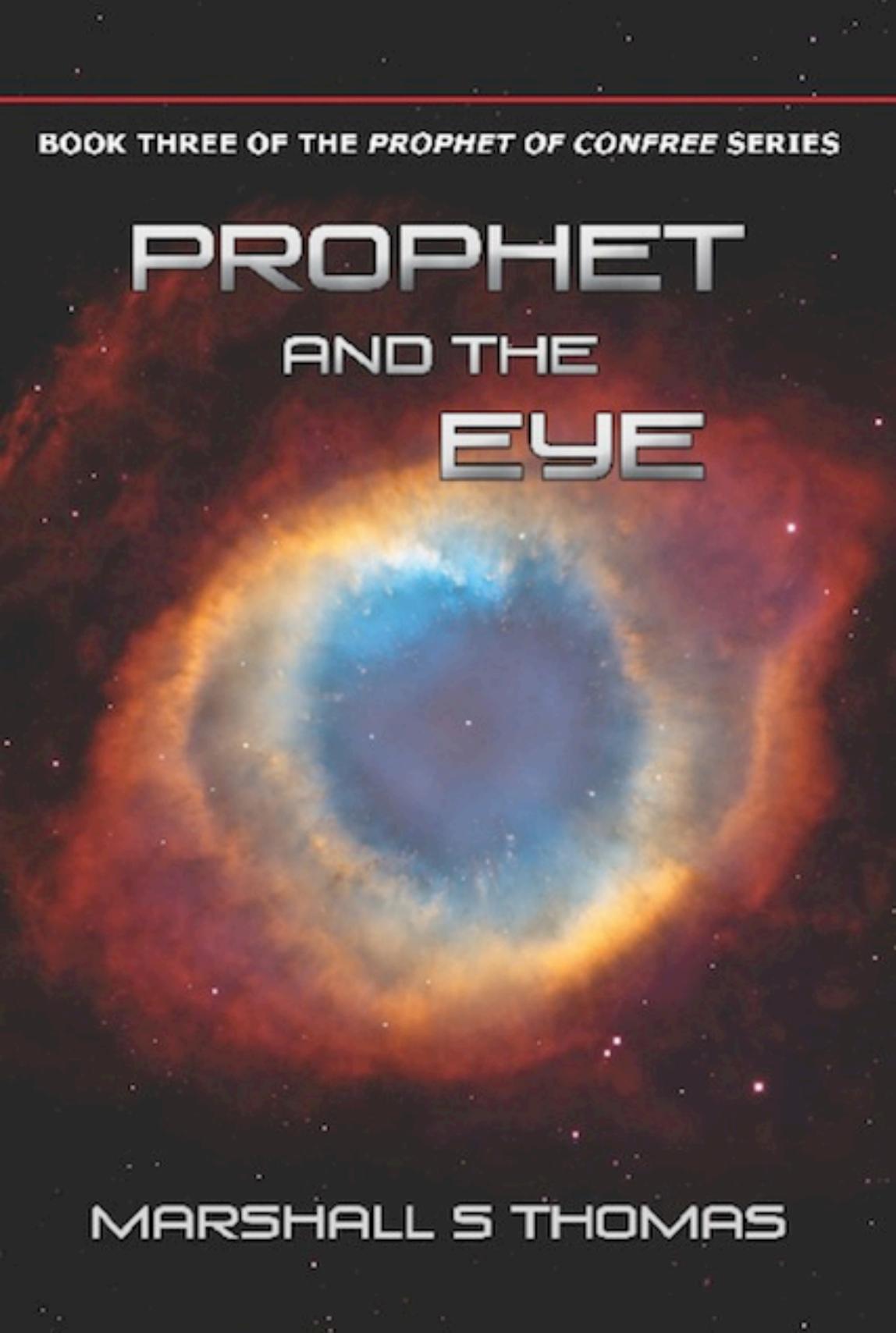
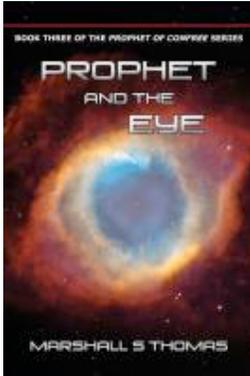


BOOK THREE OF THE *PROPHET OF CONFEE* SERIES

PROPHET AND THE EYE



MARSHALL S THOMAS



Can the Gods read the future? Maybe not, but Delta Research can. We are nine young immortals, recently returned from the dead - with a little help from Dimension X. We struggle with the awesome, alien powers of the Eye to foresee the fate of the galaxy. Our enemies swarm, secret armies from secret dimensions. We see the end of our civilization. But the ConFree Legion is going to go down fighting...

Prophet and the Eye

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Prophet and the Eye

Marshall S Thomas

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PART I

OPEN EYES



*The distinction between the past, present
and future is only a stubbornly persistent illusion.*

Albert Einstein

Prologue

Heartbeats

Honeyhair peered anxiously through the E's laser sight, focusing all her attention on the murky scene before her. It was dark, it was raining, it was very hard to see what was out there. It was icy cold, but she was sweating. Her heart pounded. She could have sworn something had moved, just a little twitch, way way out there. She was standing in the rain, the E's stock jammed against her shoulder.

There! Movement, a shadow in a sheet of rain. Outlined for a mere frac by the E's darksight. A black helmet, a crouching form, creeping forward, slithering like a snake, rain pattering off dark armor. A quick glimpse of a plasma battle rifle. Demon! Her adrenalin activated, an icy burst right into her heart. She was almost frozen with fear but she gently caressed the trigger. A quick burst of three xmax rounds erupted on target, a blinding hot phospho burst, a deafening triple bang, tracer shrapnel crackling and ripping through the dark.

Honeyhair stood, gasping, sights still on the target area. Movement! Something ran right across her field of fire, too fast to identify. Honeyhair targeted the runner and her finger slowly settled on the trigger. The E would handle the angles, impacting right on the target. Suddenly the target was visible – a little girl, human, in a torn skirt, running frantically through the night. Honeyhair released her grip on the E instantly, in shock, and the weapon fell to her chest, held by the sling. Her heart pounded and

she was shaking violently. Deadman! Oh my God! She felt light-headed, dizzy, ready to drop.

"Blondie!" she cried out. "Break, break!"

"What?" Blondie replied. "Something wrong?" She was two lanes over from Honeyhair in the indoor holo range in the basement of Delta Research. As Blondie terminated the scenario the lights slowly came on, the images down range faded away and the rain stopped.

"I killed a Demon," Honeyhair reported. "And then I almost killed a schoolgirl. Oh my God, it was so realistic! I could see her face. She was terrified! Running for her life. And I was just about to blast her, anxious for another kill."

"But you didn't."

"No. Thank God."

"It was just a holo image."

"But she could have been real."

"Well, that's why we're doing this. Shooting at bullseye targets is not quite like gunning down living beings – as you just discovered." Blondie was a petite little strawberry blonde, lightly freckled, slender and shapely.

"Let's take a break," Honeyhair said.

"No, we have to finish the scenario. Sounds like you're doing all right. No need to feel bad. I almost shot down a wounded Legion soldier."

"I can't. I can't! I'm shaking like a leaf. Come here. Please." It was late. There were only the two of them in the firing range. Blondie put down her E, approached Honeyhair and embraced her. Honeyhair was taller than Blondie, slim and sensual, with soft honey-colored hair brushing her shoulders.

They stood there for awhile, embracing, cheek to cheek, as the past flowed gently around them. Honeyhair's eyes were closed. Her heartbeat was soon back to normal.

"You all right?" Blondie asked.

"I don't know what I'd do without you, Trina," Honeyhair said. "Don't ever leave me."

"What are you worried about? Nitro and I are not going anywhere."

"I *am* worried. Very worried. And this battle scenario doesn't help any."

"It's just to ensure we're in top form, if anything unexpected happens. So we won't end up gunning down schoolgirls, or whatever."

"Well, what do they expect will happen? We're right here in Quaba. We're not soldiers, we're civilians. What could happen?"

"It's just a scenario, to sharpen up the reserves. They're not expecting anything."

"I'm worried. I've got a bad feeling."

"About what?"

"About the future. I don't know what it is – but it's something evil. Something awful. I've been having these dreams. I can never remember them, but they are terrifying. I wake up soaked in sweat. There's something out there, something horrible, something we can't resist, and it's going to be coming after us."

"Let our men worry about the future. That's what they do." Blondie was playing absently with Honeyhair's silky hair.

"We shouldn't talk about that."

"No," Blondie said. "But I agree with you that we've got to keep an eye on what's going on. We've discussed this before. We have to shape the future – not Nitro and Prophet. What the hell do they know? They're just men. They'll go charging off to their deaths without a thought. I don't care what they see in the future. I can see the future as well, and I don't need a DX brain to do it."

"I think something terrible is going to happen."

"Maybe. But we have to fight it, once we know what it is. They're just like children. We have to be strong, we have to insist they do what we say. Otherwise, they might try to tell us what to do."

And that is sure as hell not going to happen, right? We're in charge, not them."

"Absolutely," Honeyhair said with a weak smile.

"Good. Gimme a kiss." They kissed, a deep, tender kiss, just like the past, when they were heart to heart and soul to soul, terrorizing the male community.

"You're so hot," Blondie said. "Nitro and Prophet are lucky to have us. All right, let's get back to killing Demons. And be careful about those schoolgirls."

Chapter 1

The Bubble

I was completely relaxed, my eyes closed, every muscle in my body at rest, as I lay there in that criminally comfortable airchair, content. The DX helmet encased my head and the top part of my face. A cup of hot dox was within easy reach. I didn't even have to think, at that point. I was just waiting for the tendrils of time, the threads, to guide me to my selected target. What a wondrous profession. What a miracle. I was a Legion soldier, a young Outworlder, an immortal grunt. I belonged in the mud. I belonged in the grave. I'd already been killed once, and once was enough for me. But here I was, in Delta Research, in my own miraculous, spotless, impossible office cube, hurtling into the future, headed for enlightenment, illumination and truth. Who the hell was I, to be so privileged? I was just a soldier of the Legion, recently returned from the dead.

I let my eyelids flicker open. It was a dizzy ride, if you looked too long at that point. Just DX strands, millions and millions of them, faint colors shimmering and fading, to be replaced by millions of others as the separate strands all entangled together to link into possibilities – millions of possibilities – that combined to form the future – future events. It was clear by now that every time you looked, the future would be slightly different, as past and present events rushed onward and the millions of DX tendrils changed, and the future changed.

And that was our profession – reading the future, and changing it, later, if we did not like what we saw. That was the formula: $P=F$. Past equals Future. Present did not really exist; it was just a brief illusion as we continued the endless journey from past to future.

I was getting stronger – more fluent – as I learned how to read the future. Doctor Dimension was a genius, that was sure. And Delta Research was the perfect instrument – the only instrument – to accomplish the mission, which was to ensure a good future for the people of ConFree and their descendants.

I felt good about that mission. Very good.

Focus! Now the tendrils of time were rushing together, shimmering, glowing, roaring as the first sounds came through. My adrenalin activated. I looked at the ST coordinates. Perfect. I knew exactly what I had to see. I had seen it yesterday for the first time but had to back out, stunned. This time I was not going to back out. I was going to watch it.

In my helmet view I was dropping from the sky, through a dark rainy day on the planet Nirvana, falling gently towards the target. I was right on course, right on time. It was all there – still all there. A ragged long column of humans, men and women and children, trudging along a road. The line seemed endless and the marchers were clearly in distress. It was an aircar road, just a slick little guidance trail dotted with the occasional guideposts. No aircars were in sight but a major city could be seen dimly through sheets of rain. The human marchers were accompanied by strange exoseg creatures that were evidently guiding them on to the city. By then I knew what the creatures were called – Exoseg Neuroclone Vigorous. We did not know a lot about them except they claimed to be a refugee species from a world that had been destroyed by their enemies. But Nirvana was not their home. Nirvana was a human world, settled by Outworlders more than a hundred years ago. The Outworlders had been refugees too, when they settled the world.

They had been a strong, determined, fearless people, fleeing tyranny and slavery and determined not to let it happen again.

There were not too many of those exosegs, only five or six, guiding that long line of humans along the road. Nor did they appear to be armed. They were strange creatures, with a strong exoskeleton of black chitin that had a deep greenish tint. They were short, compared to humans – maybe two-thirds of the average human's height. The two powerful legs growing out of the lower thorax, just above the abdomen, had developed to make the creature bipedal. The upper thorax had two sets of legs that had developed into arms. The top set of arms were long and complex with numerous claw-fingers for grasping and detail work, and an encased, natural chitin slicing tool that snapped out of their forearms when needed. I had seen it at work. It was razor sharp and quite deadly. The lower set of arms was tipped by massive claws that appeared to be useful for grasping and crushing. The creatures had a beetle-like head with antennae that normally lay flat against the back of their heads. They had creepy compound eyes like flies, with facets that reflected blue and green tints. The mouth was a chitin beak with tooth-like ridges. The shrunken vestigial wings on their back were no longer functional. They wore a rag-like cloth covering that was used mostly to support several pouches full of whatever it was they needed.

The most frightening thing about these creatures was that they were highly intelligent. More intelligent than humans, it seemed. That was about all I had learned about them from available data. Now I had to find out what was happening on this planet. The events I was observing represented the future, some eighty stellar years into the future. This was destined to happen, unless things changed.

The rain continued. The humans trudged forward, clearly miserable, families sticking close together. Then the attacks started again. I had seen these the last time. The attackers came out of the

shadows, more exosegs in groups of two or three or four, rushing in to strike at the humans, screeching shrill cries, slashing at the humans with those deadly chitin knives fully extended from their forearms. Their targets appeared to be random. A tall male fell, spraying blood from a gaping neck wound that was clearly fatal. A woman screamed, her arm lopped off at the elbow. A toddler was snatched from his mother's arms and sliced in two, then thrown through the air as if in celebration.

The exosegs who had been accompanying the humans made no move to interfere with the attackers. They just urged the humans on. What the hell was this? There were thousands of humans, including plenty of grown males. They heavily outnumbered the exos, but they were strangely passive. Unarmed, yes, but even with their bare hands they should have been able to fight back, to prevail by sheer numbers. It didn't happen. I was furious, watching this needless tragedy unfold. Those were my people – Outworlders! What the hell was the matter with them?

The march proceeded through the suburbs of the city; residential cubes were visible through the rain. As one exoseg gang tired of their sport, another ragged group of exos would appear from the residential area, charging into the marching humans with abandon. The humans scattered, trying to escape but not resisting. The exo guards pushed the intruders aside when they could but seemed mostly intent on moving the humans along. A mother fell to her knees, shrieking in despair, grasping a little toddler who had been slashed open from neck to belly. An exoseg attacker jumped on her, punching his forearm chitin knife right through her chest.

There was not a damned thing I could do, except watch.

The march led into the city, into a great stockade surrounded with a laser fence that fried you if you brushed against it. The camp was full of naked humans who were waiting for something, shivering in the rain. As soon as the new detainees entered the site they were ordered to strip down to nothing, and males and females

and children were separated amidst howls of despair. Exoseg guards were scattered among them. They appeared to be unarmed. Weapons were apparently not necessary to handle these human creatures.

The rain slacked off. I had the view from above. The view was hazy. DX visions were always hazy. We were viewing possibilities, not reality. The crowd was facing a huge building that looked like some kind of old-time industrial plant. Tall chimneys blasted out dark, greasy smoke, staining the dark sky. A horrible stench evidently filled the air, although I could not smell it. The humans were covering their noses and mouths, looking fearfully towards the building. It must have been clear even to them what was coming. It sure was clear to me. I knew all about genocide, because the Confederation of Free Worlds was founded to counter genocide. I also knew about autogenocide. I suspected that was at play here, but I needed more information.

Two huge metal doors slowly slid open in the front of the building, screeching in protest. The prisoners watched as if hypnotized. I decided to back out again. I could only take so much of this at one time. I'd come back tomorrow and learn more.

△

I left my cube and sought shelter in Bubbie's Lounge. It was a snack bar and lounge combo located just a short stroll from our office cubes, inside the Bubble. I guess that's why we called it Bubbie's lounge. There was no human help, just an autoserve robot that we had started calling Bubbie. Arie was sitting alone at a table off to one side, enjoying the view from a spectacular simport. The Bubble was completely sealed, of course. It had no windows. It wasn't really a bubble but it was on the third floor of Delta Research, and this section was cosmic secret. We didn't want either dust motes or eyemotes getting in.

"Arie," I said. "How are you?"

"Hey, Prophet. I'm fine!" He gave me a big smile. "Life is good!" He raised a glass of ice water in greeting. I ordered a dox and popped open the top. Arie was in his formal blacks. So was I. The Prof insisted on it – Legion black was our duty uniform.

"You must have a good assignment," I said.

"Well, I do, Prophet. You look kind of grim, though. What have they got you doing?" Arie was my buddy. We had met on the day we enlisted in the Legion and hadn't separated since then. He was a little guy but a first-class athlete. He was a contact master. If he decided he didn't like you, he'd kick you right in the head.

We had both been killed in action on Vulcan, the same day, the same place, the same action. Dead as hell. And Bees had brought us both back to life. Bees was another Delta vet. Delta Research was an exceptional Legion unit, and Bees was more exceptional than most.

"Yeah," I said, savoring that warm, bubbling dox. "It was one of those random targets that the Prof asked me to follow up on. Awful stuff, I don't even want to think about it anymore."

"Well, I guess I'm lucky. You won't believe it. The Prof asked me to look at Angaroth, near-term. Ten years, he said. Just look around. In view of what you and I had seen there, I was really curious."

"No wonder. In view of the past, the future did not look very promising." Arie and I had been assigned to the occupation forces on Angaroth in the wake of the Vulcan campaign. Angaroth was one of the major worlds of the former Gulf Stellar Commune and before that had been the capital of the Pegal Stelcom, one of the most poisonous political regimes in the history of the galaxy.

"You remember Phoenix at night – they didn't even have electricity," Arie said. Phoenix was the new name the Legion had chosen for Angaroth's capital city. We had never actually attacked them, but we took out most of the power as part of our blockade, and that shut down a lot of activity. Arie and I had witnessed the new government installed by the natives in the wake of our victory in Vulcan and our overthrow of the criminal slave state

governments of the Stellar Commune. We were both hopeful for the future of those formerly enslaved peoples.

"So what were your impressions?" I asked him.

"You won't believe it! Angaroth was booming! Phoenix was lit up like a megalopolis! The whole city was flooded with aircars, thousands of them – it never stops! The starport was busy all day and night. Everybody seemed to own an aircar and there were so many heavy haulers, the traffic was getting all screwed up. The city was full of restaurants, and they were full of prosperous people. But mostly – industry! Factories, popping up like mushrooms. Huge industrial parks. Mobs of workers reporting to work. High-end shops lining the streets. The industry churning out goods, a lot for interstellar export. Remember the bread lines? Ha! They're buying luxury goods from all over the galaxy now. And many of those industrial ventures have got very familiar names – ConFree companies! They've embraced foreign investment."

"That's really amazing," I said. "That's just great! But don't get confused, Arie. You were looking into the future, using the past tense, and then the present tense."

"Come on, Prophet, I'm telling you the place has been transformed and you're quibbling over the tense? Who cares?"

"I agree it's wonderful. But it hasn't happened yet. You know we're not even supposed to be discussing this. But what's your follow-up?"

"I'm going to go back to just a few years into the future and focus on the decision-makers – the government – and see how they did it."

"I know how they did it. They followed our advice. But that's great, Arie. I'm glad you're enjoying your work." Arie and I were both DX prophets. That meant we had DX neural structures growing in our brains. DX is Dimension X – and you can't pick that up at a hardware store. You get it from being killed, or getting seriously wounded, and being brought back to life or full recovery by a

Bright, or someone who has Bright powers. Right now, the only humans who had Bright powers were members of Delta Research. No other humans in the galaxy could do what we could – for example, see the future. The Brights were aliens – and pretty much all-powerful.

Bees walked through the doorway. I knew instantly that she was upset. Bees was a lovely Cyrillian girl with black skin, soft dark hair and chocolate eyes. She was actually half Cyrillian and half Outworlder and looked like a fashion model. "Dox, Bubbie," she demanded. "Highlands Deep." She fell into a chair at our table. "Damn it!" she said. Bubbie came out from behind the counter with the dox and gently placed it before her. Bubbie was a sexless metal manikin with a silly fixed grin.

Bees ripped the top off the cup and took a quick shot of energy from the steaming dox.

"Good girls don't cuss," I advised her.

"Those medical people are driving me crazy!" she replied.

"Yeah, I don't like them much myself," I confessed.

"What have they got you doing?" Arie asked.

"Pushing the envelope, as usual. Testing our seriousness, I guess. They keep asking me to do things the Prof has already agreed we will not be asked to do. Like brainscans, pumping stuff into our bodies, sedating us, and a lot more crap like that. I don't know what's the matter with them. They just keep telling me how important it all is. I already know that. But I'm not going along with them. Then they send these snippy little memos to the Prof, claiming I am resisting the program. I'm sick of it."

"We're with you, Bees," I said. "We must all hang together, or we'll hang separately. As some famous revolutionary historical person said, I forget who. Except his country lasted a few hundred years before the people stopped hanging together and committed national suicide."

"Thank you for the historical commentary, Prophet. It does nothing to solve our problems with these white-coated baboons. You know what they asked me to do this morning?"

"Take off your clothes and pose for holos?" Arie asked with a smile.

"Shut down, Nitro," she said. Nitro was Arie's warname. "No, they had this little furry creature – some kind of hamster. They were going to kill it, and wanted me to revive it after it was dead. That made me absolutely furious! It was as if they looked at me as some kind of circus freak who could do bizarre things, and they wanted me to demonstrate it for them. I'm not a damned circus freak. And I don't bring dead hamsters back to life. I bring dead soldiers back to life. I bring my blood brothers and sisters back to life on the battlefield. Only it's not me – it's God! And it's not a damned circus trick, it's God reaching right down from Heaven, right into my soul, and guiding my heart and my hands, and when I'm in His power I can do anything, but it's not me, it's God, God himself! I'm just a vessel, a weak vessel, a temporary vessel for God. I brought you both back to life, both of you, only it wasn't me. Oh my God forgive me God. I'm sorry I'm so sorry." She reached out her hands for both of us and we each held one hand. Her eyes were swimming with tears. "That poor little hamster was looking up right at me," she choked. "I told them to go to Hell and I stormed out of the lab."

"Well, we're with you, Bees," Arie said. "How about we all refuse to participate further until they stop screwing around with us?"

"Why are you asking for forgiveness, Bees?" I asked. "I look on you as one of God's angels. You don't need forgiveness."

"It's just that I know how important the med program is. But I think they're going about it the wrong way. And I feel bad that I'm resisting them." She released our hands and dabbed at her eyes with a tissue.

"You should see the Prof, right away," I said.

"I will. I will."

The med program was a worry. They had added a whole new wing onto Delta Research just for the medical program. We spent about half our time with the medics. The idea was to learn how to bring dead troopers back to life on the battlefield. That was important, we all agreed – especially since five of us had been killed in action, and revived. The problem was that the task could only be done by either Brights or people who had DX in their brains. The Brights were aliens. So far there was only one human who had succeeded in reviving the dead, and that was Bees. It was no wonder the med folks were bothering her. We should all be theoretically able to raise the dead, all of us with DX brains, but even Bees did not know exactly how she had done it. She just did it. And the rest of us didn't even know where to start. But that didn't stop the lifies. They just kept poking at us, and asking endless questions.

I figured the best way to tackle this problem was to approach the Brights and ask their help. Prof agreed, but so far there had been delays. Probably security. Always security. They were driving us crazy too.

△

After work we'd often head up to Delta View, the dox shop on the roof of Delta Research. This was outside the bubble. Usually we'd spend the morning with the med folks, and the afternoons huddled in our cubes working on our separate projects, probing into the future. By the time 1800 rolled around, we were ready for a break.

"Ice water, please, Fred," I requested. Fred was our all-around chief janitor, handyman and bartender. He was a real person and a very nice one, too. I had helped him get his citizenship despite his low IQ, and he was always exceptionally nice to me.

"I put some lime juice in it, Sir," he said, serving me a frosty glass. He knew what I liked.

"Thank you, Fred." I was alone at a table, under a darkening sky. The air was brisk, with biting gusts of wind. Rainclouds covered the sky, blotting out Quaba's two suns. Invisible droplets of frosty dew tingled on my skin. I loved it here. Look at that sky! It was an extremist sky, and our extremist ancestors had embraced it, celebrated it, and dared anyone else to try and take it from us. ConFree was born in blood. But when it was over, the Outvac was ours, and we were a free people, free and united and strong.

I knew it only took a single generation for a civilization to go from freedom to slavery. I had vowed that was not going to happen on my watch.

"Hey, trooper! Wanna buy a girl a drink?" I looked up. It was Honeyhair and Blondie, evidently just off duty. Honeyhair was Delta's chief medic and Blondie was her chief nurse. Honeyhair was also my girl, my wife, my eternal love, my heart and soul. My heart still sped up every time I saw her. She was a tall, willowy honey with golden brown hair that had inspired her name. Blondie was her long-time gal pal. They had been through plenty of adventures before running into Arie and me on the starship that had been taking us to Legion basic training, about six years ago.

I stood up. "Welcome, ladies. I'll be happy to buy drinks for both of you."

"Where's Nitro?" Blondie asked. Blondie was Arie's wife, birth name Katrina, aka Trina. She was a dynamite little blonde and laser-sharp. Nobody could put one over on Blondie.

"Dunno. Lost in his work, I think. He seems happy with his current project."

"What's he doing?" Honeyhair asked.

"Uh, we'd better not say up here," I said.

"Yeah, sorry, I guess you're right," Honeyhair replied. The security types never stopped worrying, but they were right about keeping your mouth shut outside of the Bubble. Eyemotes could be anywhere. They were the size of a dust mote; you couldn't see them

but they sure as hell could see you – and hear you. Honeyhair and Blondie were not cleared in any case. They couldn't even enter the Bubble.

There were a whole lot of enemies out there who wanted to know what Delta Research was up to. What we were up to was astounding, amazing and revolutionary and we were not about to let the secret out. So we were pledged to silence outside the Bubble. The security types were bombarding us with memos and we were getting sick of it. But we understood.

A huge black wolf came charging out of the stairwell and made a beeline for our table. It would have been a terrifying event if we had not already been familiar with this particular canine. Blackie was Delta's mascot and definitely one of the team. He skidded to a stop by my side, gave my face a sloppy lick with his tongue and started happily sniffing up the others. Blackie was a stunningly beautiful wolf –thick, glossy black coat, clear grey eyes and a collar with the Legion cross on it. Blackie's capabilities were also cosmic secret. We were a pretty special bunch – even our mascot was highly classified. ConFree was spending millions to exploit the capabilities that Blackie had displayed and Delta had revealed.

Doggie showed up in Blackie's wake, as usual. Doggie had been Delta's squad leader when we had all initially joined the Legion, but now he was a Delta prophet the same as the rest of us. He lost a leg on Vulcan but the Brights had grown it back for him. It was an ongoing question whether Blackie was Doggie's dog, or Doggie was Blackie's human. Either way, they were pretty close.

"All right, gang, who's buying?" Doggie asked in his best gravelly voice. He was medium height, slim and wiry, close-cut brown hair and piercing grey eyes.

"Blackie said to put it on your tab," I replied.

"I'd hate to contradict Blackie," he said with a smile. "So load up, everybody. It's all on me."

A gust of icy wind sprayed us with needle-like specks of frost.

"I love this!" Honeyhair said, looking up at that dark sky.

"You seem real happy, Doggie," I said.

"Are you kidding? I love it here! This is good duty."

"The white coats are not annoying you?"

"Hey, they can ask questions all day and I'll happily answer. I'm warm and happy, I get all the rats I can eat, nobody is shooting at me and Quaba is teeming with young pretties who appear downright anxious to spend some time with someone as fascinating as me. This is paradise. What's not to like?"

"If you ever start to get serious about any of those young pretties," Blondie said, "don't forget to take advantage of the H&B YLSDS."

"H and B YLSDS? What the hell is that?"

"Oh, it's a free service that Honeyhair and I provide for Delta members who need our assistance," Blondie said. "It stands for Honeyhair and Blondie's Young Ladies Sincerity Detection Service. We examine the young lady in question to determine what kind of a girl she is and whether or not we want her to marry up with one of our comrades. By the time we get through with our targets, we know exactly where they're coming from. That's because Honeyhair used to be a complete phony and I used to be great at detecting complete phonies. I still am. Our two most recent successes are Mary and Christine. We certified them as completely sincere, and you know the happy result." Mary and Christine had recently married Bird and Smiley respectively, both Delta males, and I remembered well the enthusiasm with which Honeyhair and Blondie had conducted their investigations.

When Doggie stopped laughing, he replied, "Why, thank you, Blondie, but I don't think I need to sign up for your service. I have no intention of getting serious about anybody."

"Oh, there's no need to sign up. We provide this service whether you want it or not."

A great gust of freezing wind and rain pelted us, soaking us, blowing glasses off the table and prompting Blackie to leap up, howling wildly.

"Let's get indoors!" I suggested.

Δ

I entered the Bubble early the next morning to ensure I didn't miss the Prof's morning meeting. He had reminded everyone to show up without fail. The exterior Bubble door hissed open at my finger's touch and I stepped into a faintly-lit security cubicle. The door closed silently behind me. My ears popped, a blinding flash lit me up and a sizzling noise sounded briefly. Then the interior door popped open. The security portal had been recently installed. I wondered what these security measures were doing to my body, if anything. And I wondered how effective they were.

I walked down the hall to my cube, touched the DNA lock, and entered. I had always felt good in here before. It was a comfy little slice of the galaxy that belonged only to me. But lately my mind had been haunted with those grim visions from Nirvana. I no longer looked forward to work. I'd have to get this Nirvana mission done, resolved, fixed. Damned bugs! Who did they think they were? I had done some time-hopping, to see how things had developed – or were to develop – over time, and some things were clearer, but other things were still puzzling. It was infuriating. What was the matter with those Nirvana humans? I sat there, in my opschair, staring blindly out the simport at a light morning rain. I decided not to start in on Nirvana right yet. First I'd do the Prof's meeting. Maybe then I'd feel ready to tackle Nirvana again.

Δ

"Good morning, prophets," the Prof said as we found our way to our seats in the little conference vault. "It's a beautiful Quaba morning out there, isn't it?"

"YES SIR!" we all shouted enthusiastically. The Prof grinned and shook his head.

"Please don't do that anymore, boys and girls," he said from behind the lectern. We knew the Prof did not go in for military formalism, as he called it, and that's why we occasionally did the 'yes sir' routine. At first glance the Prof appeared to be a typical Legion trooper, but truth is he was anything but typical, with his slight physique, olive skin, black hair and dark eyes. He wore the combat cross and the blood badge on his blacks. He was completely moral, totally fearless, and consumed with the importance of doing the right thing. He was a brilliant and tireless warrior. Six years ago he had enlisted in the Legion, along with the rest of us, as a common trooper, even though he had a PhD. But by now he was a Brigadier General and entrusted with ConFree's most valuable secrets. He had earned that rank and that position. He was our maximum leader and he led from the heart. The man was simply amazing. I had no idea what race he was, but whatever it was, it produced superior people.

My ears popped, which meant that the room was sealed – a bubble within a bubble. More security crap. We were getting used to it. Everybody had showed up – Doggie, Scout, Saka, Ice, Smiley, me, Arie and Bees. The Prof was our ninth prophet. And this entire installation was set up to exploit our talents. Doctor Dimension was up there on the dais with the Prof and somebody else I did not recognize, a youngish-looking trooper in Legion black.

"I hope everyone is settling in to the various tasks to which you have been assigned," the Prof said. "This is kind of like the shake-down period of a new starship. Right now we are doing things at random, just so you can all develop experience in working with the Eye. If you run into trouble I will expect you to come immediately to either Doc D or me. What you are doing is of the highest importance to the future of our civilization, and I know you all recognize that. Call for help if you need it. Four of you are experienced prophets

who have produced visions of the future without the benefit of this amazing new technology that Doctor Dimension has devised for us. Five of us – including me – have not done that on our own but with the new technology it may not prove necessary. Either way we are all united, we are all qualified and are all learning the new technology."

Doctor Dimension gave us a goofy smile from his seat up on the dais. He was a weird bird, that was certain, tall and lanky with dark eyes and tangled shoulder-length dark hair. He was a civilian scientist and wore civvies. When I first saw him, I thought him almost comical but he was a damned genius. He'd penetrated the deepest secrets of the Demon saucers' DX drive and later went on to probe Dimension X itself. It proved to be the secret of reading the future. He'd discovered and exploited the twisted loops of DX time strands that formed the future, and allowed us to read it. He did all that without possessing any DX in his brain. It was a remarkable achievement.

"I want to give you a rough idea of what we'll be doing once we gain enough experience to focus in on the official program," the Prof said. "The objective is to read the future – that is, where current trends are taking us. Once we successfully do that, we will submit very highly classified reports to the very highest levels of ConFree. These reports will not reveal how the information was obtained but will be entitled 'current trends' or something similar. We will also make suggestions about actions that might be taken if we decide that the current trends do not lead to a desirable result. However, that's not our call."

"Who gets to see our production?" Bees asked.

"That has yet to be decided, Bees. But it will be a very exclusive audience. Now, the big picture is, we are going to have four tiers of targets. First tier, ConFree, the Darks, the Demons, the O's and the Brights. These are our most important targets."

"ConFree!" Ice leaped to her feet. "Why are we targeting ConFree? And why is ConFree listed along with our worst enemies? And why are the Brights included there? They're our allies!" Ice looked quite alarmed. She was a stunningly lovely, pale blonde honey with cold grey eyes, and faint scars crisscrossing her face. I had witnessed her death on the battlefield on Galinta. I would never forget that one. And I had seen that Bright trooper bring her back to life, laying his armored hands over her fractured skull and finally arising with bloody hands and making the sign of the cross over her. The Brights had brought her back from the dead.

"Tier One includes the most important targets," the Prof explained. "Our fiercest, strongest enemies or potential enemies. The Darks, the Demons, the Omnis and the Brights. Those are the ones we have to watch most closely. Yes, the Brights are our close allies, but we are looking into the future. Things change. We would be guilty of criminal malfeasance if we did not keep a sharp eye on the Brights, despite how we all feel about them. Because they are the greatest power in two universes. And as for ConFree – that is the most important target of all. Why are we doing this? Why are we looking into the future at all? It is to protect and safeguard the future of ConFree, of the free men and women and children of the Confederation of Free Worlds. It is to protect future generations. We must learn what the future has in store for ConFree, and if we do not like what we see, we must change it. That is our mission – to read the future, and to change the future, if necessary. I know how you feel about the Brights, Ice, and I feel the same way. I'm sure we'll not be spending a lot of time on the Brights, certainly not at first. But their inclusion in Tier One is justified.

"Now, Tier Two – lesser enemies. The ex-Commune states, the Pherdan Fed, HyadFed and the UMC. Yes, the UMC participated in the Vulcan campaign with us so they are no longer enemies but they are powerful and influential and still unstable – so we watch them. Tier Three consists of three other stellar states that pose less of a

threat: the Gassies Coalition, the Pleiades Association and the Dark Cloud Alliance. We're working for better relations with all three so they're not really enemies. Tier Four are friends or allies that we are probably going to ignore unless current trends change: the Assid Confederation, the Biogen Peoples Solidarity Accord and Santos Free State. All right – that's the big picture. Doctor D and I will be working with all of you on your individual targets. Now – changing subjects – the med program."

The Prof had our full attention now, and he knew it. The med program was another giant, expensive research program that was only loosely under Delta's control. We were running into lots of problems.

"I will reiterate the ground rules," the Prof said. "There will be no brainscans of Delta personnel. They are not permitted to sedate you, or to introduce anything at all into your bloodstream or body without prior authorization signed by me. They can take blood and urine and DNA samples. They can do body scans but not brainscans. They will not question you about your activities as prophets. They can and should ask you about your experiences involving the recovery of dead soldiers on the battlefield. If you feel uneasy about anything you are asked to do, refuse to do it and report to me immediately. The med program is very important. The goal is to restore life to soldiers who have been killed on the battlefield. A very noble goal, one with which we all agree. I am working closely with Dr. Gorgas, and we will work together to accomplish that goal. And remember – they are very much outside the Bubble. The med's security is effective, but not as effective as ours. Keep that in mind.

"Now, I'd like to introduce the newest member of our team." The Prof looked over at the trooper who had been seated off to one side, silent. "Let us welcome General Keystone, Delta Research's new Director of Security. The general is the Legion's most

experienced security administrator, and his selection for this position confirms our importance to the Legion and to ConFree."

General Keystone shot to his feet and strode confidently to the lectern. Medium height, black hair – he looked pretty young. He had a single star on each collar – brigadier general – the same rank as the Prof! I had not seen the stars when he was seated as he had a Legion scarf wrapped around his neck. "Thank you, Professor," the general said. "Greetings, prophets. I am very pleased to meet each of you. I am looking forward to our association. A few comments if I may, Professor." He dropped some notes onto the lectern. It looked like he was almost pushing the Professor out of the way. The Prof, ever the gentleman, nodded politely and stood a short distance away, perhaps to emphasize that he was still in charge. Maybe I was reading too much into these wordless actions, but it looked like bad news to me.

"The Professor and I," Keystone said, "will jointly be handling the security and related administrative functions of Delta Research. I can tell you that this project is ConFree's number one state secret, and the Prof and I are going to ensure that the secret does not get out. I ask each of you to cooperate in the security mission. We can assume that every one of ConFree's deadliest enemies is doing everything it can to learn what goes on inside the Bubble. The best counter to this is total silence about the mission outside the Bubble, indeed, outside your individual cubes. Silence is our best defense but we have to do a great deal more than that. The outside swarms with eyemotes – so numerous and so advanced we cannot possibly detect them. As prophets, you can assume that some of them get past Delta Research's defenses, follow you home, swarm into your residential apartments, follow you to work, and hide in your clothing. The security portal through which you pass every day is designed to fry any eyemote trying to hitch a ride with you. We know the portal works. However, we don't stop there. In addition to powerful anti-eyemote filters installed within the Bubble, the

Bubble's airspace is teeming with hunter-killer eyemotes that cruise around all day and night looking for hostiles. That's cosmic secret, please do not repeat it."

It slowly dawned on me what was wrong with this picture. Keystone was wearing his blacks, but there was no combat cross. What the hell? He was an administrator! How do you get to be a Legion general without earning your combat cross? An administrator! Every one of us prophets wore the combat cross and the blood badge. Those were our credentials, in the land of the Legion. And he was going to be leading us? He was going to be telling us what to do?

"Our countermeasures are extensive, and necessary," he continued. "I hope you will not resent the extra burden it places on each of you. I know you are very busy with very important work, and I'm sure you would be as distressed as I if you learn that our secrets are leaking. Regrettably, there is still some discussion about individual missions outside of your cubes, inside the Bubble. Please observe need-to-know. Just because you are inside the Bubble, it does not mean it is safe to discuss our highest national secrets. If you have issues concerning your individual missions, please discuss them with the Professor or me in a sealed security vault. Do not discuss it among yourselves. I'll be sending a series of security memos to everyone shortly. Please read them and if there are any questions, I'll be happy to respond. Thank you. Again, I'm happy to be here and glad to meet you. Together, we are going to accomplish wonderful things."

△

"Come on, Morrie, time to go!" Morrie's colleagues were calling him. They were heading for Blossoms, whatever that was. Scout watched the scene patiently through his DX helmet. As usual, it was a dim image – almost dream-like. But it was clear enough for Scout to see what was happening. All these DX images were kind of hazy,

presumably because they did not represent reality, but what reality would be should current trends continue. Doc D had explained it – Dimension X was the substance that bound all physical reality together. It was the long-sought missing piece of the puzzle that led to the final Theory of Everything. An integral part of the galactic field, it saturated the field, tying together the past, the present and the future. It was such an elegant and perfect dimension and theory that Doctor D had actually teared up when trying to describe what a beautiful thing it was.

As Morrie hurried to finish his job, Scout watched him like a snake watching a mouse. Morrie was a spacecraft tech, a specialist first class, and he was poised under the belly of a giant, lovely star shuttle. The PS *Clear Skies* was a wondrous creation, a spectacular phospho white shuttle that belonged to the PS *Coral Paradise*, a luxurious vacation dreamland for those who could afford it.

The *Clear Skies* was almost maintenance free, but starflight regs were strict and demanded human eyes and a final sign-off for critical systems by a human tech. That was what Morrie was doing. He was going over a long panel of power systems, each one of which was already glowing green and reading one hundred percent. But he had to confirm the readout. He did that by opening each panel, one by one, and activating the internal systems check with a little hand monitor. If the hand monitor also read one hundred percent, he would close the panel and touch the little DNA inspection certification tab with his fingertip.

It had taken Scout a long time to find this time strand. Everything seemed to lead to this exact place, this exact time. Interesting work, Scout thought. I guess I can do this time strand business. Unusual, but I can do it.

Scout was confident. He had always been confident in himself and his abilities. He was a tall, lean, tough Outworlder. He had developed his confidence on Sirrah, first in the contact arena and later in the Deadman Scouts, fighting a hopeless insurgent war

against the slave state until most all his companions had been killed. He was a warrior first and foremost. The Legion was his home. He thought he would be dead by now, but had somehow survived it all. And now he had a lovely, miraculous wife who was his exact opposite in almost everything except the love they felt for each other. And for their companions in Delta Research.

"Morrie! We're leaving! Are you coming or not?"

"Yeah, yeah, I'll be right there!" Morrie snapped close the last panel he had inspected and touched the certification tab. There were two panels left. They both were green and read one hundred percent. Morrie touched the certification tabs for both of them. But he did not open them and did not inspect them.

You son of a bitch! Scout thought. *You lazy bastard!* Morrie slammed the master access panel closed and ran off to join his companions. Blossoms was waiting.

Scout was stunned. Now it was clear. His first reaction was to hunt down Morrie and kill him. It was only three weeks into the future; he could head for that spaceport right now and locate him, and gun him down like a dog, before he even failed to finish his job. But he knew that wouldn't do. No, he would report it all to the Prof instead, and see what would happen. *Let's do this the way we're supposed to.*

△

I was in my office cube, DX helmet on, scanning up. The vault door opened. It was not supposed to do that. I took off the helmet, annoyed. A young Legion trooper in black stood in the doorway.

"Can I help you?" I asked.

"Uh, no. Just checking the doors." He closed the door again, moving on.

He was one of the Keystone Cops. That's what we had named General Keystone's security groupies. They were all seemingly young and inexperienced, charging around like bloodhounds,

enthusiastically doing whatever Keystone had set them to do. None of them wore the combat cross. Yet they all had access to our cubes and barged in whenever they felt like it. I made a mental note to mention that to the Professor. We should not be interrupted when at work.

Our old security group, Captain Trails and his troopies, had all been abruptly reassigned. We were not happy about that because they were competent and friendly and knew their job inside and out. The new gang was enthusiastic but had no idea what they were doing. They were not making many friends.

A new security bulletin had appeared on my work shelf overnight. The Cops came in at night and delivered these paper missives by hand, so we couldn't claim that we had not seen them. I had been ignoring it. Now I picked it up.

ALL SECRET

Delta Research Security Bulletin # 130

Date:386/2/10

For:All Cat P Deltas

From:Delta Security

Subject:Access to Cat P Work Cubes

1. It has been brought to our attention that in at least one recent incident, personnel with legitimate security access to Cat P Work cubes were denied entrance through illegal interference with the DNA access lock. Security access regulations are for your safety and security, and interference with the access lock could hinder movement during a crisis or emergency. It is illegal to

block legitimate access to your office cubes
and we ask all Cat P Deltas to cooperate.

2. Denial of legitimate access through disabling DNA locks is a security violation. Any further such incidents will be recorded as security violations.

Authorized: B/Gen Keystone
Cdr Delta Research Sec/Admin

ALL SECRET

It bothered me that Keystone was apparently sending these messages to us without clearing them with the Prof. And I sure didn't like that final line. I didn't consider him Commander of Delta Research and I had thought he and the Prof were jointly in charge of Security and Admin. As to the blocked DNA lock, I knew that was Scout. He was growing increasingly impatient with the Keystone Cops.

Δ

Saka forced himself to continue viewing the hazy images from the land of the Eye, the land of This Will Happen, Over to You. That's how Saka thought of it, cringing as the carnage unfolded, flickering past his eyes inside the DX helmet. Saka was a handsome young Assidic with a faint tracery of scar tissue running around his face. He had slanted Assidic eyes and high cheekbones and straight black hair and his ancestry ran right back to his namesake, Saka the Invincible, Saka the Merciless, who had plundered the galaxy in the distant past as maximum leader of the Assidic horde.

Our modern-day Saka was a Legion trooper, smart and tough. He had been killed on Galinta, and revived. Then he was gunned

down again on Veda, but clung to life and again survived. He had seen and inflicted a lot of death and suffering. But this was just too damned much, he thought, as he watched the young gunman blasting his way through the midschool, killing everyone he saw, kids and teachers, males and females, boys and girls, running from him like sheep before a rabid wolf, falling, spraying blood, dying with hopeless whimpers. The halls ran red with blood. He had blocked all the exits and now he was systematically shooting everyone he could find. He was armed with one xmin handgun and a backpack full of ammo. Nobody else had a weapon. The school was a gun-free zone. That was why the killer had chosen that particular school, a propaganda mill that specialized in graduating brainwashed, fact-free, ignorant, happily progressive young slaves. The killer did not want any opposition. He did not think of it as a gun-free zone. He thought of it as a government-approved killing zone, where all his victims would be unarmed.

The killer yanked open a maintenance closet to reveal three terrified girls. He gave them three shots each and turned away as they fell. They were hiding everywhere, everywhere he looked. But he would find them all, and kill them all. By then the police had surrounded the school, but there had been no response to their attempts to contact the killer. Many of the police wanted to storm the school immediately, but their orders were to wait. There was an election coming up, and the ruling party was invested in an accommodation policy towards violence. There was no danger of this unfortunate incident being reported nationally, as the media prostitutes were actively supporting the regime, and would never report potentially damaging news. It didn't matter to them how many children were killed – if it was not reported, it had not happened.

Saka was frozen in shock and hate. The bastard must have killed close to fifty by then – the bodies were everywhere, as the killer stalked the halls searching for more. If only one teacher had

been armed, he might have stopped the slaughter almost immediately. But these teachers did not believe in violence.

As the police outside continued listening to more firing from inside the school, something unusual happened. Some of those police officers had children in that school. A small group of police suddenly broke off and charged the school, ignoring their supervisor's shrieked objections. They smashed open a door, burst in, found the killer in a hall, and shredded him with xmax. It was only then that the killing stopped.

Saka fell back in his opschair, exhausted. Now it was up to him to ensure that this horrific mass murder did not happen. The school was on Monaro, a Gassies Coalition world. He would report this to the Prof immediately, and come up with a plan to alert the authorities there without compromising Delta Research's activities.

Saka felt good that he was able to do this. His actions would save all those children from a grisly death at the hands of a madman. And maybe even cause the school to rethink their no-gun policy. Maybe.

Chapter 2

Trouble in Paradise

"I don't know about the rest of you, but I'm really getting tired of this," Ice declared. We had just sealed the little conference vault from inside, another bubble within a bubble. We took seats around an oblong table. We were all there except the Prof – Doggie, Scout, Saka, Ice and Bees, Smiley, Arie and me. Eight prophets.

"Sealed and cleared," Saka confirmed.

"What's bothering you, Ice?" I asked.

"How much time have you got? Everything!"

Everyone spoke up at once.

"Hold it, hold it," I said. "Somebody's got to be moderator."

"You're it, Prophet," Saka said. "Go ahead."

"All right," I said. "Seems to me this is easy duty, plus very important. Again, Ice, what's bothering you?"

"You know damned well what's bothering me. All this security crap. We used to be a team. One person. Now they won't even let us talk to one another. We had to sneak into this vault secretly 'cause they don't want us to discuss the program."

"But we all know how important this is."

"Yes, yes, yes. But the Keystone Cops are running wild. They don't even want me to talk with my own husband. I told Kwan we had a conference – I didn't say anything about what was discussed. And next thing I know the Cops call me in and go over the contact regs. Some snotty little punk. They're siccing their eyemotes on us!

They're watching us at home! For all I know, they're watching us in bed! Shit, I'll bet they've got eyemotes right in this vault, and they're watching us and listening to everything we say. What have we got to do to get a little respect around here? I've fought and bled and died for ConFree. I don't need some brat kid lecturing me on security. I almost punched him out right there. I really had to restrain myself."

"Yes. I understand," I said. "Scout?" He had raised a finger.

"I gather we've most all approached the Prof individually about these problems, right? Maybe we should do it as a group. So he'll know we're all united."

The comset on the table buzzed. I disabled it.

"Guess they just noticed we're in here," Arie said.

"There's no doubt the work we are doing is critically important," Bees said. "But these security people are a big distraction. And have you noticed how silent the Prof is on this issue? He knows exactly what's going on. I've talked with him – but he won't say much."

"I'm sure there's a lot we don't know," I said.

"Well, we should know it!" Ice said. "We're the prophets! We're the whole program. These security bozos are just harassing us. It's like the tail wagging the dog."

"Speaking of dogs, they're even bothering Blackie," Doggie said calmly. "They didn't want him in Delta research spaces at all. The Prof turned that one around quickly, but it's typical of the Keystone Cops. They act before they investigate. They assumed he was just a regular dog. Oh, and just try and be single around here. I'm supposed to fill in a bunch of bio forms before I have authorization to dally with any sweet young things. I told them to stick those forms where the sun don't shine. I don't know what will happen next, but I don't care either."

"It's not like they can fire us," Smiley said with a big grin, "and hire somebody else. Wanted, warm body with DX brain, inquire at Delta Research. No, we don't have to worry about that."

"Job security," Saka said. "Well, we've got that. And, hey, we all admit it is very important work. Look, Prophet, how about you and me make a list of things that are bothering us all and ask the Prof for resolution?"

"That sounds good to me," I said. "You know these problems are annoying but they are minor compared to the importance of the program."

"That doesn't mean we have to put up with crap from arrogant little security weenies," Ice said.

"No, it doesn't. But we can fix it."

The vault door was buzzing – somebody wanted us to open it. What a surprise!

"So we're all agreed?" Saka asked. "Prophet and I will compile a list of things to be improved upon, and submit it to the Prof, right?"

"I'll have quite a list for you," Ice said. The others murmured approval.

We activated the vault door and it slid open as we lined up to exit. Three Keystone Cops were standing there, looking quite distressed.

"You're not supposed to be in there," one of them said, standing in front of Scout.

"You'd better stand aside," Scout said quietly. The cop stepped back quickly and we all left the vault.



Arie was very enthusiastic about his work. He looked forward to every day with the Eye. By then Delta was starting to refer to it as the Eye. Officially it was a DX scanner. That low-key designation was presumably meant to make it sound like some kind of office copier. But to Delta, it was transforming itself into The Eye, an all-powerful, god-like instrument to view the future. Some seven hundred light years from Earth lay the Helix Nebula, an amazing planetary nebula that looked exactly like some kind of titanic eye in

the heavens. For generations people had called it the Eye of God. And that's how Arie viewed the Eye, too.

Arie felt personally involved with the fate of Angaroth. Prophet and he had taken part in the occupation in the wake of the Vulcan campaign and had been kept busy executing party members. That was depressing work, but this was exciting. Now Arie was going to see how the future was shaping up. He wanted to see how Angaroth had done it, how they had gone from slavery and bankruptcy to freedom and prosperity in a mere ten years.

He followed the strings, the DX time tendrils, the threads, to see where they led. He could never have done that himself, of course, but Doctor Dimension's amazing time programs did that all automatically. And Arie could see it all – follow the DX threads to where they intersected in a giant, blinding ball of light. Something significant happened there, right there, only one year in the future, something that changed the future, an event that shaped the future. Doctor D said these things were usually something bold, something revolutionary, something that normal people would never do, never even think of doing. The future belonged to the bold. Doc D had said that himself. Arie was almost trembling as the threads fell away and a soft vision filled the screen.

The scene drifted around in Arie's view, then slowly focused to reveal a long, oval conference table crowded with attendees clad in grey uniforms. They were humans and looked like Outworlders. Some of them were military, sure, but some were not, despite the uniforms. Arie could tell – military people wouldn't wear their dress uniforms so sloppily. Collars were open, ties were loosened; one of them had even taken off his jacket and draped it over his chair. Civilians. Arie knew who they were – Angaroth civilians. This was the Angaroth Renewal Committee, and a tougher gang of fanatics would be hard to find. They all had issues, hard issues. Did they have what it took to construct a good future for the long-suffering

people of Angaroth and Kotazh? Arie didn't know, but he aimed to find out.

"No," one of the attendees was saying. "No, no, no. Look out the windows, look around. Angaroth's a shambles. A desolate slum. We've got nothing. The former regime looted and plundered it to death. They took everything, until the workers stopped working and the parasites turned full-time to crime. We need transformation, and it's not going to start here." The speaker was a slim man, almost skeletal, with thinning hair and a bony face. "No," he repeated. "We need foreign investment, yes, and we need it now. We need lots of it. With no ifs, ands or buts. We need foreign investment, interstellar investment, falling from the sky. Transforming the world! And you want to tax them. Twenty percent, you say. Why not thirty, forty, fifty percent? Fine motivation."

"What would you suggest, Medwyn?" The new voice was likely the provisional president, seated at one end of the table.

"Zero percent! No corporate income taxes, ever. Write it into the constitution. Along with the abolishment of the personal slave taxes. No personal income taxes, of any kind, ever. And anyone who tries to re-introduce it will be arrested for treason against the people."

Medwyn! Arie realized who this man was. It was the former Stellar Revolutionary Union party member whom Prophet had decided not to execute. It looked like Prophet had been right about him.

"And how does that help us?"

"Are you serious? Every major industrial player in the galaxy is going to stop dead when they hear that, and focus very, very closely on us. They'll do the calculations. Then they're going to set records on relocating and building their factories – right here on Angaroth, and Kotazh. They'll arrive like a foreign army, armed with cash. Unemployment will move from close to one hundred percent to close to zero. And we won't have to do a damned thing – just stay

out of their way and watch out you don't get hit by the packages of money falling from the skies."

"And how do we finance the government?"

"The government? The government? I don't give a shit about the government! We're here to serve the people! We already agreed on a five percent sales tax. That will finance the government. If five percent is not enough, if we can't balance the budget on that, we cut down on the damned government. Our mission is to bring prosperity to the people of Angaroth. Not to rule them. Or exploit them. Our people are free now. They're not slaves any more. Only slaves pay income tax. Angaroth is free!"

A silence followed. Then the president spoke up. "Well said, Medwyn. Government is a parasitic leech on the people. We all know that, too well. But I agree we must change that. We must serve the people. Your suggestion boxes were a good idea. They're sprouting all over the city. So the meanest, most hopeless citizen can communicate directly with the Renewal Committee. And we answer every suggestion. But it can't be just a motto. We have to really do it. We have to show them we work for them. With all our heart."

"Thank you, Franklin," Medwyn said. "As Provisional Minister of Interior, I am conscious of that day and night. We were all subversives, traitors to the state, political prisoners, hopeless and doomed. Every one of us. I'm only alive because one Legion trooper took the time to talk with me. And every one of you is here because the Legion seized power before your executions could be arranged, and because I contacted you. We're united in our goal to serve the people. We remember the slave state. So do the people of Angaroth and Kotazh. Don't think they are ever going to forget that. They're not. Now I have another subject to discuss. Franklin, may I?"

"Certainly," the president said.

"We named our political party Renewal," Medwyn said, "because I thought it appropriate. Renewal, for the entire society. At first I didn't really want to make it a political party but I thought

we'd better, because the people were going to be voting, and our group had to be in a format they'd understand. Renewal. You all know that. Of course, we are not monolithic. We welcome people from other groups, or parties, or no party at all, into the government, so long as they are sincere and want to contribute and know the ground rules." He nodded to several of the attendees.

"One of the ground rules is we do not want to come to resemble the Commune government. In any way. And one of the most important, specific rules is the one that says Renewal Committee members are not to have personal bank accounts on any worlds other than Angaroth and Kotazh. That's because Stellar Revolutionary Union party members enriched themselves at the expense of the people and stashed their loot in other star systems in case they had to flee the scene. Right?"

Silence.

"So I guess we can assume," Medwyn said, "that nobody here has any personal interstellar bank accounts. Right?"

Silence.

"Right?"

More silence.

"How about you, Wyatt?"

Wyatt was a tough looking survivor with a prominent scar on one side of his face. "You have no right to question my revolutionary credentials," he said, glaring at Medwyn.

"I honor your revolutionary credentials," Medwyn replied. "It's your judgment I question. We all know this rule. We must not have doubts raised about the personal integrity of the Committee."

"What right do you have to cast doubts on my integrity? Why is it your business if I have a savings account for my family's future?"

"I just answered that. Close that account and transfer the money back here and there is no problem. I'd suggest you do it."

"That's a sound suggestion," the president said. "Close it, Wyatt. Transfer the funds. We don't doubt your integrity, we know your history, but it won't look good to outsiders."

"You know our salaries are miserable," Medwyn said. "That's by design. We don't want anyone here who's looking to get rich. That's not going to work. After the hell we've all been through, we can see what can happen to people who think they rule the world – or to people who actually do rule the world. The Renewal Committee is looking for priests of poverty, people who own no more than the poorest nationals of Angaroth. Keep that in mind. I look on it as redemption. I'm going to invite you all to lunch at my place soon – as soon as I can collect enough food. My wife and I live in a leaky, drafty plywood shack, reinforced with flattened beer cans. The toilet is outside. We have no electricity and we cook over a charcoal stove. It's freezing in winter and sweltering in summer. And people come to us, all day, with little gifts. Tins of food, eggs, milk. Sometimes flowers. You know why? Because they know I'm a member of the Renewal Committee and I live the same as they do. They know I'm on their side, and they're hoping I'm going to change the world. I'd suggest you all do the same."

"Thank you, Medwyn," the president said. "Your views are always thoughtful, provocative, and challenging. And now, folks, we're going outside to show the people of Angaroth exactly who rules here. Let's go!" He got up and headed for the door. By then the DX time strands were tangled up so tightly that Arie had trouble following the action. It was just like a flaming, roaring geyser of lava, ripping through the scene. Strong, strong time strands, Arie thought. Something very significant is happening here.

Arie followed the Eye as the committee proceeded down a wide staircase and out into a great plaza that was crowded with thousands of civilians, a disorderly, noisy mob. As the committee members appeared, the crowd burst into applause. While they were clapping, a squad of soldiers was preparing a long row of crude

wooden chairs, setting them up along the front of the crowd, between them and the committee. The applause slowly faded, as everyone strained to see what was happening. Surprisingly, the chairs were not facing the crowd. They were facing the committee, who were lining up before the crowd.

The soldiers then chose people from the crowd – seemingly at random, inviting them to sit in the chairs. Some declined, some accepted. The soldiers chose a lot of females. The crowd was dead silent by then.

When the chairs were full, someone appeared from the ranks of the committee. He wore a robe, and seemed to be some kind of a priest. He made some complex gestures in the air, chanted a few words, and then stepped back. Then the committee members all stepped forward, each holding a bowl of water and a washcloth. Each one of them kneeled down on the tiled courtyard before one of the chosen people in the chairs, gently removed the shoes from the subject, wet the washcloth in the bowl, and then proceeded to wash the feet of the person in the chair.

Arie had studied the history of Angaroth. He knew this was the sacred ceremony of the washing of the feet from the ancient suppressed religion of the Priests of the Past, designed to force the kingly rulers of that ancient land to acknowledge the power of God and to accept the common people as their superiors.

When the committee members finished washing and drying the feet, each one bowed down and gently kissed the feet of their subject.

The crowd erupted, joyous screams, massive applause, a great thunder as everyone stomped feet and clapped hands and whistled and shouted in wild approval. The applause continued, not pausing for an instant. Media people jostled each other with their holscans to catch the best shots of the Renewal Committee humbling themselves before the people.

Arie knew those images would appear all over the galaxy, and there would be massive repercussions. The Stellar Commune had been a merciless slave state, ruled by bloodthirsty, psychotic tyrants. But now the slave state was gone, and Angaroth was ruled by the people.

△

Taking action – at last! Resolve the problem, the Prof said. Find out what the hell is happening on Nirvana. All the evidence, even now, points to exactly what you observed, in the future, he said. A blind man could see it. What is the matter with the planet's humans? Have they been hypnotized? Drugged? Find out!

The *Mary* shuddered, falling through Nirvana's atmosphere, glowing pink. I felt great. The *Mary* was Delta's phantom, and Bird was right where he belonged, in the pilot's seat. Bird was the young enthusiast who had designed and built the *Mary* and a host of other tacvac starcraft. We all loved Bird. He was just a regular guy. Who happened to be a genius, a brigadier general, a very skilled fighter pilot and a multi-millionaire. He was an Outworlder with sandy hair, grey eyes, normal build and demeanor, and no hint of the talent that was hidden within.

"All right, we're slowing down – closing on Two Rivers," Bird said. "Time to choose a target." Two Rivers was one of Nirvana's major cities. A large d-screen filled with the view below. It was early evening, the planet's star tinting one horizon a faint orange as the sunset faded away. It was to be a clear night – I could see some stars already.

"All set to kick ass," Arie said. We were A&A, armored and armed, set for anything. The *Mary* was fully cloaked, totally invisible, undetectable, invulnerable and pretty much invincible. When the Prof approved the mission, I quickly asked for Arie and Smiley. Prof nodded his assent. That's all it took. I had the strong feeling that the Prof was not informing Keystone about the mission –

or maybe would do so after we returned. Never ask permission – that was the best policy. However, I knew I couldn't disappear with Bird, the *Mary*, and a couple of prophets without checking with the Prof first.

"We won't be kicking ass," I said to Arie. "Just selecting an information source." I had already collected all the available information from Nirvana's media on the current situation, but nothing explained the rapidly expanding presence and influence of Exoseg Neuroclone Vigorous. I had started thinking of them as exovigs, to distinguish them from the many other species of exosegs. There was not a single word in the media on the creatures, although there were plenty of images of humans and exovigs standing side by side in various situations. It was as if they were invisible to the media.

"Look at that," Smiley said. The d-screen showed four humans strolling through a park-like area along a little footpath. Three exovigs appeared from the vegetation and blocked the road. The humans turned around to retrace their steps but two more exovigs appeared from that direction.

"Get down there, Bird. Let's watch this," I said.

"Those exos don't look too friendly," Smiley said. Smiley could sense things like that. He was a refugee from race hate on Katag, where Outworlders were hated and despised and routinely attacked by just about everybody else. Smiley knew all about race hate and when his family arrived in ConFree through the reunification program, he told me he had kissed the ground. And he had been smiling ever since. Choosing a war name for him had been easy.

The *Mary* floated overhead, watching the drama unfold. The five exovigs were approaching the four humans. The humans, two males, two females, huddled together, perhaps in indecision.

"The exos are going to attack," Smiley warned.

"Land, Bird," I said. We landed, silently, invisibly, a short distance away behind a tree line.

"Nitro, Smiley, activate cloaking and follow me," I ordered as the crash doors snapped open and we jumped out into a soft night. I heard screams up ahead. We ran.

Two of the humans were down, young people, one male, one female, sliced open, spraying blood, the exovigs standing over them slashing with their bloody slicing tools jutting out of their upper arms. The second human couple turned to run but collided with the other two exovigs who slashed wildly at them.

I fired xmin, ripping open the three who were standing over their victims, blowing them away to the ground in a hail of pus and gore. Arie tore one of the two other attackers to shreds with hyperdarts and Smiley blasted the remaining one with x. The exovig burst apart, splattering globs of that awful yellow pus and chunks of grisly exoseg chitin everywhere. It was too late for the second young female – she was torn open from throat to navel by one of her attackers, scarlet blood shooting out wildly. Her companion, the male, tried to get up from the ground, trembling and sweating, stunned by developments. He appeared to be shaken but unharmed.

"Oh, Julie. Julie!" He scrambled over to her and then stopped, stunned. He fell to his knees by her body.

"Julie! Julie! Oh no oh no oh no!"

I ripped open a medkit and slammed a biotic charger to her chest but I knew it was hopeless. The blood was spurting out of her body like a river. I felt so sorry for her. She was lovely – and her life had barely started. What a damned shame.

"No response. No life signs," the medprobe stated. "Subject has died of shock and blood loss." By then all three of us had uncloaked. So – I'm supposed to be able to raise the dead. But I can't! I don't even know where to start! It's too late – too late for Julie.

"I'm sorry, Julie. I'm so sorry!" the young male wailed. "It's all my fault."

"It's not your fault," I told him. It's the exosegs' fault." He stared at me like he had not noticed me before. He was at a loss for words. I didn't blame him.

"Let's go," I said. "We'll take you to safety."

"No. I won't leave Julie. Oh Julie! I love you so much!"

"More exosegs are coming. Let's go," I urged him.

"I won't leave Julie! I don't care who's coming! Who are you people anyway? Why did you kill those young people? Why are you using hateful terms? Leave me alone! I want to die. I won't leave you, Julie. I'm coming! Don't be afraid! Please don't be afraid!" He was crying.

"Smiley. Sedation please." I gathered up our medical tools as Smiley stung our subject with a mild sedative and Arie helped Smiley hustle our reluctant captive to the phantom. It was too late for Julie – and too late for the other two young humans we left behind us on the trail. I felt it was too late for Nirvana, but maybe not. If I could determine what the problem was, maybe we could change the future.



"I want to die," James said. That was our captive's name. I sat across the table from him, in a comfortable debriefing vault just outside the Bubble but still inside Delta Research. It didn't look like a vault, it looked like a luxurious hotel suite. It was, actually – James was to live there until our inquiries were over. The Keystone Cops guarded the exit.

"I don't blame you," I said. "I guess the J plus J on your arm is James and Julie." It was a nice tattoo.

He didn't answer. He was young, clean-cut, clean shaven, neat dark hair – and, like most Nirvana humans, an Outworlder.

"Is the dox all right?" I asked.

"It's fine." He sighed, toying with his cup.

"What's that other thing on your arm?" It was a complex little blue square.

"Government ID," he replied.

"I want to know about the situation on Nirvana. That's why we brought you here."

"Subscribe to the news, tune in on the holovids. I'm just a midschool kid. Why ask me?"

"The news has no answers for me. Your media do not address the most important issues. They ignore them."

"What a surprise. What is it you want to know?"

"When those exosegs approached you, it was clear they were going to attack. Why didn't you run off at once?"

"Please do not use hateful, bigoted, illegal terms. I can hardly believe you said that."

"What illegal term is that?"

"You said ... well I can't repeat it. Speciesism is an ugly, hurtful relic of the past and is forbidden speech. It offends me."

"Speciesism. What's that?" I asked.

"Speciesism is an unhealthy, hateful and illegal obsession on alleged but imaginary differences between species."

"I see. So, the use of the term 'exoseg' offends you. Well – who was it who killed Julie, and your two friends?"

"Troubled youth. It's unfortunate, but not surprising considering the past sufferings inflicted on allegedly non-human persons by the cursed Outworlders who seized Nirvana for themselves and exterminated all supposedly different groups."

"It sounds like you're reciting that from a text. I've studied Nirvana history and I don't know what you're talking about. Nirvana was uninhabited when the Outworlders landed there and colonized it. The exos didn't show up until a lot later."

"No, it wasn't uninhabited. That's geneist racist speciesist propaganda. The Outworlders exterminated the original inhabitants without mercy."

"Where did you read that?"

"It's history! They taught us that in school. Everybody knows that."

"Who were your teachers?"

"Who? What do you mean?"

"What was the name of your history teacher?"

"There was no history course. We didn't learn facts. We learned coping, and cooperation, and nonviolence, and getting along with everyone."

"Were your teachers Outworlders?"

"We don't categorize. Anyone who has Outworlder ancestry is ashamed of it. So we don't mention it. And neither should you!"

"Really. Are you ashamed of your Outworlder ancestry?"

"Of course I am! We're a blight on humanity. The spawn of criminals and thieves. I am deeply ashamed of my cursed Outworlder heritage and I work every day to atone for it."

"These ... troubled youth, who attacked you. What would you call them?"

"They were young citizens, a product of history. You can't blame them for resenting Outworlders."

"Young citizens. So they were not exosegs?"

"Stop it! How can you say that?"

"All right. Let's go back to my original question. Why did you not run when you saw those – young citizens – were about to attack you. Didn't you sense that?"

"Yes, I did, but those were primitivist remnants of race hate hidden deep within me. It is improper and illegal to react with hostility or suspicion towards fellow citizens. If we had run, we would have confirmed those primitivist feelings and I did not want to admit that, even to myself. Also we might have been arrested for speciesism. So we did not run."

"And Julie was killed. Might it not have been better to run?"

He did not answer.



We took a break and I left him alone for awhile as I pondered the situation. He appeared to be hopelessly brainwashed – mired in self-hate and worshipping alien gods. How had this happened? When I returned I offered him another dox but he refused it.

"I want to die," James repeated.

"Understandable," I said. "But it accomplishes nothing. And it's terribly permanent."

"Do you believe in an afterlife?" he asked.

"Yes, I do. Do you?"

"I don't know. We're taught that religion is just institutionalized hatred and superstition to control ignorant people. If I thought Julie was really out there, I'd join her."

"I think she's watching us right now. But let's continue our talk." I placed a holo snap on the tabletop. It showed a group of five government officials, evidently seated for a portrait. One was a human, the other four were exovigs. I had lifted it from a news report. It was labeled Flaxfield District Court.

"Tell me," I urged him. "Do you see any differences between these five individuals?"

He examined the holo carefully. "No," he replied. "No differences I can see. They're all district judges, as it states."

"How about the one on the left?" The one on the left was the human.

"I see no differences."

"Really. All right, how about this pix?" I put away the holo and substituted a pix of two individuals standing side by side – one human, one exovig. They were both typical representatives of their species – the human had a head, two arms, and two legs. The exovig had antennae, compound eyes, four arms, a thorax, an abdomen and two legs.

"They look exactly the same to me."

"You're saying the right thing, James, but you can't really believe that – can you?"

"I see no differences."

"Isn't the one on the left taller than the other one?"

"Heightism! I can hardly believe it. How primitive. I ignore that. It's meaningless."

"Doesn't the one on the right have twice as many arms as the one on the left?"

"What is the purpose of these crazy questions?"

"I'm hoping you will admit that there are obvious physical differences between separate species. And we can then go on to discuss the actual existence of separate species, without hysteria. And then we can get into the questions that interest me."

"There are no separate species! That's a lie! That's speciesism! I refuse to accept that! We are all equal on Nirvana! Our noble and long-suffering guides have shown us the way into the future."

"Who are these noble and long-suffering guides?"

"Individuals who possess wisdom and care deeply about society."

"I see. Exos, I suppose. All right, tell me about the future."

"Please do not use hateful terms. The future will be bright. There will be no more Outworlders, but only cooperative citizens."

"And how is that going to happen?"

"The government has decided to limit Outworlder reproduction. Sex will be encouraged, but not reproduction. That's fine with me. The Outworlder race does not deserve to continue to reproduce itself in this modern world."

"Really. That's genocide. I'm surprised that is not in the news. When was this decided?"

"I don't know. I told you, I'm just a midschool kid. Ask somebody who cares. Are you going to send me back to Nirvana?"

"Take a break, James. I'm sorry we couldn't save Julie. We tried." But looking back on it I asked myself – did I really try? As hard as I

could? When Bees brought me back to life she had never done it before – but she had plunged her hands into my fatal wounds, and done it. She had said God did it, not her. What if it had been Arie, down and dead, instead of Julie? Wouldn't I have at least initiated the process, even though I did not know what to do next? Plunged my hands into the bloody wounds? I know I would have done it, had it been Arie. And why had I not done that for Julie? At least tried it? Because I did not know her?

You dirty bastard, I thought. You cold, hard, selfish coward. What were you afraid of? That it would not work? That God would not be there for you, for Julie? That you might be embarrassed? That people would laugh at you? What the hell is the matter with you? God damn you to Hell!

I was enraged. The blood was ice cold in my veins. James was staring at me. I got up and left the room abruptly.



"Very pleased to meet you, sir. How may I help you?" Za Wei, director of Greenside Starport, came out from behind his wide desk to greet the distinguished, unexpected visitor, Jefferson Maxwell, president of Veronica Starlines. Maxwell, a legend, had personally built V-Star into a confederation-wide starline with an outstanding reputation for quality, timeliness, safety, great customer relations and can-do spirit. Maxwell was a tall and lanky Outworlder; Wei was a short and stocky Assidic. Wei also had a good reputation, but he knew his future might hinge on the degree of cooperation he showed Maxwell. A young Legion officer wearing captain's insignia accompanied Maxwell. It was Scout, and this was his case.

The starport chief of maintenance burst through the doorway. "Sorry, sir. We're here," he said, reporting the obvious. Wei had called for him when his secretary told him the unexpected visitor was concerned with a maintenance issue. A few other starport officials were also in the room, standing by nervously.

"May I offer dox, sir?" Wei asked.

"Thanks, but no," Maxwell replied. "We don't have time." He glanced at his chron. So did the Legion captain, who nodded to Maxwell.

"V-Star 702," Maxwell said. "The Clear Skies. Where is it?"

Wei glanced over to his maintenance chief, who replied. "Bay Six, sir."

"And its status?"

Maintenance glanced at a little palm screen. "Service completed, cleared for flight. It will be rolling towards Departure shortly."

"Let's go. Bay Six," Maxwell said. He was evidently a man of few words.

They all trooped out the door and walked over to Bay Six, which was not far off. Scout stayed close to Maxwell. He was not planning to say a single word, but had told Maxwell what to do. Scout had been introduced to Maxwell as the personal representative of the Director of Galactic Information. It was important that Scout be there, as he was the only one who knew exactly what the problem was.

The activity around V-star 702 paused as the new group approached. It was a beautiful shuttle, Scout reflected, gigantic and seemingly invulnerable, glowing white in the sunlight.

"Power system inspection panels – open, please," Maxwell ordered. The maintenance chief hustled to obey, and a long line of panels was exposed.

"Chief, has the inspection been done?" Maxwell asked.

"Yes sir," maintenance replied. "All systems are one hundred percent – inspected and approved."

"Open up that one – the second from last. Check it with your hand monitor. Any problems?"

The chief did so, opening the panel and probing it with his hand monitor. "Looks fine, sir. One hundred percent."

Maxwell glanced at Scout. "Do the next one – the last one," he said.

"Yes sir." The chief opened the last panel and inserted his probe. He looked at the result. He turned pale. He tried it again. Now his face was flushing red. He was clearly not happy with what he saw.

"Something wrong, Chief?" Maxwell asked.

"Yeah. There is something wrong. Something seriously wrong. It's the autopilot re-entry guidance data. De-orbit, re-entry, trajectory, attitude, glide path, target maintenance. Reinspection is advised." The green one hundred percent status had just changed to a red warning status.

"And how did that happen, Chief?" Maxwell asked calmly, but his voice sounded ominous.

The chief read the DNA signature on the inspection certification tab. "I don't know, sir. But I'm about to find out. Where's Morris Silva?" He looked around at the other techs.

"Um, don't know, sir. We'll page him," somebody said. Scout knew perfectly well where Morrie was. He was at Blossoms.

"Director Wei," Maxwell said, "this shuttle is not to leave this bay until this problem is one hundred percent fixed. I hold you personally responsible."

"Yes sir!"

Maxwell turned on his heel abruptly and headed back to his aircar. Scout accompanied him. That's it for Morrie, he thought. Everyone pays for his sins. Morrie is finished. And my problem is resolved.

△

"Professor, this is crazy," Ice said, waving the offending security memo in the air as she entered his office. Her face was flushed and it was clear she was upset. The Prof looked up at her in surprise from behind his cluttered desk.

"Just a mo, Ice. Let me secure the office first." The Prof activated the control on his desktop and in a few fracs the room was secure. "There, now we can talk. Please have a seat, Ice. What's wrong?"

"I'll stand, thanks. What *isn't* wrong, Prof? They're driving us all crazy! Listen to this – 'no contacts with foreign nationals will be made without advance consultation and approval from the Office of Security'. What the hell, Prof? My husband Kwan is an Assidic national, and Saka's wife Lan Hwa is also an Assidic national. Now do we have to get approval before we speak with them? Or sleep with them? Do they just write these memos on the spur of the moment? Don't they clear them with you at all?"

"Please have a seat, Ice. I'll explain everything." The Prof got up and moved over to the dox table off to one side. He liked things to be informal. Ice joined him and sank into an airchair.

"Dox?" he asked.

"Thank you, Prof." Ice knew she'd better chill. It was just that – they were driving her crazy!

They sipped at the dox for a bit, then the Prof spoke. "I approved that memo, Ice. Please look down at para twelve. It notes that the regulation does not apply to current spouses of Cat P Deltas."

"Para twelve!" She looked it over and took a deep breath. "I'm sorry, Prof. I guess I didn't get that far."

"It's quite all right, Ice. I share your frustration. The DG of ConFree does not want the secret of our DX chronological viewing capability to become known to our enemies. I agree with that. Problem is, I believe our security friends are going about this in the wrong way. I deal with this issue every day. I am attempting to educate them. Please be patient awhile longer. General Keystone just needs to become more familiar with you all. He's used to enforcing regulations – not dealing with people. He's really not a bad sort. Once you get to know him."

"I'm sorry, Prof. Why don't we have meetings anymore? We're all split up and – it's lonely! We're blood brothers and sisters, aren't we? You said that yourself. We should be having meetings, to discuss what's happening, to work together, to address joint problems and issues, like we used to. To raise morale. Can't we do that?"

"I understand, Ice. I'd love to do that – but we cannot do that for now. I promise you I am working to overcome the issues that are facing Delta Research, and I will overcome them. That's a promise."

"I'm glad to hear that, Prof. I apologize for barging in on you like that. Next time I'll read the whole memo."

"It's perfectly all right, Ice. I'm always happy to see you. You can barge in on me any time you want. But, um, if it's about Bubble matters you really should see me when I'm in my Bubble office – not out here, in DR. And that memo should not have left the Bubble. Just a reminder."

"I'm sorry, Professor. I'll be more careful in the future."

△

"Tell me how you did it, Bees. Please." We were in the conference vault, just the two of us, me and Bees. I was coming apart – grieving for Julie – and for myself.

"You don't look so good, Prophet," Bees said.

"Please. Tell me exactly. You brought me back from the dead. How did you do it?"

"I told you before, Prophet. I've told everyone. I don't know how I did it. I just know what happened. That's all I can tell you."

"Then tell me."

Bees licked her lips, then began. "I followed the tacmap to locate you. I ran through the mud, through the dark, with x and laser floating past me like in a dream. You were sprawled in the mud, your armor riddled with hits, torn open, smoking holes everywhere. Two glowing laser tracks ran right across your chestplate. Blood was

spurting from your waist and your – your – intestines were exposed, veiled in blood. Your faceplate was smashed. Ice was on her knees beside you, her arms held up like – like she couldn't believe what she was seeing, like she was afraid to touch you. I ... I ..." Bees lowered her face and raised her hands to hide the tears. She was trembling.

The comset on the table buzzed. I ripped it loose and smashed it against a wall.

Bees composed herself and continued.

"I tried to snap your visor up. It jammed. I yanked it off. Your face was all bloody, ripped open, cheekbones exposed. Shot in the face, I thought. Your skull was shattered – blood and brain matter was leaking out. Open dead bloody eyes. Dead, I thought. Dead dead dead.

"I screamed. I think I ... I cursed God. I fell to my knees, straddling your waist. I tore off my own helmet and tossed it away, losing my cloaking. Then I brought my hands to hover over your shattered head. I remembered what that Bright had done to save Ice and Saka. I decided to do the same but I didn't know how to do it. Scarlet blood was still spurting out of your helmet. I carefully inserted my armored hands into your helmet, cradling your skull. I closed my eyes. I did not move. I decided I was not going to move until you were all right. I prayed to God. I prayed harder than I had ever prayed in my life. Save him God, save him, I prayed. Save him, save him, may God's will be done. I've always been a good girl, I've always prayed to you, my whole life. Save him! Please please please! I kept my hands right there for some time, bathed in hot bubbling blood, praying to God. And then I felt it. It rushed all over me, like a warm wave. I was back on Stormhaven again, and an angel had approached me. A female Bright, surely an angel, long lovely golden hair, golden eyes, pale alabaster skin, clad in a white robe. She reached out her hands to me, cupping my head without touching it.

I felt a warm wave, the love rushing through my body, through my soul.

"*You are a healer*, the angel telepathed to me.

"*I am a medic. I heal the wounded*, I replied.

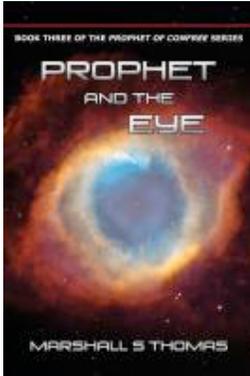
"*Take my hands*, the angel telepathed, holding out her hands. I grasped them. It was like an electric shock, coursing, pulsing through my body.

"Oh!" I cried out.

"*Peace, peace*, the angel thought. *Now you are a healer*. She leaned in and kissed me gently, right on the lips. *Thanks be to God*, the angel thought. And she faded away.

"I am a healer, I thought, as I straddled you, my hands still in your helmet, bathed in blood. It was then that I understood. The power of God was flowing through me. I could feel it – a warm warm river of peace and love, a tsunami of peace and love. I was calm. I knew you were getting better. I asked Ice to do a medprobe. She did. You were breathing. You were alive. It was a miracle. And then they told me Nitro was dead too, and I went to him and God brought him back to life, too."

Somebody was buzzing the vault door, demanding entry. I reached over to Bees and clutched her hands with mine. The tears were streaking down her cheeks. I was about ready to cry, too. We just sat that way for some time, with the Keystone Cops clamoring for entry.



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