ignoring your grief. He's drawn into himself and become useless. I can't get his attention, no matter how hard I try. Zeus' beard, but he could be dead too for all I know. And are you here to help me? No, you're off saving every other life on Alexandria."

The sky was darkening as Caleb passed into the planet's night side. Another storm was rising as well, though on this side of the world winter was a relative term. There was the rainy season, and the dry season, and not much else. The ocean was dark and mysterious beneath Caleb's hurtling form, absorbing light and reflecting none. "Caleb? Are you still there?"

"I... I'm two-thirds of the way to Gigantes," Caleb explained. "After I help the miners out there, I'll see what I can do to help you with Abbot." Before Kassy could say anymore, Caleb tongued the connection closed.

Caleb was still trying to figure out Alexandria's time-zones, and was mildly surprised to see that the sun was just setting over the pyramids of the planet's largest spaceport, Hymaeria. Outside the city limits, where the estates of Clan Acherean's elder statesmen could be found, Caleb reached Kassy's palatial home. Her parent's home, at least; she claimed that she didn't spend much time there, that the place was too big for her to call home. It certainly

was a large estate, particularly to the boy from Earth who had grown up in a small house on the grounds of Fort Bliss.

The estate of Hiram and Kornelia Acherean covered ten square kilometers, most of it wooded hills in a state of “cultivated wilderness.” The center was a sprawling palace in the Greco-Egyptian style Caleb had come to identify as typical for Atlantean architects. It had four hundred rooms, an Olympic sized pool, stables, a docking bay that looked large enough to service a dreadnought, and what seemed an endless supply of servants, courtiers, and visitors clogging its halls. Kassy’s home was beautiful, cultured, and relaxing. Caleb would have gone insane had he been confined here the past few weeks. He suddenly felt a pang of guilt for leaving her here; on the other hand, she had grown up in this building. She was probably enjoying herself.

Caleb avoided the estate proper, instead scanning the ground for the shadowy form of Doctor Abbot. He sat exactly where Kassy had said he would be, on the crest of a tall hill just beyond the walls of the mansion. Caleb saw Kassy standing on the hill as well, probably waiting for him. He hoped momentarily that she had not been waiting long, as the visit to Gigantes had taken him longer than he had expected. Shrugging mentally, Caleb plummeted out of the air like a stone.

He dropped to the grass lightly at the base of the hill. Kassy shot him a glare from where she stood beside Abbot. Caleb trudged up the slope, noting that the fire in Korusk was under control, but that a monster from the Rifts had appeared in the earthquake ravaged city of Kylostathenes. The city was not doing well without the pyramids that regulated the flow of magical energy through the area, and random Rifts were erupting in the Kylostathenes’ downtown. Caleb thought briefly about jetting out to the city once more, but one look at Kassy changed his mind.

She was very angry. Caleb had not known Kassiopaeia Acherean for very long, and he had never before seen her angry, but he recognized by the set of her jaw, the tightening of her fists, and the way her arms, decorated with artfully designed blue and white tattoos, were shaking that she was upset. Caleb reached the top of the hill, and spared a glance in Abbot’s direction. The wizard looked even more like a living shadow at the moment, sitting cross-legged in the grass, with his trench coat, hat, and cane piled next to him. Lacking the clothing to give his body definition, Abbot appeared as if he were nothing more than a man-shaped smear of darkness. The effect was as unsettling as seeing Kassy seethe with rage.

What has happened to us? Caleb wondered, not for the first time since Lothar’s death.

“Take off the armor, Caleb,” Kassy ordered.

“I haven’t got time,” Caleb heard himself say. “There’s trouble brewing in Kylostathenes.”

“I should never have bought you those cursed headphones,” Kassy muttered. And then out of nowhere she decked Caleb. Her Atlantean strength, enhanced by the magic of the tattoos she wore, was more than enough to knock Caleb off his feet and send him rolling down the hill. Surprised more than hurt, Caleb picked himself up and dusted grass and dirt off his armor.

“What was that for?” he asked dully.

“For being a jerk,” Kassy snarled. “Now get back up here, take off the armor, and talk to me like a civilized human being!”

“I don’t know what you’re getting at Kassy,” Caleb said. This time he flew up the hill, landing with a thump in front of her. “I’m sorry I haven’t been around, but I’ve had work to do.”

“Work?” Kassy said incredulously. “Since when has running yourself ragged been in the Cosmo-Knight handbook? Avoiding me and avoiding Lothar is not work. It is cowardice. Now, you want to be a coward, fine. Go and do it, and the gods be done with you. But this morning you recklessly charged into a tense situation and twelve people almost paid the price.”

Despite himself, Kassy’s words hurt Caleb. “No one was hurt except the Ogres,” he replied, trying to keep his voice even. “I saved the lives of those hostages.”

“You were lucky,” Kassy snapped. “If you had been a fraction of a second slower, or misjudged a jerky movement, someone would have died.”

“No,” Caleb said firmly. “I would never allow that to happen.”

Kassy’s hands tightened into fists again, and Caleb eyed her warily, expecting another attack. Instead, Kassy turned around, crossing her arms against her chest. Her shoulders shook. It took Caleb a moment to realize she was crying. Caleb stood still for a long moment, stunned. He glanced at Abbot, but the wizard didn’t appear to be conscious. Caleb looked down the hill at the mansion, but didn’t see any help from that quarter either. At last, Caleb took a cautious step towards Kassy, reaching out tentatively with a gauntleted hand.

“Don’t touch me,” Kassy snarled, stepping away from him. Caleb retreated, stung once more, and unsure how to respond.

They stood there for a long moment, as the sun fell and darkness expanded across the estate. Lights began to flicker on in the mansion, brightest around the empty docking bay.

At last, Caleb took a deep breath and, for the first time since Delian-4, dispelled his armor in a crimson flash. He approached Kassy again, reaching out an arm to put around her shoulders. This time she didn’t retreat, but instead turned into him and reached out to embrace him. She cried against his chest, and Caleb was surprised to feel moisture on his own cheeks.

Kassy looked up, her eyes raw and red. Caleb had never seen her look more beautiful or more vulnerable, yet at the same time the anger was still there, simmering, and Caleb knew she would deck him again in a heartbeat.

“You can’t save everyone,” she said, her voice rough. “And you can’t be Lothar, either. I miss him terribly, but you can’t be him. I need Caleb to be here. Do you understand me? I need Caleb Vulcan, not Lothar of Motherhome.”

Caleb nodded, his throat constricting and his vision clouding. He felt the cool Alexandria night air against his skin, and he could smell the clean grassy scent of the field and Kassy’s perfume without having it filtered through his helmet. He could feel her body, warm and alive, against his own, reminding him that he was alive. He was whole, and while Lothar was gone, Caleb would not bring him back by retreating into the inhumanity of his Cosmo-Knight persona. He couldn’t spend all his life inside that armor as Lothar had done; he couldn’t ignore the parts of his life that made it worth living. He couldn’t ignore his life, period.

“Kassy, I’m so sorry,” Caleb said. He hugged her tight. “I just... I wasn’t thinking. I couldn’t think. I couldn’t get past the idea of Lothar’s death, of what it meant. You’re right. I have been avoiding it, been avoiding him. I couldn’t say goodbye... I don’t know if I can. He was... I told you that he reminded me of my father, back on Earth. I was beginning to see him in that light, to identify him that way. Losing Lothar like that... it brought home the fact that I may never see my real dad again.”

“I understand,” Kassy said softly. “Caleb, do you have an afterlife on Earth?”

“Um... I think we have several,” Caleb said. “I was raised Lutheran, though. I believe in God and Heaven, an ultimate reward. What about you?”

“Atlantean religion isn’t terribly well organized,” Kassy said. “It’s more like a philosophy than a more traditional belief system. As a culture, we’re nomads of time and space, traveling from one dimension – one reality – to another. For us, death is just another means of crossing the borders between this reality and the next, one more stop on the perpetual journey we’re all undertaking.”

“Then no one ever really dies?” Caleb asked. She nodded. “I think I’ll stick with mine,” he said. “Somehow the idea of Lothar chatting with St. Peter is more comforting to me than the possibility that he’s just bopping around in some other galaxy.”

She smiled then, though her eyes were still moist. “You are back, aren’t you?”

Caleb returned her smile. “I’m sorry I left. I won’t do that again.”

“Good,” Kassy said, pulling out of his embrace and lightly punching him on the arm. “I don’t want to have to get rough with you again. Now, what about Abbot?”

“What about Abbot?” came the cultured tones of the wizard, sitting cross-legged in the grass. Caleb and Kassy started, and stared wordlessly as Abbot’s head turned and his orange eyes, his only recognizable features, opened up. Abbot unfolded his legs smoothly and rose to his full height. He gestured

with a shadowy hand, and his coat, hat, and cane rose into the air. His hat and coat settled upon him, and he reached out and plucked the cane out of the air.

“I’ve been sitting up here for weeks, going through my own mourning ritual, as prescribed by the Order of Celestial Monks that raised me,” Abbot explained with his typical British inflection, while the other two continued to stare. “I have sent Lothar off in grand style, if I do say so myself. In the process, I managed to attune myself to Alexandria’s rhythms and magical cycle. I’m afraid I became quite lost in the beauty of this world’s invisible nature.” Abbot twirled the cane in his hands. “I was in there fairly deeply, my consciousness riding along the ley lines and delving deep into Alexandria’s Astral Plane. The attunement was so powerful, so precise, that I began to pick up echoes from other worlds, joined in the great cosmic dance that keeps the Three Galaxies moving. And there, I felt a faintly familiar pinprick ripple across what was left of my mind.” He paused. “Kassy, Caleb, there is another Shadowbeing somewhere loose in the Three Galaxies.”

Kassy recovered first. Her open jaw clicked shut audibly. “Abbot,” she said, speaking slowly. “You’re not making any sense.”

Abbott chuckled, his orange eyes flashing in his dark face. “There is another being like me out there somewhere. For the first time in my life, I sensed someone like me. Unfortunately the shock of that revelation broke the connection and violently returned me to my body. I’ve been sitting here for three days wondering when Caleb would return to his senses. Now that he has, it’s time to go looking for my counterpart.”

Caleb found his voice, though Abbott was still confusing him. “I thought we were going to look for Quajinn Huo,” he said.

“All in good time, lad,” Abbott said. “If the Shadowbeing is a wizard like me, we may be able to enlist his help against Huo. That would be good, considering how badly he beat us last time.”

“Okay,” Kassy said. “Where do we begin looking?”

“I haven’t the foggiest notion,” Abbott said, eyes glinting. “Let’s go down to the house and have a bit of tea and talk it over.”

“Capital idea,” Kassy said, mimicking Abbot’s accent. She grabbed Caleb’s hand and tugged him down the hill. “C’mon,” she said. “You haven’t met my parents yet.”

I wonder if Kylostathenes still needs help? Caleb wondered, but followed her down the hill.

Chapter Fourteen

Shopping Trip

There are an estimated trillion inhabited worlds in the Three Galaxies, each one of them home to billions of sentient beings, from over a hundred billion different species. These numbers assure the Three Galaxies a vast and varied native population. Sentients as varied as Machine People, Silhouettes, Humans, Wulfen, and Oni evolved within the Three Galaxies, giving rise to cultures every bit as distinctive as their individual biologies. Moreover, as each individual species reached out to the stars, they formed alliances, empires, and a network of intergalactic, cross-species cultures.

The story of life in the Three Galaxies is not confined to native species, however. There are many places in the Three Galaxies where space and time converge to create holes in the fabric of reality – holes which lead to other realities. Phase World is only the largest and best known of these convergences, but they are scattered throughout the Corkscrew, Anvil, and Thundercloud galaxies. These convergences have opened the way for Atlanteans, Splugorth, Metzla, Gargoyles, and thousands of other species to cross over to this reality from others.

For the most part, these aliens have enriched the Three Galaxies. Others have brought nothing but danger. In particular, the Splugorth have threatened the life and liberty of sentients throughout the galaxies. Their battles with Cosmo-Knights have become legendary, and in some cases have entered the mythologies of transgalactic cultures. The Splugorth are hardly typical, however. Given the vast and unplumbed depths of the Megaverse, it is far more likely that visitors to the Three Galaxies from other dimensions will be individual beings, unique in their adopted home. Indeed, the one thing one can expect from inter-dimensional travelers is the unexpected.

– Excerpt from Travelogues of a Journeyman by Fraktyn Quint

The Garouk system was a remote one, and as it turned out, the nearest “living planet,” per the alien’s request, was a backwater world named Koola, located a short psi-jump from Garouk. Koola proved to be mostly desert, save for a ring of riverine networks around the equator, but it did have a native sentient species as well as a number of thriving communities settled by offworlders.

Joriel remained unimpressed. As a Celestine, one of the biosynthetic enforcers of the S’hree Vek Confederacy, he had crossed from one end of the Three Galaxies to the other, and very little he saw on Koola impressed him. As Koola was within Consortium space, the fact that Joriel’s vessel, the *Vigilance*, had sent a landing craft to the planet’s surface technically made them an invasion force and could be interpreted as an act of war. Relations between

the Consortium of Civilized Worlds and the S'hree Vek Confederacy were currently at an all time low, but that was something of which the Vigilance's commanding officer, Commissar Lor Koushak Dail, seemed unaware.

Joriel frowned inwardly. It was hardly the first time he had disagreed with the Commissar's decisions, and he doubted it would be the last. Her rash actions had initially brought them into Consortium space, and into an engagement with a Consortium Warshield cruiser which had nearly crippled the Vigilance. Only a desperate psi-jump to a random system had saved them from certain destruction, a move which had nearly fractured the psionic drive that powered the ship and almost killed the Commissar herself, whose psionic abilities fueled the device. While the crew had rushed to effect repairs, the Vigilance's sensors had detected a strange energy signature orbiting the gas giant Garouk-9. Joriel and his fellow Celestines had discovered the source of that signature to be a humanoid, and after bringing it aboard, the being had come to an accord with the Commissar, offering wealth and a means to reach pan-dimensional markets in exchange for help searching for one of his lost brethren.

Which brought them to Koola.

Joriel stood on a rocky promontory overlooking a sandy valley. Behind him stood his two wingmates, fellow Celestines Kalel and Kariel. All three Celestines stood an even two meters tall, resplendent in form-fitting blue-black armor over red uniforms. Long, fine maroon colored hair was tied into warrior's braids, with Joriel's being the longest and most elaborate. All three of them possessed striking, aquiline features with finely drawn brows and bright blue eyes. Their most impressive feature by far, however, were their wings. Erupting from their shoulders, the wings were composed of bright crimson feathers, and each wing could extend out to a length of four meters. The Celestines were beautiful by the standards of the humans and Noro of the Consortium, resembling the angels of human mythology. But the Adinum, Haakon, Tooranimoor and other species that made up the S'hree Vek Confederacy had different standards of beauty; they had designed the Celestines to be warriors, to be creatures of terror and destruction.

Joriel sighed, a sound that was lost in the strong desert wind. Kalel and Kariel, their senses as acute as Joriel's own, turned as one to regard their commander. "Something wrong, Sir?" Kariel asked.

Joriel adjusted his wings and turned to face his wingmates. "I don't trust this Hazmat of the Shaar," he said, referring to their guest. All three wordlessly regarded the alien, who was picking his way down the hill into the valley. Hazmat wasn't hard to see, given that he – or it – appeared to be an ambulatory shadow, its features indistinguishable save for a pair of orange lights that might have been eyes. Hazmat claimed to be a representative of a pan-dimensional society called the Shaar, and further claimed to be able to share the Shaar's wealth with the Vigilance. Joriel didn't know much more

about the creature, save for the fact that it could survive unaided in the vacuum of space, like a Celestine, and was resistant to Commissar Dail's psychic probes. Also like a Celestine.

Joriel unconsciously summoned his blazer, the most potent weapon in a Celestine's arsenal. A span of blue-white light erupted from Joriel's hand, forming into the shape of a sword. Karel frowned, while Kariel made an understanding face. On the crest of the hill, surrounding the crab-shaped shuttle, their escort of marines suddenly snapped to attention, eyeing the landscape and pointing their weapons at nothing. Joriel sighed once more, dispelling his blazer.

Karel and Kariel exchanged looks. "We don't trust him either, Sir, but that is still no justification for your agitation," Kariel said. "We've handled worse odds than this, Sir."

Joriel shook his head. "I don't think so. This shadow-man is an entirely unknown quantity. Already he has insinuated himself into the command structure of the ship. What more can he do once he's accomplished what we came here for?"

Kariel was about to reply when the marine sergeant jogged up to the trio. A massive, red-furred conaigher, the sergeant was bristling with armor plates and weaponry. "We've picked up something on the scanners," he said through sharpened teeth. "Several craft, rapidly approaching from the southwest."

Karel grimaced, his wings expanding to their full length and his blazer igniting. Kariel and the sergeant ignored him, waiting to see Joriel's reaction.

Joriel narrowed his eyes and shifted his stance on the rock, looking down into the valley. Hazmat had almost made it to the valley floor. The alien had apparently not yet reached his objective. However, if the inhabitants of this planet discovered a S'hree Vek squad on the planet's surface, the results would be disastrous.

"Get the shuttle ready," Joriel ordered. His Celestine eyes were picking up the approaching craft; five Stinger Class fighters and a Hunter Warcarrier. Too much firepower for the shuttle to handle, even with three Celestines aboard. Joriel wasn't about to risk deactivation for the alien. "Everyone aboard. I'll recover our guest." Without another word, Joriel took to the air, his wings expanding to catch the wind and his internal grav systems coming on line.

He landed on the ground in less than fifteen seconds, raising a cloud of dust that swirled around Hazmat as the alien looked up. "Trouble, lad?" Hazmat asked dryly.

"We're getting out of here," Joriel snapped.

"Not quite yet, I'm hoping. We don't want this to be a wasted trip, do we?" Hazmat said. His orange eyes twinkled in the depths of his shadowy face.

“There is some kind of planetary defense force headed this way, and we are not staying to see what they want from us,” Joriel told him, his voice rising.

Hazmat regarded him for a moment. “Hmmm, well, I won’t be a moment then.”

“Now, alien,” Joriel snarled, reaching out to grab the shadowman. Hazmat swatted his hand away, his eyes sparking. Joriel could only stare, surprised at the alien’s strength.

“It isn’t wise to cross me, angel,” Hazmat growled. His statement was punctuated by the roar of five stinger class fighters as they blasted by overhead. The warcarrier followed at a more sedate pace, its cannons eyeing the shuttle and preparing to fire. “Watch, and learn,” Hazmat added.

Hazmat dropped to one knee in the sand, placing his palms flat on the ground. Joriel took a wary step backward, shuddering involuntarily as he heard the stingers and warcarrier begin firing on the shuttle. Despite himself and his responsibilities, Joriel could not bring himself to look away from the alien. Hazmat shuddered as well, a low moan coming from his invisible mouth. The shadowy substance of his body grew darker, and darker still, until it seemed as if he were drawing all the light around him into his body, photon by photon. “This world... untapped potential,” Hazmat gasped, his voice sounding as if it came from very far away. “Ley lines... possess a purity I’ve rarely seen.” Joriel felt as if a black cloud had fallen over the desert sun, creating a pocket of night in the middle of the day. Explosions echoed in the distance, dimly heard.

And then suddenly the spell was broken. Hazmat lurched to his feet. Joriel blinked back tears as light flooded his vision once more, and he looked up sharply as the shuttle swerved past them over head, two stingers flying rings around it and the warcarrier sending beams of light to splatter off the shuttle’s shields.

“They’re doomed,” Joriel said grimly. “And I hold you responsible.”

Hazmat laughed. “Angels shouldn’t be pessimists, lad. As I said, watch and learn.” The shadowman stood with his legs spread, and raised his arms overhead, orange eyes flickering. A web of black light erupted from Hazmat’s fingers, rising and spreading with preternatural speed. The black web filled the air in the span of a few heartbeats. While the shuttle and its “escorts” had already flown clear, the other three stingers weren’t so lucky. They tried to veer out of the way, but either the pilots or the ships themselves couldn’t handle the speed and the stingers slammed into the web, enmeshing themselves in its inky strands. Hazmat waggled his fingers, releasing the web and allowing it to collapse into a tight ball, smashing the three fighter craft together with a dull explosion that was mostly absorbed by the web of darkness.

“Three ships down in less than fifteen seconds,” Joriel rasped. “Impossible.”

“Hah!” Hazmat exclaimed. “You’ve seen nothing yet, lad.”

The warcarrier began to turn, searching for the source of the fighter crafts’ demise. On the other end of the valley, the shuttle practiced evasive maneuvers while the remaining stingers whittled away at its shields. Joriel could only watch, rooted to the spot. His blazer was in hand, though he couldn’t recall igniting it, and he knew it would prove no help against the warcarrier’s heavy weapons.

A dozen streams of crimson light stabbed toward them from the assault craft’s cannons. Joriel braced for the impact, expecting to die. But the lasers balked a dozen feet away, slamming harmlessly into an invisible screen erected by Hazmat. Ripples of darkness punctuated the impact of each blast, but nothing touched either Joriel or the shadowman. The barrage did not lessen, instead increasing in intensity as the warcarrier advanced. The screen held.

Hazmat was laughing, a harsh sound that could not be drowned out by the sizzle of heavy lasers. He gestured, his eyes flashing, and the ground shuddered beneath Joriel’s feet. Rocks clattered down the slope, echoing throughout the valley. Cracks appeared in the valley floor, and Joriel saw a massive hump rise out of the ground, directly beneath the warcarrier. The rumbling in the valley increased, and Joriel’s vision blurred as his body shook. His internal grav systems kept him on his feet, but just barely.

The hump unfolded itself, expanding geometrically and reaching upward into the air. It took on the rough outline of a colossal hand that plucked the warcarrier out of the sky and crushed it like a tin can. The carrier detonated, blasting the stone hand to pieces and sending a shockwave across the valley that lifted Joriel off his feet and sent him spinning on the dusty ground.

Hazmat stood unmoved, his head thrown back, his body once more absorbing light.

As fragments of warcarrier and stone clattered to the valley floor, Joriel lurched once more to his feet. On the horizon, the shuttle doubled back towards Hazmat and Joriel, trailing smoke and weaving through the air. Its pursuers veered off from their attack, buzzing in the direction of the warcarrier’s flaming wreckage.

“This is an old favorite,” Hazmat declared. “Watch closely.” Once more he held his hands aloft, and wove patterns in the air with them. The darkness around him deepened, and Joriel had to switch over to nightsight in order to penetrate it.

A black oval appeared before one of the stingers, and before the pilot could react, the fighter flew directly into it, disappearing as it did so. For a moment, the remaining stinger hung in the sky all alone, but the black oval manifested above it. Out of the oval flashed the other stinger, slamming into the second one at high speed. Both fighters disappeared in a bright flash.

The shuttle circled close, venting black smoke and shuddering as it tried to land.

“Amazing,” Joriel said breathlessly. He eyed Hazmat warily, realizing he would never be able to trust the alien. He couldn’t trust anyone he feared so much.

Hazmat snorted, an odd sound from his featureless face. “Child’s play,” he said.

Caleb Vulcan, novice Cosmo-Knight, went shopping.

His friends Kassiopaea Acherean, the Atlantean Undead Slayer, and Doctor Abbot, the shadowman wizard, insisted that the three of them buy a starship if they were to start gallivanting all over the cosmos. Abbot, who had recently learned that another being like himself existed in the Three Galaxies, wanted to leave the planet Alexandria as soon as possible to search for the other Shadowbeing. Kassy and Caleb, willing to go along with their friend, were more concerned with hunting down and bringing to justice the Draconid wizard Quajinn Huo, who had recently killed Caleb’s mentor Lothar.

While Caleb himself was capable of surviving unaided in space and even traveling at superluminal speeds, his friends were not. They needed a ship. Unfortunately, all three of them were broke. Caleb had made a few credits working with moisture farmers on the desert world Koola, but had left that behind when Lothar came to get him. Abbot had a couple thousand creds stashed in banks all over the Three Galaxies, but nothing handy, and nothing close to the amounts they would need in order to purchase a worthy vehicle.

Luckily, Kassy was rather well off. More appropriately, her parents were well off. Which was why Hiram and Kornelia were joining them on the shopping excursion. Hiram and Kornelia were both striking individuals, with the same straight black hair and blue eyes Kassy possessed, both marked with blue-white tattoos, similar to the ones Kassy wore on her arms. Like all Atlanteans, Hiram and Kornelia were long lived and continued to grow throughout their lives, and as a result both of them were nearer seven feet than six, well proportioned and well muscled. To Caleb, they looked like Greek statues come to life, especially in their flowing togas and cloaks. As the scrawny, red headed kid from Arizona, Caleb felt thoroughly out of place and more than a little intimidated by them.

If he had been able to spend more time getting to know them, he might feel more comfortable in their company. He hadn’t had much time for visiting on Alexandria; instead, shaken by Lothar’s death, he had spent his time rushing from one dangerous situation to another. Though he had come to his senses and realized he could not save the world, or the Three Galaxies, single-handedly, he had still to spend a significant amount of time with his hosts.

The fact that he had to borrow money from the Achereans made him even edgier. Growing up in a single parent household on the grounds of Fort Bliss, Arizona, Caleb hadn’t met too many villa-owning patricians, or even any

garden variety millionaires. Though Kassy's parents had graciously offered to pick up the tab, Caleb was too self-conscious to take them up on their offer. Kassy could have taken charge, but she enjoyed watching Caleb squirm, a petty way to get back at him for abandoning her in the wake of Lothar's death. Abbot, on the other hand, simply knew nothing about spacecraft. It was one of the few topics he could not wax verbosely upon, and he claimed to prefer public transport.

"I'm not much of a pilot," Abbot had confessed in his dry, British tones. "Growing up in a monastery didn't give me much chance to go hot-rodding around the galaxies. I've used Planetary Spacelines for years, when I wasn't hitting up my friends for rides." Abbot's shadowy features lightened in what Caleb thought of as Abbot's smile, as the wizard twirled his cane. "You'll find Kassy isn't much better than I. She's a grunt, after all. Dump her planetside in the middle of nowhere with nothing but a penknife and an empty canteen and she's fine, but put her in a pilot's chair and she's useless. Odd as it may seem, though you've been a citizen of the Three Galaxies for only a few months, you've logged more flight hours than either of us."

Caleb forced a chuckle. "Lothar didn't let me fly much," he said. "But I enjoyed every moment of it." He ran a hand through his raggedly cut, blood red hair. "And, uh, I've been checking the WorldNet for ideas. We need something fast and light, I figure, and there's an Orion Industries Comet in a lot in Hymaeria. Lightly armored, no weapons, but it has a jacked-up contra-gravitonic drive that can hit ten light years per hour. It's a little dinged up, but according to the dealer's site it's in great shape. The thing is, I don't know exchange rates or any of that stuff. I don't know if thirty-four million credits is too much or dangerously little. But I do know that's far too much to be asking from Kassy's parents."

Abbot adjusted his fedora. "Perhaps," he admitted. "But they have offered to purchase a ship for Kassy in the past. And you've seen their mansion; the Acherean clan owns most of the real estate on the planet, and Hiram and Kornelia are highly ranked members of the clan. Thirty-four million credits would probably be pocket change to these people."

Caleb sighed. "That doesn't make me feel any better."

Abbot patted him on the shoulder. "You'll have to get used to moving in these kind of circles, Caleb. Cosmo-Knights rub shoulders with the rich and famous all the time."

The young Knight grinned ruefully. "Until I do, why don't *you* ask Hiram and Kornelia for the money?" Abbot laughed, but before he could say anything, Kassy had approached to let them know they would be leaving soon, and that was the end of the conversation.

Hymaeria served as Alexandria's largest spaceport, billing itself as "Atlantis' Gateway to the Stars," and it was also home to a dozen dealerships specializing in starship sales. Most of them sold Atlantean, Dwarven, or El-

ven designed ships. Hiram and Kornelia had already made their preference for an Atlantean ship known, though the adventurers remained uncommitted. And as always, the Naruni had weaseled their way into the market as well, their wares heavily armed and armored, and better suited for the use of a mercenary band or militia rather than a trio of adventurers.

“Naruni, pfeh,” Hiram muttered. He had a full beard and shoulder length hair tied back with a leather cord. The five of them were standing outside the Naruni lot, on a wide flagstone boulevard separating the dealerships. In the distance were the rising domes of starships, and beyond that the pyramids and skyscrapers of the city proper. On the other side of the Naruni lot lay the port, where hundreds of ships could be seen landing and taking off. “I still think you’d be better off with a Gryphon,” Hiram continued. The Gryphon was a twenty year old design, little more than a cab and an engine, but like most Atlantean craft it was sturdy and aesthetically appealing, with a sleek fuselage and delicate looking wings. “Gryphons have managed to get me out of more than one dangerous situation.”

“I’m sure they have, Dad,” Kassy supplied. “But I think we’re looking for something a little more modern.”

“Are you implying that I’m old?” Hiram asked, mock serious. “Do you hear that, Kornelia? Your daughter thinks I’m just a nattering graybeard.”

Kornelia Acherean, herself well into her second century and yet looking more like Kassy’s older sister than her mother, told her husband, “You should expect that when you leave an opening like that, dear. You’ve been nattering away about old model craft, when it’s obvious the kids want something with a little more kick. Isn’t that right, Caleb?”

She looked right at him, smiling warmly, and Caleb blushed, trying to mutter something in reply.

“Actually,” Abbot interjected. “I believe Caleb does have a particular ship in mind. Don’t you lad?”

“Really?” Hiram rumbled. “Then why are we stumbling around from ship to ship? If you’re looking for something specific, speak up, by Zeus.”

Caleb winced. “Well, uh,” he started to say, but was rescued momentarily from the embarrassment by the arrival of Ogretopian terrorists. They came in from the west, from the direction of the spaceport, piloting a screaming hover-car loaded down with cannons and nearly a dozen snarling Ogres, some of them hanging on to the sides of the craft, weapons in their free hands. Caleb and his companions almost missed them entirely; the piercing whine of the hover-car was largely lost in the background roar of the port, and even the war-cries of the Ogres were covered up by the hover-car itself.

Luckily, the Ogres had terrible aim. Just as Caleb began prevaricating, a sizzling bolt of laser fire flew by overhead to splatter harmlessly on the flagstones of the boulevard. The five of them stood frozen for a moment. The hover-car roared past them, barely fifteen feet off the ground, depositing

seven snarling Ogres as it flashed by and prepared for another run. The Ogres landed lightly on their feet, only one of them losing his balance and sliding across the road on his armor, their weapons drawn and ready to fire.

Caleb aimed a silent prayer of thanks towards heaven, and then sheathed himself in his metallic red cosmo-armor with a crimson flash. Kassy touched her wrist with two fingers, and a bow of blue-white fire manifested in her hands. Abbot gestured with the head of his cane and a shadowy wall appeared in the road, separating them from their attackers. Hiram and Kornelia appeared unperturbed, sharing a brief look and then turning their attention to the fight. The handful of other people in the streets scattered, looking for cover.

The Ogres opened up, beams of energy flashing from the muzzles of their guns, the stink of ozone filling the air. Abbot's wall reflected the barrage, the screen dimming with each impact. Kassy aimed her bow at an angle, sending four flaming arcs over the wall to slam into the Ogres with an explosive crash.

Caleb took to the air, aiming his armor clad body towards the hover-car, which was just coming around and aiming its cannons at his companions on the ground. A flash of red light erupted from Caleb's visor, and one of the cannons melted to slag before it could fire. The Ogres in the open cab hooted and growled, pointing the nose of the car in Caleb's direction. Caleb's laugh echoed in his own ears, and then he slammed into the hover-car, crushing the front end like an aluminum can. The Ogres howled in surprise and fear as their craft's engine died. Caleb wrapped his arms around as much of the hover-car as he could reach and guided it to the ground, letting go just before it landed with an echoing crash. The Ogres bounced on the pavement, but their body armor kept them from taking any serious injury.

Caleb landed lightly on his feet, surveying his handiwork. The Ogres were dazed but uninjured, and already drawing melee weapons and blasters, prepared to continue the fight. "If you get up, I will get lethal," Caleb boomed in his best imitation of Lothar. The Ogres stopped moving for a moment, and then one of them brought his weapon up. With a look, Caleb burned the Ogre's weapon hand away, and the fight went out of the others.

Caleb spared a glance behind him, to see if the others needed help, and saw that Kassy had the Ogres pinned down, while Abbot was sealing them off with more screens of shadow energy. Hiram had a communicator in hand, and the sound of sirens in the distance told Caleb that the authorities were on their way. In moments, Caleb would be trying to explain himself to Hiram and Kornelia once again.

Caleb turned back to the dispirited rabble littering the street. "Doesn't anybody still want to fight?" he asked.

In short order the mess was cleaned away, with Inspector Diomedes dragging the Ogre terrorists away in chains. Caleb actually welcomed Diomedes' angry lecture about Caleb involving himself in police matters, but the lecture

was cut short by a word from Hiram. Diomedes shot Caleb a glare, apologized to Hiram, and then stalked off to interrogate his new charges.

Caleb dispelled his armor. "Thanks for the assist," he said.

Hiram nodded. "Diomedes can be a bit of a martinet," he said. "And he's had it in for you since you started playing superhero a few weeks ago. But I wouldn't worry about him. As soon as you and my daughter have picked out a ship, you'll be out of his hair."

Caleb wasn't sure how to respond. All he could muster was, "Uh, right."

Hiram's piercing blue eyes bored into Caleb. "I originally agreed with Diomedes, you know. I thought you reckless and dangerous, too trusting of your Forge-given abilities. But I didn't see that today. You acted quickly and cleanly without any grandstanding, and you trusted your friends to back you up." Hiram's features softened slightly. "You're unlike any Cosmo-Knight I've ever met."

"Thank you," Caleb managed to spit out, lost for anything else to say.

Hiram nodded. Kassy approached, wearing a half smile, and threaded one arm through her father's. "Are you giving Caleb a hard time?" she asked.

Hiram smiled, exposing white, even teeth. "I was congratulating him on a job well done, actually."

"Good," Kassy said, reaching out and hooking her other elbow around Caleb's. "I would prefer it if the two of you got along." She gave her father a meaningful look, and then smiled at Caleb. "What were you going to say before we were distracted?"

"Huh?" Caleb said. Kassy's smiles could do that to him.

"What ship are you looking for?" Hiram asked, a sharp note in his voice.

"An Orion Industries Comet," Caleb told him, unconsciously straightening his back. "Dealer's asking for thirty-four million." He winced inwardly as Hiram's eyes widened at the number.

"That doesn't sound too bad," Kassy said, giving Caleb a knowing wink. "Dad?"

Hiram stifled a cough. "No, not bad at all. But let's see if we can talk the dealer down a bit anyway."

Elias Harkonnen stepped off the boat into another world.

Hala, a grim block of ice and rock floating in the void, served as one of a dozen prison planets for the Consortium of Civilized Worlds. The planet had no indigenous life, very little atmosphere, and a heavier than standard gravity. A network of tunnels ran beneath the surface, connecting the prison facilities proper. A hundred thousand sentients stalked the prison halls, carefully watched over by a force of automated guards.

Harkonnen was crippled by a power dampening harness, a set composed of a collar, belt, bracers and greaves. When the circuit of components were

completed, they stole Harkonnen's superhuman abilities of strength, flight, and invulnerability, leaving him easy prey for the other prisoners filling Hala. Or so the authorities believed; even without his bio-engineered abilities, Elias Harkonnen possessed the training and bearing of the Kreeghor Invincible Guard. The other convicts were in for a surprise or two, as were the drones in charge of the prison. This planet could not hold Elias Harkonnen for long. Eventually he would make his escape. Eventually he would be free. Eventually he would have his revenge.

Caleb Vulcan would pay for every indignity Elias Harkonnen was made to suffer. He would pay for it a hundredfold. So Elias swore.

"Get moving, creep," a metallic voice ordered. Elias gritted his teeth as an android guard jabbed him with a powerlance.

"Revenge," Elias whispered darkly, walking down the ramp and joining the prison population. "Revenge."

Chapter Fifteen

Pathfinder

While the people of the Consortium of Civilized Worlds prefer to think otherwise, magic is a powerful and vibrant force in the Three Galaxies. Most dramatically, this magic manifests itself upon and within living worlds. Observers often see this force as a network, a lattice, of lines that encircle the world. But magic permeates the environment, soaking into every living thing, piercing into and through the earth itself. Some theories hold that magic itself is the catalyst for evolution, that it guides the development of lifeforms, that it may be the ultimate source for the ascendancy of intelligent life in the Megaverse.

That theory has its detractors, but few would deny that the presence, and strength, of ley lines affects the life forms that inhabit that world. The Seljuks of Gemini One, for example, appear as normal flesh and blood, but possess supernormal strength and endurance that allow them to physically match power armor. That other reptilian species in the Three Galaxies do not possess these abilities may be attributed to the powerful, violent expression of the ley lines on Gemini One. Ley storms so devastating that the Seljuks – as a species – permanently gave up their ability to manipulate magic in order to put a stop to them, frequently tore across the planet’s surface as the Seljuks evolved.

This is not to be taken lightly.

But living worlds are not the only place in the Three Galaxies that ley lines manifest. The trackless aether of space is also home to lines of force that duplicate the energy signature of ley lines. Without the potential psychic energy provided by life, without the anchor of a world, these lines of force stab through space. The Celestial monks use them to plumb the mysteries of the Megaverse, while the Dwarven Runemasters of the UWW use them as railways to carry their magic-fueled ships between worlds. And an ambitious Consortium scientist named Arthur Nast is attempting to map these lines, and while his project is far from complete, in its current form it suggests that the space leys, too, create an invisible network, a circuit, that connects disparate worlds to one another.

What does this mean?

I have no idea. But I do believe it is absolutely marvelous.

– Weddron Nurrick, Noro scholar and quantum psionist

Caleb Vulcan, Knight of the Cosmic Forge, reclined backward into the plush leather seat of the pilot’s chair. He let loose a long sigh.

The control panel of his newly purchased, and slightly used, Orion Industries Comet was much more complicated looking than the guidance sys-

tem of Lothar's old freighter had been. Lothar, Caleb's late mentor, had allowed Caleb to pilot his ship for short distances, and Caleb had hoped that his grounding in the basics of interstellar travel would enable him to pilot the new craft. But Caleb had to admit that the array of buttons, lights and screens laid before him was a puzzle he could not comprehend. He shifted in his seat, his mop of blood red hair falling into his eyes, and checked the few indicators he comprehended.

The Contra-Gravitonic drive that powered the ship was nominal. The life-support systems were fine, the air-scrubbers chugging away to keep clean air circulating throughout the ship. The red button on the top right corner of the panel would raise the landing gear, while a dial at the bottom right controlled the ship's defense screen. Other than that, the control panel was a confusing mess. There was no joystick, no altimeter or fuel gauge, or any of a dozen other items Caleb expected to see. What it had were six tiny screens, flashing brightly with glyphs in Trade One, one of the oldest tongues in the Three Galaxies, and one Caleb could not speak, let alone read. Two globes were incised in the bottom of the panel, spinning lazily without any direction from Caleb.

Caleb spun his chair around to regard the rest of the Comet's bridge. U-shaped, the bridge had six seats spread on two levels. The lower level, where Caleb sat, was designed for the pilot and co-pilot. The raised section was largely for passengers, but contained a communications and sensor array, as well as posts for engineering and weapons targeting, though this particular Comet wasn't armed. Weaponry would have raised the price on the craft considerably, and as it was, Caleb was indebted to Hiram and Kornelia Acherean to the tune of thirty million credits for the Comet. At their daughter Kassiopeia's behest, they had purchased the ship for the use of their daughter and her friends. But neither Kassy nor their other companion, the shadowman spellcaster Doctor Abbot, could pilot a starship. The three of them had hoped Caleb's lessons with Lothar would be enough.

Caleb sighed again, and stood up. It was such a good ship, too. A sleek, red craft, nearly two hundred feet long and shaped like a dagger, the Comet was a medium-sized runner. The type of ship used by mercenaries, nobles, or smugglers; a fast ship with excellent defense screens, that could slip past blockades undetected. The drive on this particular Comet had been modified, making it slightly faster than other ships of its kind.

Not that it mattered. The ship still needed a pilot.

Caleb heard voices coming from elsewhere in the ship. He hopped up to the higher level, in time to greet Hiram Acherean and a stranger. Hiram Acherean was an Atlantean, and was gifted with the body of a Greek god. Tall and powerfully built, Hiram's dark skin was decorated with blue and white glyphs which marked him as an Undead Slayer, a specialized Atlantean warrior. He wore a white tunic, and flowing robes edged with violet. Hiram Acherean had the bearing of a king, but neither that nor Hiram's piercing

blue-eyed stare intimidated Caleb. Hiram intimidated Caleb because he was Kassy's father, and Caleb felt the need to gain the man's approval and acceptance. Perhaps it had something to do with Caleb's own father, a harsh taskmaster who had spared few kind words for his son.

To distract himself from such morbid thoughts, Caleb focused his attention on the stranger. The new figure was just as tall as Hiram, putting him a good foot higher than Caleb himself. He possessed an expansive cranium that tapered down to a narrow chin, giving him a triangular appearance. A ridge of violet-black spikes erupted from the top of his head, forming a sort of mohawk. His pale skin had a violet undersheen as well, giving him an odd look, emphasized by large eyes as black as pitch. He wore a black leather jacket, strung with chains, and beneath that an apparently nondescript gray flightsuit. As soon as he saw Caleb, the figure stuck out a long fingered hand. Caleb automatically took it, noticing in passing that there were six fingers.

"Caleb Vulcan," Hiram said, "allow me to introduce Siv Yurilak."

"A pleasure," Siv Yurilak said. He had a low, humming quality to his voice. Almost an echo.

"All mine," Caleb said. "You're the pilot?" he asked.

Yurilak chuckled. "Ah, yes," he agreed. "But I am much more than that. I am a mentalist, a seeker of truth, a wanderer of the cosmos."

"Uh... right," Caleb said, shooting Hiram a concerned glance. Yurilak sounded like some sort of hippie. How good a pilot could he be?

"My wife is helping our daughter load the supplies on the ship," Hiram said, unaware of or ignoring Caleb's discomfort. "I shall help them. You two should get better acquainted." Hiram gave Yurilak a pat on the shoulder as he left.

Yurilak grinned in Caleb's direction. "Hiram and I go back a few years," he explained. Stepping around the young man, Yurilak hopped down into the pilot's station. Casually he reached out and toggled a switch, lighting up the screens before him. Yurilak looked over his shoulder at Caleb. "You are threatened by my presence, yes?"

Caleb blushed bright scarlet, and tried to mutter a denial. Yurilak flashed neat, even teeth. "No need," he said. "I'm the best pilot in the Three Galaxies. Few could approach my skill; it's nothing to be ashamed about."

Caleb could only stare, shocked at the Noro's egotism.

Yurilak smiled enigmatically. He turned back to the control panel. "I've seen you on the newsfeeds of late," he said, changing the topic. "You're quite a busy Cosmo-Knight. Busting up terrorist cells doesn't leave you much time to learn how to drive, does it?"

Caleb grimaced, feeling his cheeks darken further. Most of his time on Alexandria had been spent buzzing around in full armor, rushing headlong into dangerous situations. Cosmo-Knights were a rarity in the United Worlds of Warlock, and the presence of such an active Knight on one of the UWW's

most prosperous worlds caused quite a stir. However, Caleb had come dangerously close to losing his humanity during his crusade. He had nearly subsumed his true self beneath the persona of a cold-hearted Cosmo-Knight, a conscious imitation of his fallen mentor, Lothar. Kassy had brought him back to his self, but the memory of how close he had come made him terribly self-conscious.

“Yes, I was busy,” Caleb said at last. “My job is saving lives. Tends to be a full time one. Not all of us can have glamorous careers, like chauffeuring people around the Three Galaxies.” Yurilak stared at Caleb, his smile fading rapidly. Caleb instantly regretted snapping at the Noro, but he didn’t care for the man’s attitude. “I think I’ll check on our supplies,” he said.

“You do that,” Yurilak said, all trace of humor gone from his voice. “I’ll do the preflight check. We should be ready to go in about half an hour.”

“We’ll be ready,” Caleb told him. He left the bridge, feeling even more gloomy than he had when he entered it.

Caleb bumped into Doctor Abbot in the hallway. The alien spellcaster looked like a human shadow, dark and featureless save for twin orange lights where his eyes should be. To make himself more approachable, Abbot favored a battered trenchcoat and fedora, complete with cane. Those, combined with the British sounding accent he used in Trade Four, gave Caleb the impression of an old professor, rather than one of the most powerful wizards in the Three Galaxies. “Caleb,” Abbot said warmly. “I hear Hiram found us a pilot.”

“Yes,” Caleb told him. “And he’s a jerk.”

Abbot’s shadowy face lightened in his version of a smile. “Excellent. Should be an interesting trip, then!”

But it wasn’t.

I turned out to be a quick, two day jaunt to another of the pastoral worlds of the United Worlds of Warlock, a planet called Celene. Celene was sparsely inhabited, populated mostly by an alliance of Elven tribes who dwelled within the vast, primordial jungles of the planet’s northern hemisphere. But what made Celene special in the Three Galaxies was the presence of an ancient monastery that sprawled across much of the planet’s smallest continent. Ten thousand years ago, a sentient named Sollust, wandering the galaxy in search of enlightenment, had come to Celene and according to his followers, discovered the perfect place to continue his meditations. Sollust found that Celene’s orbital pathway brought the planet through one of the few ley line nexuses in space, a hub that connected over a dozen individual space ley lines, and from them, connected to the vast network of celestial pathways throughout the Three Galaxies. In short, a mentalist of Sollust’s skill and experience could explore vast reaches of space without leaving Celene’s soil. The followers of

Sollust built a monastery, and codified Sollust's teachings, creating the Order of Celestial Monks. Since those early days the monks have studied and meditated, expanding the grounds of their monastery as their numbers waxed and waned over the centuries, and their knowledge of the Megaverse's mysteries deepened. In time, seekers of truth from throughout the Three Galaxies and beyond began to journey to Celene in search of Sollust's wisdom, and the Order expanded out into the Three Galaxies as well.

Centuries ago, an orphaned child of an unknown alien race was brought to Celene by Celestial monks who found him living unprotected on a floating asteroid. Raised among the esoteric Celestians, the child proved adept at wizardly arts and eventually earned a degree at the monastery's academy of magical study. He left Celene soon after, seeking a clue to his origins out in the strange and frightening Three Galaxies.

Now he was returning to the home he left behind so long ago, and it seemed that Celene held the key to discovering his origins after all. Abbot smiled at the irony, as he sat cross-legged on his bed. He had searched, off and on, on a thousand worlds and across a hundred dimensions, for some sign of his origins, his background. Even in the Megaversal melting pot of Phase World itself, however, Abbot had remained an alien. The same held true on Wormwood, on the Palladium World, through the gray reaches of the Astral Plane, and even in the darkened wastes of the Nightlands. Nowhere could Abbot find a hint or clue as to what he was, where he came from, or whether others like him existed in the Megaverse.

But recently, as Abbot had performed the funeral rites for his departed friend and ally Lothar of Motherhome, utilizing the nearly forgotten techniques of the Celestial monks who had raised him, Abbot had connected with the ley lines that crisscrossed space, the Celestial Pathways. He had felt a ripple across them, a strange feeling that had seemed at once foreign and familiar, and he knew without a shadow of doubt that another Shadowbeing existed somewhere in the Three Galaxies. But as soon as the realization hit him, the feeling was lost, and no matter how hard he tried, Abbot could not recapture it.

On Celene, however, Abbot knew he would find it again. More, he would be able to track the elusive Shadowbeing, to find them wherever they were in the Three Galaxies. Then, perhaps, he would finally find the answers he had sought all his life. He might even discover a relative. Or, dare he hope, a mate?

Abbot shook his head to clear such thoughts. His lifespan had measured several long centuries; he would not act like a child at Yuletide. He needed his wits about him if he was going to succeed, and that meant no more day-dreaming. Though, on the trip from Alexandria to Celene, there had been little else to do. Though Caleb and Yurilak barely exchanged a civil word with one another, they barely spoke at all. Caleb spent most of the trip in his

cabin, poring over flight manuals and playing with flight sims. Even Kassy couldn't coax him out of his quarters, and the boy was smitten with her. Though neither of them seemed aware of that fact; Kassy was edgy, though she didn't appear to know why, and she seemed distracted, failing to rise to Yurilak's occasional snide comments.

The Noro, Abbot was forced to admit, did leave something to be desired in the personality department. He was sarcastic, egotistical, and liked to needle his shipmates with pointed observations. Yet, Siv Yurilak truly was an exceptional pilot. Unlike most Noro, who channeled their natural psionic abilities into either mysticism or warfare, Yurilak had decided to focus his psychic abilities on his piloting skills. His sixth sense and clairvoyance allowed him to navigate a busy spaceport with ease, and he could plot a course through interstellar space without needing to consult the nav-computer. Yurilak could "see" space for kilometers in a three-hundred and sixty degree arc around himself. Further, he could feel the ship itself, communicate with its computer and drive system, and sense its strengths and weaknesses. Hiram had outdone himself in contracting Yurilak to fly the Comet.

"Attention," Yurilak's voice suddenly appeared on the speaker, jolting Abbot out of his reverie. "Attention, folks. We're coming up on Celene."

Abbot jumped to his feet, pulled his coat and fedora on, and scooped up his cane in one hand. He hurried to the bridge, almost colliding with Kassy in the hallway.

Tall and dark like her parents, with her father's blue eyes and similar blue-white tattoos running up and down her shoulders, Kassiopaea Acherean was definitely a beautiful woman by human standards. She smiled at Abbot. "A little eager, Doc?" she asked with a laugh.

Were he capable of it, Abbot would have turned red. Instead, he let his eyes twinkle and nodded. "I cannot think of the last time I was this excited about something," Abbot admitted.

"You've a right to be," Kassy told him, leading the way down the corridor. "Gods, but I'm excited for you. I just wish Caleb could muster up some energy."

"His mind is elsewhere," Abbot said. "The boy is still adjusting to his new home. It wasn't that long ago that he was living on some backwater world in another dimension. The Three Galaxies are still new to him." Abbot paused. "And he still hasn't come to terms with Lothar's death."

Kassy's eyes widened in surprise. "But I thought –"

"He is himself once more," Abbot told her, "but the guilt is still there. So he seeks distractions, hence his current quest to master astronavigation. I fear he may remain so until we catch up with Lothar's killer."

Kassy sighed, and was not able to keep the bitterness from her voice. "Perhaps. But I for one have seen enough of death and revenge. I prefer the road

we're on now." She managed to smile once more. "A chance at finding you a family. That's something to believe in."

Abbot threaded his arm through Kassy's. "I assure you, my dear, that I already have a wonderful family. One more couldn't hurt, though." Kassy's laugh brought them into the bridge.

Caleb was already there, trying not to glower at Yurilak, who was obnoxiously ignoring the other man. Caleb's features softened when Kassy appeared, and even managed a smile in her direction. The blue and green jewel of Celene filled the ship's observation screen. Abbot felt a warmth settle into his bones at the sight.

Home, he thought.

"The monastery is on the nightside at the moment," Yurilak told them as they appeared. "but somebody's up. And they're eager to see us. When I mentioned Abbot was aboard, they about flipped their lids."

"I have not been home in sometime," Abbot agreed. "And Brother Tandostiir did make me promise to visit soon when I saw him at Lothar's funeral." Out of the corner of his eye, Abbot saw Caleb flinch involuntarily at Lothar's name. Kassy reached out and laid a hand on Caleb's shoulder.

"Bring us down, Siv," Abbot said.

"Your wish," Yurilak said as his hands flew across the controls, "is my command."

The Comet landed lightly on the tarmac, though Yurilak gave it a little bounce. Caleb grimaced, Kassy grinned, and Abbot tried to ignore the Noro's sense of humor. Tucking his cane under his arm, Abbot left the bridge and headed for the airlock. Caleb hurried after him, grumbling under his breath about "showboating."

The airlock cycled open and the gantry ramp slid down to reach the ground with a thump. Abbot ambled down the ramp, and could not help smiling as he breathed the sharp Celene air. Even through the tang of ozone, heated metal, and oil coming from the ship, Abbot could smell the orchids in the monastery's garden in full bloom, the scents of bread baking in the kitchens, and the faint smell of incense carried on the breeze.

Brother Tandostiir was waiting for him at the base of the landing platform, with a circle of his brothers and sisters, all of them in the nondescript robes of the order and representing the order's diversity. Tandostiir himself was a Noro, with shaven head and a ready smile. "Welcome, Doctor Abbot," he said, stepping forward and holding out his hands in a welcoming gesture. Abbot took them, and bowed his head to receive Tandostiir's benediction. "Sollust's blessing be upon you."

“And you as well, Brother Tandostiir,” Abbot said, rising. “You remember my friends Caleb Vulcan and Kassiopaeia Acherean,” Abbot said, introducing his friends.

“Ah yes,” Tandostiir said. “The young Cosmo-Knight and the Undead Slayer. The Order of Celestial Monks welcomes you to Celene.”

“Thank you,” Caleb said.

“Yes, thank you for allowing us to visit,” Kassy added. “Hiram and Kornelia Acherean send their greetings.”

Tandostiir’s pale gray face split into a wide grin. “Good friends. I trust they are well?”

“They are indeed,” Kassy said.

“Does everyone in the Three Galaxies know one another besides me?” Caleb murmured, just loud enough to be heard. Kassy elbowed him in the ribs, but Tandostiir laughed.

“Please, let us retire inside,” Tandostiir said at last. “Our home is yours. Please, enjoy our hospitality.” The other brothers and sisters broke away, leading Caleb and Kassy across the landing field towards the campus buildings. Siv Yurilak appeared, his leather jacket slung over one shoulder, and with a grin at Abbot, followed the rest of the party. Abbot stayed behind, noting without surprise that Tandostiir did as well.

“What brings the wandering son home, so long after he left?” Tandostiir asked softly.

“I may have discovered what I left to find, so many years ago,” Abbot explained. “But I need the use of the Star Chamber. I must commune with the Celestial Pathways.”

Tandostiir’s eyes widened, almost imperceptibly. After a moment, he said, “This is not a simple thing you ask, my son. You were raised here, but never fully indoctrinated into the order’s mysteries. The use of the Star Chamber is for brothers and sisters of the order alone.”

“I understand,” Abbot told him evenly. “I do not ask for this favor lightly. While meditating on Alexandria, I felt the presence of another Shadowbeing through the celestial currents. But the presence was lost almost as soon as it was sensed.”

Tandostiir frowned. “Are you certain of this, Abbot?”

“Without doubt,” Abbot told him. “Nothing I have ever felt could compare. It felt like looking in a mirror... it was quite startling. I fear that startlement led to me losing the connection.”

Tandostiir was quiet for a moment. “The Concordation will not be pleased to hear of this, I fear,” he said at last. He smiled slightly. “But I believe I can convince them to help. We do not lightly turn away family, after all.” Tandostiir began to follow the others, and after a moment Abbot went after him.

“There may be something you can do for us,” Tandostiir told him.

“Whatever I can do to help,” Abbot said automatically.

“We have a young student, very promising, herself of an heretofore unknown alien species. She has achieved an unprecedented level of power in a short span of time. Yet the accompanying enlightenment has eluded her.” Tandostiir sighed, an uncommon occurrence. “I fear that she has reached the limit of what we can teach her.”

“You want me to bring this student off-world with me,” Abbot said.

“Essentially,” Tandostiir agreed. “Perhaps you can help her in ways that we cannot.”

Abbot blinked, and suddenly smiled. “You’re a wily old man, Tandostiir,” he said. “This is why you wanted me to come visit, isn’t it? You haven’t missed me. You want me to look after this troubled child of yours.”

Tandostiir grinned ruefully. “I am happy to see you,” he said with a laugh. “But come, let us eat dinner before anything is settled.” Tandostiir led the way, and Doctor Abbot followed.

While Abbot waited for Tandostiir to bring the Concordation, the order’s ruling body, to accede to Abbot’s request, the others explored the monastery’s grounds. Kassy and Caleb took the tour, led around by an enterprising and energetic young initiate named Arwen. According to Kassy, Caleb was astounded at the variety of people and architectural styles he found here, as well as the fact that the monks studied martial disciplines. For a boy – no, Abbot corrected himself – a man who had seen the wonders Phase World had to offer, Celene and the monastery should have seemed tame in comparison. Yet Caleb seemed charmed by the place. Kassy, for her part, had heard stories of the monastery from Abbot and her parents, but never been to the site before, and found it just as she had imagined it. Siv Yurilak, for his part, took advantage of the meditation spaces to commune with the celestial pathways himself. Abbot was impressed.

After three days, Caleb was beginning to get antsy, and took off to explore Celene a bit on his own. Kassy, feeling annoyed and abandoned, began sparring with the younger initiates, including the girl, Arwen, who proved to be an exceptional hand to hand combatant.

All this Abbot learned third hand. He could not talk to his friends, as he had sequestered himself in a cell in order to purify his mind and body for the coming trial. He burned incense, meditated with legs folded upon a reed mat, and drank only tea. Nightly, Tandostiir would visit and inform him of his progress with the Concordation and the activities of his friends.

On the fifth day, when Tandostiir visited, he brought more welcome news. “The Concordation has decided to allow you the use of the Star Chamber. With reservations. Brother Huskarl thinks it a betrayal of our precepts, while Sister Banaban fears, rightly so, that the rigors of the Star Chamber will destroy you.”

Abbot nodded. Despite Tandostiir's warnings, he felt relieved. He was one step closer to the goal that had eluded him for centuries. "I understand," he told Tandostiir. "But I have no intention of betraying the order or of losing myself within the Chamber."

Tandostiir smiled warmly. "I told them as much. But they don't know you as well as I do. When will you be ready?"

"Tomorrow," Abbot said. "At first light."

"Very well," Tandostiir said, and withdrew, leaving Abbot alone with his thoughts.

Abbot did not sleep that night, instead simply using the long hours to further his connection with the living world around him, tapping into the ley lines that encircled Celene. As the sun appeared in the western sky, Abbot rose, dressed, and made his way towards the central building of the monastery, a domed structure of steel and glass that rose a dozen stories into the sky. It was not the largest building on campus, nor the most beautiful, but it was the most captivating.

The morning sun gave the dome a blinding sheen, and the reflected light made Abbot feel insubstantial. Within the building, a dozen ley lines met, forming a nexus of incredible power. This close to the nexus, Abbot could feel the energy bleeding off of it, thrumming through the invisible lines of force that radiated out from it like the spokes of a wheel. Sollust had chosen the site well; the very air here crackled with power for those sensitive to notice such things.

Brother Tandostiir and the other members of the Concordation waited in a semicircle before the dome. Abbot slowed as he approached them, finally coming to a stop within the circle. He bowed his head.

Sister Banaban, a graying Wulfen female, stepped forward, the hem of her robes whispering on the cobblestones beneath her feet. "Who is this that comes before us?" she intoned.

Brother Tandostiir stepped forward. "A seeker of truth," he answered her. "Is his cause just?" she asked.

"His cause is just," Tandostiir answered.

"Is there any here who would block his path?" Banaban asked. Abbot risked a glance at Brother Huskarl, a thin boned Draconid, but Huskarl said nothing. After a brief silence, Banaban spoke once more. "Then proceed, seeker of truth, and may Sollust's blessing be upon you."

"My thanks," Abbot said. He handed his cane to Tandostiir, and then divested himself of his trenchcoat and fedora as well. Naked, a creature of living shadow, he stepped through the door into the dome. The world shifted around him.

Surrounded by light, imprisoned in a maze of steel and glass, he picked his way across the mirrored surface of the floor towards a distant point on the horizon. Images of his past flickered on the panes of glass around him,

like two-dimensional holovids. He saw himself as a child, on that barren asteroid, living alone. There he arrived on Celene, and was welcomed into the order with open arms. There, he struggled with his first spell, trying to light a candle with a thought. Beyond, he shattered the bonds of reality, opening a gate between worlds and ushering in a beast that had nearly destroyed him, but for the timely intervention of a young and limber Tandostiir. He saw himself, in his first hat and coat, leaving Celene behind on an outbound freighter, nervous and excited, seeing the Three Galaxies for the first time. He felt a slight pain in his chest when he beheld his first meeting with Lothar, on one of the Draconid Hub worlds while Quajinn Huo was massing his first army. Images of Abbot throughout his travels appeared before him, as he wandered from world to world, dimension to dimension, discovered friends and allies and fought terrible foes. His knowledge, his worldliness, grew, and yet the answers he desperately sought continued to elude him. Until now. Abbot reached the doorway, and stepped across the threshold, into the Star Chamber. The world shifted around him.

He stood in a small, dark room. A circle of wan, orange light lay upon the floor. Other than that, the space was bare. Abbot stepped over the light, and folding his legs beneath him, settled into the circle. He laid his hands upon his knees, closed his eyes, and opened his other perceptions. Around him, the air crackled and sizzled, and the orange light grew brighter and brighter, while Abbot's own body grew dimmer and dimmer. He felt his consciousness touch the nexus that surrounded him, broadening to touch upon the ley lines that radiated out around him. He felt his mind soar, higher and higher, until he touched the heavens. Light exploded all around him, and sucked him in. Deeper.

Deeper.

Deeper.

Golden sunlight reflected brightly off the crimson carapace of Caleb's centurion-themed armor as he descended from the clouds and flew towards the monastery. It was late afternoon on the sixth day of their stay on Celene, and after buzzing around the northern jungles for two days, Caleb was returning to the monastery to check on his companions. The jungles in the north were lush and beautiful, in the throes of their rainy season, and life abounded. Huge, draconic creatures with incredible wingspans and too many teeth glided through the rain clouds and stalked the jungle floor, while birds of incredible colors filled the skies and tiny primates chattered and hooted. The Elves Caleb had expected to see proved elusive, but then they probably had to be good at hiding to avoid the dragons. One of the creatures, assuming Caleb was food, had tried to bite him, but was rewarded with a few broken teeth for its trouble.

He had hoped to find some excitement, some adventure, perhaps some Elven damsel to rescue, but the aside from the one hungry dragon, the trip had proved a bust. Perhaps he should have stayed with Kassy at the monastery. He had enjoyed touring the grounds with her, exploring the gardens and the temples, helping in the apiary and watching the brethren test their martial skills against one another. But there was a greater danger in that than he faced against dragons or tropical storms; he was falling for Kassy.

As of now, Caleb knew it was nothing more than a crush. It could too easily become something more, however, and Caleb didn't know how to deal with it. Back at home, on Earth, he would have just asked her to a dance, or out to a kegger or something. But life in the Three Galaxies made things substantially more complicated. First and foremost was the fact that he was a Cosmo-Knight; could such beings even have normal relationships? He had pledged himself to the service of the Cosmic Forge and, by extension, all living things. Caleb had known priests with less responsibility, and they hadn't been allowed to clutter their lives with girlfriends or lives. Then there was the cultural barrier, not to mention the age difference. Kassy looked like she was only a year or two older than he was, but Atlanteans could live for centuries, and Kassy herself was almost as old as his father.

On the other hand, Kassy was easily the most beautiful, intelligent, confident, funny, and compassionate woman he had ever met.

"Aw, nuts," Caleb muttered darkly. He landed lightly on the tarmac beside the Comet, dispelling his armor with a crimson flash at the same time.

"There you are!"

Caleb turned sharply, and saw Kassy framed in the ship's airlock, her dark hair wild in the late afternoon breeze. Caleb felt his breath catch in his throat.

"Why didn't you bring your radio?" she demanded, storming down the gantry.

"There's no world-net to monitor here," Caleb explained automatically, "and I thought you would all be fine here. What's wrong?"

"Abbot went into the Star Chamber this morning," Kassy said sharply. "That was fifteen hours ago, and he still hasn't come out. The Concordation seems to think that could be trouble."

"Well, what can we do?"

"I don't know," Kassy frowned. "But I hate standing around and wringing my hands by myself. And I hate being left behind."

Caleb winced. That jab had been aimed at him, not at Abbot. "I'm sorry, I just wanted to explore..." He trailed off, unable to tell her exactly why he had felt the need to leave.

"By yourself? You didn't even ask me. It felt like Alexandria all over again. Though, at least there I could call you up on the comm and yell at you."

"I'll remember it next time," Caleb told her.

"What?"

“I mean, it’ll never happen again.”

She nodded. “Better.” She shook her head. “I swear, sometimes Caleb I don’t know whether to belt you or...” It was Kassy’s turn to trail off. Her eyes focused on something over Caleb’s shoulder, and he turned to see what it was. Arwen Griffin, the young initiate who had served as their guide, was running towards them.

Petite but well proportioned, Arwen looked human, save for green skin and blue hair. Caleb had watched her spar with some of her brethren, and found himself impressed with her skill. Kassy had been as well, which only served to impress Caleb all the more. Arwen was quick, too, covering the ground with a rapid pace that brought her to them in heartbeats. She slid to a halt in the tarmac, her hood sliding off her head and her robes in a tangle around her legs. Yet she her breath showed no sign of exertion.

“You must come,” she said urgently but clearly. “Doctor Abbot has emerged from the Star Chamber.”

Caleb arched an eyebrow in Kassy’s direction. “See, I’m right on time.” Arwen shot a questioning glance at both of them, while Kassy tagged Caleb in the shoulder. “All my worry for nothing,” she grumbled.

“Shall we take the Cosmo-Knight express?” Caleb offered.

“I have a better idea,” Kassy said. With two fingers she touched a glyph on her right bicep, and in a shower of blue light a massive, blue-white Gryphon appeared before them. “All aboard,” Kassy said with a grin, and the Gryphon let out a screech.

“Ladies first,” said Caleb. Kassy hopped across the Gryphon’s shoulders, and Arwen followed with some urging. “I’ll race you,” Caleb said when the younger girl was settled. He didn’t wait for a response, instead taking to the air. Behind him he heard the Gryphon screech again, and the heavy beat of its wings as it followed him into the sky.

Caleb reached the center of the campus in moments, but Kassy was right behind him, and the Gryphon touched down on the cobbles just as he did. The air flickered with blue light once more as Kassy dispelled her beast, and she and Caleb rushed to Abbot’s side.

The wizard stood surrounded by the Concordation, the leaders of the monastic community. While they murmured amongst themselves and checked Abbot for signs of stress or injury, Abbot himself shrugged his shoulders into his coat and leaned heavily upon his cane.

“Doc,” Caleb called. “Are you okay?” Kassy pushed her way past the monks and took Abbot’s arm to help steady him.

“Thank you, Kassy,” Abbot said, his voice strained and haggard. “I am fine, Caleb. The search took longer than I expected, and I expended much of my energy, but it was successful. I have a fix on the other Shadowbeing.”

“That’s great,” Kassy beamed. “After you’ve rested for a week, we’ll go after her.”

Abbot shook his head. "I shall convalesce aboard the ship. Our quarry is on Phase World, and could too easily disappear if we tarry too long. We must leave immediately."

"Whatever you say, Doc," Caleb told him. He had made his way through the crowd as well, and now offered Abbot his own arm, helping to support the wizard's weight.

The Noro monk, Tandostiir, materialized with Arwen at his side. "If that is the case, Abbot," he said, "then Arwen must begin packing."

"Excuse me?" Caleb asked.

Abbot smiled weakly. "So she is your prodigy," he said.

Kassy looked across Abbot at Caleb. "Did I miss something?"

"Don't look at me," Caleb said. "I've been gone the last few days."

Arwen clasped her hands before her, but bounced on the balls of her feet. "Truly, Master Tandostiir? I am to go offworld so soon?"

"Abbot?" Tandostiir prompted.

The wizard nodded. "Best find Yurilak as well," he said. "He'll need to –" In mid-sentence, Abbot passed out, and would have pitched forward but for Caleb and Kassy.

"Is he – ?" Tandostiir asked, but Caleb cut him off.

"Simple exhaustion, I'm sure," Caleb said. He reached down and hooked Abbot by the back of his knees, picking him up. "What do you think, Kass? Leave now, or give him a day to recover?"

Kassy bit her lower lip, looking over the unconscious Abbot, the eager Arwen, and the concerned Tandostiir. "We'd better leave as soon as we can," she said at last.

"Well then," Caleb said. "Let's roll."

Chapter Sixteen

Crucible of Fire II

The Kreet system, hidden in one of the spindle arms of the Corkscrew galaxy, was once inhabited by a race of intelligent tree-like beings who lived in harmony with the world around them. Gifted mystics, the tree beings built their civilization utilizing biotechnology, maintaining a symbiotic relationship with their very planet. Just as that civilization began to peak and reach out to the stars, it was laid to waste. Six billion sentient lives were snuffed out in one twenty-four hour period.

The Ronan system, near the central cluster of the Anvil, was even further along than the Kreet, establishing orbital colonies on its closest satellites and preparing to explore the universe beyond its star's light. But the first Consortium starships to enter the Ronan system found only lifeless worlds and the shattered artifacts of the Ronan species.

In the Thundercloud, a ragtag fleet of battered ships migrates from system to system, a race of beings known as Zanolics at their helms. The Zanolics originated on a world that no longer appears on star charts, a world swallowed by its sun two billion years before the sun's life cycle would have driven it to nova. The Zanolics are a downtrodden people, with failing technology and little hope for the future.

These are three disparate systems in three widely separated segments of the Three Galaxies, united not because their worlds and civilizations proved vulnerable to the inexorable pull of one of the universe's greatest forces – entropy – but because their worlds and civilizations were deliberately snuffed out by the greatest scourge the Three Galaxies have ever known.

Dominators.

*– Preface to a lecture by Captain Hiram Starling,
Consortium Armed Forces Fleet Command*

“Slowly but surely,” Siv Yurilak said sarcastically. The Noro starpilot sat at the helm of the Orion class Comet, tapping his fingers against the smooth surface of the control panel.

“Relax,” Caleb Vulcan told him sharply from his own seat at the co-pilot's chair. The Cosmo-Knight gestured at the viewing port before them. A queue of starships lined up ahead of the Comet, each one awaiting a trip through the Svartleheim Rift. The Rift was a naturally occurring tear in time and space that operated as a major source of revenue for the Dock Alfar system, serving the entirety of the United Worlds of Warlock as a quick route to the center of the Three Galaxies. Hundreds of ships passed through the Rift daily, ferrying passengers and goods through to the other end, which opened up just light years from Phase World itself.

As a result, the space around the Comet was packed tightly with ships. A pair of Arcane Mark II patrol ships orbited the Rift, their presence a sign that the Rift itself was important enough for the loose alliance of the UWW to maintain a presence here. In counterpoint orbited the ships of the Dock Alfar themselves, which looked to Caleb's inexperienced eye like Viking long-ships, whose masts were replaced with domes. Brackets of oars still jutted from the ships' flanks, proud dragonheads curved up over each prow, and the whole of the ships' surface appeared to be fashioned of wood.

The Dock Alfar ships were not the most remarkable, either.

The starships of Alfheim looked more like sculptures than ships, fashioned from a substance Abbot referred to as a "wizard-glass," a kind of enchanted crystal that the Elves could shape into a variety of designs. Weird, fluted projections were common, as were delicate looking wings, giving the Elven ships the appearance of glass insects or anemones, but some took on the appearance of whales, trees, or other natural shapes. In contrast, the Dwarven Iron Ships were narrow craft of cold black iron. Bullet shaped, the Dwarven ships were covered with metal plates, each plate covered with rivets that sealed in the enchantments of the Dwarven Rune Wizards. Weapons bristled along the ships' expanse. The Dwarven ships were clunky, blocky, and crude looking. Somehow, though, they glided through the vacuum of space with ease. The Draconid ships swooped like metallic dragons, while Naruni craft, coal black and with rounded edges, hovered quietly but menacingly, and two Flotilla class Oni starcruisers jockeyed for a spot ahead of the Naruni. Dozens of other runner and merchant craft, virtually interchangeable with the Comet itself, floated around the larger ships. Most of them would reach the Rift before the Comet, which meant that Siv, Caleb, and the rest of the crew were forced to wait. Already, hours had passed since Caleb and his friends had arrived at the Svartleheim Rift, and though a hundred starships had passed through the Rift, another hundred would make it through before the Comet got anywhere.

Yurilak sighed again, his leather jacket creaking as he leaned back in his chair. "I'm not good at patience," the Noro admitted.

"Practice," Caleb started to say, but he was cut off. He felt a sudden surge within his chest, and his eyes rolled back in his head as he heard a strong, feminine voice echo within his mind.

Caleb, you are needed. A vision of a small, blue-green planet appeared within Caleb's mind, complete with spatial coordinates and the fastest route to reach the world.

Caleb slumped forward in his seat, slamming his forehead against the control panel. He felt Yurilak grab his elbow and pull him into a sitting position. "What in blazes just happened?" Yurilak demanded.

Caleb shrugged, loosing himself from Yurilak's grip. "I just received a message from the Forge." He hopped up onto the upper deck of the U-shaped

bridge. “Keep an eye on the Rift,” Caleb told Yurilak. “I’m going to talk to Abbot.”

He found the enigmatic wizard in the galley, with the rest of the crew. Doctor Abbot sat at the table, a leather-bound book in one hand and a cup of tea in the other. His fedora and trenchcoat looked rumpled, though his shadowy body, featureless but for the twin orange lights of his eyes, betrayed no sign of the weariness Abbot must have felt. Abbot was an orphan, a being believed to be unique in all the Three Galaxies. Since adolescence, Abbot had searched for his origins, but only now was he nearing the end of his quest. He had detected another Shadowbeing like himself for the first time in centuries, and had exhausted himself pinning down the Shadowbeing’s current location.

Kassiopaia Acherean, the Atlantean Undead Slayer, made dinner at the abbreviated kitchen station. Tall and beautiful, Kassy had hair the color of midnight and eyes of cobalt blue. She always left her arms bare, showcasing the arcane blue and white glyphs that were the key to her powers. Beside her stood the group’s newest charge, a young woman named Arwen Griffin. Arwen appeared human-like, but the green cast to her flesh and the shock of bright blue hair on her head cast her as an alien. She too was an orphan, and her monk’s cloak and tunic hinted at her isolated upbringing. Arwen had never before been on a starship, nor had she ever cooked a meal. Kassy, a talented chef in her own right, was more than willing to show Arwen around the galley, glad for the help. Kassy looked up as Caleb entered the room, offering him a dazzling smile.

Caleb felt a twinge of guilt for not pitching in himself, but the core of energy granted him by the Cosmic Forge ensured he no longer required physical sustenance and he often found himself forgetting others ate. He made a mental note to do the dishes.

“Caleb, is something wrong?” Abbot’s dry, British tones snapped Caleb back to the matters at hand. “You look like you’ve seen a ghost.”

“Not exactly,” Caleb admitted. “But I did receive a message from the Forge.” Kassy stepped around the counter, wiping her hands on a towel. Arwen, serving tasting duty, looked over the rim of her spoon at the Cosmo-Knight. “There’s a small world only a few light years away that is in serious trouble.”

Abbot’s orange eyes narrowed, his version of a frown. “I suppose Phase World can wait,” he said, folding his book closed.

“Actually,” Caleb said, “I can handle it myself. I’ll just have to catch up to you guys when I’m done.” He forced a chuckle. “Heck, I’ll probably be back before the ship reaches the Rift, anyway.”

Abbot blinked, but his expression didn’t soften. “Nonsense, my lad. If the Forge itself thinks this world is in danger, then you shall need our help.”

“Of course,” Kassy agreed. “We’re not going to let you fly into danger on your own.”

Caleb shook his head. He couldn’t pull Abbot away from his quest, not at this stage. Not when the wizard was so close. Caleb may have failed Lothar, but he was not about to fail Abbot. “The Forge asked for me. I can get out there and back in no time at all, and we won’t have to lose our place in line.” He paused, noting Kassy’s raised eyebrow and Abbot’s rapid blinking. “End of discussion.”

“You’ve certainly absorbed some of Lothar’s less endearing traits,” Abbot said sharply.

Kassy cocked her head, examining Caleb closely. For a long moment, Caleb thought she would give him a lecture, but all she did was put a hand on his shoulder and say, “Hurry back.”

Caleb grinned fiercely at her. Kassy understood.

“You’re not serious?” Abbot asked.

Kassy turned to the wizard. “He’s not an apprentice anymore, Doc. He’s a Knight.” She looked at Caleb again. “And he has to do what he has to do.”

Maybe she understood too well. “Thanks,” Caleb whispered to her. “I’ll be back in no time,” he told the others. Then he was gone.

A crimson bolt of light blasted through the cold void of space, and Caleb Vulcan materialized in orbit over the planet. Clad in his centurion themed metallic red armor, he surveyed the scene and noted several points of concern. A network of Naruni defense satellites orbited the planet, operating in clusters of three. Yet all of the satellites appeared to be offline, their running lights dark and their weapon systems pointing at nothing in particular. Caleb could see small bursts of light in the planet’s upper atmosphere as satellites whose orbits had decayed fell towards the planet. Strangely, those were the only lights visible, despite the fact that Caleb had arrived on the world’s nightside. A planet advanced enough to run a network of defense satellites must have had cities or other technology, visible from space. But there was nothing in sight.

Caleb’s eyes narrowed behind his visor. Though a relative newcomer to the Three Galaxies, Caleb felt alarm bells ringing. He took a moment to regret not asking Abbot and Kassy along, and then reached out with his cosmic awareness to see if he could sense anything strange occurring.

Nothing terribly alarming came to light. The planet had three moons, two of them larger than the third. Much larger, Caleb thought. Perhaps it was worth taking a look at the little moon. He circled the planet at top speed. His eyes automatically adjusted to the brightness of the planet’s sun as he reached the dayside, so he didn’t even blink as the moons came into view. The two larger ones bobbed in a high orbit, each one easily measuring about half the

size of Earth's moon. Between them floated an artificial construct of some kind.

Caleb moved in for a closer look. The construct was massive, larger than any man-made object Caleb had ever seen, larger than the Statue of Liberty, space station Xerxes, or the city of Center on Phase World. The construct, at least, was not malfunctioning. Indeed, its surface was lit up like a Christmas tree, and as Caleb drew closer he saw cannons and missile batteries projecting all over, each of them tracking Caleb's movements. He drew to a halt, eyeing the thing and wondering what it could mean. It was stationed further away from the planet than the satellites and could presumably have been outside the range of whatever effect had put them out of commission. But something told Caleb that the construct didn't escape the problem. It was the problem.

Caleb moved closer, but just as a dozen cannons of various calibers homed in on him, he caught a bright blue light appear at the edge of his vision. Caleb backed off from the construct, and glided towards the blue light. The light solidified, materializing into a human sized figure clad in metallic blue armor. The armor was bulky and baroque, with an intricate design winding around its surface and a pair of huge horns erupting from the helm, which, though open-faced, appeared featureless.

Two Knights? Caleb thought. *I definitely should have brought Abbot and Kassy.*

The Knight saw Caleb and maneuvered to meet him. "Greetings," he said as he approached. Caleb couldn't hear him, not exactly, but the Knight's voice reached him nonetheless. The link they shared to the Cosmic Forge allowed them to communicate with one another, even through the vacuum of space. "I am Vyking," he added. "What's going on here?"

"Caleb Vulcan," Caleb introduced himself. "And I'm not exactly sure. The Forge summoned me here, but I have no idea what the trouble is. Your arrival has me more than a bit concerned, though."

"Vulcan?" Vyking asked. "Weren't you with Lothar of Motherhome?"

Caleb was about to explain when they were both distracted by a silver light. Another Knight arrived, this one nearly twice as tall as Caleb or Vyking, clad in shining silver that resembled Greek hoplite armor. Her armor was so bright that Caleb could see himself reflected in it. "Ariel," she said by way of introduction. "I'm guessing we have serious trouble."

"Our assumption as well, Titan," Vyking agreed. He opened his hand and a bar of blue light formed there, forming a metallic blue longsword.

There was something familiar about that sword, Caleb thought. The silver giantess gave him a sense of *deja vu* as well. "Was the Forge as vague with you as she was with me?" Caleb asked.

"Indeed," Ariel agreed. She looked over Caleb's shoulder, noting the massive construct near the moons. "Shivok!" she swore suddenly. Caleb whirled,

his own hammer materializing within his hands. All he saw was the strange artificial moon, and beyond that, empty space.

“Do you recognize it?” Caleb asked.

“Yes,” Ariel hissed. “It’s a Dominator craft.”

Vyking whistled low, a sound that echoed strangely in Caleb’s mind. “We should wait for reinforcements, then, shouldn’t we?”

“Reinforcements?” Caleb echoed. “Three Knights of the Forge aren’t enough?”

“You are a rookie, aren’t you?” Vyking said. “Any Dominator who isn’t afflicted with a terminal illness would eat three of us for breakfast.”

“Regardless,” Ariel interjected. “We cannot assume the Forge has summoned more of our compatriots. There are people on the surface who will need our help.”

“Unless the Dominator is still sitting pretty in his ship,” Vyking pointed out.

The three of them were silent for a moment. “Then you check the ship,” Caleb said. “And we’ll check the surface. But we’ll have to move quickly.”

Vyking touched the blade of his sword to his helmet in salute. “So be it, then. Happy hunting.” The blue Cosmo-Knight flew towards the Dominator ship without another word, his sword held loose but ready in his hand.

Caleb followed suit, tucking his hammer against his chest and angling towards the planet. He dropped through the atmosphere like a rock, feeling the air burst into flames at his passage and lick along the edges of his armor. A blur of silver and orange in his peripheral vision told him that Ariel was right beside him.

The two Knights burst into the lower atmosphere, their armor still smoking and sparking in places, but completely unmarked. A cloud evaporated as they flew through it, coating both of them with dew. The surface of the planet spread out beneath them, a patchwork of cultivated fields and forests, dotted here and there with tiny outposts of technology. In the distance, they could just make out the metallic hump of an arcology or city. As Caleb and Ariel buzzed low over the fields, they saw farming ‘bots, grav-sleds, and other machinery lying in disarray. Fur-covered humanoids milled about in pockets, some of them injured, all of them confused and alarmed.

“The satellites were not an isolated case, it seems,” Ariel said, slowing.

Caleb checked himself, matching the Titan’s speed. “Those people down there need help,” he pointed out.

Ariel nodded. “I’m concerned about the Dominator as well,” she said. “Perhaps the ship –” she began to say, but was cut off by a flash of light from the direction of the arcology. A spiral of smoke rose into the air, black and heavy. “On the other hand,” Ariel said, “maybe we should check the city.”

Ariel took off at top speed, leaving a sonic boom in her wake. The furry humanoids on the ground below pointed and chattered at one another in their

native tongue. Caleb offered what he hoped looked like a reassuring wave, then rocketed off after Ariel. He caught up with her as they reached the outskirts of the city. It was laid out in a spiral pattern, like a nautilus shell, and the buildings grew larger and more elaborate as the spiral tightened, eventually reaching a central tower that climbed hundreds of feet into the air. Small fires grew in pockets throughout the city where aerial craft had crashed to the earth. The natives thronged the streets, trying to force their way to safety, trying desperately to reach the outskirts of the city. Some brave souls were trying to get hydro units working to put out the fires, but as with everything else on the planet, the technology simply didn't work. None of it was operating.

Except, that is, for the huge grav-sled orbiting the city's central tower. Sitting atop the sled was a gigantic humanoid, easily thirty or forty feet tall, clad in a full suit of arcane seeming armor. Its head was large, round, and extremely pale, with stunted ears, a pug nose, and large black eyes. The giant held a wicked looking axe in its hands, a weapon that looked large even in its massive paws. The black eyes regarded the Knights as they approached, examining them coldly.

Caleb could also see some aerial craft floating through the air. Each of the tiny ships had the same arcane design as the Dominator's armor, a strange blend of futuristic and ancient looks. Some of the craft were landing on the city's streets, disgorging metallic figures that began to round up the natives and throw them inside the craft. "All this chaos to kidnap people? To what end?" Caleb asked aloud. Ariel didn't answer, instead summoning her cosmic weapon, a silver two-handed sword that was scaled for her frame. "Okay, how about this one," Caleb said, changing his tack. "How is it nothing on this planet is working except the bad guys?"

Ariel focused on Caleb at last. "A computer virus, an artifact, some strange ray? Who knows. Are you ready for battle?"

"Shouldn't we try negotiation first?" Caleb asked. Ariel laughed.

"Gnats of the Forge!" the Dominator bellowed, half rising from its sitting position on its grav-sled. "Come, taste my blade and perish in the service of your accursed master!" The axe shifted in the giant's hands. It pointed the jeweled crest at the two Knights, the heavy blade of the weapon aimed at the ground. The jewels flashed, and a scarlet beam of light flashed through the atmosphere to slam into Caleb and Ariel as they hung in the air. Caleb felt it as a warm breeze, irritating but harmless.

"A poor attempt, shivok-eater," Ariel shouted. "Let's go," she added in Caleb's direction. Without waiting for confirmation, Ariel launched herself towards the Dominator, her eyes flashing with silver light. Her energy beams slammed into the Dominator, but sizzled as they struck some kind of personal force field that shimmered bright blue in response to the attack.

The Dominator laughed, a horrendous sound that grated on Caleb's nerves. He burst into his own assault in response, pulling his arm back and throwing

his hammer with all the strength the Forge had given him. Caleb's hammer struck the Dominator's grav-sled with a thunderous crash, rending metal and electronics. The grav-sled vented flame and sent shards of metal falling to the ground. It tilted dangerously, alarming the Dominator who fought to keep its balance. As the sled aimed towards the ground, the hammer wrenched itself free of the frame and flew back to Caleb's welcoming hand.

As the Dominator fought to maintain control of the listing vehicle, Ariel closed in with a tremendous cry, slashing wildly with her sword. The blade skittered against the edge of the force-field, sparking blue light but unable to cut through. The Dominator lashed out with a wild swing of his axe, but Ariel was quick, and the axe cut nothing but air. But Ariel proved enough of a distraction; the grav-sled slammed into the earth with a muffled "whump." The Dominator spilled from his seat and crashed to the ground. Caleb threw his hammer in an effort to keep the Dominator off balance, but the force-field remained in place. All Caleb managed to do was create more blue sparks.

The Dominator began to get up as the grav-sled exploded in a ball of flame behind it. "Amusing," it growled. "But futile."

Caleb landed lightly on the ground, barely a hundred yards from the giant. Ariel remained in the air, sending the occasional burst of silver energy to spatter harmlessly against the Dominator's shield. Caleb surveyed the situation; the three of them were in the heart of the city, surrounded by towering skyscrapers and empty streets. Chunks of flaming grav-sled rained down upon the streets, smashing through windows and crushing stalled cars.

The Dominator rose to its feet, an even more impressive sight from Caleb's vantage. The monster was immense, towering over thirty feet high. The blade of the great axe in his hands measured ten feet in width, and it looked sharp enough and heavy enough to split Caleb in two quite easily. He reminded himself that, though the Forge kept him immune to energy attacks, he was all too vulnerable to simple, physical force.

The Dominator bellowed, gripping its axe in two hands, and slashed at Ariel. The Dominator's size didn't seem to affect its speed at all, an Ariel barely managed to evade the attack. The mass of the axe and the strength of the blow spun the Dominator around, and rather than bisect the airborne Cosmo-Knight, the Dominator's axe cut into a skyscraper, shattering stone and steel and slashing the building in half. Caleb watched in horror as the building buckled, and the masonry shattered like glass. The sky darkened as the building came crashing down. Caleb took to the air, a red bolt that circled the Dominator as the building came down upon it. Caleb heard a rumble like distant thunder, and then the skyscraper crashed down upon the giant, and the world quaked. Other buildings shuddered as well, and shards of rock and glass rained down upon the square. Dust filled the air, obscuring Caleb's vision.

He saw Ariel poised above the cloud, sword at the ready as she surveyed the damage. Caleb hefted his hammer in his hand and grimaced beneath his helm. Was the battle over before it truly began?

The dust cleared slowly, and it revealed the Dominator standing, unharmed, its force-field flickering blue light. Just beneath the roaring in his ears, Caleb heard the low, infuriating chuckle of the Dominator. Ariel shouted another alien curse and launched a whirlwind attack, her silver sword flashing and slashing again and again. Blue sparks erupted wherever she struck, but the Dominator merely stood and laughed. With one swipe of its massive fist, it knocked Ariel from the sky. She crashed to the ground with a metallic clang, but Caleb didn't see. He was already in motion, flying full speed at the Dominator. He impacted with all the force of a runaway train, and though his world turned blue and his head rang with the force of his crash, he succeeded in staggering the giant. The Dominator lurched backward two steps, crunching rubble beneath its titanic boots.

The Dominator roared with indignation. "You will pay for that, flea," it growled.

"Bring it on, fathead," Caleb shouted to ensure the monster heard him. Caleb braced himself against the Dominator's force-field with his feet and used his hammer like a sledge to wear away at the energy field. It flickered with each blow, growing less and less bright with each strike.

The Dominator shifted, trying to knock Caleb away, but the young Knight was ready and easily dodged the Dominator's clumsy attack by leaping into the air. At the same time, Caleb loosed a flash of crimson energy from his visor. Still the force-field held.

"By the Forge!" Caleb cried. "You will fall!"

"Better men than you have tried, flea," the Dominator rumbled. The axe whistled through the air, cutting dangerously close; Caleb actually felt the edge of the weapon scrape against the protective layer of armor guarding his stomach.

Caleb retreated out of the Dominator's immediate range, peppering the giant with energy blasts as he did so. The Dominator advanced, grinning and swinging its axe in lazy arcs before it. Caleb saw dark shapes appear in the sky behind the Dominator. He recognized them with a sinking feeling in his stomach. Apparently the Dominator's automated servants were through kidnaping innocents. Caleb saw a dozen cannons from as many ships train their barrels upon his small metallic red form.

Caleb forced a smile beneath his helm. He had survived a supernova, an ancient alien artifact, and a psychotic Elf with superpowers. He could handle this.

The Dominator leaned forward and the axe swept towards Caleb with preternatural speed. Caleb dodged, flying around the axe and darting towards the Dominator. The axe connected with the street, burying its head deep within

the ground. Caleb slammed into the Dominator, hammer first, and once more the giant was staggered. It lost its grip on its axe and took another half-step backwards. The blue shimmer of the force-field lessened a fraction.

A silver flash appeared in the sky above Caleb. Ariel, recovered, rejoined the fray. She directed her attacks at the Dominator's automated craft, her Titan-sized two-handed sword slicing through engine parts, wings, and bulkheads. The smoking craft spiraled towards the ground, impacting with a sickening crunch. The Dominator roared, and the flat of the immense axe caught Caleb unawares. Caleb, hammered, felt his armor bend under the force of the blow, and then he sailed through the air and shattered through the wall of a skyscraper, only slowing after he tore through three inner walls.

Caleb groaned and lurched to his feet, still clutching his hammer. He pressed his empty palm against the flattened forehead of his helm, wondering if he had ever been hit so hard. He couldn't recall. He didn't remember the Dominator recovering its axe, either.

The dull roar of an explosion reached him deep within the building, and reminded Caleb that he still had work to do. He took to the air once more, blasting from the ruin at top speed.

The Dominator stood in the middle of the square, surrounded by rubble and flaming ships. It held its arms aloft in triumph, one hand holding the axe proudly, while the other held Ariel tightly, squeezing the life out of her. The valiant Knight struggled, but the Dominator had her pinned. Four of the Dominator's ships remained, and the way they oriented on Caleb suggested their radar had picked him up quickly.

"Where are Kassy and Abbot when I need them?" Caleb mumbled. He tightened his grip on his hammer and prepared for the fight of his life.

One of the ships suddenly dissolved in a burst of golden light. Blue and green energy bolts found two of the others, and the last one exploded as a ray of black light pierced it. Caleb looked up, alarmed.

"Yahoo!" Vyking roared as he exploded out of the sky. Three more Cosmo-Knights flew beside him, armor glinting in the sunlight and weapons bared menacingly. The one in gold looked human enough, and the twin pistols in his hands combined with the odd shape of his helmet made him look more like a cowboy than a Knight. The black Knight had the upper body of a man and the lower body of a horse. Sheathed in reflectionless black armor, the Centaur held a lance beneath the crook of his arm. The movement of his legs gave the impression that he ran across the sky rather than flew. The fourth Knight had a massive mouth, a cyclopean eye, and a quadrupedal body. All four of its tentacles held a double-headed battle axe which sent sickle shaped bolts of green energy at the Dominator.

The Dominator roared in surprise and anger. It threw Ariel to the ground and braced itself, gripping its massive axe in two hands. As the four Cosmo-Knights closed in, Caleb joined them, grinning beneath his ruined helmet. He

added his own red energy bolts to theirs, and in moments the Dominator's force-field finally flickered and died. A stricken look appeared on the Dominator's face, its arrogant features twisting into fear.

"Jasper, keep him buttoned down," Vyking ordered. The golden Knight hovered in the air, spraying the Dominator with deadly bursts of golden light. "Kolkvet, grab Ariel," he added. The green plated Monro Knight dipped low and grabbed Ariel with his winding tentacles.

"Cervantes, ram 'em," Vyking ordered. The Centaur never slowed, and as the black Knight hurtled towards the Dominator, the lance braced against his shoulder pierced the Dominator's armor and the flesh beneath. Black ichor sprayed from the Dominator's body as the Centaur broke away.

"Caleb, good to see you," Vyking added as Caleb approached. "Cover me," he said. "I'm going in."

Caleb followed Vyking as the blue Knight closed on the Dominator. The Dominator swiped at Jasper with its axe, but the Knight was out of range. Caleb saw Cervantes begin to turn for another assault. Kolkvet cradled Ariel in his tentacles and glided towards the roof of a nearby building.

"We're going for a one-two finish, kid," Vyking told Caleb rapidly. "Follow my lead." Vyking held his longsword out before him with both hands, forming a triangle with a deadly point. Jasper and Cervantes kept the Dominator distracted for a moment longer, just long enough for Vyking to slip in past the swinging axe. The Dominator's massive, pasty face loomed before them, its dead black eyes showing shock and fear. Vyking aimed his sword between the Dominator's eyes, and the giant couldn't move quickly enough to evade the Knight's attack. The sword pierced the white flesh, burying itself deeply. Vyking let go and skimmed the surface of the Dominator's forehead, looping up and around.

The Dominator blinked and looked cross-eyed at the tiny blue sword jammed between its eyes. Caleb screeched to a halt, swinging his body around in midair so he could plant his feet on the Dominator's cheeks. He raised his hammer over his shoulder. Stunned for a moment more, the Dominator made no move to impede him. Caleb let the hammer fall, and felt the shock travel up through his shoulders as the hammer struck the hilt of Vyking's sword. The impact drove the weapon deeper into the Dominator's skull.

The big black eyes rolled back and the Dominator fell backwards. Caleb leapt back into the air as the Dominator crashed to the earth once more, never to rise again. Vyking looped back and gave Caleb a light punch in the shoulder. "Nice job, Cal," Vyking said. "Now let's check on the survivors." Vyking flew off again, a blue blur.

Caleb looked at the corpse of the Dominator for a long moment, and then followed the other Knight.

Chapter Seventeen

Origin

The strangest thing about the Prometheans is that they just don't care. For an enlightened species, they're surprisingly selfish and short-sighted. They can build the city of Center – all ten amazing levels of it – and design the jump gates that make Phase World the hub of the Three Galaxies, they can master both phase magic and phase technology. They can do all this and more, but they don't seem to care too much that a good chunk of Center is owned and operated by the Splugorth, the Transgalactic Empire, and the S'hree Vek Confederacy. Slavers, drug runners, murderers, trigalactic despots, genocidal madmen, and worse call Center home. And the Prometheans don't care. I don't understand it. I don't know anyone who understands. Whenever I press a Promethean for an explanation, their little blue faces tighten up and they refuse to talk to me.

It's true that the Splugorth, TGE, Naruni, and even Thraxus are wealthier than half the sovereign planets in the Three Galaxies, but the Prometheans aren't greedy. Center would be profitable even if the Prometheans didn't turn a blind eye to all the cruelty and evil going on under their watch.

What is particularly maddening is the number of individual Prometheans I have met who could best be described as paladins, veritable paragons of virtue. I've known Prometheans to gladly give their lives to protect innocent beings, who have fought tooth and claw against Splugorth or Kreeghor, who have boycotted the Naruni, and used their magic and technology to improve the lot and lives of thousands.

And yet...

... the madness of Phase World, the madness of Center, continues unabated. If only I could gain an audience with a Second Stage Promethean, I believe all my questions would be answered.

– Weddron Nurrick, Noro scholar and quantum psionicist.

Doctor Abbot and Kassiopaea Acherean stood before the doorway to docking bay ninety-four, on the second level of Center. The doctor, a being composed entirely of shadow, wore a trenchcoat and fedora to lend himself some corporeality. Slightly taller than Abbot, Kassy wore her long dark hair tied into a tight ponytail, and the halter top she wore revealed arcane blue and white symbols running up and down her arms and across her collarbone, the Atlantean tattoos that made her an Undead Slayer, stark against her pale skin.

Abbot's glowing orange eyes, his only perceivable feature, seemed to bore into the massive slab of megasteel that served as the docking bay's access door. Beyond it lay the end to the quest that had driven Abbot for his entire life: a clue to his origins. In all the Three Galaxies and beyond, in several

hundred years of existence, Abbot had never encountered a being quite like himself. He had searched all that time for some clue, some inkling, as to where he had come from, but only in the past few weeks had his mystic senses detected another Shadowbeing elsewhere in the Three Galaxies. Mere days before, Abbot had tracked the Shadowbeing's essence to Phase World. Upon setting foot on Phase World, Abbot traced the emanations to docking bay ninety-four.

He and Kassy had reached the door ten minutes previous. But rather than keying the opening sequence, Abbot had stood, staring, and alternately tightening and loosening the grip on his cane.

"You okay, Doc?" Kassy finally asked.

Abbot looked at her sharply. He forced a chuckle. "No, I don't suppose I am. I am close, Kassy, closer than I have ever been in my life. And yet I find it difficult to take the next step. Why is that, I wonder?"

Kassy's features softened. She placed a reassuring hand on his shoulder. Abbot chuckled again, this time with genuine emotion. "Thank you," he said. He straightened himself, stepped forward, and gently stabbed the door lock with the end of his cane. The massive door rumbled open, rising and revealing the docking bay beyond.

Kassy started as the room on the other side was revealed. A massive, red hulled and crab shaped craft squatted in the midst of the docking bay, a half dozen landing gear bracing it against the tarmac. Coils and cables snaked out from the ceiling and walls and plugged into the sides of the craft, cycling fuel and gases into the ship. The exterior airlock was open, revealing the cold Phase World night and a smattering of stars. An arctic wind swept across the room, ruffling the edges of Abbot's coat and raising goose bumps on Kassy's exposed flesh.

"A S'hree Vek vessel," Abbot said, his voice harsh.

"The Confederacy?" Kassy asked. "Are you sure?"

Abbot nodded. The S'hree Vek Confederacy was a small alliance of worlds in the axis of the Corkscrew Galaxy. They were slavers and peddlers of biotechnology and psi-tech. Though not allied with the Splugorth, the Confederacy counted them among their best customers. The ships they flew were grown with biotech, enslaved with hard technology, and crossed the vast distances between worlds through warp-gates created by the psionically powerful Adinum. The Adinum, highly intelligent fish-like beings, were the nominal rulers of the Confederacy, and they lorded over the other five member races.

If the Shadowbeing was aboard the ship, then it was very likely that he – or she – was imprisoned, ready for the auction block and whatever atrocities the Splugorth could devise.

Abbot took an angry step forward, but Kassy tugged at his arm. "Be careful," she said. "If it is a Confederate ship, they're a long way from their section of Center. And notice the lack of guards."

Abbot paused. "Of course, Kassy," he said. "You're right. We must be on our guard. It's just, the thought of my... kinsman in a S'hree Vek pen has me angered beyond reason."

"Let's try to keep from doing anything rash," Kassy told him. "Without Caleb's firepower, we're at a bit of a disadvantage." She made a vague gesture at the S'hree Vek ship. "Let's at least get beneath the arc of fire her guns possess before we start throwing our weight around."

Abbot's orange eyes glimmered slightly, his version of a smile. "Agreed."

They crossed the threshold together, and began to lazily walk across the tarmac in the direction of the vessel. Abbot felt almost relaxed, but he knew it was the false kind of ease that he always felt before a deadly row. He had felt it most recently on Delian-4, Malthus' World, when he and Kassy and Caleb had fought against the Draconid wizard Quajinn Huo, and Abbot's oldest and dearest friend, Lothar of Motherhome, had perished.

"The guns should be tracking us, but they're frozen," Kassy observed. "This is very strange."

Abbot nodded. "I'm not sure what to make of it. Even the running lights aren't functioning. Is it possible the ship is dead?"

"Or a renegade?" Kassy suggested. "We are a long way from the Confederacy's sphere of influence on Center."

"A distinct possibility," Abbot said, trailing off. Halfway across the docking bay, they were finally witness to signs of life. One of the airlocks beneath the ship cycled open with a low burr, and a cylinder descended to the floor. Kassy tensed beside Abbot, her right hand dropping to her left wrist, ready to call upon her Atlantean magic. Abbot, for his part, tucked his cane beneath his arm and eyed the activity with concern.

A door slid open, and out spilled a squad of Conaigher, massive creatures that should not have been able to fit in such a confined space. Each of them towered over two meters in height and bristled with weaponry. Covered in red fur, each Conaigher possessed six arms, and each hand appeared to be gripping a laser gun of some sort. And all thirty-six muzzles were aimed in Abbot and Kassy's direction.

"I believe, my dear," Abbot said softly, "that we have been made."

The ape-like humanoids swarmed across the docking bay. One of them shouted out in Trade Three at the duo, "Do not move! Or you will die!"

"I think you may be right," Kassy said out of the corner of her mouth. She raised her hands slowly. "We go with Plan K, right?"

Abbot risked a glance at Kassy, while also raising his hands in surrender. "What was Plan K, again?"

Kassy's ice blue eyes shot him an angry look. The Conaigher had reached them, and dozens of guns were jammed into their faces. "You will come on board the ship or you will die!" growled the leader. The Conaigher obviously possessed a limited proficiency with Trade Three.

"Okay," Kassy said, stressing the second syllable. "We give up. Take us to your leader."

Beneath the brim of Abbot's hat, his orange eyes glimmered. He had suddenly remembered what Kassy had meant by "Plan K." They had used it once before, years ago, against a group of bandits in the S-K system. Lothar had been with them then; it was one of the few times the Wulfen had stepped into a dangerous situation without his armor.

Aboard the Orion Industries Comet starship that served as Abbot and Kassy's base of operations, their pilot, Siv Yurilak, sat cross-legged in his cabin. The Noro had honed his clairvoyant abilities in order to increase his piloting skill, to be able to "see" the space around his ship without resorting to electronic sensors. But his psychic abilities came in just as handily when it came to monitoring the progress of his employer's daughter.

Siv Yurilak had known Hiram Acherean for years, and pulled many jobs for the Atlantean in that time. Most recently, Hiram had hired Siv to pilot his daughter's ship while she and her companions tracked down the mad wizard Quajinn Huo. But Hiram had also deposited a bonus in Siv's Noro-Gor account to ensure Siv kept a close eye on his eldest child's activities and ensure her safe conduct.

Now, though, it appeared as though her faith in Abbot and that wild card Caleb Vulcan had been misplaced. She had walked into a trap, led there by the wizard and abandoned by the Cosmo-Knight.

Siv unfolded himself from his crouch and stretched, feeling the bones in his shoulders pop. He pulled his leather jacket off his chair, slipped it on, and went to look for the other member of the crew left behind. He knew Arwen Griffin was in the ship's hold, using the broad space to practice her martial arts.

The Conaigher separated them as soon as they stepped aboard the craft. Three of them dragged Kassy down a darkened corridor into the bowels of the ship, while the remaining three flanked Abbot.

"She goes to the pens," the apparent leader growled. "You see the Commissar."

Abbot nodded and followed, though he was concerned about Kassy. It was her plan, but if they bound her in some way and she couldn't reach her tattoos, then Kassy would be all but helpless. It was quite a gamble.

To reassure himself, as he followed the Conaigher soldiers, he extended his supernatural senses and found the nearest of Phase World's ley lines. It thrummed only a kilometer to the southwest, closer than he needed it to be. So long as it was there, he at least could not be disarmed. Though reassured, he suddenly noticed an odd shimmer encircling the Conaigher guards. Someone or something had ensorcelled them. Abbot's faith in the outcome of this situation faded suddenly, and he found himself unsure of Kassy's course of action. Plan K depended upon their captors not having any magic sensitives present.

The corridors they passed through were empty of other traffic. Some of the lights appeared to be malfunctioning as well, and in more than a few areas, Abbot thought he saw signs of carbon scoring on the walls. Had the crew rebelled? Would that explain the inactivity of the vessel, and the distance between it and the S'hree Vek part of Center? Perhaps the mysterious magic-user was involved.

That train of thought was not heartening, Abbot silently admonished himself.

Then the final set of doors scissored open, revealing the bridge. The Conaigher ushered Abbot into the room. One of them gave him a rough shove with an elbow, and Abbot nearly fell. He recovered quickly, catching himself with the aid of his cane. Abbot righted himself, adjusted his trenchcoat, and shot the offending conaigher an angry look. The beast nudged Abbot once more, directing his attention to what lay before him.

Abbot turned, and felt his hands go slack on his cane. It clattered to the floor, and he knew that, had he a mouth, it would be hanging open in surprise and horror.

Abbot knew that S'hree Vek ships were always captained by an Adinum, the psionic species in the Confederacy. To facilitate the Piscean creatures' movements through the ship, most of the key chambers in the ship possessed tanks of virium, the same fluid that covered the surface of the Adinum homeworld. An ingenious network of tubes connected each virium tank in the ship to the others, allowing the captain – or Commissar in S'hree Vek lingo – to move about the ship with nearly the same ease as his air-breathing crew.

But no tank existed on the bridge of this ship, not any more. Bits of glass and puddles of virium were scattered across the bridge's expanse, though the command stations were all empty and no crew was evident. In the bowl of the empty virium tank sat a throne, a horrid thing fashioned from flesh and bone through some twisted form of biomancy. The lifeform used to create the massive chair was unmistakable; the sloping fins that served as armrests, the thick tentacles fused together to make the legs, the six unwinking eyes that stared out from the top of the throne's backrest, sickeningly aware yet shining with

madness. The throne had once been the Adinum Commissar of this craft, and Abbot knew that the creature sitting upon it was to blame for the poor thing's horrid transformation.

The Shadowbeing Abbot had tracked across half a galaxy reclined in his chair, orange eyes shining brightly. "So," he said, "it appears to be me lucky day. Ye've come ta me, saving me considerable trouble tryin' to track you down, me wayward boyo."

The Shadowbeing leaned forward. "Good lad," he said. "Good lad."

Kassy followed the lead commando down a darkened corridor, wrinkling her nose in distaste as the other two crowded a little too close to her in the narrow passage. The Conaigher were pungent creatures, and given the disrepair of the S'hree Vek craft, Kassy had to wonder if the showers were working. She doubted the Conaigher would satisfy her curiosity if asked.

A door scissored open, and the leader paused. Around him, Kassy saw a winged figure standing in the doorway. Red armor plates and maroon wings were all she could see with the multi-limbed primate obscuring her vision. With the newcomer's arrival, the commandoes snapped to attention. The leader's shoulders began to tremble.

Interesting. Kassy recognized the winged figure as a Celestine, a bio-engineered superhuman created by the S'hree Vek to counter Cosmo-Knights, Quatoria, Invincible Guardsmen, and the like. Kassy allowed herself a grim smile, mentally adding Undead Slayers to the list.

The Celestine shouldered aside the lead Conaigher, and Kassy found herself looking in the man's crimson eyes. Kassy was slightly surprised to see that the Celestine looked almost completely human, despite its coloring. Red eyes, fine, maroon colored hair, and dark skin were all that separated him from an entirely human look. "Gentlemen," he said without taking his eyes from Kassy, "you are dismissed. I'll take her from here."

The three Conaigher shifted uneasily, looking from one to the other, trying to keep from looking at the Celestine. "Lor Hazmat..." the leader finally began, but the Celestine interrupted.

"Hazmat rules the ship," the Celestine snapped, "but I remain your superior. And the penalty for insubordination has not changed."

The lead Conaigher wilted, shoulders slumping and ears folding back. "Yes, commander. We hear and we obey." As one, the three commandoes turned and shuffled down the passage the way they had come, leaving Kassy alone with the winged warrior.

He surveyed her for a moment, looking her over head to toe. Kassy returned the look, noting that the Celestine cut an impressive figure. The blue flightsuit, overlaid with highly polished plates of crimson megasteel, combined with his bioengineered features and sweeping wings to create a power-

ful image. The sneer that crossed his face ruined it, however. "So," he said, "do you have a name, Atlantean?"

"Kassiopaeia Acherean. What's going on here?"

The Celestine's eyes narrowed. "Something terrible, Kassiopaeia Acherean," he said. "My ship has been usurped by an alien being and my Commissar has been murdered. I fear what may happen if the alien gains any more power."

"What alien?" Kassy asked.

"Your friend's kinsman, of course," the Celestine said. He smiled grimly. "And you're going to help me kill it."

Kassy arched an eyebrow. "I am?"

"Indeed," he said. "Because if you don't, both you and your friend are doomed."

"A threat?"

He shook his head. "A simple fact. Without your help, I am doomed as well. Yet I doubt somehow that your sympathy lies with me."

"You're right about that," Kassy said. "You people are no doubt getting what's coming to you."

"With interest," the Celestine agreed. "Half the crew was sacrificed to fuel the Shadowbeing's magical abilities. Do not assume that the prisoners and slaves in the ship's hold were spared, either. My lieutenants, Kalel and Kariel were butchered before my eyes. It made a throne out of my Commissar. A hundred denizens of the planet no longer live because of this monster, and each death seems to make it stronger."

Kassy looked at the Celestine for a long moment. "What's your name?" she asked.

"Joriel. Until recently I was the senior Celestine aboard the Vigilance."

"Well, Joriel," Kassy said. "It appears that you do need my help. More importantly, we're going to need my friend Abbot's help. Tell me, what is the Shadowbeing likely to do to my friend?"

Joriel shrugged. "I'm not certain. It originally commandeered the Vigilance to track down the other Shadowbeing it sensed abroad in the Three Galaxies. When it came aboard, it claimed that it was going to bring the other Shadowbeing back to its home dimension. But it also claimed that it would deal with us in good faith." The grim smile returned. "I do not see any reason to trust its good word."

"Shivok!" Kassy swore. She spun on her heels and began to run down the corridor. She brushed the star within a circle on her wrist and sheathed her body in a suit of blue-white body armor.

"Wait!" Joriel called after her. "We need a plan!"

"Too late!" Kassy shouted back at him. Though, in her heart, she hoped it was not.

“Who are you?” Abbot asked.

“A good question,” the Shadowbeing said, rising from his grotesque throne. “A natural question,” he added. “But a complex question. My appellation is Hazmat, and I’m in the employ a’ the Shaar Continuum. They sent me along ta this bloody backward universe ta track down a missing Shadowen. But I’m currently also the Commissar of the Vigilance, which makes me the local Lor, whatever that may be. I must admit ta not trying terribly hard ta understand these primitive carbon beings. They’re useful in their own way, though. Just fulla psychic energy ta fuel me magics.”

Abbot tightened his hands around his cane. He felt unsettled, and slightly ill. Though Abbot prepared himself to see his fellow Shadowbeing – the “Shadowen” – imprisoned in a S’hree Vek slave pen, witnessing the true state of affairs made his earlier assumption seem almost innocent. This Hazmat person was just as monstrous, if not more, than the Confederacy. But unlike the beings from the S’hree Vek system, Abbot was related to this one.

“Living creatures are not batteries,” Abbot said coldly.

Hazmat’s orange eyes glimmered. “A’ course they are, lad. By the Dark, ye’ve spent far too much time in this universe. We’ve got ta get ye back home and put ye right.”

Abbot felt torn. His natural instinct was to harness his own wizardly might and smite this abominable creature, yet at the same time he felt a terrible curiosity. This Hazmat was his only link to his origins, the only clue he had ever found in all his travels that proved he was not unique, that he came from somewhere, that he was not alone. “What is home?” he heard himself ask. “What is the Continuum?”

Hazmat stared at him for a moment, then hopped down from his perch. “The Shaar Continuum lies on the edge a’ the Void in the Astral Plane. It’s a place fer higher beings ta congregate, exchange ideas and energy, an’ exist apart from the primitive solids that propagate the majority a’ the Megaverse, wasting space and resources.” Hazmat reached out with his left hand, his eyes shining brightly. Abbot sensed Hazmat summoning up his energies, but still flinched as a bolt of light leapt from the chest of one of the Conaigher soldiers and flew to Hazmat’s hand. The soldier writhed and then collapsed. Hazmat turned his attention to the two remaining Conaigher.

“Ten thousand years ago, more or less, the Continuum seeded the Megaverse,” Hazmat said, gesturing once more. Two more beams of light leapt into his hands, and his eyes began to glow more brightly. “Seven hundred thousand podlings were scattered across as many realities. The purpose was ta mine those realities fer their magical knowledge. The podlings were ta bring that knowledge back to the Shaar, strengthening the Continuum, an’ giving us the tools ta mount a long-delayed attack against our old enemies, the Nightlords. Very few a’ ye’ve survived, however. At last count, we’ve only recovered about four hundred a’ ye.”

The baleful, orange eyes examined Abbot closely. “Ye will make four hundred and one.”

Abbot returned Hazmat’s stare for a moment, then thumped his cane on the floor. “I don’t think so. I... have searched all my life for the source of my origins, assuming that, by doing so, I would find my life’s meaning. Yet this Continuum that you speak of has no place in my life. I must decline your offer, Hazmat.”

Hazmat nodded. “Well said, lad. But what makes ye think I’ll take no fer an answer?”

A flash of light leapt from Hazmat’s open palm, but Abbot reacted just as quickly, deflecting the beam with the head of his cane. “The thought never crossed my mind,” Abbot replied, happy that his voice didn’t shake.

Abbot’s finely honed magic senses had detected a ley line nearby earlier, and he instinctively tapped into that reservoir of power. A shadowy shield rose up around his form, a field of coruscating light and dark that all but obscured Abbot’s features.

Hazmat cackled. He stretched his arms out and rose off the floor of the bridge, levitating about a foot in the air. Waves of light and heat began to emanate from him, washing across the bridge and Abbot. His shadow-shield protected him from the effect, but Abbot could see the dimensions of the bridge begin to warp and twist as the waves struck them. A crack appeared in Abbot’s field suddenly, alarming him. Nothing short of a Cosmo-Knight or a small nuclear device should have been able to do that.

Abbot could not help but feel concerned.

He tapped his cane on the floor panel under his feet, and focused his will. A beam of concentrated blacklight flashed from the force-field and slammed into Hazmat. It dissipated without fanfare against Hazmat’s own protective field. Hazmat cackled again.

“Ye’re no match fer me, boyo,” he said. “I’ve survived on the edge a’ the Void fer twenty thousand years, shattered Torturians and Hounds alike with a wave of me hand, and I’ve the skulls uv a dozen Night Princes hanging on the walls a’ me tower. Yer but a podling with delusions a’ grandeur. Yer still using the ley lines ta power yer magicks. Silly child.”

As Hazmat spoke, the light and heat pouring off of him increased in rate. The bridge wasn’t built to withstand the kind of punishment Hazmat gave it. The bulkhead warped and shifted, the computers cracked open and sent sparks flying into the air. The empty tank, holding Hazmat’s horrible throne, collapsed. The throne itself burst into flame, emitting a psychic scream that echoed in Abbot’s ears.

Abbot narrowed his eyes. He was angry before, but now he felt a terrible fury rising within him. Hazmat was a perversion, a monstrous creature that violated everything Abbot held dear, whose very existence made Abbot’s some kind of cosmic joke.

Abbot summoned a pack of Shadow Beasts to distract Hazmat. There was too much light for them to appear in strength, but they made up for it with numbers. A half-dozen of the immaterial, misshapen creatures stepped out of the shadows cast by the broken bulkheads. They swarmed towards Hazmat, growling and snapping their shadowy jaws. Hazmat didn't flinch. As the Shadow Beasts leapt for him, beams of light reached out from his body and caught them, devouring them in the blink of an eye.

Abbot followed up with a stream of fireballs, spheres of orange-white flame that hammered into Hazmat. Still without affect; they scattered harmlessly against Hazmat's protective field.

Hazmat cackled again, a sound nearly lost in the roar of his magical energies and the metallic crunch of the bridge collapsing in on itself. Hazmat brought his hands together, and as they met, a nearly invisible beam flashed from them towards Abbot. Abbot's shadowscreen splintered under the onslaught. Bits of shadowstuff fell to the floor like panes of glass.

"Can't ye see, lad? Yer cause is hopeless!" Hazmat shouted. Abbot dropped to one knee, shaken.

Abbot heard a familiar sizzling sound behind him, and heartened instantly. He pivoted on his heel to look over his shoulder. A blue-white blade sheared through the door, cutting through megasteel as if it were tissue paper. As Kassy smashed through the door, clad in shimmering blue-white hoplite armor, Abbot turned back to Hazmat. The other Shadowen barely acknowledged Kassy's arrival. Hazmat's orange eyes were locked on Abbot.

Mistake.

Abbot tucked his cane under one arm smoothly, reaching out to place his fingertips against the floor with his other hand. The bridge shuddered, the floor panels cracking apart under Hazmat's assault. Abbot concentrated, focusing his magic, and helped the process along. An explosion of metal fragments erupted beneath Hazmat, and chunks of red megasteel shredded through Hazmat's protective field. The Shadowen staggered, orange eyes blazing dangerously.

Kassy leapt over Abbot's kneeling form, her energy blade swinging in a wide arc. Hazmat roared as Kassy's blade connected with him, cutting through his protective field as easily as it had the ship's door. Hazmat bled darkness, and lashed out with a closed fist. He clipped Kassy's temple, knocking her sideways into a sparking computer bank. The Undead Slayer recovered quickly, leaping to her feet with a growl.

As she did, a dull, heavy echo resounded through the room. At first Abbot assumed it a side effect of Hazmat's warp field, but when it repeated, Hazmat appeared surprised at the sound as well.

A winged figure appeared in Abbot's peripheral vision, snarling savagely, a shimmering blade of psychic energy in his hand. "Joriel," Hazmat said. "Now this is a stunning turn of events."

“I’ve watched you despoil this craft long enough, Hazmat,” the Celestine shouted.

Hazmat’s eyes glimmered dangerously, and he waved his hand. Joriel the Celestine was lifted bodily by a wave of heat and light, and slammed into the ceiling of the bridge with a sickening crack. The strange echo repeated once more.

Abbot twirled his cane and sent a dozen red and black darts through the air to slam into Hazmat. Hazmat shook, releasing the Celestine, and took a threatening step in Abbot’s direction. He didn’t get far. A glowing white tiger with blue stripes slammed bodily into Hazmat and dragged him to the floor, claws tearing into him and ripping up bits of shadow. Hazmat roared in anger, and the tiger disappeared in a flash of light, absorbed into Hazmat’s body like the Shadow Beasts and the Conaigher before it.

Hazmat leapt to his feet, helped a little by his levitation, but Kassy was waiting for him. As soon as he was upright, Kassy tagged him in the back of the head with a glowing blue-white sledgehammer. Hazmat’s eyes dimmed slightly, but he did not fall. He spun around, grabbed Kassy’s glowing breastplate, and tore it from her. Kassy fell backward, while Hazmat absorbed the energy from her armor into himself.

The dull echo sounded again, louder this time. Hazmat looked up at the ceiling, irritated.

Abbot set his cane on the ground and stood up. Hazmat twirled to face him once more. Hazmat raised his hand, made a fist, and dropped it. A cascade of light fell towards Kassy, but she was quicker than Hazmat; a finger on her collarbone called up a shimmering blue white shield that caught the brunt of the blast.

Abbot stepped toward Hazmat. “You may indeed be as old as you say,” Abbot said tightly. He didn’t know if Hazmat could hear him or not, and wasn’t sure if he cared. “You certainly seem powerful enough, and what you’ve done to this ship is certainly impressive.”

Hazmat cocked his head, watching Abbot’s approach and apparently listening. The loud clang from above did not distract him this time.

“But the clincher must certainly be your colossal arrogance. I may be a mere podling, I may be only a few centuries old. But I have spent those few centuries crossing the length and breadth of the Three Galaxies and a dozen different universes. Your style of magic, for all its vaunted superiority, is not unknown to me.” Abbot held his hands out, palms forward, and closed them. It was a simple Negate Magic spell, but given how Hazmat was powering his magicks, he had no protection against the maneuver.

Hazmat dropped to the shattered floor, the shimmering field around him snuffed out. He blinked. “What –”

Abbot stepped forward and decked him hard. Hazmat slumped, eyes dimming. Abbot followed with a devastating uppercut that knocked Hazmat

sprawling across the empty, warped tank behind him. As if to punctuate the blow, the hammering sound above them echoed once more.

Abbot held his right hand out, and the cane flew into it. While Hazmat struggled into a sitting position, Abbot lashed out with the cane, hammering the other Shadowen again and again. He only stopped when Kassy put her hand on his shoulder.

“You’re killing him,” she said.

“I know,” he told her. He barely recognized his voice, however. It was something guttural and ugly.

“Abbot,” Kassy said softly. “Let him go.”

Abbot stood still for a moment. Finally, he craned his neck to look in Kassy’s eyes. “You’ve won,” she said. “He’s beaten. If you go any further, you’ll murder him.”

The hammering sound had continued unabated while Abbot beat Hazmat, and now the sound of screaming metal was added to the noise. It barely registered on Abbot.

He stared at Kassy. “He is an abomination,” he explained. “He needs to be destroyed.”

“That may be,” she told him, “but is this the best way?”

Her blue eyes bore into his orange ones, and at last, Abbot’s shoulders fell. He threw his cane to the ground.

Abbot felt a shadow fall across him, but before he could react, Kassy pulled him out of the way. Abbot twisted, and saw the Celestine, face bloody and contorted in anger, slam his psionic blade into Hazmat’s chest with a sizzle. The other Shadowen shivered, made a small sound, and dissipated. The psionic sword sank into the bulkhead, burning through it as Hazmat disintegrated.

“As you said,” the Celestine said hoarsely. “It needed to be destroyed.”

Kassy and Abbot exchanged concerned looks, but the Celestine made no move to attack. He slumped to the floor, dispelling his sword.

As Abbot straightened himself and Kassy took a tentative step in the Celestine’s direction, another hammering sound echoed above them. This time, the scream of metal was more pronounced, and suddenly the ceiling split open.

Arwen Griffin dropped into the room through the gap, her body glowing with a violet light that gave her normally green skin and blue hair a darker shade. Siv Yurilak, two grav pistols in hand, landed beside her. He looked around, smiled grimly when he saw the scene, and said, “Sorry we’re late. What did we miss?”

Thraxus, the richest man in the Three Galaxies, reclined in his plasmoid chair. The chair molded itself to his frame, hovering a foot off the ground.

Nearby, a computer screen twirled slowly in the air, the day's financial news scrolling across it quickly. Thraxus did not blink as the numbers sped past.

A slight, polite cough brought him out of his reverie. Thraxus looked away from the screen, into the eyes of his manservant Hecubus. Tall and spare, Hecubus was a red-skinned Catyr with burnished bronze hair and impeccable fashion sense. "My apologies, my lord," Hecubus said softly, "but I thought it best to inform you immediately."

Thraxus raised an eyebrow. "Inform me of what?"

"Seven hours ago, two of the 'adventurers' who foiled your plan for Delian-4 arrived on Center. Their business here is unclear, but they do appear to be staying for an extended period."

"Interesting," Thraxus said after a moment. "Thank you, Hecubus."

Thraxus returned to the financial news, while Hecubus bowed and departed. Thraxus barely noticed his manservant's retreat, nor did he follow the images and numbers on the computer screen very closely. Thraxus was wealthier than most planetary governments, and nearly ageless. An infinite source of wealth and eternal youth had left Thraxus possessed of a nearly soul-crushing boredom. In ancient days, he had taken up broadsword and battle axe to alleviate that boredom, but since becoming one of the premier personalities of Phase World, Thraxus had taken to more esoteric pursuits. Several months before, Thraxus had contracted a band of mercenaries to sabotage the food production facilities on Delian-4, a terribly overpopulated planet in the fringes of the Consortium of Civilized Worlds. The destruction and terror of such an act would have provided Thraxus with hours of entertainment, while his own controlling stock in several food production companies in systems near Delian-4 would ensure Thraxus' considerable fortune would increase by several factors.

But Thraxus' plans were foiled by a band of crusaders led by the Wulfen Cosmo-Knight Lothar of Motherhome. Delian-4 survived, relatively unscathed, and the mercenaries were caught and punished. Their leader, a former Invincible Guardsman of the Transgalactic Empire, was sentenced to two hundred years on a penal planet. Not once during his trial or sentencing had Elias Harkonnen mentioned Thraxus' name.

The former Guardsman deserved some kind of reward for that, at least. Though his failure against Lothar didn't warrant a rescue attempt, Thraxus could certainly exact revenge for Harkonnen against the heroes. Besides, Thraxus was having a slow afternoon.

Thraxus activated his personal comm-unit and contacted his bodyguards. "Saburo," he said, "gather the boys. I want you to collect some people for me."

Chapter Eighteen

Repo Man

“Never make a deal with a Naruni.” – Noro proverb.

“Never make a deal with a Naruni, unless your jaws are around his throat and you’ve a pistol jammed in his stomach.” – Wulfen proverb.

The bridge of the S’hree Vek starship *Vigilance* was cluttered with bodies and refuse, its dimensions and angles warped by a magical assault. Jagged shards of red metal, the remains of the shattered roof, lay scattered about the cabin. The corpses of three Conaigher, multi-limbed and red-haired simian aliens, sprawled at the foot of the command console. The console itself was scorched, decorated with broken glass and puddles of a viscous fluid called virium. The remains of the ship’s aquatic captain rotted atop the console, still smoking.

A moment ago, a deadly battle had raged across the bridge. But that was over now, and the survivors were left to take stock.

Siv Yurilak, Noro psychic and pilot, stood in black leathers and body armor with two drawn grav pistols in his hands. Beside him, Arwen Griffin’s body glowed with a violet light that gave her normally green skin and blue hair a darker shade. It was Arwen who had single-handedly torn open the roof of the craft, allowing her and Siv to drop in during the final moments of the battle.

Doctor Abbot leaned heavily upon his cane. A being composed almost entirely of shadow, Abbot’s only distinguishing features were the twin orange lights of his eyes. He wore a battered trenchcoat and a snapbrim fedora, and just minutes ago the only other being like himself that he had met in over six centuries of existence, had died. At Abbot’s side, Kassiopaea Acherean, Atlantean Undead Slayer, placed one of her brightly tattooed arms around his shoulders to help support him. She brushed a lock of dark hair out of her blue eyes and checked on the fifth member of their little circle.

Joriel was a Celestine, a bio-engineered humanoid with huge, feathered maroon wings erupting from his back, built by the S’hree Vek to act as a superhuman enforcer. Over the past few weeks he had watched as his ship was subverted by the Shadowen, Hazmat, and its crew was devoured by the shadowy necromancer. Kassy could not begin to imagine the horrors Joriel had witnessed, but the look on his face and the slump of his shoulders suggested to her that the experiences had broken him.

It was Joriel who had laid the killing blow upon Hazmat. Abbot had beaten his kinsman in a magical duel, and then brutally hammered the prone Shadowen with his cane. Kassy pulled Abbot away from Hazmat, stopping Abbot

short of becoming a murderer. But Joriel had lurched forward and buried his energy sword in Hazmat's form, killing him instantly.

Now the four allies stared at the Celestine, wondering what would happen next.

"Are you sure you're okay?" Kassy finally asked Abbot.

Abbot nodded, his orange eyes dim. Straightening, he gently disengaged himself from Kassy's hold. "I will be fine, my dear," he said in soft British tones.

"Yurilak," Kassy called. "Holster your guns."

Siv looked at her a moment, then at each of his pistols in turn. With a sheepish grin he complied.

"Arwen, same goes for you," Kassy continued. The young monk blinked once, and then the violet glow faded. Arwen smoothed her robes and folded her hands before her.

"Siv, I want a comprehensive scan of the ship. Let me know how many more are aboard. I know there are at least three more Conaigher somewhere out there."

Siv's large black eyes rolled back in their sockets as he sent his psionic senses out to survey the ship. He had honed his natural abilities with the aim towards making himself one of the best pilots in the Three Galaxies; he was perhaps one of the most powerful clairvoyants the planet Noro-Gar had ever produced. Kassy knew he was quite capable of surveying the entirety of the craft in an eye blink. While he did so, Kassy dropped to one knee beside Joriel, glass crunching beneath her. Joriel's red eyes regarded her coolly as she approached. His expression did not change. He had the eyes of a man who now saw a gaping black hole where his future had been.

"What do you want?" he growled at her.

"That would be my question as well," Kassy responded. "What's next, Joriel?"

"There are seven individuals left on this ship," Siv interjected. "Present company excluded, of course."

"Of course," Abbot agreed. "Kassy, perhaps we should be going."

"In a minute," she snapped at him. She instantly regretted her tone, and shot Abbot an apologetic look. He nodded, though she could tell he didn't understand. Not that she really understood what she was doing, either. Joriel had helped them defeat Hazmat, true, but he had not acted out of altruism. It had been the last act of a dying man, a desperate grab for any chance at revenge. As a manufactured being, a genetically designed robot, Joriel was programmed to serve the S'hree Vek. He was also probably programmed to go down with the ship. For some reason, Kassy couldn't stand by and let that happen.

"Joriel," she began once more. "Come with us. You have a chance here. Make a clean break. Start over. Find yourself some peace."

Joriel stared at her for a long moment. “Go away,” he said at last. “Before I have you thrown in the pens.”

Kassy sighed. “Think for a moment,” she said. “What’s your next move? Report to the S’hree Vek embassy on Center? They’ll melt you down to slag. Come with us. We’re your only chance.”

Joriel frowned, but a glimmer of anger appeared in his eyes. His wings shifted slightly, and he opened his right hand. For a moment, Kassy thought he might ignite his blazer, the psionic energy blade with which all Celestines were equipped. Instead, Joriel placed his palm flat against the floor and levered himself to his feet. Kassy rose with him.

“Last time,” Joriel said. He looked over all four of them. “Get off my ship.”

Kassy crossed her blue and white tattooed arms and gritted her teeth. He was infuriating. But he wasn’t going to budge, she realized. “Good luck,” she told him. She turned to her companions.

“A noble effort,” Abbot told her.

“Arwen,” Kassy said, “can you make us an exit?”

The young monk grinned suddenly, and barely seeming to move, she flowed into an intricate kata, as delicate and entrancing as a dance step. Instantly the violet glow suffused her form.

“Wait, you can’t just –” Joriel began to say, but not quickly enough. Arwen moved gracefully and swiftly towards the wall, almost seeming to glide through the air. Her hand fell like a hammer against the bulkhead, and it exploded outward with a terrific crash. The entire bridge shuddered and groaned; the lights flickered and went out, finally succumbing to the terrible toll placed upon them in the past ten minutes.

“– do that,” Joriel finished lamely in the empty silence that followed.

“There’s a ten meter drop to the tarmac,” Arwen told them, leaning out the gaping hole. Still awash in violet light, she glanced back at her friends. “Is that a problem for anyone?”

“Not at all,” Kassy said. “Go ahead.”

With a grin, Arwen dropped from sight. Siv swept a gloved hand across the bald dome of his head and regarded Kassy with an inscrutable expression. Then he, too, stepped into the hole and dropped to the hanger floor. Kassy knew that Siv would cushion his fall with some carefully applied Telekinesis. Abbot was next, conjuring a platform of shadowstuff to lower himself safely.

“Joriel,” Kassy said, backing up towards the shattered wall. “Give yourself time to think. We’re not leaving Center any time soon. If you change your mind –”

“I won’t,” he interrupted.

“– if you change your mind,” she repeated, ignoring him, “you’ll be able to find us.” Then she turned, and was gone.

The pastoral world of Ninemous had recently been the victim of a Dominator attack. The galactic predator was defeated by a coalition of Cosmo-Knights, but the planet did not escape unscathed. Before his attack, the Dominator had introduced an anti-tech virus to the planetary network, which crippled its ring of defensive satellites and also managed to shut down much of the technology planetside. The Dominator himself had landed in the capital city and attempted to cart off as many slaves as possible. He was stopped, but the heart of the city was destroyed in the course of the battle.

The city, laid out in a spiral pattern like a nautiloid or ammonite, had once had a great central tower at its heart. That tower was destroyed with one casual swipe of the Dominator's arm. Most of the city had evacuated itself by the time Caleb Vulcan and his Cosmo-Knight allies had arrived on the scene, but there remained much devastation.

Two days had passed since the battle, and the Cosmo-Knights remained on Ninemous. Ariel, the silver armored Titan, Kolkvet, the green armored Monro, and Jasper, the golden armored gunslinger, were aboard the Dominator's craft. The size of a small moon, the Dominator's ship was a bed of ancient and lost technology, packed with powerful weapons, imprisoned sentients, and forgotten lore of the universe. The Cosmo-Knights aboard it were systematically dismantling the craft, while also searching for a means to erase the anti-tech virus.

Planetside, Caleb Vulcan and the remaining Knights volunteered their services to the clean-up effort. Their Forge-born strength, endurance, and cosmic awareness proved invaluable. Caleb, Vyking, and the centauroid Knight Cervantes could – the three of them working together, or most often single-handedly – move massive building fragments that weighed tons, and since they only needed to rest an hour or two out of every twenty-four, they could work around the clock. More, Vyking and Cervantes in particular had a talent for locating hollow spaces that might hide survivors. In this manner, Caleb and his allies had managed to rescue dozens of Ninemans who were trapped or pinned beneath rubble. Unfortunately, they also found hundreds who had not escaped death.

Each corpse they found cut like a knife into Caleb's heart. The Ninemans were a slender, slightly built people, their bodies covered with a short layer of fur and gifted with large eyes and a prehensile tail. They were quick, smart, and compassionate, and they chattered at one another in their native tongue, though many could converse in Trade Three. Something about them reminded Caleb of raccoons or weasels, grown as tall and smart as a human being.

Caleb could not help but feel that, had he been a little faster or a little stronger, he might have been able to reach Ninemous in enough time to keep the Dominator from... from what exactly? It had taken six Cosmo-Knights together to stop the giant alien, and Caleb had faced the Dominator on his

own for several desperate minutes with little effect. Still, the feeling that he should have done more refused to go away.

Making Caleb feel even worse was the joy and adulation that the Ninemans laid upon the Cosmo-Knights. The furry humanoids showered them with praise and admiration, sharing gifts and kind words and prayers of thanks with equal fervor. Vyking seemed to bask under all the attention, assuming the position of leader with grace and ease. Cervantes, towering over his fellow Knights and the natives on his four legs, took the adulation in stride, as if he expected the Ninemans to act as they did. Caleb, in contrast, shrank from the attention. He threw himself into his work instead.

In two days the three Cosmo-Knights and squads of Nineman rescue workers had managed to quell the fires scattered throughout the city, and cleared away the rubble in the northern quadrant of the battle zone. Much work remained, however.

Caleb and Vyking were levering a fragment of the Dominator's grav sled into the air when Caleb was first visited by the apparition. Cervantes had retired to take a rest period, to meditate and recharge for an hour, and the Ninemans stood nearby, ready to help Vyking and Caleb but physically unable to do so. Both Knights had divested themselves of their armor, and Caleb had further stripped down to just his jeans and boots. His red hair, growing irritatingly long, was tied back into a ponytail to keep it out of his eyes. He was covered head to toe in dust and grime, and so too was his fellow Knight. Vyking, out of his armor, proved to be a ruggedly handsome human with dark hair and a neatly trimmed beard, only a little older than Caleb himself. Vyking wore only a pair of shorts with multiple pockets and a pair of sandals. He had shredded his shirt days before to make impromptu bandages, and had yet to replace it.

Caleb hovered in the air above the twisted metal frame of the grav sled fragment. While he searched for a sufficient handhold, Vyking wormed his way beneath it. Bracing the grav sled with his shoulders, Vyking slowly rose. The massive mass of metal shifted above him, and Caleb quickly grabbed hold to steady it. Caleb tightened his grip as Vyking lifted off the ground, and the grav sled lifted with him, the metal struts groaning.

"You okay, Vyking?" Caleb called.

"I'm fine," the other Knight responded. "This thing going to hold together?"

"I don't see why it wouldn't," Caleb started to say, but trailed off. The air before him began to shimmer and glow. He heard a collective gasp from the Ninemans, and then the sound of them scrambling over rubble, chattering in their native tongue. Two of them – Alcibiades and Mushiu – ran toward the grav sled as if to help.

"What's going on?" Vyking demanded, unable to see the cause of the commotion.

“I don’t know,” Caleb admitted.

“An attack!” Alcibiades’ excited, high-pitched voice called.

The grav sled shifted under Caleb as Vyking prepared to set it down and leap into action. Caleb hastily reassured him and the furry humanoids. “I don’t think so,” he said, loud enough for Vyking to hear. The shimmer in the air was beginning to take on definition, gaining color and substance. Striations of black and red passed before Caleb’s eyes, and geometric shapes took form. He began to see something that resembled a face at the peak of the shimmering field, and as he made that realization, he heard it speak. Or try to, at least; many of the words were obscured as the shimmering field flickered, as though it were a radio station drowned out by static.

“Cal... Vulcan... bring... warn... you must be... Quaj... has the... watch. Uter...aster. Must... us. All... lost unless – “

And then it disappeared, as quickly as it arrived.

“What just happened?” Vyking demanded. His voice sounded strained.

“I’m not sure,” Caleb said softly, then repeated himself more loudly. Yet amidst the strange speech, he had recognized his own name, and suspected the mention of another that made his blood run cold. He thought the voice mentioned Quajinn Huo, the Draconid wizard who had killed Caleb’s mentor, Lothar of Motherhome, among a thousand other crimes perpetrated across the Three Galaxies. If the vision did concern Huo, Caleb was at a loss. He could not leave Ninemous just yet, and even if he did, he needed first to stop at Phase World and collect his friends.

He would puzzle the problem out later.

“Let’s get this thing moved,” Caleb told Vyking. The other Knight grunted, but the grav sled began to rise once more. Caleb guided it as best he could.

Kassy alighted on the tarmac with a thump. She felt the shock of her landing travel up her legs, but the ensorcelled tattoos climbing up her arms and shoulders made her flesh as strong as mega-steel. A ten meter drop was child’s play for her.

The spacious hanger held the *Vigilance* and a great deal of open space, enough room for another scout craft. The hanger’s exterior airlock was open, allowing the cold air of the Phase World winter to blow into the chamber. Kassy suppressed a shiver, reminding herself that Undead Slayers did not feel the effects of cold.

“Gliz,” Siv swore in his native tongue, “but it’s colder than a space rat’s rump in here.”

“Space rat?” Arwen repeated, bemused by Siv’s colorful language. Her violet glow had once again faded.

“Ugglies,” Siv explained. “Little octopus things that breed on ships. Always underfoot, and they bring disease and worse with them.”

“And they are notoriously cold?” Arwen pressed.

Siv grinned. “Notoriously.”

Kassy let them banter while she checked on Abbot. He did not look well. His orange eyes were dim, while his shadowy features had apparently brightened. He leaned heavily on his cane.

“Abbot, are you alright?”

He dissuaded her with a waved hand. “I am fine, Kassy,” he said. “The battle took a great deal out of me, however. I need rest and meditation.”

“Let’s get you back to the ship, then,” she told him. He nodded wearily. “Arwen, give Abbot a hand, would you?” she suggested.

The young monk quickly moved to assist Doctor Abbot, but as she did so, the interior airlock, the massive slab of mega-steel that allowed access to Center proper, began to scissor open. Kassy exchanged a concerned look with Abbot, but she did not become truly alarmed until Siv yanked his pistols from their holsters.

“Something is wrong,” he said grimly, all trace of his previous humor gone.

Arwen instinctively sheathed herself in her violet aura, spinning to face the doors. Abbot shifted uneasily, but Kassy touched the star within a circle on her wrist and called up a suit of blue and white armor.

Just as the magical protection wrapped around her, the doors finished opening and a swarm of black and gold Naruni Repo-Bots surged into the room. In a flash, Kassy counted thirty-two of them, two full platoons. Kassy shivered, and it had nothing to do with the cold.

Naruni Repo-Bots were not strictly robots at all. More precisely, they were cyborgs. Their mechanical heads housed humanoid brains, the minds of warriors, spies, assassins, and other hardened individuals. The Naruni were notoriously strict about payments, and if they could not get the credits they were owed, the Naruni would happily take whatever else you had in their place. As the leading weapons manufacturer in the Three Galaxies, the Naruni Corporation had legions of soldiers in their debt. One missed payment could land a sentient on the Repo-Bot service line, donating their brain matter and military expertise to the corporation. It was also well known that the Naruni reserved their top of the line weaponry and armor for their own use; the Naruni had ensured that a single Repo-Bot could hold its own against a Cosmo-Knight.

Thirty-two of them now rushed towards Kassy and her friends, and the only coherent thought she could shape was, “Why?”

Their metal feet echoed throughout the chamber as they hammered against the floor. Thirty-two particle beam weapons pointed at the four adventurers.

Kassy quickly assessed the situation. Abbot was spent. Arwen and Siv were fresh and ready for combat, but Siv’s grav pistols would be as useless against the Repo-Bots as his psionics. Arwen could shatter starship plates

with her fists, and Kassy knew she was a capable martial artist, but Kassy doubted that the monk could hold her own against a numerically superior foe. As for herself, Kassy recognized that her own power reserves were flagging. She might be able to handle one or two of the cyborgs. The rest would kill her quickly.

“Fall back!” Kassy shouted. She grabbed Abbot’s elbow and dragged him backward. Their only hope was to escape out the exterior doorway, but they had to make it across the tarmac in one piece to do so. “Siv, take Abbot! Arwen, you’re with me.”

Siv gave her a blank look, then took Abbot and began to race across the hanger floor. Arwen grinned hugely and set herself in a fighting stance, anticipating the attackers. Kassy swallowed a curse, called up a broadsword of shimmering energy, and waited for the hammer to drop.

The Repo-Bots were eerily silent, save for the clanking of their armor, the whining of servomotors, and the hammering crash of their march. Particle beams slashed through the air. Kassy felt several beams sizzle against her armor. She flinched, feeling the armor begin to give way under the first barrage. Arwen, in contrast, was unfazed. The particles beams dissipated as they struck her violet aura. Kassy, wisely, ducked behind the monk.

“What are these things?” Arwen hissed at her.

“Naruni Repo-Bots,” Kassy supplied. “We’re not going to survive this unless we run, so be ready to bolt as soon as Abbot and Siv are safe.”

“Kassy!”

The Undead Slayer whirled at the sound of Siv’s voice, and the note of total panic within it. Siv and Abbot had nearly reached the edge of the exterior airlock, but they had slammed to a halt. A massive, reptilian claw curled around the lip of the airlock, and a sinuous, reptilian neck reared up in the doorway. A network of horns ringed the long, toothy head, and angry red eyes blazed.

There would be no escape in that direction, Kassy realized. An enraged Great Horned Dragon was no less dangerous than a platoon of Repo-Bots. Still, if they were to die, Kassy wasn’t going to die alone.

The Repo-Bots reached Arwen and Kassy’s position, but Arwen met them with a frightening chuckle. Arwen’s fists and feet flashed like quicksilver, and where they connected, black and gold mega-steel folded like tissue paper. Kassy didn’t have time to be aghast. Instead she placed two fingers against three tattoos on her left arm, and called up her blue and white tiger, her polar bear, and her azure-winged Gryphon. She sent the bear and the tiger to support Arwen and the Gryphon to back up Siv and Abbot, and then had to start swinging her broadsword as a Repo-Bot managed to get around Arwen.

Her sword sheared off an arm, but the Repo-Bot had blades of its own, and they cut deeply into her armor. “Shivok!” Kassy howled, and bisected the Repo-Bot’s head with a hammering blow.

Siv fired his pistols wildly at the dragon. He and Abbot suddenly disappeared, enveloped in a cone of flame as the dragon sprayed them with its deadliest weapon. When the barrage faded, Siv and Abbot were unscathed, protected by a shadowy screen of magical energy. Abbot had strength enough for that, at least, but it would not last.

A particle beam clipped Kassy behind the ear and she went down hard, slamming into the tarmac. Her sword spun out of her hands and dissipated. She could smell the singed flesh of her neck, and knew her hair was on fire. She beat the flames out with her palm.

With a growl, she surged to her feet. Kassy called up her bow, and shot glowing blue-white arrows into the mass of Repo-Bots. At point blank range, she could hardly miss. But the cyborgs were too heavily armored for the arrows to affect them much.

The tang of ozone filled the air, and Kassy heard the loud thrum of powerful generators. Before she had a chance to wonder what was happening, sizzling emerald bolts of heavy lasers flashed by overhead and slammed into the mass of Repo-Bots. Kassy stumbled backward at the explosion, and even Arwen had the good sense to leap away. The energy beams cut a savage swathe through the Repo-Bot line, melting a dozen of them to slag in as many seconds.

The *Vigilance* had entered the fray.

Apparently, though they had trashed the command center, the manual fire controls were still functional. Kassy thanked Zeus fervently that Joriel had decided to help. She grinned fiercely as the cannons on the other side of the ship opened up on the dragon. The great beast roared in fury, surged through the airlock and attacked the *Vigilance*.

“Arwen!” Kassy yelled. “We’re leaving!” She didn’t wait to see if the monk had acknowledged her order. She lit off across the hanger in the direction of Siv and Abbot, who had both dropped to the ground as the dragon flew over them. Kassy whistled to her Gryphon, and the winged beast landed lightly beside the Noro and the Shadowen.

Behind them, the Repo-Bots tried to rally. The heavy cannons of the S’hree Vek scout ship fired again, and the remaining cyborgs scattered. Metal screamed as the dragon shredded the ship’s hull with his talons, and the port cannons were torn from their housings. In moments, the dragon would turn on the adventurers again.

Kassy tried not to think about that. She and Siv levered Abbot onto the Gryphon, and then Kassy forced Siv and Arwen to climb aboard. The Gryphon grumbled under the weight, but Kassy knew she would be fine. “Get them to safety,” she ordered. The Gryphon’s wings beat and the great beast rose into the air.

Siv’s black eyes bugged in his face. “Them?!” he shouted as the Gryphon headed out into the Phase World night. “What about you?”

“I’m going back for Joriel!” she yelled back, but couldn’t be sure she was heard. It didn’t matter anyway. Kassy turned on her heel and raced towards the *Vigilance*.

Caleb remained on Ninemous for another five days. By then, Ariel and her team had managed to disable the anti-tech virus, and the Ninemans were able to at last bring their formidable technology to bear on the problem. Caleb bid his farewells to Alcibiades, Mushi, and the other Nineman friends he had made, and thanked Cervantes, Jasper, and Kolkvet for their help, promising to return the favor whenever they were in need. Ariel and Vyking, however, insisted on accompanying Caleb to Phase World, particularly after he explained the situation.

As it turned out, Doctor Abbot and Lothar of Motherhome had visited Ariel’s homeworld, a planet called Titan, long before she was born, and had helped save the population from a rabid Star Hive. A chance to return the favor, to help Doctor Abbot, was not to be passed up as far as Ariel was concerned. Vyking, on the other hand, simply sensed an adventure in the making and wanted to tag along.

Caleb could not begrudge them. Their help would be more than welcome; Caleb just hoped that they wouldn’t be too late. Already he had tarried over a week, and he was anxious to find out how his friends were doing. He had been filled with a terrible feeling of dread since the apparition, and would have bolted for Phase World as soon as it came to him if not for his overriding sense of duty. It heartened him that he would not have to take the long trip to Phase World alone.

So the three of them blasted out of Ninemous on a cool summer evening, a triplicate of dazzling red, blue, and silver lights. They reached the Svartleheim Rift in only a few hours, though Ariel and Vyking had to slow down to let Caleb keep up. Then it was time to “hurry up and wait,” as the line of ships to pass through the Rift crawled along at a snail’s pace. The last time Caleb had been at Svartleheim, he was aboard a starship; he had hoped that three Cosmo-Knights might be able to sneak through ahead of the cruisers. No such luck.

The three of them – Caleb in his crimson centurion armor, Ariel in her silver hoplite suit, and Vyking in his blue plate mail with horned helm – floated in space, waiting for their turn.

Caleb taught Vyking and Ariel a few choice Earth curses, which Ariel in particular found amusing. Ariel began teaching Caleb the fine art of cursing in Dragonese, which involved far more syllables than Caleb was used to using. By the time he had mastered the first one, Vyking informed them that they were next through the Rift. “That was quick,” Caleb said, grinning under his helmet.

“That’s what you think,” Vyking grumbled.

Traveling through the Rift was different than flying through space, even when Caleb was transformed into energy and moving at faster than light speeds. For one, the Knights needed to be corporeal to go through the Rift. They also did none of the work. They flew into the glowing gate, and then the Rift grabbed each of them, and the next thing Caleb knew, he was hurtling down a spinning, whirling, flashing tunnel of light. Within the space of an eye blink, they were thrown out the other side.

Caleb spun lazily through space, slightly stunned. Vyking grabbed his ankle and dragged him to a halt. “You okay?” the blue Knight asked.

“Whoah,” Caleb replied. “Can we go again?”

Vyking released him. “Idiot,” he said, not unkindly.

Caleb righted himself and had a look around. This side of the Svartleheim Rift emptied out into the ring of space gates that serviced Phase World. Hundreds of ships blinked into existence as they entered the system, or disappeared for the further reaches of the Three Galaxies. A blue and red globe hung in the distance, crisscrossed by a delicate tracery of ley lines and ringed by hundreds of tiny satellites. A steady flow of starships cut back and forth across the aether to and from the planet. This was only his second visit to Phase World, and still the view took his breath away. Or would have, if he were breathing.

“Let’s go,” Ariel told them, in that strange, airless means of communication that Cosmo-Knights used in space. “We don’t want to be here when the next ship comes through the Rift.”

“Good point,” Vyking admitted. “You up to it, Vulcan?”

In response, Caleb rocketed away, blasting at full speed for Phase World. He couldn’t wait to tell Kassy about his adventure on Ninemous, and was dying to ask Abbot about the apparition. As well, he hoped that Abbot’s meeting with the other Shadowbeing had gone well. If they had managed to find him in the riotous bustle of Phase World at all. Caleb remembered being quite confused by the size and breadth of Center on his last visit, and expected a repeat of his performance this time.

Caleb led the way to the planet’s surface and the mile-high city of Center. Ariel marveled at the size of the metroplex, finally admitting that she had never before been to Phase World. Caleb was surprised, having assumed that everyone else in the Three Galaxies knew more than he did.

“How do you plan to find these friends of yours?” Vyking asked, putting an end to the frivolity and reminding them of business.

“Good question,” Caleb admitted. “But I do have a plan.”

Tor and Egis were on duty at the same customs station where Caleb had last seen them, but they didn’t appear to remember him at all. When he reminded the Promethean guards that he was a friend of the late Lothar of Motherhome, a glimmer of recognition finally showed in Tor’s dark eyes.

“Ah yes,” he rumbled, “I remember now. Did you have any luck against Quajinn Huo?”

Caleb’s features tightened. “No,” he said. “In fact, Huo killed Lothar. But we foiled Huo’s scheme, managed to save Delian-4, and sent his allies to prison. We’re still after Huo, but we need to pick up some friends first. Which is where you two come in.”

Egis balked, but Tor gave him a black look, and eventually Egis bent over his monitor. Apparently their relationship had flip-flopped in the interim. When Caleb last saw them, Egis had been the one in charge. Given the specs on Caleb’s ship, Egis located the Comet easily. He made a curious sound when he scrolled down the screen.

Vyking, more experienced at reading inscrutable Prometheans, said, “What have you found, Egis?”

“The, um, Comet has been impounded.”

“What?” Caleb demanded. “By whom?”

Egis looked up at him. “The Naruni Corporation, apparently.”

“Shivok,” Ariel swore. “What would the Naruni want with your ship? What did you do to get them mad at you?”

Caleb shrugged. “I’m still not exactly sure what a Naruni is,” he said. “What about my friends?”

“I’m afraid there’s no information on that,” Egis told him. Was it Caleb’s imagination, or did Egis seem pleased?

“Don’t be so smug,” Vyking snapped at the Promethean. “Who signed that impound order?” Egis gave him a blank look. With a muttered curse, Vyking reached across the console and started hitting buttons. He ignored the Promethean’s indignant squawk. “Saburo,” Vyking said at last. He glanced at Caleb. “That name mean anything to you?”

Caleb shook his head. However, the young Cosmo-Knight noticed that Tor’s blue-gray hands had tightened hard around the haft of his halberd. “But it means something to you, doesn’t it?” he said in Tor’s direction.

“Indeed,” Tor said. “And you will not like it.”

“Let us be the judge of that,” Ariel growled.

The Promethean looked up at her, rolled his shoulders in an awkward shrug, and said, “Saburo is a horned dragon in the employ of Thraxus. Thraxus, you will note, is on the board of directors at the Naruni Corporation.”

“Who is Thraxus?” Caleb asked.

“Bad news,” Vyking told him. “Extremely bad news. He’s widely known as the richest man in the Three Galaxies. He’s as old as Center, has allies scattered across the Megaverse, and nearly unlimited resources. He is the wrong man to have angry with you, Vulcan.”

Caleb’s only response was, “Huh.”

All five humanoids stared at one another for a long moment. Ariel finally broke the silence. "I am definitely sticking around," she said. "I have a feeling that as long as I know you, Caleb, life will never be dull."

"Thanks," he said. "I think. Anyway, Thraxus is welcome to the ship. What about my friends?"

"Nothing here," Vyking said, hitting buttons on Egis' screen. "But the Naruni haven't moved the Comet."

"Then we'll start there," Caleb said.

Vyking grinned. "I must admit, Vulcan, Ariel is probably right. This should be interesting at the very least, and extremely dangerous at best."

Caleb looked from Vyking to Ariel. "Well, it's our job, isn't it?"

Chapter Nineteen

Everything New is Old Again

The Naruni Repo-Bot is the deadliest soldier in the Three Galaxies. Armed with the latest in Naruni designs, armored like a tank, powered by a fist-sized cold fusion reactor, and piloted by the cybernetic brain of a sentient warrior, amplified by all the tricks and toys the Naruni could fit into the 'bot's combat computer. A single Repo-Bot is capable of tearing apart an entire platoon of lesser troops, and can hold its own against a single Cosmo-Knight.

On the other hand, if you put two or three Cosmo-Knights against a platoon of Repo-Bots, then the Naruni Corporation is going to be spending a lot of money to replace their damaged property. For that is the one weakness of the Repo-Bot: They are essentially slaves, and their programming ensures that the only freedom they will ever know is death.

Of course, the fact that Repo-Bots aren't afraid to die just makes them more dangerous.

— From the trideo documentary Thraxus & Me by Morlan Miks

Caleb Vulcan recognized the long, low-slung starship parked in the midst of the tarmac. The crimson finish was unmistakable, as was the Acherean clan symbol painted on the nose. What worried him was the six black and gold 'bots standing in a semi-circle around the ship's access hatch.

"It's our ship, no doubt about it," Caleb told his friends. He and his Cosmo-Knight allies were clad in their civvies, in an attempt to remain inconspicuous. Caleb wore his blue jeans, red grav boots, and silver shirt. His goggles and communications ring hung around his neck.

Vyking, a tall and rangy human with a shock of raven hair and a neatly trimmed beard, gestured at the robots stationed around the craft. "Bad mojo, Caleb. Looks like your Promethean buddy was right; the Naruni Corporation has impounded your ship." Vyking looked extraordinarily comfortable in canvas shorts, sandals, and a blue t-shirt with a palm design. Vyking looked more ready for the beach, rather than a tour of Phase World.

"I'm more concerned about my friends," Caleb answered, running a hand through his red hair. He felt Ariel place a reassuring hand on his shoulder.

"We'll find them," the Titan told him. Nearly ten feet tall, Ariel had auburn hair and green eyes, and her statuesque frame was wrapped in an elaborate white toga.

Vyking grinned, a mischievous light in his blue eyes. "Let's see what the Repo-Bots have to say." His grin broadened, and the Knight sauntered across the tarmac in the direction of the ship. Ariel exchanged a concerned look with Caleb, then followed.

Caleb took a moment to survey the scene. Docking bay sixteen was a massive room the size of a warehouse. It contained docking space for six separate medium-sized starcraft, including maintenance bays, and umbilicals linking the ships to Center. Power, oxygen, coolants, and other chemicals were fed back and forth between the city and the ships. The far end of the room was a doorway opening out into Phase World's cold, gray afternoon sky. Half of the docking brackets were empty, while the remaining two were occupied by merchant craft. A crew of Catyr swarmed over one of them, effecting repairs on its damaged hull. The last ship, like the Comet, was dark. The only potential hostiles in sight were the six Repo-Bots around the Comet.

Which forced Caleb to focus on them once more. At Vyking's approach, the six of them formed up in an impressive display, their heavy plasma ejectors braced against their chests.

"Evening, gentlemen... and ladies." Vyking's voice carried across the room. The Repo-Bots didn't seem impressed by his casual tone. Vyking stopped about twelve feet from the first two cyborgs, and Ariel halted right behind him, crossing her arms and looming threateningly.

The Repo-Bots remained unimpressed.

"You know," Vyking continued in the same bored manner, "I used to have a friend who flew one of these rigs. Same bright red shade, too. I don't suppose you folks have seen the pilot?"

One of the cyborgs stepped forward. Curiously, the robot body was curved in a feminine shape. "Step away, citizen," she said mechanically, levering the barrel of her gun at Vyking's head.

Vyking held his hands up in surrender. "Hey, hey," he said. "There's no need for violence. I was just asking a question."

"I will not ask you a second time," the robot warned.

"Oh, sure," Vyking said quickly, "I'm not one to press my luck. It just seems like too much of a coincidence, you know, seeing my friend's ship here. I mean, what are the chances?"

"What are the chances," the cyborg returned, "that I will pull this trigger?"

"Eh, right." Vyking turned on his heel and began walking back to the maintenance bay where Caleb waited. Ariel waited for a moment. Caleb knew she was contemplating calling up her two handed sword and slicing the cyborg in two, but at last she started back towards Caleb.

"That was a wash," Caleb said when Vyking drew near.

"Mmmm," Vyking muttered. "Are they watching us?"

"Of course. Still aiming her gun at your head, too."

"Good. Hate to think they won't remember us."

"Why would you want them to?"

Vyking grinned enigmatically. "I like my enemies to see my face," he said. "When this is all over, I want them to be able to look back and realize this point is when we arrived, when they could have just handed over your

friends and your ship and avoided all the pain and misery that's about to follow."

Caleb could only stare at his fellow Knight, but before he could fully process Vyking's words, Ariel appeared. "What next? A trip to the Naruni sector to poke around?"

Vyking shook his head. "According to our Promethean informants, the customs agents Tor and Egis, a man matching Doctor Abbot's description was last observed in docking bay ninety-four. I say we head up there to poke around, look for clues."

"Clues?" Caleb said absently, still shocked at Vyking's speech.

"You okay, Caleb?" Ariel asked.

"Yeah, I just, I don't –" Caleb stuttered. A shadow detached from the wall behind Caleb, interrupting him and drawing the attention of all three Cosmo-Knights.

"Caleb Vulcan?" the shadow asked. It roughly approximated the shape of a human, but the dark matter of its body was as wispy and thin as its voice.

Caleb brightened, though he sensed his companions bristling, preparing to deflect an attack. Caleb put a hand up to block his friends. "Yes?" he said to the shadow.

"I have a message from Doctor Abbot," it said. "He is hiding on the lower levels with Siv Yurilak and Arwen. I must bring you to him."

Caleb frowned. "What about Kassy?" he asked. Instead of answering, the shadow merely repeated its previous statement.

"Magic," Vyking muttered derisively.

"It's only a construct," Ariel told Caleb. "It isn't intelligent. It can only answer questions it's programmed to understand. The trick is to think of the right questions."

"Yeah, well, think of them quickly," Vyking said, looking over his shoulder. "The Repo-Bots are getting curious and some of them are heading this way."

Caleb risked a glance of his own. The lead cyborg was indeed marching across the tarmac, accompanied by two other black and gold bots with weapons at the ready. "Shivok," Caleb swore under his breath. He turned back to the shadow. "Take us to Abbot," he said.

Those seemed to be the right words. The shadow expanded outward, stretching its thin body even thinner. Though it grew outward, the shadow did not gain any mass, and in but a few heartbeats, it stretched itself to the breaking point. A sharp tearing sound echoed across the chamber as the shadow split apart, ripping a hole through space. A window opened up within the tear. On the other side was revealed a darkened room, containing rough hewn furniture and three humanoid forms familiar to Caleb.

Doctor Abbot, Siv Yurilak, and Arwen.

Caleb risked a glance at the advancing Naruni, and grabbed his friends by the hand. Without hesitation, and against Vyking's protests, Caleb stepped through the window. He felt a chill wind pass through him, and the next moment the three of them stood in the middle of the darkened room. Ariel had to crouch.

Doctor Abbot surged to his feet. "Caleb, my boy! You made it," he said energetically, his dry British tones unmistakable. Abbot was a humanoid shadow clad in a weather-beaten trench coat and fedora. He possessed no distinguishable features save twin orange lights that served as eyes, and they focused closely on Vyking and Ariel now. "You brought reinforcements as well. Good for you."

"It's great to see you, Doc." Caleb said as he took the doctor's proffered hand. Siv Yurilak, the lanky Noro hired to pilot the Comet, grinned uncertainly. Yurilak wore black leathers and armor plates, and two prominent grav pistols hung from his belt. Arwen Griffin, a slightly built alien girl with green skin and blue hair, gave Caleb a quick hug. The young Knight made quick introductions, and Abbot was visibly heartened to learn Ariel and Vyking were servants of the Forge.

"Abbot," Caleb said at last. "What happened? Where's Kassy? Why have the Naruni impounded our ship?"

The doctor sighed, a strange noise coming from his mouthless face, and gripped his cane tightly. "We've had a rough few days, Caleb." Abbot dropped into a poorly designed chair with a thump. "As you know, we initially came to Phase World to locate a possible kinsman of mine. I've sought clues as to my origins for as long as I can remember, and this was the best opportunity I've had in centuries. We tracked the signal I detected to the *Vigilance*, a S'hree Vek vessel on one of the upper levels, and were invited aboard. There we met Hazmat, the other Shadowbeing." Abbot paused.

"It didn't go well," Arwen supplied, offering Abbot a concerned look.

"Indeed," Abbot said, finding his voice. "Hazmat proved to be a monster. Apparently, I am descended from some of the most evil entities in the Megaverse. Answers I found, but I almost wish I had remained ignorant."

Caleb placed a hand on Abbot's shoulder and gave him a reassuring squeeze. "I'm sorry to hear that, Doc. I'm sorry I wasn't there."

"Thank you, Caleb. But I'm sure your business for the Forge was more pressing," Abbot said, gesturing at the other Knights with his cane. "Our encounter with Hazmat left us drained, myself in particular," he continued, "and we were unprepared for the assault that followed. We were attacked by two platoons of Naruni Repo-Bots and a Great Horned Dragon. It appears that Thraxus may indeed have been involved in Harkonnen's assault on Dellian-4. At the very least, that is the only motive I can think of for the involvement of the Naruni."

“According to our sources,” Vyking interrupted, “the Horned Dragon you fought is one of Thraxus’ personal bodyguards. How did you three manage to escape?”

“Kassy took charge,” Abbot continued, “and it is entirely due to her quick thinking that we three survived.”

“Kassy?” Caleb asked sharply.

“Remained behind to help Joriel, a Celestine who distracted the dragon with the *Vigilance*’s cannons long enough for us to slip away. Kassy refused to leave Joriel behind, and before I could do anything, her Gryphon had carried us from the battle.

“We’ve been in hiding ever since, here on Center’s lower levels, where it is very difficult for the Naruni to locate us. I sent servants out to watch for you and Kassy, however.”

“And Kassy hasn’t turned up yet,” Caleb said needlessly. “How long have you been down here?”

“Four standard days,” Yurilak explained.

“That’s a long time,” Vyking pointed out. Caleb shot him an angry look.

“Indeed,” Abbot agreed. “Every moment I grow more and more anxious for Kassy’s safety.”

“We’ll find her,” Caleb said sharply. He had lost his mentor, the Wulfen Cosmo-Knight Lothar of Motherhome. He was not about to lose Kassy as well.

“Yes,” Abbot said. “Now that you’re here, we can begin planning a course of action. I’ve been recharging my energy reserves thanks to a nearby ley line. The battle with Hazmat took a lot out of me, but I’m ready to rescue Kassy now.”

“We’ll need intelligence,” Vyking pointed out. “Your friend may be captured, or she may be dead.” The blue-eyed Cosmo-Knight appeared unfazed by Caleb’s angry stare or Abbot’s concerned look.

“She’s not dead,” Abbot said. “If she were, Siv or I would be able to locate her. The only possibilities that remain are incarceration at the hands of the Naruni, or that she is lying low as we are. If the latter were true, I believe by now she would have found a way to contact us, or activate the servant I left to wait for her.”

Vyking held up his hands in mock surrender, grinning easily. “Fair enough. Either way, we’ll have to find where she’s being held. Caleb, you think your Promethean buddies will be any help?”

“Wouldn’t they have told us that already?” Ariel interjected.

“She’s right,” Caleb agreed. He snapped his fingers, and shifted his attention to Abbot. “What was the name of that Monro you and Kassy met with last time we were here?”

Abbot's orange eyes twinkled suddenly, his version of a smile. "Of course. I should have thought of him myself. Squamato Kekkil Damathui, better known to his patrons as Squiddy."

"Is he reliable?" Vyking asked.

"I would never use that term to describe him," Abbot answered. "But if anyone knows what's going on, I wager it will be Squiddy. His tentacles extend very far."

"Fair enough," Vyking nodded. "We should also plan on freeing the ship. Ariel, why don't you take Yurilak and Ms. Griffin here and take care of that." Ariel frowned, clearly disappointed.

"Actually," Arwen said brightly, "I can handle the Repo-Bots on my own."

Vyking looked at her, uncertain. "She can," Abbot and Yurilak said simultaneously. With a grin, Vyking relented. "How about you?" he asked Siv. "Will you be able to handle the ship? The Naruni will have installed some kind of control system in the ship's computer."

Siv scratched at his spiky mohawk. "There isn't a ship in service or computer system online that I can't handle," he promised.

Caleb was suddenly reminded of why he didn't care for the arrogant Noro, and Vyking's cavalier attitude was beginning to rankle him as well. He reigned in his emotions quickly. What mattered now was not Caleb's ego, but Kassy's safety. Vyking could take charge all he wanted, and Yurilak could boast until his face turned blue and Caleb wouldn't care, so long as they were able to rescue Kassy from the Naruni.

"Do you really think this is all the doing of Thraxus?" Ariel asked. With a start, Caleb realized that he had lost the thread of the conversation.

"It must be," Abbot admitted. "As far as we could tell, we did nothing to provoke the Naruni Corporation itself. It is conceivable that their real target may have been the S'hree Vek vessel and we were simply caught in the cross-fire, but I do not believe this to be the case. My instincts tell me that this was done at the behest of Thraxus."

"I've tried looking for clues psionically," Yurilak offered, "but Doctor Abbot was afraid we would alert the Naruni to our whereabouts, so I've had to be extra careful. I haven't learned much."

"Then we'll just have to depend on this Squiddy fellow," Vyking said.

Squiddy's pawnshop was located in a rundown neighborhood on Center's fifth level. Abbot led the Knights there, while Yurilak and Arwen split from the group to head up and see what they could do about the Comet. As Caleb picked his way down the street, stepping around mounds of trash spilling out of doorways and alleyways, and over the bodies of beggars or drug-addled humanoids, his mood darkened. The presence of such squalor, such poverty,

on a planet as rich and technologically advanced as Phase World angered him.

Abbot, perhaps sensing Caleb's growing anger, hurried them along. Vyking appeared nonplused by the decay, but Ariel wore a concerned look. "I wish there was something we could do for these people," she said at last. Caleb echoed the sentiment.

"Unfortunately," Vyking pointed out, "we weren't empowered by the Forge to look after the poor and disenfranchised – nor the rich and powerful, either."

Caleb looked at him sharply. "What do you mean?"

"We're warriors, Caleb. We're designed and built to battle cosmic threats, the hostile forces that seem to propagate throughout the Megaverse." Vyking grinned suddenly. "No one else could have saved Ninemous from the Dominator, and very few others besides us could pose a danger to the mechanized armies of the Naruni. We have larger responsibilities, in other words. We're the light that shines against the darkness, and that means hard choices."

"Hmm," Abbot interrupted. "I hate to end a philosophical discussion, but we've reached our destination."

The four of them stood outside a nondescript storefront with darkened windows and a great deal of graffiti adorning its exterior walls. "This is it?" Caleb asked. Abbot nodded and pushed open the front door with the tip of his cane.

"I guess I'll wait out here," Ariel said, frowning at the human-sized doorway.

"We will return momentarily, my dear," Abbot told her, eyes twinkling.

Caleb followed Abbot into the dark interior of the pawnshop, Vyking in tow. The young Knight's first impression was of clutter. There appeared to be three aisles, but the visible shelves were covered in items, piled haphazardly and dangerously. Many of the piles expanded off the shelves and into the aisles, creating difficult footing. Most of the items were unrecognizable to Caleb's eye; strange bits of technology that were beyond his experience. He did notice robotic and cybernetic limbs and heads, helmets and bits of armor, flight suits and other bits of clothing, as well as less advanced bits and pieces like lengths of string, wrenches, video screens, small figurines, and the like. Caleb's heart skipped a beat when he saw a "Snoopy" poster, tattered and draped across a mound of refuse.

He thought for a moment that his eyes were playing a trick on him, but the instant his trembling hand touched the brightly colored paper, he knew it was real. A relic from Earth, a piece of his home world. He turned to Abbot and Vyking to share the discovery with them, but realized there would be little point. They had no frame of reference; they could not possibly be as delighted as he was to see a picture of Charles Schultz' little beagle.

The choice to travel to the Three Galaxies had been his own, and he didn't regret that choice for a moment, but a crushing wave of homesickness inundated him. He never expected to see Earth again, let alone something from Earth, and his knees threatened to buckle as visions of Sunday newspapers, hot cups of coffee and doughnuts, the smell of his father's cigarettes, the warm Arizona mornings, and other reminders of home flashed through his mind.

"You like that? Two credits," a deep, croaking voice said. Caleb looked up, blinking back unshed tears. A heavy-set Monro regarded him, his wide, frog-like mouth split into a friendly grin. One baleful red eye examined Caleb closely, while the Monro's tentacles waved about, almost tasting the air. One fluid limb brought a cigar to the Monro's lips, and he puffed contentedly. The quadrupedal alien was the fattest Monro Caleb had ever seen, and though he was only five feet tall and about as long, the Monro looked as corpulent as a hippopotamus.

"You must be Squiddy," Caleb said, suddenly and violently brought back to the present. He let the poster fall from his hands.

The red eye narrowed in suspicion. "Who wants to know?"

"My name is Caleb Vulcan." The young Knight grinned at the reaction his name elicited. Squiddy blanched, and tried to waddle backwards, flashing his tentacles in a frenzied patterns between himself and Caleb. Before he could get far, Squiddy bumped up against Vyking, who had materialized from behind a mound of refuse. Caleb didn't remember losing track of his friends, but then he hadn't noticed the approach of Squiddy either.

"What is this?" Squiddy croaked. His fat neck flexed as he looked back and forth between Caleb and Vyking. "I haven't talked to Harkonnen since he left Center, and I seem to recall helping your friends locate him in the first place."

"Indeed," Abbot agreed, appearing at Caleb's elbow. "And we need your aid once again."

Squiddy's face fell as he recognized Abbot. "The wizard," he muttered around his cigar. Suddenly, he brightened. His red eye widened hugely, and his wide, lipless mouth split into a hungry grin. "You're here on business. That's different." Grunting and puffing, Squiddy maneuvered himself around Vyking and waddled to the back of the store, where he took up a station behind a glass counter. Settling into a sitting position, the Monro used one tentacle to flick his cigar into a dark corner, while two other limbs produced and lit a second one.

"What can I do for you? And how do you expect to pay?"

"I helped save your life," Abbot reminded Squiddy.

The Monro smile widened. "What have you done for me lately?" he chuckled.

"Our friends were attacked by the Naruni," Abbot continued, orange eyes glinting dangerously. "This is fallout from the Dellian-4 affair. Harkonnen

kept his mouth shut, and we never had the proof nor the political leverage we needed to press the issue, but it is clear that Thraxus wants payback for the job we did foiling his genocidal scheme. I believe that means I still have some credit here.”

The grin had disappeared. Squiddy’s red eye jumped around, examining each of them closely. “That, uh, isn’t how I do business,” he coughed.

Vyking placed his fists on the top of the glass case and leaned forward dangerously. “Let me tell you how I do business. I serve the Cosmic Forge. Monetary matters do not concern me, but justice does. Those who obstruct justice feel my wrath.”

Squiddy’s eye blinked rapidly. He sucked on his cigar for a moment, sending puffs of smoke into the air. “Okay,” he said finally, “I suppose I can extend you guys some credit. What is it that you want?”

Caleb frowned, but Vyking wore an expression of triumph. Abbot didn’t seem to care. “Four days ago, docking bay ninety-four was attacked by Saburo and two platoons of Repo-Bots. We believe that at least two individuals were captured by the attackers. We want to know where they are being held.”

Squiddy puffed his cigar, looking at Abbot. “Wait here,” he told them. He turned around and disappeared through a low doorway into a backroom.

Caleb nudged Vyking with his elbow. “You didn’t have to threaten him,” he said. “We have some money.”

Vyking shrugged. “Creatures like him only understand one language,” he said.

Abbot and Caleb exchanged concerned looks, but it didn’t look like Abbot wished to press the issue, and Caleb wasn’t sure if this was the right place to argue with Vyking. He did know that some kind of confrontation with the other Knight was coming. The man’s arrogance was grating, and he seemed to have some strange ideas about how best to serve the wishes of the Forge.

Or were Caleb’s views the flawed ones? He didn’t want to explore that venue, even within the privacy of his own thoughts.

Ten minutes passed before Squiddy poked his head out the door once more. Seeing that the three of them were still there, he heaved a great sigh, and waddled back into the room. “According to the records I have access to,” he began, “Saburo and the Repo-Bots captured six individuals, including an Atlantean and a Celestine. Surprisingly, they weren’t brought back to the Free Trade Zone. Instead, the prisoners were escorted to a warehouse on 4-B, ostensibly owned by Kralizec Industries.”

“Isn’t level 4-B the UWW sector of Center?” Abbot asked.

Squiddy nodded. “Yep.” He paused. “It’s also where Harkonnen had his interview with Thraxus.”

“Interesting,” Vyking said softly.

Ariel agreed with Vyking's assessment after they briefed her. "That's something of a relief, actually," she said. "I was afraid we'd have to fight our way through the Naruni sector to find your friends."

"No," Abbot said, "we'll just have to worry about a Great Horned Dragon and a few dozen Repo-Bots, in addition to whatever defenses Thraxus has secreted within the warehouse itself."

"Exactly," Ariel enthused. "It should be a cakewalk."

Abbot's eyes twinkled. "I admire your spirit, my dear, but I..." He trailed off. "What is that?" he asked.

The four of them were tracing their steps through the fifth level's clogged and dirty streets, heading toward the lifts that would carry them up to the fourth level. Abbot and Vyking led them, with Ariel and Caleb bringing up the rear. They had just reached a plaza when a shimmering, black and red field appeared before them, eliciting Abbot's outburst.

The air before the foursome shimmered and shifted, like the haze over an Arizona road in the midst of summer. Brief flashes of red and black flickered into view, forming vague geometric shapes that gradually achieved greater definition. Something resembling a face came into view at last. Abbot gasped, and raised a hand to fashion some kind of ward.

Caleb stepped forward and placed an arm across Abbot's chest. "It's okay," he said. "I've seen this before. I don't think it's an attack."

As soon as he finished speaking, the flickering face before them began to talk. But whatever force kept it from attaining perfect resolution also interfered with the message it wished to impart. Only garbled fragments reached the ears of Caleb and his friends.

"Cal... Vulcan... bring... warn... you must be... Quaj... has the... watch. Utter... aster. Must... us. All... lost unless -"

And then it disappeared, as quickly as it arrived.

"An omen," Ariel breathed.

Abbot looked closely at his young friend. "You've seen something like this before? Why didn't you mention it?"

Caleb shrugged. "It didn't seem important in all the excitement."

"Someone is trying very hard to send you a message," Abbot said sharply. "Someone incredibly powerful who, unless I miss my guess, just mentioned the name of Quajinn Huo."

Caleb gritted his teeth. He had assumed the same thing after the apparition's first appearance on Ninemous. But there wasn't anything he could do about the message, not yet. On the other hand, he could do something about Kassy. "We have more pressing matters to attend right now," he told Abbot. He opened his mouth to say more, but the sky suddenly split with a metallic scream.

Caleb looked up, and to his surprise he saw two giant black and gold eggs roaring through the air, each orb marred by strange projections. The projec-

tions flickered, and Caleb realized they were guns. The pavement beneath their feet exploded as plasma beams and rail gun slugs tore across the ground. Abbot cried out, and without thinking Caleb used his own body as a shield to protect the wizard.

Silver and blue lights flashed, and within moments, Ariel and Vyking stood in their cosmo-armor. Ariel towered in a form fitting suit that resembled Greek hoplite armor, the blackness of the void showing through the joints, and from the depths of her helmet. Vyking's armor looked more like a medieval Knight's, save for the two curling horns that erupted from his helm. Vyking's blue longsword appeared in his hand, and Ariel likewise summoned her silver two-handed sword, as long as she was tall. In the same instant as their armor sheathed them, the two Knights leapt into the air to engage the enemy.

A terrific crash thundered across the plaza as Cosmo-Knights met eggs of death in mid-air. Abbot pushed Caleb off of himself. "I'm fine, Caleb," he said hoarsely. "Help your friends."

Caleb stood, and a crimson light brought his own centurion themed armor to him. "What are those things?" he asked.

"Naruni Ovoid combat 'bots," Abbot explained. He struggled to his feet, brushing off dust and fragments of pavement. His hat and coat looked unruffled, but his cane had disappeared.

"Naruni," Caleb echoed. "Why am I not surprised? Find cover Doc, we'll take care of this." So saying, the young Knight stepped into the air.

The Ovoids were the size of fighter jets, Caleb observed, but they were obscenely maneuverable. They glided across the sky with ease, stopping on a dime and rotating their guns to track their airborne targets. Plasma tracers lit up the sky, and rail gun bullets screamed through the air. Buildings exploded in showers of glass, stone, and fire as the Naruni cut loose without regard. Ariel and Vyking ducked and weaved, trying to evade the attacks, looking for an opening to make a counterattack.

Focused as they were on the other two Knights, the Ovoids didn't appear to register Caleb's presence. Caleb's visor flashed three times with crimson light, and one Ovoid's force field flickered and died. The robot reoriented itself, seeking out the new threat. The guns on one side tracked Caleb, while on the other side a panel opened and a volley of missiles fired in Ariel's direction. With preternatural accuracy, the silver Knight blasted the missiles out of the air with her own energy beams, then flashed forward for the kill. Caleb distracted it with more energy attacks, and Ariel slashed at the black and gold surface of the Ovoid with her giant blade. Megasteel shredded like tissue paper.

Meanwhile, Vyking was being knocked about by the other Ovoid. The sudden attack had drawn the attention of civilians, and Vyking was forced to use his own body as a shield to keep the innocents from being harmed by a

stray bullet. The plasma ejectors couldn't harm the Knight, protected as he was against all forms of energy, but the rail gun bullets were cutting his armor to ribbons. He took the punishment without complaint, answering with bolts of cerulean light launched from the tip of his sword. The Ovoid's shields flickered under the onslaught, but held.

Ariel braced herself upon the first Ovoid's dorsal surface, and stabbed repeatedly into the robot's body with her sword. Smoke and flames erupted from the machine, and it began to slowly descend to the ground in a spiral. Caleb blasted past with a salute to the Titan.

A red bar appeared in Caleb's hands, resolving into his chosen weapon, a massive sledgehammer. At close to top speed as he could get in the amount of space he had available, he slammed into the remaining Ovoid, leading with his hammer. The robot's shields popped like a bubble. The hammer dented the side of the egg, and it listed sharply. Its surface was raked by Vyking's energy beams, and while the Ovoid's guns tried desperately to track Caleb and fire, the crimson Knight laid into the machine again and again with his hammer.

In moments, it too was a smoking wreck lying in the street.

While Ariel and Vyking wrenched the Ovoids open and extracted the pilots, harmed but whole, Caleb and Abbot checked on the civilians caught in the crossfire.

The plaza around them was a smoking ruin. Bodies lay in smoking heaps all around. Shards of glass and chunks of concrete littered the ground. Sirens echoed in the distance, promising the swift arrival of medcabs, but too many of the people Caleb and Abbot found were beyond help.

With each death they discovered, Caleb's anger grew. Thraxus would pay, he vowed. He didn't know how he would bring the wealthiest and most powerful being in the Three Galaxies to justice, but he knew it had to be done.

Chapter Twenty

The Great Escape

“Time.

“It is one element we have not mastered. Space, we have mastered, crossing from one galaxy to another and navigating the empty space between. The mind, we continue to explore, discovering new and exciting psionic disciplines and plumbing the depths of the sentient psyche. Wizards have discovered the means to alter the very fabric of reality itself. But time continues to elude us.

“We can build starships capable of traveling faster than light itself. The laws of physics, the fundamental concepts of thermodynamics, have become our playthings. Yet time marches on, inexorable, unapproachable, unforgiving. History is immutable, and we would do well to consider this as our Consortium’s influence and policies expand across the Three Galaxies. Once done, a thing cannot be undone.”

– Weddron Nurrick, Noro scholar and quantum psionicist

Thraxus, the richest man in the Three Galaxies, reclined in his plasmoid chair. The chair molded itself to his frame, hovering a foot off the ground, neon blue in color. Around him orbited a dozen computer screens, each describing a different scene. Thraxus lifted his glass of brandy and sipped lightly, barely noticing the bouquet or the smoky flavor, his mind more closely involved with the flickering images spinning around him.

Thraxus was rich beyond imagining, wealthier than most planets and some empires, and beyond that he was immortal. His life had once been consumed with conflict, with the shattering of bone and the hot spray of blood, with the destruction of foes and the winning of great rewards. But that was a long time ago, and the dungeons he had plundered, the people he had killed and the women he had loved, had turned to dust thousands of years before. Now, he spent his days basking in luxuriance, his every wish answered immediately, no demand beyond fulfillment.

Boredom was endemic.

Which was why, just months ago, he had hired the former Invincible Guardsman Elias Harkonnen to sabotage the food production facilities on the overpopulated planet of Delian-IV. Mostly he simply wanted to see what would happen if Harkonnen proved successful, but he also stood to achieve considerable financial gains by providing relief and supplies through his own shipping concerns. Yet Harkonnen failed, and Thraxus’ scheme was dashed, taken apart by a small band of adventurers lead by Lothar of Motherhome, a Wulfen Cosmo-Knight.

Lothar perished during the defense of Delian-IV, but that was small consolation. The other heroes disappeared into the United Worlds of Warlock, and Thraxus' informants lost track of them. Until just days before, when the adventurers had arrived on Phase World, unwittingly putting themselves within Thraxus' grasp. Two of the heroes were currently convalescing inside one of the many warehouses Thraxus owned on 4-B, purchased through a dummy corporation and stocked with enough obstacles to slow down an army of Cosmo-Knights.

Which, unfortunately, would seem to be necessary. One of the screens hovering before him showed a trio of Cosmo-Knights heading rapidly towards Phase World's fourth level. The female, a Titan, wore a suit of silver hoplite armor. She towered over the human who wore a suit of metallic blue full plate, as well as the other human in crimson centurion armor. The one in red was the one to watch.

His name was Caleb Vulcan. Aside from his bonded deputy status in the Consortium of Civilized Worlds, Vulcan possessed no records of any kind in any government known to Thraxus or his investigators. Not unusual in and of itself; the Cosmic Forge chose its candidates from all manner of backwater worlds and dimensions. But Vulcan had seemingly come out of nowhere, and he had managed to single-handedly defeat the invulnerable Elias Harkonnen, destroy an ancient doomsday weapon let loose by a supernova, and proved pivotal in the eradication of a Dominator plaguing the UWW. No small feats for a novice Knight. But then, Thraxus had reservations as to Vulcan's level of skill.

Thraxus and Caleb Vulcan had met before, seven hundred years previously. And again, four hundred years after that. The second visitation, Vulcan had obviously Fallen from the lofty perch of Cosmic Knighthood, and yet here he was, reinstated and seemingly oblivious to the past. Or was it some kind of game? Some ruse that Vulcan had hatched in an attempt to lull Thraxus into a sense of security?

Since Vulcan's arrival on Phase World just hours before, Thraxus had felt a foreign emotion niggling at the edges of his psyche, an emotion he had not felt in ages, and which he initially had trouble naming. And that emotion led to others, almost forgotten in the mist of time. Confusion, uncertainty, disquietude.

It was delicious, really. Thraxus sat forward in his plasmoid chair, eagerly devouring the unfolding story.

Arwen Griffin stood outside the lock to docking bay sixteen, Siv Yurilak at her side. The long-limbed Noro pilot shifted nervously, his leathers creaking, and his hands dropped unconsciously to caress the butts of the two grav

pistols hanging from his waist. Arwen shared a reassuring grin with Siv, sympathizing with his anxiety but not feeling a bit of it herself.

The petite alien girl with the green skin and blue hair bounced on the balls of her feet, eager for the coming conflict. Doctor Abbot, her acting guardian beyond the reaches of the Celestial Brotherhood, had asked her and Siv to retake their starship. Impounded by the Naruni Corporation, the red-finished Comet class light frigate was now guarded by a platoon of Naruni Repo-Bots. Arwen had already fought a number of the cybernetic creatures, and could only describe the experience as exhilarating. Raised among the ascetic Celestial Monks, Arwen's life to this point had been anything but exciting. Only the constant martial arts drills had relieved her boredom, and now let loose in the wide and wild Three Galaxies, she found her martial skills invaluable. Calling upon the strange reservoir of energy within her made her a physical match for even the peerless Repo-Bots, and the advanced hand to hand techniques of the Brotherhood made her their better.

So, no worries. She practically salivated at the chance to unleash the full measure of her abilities once more. Training against her fellow monks, Arwen always needed to hold back. But against the Naruni cyborgs, she had no such need.

"Okay," Siv said, "the docking bay is clear. The last of the Catyr engineers is leaving through the access passage." He had monitored the target area with his clairvoyant abilities, and though Siv wasn't much of a combatant, he could ensure no innocent bystanders would be caught in the middle of the coming battle.

"Excellent," Arwen giggled. "Wait here. I'll be right back." With that, the young monk passed through the lock into the docking bay proper. She barely heard Siv's whispered "Good luck."

Docking bay sixteen was a massive chamber the size of a warehouse. Six medium sized starships would have fit easily within its expanse, but only three of the brackets were currently in use. Maintenance bays were scattered around, and huge umbilical tubes linked the ships in place to Center. Power, oxygen, coolants, and other chemicals were fed back and forth between the city and the ships. The far end of the room was a doorway opening out into Phase World's early evening, where the planet's gray half-light waned. The Comet was unmistakable, and not for its crimson paneling nor the clan Acherean symbol etched on its nose. The six black and gold robots standing around the craft brought the eye immediately to it.

The six of them tracked her as she loped easily across the tarmac. She was grinning, but couldn't help it. This was going to be fun.

Before she was halfway to her destination, Arwen triggered her transformation. Immediately, her body was suffused with an indigo glow, which gave her brightly colored features a violet cast. That got the Repo-Bots' attention. An alien with a strange energy signature equaled trouble in anyone's

book, and she wasn't disappointed by the robots' response. Six plasma rifles were raised to six shoulders, and six streams of electric blue light flashed across the docking bay. The energy beams scattered harmlessly off Arwen's protective field.

She doubled her speed, and half a second later doubled it again. The Repo-Bots momentarily lost track of her, and while their targeting systems recalibrated, she flashed between a pair of them and unleashed a Phoenix Eye Fist that shattered the chassis of the one on the right. Metal screamed as her hand sank into the machine's chest. Electricity flared, reacting with her energy field, and the Repo-Bot crumpled to the ground, out of the fight.

The one on her left, perhaps reacting instinctively, dropped its rifle and popped a row of razor sharp blades from its knuckles. Arwen spun on her heel to face the cyborg; suddenly it had become the most dangerous foe in the room. Her energy field would deflect blaster fire until she passed out, but old fashioned kinetic energy would pierce the field easily. Luckily for Arwen, charged up as she was she could match the robotic strength and speed of her opponent with ease.

Blades slashed for her throat and she blocked with a forearm, then danced around to the robot's right as it tried to gut her with its other hand. Before the cyborg could reorient on her, Arwen connected with a Shattering Dragon Kick that popped the Repo-Bot's head off its shoulders. Another foe crashed to the ground with a metallic clatter.

She heard a kind of siren wail coming from behind her, and without conscious thought she leapt straight up half a dozen meters, and landed on her feet a meter away. The mini-missile aimed at her back passed harmlessly beneath her and connected with a maintenance bay on the other side of the chamber, turning it to slag. One of the Repo-Bots had produced some heavy artillery and it was already drawing a bead on Arwen as her feet met the ground. The other four closed in slowly, their rifles still trained on her but silent for the moment.

Arwen grinned fiercely. Water Rolling Uphill brought her across the intervening space in the blink of an eye, and the hard edge of her left hand cut the missile launcher in two. Shivering Palm Strike dented the Repo-Bot's chest. It staggered backward a step, and then dropped to the ground, sparking and smoking as its internal systems rattled themselves to pieces. Arwen allowed herself a brief smirk, satisfied that the technique worked as well on mechanical systems as it did on biological ones.

In less than thirty seconds Arwen had halved the opposition. She could see the cyborgs were unnerved by this. Their photoelectric eyes watched her closely, and two of them were backing away from her slowly, tracking her every move with the muzzles of their guns. The third was a little more sure of itself; it placed its rifle over its shoulder, and popped open twin panels in its thighs. Reaching in, the repo-bot pulled out two serrated knives. When

Arwen focused her attention on the knife-wielder, the other two followed the example of the leader. Plasma rifles went away, to be replaced with close-quarter weapons pulled out of hidden compartments.

The one with the knives got in a cut, slicing a shallow gash across Arwen's collar bone, but she barely noticed the wound. She took the 'Bot down with a Spinning Axis Kick. The Repo-Bot with the neural mace ended up eating his own weapon, and the last one, the one who favored some kind of wickedly curved cleaver, proved no match for a Running Centipede Strike.

When the last Repo-Bot fell apart, Arwen dropped to her knees, her energy field fading. Soaked in her own sweat, clear blood pooling on her collar, she fell on her back. "Cool," she breathed.

Siv's head appeared in her line of vision, leaning over her and looking concerned. "You okay?"

"Yeah," Arwen said tiredly. "Just took a lot more out of me than I thought it would. That was fun, though."

Siv sighed. "You're a weird kid, Griffin." She laughed. "You stay here. I'm going to get the ship ready. Something tells me we'll have to be ready to blow out of here the moment Kassy and Joriel are free."

Arwen levered herself to her feet. "Wait for me," she grunted. Together, they hurried into the Comet. Arwen hoped that the others were facing as little resistance as she had.

The UWW sector on Center's fourth level was a riot of sounds, sights, and smells. Creatures that Caleb Vulcan had only ever seen before in story-books or Harryhausen movies filled every available space. Pegasi, Chimeras, and Gryphons flew by overhead. Elves and Dwarves and Goblins walked the streets. Storefronts showed bubbling cauldrons and weird grimoires and Caleb thought he even glimpsed a gingerbread house, half hidden down an alleyway by more conventional structures.

The denizens of level 4-B gave Caleb and his three friends a wide berth, eyeing them with fear and suspicion, wonder and amazement. Cold stares and pointed fingers stalked them across the city streets. The four of them were an impressive sight, Caleb knew. How often did the average citizen of the Three Galaxies see one Cosmo-Knight, let alone a trio of them, escorted by a walking shadow in a trenchcoat?

Normally Caleb would have preferred his nondescript human form, red headed human teenager from Arizona. But his sense of humor and good nature had evaporated in the face of the threat posed by Thraxus. The immortal had kidnaped two of Caleb's friends, and in attempting to keep Caleb from rescuing them, loosed an army of Repo-Bots and other Naruni toys which had devastated a neighborhood and injured dozens of innocents. So now he walked through Center's streets in full Cosmo-Knight regalia, encased in his

metallic red centurion armor. The darkness of the void showed at his joints and through the narrow slit of his visor, and a stylized image of a hammer embossed his breastplate.

Caleb's companions were no less impressive. Vyking, also human, also a Cosmo-Knight, wore a suit of segmented plate mail, brilliant blue in color. A pair of curved horns decorated his otherwise featureless helm, and he carried a metallic blue longsword in his right hand. Beside Vyking towered Ariel, a ten foot tall Titan in shimmering silver hoplite armor, her ethereal beauty hidden behind a crested helm. Completing the quartet was Caleb's oldest living friend in the Three Galaxies, the mysterious wizard Doctor Abbot. Abbot appeared as insubstantial as a shadow, his face featureless save for his pale orange eyes, and he wore only a battered fedora and trenchcoat, twirling a cane between his fingers.

"We take this left," Abbot said, emphasizing his statement by gesturing with his cane.

The four of them turned into the side street, drawing the attention of a hulking Promethean guard in violet armor. Caleb felt his pulse pounding in his ears. Their destination approached, an aging warehouse supposedly owned by Thraxus, and currently housing Kassiopeia Acherean and Joriel the Celestine. Caleb had not yet met Joriel, but Kassy had risked her own life in an attempt to save the Celestine's, and that made his continued existence important to Caleb as well. Because Caleb was a little bit in love with Kassy. And if anything happened to her...

... he couldn't complete the thought. Instead, he held up his right hand. A crimson bar of light appeared between his fingers, resolving into a solid and very heavy sledgehammer, Caleb's chosen weapon.

The warehouse appeared up ahead on the right, a tall rambling structure of slate gray megasteel. Tiny windows decorated its top floor, but the bulk of it was featureless and unmarked. The front door was twice as tall as Ariel and nearly half again as wide, segmented to open in a kind of spiral fashion. A smartly dressed Catyr stood outside the door. He stood stiffly, holding a golden watch in his hand, peering at it closely.

"You're running a little late," the Catyr said, snapping the watch closed and making it disappear into the pocket of his waistcoat.

"Our sincere apologies," Vyking said sarcastically. He took a threatening step towards the Catyr, his sword half-extended. The Catyr didn't blink. Instead, he regarded Caleb coldly.

"Keep your friends to a tight leash, Mr. Vulcan. Time is of the essence."

Vyking actually raised his sword as if to strike, but Caleb held up his own hand, palm outward. "Leave him," he said. Vyking stared at Caleb a moment, his look inscrutable behind his helmet, but dropped his sword.

Caleb nodded. He stepped toward the Catyr. "Here is the way it's going to be. You're going to release Acherean and the Celestine, or we will take

Thraxus' organization apart, brick by brick. We won't stop until we've razed his ivory tower to the ground."

The suggestion of a smile graced the Catyr's lips. "Very impressive, Mr. Vulcan. But allow me to correct some misconceptions. You have no case against my employer, no proof of his involvement in any of the day's activities. He is very well regarded in this city, and even the threats of Cosmo-Knights hold little water to the Prometheans who rule here. No, I'm afraid if you wish to see your friends alive, you will have to play by our rules."

"Let us take this case to the Prometheans, then," Ariel said, "and see what happens."

"I doubt you'll want to do that," the Catyr said. "Promethean morality is alien to most sentient beings, particularly the servants of the Forge. You'll find that their sympathies will lie more closely with a native son than a group of foreigners."

"What do you want from me?" Caleb asked.

"Caleb," Abbot started to say, but Caleb cut him off.

"We don't seem to have a choice, Doc." Abbot's orange eyes flashed dangerously, but he nodded.

The Catyr smiled slyly. "That is much more agreeable. I am pleased to see you four willing to listen to reason." He paused, examining them each in turn, and folded his hands against his abdomen. "Caleb Vulcan – and only he – may pass beyond the threshold of this door. Three challenges await within. Each of these must be surmounted in an allotted span of time, or the prisoners will be executed. Once the third challenge is defeated, they, and Mr. Vulcan, will be allowed to go free."

"Madness," Vyking growled.

"I don't like it Caleb," Abbot confessed. "I doubt Thraxus can be trusted to play his own game fairly."

"You got Burt Ward and Adam West trussed up in there too?" Caleb asked the Catyr. Blank looks answered his attempt at humor, and Caleb mentally shrugged. "I agree with Abbot and Vyking. But, unless anyone can suggest an alternative, I think we'll have to play along."

More blank looks. "I wish the Forge had given us x-ray vision," Ariel grumbled suddenly. Caleb grinned under his helmet.

Caleb turned to Abbot. "Can you sense anything?"

Abbot's shadowy face went completely blank as he closed his eyes and concentrated. They reappeared almost instantly. "No, I do not. But the moment I do, I will pull all three of you out of there."

Caleb nodded. "Let's go," he said. The Catyr's sly smile grew more oily. At some hidden signal, the warehouse door cycled open with the hiss of hydraulics. Caleb reluctantly stepped forward, into the darkened doorway. He stood there for a moment, and then the door scissored shut behind him. A soft green glow washed over him momentarily, illuminating a large airlock and

an inner door at the far end. Caleb braced himself for an attack, but nothing came. Instead, the other door opened. Golden light spilled into the airlock.

Caleb stepped into the next room. It was a large chamber with a vaulted ceiling, filled mostly with nondescript metal boxes. Another door waited a hundred yards distant, through a maze of boxes. Caleb looked around carefully, but he didn't see any obvious threats. Cautiously, he began to cross the chamber, his visor scanning as he moved. Halfway across the room, a loud thumping began to emanate from one of the boxes Caleb had passed, and the metal cube shifted and scraped along the floor.

Caleb shifted automatically into a battle stance, hammer held up in a guarded position, his visor beginning to glow with lethal crimson energy.

A shimmering indigo hologram appeared at Caleb's elbow. He shifted part of his attention to the light, noting an elegantly dressed humanoid with pale skin and a dark helmet of hair. "Greetings, Caleb. It's good to see you again."

What was that supposed to mean? Caleb thought. Aloud, he said, "Who are you?"

The semi-transparent face frowned, but a smile blossomed almost immediately. "I am Thraxus, of course. Since I now know you have no recording devices secreted on your person, I thought I would enter the game personally. The first of my three challenges is fairly straightforward. In that box is a creature called a Holy Terror, brought here from a dimension called Wormwood."

The box cracked open, and a silver, spiked arm reached out. Metal wailed as the box was shredded, and a human sized tank stepped out into the room. Glittering gems decorated the creature's carapace. It had rubies for eyes, emeralds across its pectorals, and sapphires up and down its arms. The finish on the metal was dull, however, and were it biological Caleb would have said the creature looked sickly. The head hung low and the limbs, despite their apparent weight and the certain supernatural strength of the thing, swung lazily.

"Normally," Thraxus continued, "Holy Terrors are crusaders on a par with you Knights. But this one has been infected with a Bio-Wizard virus I purchased from the Splugorth, tailor made for just this kind of opponent. The virus has driven this Holy Terror insane, and horribly violent. The door will unlock when you have defeated it. Be careful." The hologram winked out, and almost at the same moment, a sextet of silver spikes flashed through the air in Caleb's direction.

Caleb instinctively dodged, and his cosmically enhanced agility was almost enough. A spike pierced his left thigh, driving deep and eliciting a cry of pain from the Knight. Caleb retaliated with a burst of red light from his eyes. The Holy Terror, too big to dodge capably, howled a multi-toned sound that made Caleb's ears ring. He followed up by throwing the hammer, connecting easily, and the creature was knocked off its feet by the blow.

The hammer reappeared in Caleb's hands, and he edged closer to the Holy Terror, eyeing it carefully. It remained supine. Caleb took the opportunity to grab the head of the spike and tried to pull it out of his leg. It wouldn't budge; he couldn't get it to move by scrabbling at it with his fingertips. Two arcs of lightning suddenly flashed across the room and struck Caleb with a crackling boom. It hurt.

But it shouldn't have. As a Knight of the Forge, he was immune to all forms of energy. He could fly through a sun – how could lightning hurt him?

Magic. Of course. "Shivok," Caleb muttered, one of the curse words he'd picked up from Ariel. That explained putting this warehouse in the UWW sector of Center. Cosmo-Knights had no natural defense against magical attacks. Then again, Caleb had no magic phobia like some Knights.

The Holy Terror was clumsily crawling to its feet. Caleb flexed his legs and leapt across the room. He crashed into the creature, driving the hammer hard into its head, and one of the horns on the thing's crown snapped off. It roared again, staggered, and swiped at Caleb with its three-clawed hands. Caleb blocked almost casually, and drove his fist into where the creature's solar plexus was supposed to be. If it had one. The intended effect didn't occur, but he did dent its abdominal armor.

The Holy Terror's arms clamped down on Caleb's shoulders suddenly. It was strong enough to keep him locked in place. Caleb pulled back a leg to kick it away, but the mandibles in the Terror's helmeted face opened up. A green mist sprayed from its mouth, splashing across Caleb's face and chest. His armor burned, a searing pain that cut through Caleb more sharply than anything he'd ever felt before. Another crimson colored slash of energy sparked from Caleb's armor, washing over the Holy Terror's face. Metal features burned and melted to slag, and its ruby eyes shattered like glass.

The Holy Terror released Caleb and lurched backward, senseless and reeling. Caleb's hammer rose and fell, connecting with an echoing clang. The Holy Terror crumpled to its knees and raised its hands in an ineffectual attempt to block further blows. Caleb frowned under his helmet, then tagged the Terror along the temple with the hammer. With a resounding clatter, the beast finally fell.

Caleb knelt beside it for a moment, wondering if he'd hit it too hard and killed it, and wondering how he could check. His armor and helmet still burned, but the pain had dulled. He felt a headache building behind his eyes, though. Caleb rose with a grunt and flew through the air towards the far door. He heard a loud click as it unlocked, and then hydraulics hissed as the door opened.

As Caleb passed through it, he felt a tickle at the back of his throat. He forced a cough to clear it. A cough?

Another stark room, with strange boxes piled high, almost to the ceiling. The hologram reappeared, grinning malevolently. "Oh poor Caleb, have you caught a sniffle?"

"What have you done to me?" Caleb demanded. His vision blurred momentarily, and the headache grew, a stabbing pain behind his eyes.

"You've been infected with the same virus the Holy Terror carried. I'm curious to see how well the microbe does against a cosmically powered being. Looks to be doing pretty well." Thraxus mimed checking a watch on his wrist. "You'll be irreversibly contaminated in about twenty-three minutes. Don't worry, though. The antidote is in the next room."

Caleb lurched forward, his head throbbing, hammer suddenly a heavy weight in his hands. His armor burned. No, it wasn't his armor, the burning was inside. Caleb dispelled the helmet, and wiped sweat from his forehead with the back of his gauntlet.

"But first, you'll have to survive this chamber. In keeping with the Splurgorth theme, there's a Conservator loose in here. I'll see you shortly. Good luck."

The hologram derezzed with a popping sound as a metal crate flew through it, spinning across the room towards Caleb. Coughing, Caleb dropped low and rolled. The crate smashed into the wall behind him, but Caleb barely noticed. He lurched to his feet and raised the hammer protectively while scanning the room.

There it was, standing proudly atop a pyramid of packing crates. It looked like some kind of huge insect, six-limbed and covered in dark gray plates of chitin-like armor. A long, narrow tail lashed behind it, tipped with a wicked looking stinger, and its three baleful eyes glared at Caleb angrily. The mouth opened, showing sharpened teeth, and the thing roared. "You're dead, Knight!"

"Oh brother," Caleb muttered. "I don't have time for this." He loosed energy beams from his eyes, but the Conservator dodged, leaping like a grasshopper out of the way. It disappeared behind another tower of boxes. It did not immediately reappear.

Caleb watched and waited. He blinked back beads of sweat and stopped his reflexive breathing. The urge to cough subsided, but his throat continued to burn. He counted a slow sixty, but the creature remained hidden. With a mental shrug, Caleb took to the air and flew towards the waiting door on the opposite wall. Before he had gone a dozen yards, the Conservator slammed into him at high speed, pouncing from cover and carrying him to the ground with a resounding crash. Four fists pummeled him rapid fire, denting his armor and forcing a cry of pain from the Knight. The Conservator's claws tore into his body, rending crimson metal and cutting into the flesh beneath.

Caleb struggled and twisted, trying to get out from under the creature, and managed to wedge his forearm beneath the Conservator's slathering jaw. The

Conservator wrapped two hands around Caleb's throat and began to squeeze, while its lower arms began to rip the plates of his armor off of his abdomen. Caleb's vision dimmed, but not from lack of air. The virus was speeding up, devouring him from the inside. Time was running out.

Luckily, he had the Conservator right where he wanted it.

Crimson light erupted from Caleb's eyes, searing the Conservator's face. It howled and leapt off him, claws skittering along the floor as it moved, faster than Caleb's eyes could follow at the present time.

Pain blossomed across the back of his neck as the spiked tail slashed him from behind. Caleb spun on his heel, but the creature was already gone, slithering out of the way with lightning speed. Caleb slashed at the air with energy beams. Crates exploded, and slivers of metal flew through the air. They bounced off Caleb's breastplate with a metallic tinkle.

Black smoke billowed into the air, and flames roared across the ground. Caleb groaned inwardly. His outburst offered the Conservator more chances for concealment. Caleb ducked low and circled slowly, wondering from where the next attack would come. Suddenly the smoke on his left parted, and the Conservator sailed through the air towards him, claws extended.

Caleb gave it a red look. Energy beams slashed the air and struck the creature on the chest, knocking it back into the flames. The Conservator howled in pain, then hopped back into view, trailing flames. Caleb launched himself at the creature, hammer swinging. The Conservator slithered low and around to Caleb's left. It was fast, but not quite fast enough. The sledge caught it at the base of its skull, and the Conservator collapsed.

Caleb stared at it a moment, daring it to rise, but the Conservator remained on the floor. Caleb eyed the flames, then hooked an elbow under one of the thing's armpits and dragged it free. He left it spread-eagled in the open and limped towards the door.

Sweat streamed from his temples and wept from his cheeks. His armor was stifling, pitted and scored with acid across his shoulders, dented and torn across the chest and abdomen. The silver spike was still wedged in his thigh, and the hammer grew heavier by the moment. The door opened, revealing only darkness on the other side.

Caleb dispelled his hammer – it really was too heavy for him to carry at this point – and crossed the threshold. The darkness did not recede. Indeed, it only grew more intense as the door closed with a hiss.

The hologram shimmered to life before Caleb. Thraxus' waxen features grinned malevolently. "Caleb, my old friend. You don't look well. Did I neglect to mention that the virus works faster the more energy you expend? I feel just awful. But don't worry, your salvation is at hand."

Fifty feet away, at the end of what appeared to be an empty room, a light flickered on overhead. It illuminated a small pedestal, upon which was set a

crystal vial of some sort. Something beneath the vial glowed redly, and the liquid within was beginning to bubble.

“The antidote,” Thraxus said needlessly. “Though once it boils over, it will be useless. You haven’t got much time to ingest it. Of course, if you do, you won’t have a chance to save your friends.”

Another light flickered overhead, a hundred feet distant. Caleb’s eyes blurred again, forcing him to wipe moisture from his brow. The object beneath the light came into focus, a strange metallic green structure. It had a central pole, and six slats arranged around its base like the petals of a flower. Kassy, unconscious, and another humanoid with maroon wings and red and blue armor lay attached to separate slats. As Caleb watched, panels opened in the pillar’s surface, and a hundred sharpened points sprang outward, dripping venom. The panels began to ratchet upward, a tick at a time. It was clear that they were designed to drive Kassy and Joriel into the spines. Death would probably be instantaneous.

“Choose, hero. Your life, or theirs.”

“Not much of a choice at all, then,” Caleb muttered. He lurched forward, metal boots scraping across the floor as he took each step. Flight was out of the question; his vision was too untrustworthy, and he might overshoot the target. He couldn’t afford such a mistake. Trying to use his heat vision would be just as disastrous.

Thraxus urged him on. “I would suggest hurrying, my friend. At your present rate, you’ll be far too late to do anyone any good.”

Caleb grimaced. His throat burned, his sight was failing, and beneath his armor every square inch of flesh itched maddeningly. Still he broke into a clumsy run, loping across the darkened space with all the speed he could muster. His foot struck some low placed object, hidden by the darkness, and he tumbled to the ground, landing with a metallic crash. Caleb lurched to his feet clumsily, dispelling his armor with a crimson flash of light.

He felt a sudden chill, but his mind cleared for a moment. With a sudden burst of speed, Caleb leapt across the intervening space and slammed bodily into the torture device. It did not budge, but Caleb felt bruises forming on his shoulders and back. He wedged himself upright, ignoring the sarcastic clapping sounds emanating from the hologram, and grabbed the base of the slat holding Kassy aloft. It was almost vertical, and the spines were dangerously close. A drop of venom landed on the back of Caleb’s hand, and he smelled burning flesh.

With a twist of cosmically enhanced strength, the slat broke free of its base, and it tumbled to the floor, taking Kassy with it. Caleb keeled over as every nerve in his body suddenly screamed; he felt as though his blood vessels were filled with fire, as though he were burning alive from the inside out. But there was Joriel left, and he couldn’t let the virus take him yet. Caleb forced himself to his feet, forced his eyes to focus. The winged Celestine,

unconscious, rose another tick. The larger spines scraped against the plates of his armor, and only the lolling of his head saved him from taking several lethal jabs in his neck. Caleb roared, summoning the last dregs of his strength, and shattered the base of Joriel's slat. The metal tore like tissue paper, and Joriel clattered to the ground.

Caleb landed beside him. He looked across the room, failing eyes drawn to the pedestal with his antidote upon it. There was nothing there.

Thraxus' hologram approached, clapping politely. "Well done, Caleb. It's a pity you have to die, but I am a man of my word. Your friends will go free."

Caleb tried to respond, but his throat was too raw. The words wouldn't come.

Then everything went black.

Chapter Twenty-One

As I Lay Dying

“It is important to remember that Cosmo-Knights are not immortal. Sure, they seem to be. They don’t visibly age, or even need to eat or drink. They can take a full blast from a starship’s laser cannons without flinching, and a Knight can exist in the vacuum of space without even having to seal herself in her armor. Yeah, they’re tough alright.

“But immortal? Not by a longshot. So be prepared to back them up when it hits the retro-rockets – and it will – because at the end of the day, for all their power, a Cosmo-Knight is just a person. Like you and me.”

– Captain Hiram Starling of CAFFCO

Consciousness returned slowly. First came aches and pains, eliciting a groan, then senses sparked to life, and finally full awareness returned.

Slowly, Kassiopeia Acherean, Atlantean Undead Slayer, sat up, rubbing her biceps where the straps had cut into her skin.

Straps?

Kassy blinked and forced herself to think. The last concrete memory she possessed, she and Joriel had been fighting a rear guard action against the forces of Thraxus. Their efforts ensured that their friends escaped capture, but she and the winged android had been overwhelmed and captured. The throbbing in her skull told her she had been drugged and the pains in her arms and thighs suggested she had recently been bound as well. Kassy pressed a palm against her forehead and counted slowly to ten.

She rose shakily to her feet. A few meters away, Joriel lay in a tangled heap beside a broken board of some kind. The pale-skinned android still wore his red and blue body armor, and his feathery maroon hair lay over his features like a cloud. His gorgeous, maroon feathered wings looked painfully folded behind his back, but Joriel remained unconscious.

Beyond his crumpled form, Kassy made out a Vortex Blossom, an ancient Draconid torture device. Kassy realized that the board lying beneath Joriel was actually one of the petals from the Vortex Blossom, ripped from its housing by someone or something with prodigious strength. They must have been attached to the device, she thought. But who –

Kassy turned, suddenly feeling eyes upon her. Her heart leapt into her throat when she beheld the tableau before her. Her friend Caleb Vulcan, neophyte Knight of the Cosmic Forge, lay on the ground. He wore only civilian dress, having presumably divested himself of his crimson battle armor, and he shivered and convulsed with painful-looking spasms. His flesh flushed dark and red, soaked with sweat, and blood seeped from his ears and nose, mixing with mucous and bile around his lips. Over Caleb towered the ho-

lographic image of the wealthiest man in the Three Galaxies, his patrician features twisted into a cruel smile.

“Thraxus.” Kassy gasped his name like a curse. Instinctively, she placed two fingers on her right hand against the blue and white sword glyph on her left wrist. A blue-white flaming blade appeared in her open left hand, flickering angrily. It was an empty gesture; she could no more harm the hologram than she could warp space and time, but it made her feel better.

Thraxus remained unimpressed. “A brave display, my dear, but wholly wasted. I advise you to concern yourself with your fallen comrades rather than myself.”

“What have you done?” she demanded. “What do you want?”

The smile grew darker. “I’ve gotten what I wanted,” he said. “Caleb has passed the test. You may leave now.” He paused. “You may wish to give him the antidote, though I’m sure the heat as long since destroyed it.” Thraxus waved his hand towards the rear of the vast room. Kassy made out a small table, apparently empty.

Thraxus’ smile disappeared. “Where is it?”

Kassy ignored him. Caleb was certainly poisoned then, and any poison potent enough to cripple a Cosmo-Knight was not to be treated lightly. She dispelled the sword and lurched towards Joriel. A quick scan revealed no external injuries, so Kassy lightly slapped his face. His eyelids fluttered, and Kassy applied a tiny bit more force.

Joriel’s lavender eyes flashed open, wide and surprised. “What,” he rasped, “happened?” Kassy pulled him up, and shared a sympathetic wince as Joriel’s wings unfolded themselves and forced a sharp grunt from him. Though an artificial being, Joriel had been grown, not built, and his manufactured biology was just as vulnerable to the drug in his system as Kassy was. Perhaps more so, as he didn’t have Atlantean tattoo magic boosting his physical endurance.

“We’ve just been freed,” Kassy told Joriel. “But our rescuer, my friend, is paying the price. We’ve got to get him out of here and get him to Abbot.” Doctor Abbot was one of Kassy’s oldest and dearest friends, a wise and powerful wizard. If anyone knew how to save Caleb, it would be Abbot.

Joriel waved Kassy away and levered his feet beneath him, forcing himself to his full height. He stretched luxuriantly, flexing his wings to their full twelve-foot span, and shook himself. He surveyed the room. “This must be the quok-sucking syervis who destroyed my ship,” Joriel swore, noting the hologram. “And this is your friend. He looks far gone.”

“Yes,” Kassy snapped, “and he got that way saving us. Both of us!” It was difficult to remember, looking at him, that Joriel was a biological weapon, a warrior in service to the S’hree Vek Confederacy, an unscrupulous nation of slavers. His appearance was designed to mimic that of an angel, but that was an ironic statement in the eyes of the Confederacy’s leaders. Yet in their first

altercation, when they had met as enemies, Joriel had acted with honor, and had helped Kassy and Abbot face off against an evil wizard. When the battle was over and Kassy's friends attempted to leave the field, Thraxus ambushed them. Joriel could have let them all be taken, but instead he had charged the weapons on his ship and fired at their attackers. For that service, Kassy had tried to help Joriel himself escape. Which led them to their present circumstances.

Joriel stared at her for a long moment, his lavender stare much harder than it should have been for such pretty eyes. "Very well," he said at last. "I shall help you." Ignoring the holographic Thraxus entirely, Joriel crossed to where Caleb lay thrashing and gently reached down to pick him up.

Kassy located the door in the vast, darkened chamber and led Joriel to it. Thraxus watched them go without saying a word, and as the door cycled open, the hologram winked out. Kassy and Joriel passed through the portal without a backward glance. Two more large rooms followed, filled floor to ceiling with crates and boxes, each showing signs of conflict. A battered Splugorth Conservator splayed in the midst of one room, while the second held a hulking pile of machinery in a humanoid shape. But through the third door, Kassy and Joriel emerged into the artificial daylight of Center.

At the base of the ramp, waiting for them, were Doctor Abbot and two Cosmo-Knights. Abbot, clad only in a battered fedora and trenchcoat, looked as insubstantial as a shadow save for the twin orange lights that served as his eyes. The Knight in metallic blue wore a suit of full plate mail and a horned helm, while the second Knight, a female Titan by the look of her, towered over them all in a silver suit of hoplite armor.

Abbot hurried up the short ramp and wrapped Kassy into a tight embrace that she gingerly returned. "What happened?" he asked.

"We know not," Joriel answered, "save that your friend here has been poisoned."

"Poisoned?" demanded the Knight in blue. "Impossible."

"Vyking," Abbot admonished, "relax." He turned to Kassy. "Are you alright?" At her brief nod, Abbot gave Caleb's body another worried look, then said, "Introductions are in order, but let me examine Caleb first."

At Kassy's insistence, Joriel placed Caleb gently on the ground and stepped back. Vyking and the other Cosmo-Knight crowded close as Abbot knelt beside Caleb and placed one shadowy hand against the boy's forehead. Abbot muttered arcane phrases beneath his breath, using whatever magic he had to try and diagnose Caleb's ailment. Kassy told him about the antidote Thraxus had promised and the immortal's puzzlement at the cure's disappearance. She prayed to Zeus that Abbot might be able to heal Caleb. For if Abbot could not, who in the Three Galaxies could?

To distract herself from such morbid thoughts, Kassy examined her surroundings. They stood outside a row of squat, blocky warehouses that

stretched around a city block. Beyond, Kassy could make out a bustling city street and passers-by in distinctive styles of United Worlds of Warlock clothing. Elves, Minotaurs, and Dwarves were interspersed with Draconids, Catyrs, and more exotic species. Kassy surmised that they were somewhere in the UWW sector of Center, but couldn't quite fathom why.

"Ariel," the silver Cosmo-Knight said, interrupting Kassy's train of thought. "And this is my ally, Vyking," she added, proffering her hand. Kassy took it; her slim, tattooed hand disappearing into the Titan's grip, and introduced herself and Joriel. With that out of the way, Ariel and Kassy stared at one another wordlessly for several awkward moments, and then unanimously decided to return their attentions to Abbot and Caleb.

Abbot did not appear to be making any headway. He sat back on his haunches with a disgusted sound. "I'm getting old," he muttered. Louder, he added, "I cannot discern what it is that is ravaging Caleb's body. Anything powerful and insidious enough to batter aside the defenses of a Cosmo-Knight's immune system is frightening stuff, however." He paused momentarily. "Perhaps if we were to relocate to a ley line nexus, I might be able to—"

But Abbot trailed off as a shimmering field of black and red light appeared before the six of them. Kassy instinctively placed her right forefingers against her left wrist, but Ariel shook her head. "We've seen this before, it's not an attack." Kassy did not immediately relax, and noted with a mixture of amusement and relief that Joriel remained wary as well. His right hand flexed dangerously, and the blue jewel inset in his palm flashed intermittently, a sure sign that he would ignite his Psi-Sword, his Blazer, at any moment.

The black and red field coalesced into a humanoid shape. Abbot and Ariel gasped, and Ariel was forced to admit, "It didn't do this last time." Kassy summoned her sword in the same instant that Joriel's blazer came to life.

Black and red light flashed and popped, but the human shape developed substance and weight, eventually forming into a kind of hologram. It lacked transparency, but it also didn't appear to be active in real-time, as Abbot's attempts to interact with it fell on deaf ears. It took the shape of a petite human woman, with pale skin and hair the color of midnight. Dark red lips matched the color of her blouse, and a black skirt wrapped around her legs. She spoke Trade Four with just a trace of an Atlantean accent.

"Caleb Vulcan," the figure began, "I bring you a warning of grave importance. You must be made aware that Quajinn Huo has possession of the Singularity Watch. Utter devastation and disaster can be the only consequence. You must help us. All will be lost unless you contact the Council of Time."

"The Council?" Abbot whispered, more to himself than anyone else. "My lady, Caleb Vulcan lies dying. Can you offer us aid?" Instead of answering, the figure merely repeated its cryptic warning.

"Quajinn Huo," Kassy muttered darkly. Huo was a Draconid wizard, one of the deadliest and most megalomaniacal who had ever lived. Seven hun-

dred years ago, he tried to transform the United Worlds of Warlock into an empire, with himself at the head. He was defeated then by a coalition of heroes, including Lothar of Motherhome, the Wulfen Cosmo-Knight, and a young Doctor Abbot. Huo was exiled to Center after his defeat, cursed to remain there until his death, until he managed to circumvent the wording of the curse and escape. Most recently, Huo had murdered Lothar, Kassy's friend and Caleb's mentor, and disappeared into the Three Galaxies. It seemed they finally had a lead as to his whereabouts.

Kassy looked down at Caleb's bleeding and battered form, and her face crumpled. She blinked back tears fiercely, thinking that the notice came too late.

"Steady," Joriel said softly in Kassy's ear, startling her. He placed a comforting hand delicately on her shoulder. She thanked him with a look, and then with a start realized that they were missing two people.

"Abbot," Kassy said, "where are Arwen and Siv?" Siv Yurilak was a Noropion and one of the best pilots Kassy had ever seen. He was also an old friend of her father's, and she knew Siv traveled with them to keep an eye on her. Arwen Griffin was a young monk added to their company after visiting with the Celestial Brotherhood, the group that had raised Abbot. Young and full of vitality, Arwen was a delight to be around, and Kassy was already thinking of her as the little sister she never had.

"They've recovered the ship for us," Abbot said distractedly. More focused, he added, "They're fine, Kassy, so no need to worry on their account. Caleb is our primary concern right now."

"What is this 'Council of Time'?" asked Vyking. He had a deep voice, and the way he spoke told Kassy he was used to command.

Abbot looked askance at the horned Knight. "A group of temporally obsessed spellcasters, warriors, and explorers who monitor the use of time travel and temporal magic. They operate across the Megaverse, and though they haven't a chapter in every dimension, they do have representatives in most." With a flourish, he produced his trademark cane and planted it on the ground with a sharp click. "And they may be the answer we seek. Come, we must return to the ship and depart for the Demosthenes cluster within the hour."

Abbot marched off, heading for the street. Without a word, Ariel reached down to scoop up Caleb and cradled him against her breast. She and Vyking hurried after Abbot. Kassy remained for a moment, watching the time councilor's message play out its loop one more time. Then she turned to Joriel. He would probably return to his S'hree Vek masters, she thought, but he had been a trustworthy ally and she didn't want to see him go back just yet. "Coming?" she asked.

"What of Thraxus?" he asked.

“He’ll still be here when we return,” Kassy said darkly. Joriel’s thin lips threatened to smile, but he otherwise kept his face blank. “You don’t have to go back,” she added. “Come with us.”

“My Commissar is dead,” he said grimly, “my crew lost. All that awaits me in the Confederacy is death.” He stared past her, at the shining red and black form over her shoulder. “I will accompany you for now.”

Kassy felt a sudden surge of relief, and then felt immediately guilty. Caleb was dying, and here she was becoming as giddy as a schoolgirl. She quashed the feeling angrily, then took Joriel’s hand and tugged him after the others. The time councilor winked out of existence finally as they passed her.

The journey to the Demosthenes cluster was not a gentle one. Abbot insisted upon pressing their small Comet class runner to its top speed, and around them the ship rattled and groaned in protest as the crew pushed it to its limits. Siv Yurilak, the pilot, voiced his own protests as well. He promised them that the ship wouldn’t be able to take that stress for long, that the grav drive would die or the ship would implode and kill them all. Abbot glowered balefully, his orange eyes blazing with anger and determination, and simply told Siv to use his finely honed clairvoyance to keep the ship from doing just that. But Abbot insisted that Siv keep from slowing unless and until the danger grew too great.

Abbot warned him that he would be sole arbiter of what constituted “danger.”

The Titan Cosmo-Knight, Ariel, remained in the ship’s hold, as she was too tall to maneuver through the narrow corridors of the craft, but her companion Vyking stalked about the Comet’s two-tiered bridge. Joriel lounged in the navigator’s chair, eyeing the star charts and his new allies with equal caution. Kassy remained near the doorway that led to the rest of the ship, watching over the tense cockpit while snakes writhed deep in her belly and she worried about Caleb.

The young Cosmo-Knight lay in his quarters. Kassy had wrapped him in a couple blankets, cleaned away the blood weeping from his eyes and ears, and prepared to keep a long vigil over him as they flew towards Demosthenes. Arwen, however, had insisted on taking that duty. The green-skinned young alien blushed a deep blue as she said, “I know some meditation techniques that can help ease his pain,” she offered. Arwen was raised among the monks of the Celestial Brotherhood, and Kassy knew she was a highly trained martial artist, but the ability to heal surprised her.

“The only problem is,” Arwen added, her blush deepening, “the ceremony must be done in the nude.”

So Kassy stood in the doorway to keep from embarrassing the young monk while she struggled to keep Caleb alive. Standing and waiting did not

sit well with Kassy. She preferred action, or at least a clear solution to a problem that could be found through hard work or research. But she had the sense that Abbot was grasping at straws with this “Council of Time” nonsense. Kassy had traveled much of the Three Galaxies, and benefitted from an Atlantean education on her home world Alexandria, but she had never heard of the “Council of Time.”

As if sensing her thoughts, Vyking turned to Abbot and asked the very question on her mind. “Tell me, wizard,” he said. “What do you expect to find in the Demosthenes cluster?” Vyking was a powerfully built human in his early middle years, with jet-black hair cut short and a neatly trimmed beard. Outside of his armor, he was clad in some kind of tourist garb, complete with a loud shirt, canvas shorts, and sandals.

Abbot’s eyes glinted dangerously beneath the brim of his fedora. Kassy had rarely seen him this agitated, even after the death of Lothar, one of his oldest friends, at the hands of Quajinn Huo.

“The Council,” he explained in a low tone, “is a band of temporally gifted individuals who monitor the use of time travel across the Megaverse.”

“The Megaverse?” Vyking scoffed.

Abbot nodded. “They are spread thinly across the infinite dimensions. An organization made up of billions of sentient beings averages but a handful of members in each reality. They monitor the timestream of each respective dimension, watching for unnatural divergences or undue damage caused by chronal distortions. Sometimes, the universe takes care of those divergences on its own, but often it is up to the Council, or the Council’s hired agents, to correct such problems.”

Vyking remained skeptical. “The only beings I am aware of who are capable of manipulating the timestream on that scale are the Temporal Raiders. Such creatures are not given to charity.”

Abbot’s eyes glimmered. “A generalization of that nature is a dangerous thing, Vyking.”

Siv asked for clarification. “There are T-Raiders on the Council?”

“Quite a number of them,” Abbot agreed. “But not nearly as many as there should be. Representatives from the Council of Time are just as varied as those of the Cosmo-Knights. A billion races from as many dimensions fill their ranks. Don’t let your prejudices blind you, gentlemen.”

“I trust you,” Kassy heard herself say.

Abbot’s stern expression softened. “Thank you, my dear.”

“I still don’t know what you expect they can do for Caleb,” Kassy said. Abbot’s features hardened once more.

“I too wonder,” Joriel interrupted softly. His look was grave and his wings were folded tightly against his back. “They will not turn back time to undo what has been done, will they?”

“I am hoping they will not have to,” Abbot said enigmatically.

The discussion was cut short as a blinking red light flashed on Siv's control panel. "We're coming up on Demosthenes," the Noro psychic said needlessly. The shimmering field of energy on the ship's view screen changed to a field of stars as the Comet's faster than light drives disengaged.

A triple star system appeared before them, a red giant orbited by two yellow suns, and the nav computer informed them that a dozen planetoids orbited around the triple stars. A massive particle field encircled the whole system; a ring made up of millions of asteroids, fragments of larger planets that once filled the system.

Kassy reached across Joriel and keyed the comms. "Arwen, we're coming up on our destination. Prepare Caleb for transport." She turned to Abbot, sweeping her dark locks over her shoulder. "I hope you know what you're doing," she told him.

Siv guided the Comet deeper into the cluster. Abbot took a stance at the communications console and began to beam messages at random bursts and intervals into the collection of rocks orbiting the suns. Before long, Abbot received an answer. Terse, but succinct, it was simply a list of numbers, coordinates to the Council of Time's hidden base. With a loud sigh, Siv aimed the ship in the supplied direction.

Asteroids bobbed in space around them, but Siv's clairvoyant abilities were up to the task. Not a single impact scarred the Comet's hull, nor did the ship once come dangerously close to touching one of the frozen blocks of stone. Siv wove a complex weave through the chaos, round black eyes gleaming as he piloted the craft. An electric hum emanated from the Noro as his psionic abilities came to life.

Kassy watched in rapt fascination, almost flinching twice as particularly large asteroids came into view and Siv wove his magic on the controls. And then the Council of Time's fortress appeared on the ship's screen. Kassy gasped, and heard others on the bridge react with surprise.

The fortress looked as delicate and perfect as a snowflake. A central spiral twisted majestically, decorated with a thousand gracile spines that branched and twisted into abstract and arcane patterns. "It's beautiful," Kassy whispered.

"Yes," Abbot agreed, "Bring us in, Siv."

Kassy excused herself from the docking procedure and went to check on Caleb. She knocked politely on the door, and at Arwen's acknowledgment, let herself inside. Caleb's face was bandaged, though crimson patterns marred the whiteness of the fabric, and he thrashed weakly though he was wrapped in blankets. Beside his bed sat Arwen in a lotus position, fully clothed thankfully, and the young monk looked haggard. Dark circles ringed both eyes, and she had the limp stare of someone who had been awake for days. Kassy put a reassuring hand on Arwen's shoulder and the girl smiled weakly.

“I managed to slow his metabolism down,” Arwen said softly. “But I don’t know if it will keep.”

“You’ve done enough, Arwen,” Kassy said.

“Ladies.” Abbot’s voice echoed over the ship’s comm. “We’ve docked with the Timeship.”

“On our way,” Kassy told him.

They all stepped out of the Comet’s airlock into a large chamber. No lights appeared visible, but the panels of the floor, walls, and ceiling glowed with a soft white light that filled the room. The ceiling was high enough to allow even Ariel to stand without trouble, and the Titan had dispensed with her silver armor. Just as well, as the glare from it would have blinded them all. Arwen and Kassy supported Caleb’s limp body between them. Joriel hovered nearby, as if he didn’t want to be separated from Kassy. Siv lounged in his black leathers, eyeing the room curiously. Vyking stood near Abbot at the front of the crowd. Kassy had the impression that the Cosmo-Knight was once more trying to take charge of things and failing miserably.

One of the panels in the far wall scissored open, and a welcoming committee of sorts swept into the chamber. There were three of them, a pair of humanoids and an amoeboid. The figure in the lead was an eight-foot tall giant, with long arms swinging ape-like from his sides. His eyes glimmered like pits of green flame in the grotesque silver mask that served as his face, and his heavily muscled, silver plated body was draped in a heavy black cloak. Beside the striking figure flowed a mass of protoplasm, a lump of pink and blue semi-solid flesh. Pseudopodia tipped with dark blue eyes reached out from the mass and examined Kassy and her friends. Beside these two extraordinary individuals, the third being looked somewhat plain. She was a human, tall and handsome, with short, dark hair and intelligent black eyes. She wore a red waistcoat over a white blouse, and black leather jeans.

“Doctor Abbot,” the green eyed giant rumbled. “You have returned, and you have brought Caleb Vulcan with you.”

“I have, Astyanax,” Abbot agreed, leaning heavily on his cane. “Alas, Caleb Vulcan is the victim of poisoning, and his body fails him. Without aid, death will come for him soon.”

“No!” the woman said, stepping forward. Only the outstretched arm of the first speaker blocked her from crossing the room. With a start, Kassy realized that this girl was the very one who had sent the message on Phase World. Her reaction to Caleb’s condition was commendable, but surprising.

“A Temporal Raider,” Joriel said in Kassy’s ear, “bracketed by a Traskian and a human. Most unusual.” So that’s what the silver skinned giant was, a Temporal Raider. Kassy had never seen one before, but she had heard plenty of tales regarding them. For all their solid appearance, the Temporal Raid-

ers were supposed to be composed of energy, a kind of energy that fed itself through a kind of psychic vampirism. Abbot didn't seem concerned, so Kassy wouldn't allow herself to be. But she wondered.

"Calm yourself, child," Astyanax was saying to his colleague. To Abbot, he added, "Caleb Vulcan is needed. He must be repaired. How did he come to harm?"

"Saving us," Kassy responded. "He was given the choice to save us or take the antidote, but he saved us. When we tried to administer the cure, we discovered it had disappeared."

"Interesting," the amoeboid Traskian gurgled. Kassy couldn't see a mouth, but she heard its voice perfectly. "How was he poisoned?"

"Look, can we just get on with it?" Kassy demanded in exasperation. "He is dying, and Abbot believes you can help him. If you can, then do so!"

"Yes," the woman in red and black agreed vehemently. "We can. We must!"

"Romana," the Temporal Raider growled dangerously, "remember your place."

For a moment, it appeared as though the woman would argue, but her expression changed to one of meek contrition. "Of course, Master Astyanax," she said.

"Astyanax," Abbot interrupted. "You can save him, can't you?"

The massive Temporal Raider stared at Abbot for a long moment, his emerald eyes flashing brightly. "Yes," he said at last. "Follow." The Raider turned on his heel and headed back through the open panel in the wall. The Traskian flowed after him, and young Romana too, though the girl looked back at Caleb with a worried expression.

Arwen and Kassy carried Caleb and the others followed, down a long, sloping corridor, surrounded by glowing white panels. When the corridor branched, they took their left turn, and then a maze of passages led them to another large chamber with a vaulted ceiling. In the center of the chamber was a pool of dark liquid. The light coming from the panels refracted on the surface of the liquid, creating slick and shimmering rainbows that made alien shapes and dazzled Kassy's eyes.

"What is this place?" Arwen asked. Kassy shrugged, unsure what to say.

"This is the Well of Kronos," Romana told them, her voice just above a whisper. "It is one of many artifacts the Council looks after and utilizes. It helps us focus our temporal magic, among other things."

"Such as?" Kassy pressed.

"I believe we are about to see," Joriel said in Kassy's ear.

Astyanax stood at the lip of the pool and spread his arms wide, his green eyes flashing with flame. Abbot stood at the Temporal Raider's elbow, looking diminutive beside the silver plated alien's bulk. The two wizards conferred in low tones, and as they spoke, an image took shape within the pool.

Kassy saw a dim room, the green and red petals of a Vortex Blossom, and two figures lying unconscious upon it. A doorway opened, and a Cosmo-Knight in crimson armor stumbled into the room.

“By Zeus,” Kassy breathed. “That’s Caleb about to rescue us.” She risked a glance at Joriel, and saw that the Celestine’s lavender eyes were fixed on the pool, his mouth a grim line.

The image continued to move, and as Kassy watched, the holographic form of Thraxus materialized to taunt Caleb. With one hand, Thraxus indicated the antidote, boiling on its pedestal, and with the other, the unconscious Kassy and Joriel about to be skewered within the Vortex Blossom. Caleb dispelled his armor with a red flash and stumbled toward the torture device.

“Now, Romana,” Astyanax’s grating voice echoed.

The slim woman left Arwen’s side and hurried to the edge of the pool. Without breaking stride, she stepped into the pool and dropped like a stone beneath its surface. She disappeared without a ripple, and to Kassy’s astonishment, suddenly appeared within the image.

Caleb, blood tearing at the corners of his eyes and dripping from ears and nose, grunted with the effort of wrenching the petals of the Vortex Blossom free. Unseen by Thraxus or Caleb, Romana dropped down lightly on her feet beside the pedestal. She plucked the vial from it and then reached up into the air and vanished.

A heartbeat later, Romana rose from the pool. Not a drop of the liquid marred her form, and as she broke the surface she stepped out of it.

“Did she just do what I think she did?” Arwen whispered.

“Time travel makes my head hurt,” Kassy admitted.

“Romana,” Astyanax rumbled, “make haste. Caleb Vulcan is not destined to die this day.” Romana crossed the room quickly, her heels clacking against the white floor, and held the small blue bottle out towards Kassy.

“He will need to ingest this,” the young woman said.

Kassy and Arwen exchanged looks, and then Kassy shifted Caleb into Arwen’s arms. Kassy took Caleb’s head in both hands and cupped his jaw. Gently she opened his mouth, and gestured with her chin for Romana to administer the potion. Unsure of herself, Romana tipped the bottle over. A bright red liquid poured down Caleb’s throat.

“It will take time to work,” Romana said, dropping her hand. “If it works at all,” she added, *sotto voce*. Kassy gave her a questioning look. “I think I recovered the antidote in time, but we do have to depend on Thraxus’ word that it works.”

“Good point,” Kassy agreed. But she didn’t want to entertain that possibility. “Is there somewhere we can take him?”

“Yes, of course,” Romana agreed. Before she could elaborate, Astyanax interrupted.

“Bring Vulcan to a place of rest,” he commanded. “The others as well. We have much to speak of, but your minds must be clear and Vulcan must be present.”

“Quajinn Huo and the Singularity Watch?” Abbot asked. Astyanax nodded grimly. “What has happened?”

Astyanax placed a massive paw upon Abbot’s shoulders. “In good time, my friend, in good time.”

Chapter Twenty-Two

Racing to the Starting Line

Draconids are one of the more curious species of the Three Galaxies. Though reptilian in form, they are mammalian in design, and appear to be distantly related to dragons. Like dragons, Draconids are predisposed towards psychic and magical abilities, buttressed by a hardy physicality that enables Draconids to survive in a wide range of environments. Draconids do not appear to possess Galactic level technology themselves, but as experienced dimensional travelers, they have managed to acquire it through trade. Draconids first appeared on Phase World, but they have branched out into the rest of the Three Galaxies and today control nearly a dozen systems within the United Worlds of Warlock, the so-called “Draconid Hub Worlds.”

Draconids as a species defy expectations. Individualistic, free-spirited, and impulsive, each Draconid is a nation unto itself. That a number of them have banded together to form governments is amazing in and of itself, and yet some of these governments have stood the test of time, withstood wars and despots and galactic tragedies.

– *Guide to the Three Galaxies, Arturo Vargas*

Consciousness returned slowly. First came aches and pains, eliciting a groan, then senses sparked to life, and finally full awareness returned.

Slowly Caleb Vulcan opened his eyes and sat up. He lay in a comfortable bed beneath white satin sheets. The walls around him were covered in panels of similarly colorless material, cut in multi-faceted geometric shapes, and the panels in the ceiling emitted a low, ethereal light that gave the entire chamber a pale glow.

Caleb pressed his palm against his forehead, trying to recall how he ended up in this place. The last thing he could remember was –

white-hot pain flashing through his body, blood seeping from his eyes and nostrils, ears and lips, and the cruel, booming laugh of Thraxus

– just behind his eyeballs he felt a flash of memory, and he flinched involuntarily. When he blinked tears free of his eyes, he realized he was not alone in the room. The enigmatic Dr. Abbot reclined in a low, white frame chair. The doctor’s blank visage starkly compared to the brightness of the room, as Abbot was a being composed entirely of shadow. The twin orange lights of his eyes were his only features, and the battered fedora and tattered trench coat he wore were the only things that gave his lithe, dark form definition. Despite Abbot’s nearly sinister appearance, Caleb found himself immediately relaxing at the sight of his friend.

“Caleb,” Abbot said lightly, his British accent no longer as jarring as it was when first they met. “How are you feeling?”

“Better,” Caleb said, surprised at how weak his voice sounded. He was a Knight of the Cosmic Forge, gifted with superhuman strength, agility, and the ability to withstand the burning hot core of a star, and yet at that moment he felt as though a kitten could overpower him. “What happened?”

“How much do you remember?” Abbot asked.

Caleb shrugged. “We were on Phase World, deep within Center. I was trying to rescue Kassy.” A sudden fear constricted his heart. “Where is she?”

“She is here,” Abbot assured him, “and quite safe. You saved both her and the Celestine called Joriel, and nearly paid with your life. Thraxus managed to poison you with a magical virus that even your Forge-enhanced immune system could not shake off. There was nothing we could do to save you.”

Caleb looked around the white room with sudden alarm. “I don’t feel dead,” he said.

Abbot’s eyes glimmered brightly in his version of a smile. “No, you are not. Fortuitously enough, just as we escaped Thraxus’ clutches, we received a communication from the Council of Time. Those strange visions that were bedeviling you of late turned out to be the Council’s garbled attempts to contact you. I knew from past experience how to reach the Council’s hidden home, and we rushed here as quickly as we could. As I’d hoped, the Council was able to reach back through space and time to steal the antidote from Thraxus and cure you. Which brings us more or less to the present.”

Caleb massaged his temples. “Okay, that almost makes sense.”

Abbot’s eyes flashed again. “Yes, quite. Questions?”

“The regular kind,” Caleb said. “Who, what, where, etc.”

“The Council of Time is a group of wizards, scientists, and adventurers who monitor the use of time travel throughout the Megaverse. They are spread thinly across the infinite dimensions, and their responsibilities are vast and varied. Not many are aware of them, or their mission, because of the nature of what they do.”

“Which is?”

“They ensure that time is allowed to progress naturally. Think of the Council as a sort of environmental protection agency, but they don’t look after wetlands or deserts or pollution levels. They fix damage done to the timestream itself.”

“What do they want from us?” Caleb asked.

“Us?” Abbot echoed. “Not a great deal. They seem to be primarily interested in you.”

Caleb lurched to his feet. “Why does that not fill me with joy?”

“I wouldn’t worry, my boy,” Abbot said. “They saved your life for a reason. I suspect they want your help dealing with a certain Draconid wizard of our acquaintance.”

“Quajinn Huo,” Caleb breathed.

Abbot nodded. "They haven't told us much more than that. I believe the Council is waiting for you to fully recover before sharing everything."

"Let's go give them the good news then, Doc," Caleb said.

Aboard the Draconid warship *Strabo*, the wizard Quajinn Huo paced across the bridge. Huo was physically unremarkable for a Draconid. He stood about two meters tall, raw-boned and thin, with a long snout and needle-sharp teeth. Thick brow ridges nearly hid white, pupilless eyes, and a thick mane of white hair spilled down nearly to his waist. Huo's scales were colored a brilliant shade of electric blue, and his red and gold tunic complemented his natural coloring. In one thin, clawed hand, Huo clutched a staff forged of Durnium steel, topped with a pale blue crystal.

On his left wrist dangled a seemingly ordinary looking wrist-chronometer. It was slate gray, with a clouded lens that showed a crack in the glass. But the digital read-out still ticked away the seconds, minutes and hours at a steady rate.

The chronometer was far from ordinary, however. It was, in fact, one of the single most powerful magical artifacts in the Three Galaxies. And it had allowed Quajinn Huo, a powerful mage in his own right, to slip seven hundred years into the past, where he now stood. In his own time, he had once led an army across the United Worlds of Warlock and conquered world after world. A small band of adventurers had shattered his dream of a Draconid empire spanning the Three Galaxies, but now he had reached a point hundreds of years before those adventurers had even been born.

With the chronometer in his possession, Huo planned to use its time traveling powers to kill those brave fools over and over again, but first he would conquer the Three Galaxies. Without interference from Doctor Abbot, the Wulfen shaman Koguk, the sorceress Callista, or that blasted Lothar of Motherhome.

Huo had already killed Lothar once, and looked forward to doing it again. He would savor it the next time; Lothar's first death had suffered from a necessary haste.

"My lord," a voice interrupted Huo's thoughts. The wizard turned. Arrayed around Huo was his command staff, all Draconids, all clad in the baroque battle armor that the reptilian humanoids preferred when going into battle, even aboard a warship.

"Yes, Commander Krang?"

Krang had golden scales and a neatly trimmed goatee, and a brace of medals across his chest. "We are coming up on Ogretopia," Krang reported.

"Excellent," Huo said. He leaned heavily on his staff and pointed at the viewscreen, where the green and black Ogre home world quietly spun in space. It was ripe for the plucking, a backwards planet ceded to the Ogres

to keep them from raiding more peaceable Elven and Dwarven worlds in the UWW. Ogres were not technologically adept, but they were powerful warriors and formidable opponents. Unless, of course, one had the combined military might of the Draconid Hub Worlds at one's back.

Ogretopia would fall quickly. Its mineral and biological diversity would be added to the burgeoning Draconid empire, and its populace forced into the Draconid military as shock troops. The next worlds to fall would be those of the Elves and Dwarves. And after them...

... laser fire suddenly flashed across the viewscreen as the Ogretopia militia fired a volley across the bow of the *Strabo*.

Beside Commander Krang, Sub-commander Voorlak gestured at the ensign manning the weapons console. *Strabo* answered the Ogres' attack, unleashing a barrage of laser fire upon the defenders that was echoed by the other ships in the Draconid fleet.

Huo cackled. "Release the fighter craft," he ordered. "Begin a bombing run on the capital city. Let these low-browed apes know who their masters are."

Krang gestured at his staff, and a klaxon bell rang across the bridge. In the bowels of the ship, pilots scrambled to their craft and launched out into space.

"They're responding with their own small range ships," Krang reported. "But the Ogres have sub-standard weaponry. This assault will not last much longer, my lord."

"I did not expect it would," Huo muttered. Seven hundred years in the past, Galactic level technology was not much more primitive than it was in Huo's own time. The Draconid Hub Worlds had managed to accrue a massive amount of materiel, and small targets like Ogretopia simply could not mass sufficient defenses to hold back the tide of Draconid power. Which was as it should be.

Huo closed his eyes and concentrated upon the well of Potential Psychic Energy that raged within his thin frame. He called upon that reservoir and transferred a trickle of it to the chronometer on his left wrist. The chron began to hum and glow, and outside the *Strabo*, an Ogretopian defense satellite suddenly crunched together, as though a giant invisible fist had closed around it.

Twenty minutes later, Ogretopia lay conquered. Quajinn Huo strode across the rough-hewn plaza at the center of the planet's capital city. Shattered bodies lay strewn across the square. Carbon scores marred the stone ground. The Grand Chieftain of Ogretopia kneeled in the center of the plaza, and he looked up with a blood-streaked visage as Huo and his entourage approached.

"This is their supreme executive," Krang sneered.

Huo pointed his index finger at the chieftain. A line of fire flashed from his fingertip to the Ogre, immolating him instantly.

"Not anymore," he snarled.

Caleb and Abbot found the rest of their friends in some kind of reception room, which Abbot located after navigating the two of them through a labyrinth of white hallways. It was a large chamber, with plush carpeting and the kind of pseudo-futuristic plastic tables and chairs which Caleb always associated with Saturday matinees. On the far wall, a wide window looked out on the empty expanse of space outside the station.

Siv Yurilak, the Noro pilot, played a game of chess with Arwen, the green-skinned and blue-haired martial artist. Siv in his leathers and Arwen in her monk's garb made an odd pair, but the glance Caleb spared in the direction of the chess board suggested they were evenly matched. Against the far wall, looking out of the window, stood the tall and graceful form of Ariel, the beautiful Titan who was also, like Caleb, a Knight of the Forge. Their other colleague, the bearded and darkly sarcastic Vyking, reclined on a divan, staring into space and mumbling to himself. A strange figure in blue and red armor, a pair of maroon colored wings erupting from his back, leaned against a wall, coldly watching the room with his lavender eyes. Kassiopaea Acherean, Atlantean Undead Slayer, sat in a chair reading a fat hardback.

As soon as Caleb appeared in the doorway, Kassy threw the book down and leapt to her feet. She was across the room and hugging Caleb tightly before he could squeak out a "hello."

She released Caleb, smiling broadly. "I was worried about you," she said.

Caleb grinned lopsidedly. "You should know better," he said. "Mamma Vulcan's little boy always bounces back." He didn't want to tell her he still felt weak.

Kassy led Caleb into the room and the others exchanged greetings and expressions of concern. The guy with the feathers turned out to be the Celestine, Joriel, who had been strapped to Thraxus' torture device next to Kassy before the virus had stolen Caleb's consciousness. Joriel shook Caleb's hand with a strong grip, but said little. Ariel and Arwen were more effusive, and even Siv gave Caleb a slap across the back.

"Perhaps now," Vyking suggested, "we can get to the bottom of this 'Time Council' nonsense."

"An excellent idea," offered a new voice. A petite human woman in black leather jeans and a red waistcoat stood in the doorway. Her black hair was cut short and neat, her dark eyes warm and intelligent, and her lips were bright red against pale skin. She was also easily the most beautiful woman Caleb Vulcan had ever seen. He watched, dumbfounded, as she approached him slowly.

"Romana Vorishcenko ne Usckios," she said, offering her hand.

Caleb took it. "Caleb Vulcan," he responded.

"I know," she said. Caleb felt his cheeks redden, and watched with some surprise as color appeared on her cheeks as well. She dropped her eyes and pulled her hand away. "Doctor Abbot," she said, turning to the shadowy wiz-

ard, "Master Astyanax is waiting for you all." Caleb had the sudden nagging feeling that he had met this girl somewhere before.

"By all means, my dear," Abbot said, "lead on."

As the gathered adventurers followed the girl out of the room, Vyking smoothly interposed himself between Caleb and Romana. "That's an Altess name, isn't it?" Vyking asked her. Kassy linked her arm under Caleb's, and he missed Romana's response.

"Abbot trusts these people," Kassy whispered. "But something about them rubs me the wrong way. Siv's nervous, too. He won't say anything, but I can tell by the way he moves that he's not comfortable."

Siv Yurilak's comfort levels were not a priority for Caleb, but he knew better than to ignore Kassy's instincts. "Received," he told her. In all honesty, though, all he could think about was the girl.

Romana led them along another winding path through the space station's antiseptic white corridors. At one point in the trip, Siv sidled up next to Kassy and said, "This place is messing with my senses, but it is definitely larger on the inside than it is on the outside." He sighed. "Headache central, kid."

Kassy merely nodded. Caleb had no idea what they were talking about. He wasn't sure he cared. Whatever this Council of Time's plans might be, they had voluntarily saved his life. That earned them a fair hearing at the very least.

The corridor opened up into another large room, this one more spacious than the reception area, but devoid of furniture. A dozen figures stood in a semi-circle in the center of the room, a broad cross-section of alien races that included a silver-skinned giant with glowing eyes, a human-sized amoeba covered in dark blue eyes, a squat-bodied, fish-lipped alien, something that looked like an armor-plated jellyfish, and more human-looking beings with strangely colored skin or odd ridges on their faces.

"Ladies and gentleman," Romana said, "I present the Council of Time."

"Caleb Vulcan," the silver-skinned giant said, his voice booming, "you have been summoned here and resuscitated so that you may be of service to us."

"Astyanax," Abbot said, a note of warning in his voice, "you can spare us the theatrics. We are grateful for your help, and we will happily aid you in any way that we can, but don't try to impress us."

Astyanax's glowing eyes flashed for a moment, but his metallic face remained expressionless. "Doctor Abbot," he said at last, "you will be silent. Caleb Vulcan, step forward."

Abbot's orange eyes blinked rapidly at the rebuke. Caleb bit back an angry remark and stepped around Abbot into the room. He folded his arms across his chest and looked Astyanax in his freakish, glowing eyes. "What's the trouble, Sparky?"

The shimmering green gaze flashed angrily in Caleb's direction this time, but a titter went through the other councilors. The armored jellyfish shook slightly, its tentacles lashing the ground as it floated in the air. The amoeba reached out a pseudopod and placed it along Astyanax's arm. There was no mouth, and yet a perfectly enunciated gurgle sounded, saying, "Quajinn Huo has gained possession of a powerful temporal artifact. He has used it to travel into the past, and unless Caleb Vulcan stops him, Quajinn Huo will march his armada across the Three Galaxies and bend them to his will."

"Shivok," Siv swore softly behind Caleb.

"That does sound pretty bad," Caleb said. "I'll help in any way I can. But I have to ask, why me? You must have the whole of the Three Galaxies to choose from – certainly there are more experienced Cosmo-Knights who could help you."

"The answer is simple," Astyanax boomed. "It must be you, Caleb Vulcan, because that is how it happened."

Caleb exchanged a look with Abbot. Abbot's eyes flickered. "Time travel," Kassy muttered. "Instant headache."

"What do you mean?" Caleb asked Astyanax.

It was the armored jellyfish who answered. "History has recorded Quajinn Huo's attempt to conquer the Three Galaxies seven hundred years ago. It also records his failure and defeat at the hands of an hitherto unknown Cosmo-Knight named Caleb Vulcan."

Caleb felt his mouth drop open. His mind whirled with the implications. When he could form a coherent sentence, he said, "Okay. Assuming for a minute that I understand what you just said, what do I have to do to take Huo out?"

The jellyfish managed to smile somehow. "That, I fear, we cannot tell you. The exact means used to defeat Huo have been lost. Further, the artifact he holds complicates things."

A pastel-skinned woman in multi-colored robes stepped forward. "With the Singularity Watch, Quajinn Huo possesses the power to change the way history has worked out. There is a very real possibility that he may succeed in his aims."

"Shivok," Siv swore again.

"How in Hades' name did Huo get his hands on such a thing?" Kassy asked.

The pastel woman shrugged. "We are not certain. The Watch remains safely ensconced within its tabernacle here within our citadel. Yet we can clearly feel the echo of the Watch's powers being used seven hundred years in the past."

"If we look down the line into our future," the amoeba said, "we see that the Watch will be stolen. Somehow the future Watch found its way into the present, and into the hands of Quajinn Huo."

Vyking snorted angrily. "Security isn't very tight around here, is it?"

"And what would you know of that, Vyking of Vegas?" Astyanax rumbled. Vyking looked ready to retort, but Caleb put his hand up, and the other Knight fell silent.

"Save the arguments for later. What do I have to do?"

Astyanax pointed a cruelly clawed finger at Caleb. "You will go seven hundred years into the past, defeat Quajinn Huo, recover the Watch, and return to the present."

"That doesn't sound too hard," Kassy said. "We should be back before lunch."

"Romana will accompany you," Astyanax continued, as if Kassy had not spoken. "Two others can fit within the Timepod."

"Two?" Caleb said. Ariel and Vyking would probably be a natural fit. Three Cosmo-Knights would be much more useful than only one, especially considering how weak Caleb felt. And Huo had already killed one Cosmo-Knight, Caleb's mentor, Lothar of Motherhome.

"It's a matter of practicality, I'm afraid," Romana said quietly. "We expended a great deal of power to send me back to Phase World in time to recover the antidote for you. Short jaunts like that are actually more costly than larger leaps forward or back."

"You saved me?" Caleb asked, surprised. Romana's eyes widened slightly, as if surprised herself. She nodded. "Thank you," Caleb said sincerely. She turned red again, and Caleb allowed himself a little smile.

"Who must go?" Abbot asked Astyanax. Caleb refocused his attention on the Council and the matter at hand.

"Caleb Vulcan will choose. Now leave us. We must prepare."

They waited in the reception room for the Council to ready itself.

Siv settled down into a lotus position in one of the room's corners and tried meditating to quell the migraine growing right behind his eyes. Arwen, more used to physical activity, swept her outer robes off and began to do calisthenics in the opposite corner. The others gathered in the center of the room to discuss their options. Caleb could not ignore Romana, who hovered nearby.

"I'm sorry, but I'm going to have to bug out," Ariel said almost immediately. "I've felt the Forge tugging at the corner of my senses for some time, but stayed to ensure Caleb's health returned. I wish I could help, but the Forge requires my presence elsewhere."

"Uh, yeah," Vyking said in the silence that followed Ariel's declaration. "I have to second that motion. This whole time travel trick is terribly intriguing, but I'm needed elsewhere as well."

“Of course,” Abbot told them while Caleb stared dumbfounded at his colleagues. He had hoped that three Cosmo-Knights would provide the necessary firepower to deal with Quajinn Huo with finality, but apparently the Forge had other plans. “You must do what you must,” Abbot continued, “and we wish you well.”

“Good luck,” Caleb finally managed to say.

Ariel rose to her full height and, with a smile, bent down to plant a kiss on Caleb’s forehead. “I think you will need the luck, my young friend.”

Vyking pointed thumb and forefinger at Caleb and faked pulling a trigger. “See you around kid. Give Huo my regards, will ya?”

Then they were gone. Romana volunteered to guide them to the nearest airlock, promising that their cosmic awareness would be of little use within the station. The four of them who remained in the circle sat silently for a long moment.

“That was sudden,” Kassy said at last.

“And unfortunate,” Abbot agreed. “We’ll miss their firepower.”

“Which is why,” Joriel said slowly, “I will accompany Caleb into the past.”

Abbot, Kassy, and Caleb exchanged a look. “I’m not sure that’s wise,” Abbot began to say, but the Celestine interrupted him.

“Can you stand toe-to-toe with a starship?” Joriel asked pointedly. “Now that the Titan and the human are gone, Caleb and I are the only people on this station who can both survive in a vacuum and withstand the firepower of a warship.”

“Point,” Caleb agreed. Kassy and Abbot seemed to trust Joriel, but up until a few days ago, Joriel was an enforcer for a confederation of intergalactic slavers. As a Celestine, Joriel wasn’t even alive in a conventional sense. He was an android, cunningly and artfully designed, but still artificial for all that.

“Abbot and I have a prior claim on Huo’s head,” Kassy said. “We owe him for Lothar.”

“Among other things,” Abbot muttered. Louder, he said, “But Joriel raises a salient point. Nor am I one to give up a tactical advantage in the interest of what is ‘fair.’”

Kassy frowned and crossed her arms. “This two companions nonsense is so arbitrary.”

On other hand, Caleb thought, Quajinn Huo was a deadly adversary. If anything happened to Kassy or Abbot – if Lothar’s death repeated itself – Caleb didn’t know what he might do. Perhaps he was indeed fated to defeat Quajinn Huo, but the murky promises of the Time Council did not fill him with much in the way of confidence for the survival rate of either himself or anyone who went with him. If he brought Abbot and Kassy into the past, he could be signing their death warrants.

“I accept your offer of help,” Caleb told Joriel. The Celestine merely grunted. Kassy looked at Caleb as if he had slapped her. He tried to ignore her look, and turned to Abbot for support. The wizard’s orange eyes dimmed slightly. Despite his earlier words, Abbot didn’t approve of his decision either.

Arwen bounced into Caleb’s line of sight. “I’ve decided. I’m going too.”

“You don’t get to...” Kassy started to say, but Caleb cut her off.

“No, she’s right,” he said. “We’ve got the wizard thing covered with Romana, so Abbot can stay here. And Arwen has that power shield thing. You said she handled those Repo-Bots all by her lonesome, right?”

“Did you suffer brain damage while you were in that coma?” Kassy demanded.

Romana appeared in the doorway once more. “They’re ready for us, Caleb.”

“We’re not ready,” Kassy said.

Caleb rose. “We’re done here,” he said. Kassy’s look shot daggers at him.

Romana led them out of the reception room for one final time, through another winding path down the white walled corridors of the Time Council’s space station. This time the trail ended in a smaller chamber, dominated by a giant white bubble.

Kassy could barely think straight, she was so angry with Caleb. What was he thinking? Arwen was powerful, yes, but relatively inexperienced. Joriel might be able to hold his own against a starship, but he was too new, too untried. Yes, he had helped Kassy and Abbot against Hazmat, but he had been backed into the corner at the time.

Why had Joriel volunteered? Kassy shook the nagging thought away. She was more concerned with Caleb’s cavalier attitude. Did he really expect to handle Quajinn Huo alone? To succeed where even Lothar had failed?

“What is he thinking?” Kassy hissed at Abbot.

They watched as Astyanax opened a door in the side of the bubble and Romana slipped inside. Arwen followed, humming some obscure tune, and then Joriel wedged his bulk through the small opening. His wings caught on the edge, and Kassy heard the Celestine growl a colorful curse. Caleb paused before entering, and offered his friends a lopsided grin and a shrug. Then he was inside, and Astyanax sealed them up.

“He is finally thinking like a Knight,” Abbot said softly. “My heart, like yours, wishes to face Quajinn Huo and revenge myself upon him for the loss of my dear friend. But I see what Caleb is doing. This is the first salvo. If this fails, there must be someone left behind to deal with Huo.”

Kassy’s anger slowly dissipated. “He doesn’t expect to come back.”

“Of course he doesn’t. He is not the insecure youth from mythical Earth that we first met so long ago. Caleb Vulcan is a Knight of the Forge, and I believe he is finally coming to learn what that means.”

The Council gathered around the bubble, the “Timepod,” and a silver light filled the room. Kassy heard voices chanting in esoteric tongues, and a rising roar of sound. The light grew steadily brighter, as did the sound, drowning out the voices. Eventually Kassy had to look away, tears streaming from her eyes, and just as she did, everything stopped.

Slowly she opened her eyes. The Timepod, and her friends, were gone.

“Good luck, Caleb,” she whispered.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Unexpected Allies

“One of the earliest interplanetary societies in the Three Galaxies was that of the Elves. This should come as no surprise. On nearly every planet or dimension where Elves have evolved or been placed, they have developed more quickly and more dramatically than any other species with which they share space. It is also true that, reaching their apex early, Elves also tend to be superseded quickly by Humans, Dwarves, and in some cases even Orcs.

“But in the heart of the United Worlds of Warlock, on the wooded planet of Alfheim, the Elves developed alone. Without any rivals for living space, the Elves were able to create a truly singular civilization, amazing in all respects. One of the most amazing aspects is that, when the Elves began to look beyond the bounds of Alfheim for (literally) new worlds to conquer, they did not develop spacecraft like other sentients, but instead turned to magic. Using divination, Elves discovered inhabitable planets elsewhere in their star system and beyond, and then created dimensional gateways to transport themselves from Alfheim to their colonies. In doing so, they bypassed most of the dangers inherent in interplanetary travel... but they also left themselves vulnerable to attack from more primitive cultures.”

– Weddron Nurrick, Noro scholar and quantum psionist

A moment before, Caleb Vulcan had stepped into the Timepod and felt reality fade away around him in a wash of multicolored light, and a cold far more intense than the void of space.

Now that moment was seven hundred years into the future.

The Timepod resolved itself around Caleb once more. The strange colors and the aching cold faded, replaced by the curved white walls of the pod and the faces of his companions. This was an untried crew, Caleb reminded himself, three individuals he barely knew, whose powers and abilities were as yet untested as far as he was concerned. Yet they had volunteered to help him all the same, and he had accepted without reservation. The challenge facing them had already proved lethal to Caleb’s mentor, Lothar of Motherhome, a Cosmo-Knight of considerable experience and distinction. Caleb had no illusions about this mission, no real hope that he would face off against Quajinn Huo, one of the most accomplished wizards in the Three Galaxies, and live to tell the tale.

So he had left behind his two closest friends, Doctor Abbot and Kassio-paia Acherean, and taken this trio of relative unknowns with him. Partly, he feared that if he failed and Huo’s mad scheme to dominate the Three Galaxies came to fruition, then at least Abbot and Kassy would remain to make a sec-

ond attempt at Huo's defeat. But mostly he feared a repeat of the last encounter with Huo, and the possible death of someone he cared very much about.

The pod's door chimed and slid open. It was a narrow aperture, keeping with the pod's overall design. The four of them wedged into the pod's interior made for a tight fit, particularly with Joriel the Celestine present. Large bodied alone, and encased in midnight blue body armor, the android also possessed a pair of lavender wings that erupted from his back. They looked amazing, but they also took up quite a bit of room. With a grunt, Joriel managed to make it to the door and slid outside, carefully folding his wings to keep from catching them on the door rim.

Next out of the pod was Arwen, a green-skinned and blue-haired young monk who had fallen in with the group after a visit to Abbot's home. A member of the Celestial Brotherhood, Arwen was lithe and athletic, cheerful and optimistic. Her upbringing among the Brotherhood had left her isolated from the wonders and cultures of the Three Galaxies, and everything she saw seemed part of a grand new adventure.

Caleb could sympathize. It was barely a year since his high school graduation and the cruel promise of a tour in Vietnam cut short by his ascension into the ranks of the Cosmo-Knights. The Three Galaxies were an amazing place to live to be sure, much more exciting than Arizona or, indeed, anything else Earth had to offer. Somewhere along the way, though, some of Caleb's wide-eyed innocence and exuberance had worn away. Maybe it was all those people who had tried to kill him, or the disappointing prevalence of cosmic despots like Thraxus and Quajinn Huo.

Caleb's fourth companion threatened to cut through some of his jaded cynicism. He had only met her a few hours before, and already he owed her his life. Poisoned by a magical virus, Caleb would have perished had Romana Vorishcenko ne Usckios not used her temporal-manipulating abilities to traverse time and space and recover a cure. She was fine-boned and delicate, with short black hair and warm dark eyes and full red lips and – she was staring at him.

“Yes?” Caleb asked.

“After you,” she said.

“Thanks,” Caleb muttered, belatedly realizing that *he* was the one who had been staring. He grabbed the rim of the doorway and hauled himself out of the pod, landing lightly on his feet. He could not quite stifle a gasp as he beheld the world waiting for him.

Arwen grinned. “Isn't it beautiful?” Caleb could only nod dumbly.

Romana nudged him aside and slid to the ground. “Welcome to Alfheim,” she said, “core world of the Elven Star Kingdom.”

They stood in the canopy of a gigantic forest, rich with the bright colors and enchanting scents of midsummer. Around them rose vast trees as thick and tall as skyscrapers, decorated with shiny green leaves as broad as Ca-

leb was tall. Overhead the sky was a scintillating azure, dotted with light and breezy clouds. Below them shadows grew deep, as the bright sun cut through branches as large as city streets. For a moment, Caleb feared that the shift through time and space had somehow shrunk their small party, until he realized that the strange humps and growths dotting the surface of the trees around them were buildings of some kind, grown rather than made. Figures moved lightly among the leaves and branches, lithe figures with nut brown skins and tapered ears. The sounds of tinkling laughter and soft music carried on the wind.

“Alfheim?” Joriel muttered. “I thought the Elves built cities of crystal from which to rule.”

Romana shook her head. “The famed Palace of Diamonds is still under construction in this era. Besides, the Palace is only used for trideo opportunities and the like. King Silverlight’s true seat of power is here among the trees.”

A flock of Gryphons flew by overhead. Joriel eyed them dangerously. The intensity of the Celestine’s look forced Caleb to follow his gaze. “What is it?” Caleb asked.

“I would suspect it’s a welcoming committee of sorts,” Romana supplied. “The Elves could not have missed the arrival of the Timepod. The surge in the ley lines that accompanies the pod’s materialization would have alerted their wizards.”

“What kind of welcome can we expect?” Arwen asked, bouncing on her feet. She wanted action, Caleb could see, but he hoped she would be disappointed. At the same time, Caleb’s experience with Elf-kind had so far been limited to the former Imperial Guardsman, Elias Harkonnen. Caleb wasn’t one to judge a whole species on the actions of a single person, but if he was, he’d never trust an Elf.

The Gryphons wheeled overhead, and now the companions could see a glint of silver upon their backs. Riders in gleaming armor sat between the animals’ wings. The Gryphons flew closer and alighted upon the branch around the companions. The Gryphons snapped their beaks and growled deep within their chests as they paced around the Timepod. The riders looked scarcely more hospitable. A female Elf with silver hair and eyes pointed the tip of her lance at Caleb.

“Speak, quickly! Are you friend or foe?”

“We come in peace, milady,” Romana said with a respectful bow. “We have come at the behest of the Cosmic Forge to aid you in your hour of need.”

“The Forge?” Silver eyes narrowed in suspicion. The lance head did not waver an inch. “The Knights come rarely to the Worlds of Warlock, and when they do, they arrive with all the pomp and circumstance accorded their kind. No Cosmo-Knight alive travels through sorcery.”

“And yet, here we are,” Caleb said, stepping forward before Romana could say a word. At his movement, the other Gryphon riders raised their lances as one. A half-dozen shining spears pointed at his breast, but Caleb did not pause. In a flash of crimson light, the Knight was enveloped in the metallic red armor that was his sign of power. The Gryphons reared back, startled, and one of the riders loosed a lance. Before Caleb could react, Arwen was there, plucking the lance out of the air and tossing it to the ground. A violet glow suffused the young monk, a light which quickly died as no more hint of violence was forthcoming from the Elves.

Instead, their leader examined the four of them more closely, her mouth a thin line. “This is passing strange,” she said. “Unexpected and unusual your arrival may be, but I know a Knight of the Forge when I see one. You say you are here to offer aid?”

Romana placed a hand across Caleb’s left shoulder pad. “Quajinn Huo is destined to fall at the hand of Caleb Vulcan.”

“Prophets as well, are you?” the leader said. “Perhaps we will have use of you. The King and his advisors deliberate over the best course of action even now. We shall bring you to them, and see what aid you might offer.”

Romana and Arwen settled atop two Gryphons and held the riders close as the great beasts took the air. Joriel and Caleb followed under their own power. Joriel shot Caleb a meaningful look as they rose. The Celestine said under his breath, so low that Caleb barely heard him, “Beware.”

For some reason, Caleb agreed with him.

Quajinn Huo relaxed in his stateroom aboard the Draconid warship *Strabo*. With the bridge under the capable command of Quajinn’s right hand man, Commander Krang, Quajinn felt the time was right to retire and meditate. He had been expending a great deal of magical power over the past few weeks, and though the Watch helped mitigate the strain on his psyche, Quajinn still needed time to recover, now and then.

Time.

The Draconid wizard hefted the Singularity Watch in his electric blue claw. It appeared to be an ordinary wrist chronometer, with a clouded face showing a hairline fracture in the glass. But the LED still shone brightly, neon green, counting down the seconds, minutes, and hours accurately. Though Quajinn had to confess he still wasn’t sure what planetary system the Watch was keyed to, he had managed to divine most of the Watch’s other powers.

The artifact’s name was surprisingly apt; beneath the cracked and clouded glass was constrained an actual black hole, and the unfathomable power of that celestial event was at the wearer’s fingertips. Such power was tempting to unleash in an endless wave, but Quajinn’s disciplined mind resisted that temptation. The fundamental forces of the universe had been at his command

for centuries already. His first bid for control of the United Worlds of Warlock had succeeded due primarily to his own magical talents. In his time, he had held at bay the Wulfen shaman Koguk, the dark sorceress Callista, and that infernal Doctor Abbot. Not all at once, truthfully, but still he had bested all three of them separately. It was a testament to the danger he had presented that the three of them needed to join forces to defeat him.

Quajinn's snout twisted into a grim smile that showed all of his needle-sharp teeth. *But that was a long time ago.* The smile faded. Draconids, like many species in the Three Galaxies, were long-lived. Were he an ordinary member of his species, Quajinn Huo could look forward three millennia of life. But he had sold off much of his life span in return for most of his magical power, shortening it to but a third of its intended length. He had only a few centuries left – the Watch was able to determine that much – and though that was perhaps long enough to conquer the Three Galaxies, he would not enjoy his reign for very long.

The Watch helped immeasurably. Quajinn had no idea where Elias Harkonnen had acquired it, but even Quajinn Huo's pitiless heart could afford a small bit of gratitude for the twisted Elf. With it, Quajinn had speeded up time in localized areas to manufacture the fleet of Draconid ships under his command, as well as accelerated the growth and development of thousands of Draconids to crew those ships. His troops looked upon him as a deity, and with the Singularity Watch in hand, he was very close to godhood. Not close enough to suit him, but very close indeed.

The Three Galaxies contained numerous paths to immortality. This was one of the limits of the Watch's power – it could not extend his life span, though it could delineate it. But with the power granted him by the Watch, Quajinn Huo could scour the UWW and the rest of the Three Galaxies for the secret, the answers, he required. He clenched his fist around the Watch in a silent vow.

Once he had secured himself everlasting life, then would come his revenge against those who had defeated him the last time.

"Milord," Krang's voice echoed from the comm beside Quajinn's chair.

"Speak," Quajinn commanded.

"You wished to be informed when we arrived in Elven space."

The grim smile returned. Quajinn rose from his seat and slipped the Singularity Watch over his wrist. "Prime the cannons, Commander. I am on my way."

The Gryphons led them through the forest city at a brisk pace, and finally alighted upon a broad wooden platform stretched between two massive branches. The flight brought the companions considerable attention, unsurprising given how brightly colored and out of place Caleb and Joriel were

compared to the browns and greens and yellows that Alfheim's populace seemed to prefer.

Caleb dropped down beside the lead Gryphon, his metallic boots thumping loudly against the platform's boards. The Elven woman slid to the ground as well, her silver harness jingling. Caleb was surprised to see that she was actually taller than he was, even in his armor. Joriel thumped down next to the two of them, the Celestine looming over them both. "Where are we?" Joriel demanded.

The Elven woman pointed towards the trunk of the great tree. Caleb saw a pair of cunningly designed doors cut into the tree's face. They might have been invisible but for the arch above them, carved with some kind of Elven glyphs, and the four guards that stood at attention nearby. The Elven guards wore some kind of wooden-looking armor and wore swords belted at each hip. Their one concession to existence in the Three Galaxies appeared to be the laser rifles each cradled with threatening ease.

Romana and Arwen approached, Romana limping slightly. "I prefer bucket seats," she offered by way of explanation.

In contrast, Arwen fairly floated across the deck. "That was fun!" she said.

The lead Gryphon rider escorted the four of them to the door. She spoke rapid fire Elven to the guards, and after a dubious look in Caleb's direction, the guards acquiesced and let them pass. One of the guards toggled a comm and spoke quietly into it. A moment later the doors swivelled open on unseen hinges. The passage beyond was dark, but it grew brighter as Caleb and his friends passed within it. The hallway looked more grown than carved. Caleb couldn't see any planks or joints, just smooth finished wood.

Caleb trailed fingers along the walls, but he couldn't feel much through his gauntlets. He didn't like wearing the armor in general, but it was his badge of office and it had managed to gain him an audience with the King, so he left it on.

"Biomancy," Romana said in his ear. Caleb started, eliciting a chuckle from her.

"What was that?" he said, trying to recover his composure. Suddenly he was glad of the helmet, which hid his embarrassment from her.

"The Elves use Biomancy to grow the trees this large, as well as the compartments within and without. The trees remain alive and growing, even as the Elves continue to live inside them."

"That's amazing," Caleb said.

Romana smiled. "Isn't it?"

The corridor sloped gradually, winding around the trunk of the tree and heading for the heart.

"So, Knight," Joriel said, "what is your plan?"

"Plan?" Caleb said.

“Yeah, you do have a plan, right?” Arwen asked. “It would be a shame to come all this way without a plan. I mean...”

“I get it, Arwen,” Caleb snapped. The Elf looked over her shoulder at the four of them, and her expression was not encouraging. “I do have a plan. But it won’t do us much good until we figure out where Huo is and what he’s up to, which we won’t know until we talk to this council. Okay?”

Joriel merely grunted, but both Arwen and the Elf looked relieved. *Do I really look that inexperienced, that clueless?* Caleb wondered.

I don’t want to know the answer to that question.

Finally they reached another set of impressive looking double doors, and more Elven guards with energy rifles. The weapons looked incongruous with the wooden armor and swords, but no less dangerous for the oddity. More Elven words were exchanged, and the conversation quickly grew heated, until the guards begrudgingly backed down and opened the door.

The Gryphon rider crooked a finger and urged Caleb and his friends to follow her through the doorway. Beyond was a large chamber with a polished wooden floor and darkened walls. Illumination came from globes situated strategically around the room’s edges, but it was the center of the chamber that drew the eyes. A large, round table carved, not grown, from a huge oak stood in the center of the room. A three-dimensional map of some sector of space hovered over the table’s surface, the projector hidden somewhere within the table itself.

Around the table stood a dozen individuals, most of them Elven in appearance. Caleb saw one in a stylized suit of wooden armor, another in robes of scarlet, a third in a standard issue flightsuit, and another in rich looking clothes. A massive Minotaur in iron armor was there as well, stroking his chin and looking into the star chart. There were also a pair of Dwarves in black and silver, two humans in modern looking mega-armor, some rat-like humanoids, and standing on the far side of the table, almost hidden by the projected image, a pale-skinned humanoid in neatly cut black clothes, whose face was instantly recognizable to the young Cosmo-Knight.

“Thraxus,” Caleb muttered under his breath.

The dozen members of the council were arguing something, and had not yet noticed the arrival of Caleb and his friends. For a moment, Caleb thought about loosing an energy blast across the room to cut Thraxus into steaming chunks of flesh. But Romana noticed his instant discomfort and laid a hand across his arm. “Easy, Caleb,” she whispered. “Remember, we’re seven hundred years in the past. Thraxus has no idea who we are and no reason to attack us.”

Caleb looked at her for a moment, then across the room at Thraxus. He took a deep breath, despite the fact that he didn’t need to breathe anymore, and forced himself to relax. “Okay.”

“King Silverlight,” the Gryphon rider called. “More allies have arrived to help us in our struggle.”

The council broke off its deliberations and turned its attention to the new arrivals. The silver-haired Elf in the rich clothes stepped around the table. “My thanks, Elloran,” he said. “If our old eyes do not deceive us, you have brought us a Cosmo-Knight.”

Caleb stepped forward. “Caleb Vulcan of the Forge, Your Majesty,” he said, bowing.

“Thank you,” King Silverlight said. “But we do not stand much on ceremony here. If you have come to aid us against this Draconid uprising, we are most grateful.”

“This is no mere uprising, Your Majesty,” Romana said. “You are facing a full scale rebellion. One that, if not checked, will envelop the entire UWW and threaten the Three Galaxies themselves.”

“Indeed,” King Silverlight said, with some skepticism. “Such a dire prediction from such an attractive child. Are you so sure of this threat?”

“Perhaps she exaggerates,” rumbled the Minotaur, “but her concern does her credit. The Draconid fleet has grown more quickly than we would have thought possible. They are producing ships in numbers beyond what their resources should be, and the Draconids have already absorbed a dozen worlds.”

“Do the Goblin planets really count?” groused a Dwarf. “We should thank the Draconids for taking those animals off our hands.”

“Who are you calling ‘animals’?” hissed one of the rat-men.

“Guildmaster Hammerskjold and Lord Lemmus, please,” Silverlight said. “We are all friends here, and we do not wish our guests from Phase World and the Forge to think otherwise.” The Elf-King’s rebuke was mild, but the effect was instantaneous. Both Lemmus and Hammerskjold straightened and looked away from one another, keeping lips pressed tightly together.

Bright red lights appeared on the star chart, winking to life with a suddenness that made Caleb uneasy. His fear was well-founded.

“Your Majesty,” spoke a familiar voice that sent chills down Caleb’s spine. “We have more immediate concerns than the enmity between Dwarves and Ratinoids.” All eyes turned towards the table. Thraxus continued. “It appears that the Draconid fleet is coming out of light speed within striking distance of this planet.”

“Ye gods!” Silverlight exclaimed. “How is that possible? They took control of Ogretopia but days ago. That’s too far to travel in so short a time, not in those numbers.”

“Your protests to the contrary aside, Your Majesty,” Thraxus said, “they are here. All that stands between you and them, it seems, are the handful of ships my friend Inglix has loaned me.” Thraxus grinned and flattened his palms on the table. “What is this planet worth to you?”

“We see where your incomparable fortune comes from,” Silverlight muttered bitterly. He turned to the Gryphon rider and said, “Elloran, spread the word. Begin the evacuation.”

“You are giving up?” Hammerskjold said with incredulity.

“Hardly, Guildmaster. But we have millions of noncombatants who should escape through dimensional gates to safer climes. They, perhaps, may be able to alert our allies of our trouble. Hopefully we can hold the Draconids here long enough for the Warlocks or your own Dwarven warships to send aid.”

“Aye, so shall it be done,” Hammerskjold proclaimed.

“Your Majesty,” Caleb interrupted. King Silverlight turned to look at him with an expression that suggested the Elf had all but forgotten Caleb’s presence. “The Draconids are led by a wizard named Quajinn Huo. He has in his possession an artifact that grants him control over time itself. This will not be an easy fight.”

Silverlight’s blue eyes examined Caleb closely, then switched to Romana.

“That is how the fleet was able to arrive so quickly and unexpectedly,” Romana explained. “The artifact is also the key to their inevitable victory.”

“Inevitable?” Silverlight echoed.

“It need not be so,” Joriel said. “Vulcan has a plan.”

Caleb turned red beneath his helm. “It’s a bit more of a desperate plan than I had originally envisioned, Your Majesty. How many ships do you have at your disposal?”

Thraxus had approached, and his black eyes narrowed as he looked the Knight up and down. “We have eight Dwarven Iron Ships at our disposal, and half as many Arcane patrol ships. Four squadrons of Shadow Bolt fighters. They are arrayed against, apparently, three hundred Draconid frigates, a dozen Cobra class cruisers, and a single Beowulf class dreadnought.”

“That many?” Silverlight said, sparing a look at the star chart and the growing number of blinking red lights.

“How long can you hold against those odds?” Caleb asked Thraxus. He tried to keep a quaver out of his voice while resisting the urge to smash the smug grin off of the immortal’s face.

“How long do you need?” Thraxus said pointedly.

“Long enough for my team to get through the Draconid line, board the flagship, defeat the wizard, and recover the artifact.”

Both Silverlight and Thraxus looked at Caleb with some doubt, then exchanged a look with one another. “You Cosmo-Knights have a reputation for doing the impossible,” Silverlight said at last.

“We try, Your Majesty.”

“You shall have all the support we can muster,” Silverlight decided. Make your demands, Thraxus, and I shall meet them.” Silverlight turned and headed to towards the table, barking out commands. The council rushed to follow

them out. Thraxus spared one more close look at Caleb and then followed the King.

The four companions were momentarily alone once more.

“That’s your plan?” Joriel growled.

Caleb shrugged. “I thought we’d have more back-up, but essentially, yeah.”

“That’s a pretty sucky plan,” Arwen said. “If we’re going to fly into the mouth of Hell, we should have brought Siv.”

Caleb shook his head. “We’ll be fine. We’re just pulling a blitz. Joriel and I are blocking tackle, and you and Romana will glide into the flagship untouched. With Romana to counter the Watch, and you protecting Romana, that will leave Joriel and I to take down Huo. No problem.”

Joriel sighed. “You’re mad, Vulcan. But it might work.”

Romana looked at Caleb sharply. “What do you mean, ‘counter the Watch’?”

Before Caleb could respond, Silverlight returned. “Quickly,” he said, “you must follow Thraxus to the launching pads. While my people escape to safety, he will cover your assault. May the gods smile upon your endeavor. The prayers and hopes of the Elves go with you.”

Chapter Twenty-Four

War in Time

“The confrontation with Quajinn Huo would prove to be one of the greatest tests of Caleb Vulcan’s life. The Draconid sorcerer had already killed his mentor, the Wulfen Cosmo-Knight Lothar of Motherhome, and, armed with the Singularity Watch, traveled back in time seven hundred years to begin his conquest of the United Worlds of Warlock. Armed with the Watch, Huo had marched across the UWW, using the artifact to accelerate time and build an armada in days rather than years.

“With this force at his back, Quajinn Huo conquered the Draconid Hub worlds, the Grimbor System, Ogretopia, and quickly advanced on the center of Elven power in the UWW. It was there that Caleb Vulcan and his small band of allies, together with the immortal Thraxus of Phase World, faced off against the mad Draconid, his army, and the Singularity Watch. The future of the Three Galaxies literally hanged in the balance. Unchecked, Huo could use the Watch to unwrite what had already been written.”

– Excerpt from Caleb Vulcan: Before the Fall, by Gymnos Terrice

King Silverlight stood in the midst of the control room, deep in the heart of one of the great rowan trees that covered the world of Alfheim. His homeworld, and the homeworld of the millions of Elves he served as King. Now, that world was under siege. Over three hundred Draconid warships had come out of light speed just minutes away from Alfheim, and now bore down heavily upon the nearly unprotected world. The Elves were an interplanetary people, but not a starfaring one. They used dimensional gates to traverse the intervening space between worlds, and as a result the planets under their control lacked the orbital space stations and k-sats that other planets possessed.

Instead, Alfheim depended upon its position in space as a defense. It lay at the heart of the United Worlds of Warlock, an emerald jewel nestled within the crown of the UWW. Any invading armada should have had to pass through a dozen heavily protected systems before reaching Alfheim. Even had the Draconids enough strength to batter through those defenses, there should have been plenty of warning. Alfheim should not have been caught flatfooted.

Yet, the Cosmo-Knight had said something disturbing to the King. He had claimed that the Draconids were led by a wizard in possession of an artifact capable of controlling Time itself.

With a weapon like that...

It did not bear thinking about. King Silverlight could not allow himself to complete the thought. Yet he could not ignore the possibility either.

The King looked about the control room. Moments ago, a council of representatives from the allied worlds of Warlock had encircled the table in the chamber's center. But now Thraxus and Guildmaster Hammerskjold and Lord Lemmus and the others were scrambling for the launchpads and the few ships available for Alfheim's defense. King Silverlight stood alone, save for a few of his attendants and advisors.

"Seneschal," King Silverlight said into the silence. "Fetch our sword and armor."

Greenleaf's bright eyes widened in surprise. "Milord, is that wise? If the Draconids break through Thraxus' line, I doubt they will condescend to facing us sword to sword, face to face."

King Silverlight shook his head. "Our sword and our armor, Seneschal. We will not ask a second time."

Greenleaf swallowed, nodded, and spun on his heel to do his King's bidding. King Silverlight turned to his aide, Skystone. "You," he said, "fetch the Norn Stones."

Beneath her golden tan, Skystone paled. "Milord, are you certain?"

"Is there anyone to hand who will not question our orders?" King Silverlight snapped. Skystone blanched further and, without another word, raced to complete her appointed task.

The Norn Stones were artifacts of power, like this so-called "watch" of the Draconid's. If need be, King Silverlight would fight fire with fire.

His world. His people.

And damn the consequences.

Caleb Vulcan hurried after the retreating form of Thraxus and tried to reign in the irrational anger that surged through him every time he looked at the immortal. According to present time, it would be seven hundred years before Thraxus would kidnap Caleb's friends and attempt to kill him, but thanks to the miracle of time travel, those events had happened only days ago to the young Cosmo-Knight. This Thraxus, the one who had stood calmly beside the Elven King and pledged his ships to the defense of Alfheim, had never met Caleb before. He was entirely unaware of the fate future (*or was that the past?*, Caleb wondered) had in store for the both of them. That did not make dealing with Thraxus any easier.

His friends understood. He hoped. Joriel, the winged and armored android warrior whose heavy steps thundered at Caleb's, was among those kidnaped and used as bait for Caleb. Caleb had rescued Joriel, and now the Celestine had pledged himself to Caleb's service, determined to pay Caleb back for saving his life. The blue-skinned, green-haired and lithely built young monk Arwen Griffin had evaded Thraxus' soldiers, but only barely. The only one of his companions who might not understand Caleb's feelings towards Thraxus

was the dark-haired and dark-eyed Time Councilor Romana Vorishcenko ne Usckios. But then, it had been Romana who used her temporal manipulating powers to recover the antidote which saved Caleb from Thraxus' poison.

Thraxus and a stoutly built Dwarf in battle-leathers led the charge down the smoothly sloping corridor. The Elves lived in the trees that covered their world; inside them, in fact, growing passages and rooms with magic. It was fascinating and wonderful and enchanting, and Caleb wished he had time to appreciate it. But if they did not hurry, the verdant forests that covered Alfheim would turn to ash. Quajinn Huo would see to that.

Caleb swallowed a curse. Allowing Thraxus to go free – worse, allying with the immortal from Phase World – was ridiculously easy when Caleb reminded himself that he was doing so to ensure the defeat and apprehension of a villain much worse than Thraxus could ever hope to be. While Thraxus had intrigued to kill Caleb, he had at least failed in his attempt to murder a Cosmo-Knight. Not so Quajinn Huo. On Malthus' World, Huo's magic slew Lothar of Motherhome, Caleb's mentor and friend. Caleb had been looking for Huo ever since, but only recently had he learned that Huo evaded capture by escaping into the past.

Now he had a chance to put things right. He would not fail.

The corridor ended in a broad doorway that dumped the racing sextet onto one of the massive, boulevard wide branches of the great tree. Thraxus and his Dwarven attendant slowed to a jog. Caleb and his people matched their pace. On this level of the great tree, the Elves had grown wide platforms along the branch, large enough and strong enough to withhold the considerable weight of spacecraft. Even as they raced across the branch, Caleb saw light fighters lifting off and surging into the sky, knifing through the air and heading into the upper atmosphere.

On the level beneath them, Gryphons and more advanced transport modules ferried Elven civilians towards designated evacuation points. Bursts of light half-seen through the forest canopy could only be dimensional Rifts opening to safety. Caleb saw men and women and children, whole families, crammed into the modules or clinging for dear life on the feathered backs of Gryphons. The Elves looked serious, but none showed fear or panic. They trusted their leaders to ensure they were kept safe.

And the Elven leaders trusted Caleb to do the job.

The Knight returned his attention to Thraxus. The immortal and his Dwarven attendant had stopped before a large vessel that looked more like a 19th century Earth submarine than a starship from the Three Galaxies. It was cigar-shaped, black as midnight, and rust red rivets showed along its chassis where metal plates had been welded to the ship's frame.

Thraxus looked askance at Caleb and his friends. "We can spare a shuttle for you," he said. "I just hope you know what you're doing."

So do I, Caleb thought to himself. “The flagship is the key,” he said aloud. “If we can get aboard it, we can end this thing before too many innocent people get hurt.”

“That’s the trick, isn’t it?” Thraxus said. “I hope for your sake the Forge is paying close attention to you. You’ll need all the divine intervention you can get.”

Caleb grinned, an expression lost behind the t-shaped visor of his helmet. “Not with you covering us, Thraxus.”

Thraxus was about to reply, but the Dwarf started talking to him in something other than Trade-4. Caleb couldn’t understand a word. “I understand,” Thraxus told the Dwarf. He turned to Caleb. “Stefrick here will show you to the ship. I’m needed in the air. Good luck.” With that, the immortal clambered up onto the ship’s hull and through an airlock. As soon as he was aboard, previously invisible markings appeared upon the ship, brightly glowing runes that traced along the entire craft’s length. Without a sound, the frigate lifted off the landing pad and began a slow but steady ascent into the sky.

The Dwarf was already beckoning Caleb and his friends to follow him. “Lead on, Stefrick,” Arwen suggested. The Dwarf nodded and hurried further along the branch, his charges in tow.

They stopped at one of the smaller pads, upon which sat a sleek, snub-nosed shuttle craft with a mirror-polished finish. One look, and Caleb knew that this ship was the Thunderbird of the Three Galaxies. Clearly it was built for speed and power and it looked mighty sharp to boot.

“Lord Thraxus’ personal craft,” Stefrick explained. “Don’t damage it.”

“Be assured, we shall be extra careful,” Joriel said with a savage grin that belied his words.

The foursome left Stefrick standing on the launch pad and hurried into Thraxus’ ship. It was definitely built for speed; most of the ship was engine, and the cockpit was packed tight with the four of them. Caleb dropped into the driver’s seat and looked over the controls. Nothing terribly complicated, he decided, and began to power up the ship. “Romana, Arwen,” he said, “see if you can find some vac-suits. We’re probably going to go extra-vehicular on this one.”

Romana arched an eyebrow, but Arwen hurried to comply, popping open panels and checking compartments until she found what she was looking for, two matte black flight suits with seals and helmets. In a pinch they would serve as mega-armor, but their primary use was for protection from vacuum. Caleb waited until Arwen and Romana began to put the suits on before he fired up the engines and pointed the ship’s nose towards the sky.

Caleb put all the available power on the shields and ignored the two laser cannons and the single mini-missile bank. As Alfheim dropped behind them and the stars appeared before them, Caleb spared a glance at his passengers. “Fasten your seatbelts, kids. It’s going to be a bumpy ride.”

Aboard the command deck of the Draconid ship *Strabo*, the mad magician Quajinn Huo leaned heavily upon his staff. On his left wrist dangled the Singularity Watch. Beneath its cracked and clouded face was contained the seething power of a Black Hole, and all that power was at Huo's command. Within his spindly frame, clothed in a crimson kimono and covered in electric blue scales, seethed power of a different sort, enough raw magical energy to power a star. Quajinn Huo was the greatest wizard of his age – or any age, now that he had the Watch – and though his physical strength was not what it once was, his magical abilities were at their peak.

Commander Krang stood beside Huo, resplendent in his battle armor, both hands folded behind his back. Around them bustled the troops and staff of the *Strabo*, while the alarm klaxons rang and the dreadnought's cannons and torpedo banks came online. On the viewscreen shimmered the green and blue planet Alfheim. Bright lights on the screen's upper left hand corner kept track of the rest of Huo's fleet: three hundred Draconid frigates, a dozen Cobra class cruisers, and the thousands of fighters launching from the frigates' docking bays.

"We slipped past their defenses with little trouble, my Lord," Krang said. "Now Alfheim will become a pyre, and the Elven worlds will be added to your growing empire."

The fleet had "slipped past" the Elven defenses due entirely to Huo and the Watch. A minor application of the Watch's temporal manipulating abilities had seen fit to accelerate the passage of the ships through space, too fast for normal tracking systems to notice them. But it would be the massed might of Krang's ships that burned Alfheim and drove King Silverlight to his knees, so Huo did not reprimand Krang. The Commander was arrogant, but he was also as loyal as a dog. Krang, like all of Huo's troops, had been raised within a time bubble summoned up by the Watch, and Krang had known and loved his master Huo for the entirety of his life.

The fleet was built similarly. No one in the UWW had even been aware of the fleet's existence until it had first thundered out of the Draconid Hub worlds, guns blazing.

"What kind of resistance can we expect?" Huo asked Krang.

The Commander's yellow eyes surveyed the screen perfunctorily. "Not much, my Lord. A handful of Dwarven Iron Ships. A few Arcane patrol boats, one of the laughably simple Minotaur ships, and assorted freighter-craft. I should expect some Shadow Bolt fighters, as well. We'll be landing within the hour, my Lord."

Yes, Krang was exceedingly arrogant. But he meant what he said. Huo had no doubt of victory, but he did not discount the Elves as readily as his second-in-command. The Elves were skilled wizards, and they would have defenses aplenty, if none so brazen as a fleet of starships.

“Begin the attack,” Huo ordered. He turned and walked across the deck to the throne that sat in the middle of the room. Huo eased himself into the chair and prepared for the coming battle. The Watch on his wrist began to glow with a silver light.

The shuttle’s engines thrummed as Caleb pushed them to their limits.

“Are you certain you know how to fly this thing?” Joriel grumbled from the back seat.

“Nag, nag, nag,” Caleb retorted. “I have cosmic awareness. I’m a natural pilot.”

At that moment the ship breached Alfheim’s atmosphere and exploded into space. Blackness closed in around them through the shuttle’s windows, but it was suddenly split with laser fire. Energy bolts skimmed across the shuttle’s shields and the craft shook from the impact.

A dozen green fighters, shaped like pterodactyls, closed in on the shuttle, cannons firing. “Hmph,” Joriel said. “I recognize the make. Wyvern class fighters. Antiques. They’re fast but brittle.”

Romana turned in the navigator’s chair to look at the Celestine with a worried expression. “They aren’t antiques in this era, Joriel. They’re not exactly cutting edge tech, either, but they’re more than a match for this ship.”

“I doubt that,” Caleb said, tightening his grip on the controls and buzzing through the squadron of Wyvern ships. The radar showed them breaking and looping around to follow the shuttle. Even as they did, another thirty red dots appeared on the screen as more fighters closed on Thraxus’ ship.

Caleb rolled, and laser blasts cut through space where the shuttle had just stood. He revved the throttle and forced the shuttle up to its top speed. The ship groaned at the stress, but it blasted through the cloud of Wyverns like a greased eel. Laser blasts lanced across the shuttle’s hull, but the shields held.

Thousands more fighter craft filled nearby space. Most of them dropped into Alfheim’s atmosphere, but dozens of squadrons looped towards the shuttle and the defenders of Alfheim. Thraxus’ eight Dwarven Iron Ships rose ponderously through the vacuum, guns blazing and runes shimmering brightly as they engaged the enemy. Wyverns exploded in bright bursts of light, but there were a lot of them, and Thraxus had no hope of defeating them all. Laser light, bright reds and yellows and blues, sizzled through space, illuminating the endless night with eerie color.

Beyond the formidable numbers of fighter craft, three hundred Draconid frigates floated serenely in space, waiting for their turn. And in the midst of them all was the massive gray-green bulk of the Beowulf class dreadnought that served Huo’s fleet as the flagship. The ship itself was shaped like a gigantic dragon, with a great horned head and wing-shaped ailerons. Compared

to the dreadnought's frightening bulk, the shuttle was the size of a sliver, and about as threatening.

Caleb grimaced as a volley of missiles was added to the laser fire battering at his shields. Caleb juked and rolled, but there were a lot of Wyverns, and it was impossible to evade the field of fire they could lay down. The shuttle's shields were dropping quickly, and the dreadnought was still far away.

Suddenly there came a flash of light, followed quickly by a rumble of thunder that all four of them heard despite the emptiness of space and the thick walls of the shuttle. In the midst of the whirling swarm of Wyverns materialized a chariot, drawn by the two biggest and meanest goats Caleb had ever seen. Holding the chariot's reigns was a giant of a man with flaming red hair and beard, and in one massive gauntlet he held a gigantic hammer that flashed with lightning.

"Thor," Romana breathed.

"Who?" Caleb asked. He looked away from the new arrival to concentrate on his flying, and just barely evaded crashing into an enemy fighter.

"Thor," Romana said, "the Asgardian god of thunder and lightning. I'd always heard that the Elves of the UWW originally came from Asgard, but I never really believed it."

Caleb allowed himself one more look out the window at the chariot. The giant threw his hammer, and with another flash of lightning and crash of thunder, the weapon destroyed three of the Draconid fighters. The small craft wheeled and sent arcs of laser light at the giant and his chariot, but the Draconid attack splattered harmlessly against walls of magical force.

As far as Caleb was concerned, there had only ever been one God, but he was certainly grateful to this Thor fellow, whomever he might be. The Draconids were still bearing down on Thraxus' shuttle, but not as heavily as they were a moment before. Caleb saw his chance and he took it. He throttled the engines and shot forward at full speed, trusting his enhanced senses and preternatural reflexes to keep them safe as the shuttle surged towards the dreadnought. The ship groaned around them at the stress Caleb forced upon it, and the control panel lit up with warning lights.

The shuttle slipped through the cordon of Wyverns, and for a moment, Caleb felt as though he were hot-rodding across the Arizona desert once more. He looped around the frigates, dodging laser fire with a mixture of skill and insane luck, and flew in close to the dreadnought. Almost casually, the guns on the dreadnought began to fire on the shuttle, a giant reaching out to crush a fly. Caleb grinned behind his helmet and buzzed in low, almost scraping the dreadnought's hull. The shields were on their last legs – another volley of laser fire would puncture them.

"Helmets, ladies," Caleb said through gritted teeth. "It's about time to go ee-vee-ay." Romana clipped her helmet over her head, and the shuttle lurched under a concentrated blast from the dreadnought's cannons. The shields col-

lapsed. The control panel sparked and Caleb felt the control stick shudder under his hands. “Joriel, blow the air lock,” Caleb said.

“You’re mad,” the Celestine said, but there was a note of admiration in his voice. His heavy body lurched in the small cabin and he struck the airlock release panel with his fist. The outside panel blew off and flashed away to clatter soundlessly against the dreadnought’s hull. Joriel was sucked out into the vacuum along with it, but he was smiling as he went. Caleb hit the release on his seatbelt and gestured for Romana and Arwen to do the same. They had seconds before the shuttle was either vaporized or smashed into the larger ship. He grabbed each of the women by the elbows and flew them out the airlock.

As they flew away, the shuttle, now rudderless, wobbled in close to the dreadnought and scraped against it, coming apart in a silent explosion.

“Was that, or was that not our ride out of here?” Arwen grumbled over the comm.

“Romana said it herself,” Caleb told her, “the watch is our ticket home.”

“Besides,” chimed in Joriel, swooping towards them with his wings outstretched, “with the ship destroyed, the dreadnought’s systems should just see us as debris.”

“Right,” Caleb agreed. “Now let’s find ourselves a way onboard this crate.”

“I see a maintenance airlock from here,” Romana said. Caleb followed her pointing finger. He grinned beneath his helmet once more.

“The rogue ship is destroyed,” Commander Krang reported.

Quajinn Huo grunted. He had a bad feeling about that small shuttle. It had gotten entirely too far across the battlefield before being destroyed. The pilot had to have been either insane or lucky or both, and something about it had triggered all of Quajinn’s internal alarms. He felt considerable relief now that it was gone.

The biggest threat was that mad Asgardian mowing down his fighters out there in the midst of the conflict. Huo had expected the Elves to have formidable magical defenses of some kind, but he had not expected Silverlight to summon up a god to fight on Alfheim’s behalf. The little shuttle was irrelevant, the Dwarven warships were irrelevant, Silverlight and all his Elves were irrelevant compared to Thor. Wherever he swung or threw that hammer of his, Draconids died.

Huo sighed. There was only one thing to do. Against Thor, his options were limited. Even the full power of the *Strabo* could not hope to stand long against the Asgardian, let alone the lighter and more vulnerable Wyvern fighters. But the Singularity Watch could check Thor, could make him vul-

nerable to the *Strabo's* heavy cannons. Perhaps not enough damage to kill the immortal, but certainly enough to force his retreat.

"Commander," Huo barked. "Bring us in closer." The Watch was powerful, but it had such a limited range, especially where attack was concerned.

"My Lord," Krang said, clearly puzzled, "are you certain that's wise?"

Huo's yellow eyes flashed dangerously. "Are you questioning me, Krang?"

The Draconid quickly wilted. "Of course not, Lord Huo." He turned to the helmsman and gave the order. The *Strabo* advanced. Her guns found targets and began to fire.

Something nagged at the back of Huo's mind as the *Strabo* moved forward. He forced himself to ignore it, and focused instead on the task at hand. One misstep with Thor could prove disastrous.

When they first stepped through the airlock into the dreadnought's interior, a pair of curious Draconid soldiers had been waiting for them, handguns at the ready. It took Arwen less than five seconds to put them both into a dreamless sleep.

"We can't fight the whole ship," Caleb said, standing over the unconscious guards.

"Watch me," Arwen said with a laugh.

"It's risky," Romana said, "but we may have no choice. I can use my magic to keep us hidden from prying eyes, but the use of it may alert the Watch, and thus Huo."

Joriel frowned. "I would prefer a straight fight to sneaking around."

"We don't have that luxury," Caleb decided. Which was why they were now creeping around the corridors of the ship like ghosts, somehow placed "out of phase" with local time. Most of the hallways were actually empty, as the crew were at battle stations and manning their posts, but a few security details still patrolled the halls. Looking for what, Caleb wasn't sure, but from the ominous mutterings the Draconids made into their comms in their slithering, raspy language, Caleb suspected someone had found the unconscious guards.

They were running out of time.

Caleb quashed that thought. If Huo was aware of them, somehow Caleb suspected he would know. He shook his head; every corridor looked the same, none of the passages or doorways showed much in the way of variation. And for all their assorted talents, neither he nor his companions knew their way around a Draconid dreadnought.

Then they turned a corner and found themselves facing a set of large and shiny double doors, flanked by two lounging guards with laser rifles. Caleb and Joriel shared a look, and a slow grin crossed the big Celestine's face. "Romana, if you would, drop the mask."

Romana raised an eyebrow but snapped a finger. Caleb didn't notice a change, but the sudden looks of alarm that crossed the Draconids' features told him that the spell was ended. Joriel stepped forward, cracked his knuckles, and looked prepared to do something incredibly violent when the ship shuddered warningly beneath their feet. The Draconid guards, startled, dropped their weapons and lurched down the corridor as quickly as they could move, babbling into their comms and obviously raising the alarm.

Joriel took one step in pursuit of the fleeing guards, but stopped as the ship shuddered again. "That wasn't laserfire," he said ominously. "Something hit the ship."

"Thor," Romana intoned. "Now would be a good time to save the day, with Huo distracted by the angry god just outside the ship."

"Good point," Caleb agreed. The time for subtlety had passed. A bar of red light appeared in his right hand, coalescing into a massive sledge hammer. He hefted it once, then heaved the hammer towards the gleaming double doors and grinned beneath his helmet as they buckled and split and fell inward. The hammer materialized once more in Caleb's hand and he flew through the gap, his friends close beside him. Joriel's blazer, a blue-white line of force that could carve through a spaceship's armored hull, flashed in his hands. A violet field of energy swirled around Arwen, and Romana stayed close to the monk and her shield.

The bridge looked up at the foursome in surprise and horror. A dozen Draconids spread across as many command stations stared slack-jawed at the intruders. Quajinn Huo stood in the middle of the room, his hands upraised, staff and Watch shining with eldritch light. Beside him stood a mean looking Draconid whose hand dropped quickly to the blaster at his side, an officer of some kind. Beyond them all loomed the view screen, upon which played out the battle in space. It looked to be going in Huo's favor. Most of the Dwarven ships were shattered or drifting, listless in the vacuum. Flares of light in Alfheim's gauzy atmosphere could only be ships landing, ready to attack the surface. Only the red-bearded Viking warrior Thor still raged against the invaders, but one of his goats was dead, and concentrated laser fire hammered against the giant's shields. The mighty warrior raised his hammer to let fly.

The Watch flashed and the giant stilled, frozen in space like a fly trapped in amber. The ship's guns continued to batter him, and it would be only a matter of time before he was destroyed.

Caleb would not let that happen. "Quajinn Huo, in the name of the Cosmic Forge I demand you surren—" The words caught in his throat, and his advance across the bridge was suddenly arrested. He didn't have to look around to know that his friends were similarly stopped.

Frozen. Stopped in Time, but still aware. Caleb had been counting on Romana's magic to counter the Singularity Watch, but he admitted ruefully to himself that she had not actually said she was capable of such an act.

“Fools,” Quajinn Huo spat. His sidekick had drawn his pistol finally, and pointed it warily at the four heroes. Huo walked towards them, leaning heavily on his staff. “Do you think I was entirely unaware of your presence on my ship? I am master of Time and Space, and your pathetic powers are no match for me.”

Caleb tried to lance the wizard with his eye beams, but even that was denied him.

“I remember you,” Huo continued, jabbing an angry claw at Caleb. “You’re one of Lothar’s lapdogs. A tiresome do-gooder, pawn of the vaunted Cosmic Forge. I’ve killed many Cosmo-Knights, pup. But one more notch on my staff would please me greatly.” The wizard gestured with the Watch, and suddenly Caleb’s time-locked body was wracked with horrible pain. He felt it twist and expand within him, racing through his bloodstream like molten lava, searing every nerve in his body. But he couldn’t thrash in agony. Huo’s spell even denied Caleb the ability to scream.

Huo grinned. “I think I’ll keep you around at least until Alfheim lies in ruins. I shall enjoy killing you... over time.”

Caleb willed his eye beams to fly forward and strike Huo down, but still nothing happened, and the pain drilled deeper and deeper into his body. The unvoiced scream echoed in his mind, on and on.

Then the great Draconid dreadnought shuddered once again, and alarm klaxons began to ring once more. The Draconid officer looked around in confusion. “My Lord,” he said to Huo, “we’re showing a dozen ships appearing behind and above us. They’re coming out of nowhere. More of them!”

“What?!” Huo demanded, looking away from his captives. “On screen!”

The view screen shifted away from Thor, still frozen and still being cut to ribbons by the *Strabo*’s cannons, to the aft view. For a moment, Caleb wasn’t sure what he was seeing. It appeared as though a mountain range had ripped itself free of its planetary moorings and now soared through space. But then runes flared brightly, and Caleb realized that he was looking at Dwarven warships. Balls of fire and bolts of lightning flashed from the mountain-ships and crashed against the Draconid dreadnought.

“We’re being hailed,” one of the techs said from his station.

“On screen,” the officer snapped.

Thraxus’ grinning face appeared on the screen. “Greetings, Quajinn Huo,” he said. “By now I hope you’ve realized you’ve bitten off more than you can chew this time. Alfheim and the United Worlds of Warlock are under my personal protection, and I’m afraid your little coup is bad for business.”

Huo’s electric blue face turned purple with rage. “I’ll go back to the dawn of time to kill you,” he roared at Thraxus, “you arrogant, backstabbing...”

Caleb couldn’t help grinning. He hated Thraxus nearly as much as he hated Huo, but he was glad to see the pasty-faced immortal, as glad as he’d ever been in his life.

He was grinning.

The pain was gone.

Caleb laughed out loud, and for a split second, Quajinn Huo realized his mistake. With a look of horror, the wizard spun towards the Cosmo-Knight, raising his left claw and preparing to use the Watch once more. But Caleb's eye beams were already flashing across the bridge, and with a sizzling flash Quajinn Huo's left forearm flopped to the floor, grasping weakly at the air.

Then everything seemed to happen at once. The Draconid officer fired his pistol, but Joriel was there to deflect the beam with his blazer, and with one swift stroke he cut the officer down. The techs leapt from their seats in a desperate effort to defend themselves, but Arwen was an amethyst blur, faster than the eye could follow and strong enough to defeat beings with skin hard as steel using only her fists and feet.

Caleb flew across the bridge at Quajinn Huo. The wizard raised his staff and his yellow eyes flashed, but Caleb's hammer knocked the staff out of Huo's hand, and his shoulder slammed into the wizard's chest. Huo flopped to the floor and bounced. Lightning erupted from Huo's raised claw, burning through Caleb's chest and out through his limbs. He felt blood fill his mouth as one of his teeth exploded, shredding the roof of his mouth and cutting his tongue. Caleb didn't slow. He'd taken worse punishment before.

Caleb planted a boot across Huo's neck and pressed his full weight down upon it. Huo's eyes bugged out of their sockets and his mouth opened, pink tongue lashing at the air. A thin, reedy croak loosed from his throat, and a dozen hostile spells went off, slamming into and through Caleb with all the strength and rage Huo could muster. Caleb's armor cracked, melted, broke apart. His flesh tore and burned and blood dimmed his eyes. He pressed down harder on Huo's neck and swung his hammer at the wizard's head. Finally the fireworks came to a stop and Huo's head slumped backward. Unconscious or dead, Caleb wasn't sure. Not that he cared overmuch either way.

Caleb dropped to his knees beside the wizard and spat blood.

Romana knelt down beside him. She had the Singularity Watch in one hand, and she put the other on Caleb's shoulder to steady him. A look of horror constricted her pretty features. "I didn't save you just to let you kill yourself," she said sharply.

But his body was already repairing itself. Slowly but surely, the gifts of the Forge were undoing all the damage Huo had just inflicted.

Joriel stood at the comm station and tried to hail Thraxus. Arwen moved rapidly to the ruined doors and prepared to guard against any attack from within the ship. The dreadnought shook under the barrage from the Dwarven ships, and the familiar pounding of Thor's hammer had resumed as well. The giant was free of Huo's spell as well, and judging by the ferocity of his attack, he was very, very angry.

“It’s no use,” Joriel muttered. “I cut through the panel by accident. We’ll have to fight our way to the escape pods, I suppose. Hopefully this crate will last long enough for us to make them.”

Arwen shot a wicked grin over her shoulder. “If there are any left. There are a lot of troops left on this ship who know where the escape pods are located.”

“Unnecessary,” Romana said. “I told you that the Watch was our way home. We have that now. There’s no reason to linger.” Caleb tried to say something, but his tongue was still a ruin, and all he managed was a burble. Romana patted him reassuringly. “Everyone get close.”

Joriel moved in, and Arwen jogged back to where Caleb, Romana and the unconscious body of Quajinn Huo lay. “We can’t,” Caleb finally managed to spit out, “we can’t leave Huo here.”

Romana nodded. “We’re not going to. Everyone grab hold of me.” Joriel’s huge paw dropped across Romana’s shoulder, and Arwen looped an arm through Romana’s. The time councillor raised the Watch and pressed a button on its side. The cracked facade flashed and then everything went silver.

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