

BOOK FOUR OF THE *PROPHET OF CONFREE* SERIES

**PROPHET
AND THE
CREATURE
FROM
ETERNITY**

MARSHALL S THOMAS



In the wake of an apocalyptic alien attack on Quaba, the young prophets of ConFree struggle to rebuild their shattered nation. Facing an endless war with Dark Haven, Prophet and his comrade Arie must counter a pitiless shape shifter from the edge of the galaxy with a mission to destroy humanity. Fear no evil, Bees says, for you are already in the land of death - and you are the light in the dark.

Prophet and the Creature from Eternity

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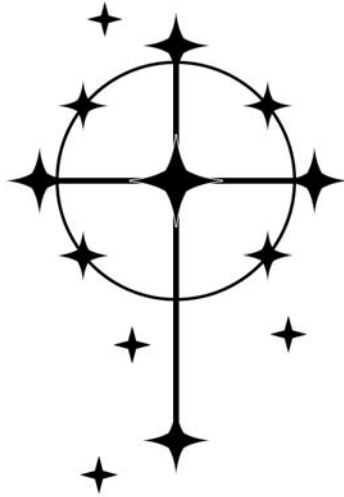
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Prophet
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by

Marshall S Thomas

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Prologue

The Eternal Voyage

"There it is," Joan said. "Right where they said." She peered intently at the glowing d-screen.

"Yes," Sara replied. "Right on course. But it still makes no sense." Joan and Sara were intrigued by the fuzzy little spot, their first visual image of the far-off target. They were in the cockpit of a recon tacship, the *Accord*, one of the BPSA's latest starships. Joan and Sara were both Biogens and each was stunningly beautiful as well as highly intelligent. They each had fair skin and pale, silky blonde hair. The Biogen People's Solidarity Accord equipped each of its citizens with every possible advantage in dealing with humans and aliens alike, and physical beauty was easy enough to produce. So was high intelligence.

"It appears to have no propulsion system," Mina commented. She was another beautiful Biogen, with sultry brown flesh, dark eyes and a soft cascade of luxuriant black hair. Mina was the pilot and mission leader. There were only the three of them in the ship. The Biogen nation was badly outnumbered by their enemies and made do with what it had.

"No propulsion?" Sara repeated. "Well, how did it get way out here? And where is it going?"

"Good questions. Let's see what it looks like," Mina replied.

As they neared the target, the visual image cleared up and details were revealed. The dark, blunt metallic cylinder, a bit larger than the *Accord*, hurtled into infinity at a quite respectable speed, pitted with the debris of the cosmos, scarred and blasted everywhere by microscopic grains of dust. No openings or seams were visible on the craft's exterior.

"I wonder how old it is."

"It could be millions of years old, way out here."

"It's got some kind of shielding."

"All right, where is it going?"

"Nowhere," Mina said. "It originated somewhere in the Nulls – can't tell where or when – and it's headed for the galactic rim. It has evidently been programmed to leave the galaxy since its projected course avoids all stars with planets. Of course, at current speeds that may take – well, millions of years."

"Why would anyone do that? Can we see any signs of who built this starcraft?"

"Not so far," Mina said. "And it's not really a starcraft – only a pressurized container. But we've just got some analysis on the signal that it's been transmitting. No hints of language or who the creators of the signal might be, but Central tells us that it might be a danger signal. Based on the characteristics of the signal – whatever that means. Perhaps a warning to avoid this ship."

"A warning?"

"Yes."

They gazed into infinity, a silent, glorious, star-spangled vista of softly glowing silvery molecular clouds and endless milky rivers of stars flowing majestically through galactic skies.

"If they want people to avoid the ship, why send out a signal?" Joan asked. "That's the only reason we're here."

"Don't know. If it came out of the Nulls, we have no way of knowing who sent it. Or why. Aliens – maybe."

"Great! Why does Central want us to examine this – crudely guided vessel?"

"We're over twenty thousand light years from the BPSA – past Dragon Shoals," Mina said. "It's beyond me. Nobody's ever been out this way before. Why should anyone care? But those are our orders, gals."

"I feel silly asking this," Sara said, "but if the signal is meant to warn us off, and if whoever sent this thing into the vac felt strongly that it should leave the galaxy, might it not be a good idea to leave it alone?"

"Yes, it might. But that's not what we're going to do, is it?"

"Oh, of course not! We're going to poke at it until it bites us on the ass."

"That's it. You clearly have management potential."

"Why, thank you, Mina. I appreciate that."

"All right, let's get to work."

Δ

"Access port locked in place," the *Accord* informed them. "Secure and sealed. Scanner probes mapping interior of the target, see the tacmap." They had found the entry port without a problem. It was circular so the *Accord's* access port had no trouble adjusting and locking on. Now all they had to do was make the entry.

"Strange," Mina said. "The central portion of the ship seems designed to hold the payload – or cargo. And not much else. Looks like life support and interior power systems fore and aft but no stardrive or guidance or propulsion systems at all. It's quite primitive – just a container that somebody shot into the vac, destined to leave the galaxy and never change course. An eternal voyage, ladies. They clearly never want to see this thing again."

"It's a garbage scow," Joan said. "Full of dangerous radioactive waste. Now that makes perfect sense."

"No, there appears to be nothing special so far in the cargo area. And no radiation." The *Accord's* scanner probes roamed over the ship's exterior, the remote sensors now sending back images of the interior. The large cargo bay – if that's what it was – was divided into two sections. One seemed mostly empty, the other, it now appeared, contained a large black sphere of metal that almost filled the bay. It seemed to be featureless.

"All right, this is the payload," Mina said. "Got to be!"

"Look at that!"

"The scanners cannot penetrate it."

"An oversized bowling ball," Sara said. "Why didn't we think of that?"

"We're going to examine this – thing," Mina said. "Sara, you and I are the entry team. Joan, you're in charge of the ship. Just make sure we can get out of there when we want to. All right, suit up. You too, Joan. I want us to be ready for anything."

"Q-link message from Central," the *Accord* informed them. Mina read through the text message.

"It urges us to take extreme security precautions," she said. "We are to enter the target armed and prepared to defend ourselves. We are to make no contact with any biological organisms, human, alien, Biogen or others. We are not to interact with any biological life forms we may encounter. If we note any living organisms, the entry team is to retreat immediately to our ship and not leave the airlock until any and all alien life forms that may be accompanying the entry team have been eradicated per standard operating procedures. If eradication cannot be confirmed, the entry team is to remain in the airlock until it is. Report any problems immediately to Central."

"Extreme security precautions," Joan said. "What does that mean?"

"Unusual phrasing," Mina replied.

"No contact, no interaction," Joan said. "Well, why are they sending us here at all? What do they want from us?"

"I don't suppose they gave us any hints what the problem might be?" Sara asked.

"No. Another silly question. Let's go."

Δ

Once Mina and Sara were inside the alien ship, the *Accord's* access port snapped shut behind them. Mina and Sara activated their spotlights in the pitch-black interior. They were just outside the aft bulkhead of the cargo bay. The spots revealed a gritty metal deck, and the bulkhead appeared to be covered with unidentifiable dark rectangular items.

"Ship is pressurized, ship air is breathable, nontoxic but not recommended, see the analysis," the *Accord* advised them. "Ship's grav is set to zero point seven, suggest move carefully."

"Do you detect any biological organisms?" Mina asked.

"No life detected."

The alien ship's interior lighting suddenly activated, a cold white light, startling the entry team.

"Damn! That scared the hell out of me," Sara declared.

"Nothing to be scared of," Mina said. "It's probably an auto-light." She was looking around carefully, armed with an E battle rifle.

"What a mess. This place is filthy," Sara declared. She also clutched an E. "Look at this bulkhead!" It blocked further access into the cargo bay. The bulkhead was covered with what looked like plastic information posters, etched in an unknown language. A large, twisted violet cross suddenly lit up and began throbbing insistently. More crosses appeared, scattered around the bulkhead. In the very center of the bulkhead there was a hatch, sealed shut. It had one of those twisted violet crosses set into the metal.

"Stop moving and focus in on those runes," Joan said from the ship.

"It's a warning," Sara said. "Do not enter. I don't need to know the language to see that clearly."

"Accord," Mina said. "Any sign of life?"

"Negative life. Nothing at all."

"How about on the other side of this wall?"

"No life detected."

"This hatch is – suggestive," Sara said.

"If they don't want anyone going in, why have a hatch?" Mina asked.

"Maybe it's designed to raise the overall IQ level in the galaxy. Anyone who enters dies, and her low IQ vanishes from the galactic genetic pool."

"So what do you suggest we do?" Mina asked.

"We're going in. Of course, we're going in. You don't want us to go in, just order it. And I guarantee I'll get back to the Accord before you do."

"You are a continuing reassuring source of common sense, Sara. If you expect to advance in this outfit, I'd advise you to ease up on that. Of course, we're going in. Let's see if we can get that hatch open."

Δ

"So – we've got the hatch figured out?" Sara asked.

"I do believe so," Mina replied.

"Press down the handle, then touch the red activation button that is revealed. Right?"

"Right."

"And the hatch snaps left, vanishing into the bulkhead, and we step in."

"That's it."

"And then, very likely, the hatch snaps shut behind us."

"Right."

"That's the part that worries me," Sara said.

"As discussed, we confirm that there is a similar mechanism on the other side, before we actually step in. The probe scanner images appear to indicate this is the case. It actually makes sense, even if it was constructed by an unknown civilization.

"All right, we do it!" Mina reached out and pulled the handle down, pressed the red button, and the hatch snapped open, revealing the next chamber, at first pitch black and then slowly flickering to white light. Mina and Sara cautiously paused in the hatchway, their weapons pointed into the chamber.

"Hatch controls look similar on this side," Sara confirmed, then stepped all the way in. Mina followed and the hatch snapped shut behind them.

They were facing a huge, dull-black sphere that almost filled the cargo chamber. A prominent twisted violet cross was affixed to the sphere, throbbing eerily. There was nothing else in the room, nothing on the chamber walls. It was deadly quiet.

"Accord, composition of the sphere please."

"Unknown. Please touch with medprobe." Mina touched the tip of a medprobe to the sphere.

"Unknown composition. The sphere is coated with a transparent substance that resists penetration and resists analysis."

"Unknown? Accord, what substance is the coating? What substance is the sphere?"

"I have insufficient information for analysis."

"Terrific. Look, Sara, the probes show the sphere is secured to the deck but it's not part of the ship. It's completely separate."

"Mina, please get me a better view of the sphere," Joan said from the ship.

"Accord, can you get me an interior shot of the sphere?" Mina asked. "What is in there?"

"Mina, the sphere is impenetrable to our probes," the *Accord* replied.

"I'm sweating like a pig," Sara confessed. "I really don't want to see what is inside that thing."

"We've got to investigate it," Mina said.

"Look at this." Sara barely whispered it. One of her armored fingers was touching the sphere. "It's a seam. A seam." She brushed it with her hand, clearing away a thin smear of oily dust, and followed the scarcely visible seam until it revealed itself as a rough oval, about a mike wide.

"And look at this," Mina said, clearing another small rectangular space to one side of the oval. "Another seam! Surely they're related."

"This is so exciting!" Joan commented.

"Easy for you to say," Sara replied. "I'm shaking."

"Calm down, Sara," Mina said. "We'll be fine."

"It looks like a ... a simport."

"Yes. And the smaller one is the on/off function. Bet?"

"Oh, good lord!"

"This is thrilling!" Joan said.

"Now," Mina said. "Let's see what we've got here." She touched the small rectangle with one finger.

△

The simport slowly appeared, filling with a faint light, revealing a dim view of the interior of the sphere. The interior now flickered with a more intense white light – as if hesitant. As if the autostart had not performed this task for some time.

The light ceased flickering and flooded the interior. It revealed a large chamber full of unidentifiable structures that might have been furniture, or containers, or technical gear, or pretty much anything else.

"Any life, Accord?" Mina asked.

"The probes cannot penetrate the simport, Mina. The visual data reveals no life. The objects within do not appear to be biological."

"So what are they?" Sara asked.

"I have insufficient data to respond."

"Now what, Mina?" Sara asked. A pale face appeared right up against the simport, peering out at them. It was so unexpected that Sara shrieked, staggered back and almost fell. Mina jumped back but rapidly recovered and slammed the barrel of her E against the simport.

The pale face was a female, seemingly young but worn down by some awful, great tragedy. She was clearly exhausted, on her last legs, ready to drop. She appeared human to Mina, pale eyes and light brown hair that seemed dry and dirty. She placed two hands against the simport and her fingers were trembling. It was almost like a plea.

"Who are you!" Mina demanded, still covering the apparition with her E. Mina was terrified but did not want Sara to know it. Sara recovered and pointed her E at the girl.

"Warning, it is unlikely that our weapons will penetrate the sphere or the simport," the *Accord* noted.

"Thank you, Accord," Mina said. She was trying to stop shaking and was unsure of her next step.

Please please please. Help me. Help me. Help me. The words formed in their minds, as clear as a bell sounding on a cold, still winter's day. Telepathy. Very strong telepathy.

"Accord, why did you not detect life?" Mina asked.

"No life was detected, Mina."

"And how about now? Do you detect life?"

"No life is detected."

Please please please. I have been here over a hundred years. Imprisoned, by cruel enemies. Please help me. I am only a young woman, and I only want a normal life. I want to see the sun and moons and walk in sunlight through flower gardens and touch the blue grass and reunite with my family, if they are still alive. Please help me. I am so very, very weary. I fear I shall die of heartbreak, and loneliness. I am immortal, and destined to

travel onwards, into infinity, forever, trapped and alone in this cruel, eternal prison.

"Joan, are you recording this?"

"Affirmative."

"Accord, why do you not detect life? You can see her, yes?"

"I have a visual image but my probes cannot penetrate the sphere. She appears to be biological, but I cannot confirm it."

"What is your name, prisoner?" Mina asked. "We can hear your thoughts. Can you hear us?"

I hear you and understand. My name is Ch'aka-Shan Lasseion. I am a royal princess of the House of Lasseion, which is the legitimate ruling family of the Celestial Sphere of Thoran, the sacred voice of the people.

"Why are you imprisoned here? What crime did you commit?"

I committed no crime. Our legitimate kingdom was overthrown by jealous rivals, aided by a mercenary pirate gang. In our society it is forbidden to spill royal blood. I was placed in this prison and sent out into the dark, to my fate. She blinked, and tears trickled down her cheeks.

"That's terrible!" Sara said. "We should help her!"

"Um, Mina," Joan interrupted. "Remember, we are supposed to retreat to the ship, immediately, if we contact biological life, and not interact with it in any way. Remember?"

"I am fully aware of our orders, soldier. I need no reminders from you or anyone else."

"Yes sir. Sorry, sir."

Please please please. You are my only hope. I cannot escape from here on my own, but I can tell you how to release me. If you can do that, I will pray to our gods for you, and the House of Lasseion will reward you with anything you may desire.

"Sara, describe this person to me," Mina said.

"Well, you can see her. Black hair, pale face, grey eyes, very thin, grey sleeveless top, seems very sincere, a good person."

"Joan, you can see the image. Describe her."

"I see an attractive young lady with very blonde hair, almost white, looks like green eyes, a thin face, soft pink lips, a white sleeveless blouse, overwhelmed by sorrow, maybe we should report back to Central before – um, sorry."

"And I see yet another young lady. Accord, how do you see her?"

"My view of her is – imprecise. And unfocused. A featureless face, light brownish hair."

Please please please. The secrets of the universe are yours if you help me. Our planet was a paradise for all, we had everything that anyone could desire, peace and plenty and wisdom and strength, no work or strife or worry or responsibilities, only life and love. I can do all that, I can change the future for you and for your worlds. I beg you, do the right thing, for me, for yourself, for all your nations, for all your worlds. Change the future!

"Sara, let's get back to the Accord. Joan, prep me a flash critic for Central. I'll add the text soon as we get back."

"That's one scary lady," Sara said slowly. She was almost in shock.

Please please please! Think of your children! Safe and secure forever!

"May God have mercy on your soul," Mina said.



Chapter 1

Tough Love

"Rains, Richard. Warname Prophet, rank commander, Galactic Information, ConFree Legion. Front and center!" I entered the room, marched over to the table and snapped to attention. It was clearly a temporary set-up, but the cross of the Legion hung on the wall, flanked by the Legion shield and the seal of the government of the Confederation of Free Worlds. There were not many buildings in Quaba City that survived the Apocalypse. I knew they were rebuilding as quickly as possible but I had not had a glimpse of the outside world in two months, and I did not even know where I was.

Three Legion officers sat behind the table, clad in their blacks, looking me over curiously. These were the court-martial judges. I knew nothing about them. They wore no rank insignia, per court-martial regs, but each one bore the combat cross and the blood badge on their blouses. That told me all I had to know about them. They were brothers-in-arms. I, too, wore the combat cross and the blood badge. I had been ordered to wear my blacks, and I was hoping that was a good sign, but I did not know for sure. Until an hour ago I had been wearing a phospho-orange jump suit. I knew the decision about my case had already been made. Good or bad, I

did not know. Nor did I care much. I do what I do, I thought. I do what I think is right, and that's it. If it's wrong, I pay the price. And the penalty for desertion and treason is death. No good deed goes unpunished, I knew that much. And by now they know exactly what happened, and why. The truth is never in question, in a ConFree court. Neither is the law. All that is in question is justice.

"At ease," somebody said. I snapped into at ease. A Legion soldier in A-vest stood against the wall, with an E Model 11 at port arms.

"Commander Prophet, the court has reached decisions on the charges against you." One of the officers, presumably the lead judge, was looking over a printout. He did not even glance at me. "On the first charge, willful desertion in time of war, with a penalty of execution, the court finds you guilty as charged but waives the penalty because of a result that advanced the interests of the people of ConFree and convinced the court of your courage and willingness to sacrifice yourself for the common good."

Waives the penalty, I thought. What the hell does that mean? No execution, all right, but what do they do with me? Banishment? Cast from the service? Let me sweep the streets? Do I even care? I knew I'd accept whatever they said. Not that I had any choice. I was so burnt out, I'd go with whatever road appeared before me. I had given it my all, with the Eye – and failed. I had failed to protect the women and children of ConFree. Failed. Who the hell was I, to ask for mercy, or anything else? I was a failure. So were we all. And now all we had to look forward to was vengeance. But if the people of ConFree thought I was part of the problem, I might not even get that chance.

"On the second charge," the lead judge continued, "gross negligence treason, with a penalty of execution, the court finds you not guilty. The questionable Galactic Information program in which you were directly involved has been thoroughly researched and

investigated, and your brainscans indicate that you were acting in good faith at all times, despite the program's unacceptable results.

"Attention!" the lead judge continued. I snapped to. "Commander Prophet, the people of ConFree have spoken, through their representatives, the General Courts-Martial of the Quaba First Judicial Circuit. You are cleared of all charges. You are dismissed. Exit through the door on your left."

Δ

The door on my left opened into a comfortable office mod where a young colonel stood up from behind a cluttered desk to greet me. "Commander Prophet, congratulations on the verdict. The people of the Confederation of Free Worlds thank you for your service and for your role in the liberation of Quaba City. Please have a seat. Would you like some dox?" He was an Outworlder, dark hair, a wiry frame, piercing dark eyes. He wore the combat cross on his blouse.

"No, thank you, Colonel, I'd rather stand."

"Are you sure? A little dox? It's over – best to relax."

"It's quite all right," I said. Get it the hell over with, I thought. Whatever you have to say, say it and let me get out of your office. As for the people of ConFree, they have a strange way of showing their appreciation.

"All right, I understand," he said, still standing by his desk. "This won't take long. I'd like to give you some background on your case, so you will understand what happened. I'm sure you know ConFree is focused on justice, not laws. The desertion charges seemed quite serious on paper, but once it became clear that you were fleeing a very secure rear echelon position working a failed program in order to rejoin your comrades in the Quaba City combat zone, and once we realized what that entailed, and what you went through, and what you accomplished, the desertion charges went away. Most deserters run from the battle, not towards it. Is that accurate so far?"

"Yes sir."

"And as for the Eye, the gross negligence treason charge, everyone involved was detained – including the former Director-General of ConFree – because of the critical importance of that highly classified program, what it did, and what it failed to do. It wasn't just you. But our intensive investigation of that program concluded that although the program was flawed, you and your comrades did all you could do to make it work and when you realized it was not working, you reached the correct conclusions. By then it was too late, of course, but that was not your fault. We can classify this as a noble effort, and certainly not gross negligence treason. Am I right?"

"Yes sir."

"Again, the people of ConFree thank you. Justice has been served. I have here an unclassified summary of the conclusions of your court-martial. This is your copy."

"I won't need that, Colonel."

"You may need it, Commander. You have been reactivated and reassigned to Galactic Information. Please report to them tomorrow morning, at 0800. You are dismissed. Please pick up your personal property at the Property Office."

I left the document on his desk. I didn't give a damn what it said. And I didn't give a damn what the people of ConFree thought of me, either.

Δ

Free at last! I set out on foot from the detention facility, which was evidently attached to the temporary quarters of the Ministry of Justice. It was a dark afternoon, lightly raining. I felt terrific, clad in my blacks, coldcoat and field hat and boots. They had returned my IDs and other miscellany – even my vac gun, which now rested comfortably in my jacket pocket holster. Free and armed. I almost felt like a regular ConFree citizen. Almost.

It was delightfully cool – I didn't mind the temperature or the rain. I wandered around trying to get my bearings. New buildings were going up all around me, prefab habmods that built themselves under pressure, very light and very strong. It only took a few days to set up these buildings. Most all of Quaba City had been destroyed, so it all had to be rebuilt. Construction techs in blue coveralls were swarming everywhere. Whatever was to replace the old city was evidently well planned – these were low-rise structures of pale simstone. It was too early to get an idea of the master plan, but lines of airhaulers were snaking through the city-wide construction site pulling hundreds of large live trees that were being dropped off all over the place.

I spotted the city air raid shelter. It was festooned with construction tape and barriers warning everyone away. The ASR had attacked head-on into the shelter and killed everything that moved.

I didn't know what to do. My mind was aflame. I was sick of it all, all the struggle, all the blood and sweat and tears, the hatred, the wasted effort, years of bitter searching to read the future, and for what? A city full of corpses. I had given it all I had, I failed, and the enemy fell from the skies and slaughtered our people. We fought back, hard, and suffered catastrophic casualties. We smashed them to bits and chased them from the Outvac. Then the civilian survivors turned on us, furious, determined to avenge the dead, to round up the traitors and execute them all. Only there were no traitors. Only faithful, weary soldiers.

My tacmod guided me to the Renewal Suites. It was a sprawling hotel, brand new and quite impressive. The front lobby had a beautiful marble fountain set up in a garden area. I touched my ID to the check-in pad at reception, and a sweet little honey handed me two access cards for my suite.

The suite was astounding. As a soldier of the Legion, I was used to spartan surroundings. They hadn't mistreated us at the detention

facility, but they hadn't spoiled us either. Two simple meals a day, no exercise, no recreation, no contact with the outside world or other detainees, no access to comms systems, tacmods, vid or audio broadcasts, no visits from friends or family, no idea what was happening in the outside world. Just sit in solitary and wait. The cell was not so bad as we were detainees, not prisoners, but there was nothing at all to do. In old films the prisoners would make friends with mice or roaches or wall lizards, but ConFree prisons were so clean that was out.

And here I was in a huge, luxurious suite that had plenty of room for everyone in Delta, my old squad. I called Honeyhair on my comset.

"Honeyhair," I said, "I'm out."

"Prophet! Oh my God, thank you. I've been praying for you every day."

"I'm at the Renewal Suites, right downtown. Please come."

"The Renewal Suites? Oh. Why not come here, come home?"

"No. Please come here."

"All right, sure, be right there!"

"Love you!"

Δ

When the door chimes sounded, my adrenaline activated. "Open," I said. The door snapped open. Honeyhair stood there in the doorway, faintly smiling, poised like a model on a catwalk, tall and slim and lovely, clad in her seductively-tailored grey Civilian Support Corps outfit, a cascade of honey-colored hair touching her shoulders, smouldering green eyes burning into mine. For an instant she seemed cool and distant, then she squealed and threw herself into my arms, almost knocking me off balance, wrapping around me and squeezing like a boa constrictor, sharp nails digging into my back. We stood there for awhile, lost in the past. I closed my eyes. We had been through so much, together and apart. I felt her

heartbeat pounding against my chest. She began to tremble. She began to cry. Sudden tears, sticky against my flesh. Yes – this was what I needed, a hot dose of Honeyhair, my eternal love, this and nothing else, forever and ever and ever.

"I missed you so much!" she gasped. I couldn't say a word. I lifted her up into my arms and carried her to the side of the Emperor-sized bed and let her feet touch the floor and carefully began removing her clothing with shaking hands. As her blouse slid to the floor and her bra fell away, her hands were at my shoulders.

"Shouldn't we close the door?" she asked quietly.

The door. Oh. She was always thinking. "Close," I whispered. It closed. Her pants slid down her long lovely legs. I cupped those tempting creamy breasts, the nipples already hardening. Deadman! This was what life was supposed to be about. Love. Not death.

Δ

"Why didn't you want to come home, instead of asking me to come here?" Honeyhair asked. We were naked, in each other's arms, spent and exhausted and happy, tangled in the sheets, bedspreads fallen to the floor.

"I didn't even know where home was," I replied. "Last time I checked we were homeless, after they arrested the Prof."

"I could have told you. I was planning a big welcome home party with all our friends."

"Yes. I was pretty sure you'd do that. I didn't want that. I wanted you all to myself. I needed to ... talk."

"I see. You haven't done much talking so far. Not that I'm complaining."

"It's just that I'm ... in bad shape. I think you know me better than anyone. Am I a whiner? A complainer?"

"You are a loyalist. Strong as cenite. Driven. Determined. Impossible to stop, once you start. You'd rather die than quit."

"Yes. That was before. But things have changed. I'm not that way anymore."

"Why not?"

"I did everything I could. They even killed me, and I ... returned. Yes, it was victory or death. But our quest – it failed. The Eye – you called her my evil mistress. She lied to us. She failed us. And a lot of ConFree nationals died horribly. Then, after final victory, the people wanted vengeance – against us. We, who spent our lives sacrificing everything for the women and children of ConFree. They threw me in jail. Desertion, and treason, they said. I was lucky to survive that."

"It's the wheel of history, Prophet. You taught me that. After a national disaster the people search for traitors. It's only natural."

"I'm not a traitor."

"That's what they ruled. You're free."

"I'm sick of it. I'm sick of it all. I've decided you were right after all. I want to quit the Legion."

"I've been urging you to do that for years – and you always refused."

"I'm going to hand in my resignation, tomorrow. I want to live with you, forever. We can easily afford that. You keep your Civilian Support Corps job. I'll find something else – I don't care what."

"That may not be possible. Haven't you been keeping up on the news? We're at war, and it looks like it's going to last forever. Legion enlistments have been frozen indefinitely, and just about every male and a whole lot of females as well are being drafted into national service. It's a national emergency, and they'll just laugh if you submit your resignation."

"No, I have not been keeping track of the news. That was against the rules."

"I'd like you to leave the Legion as well, but now is not the time."

"I hate these people. I risked everything for them, and they want to execute me? Tossing me in jail? The hell with them! They can find

somebody else to look after them. I no longer care about the women and children of ConFree."

"Don't say that, Prophet. Please. That's what we do. That's what we all do, and that's all we do. Please don't say that."

"I care about you, and I care about my comrades in Delta – that's it. The rest of the galaxy can burn in Hell."

"You need some dox," she said, wrapping a sheet around herself and heading for the snackmod.

"Drop the sheet," I said. She paused, smiled, and let the sheet fall to the floor.

"Is that better?" she asked.

"Yes." She was a naked angel, touched by the gods. She went into the snackmod and brought back two doxcups and settled in beside me once again. We popped the tops and the warm, sweet aroma flowed over us.

"Dox won't help me," I said, sipping the heavenly brew. I was kind of pleased that Honeyhair had so far not mentioned Jennifer. Jenn was a sore point with Honeyhair and I had no plans to recontact her. That was the very last thing I needed.

"We'll have to work something out," Honeyhair said. "You can't leave the Legion, but perhaps you can find some position where they can use your talents but chances of getting killed are low."

"Like what? That's what we thought we had with Delta Research, at first."

"Like training. You can teach the kids, the new generation. They might send you to Providence, who knows?"

"Or to Planet Hell. I'm supposed to report to Galactic Information, tomorrow at 0800. I'm going to do that, but I'll submit my resignation soon as I get there."

"That won't work. You'll have to accept it, Prophet. Whatever they want you to do."

"So nothing has changed."

"You have to be realistic."

"So I'm destined to fight until I'm killed."

"Prophet –"

"You know what I'd like to do?" I asked. "I'd like to build a secret home, like the Prof did, in the Wildlands. So secret that nobody will be able to find us. Just you and me, hiding from the world."

Honeyhair picked up her purse from the bedside table, and rummaged through it. She extracted a crumpled printout, and handed it to me.

"Take a look," she said. It was a color image from an A-suit helmet. It showed a rusty wire fence, and mounted on each metal fencepost was the bloody, decapitated head of a child – eight children, Outworlders and Assidics, once darling little boys and girls, now only obscene symbols of insane rage and hatred. At the bottom of the fence, the body of a little girl lay as if sleeping, clad in colorful little girl clothes, clearly dressed by a loving mother. She had no head.

"What the hell!" I objected. "Why do you show me this?"

"What do you think of it?"

"You know damned well what I think of it! Who did this?" Rage and hatred – yes, it was burning in my veins, red hot adrenaline surging, burning. My muscles were twitching. This was the real-world consequence of failure. My failure!

"Demons," she said. "Demons did this." Her face was cold and hard.

"Why do you carry this around?" I asked.

"I don't need it any more. You can have it. It's seared into my brain."

"Answer my question!"

"It's my motivation. I take it out and look it over every time I consider something stupid – like hiding from the world. Take it!"

I couldn't stop staring at that obscene image. Now my eyes were filling with tears, blurring my view.

"Wake up, Prophet," she said coldly. "No more self-pity, please. We have to avenge those children – and a lot more ConFree dead. We have to kill every Demon we can find, and every Dark as well, and everyone allied with them. ConFree is at war. We can't hide in the Wildlands. We have to invade Deneb, and the PherdanFed, and Earth, and kill everything that moves, and show the entire galaxy that anyone who opposes us is going to die horribly. We are going to show no mercy to our enemies. We are going to avenge our dead. I'm going to be right there, when that happens. And I want you to be at my side. Don't submit that resignation. Just show up tomorrow, at 0800, at Galactic Information, and see what they want. Now put that picture in your wallet, and whenever you feel yourself weakening, take another good look at it."

Talk about tough love. I was stunned. I couldn't even answer her. I knew she was right. What the hell was the matter with me? ConFree is at war, a war for national and species survival, and I want to hide in the Wildlands? No. Impossible. After all I'd been through, I was going to give up? No. Impossible. I might as well just admit it. Death is my destination. And the mission isn't accomplished until you are killed. I knew that. I knew that very well.



Galactic Info was a giant bloc of armored simstone that had mostly survived the Apocalypse, but it was heavily damaged and scorched almost black and was now under repair. Most all of Quaba City had been levelled and was now a sprawling, smoky construction site. All the bodies had been removed, but the memories could not be erased that easily.

It was a cold dark morning. There was a lot of foot traffic, and most of the people were in uniform. It looked like everyone was going to be participating in our national renewal effort, and in the war of national salvation. Those were the terms they were using. I

joined a group of troopers entering the Galactic Info building. Two armored and armed Legion troopers guarded the door, ensuring that everyone had proper access. A huge holo poster loomed over us from a vacant lot beside the building. It showed a field full of dead Demons, under a dark sky, lying in a great tangled heap of smoking, glowing armor. Three Legion soldiers in black armor stood off to one side, E's at the ready. The blood-red caption read: **PATRIOTS! ENLIST IN THE CONFREE LEGION. DO YOUR PART TO DEFEND THE PEOPLE OF CONFREE.**

Once inside, I joined a mob of troopers in a large foyer waiting patiently for access to a line of clerks at makeshift tables, who were looking over ID's and directing people onward to their assignments. I was surprised at the number of people who were evidently being assigned to Galactic Info. It had always been an elite outfit, and I was unsure what all these people were going to be doing.

"Your warname Prophet? Richard Rains?" The official was looking over something on his d-screen.

"That's me."

"Report to Assignments, Room 3302 upstairs. Don't show up until 1115 hours. They won't let you in if you come earlier than that. You get in with your DNA, but don't try it before 1115."

"Sure. Does it say what my assignment will be?"

"It's classified. Next!"

△

The cafeteria was still in the same place, but it was a scaled-down version. I purchased a dox from the autoserve and found a little table where I could relax until my appointment. I popped the top on my cup. The place was getting crowded.

"Prophet! I'll be damned! How are ya?" It was Arie, my best buddy, in his blacks, stepping out of the crowd, a frosty water bottle in one hand.

"Arie! It's great to see you!" I leaped up and we embraced warmly. We were truly blood brothers. We had enlisted in the

Legion on the same day on Eugarat and we had both been killed in action in the same engagement, on Vulcan, and we had both been brought back to life shortly thereafter by our loving comrade, Bees. Arie was a little guy; he looked like an innocent kid but he was a contact master and tough as nails. If he decided he didn't like you, he'd kick you right in the head. I'd seen him do it.

"All right, no kissy-face now," he said. "People are starting to look at us." We sat down. I was so happy to see him again.

"When did you get out?" I asked.

"Three days ago. I was in about two months."

"What did they charge you with?"

"Desertion and gross negligence treason. What a load of crap. And a colossal waste of taxpayer money."

"But you're cleared of all charges?"

"Yeah. Whoopee. I couldn't care less."

"Honeyhair told me they detained all the prophets in Delta except for Bees. What happened with Bees?"

"It seems they were not comfortable arresting the ambassador from Bright Haven. But by that time, they had fired the new Director General, Buzz whatsizname, and the Salvation Committee ruled that Bees could not continue to function as ambassador from Bright Haven, even if the Brights wanted it. Because she was a ConFree citizen. They explained it to the Brights. So far they have not detained Bees."

"What about the others? Is everyone being released?"

"Not yet. Scout and Smiley were freed. Saka and Ice are still in jail. They finally freed Tara, but the Prof and Doctor Dimension are still in detention. This is what we get – for all our work." Arie grimaced.

"It's depressing," I admitted. "Honeyhair persuaded me to carry on. I was getting set to quit."

"So was I. Blondie got on my case and said we could not quit the field of battle."

"Sounds like a well-coordinated plan. They were both hot for us to quit the Legion, now they both urge us to stay on."

"I don't try to understand her. I just do what I'm told."

"Yeah, me too."

"So did they tell you to report to Assignments, upstairs?"

"Yeah – Room 3302."

"Ha! Me too! Maybe we'll get the same assignment."

"Well, I doubt it. But maybe. That would be nice."

"We'll see."

"Arie. I just got out of jail yesterday. I spent a lot of time with Honeyhair, but I was kind of focused on her, and myself, and not on the political situation. You've been out for three days. What the hell is going on? I remember hearing about the declaration of war, before they arrested me, but I never got a chance to follow through. This may be a lame question, but who did we declare war on?"

"ConFree declared war on the Realm, the Domain of the Wandering Angels, as the Darks call themselves, or Dark Haven, as we are now calling them – and all allied and associated states. That includes Deneb and the PherdanFed and Earth. Quite an impressive list of enemies."

"The Realm. That's Satan!"

"He was not mentioned but yes, that's Satan, if you listen to Bees. And quite a few others."

"So we're declaring war on Satan."

"Satan, the Darks, the Demons, the Army of the Spirit of the Realm, and all allied military forces on Earth, the PherdanFed and Deneb. Should be fun."

"But you said Satan is not mentioned?"

"No, and that may cause you to wonder who is going to win this war. When you are not allowed to mention your principal enemy's name, it calls into question how serious you really are, does it not?"

"What the hell are we afraid of?" I asked.

"A lot of people do not accept Satan's existence, and just do not want to hear it. Everybody seems willing to go to war against the Realm, or the Darks, but not against Satan."

"Who's running ConFree now?"

"Um – it's the Salvation Committee of the Directorate of National Salvation."

"And exactly who are they?"

"Presumably people who managed to avoid being arrested for treason after the recent hostilities."

"Clever of them! Who's the new DG?"

"I have no idea. I believe they're still trying to decide that. The ConFree Council is still there – they report to the people in the member worlds of the confederation. The Directorate of National Salvation replaces the old Executive Committee, and includes the Council of Ministers. The Salvation Committee is the new executive action arm, headed by the Director General."

"That's more than I ever wanted to know. Thanks, Arie."

"Well, I've got to go – it's almost 1015 and that's when my appointment is."

"All right, good luck!"

"You too!" He got up and headed into the future. The future! That's what we had been looking at, with the Eye. And now it was just as murky as it had been before. But it wasn't up to the Eye any more. It was up to us.



"Commander Prophet, reporting as ordered, sir," I said, saluting. A young commander in black rose from behind a cluttered desk to greet me. He had dark hair and a pale face and the combat cross on his blouse. A giant holo sitmap of the Quaba region covered the wall directly behind him. He appeared – tense.

"Prophet!" he said. "Yes, welcome. We need another commander." He looked me over carefully. "I'm Commander

Quigley. I've read your file. It looks good to me, and I could not care less about your court martial."

"Thank you, sir."

"We're at war, Commander, and we need every man. Right now we're putting out fires, prepping our forces for the counterattack."

Counterattack! That sure sounded good to me.

"Sir!" Another trooper appeared, dropping a heavy infopak onto the commander's in-box. "Immediate eyes, sir." Quigley ignored him.

"Prophet, you are now assigned to Galactic Info Plans. You're one of our emergency firemen. Your mission is to resolve whatever problem we send you to, as quickly as possible, then return here for further instructions. Clear?"

"Yes sir."

"All right, your mission is a regiment called the Guardians. They are based at Camp 802, which is so new it doesn't even have a name yet. It's eighty K out of town. They are ethnic Taka, from Andrion Two, a ConFree world, as you know. I'm not sure what the problem is, but it seems to be multi-faceted. These are tough soldiers, and they are all volunteers, faithful to ConFree, from all I hear. However, they operate under their own commander, also a Taka, and he is of royal blood – from their tribal leadership. That's why Galactic Info is getting involved. It is vital that no problems arise that would threaten the close relationship between Andrion Two's ConFree and Legion installations and the natives, especially at this sensitive time."

"These ... Guardians," I asked. "Are they a Legion regiment? Does their commander report through our chain of command?"

"Yes, we ran them through Planet Hell. On paper the commander is a Legion Senior Captain, one of our guys. The Taka commander does what he says. But it seems the troopies do only what their Taka chief tells them to do."

"I see."

"Fix it, Prophet. Then report back here."

"Yes sir. I'll do that."



Chapter 2

The Guardians

"Sir! The Guardians Regiment is all present or accounted for! We stand ready for inspection." The young Taka captain saluted us and stood at attention in front of his regiment. It was a chilly day and the sky was covered with dark grey clouds. We were on the base parade ground. The captain and his regiment were in camfax; so were Senior Captain Regs and I. The Taka captain looked sharp and intent.

We inspected the troops on foot, Regs and I and the Taka captain. The men were in A-vests and comtops, with E's at port arms. I was thrilled, looking over this mass of soldiery, all Takas, all volunteers, braced at attention, a thousand willing soldiers from a distant world some seven hundred light years away, offering their souls and bodies to protect the peoples of the Confederation of Free Worlds from anything that would threaten them. They were small-framed but weather beaten, wiry and tough, I could see. I knew they would never quit. Why were they here? Was this their fight? Five companies, each with four Combat Assault Teams of five squads, fifty men each CAT, a total of over a thousand men. Yes – we needed every man.

△

"Sorry about the quarters," Captain Regs said. "They're still working on more permanent offices for us." We had just entered the regimental Hqs, a large tempo officemod tent that was crowded with field desks and d-screens and holo tacmap generators and officers making their way from desk to desk over a muddy floor.

"It's quite all right," I said as Captain Regs sat at his desk and offered me a folding chair. "The regiment looked sharp and the soldiers looked fit. So what's the problem?"

"Well sir, the problem is a lack of discipline, and an improper chain of command. It's one problem after another. We ran the unit through Basic and Planet Hell but with the war it was probably hurried, and it seems to me that they're not ready for combat. They are a tribal society and it still shows. The soldiers are tough and fit, yes, but Captain Stormdawn is a problem. He's hard to deal with. They tell me he's from the royal family of Andrion Two but I don't care about that. He's had the training, and I treat him like any other officer. He's here because he's the native leader of the regiment, but I am the CO and he's supposed to take his orders from me. He does, but whenever I give an order to the unit, they all look to Stormdawn and unless he nods his head, they do nothing. That's unacceptable."

"So he is the problem?"

"Yes sir. I know, it's an all-volunteer outfit, they assure me, and it's his regiment. Those were the political decisions we made. And I'm stuck with the result. He does what I say, but he's arrogant and silent and hostile. I'm not sure why."

"What's this latest dust-up, you have some Taka in the brig?"

"Yes sir. Two of them wanted to exchange some rations. They went to the warehouse but were refused because they already had the proper amount that was issued to the unit. They attacked the supply clerks, then the clerks threw them out but it was a big brawl. The two Taka were taken to the brig, the word got out and three other Taka attacked some supply folks, presumably to retaliate, and they were also thrown in the brig. Everything was done by the book."

Stormdawn was furious but will not even discuss the incident with me. He's acting like a child."

"A squabble about rations and fighting among units. This should not be a problem. It should be resolved in about five marks. Nobody should be wasting their time with this crap when we're prepping for war. Where are these five Taka now?"

"They're still in the brig, sir."

"Why's that? They're not doing anyone any good in there."

"The regulations call for a mandatory week for breach of peace, sir."

"I see. Any Legion troopers in the brig from that fracas?"

"No sir. They were defending themselves."

"Thank you, Captain. I'll see this – Stormdawn – now. I'll see him alone. Thanks for your assistance."

"Thank you, sir."



The Taka barracks were also tempo quarters, set in a field of mud. It was starting to rain. Fine. The Taka troopers seemed busy but they snapped to attention when I entered and guided me to Captain Stormdawn's little office. He was at a desk before a d-screen and seemed startled to see me. He leaped to his feet and snapped to attention and saluted. "Sir!" he said.

"At ease, Captain. My name is Prophet. I'm a Legion commander. I was impressed with your regiment. They seem to be fine soldiers. Sit down, please. I'd like to learn more about your regiment." I sat in a nearby field chair.

"Yes sir." He cautiously sat down again. He was medium-framed but clearly very fit. His flesh was fairer than most of his troopers. He had dark hair and clear brown eyes. He was a handsome youth.

"When was your regiment formed?" I asked.

"It was formed hundreds of years ago, sir. At that time it was not a regiment. It was composed of warriors from the Clan of the Sun

and the Golden Sword who were the Guardians of the Tomb of the Kings. They were descended from the People of the Clouds, who made the Far March and kept our race alive. By 312, our people were nearing extinction because of a suicidal political philosophy in response to a deadly invasion of giant exoseg creatures. The Legion then invaded our world and cleansed it of the exos. In response and gratitude, we allied with the Legion. When the Omnis invaded our world in 328, we again allied ourselves with your Legion troopers and together we drove those vile alien invaders from our lands. I was a young warrior then and I remember well the sacrifices the Legion soldiers made for us. More recently, when we learned that Dark and Demon armies had attacked ConFree, we formally organized a regiment, called it the Guardians Regiment, and most every young Taka male volunteered. We chose the best for our regiment. Then we joined the Legion, as a volunteer unit."

A couple of Taka troopers entered silently and served us a pale tea in little cups.

"This is delicious," I said. It was light and clear with a pleasing taste. It was raining heavily outside, the rain beating on the tent.

"It is Stone Mountain Winter tea," Stormdawn said. "Direct from Andrion Two."

"I understand you have royal blood."

"My mother is Queen Moontouch. She has united all Taka clans in friendship."

"And your father?"

"My father is a Galactic Information officer, warname Thinker, also known as James Wester. He is assigned here on Quaba."

"Thinker? James Wester? Why, I know him! I did not realize you were his son." Wester had been, until recently, the Galactic Information official responsible for Delta Research. He had a very good reputation. I remembered vaguely that he was said to have three wives and had helped to open up Andrion 2.

"Yes, I am his son."

"Please tell me about the incident that ended with five of your soldiers in the brig. What happened?"

"Two of my soldiers carried two large packs of Legion rats to the Supply Warehouse. They wanted to trade them for another type of ration, but they were refused. This was directly after they had seen Legion soldiers doing the same thing, without problem. They had a dispute with the supply clerks. It became a violent physical altercation. More supply troopers arrived and beat my two men badly. The military police arrived and arrested my two soldiers and brought them to detention. The word spread and some of our soldiers attacked some supply troopers in vengeance. Three more of my troopers were arrested and imprisoned."

"I see. What was the problem with the rations?"

"We have plenty of rations, sir. But we prefer the DFCV, Dill Fish in Bed of Crispy Vegetables. We love those rations, we find them delicious, but your Legion troopers do not like them, they call them Decomposed Fish in Bed of Congealed Vomit – or Vomit Fish. So we trade with them in friendship and there are no problems. This time we thought we'd go directly to Supply and return some of the other rats for some large packs of the dill fish. They refused us. Only because they dislike us."

"What did Captain Regs do?"

"He was not helpful. I asked to see my soldiers, in the brig. He refused; he said he'd see them. That was wrong. My troopers want to see me, not him. If I do not appear, it means that I do not care about my own men. It means I am insulting them."

"Do you find it difficult to work with Captain Regs?"

"I will work with and obey any superior Legion officer, without complaint, difficult to work with or not."

"And what if he was not a Legion officer? What kind of man is he?"

"If he was not a Legion officer I would find him arrogant and narrow minded and not open to constructive criticisms or suggestions. Sir."

"All right, Captain. Let's go."

"Yes sir. Where are we going?"

"Just follow me."

Δ

We walked through the rain to the Regiment brig, a solid, newly-constructed simstone bunker-type building. I showed my Galactic Information Inspector ID card to the military police access guard just inside. I had received it from Commander Quigley. It was signed by the Director of the ConFree Legion and designed to terrorize on sight and produce instant cooperation from all military personnel.

"You have five Taka troopers in the brig," I said. "Please bring Captain Stormdawn here to them and release all five to him, by my authority."

"Yes sir," he said. That was the proper response. So Stormdawn got to release all five of his men, in person. The seven of us walked back to the barracks in the rain, and Captain Stormdawn and I returned to his office.

Δ

"This tea really is excellent," I said. The tea troops had refilled our cups.

"Thank you, sir. Sir, I thank you for allowing me to release my men. They have apologized to me for the problem."

"There's no need for them to apologize, Captain. They did nothing wrong. Your men stood up for their rights and backed each other up in a fight – that's what they should do."

"They believe they have failed in the mission – that is, to obtain the rations we like."

"That shouldn't be a problem, Captain. If official channels won't give you what you need, use unofficial channels."

"Unofficial channels?"

"Yes. In the Legion we call it 'midnight requisitions'. That's when you obtain your items in secrecy, under cover of darkness. Of course, I cannot recommend you do anything like that, because it's illegal. However, it's a lot easier nowadays than in the past because as a combat unit you can use your cloaking, and your activities will be invisible to anyone who does not have anti-cloaking technology."

"I see." He appeared fascinated by what I was saying.

"If I were you I might ask those five troopers to complete their mission by visiting the supply warehouse again, maybe at night when it's closed, and take whatever your unit needs. Then they will have accomplished their mission. Of course, I'm not suggesting that."

"No sir, of course not."

"Captain, I'm going to be here at least a few more days. As soon as I get a chance, I'd like to invite you to my miserable tent for some dox. I'd like you to try Dindabai Highlands Blue Dox. It's a truly superior brew. Do you like dox?"

"Yes sir, I surely do."

"Excellent!"

△

"Sir, my mission here is complete," I said. I was standing at attention before the base commander, General Clawhammer. He was in a comfy office in the huge new base Hqs building, looking up at me from his desk.

"So what happened, Commander?" he asked. He was a formidable, rugged-looking character.

"I have relieved Senior Captain Regs of his command. I am, of course, reporting this to you as a courtesy. He's a fine officer, sir, but

he has lost the respect of his men due to an inflexible nature in situations when flexibility is required."

"Oh, really. Well, that's why his warname is Regs. And what about that Taka officer, what's his name, Stormdawn?"

"He's just fine, sir. He'll work with anyone, but I consider Captain Regs to be unsuitable to command the Guardians Regiment. I recommend he be replaced immediately."

"With who?"

"You know that better than I, sir."

"Tell me, Commander, do you know anything about a theft from the Supply Warehouse last night?"

"A theft? Why no, sir. What was taken?"

"Several dropboxes of Drunken Ducks – you know, roast lemon duck. That's a highly desirable item. And the MPs found a whole pallet of it, under a tarp, behind the Supply Section's barracks."

"The supply section's barracks. But why would they steal from themselves?"

"We don't know, Commander. We are investigating. It's a bit of a puzzle. In view of the recent problem with the Taka and the warehouse, the question has arisen if they might have something to do with this."

"I doubt it, sir. The Taka like the dill fish on crispy veggies. That's what the fight was about. Not roast duck."

"All right, Commander. Please report back to me before you leave post."

"Yes sir."

Δ

"So how do you like it?" Captain Stormdawn was sampling my Dindabai Highlands Blue Dox. We were sitting in field chairs in my leaky VIP tent, and it was another rainy day – a miserable, slow, cold drizzle.

"It's wonderful, sir! Perfect for a day like this."

"I'm glad you like it. Tell me, Captain, have you heard about the recent theft of rations from the Supply Warehouse?"

"Why no, sir. I'm sorry to hear about that. What is missing?"

"Several dropboxes of roast lemon duck. And they were found in back of the supply barracks."

"That's strange. Was anything else missing?"

"No, that's it."

"Well, it's no concern of ours. By the way, sir, we recently solved our problem with the dill fish."

"Really? How so?"

"Oh, a friend passed us some packs of DFCV. So we're all set."

"Oh good. How much do you have?"

"About a year's supply."

"That's very impressive! Your friend is very generous."

"Yes, we love the dill fish. We've hidden our stash well. We'd hate to have anyone steal it."

"That's wise."

"Sir, I recently ran across another item – for you." He produced a small package. I opened it. Six packs of Dindabai Highlands Blue Dox.

"Why, thank you, Captain! This is most kind of you! Where in the world did you get this? Ah, no, don't answer that. I think it would be best if I did not know."

"Commander Prophet, you are a true friend of the Guardians Regiment and the Taka people. We Taka take true friendship very seriously. If you are ever in need, come to us. We will help you, without question. I swear it on the Book."

"I thank you, Captain. I appreciate that."

△

"Sir, Commander Prophet reporting as ordered." I saluted General Clawhammer. He was seated behind his desk. The base was

swarming with activity; I had almost been run over by a platoon of runners just outside the Hqs building.

"Prophet! Welcome. I've found someone to replace Captain Regs."

"Excellent! Glad to hear it sir. So my mission is concluded, I'll be returning to Galactic Info now."

"Don't you want to know who it is?"

"Oh, yes sir. Who is the new regiment CO?"

"It's you."

"Sir?"

"It's you, Commander. You are the new commanding officer of the Guardians Regiment."

"Sir, I am a Galactic Information official. I'm under orders to return to my Hqs as soon as my mission here is concluded."

"Oh, don't worry about that, Commander. I've already spoken with your Commander Quigley and his chief has signed off on it as well. They've agreed to your temporary transfer here. I can have you for as long as I want. But it's temporary, Commander. We'll continue looking for a permanent replacement for Captain Regs. In the meantime, it's you. Welcome to the Twenty-Second Legion and the Guardians Regiment."

I was stunned. It was true – no good deed goes unpunished.

Δ

"Enemy spotted, sir, see the zero." One of our recon scouts reported them first, an advance element from CAT 32 of the Third Company. We were in armor, snaking through a thick wet forest under a rainy night sky, searching for the enemy. It was bitterly cold but we were fine inside our A-suits.

"Two hostiles, TR soldiers, armored, cloaked, armed with E Mark Eleven battle rifles, note the zero," our tacmod said, and inserted the enemy troopers onto our tacmaps. Excellent! So our Black Magic anti-cloaking tech was working as advertised. Now all

we had to worry about was whether or not the enemy was also equipped with anti-cloaking tech. If so, we were going to be evenly matched, and I had a feeling that was going to prove to be the case. TR stood for Training Robot and this was another test for my new regiment. This time we were working the Third and Fourth Companies of the Regiment, each with two Combat Assault Teams, a total of two hundred men. Full strength was four CATs per company but they were under strength for this exercise. The scenario was an enemy unit of unknown strength, infiltrating our AR. We were in the Swamprot Forest, a large section of the wildlands that we used for training.

"Three, close on the enemy behind Recon, Recon probe for further enemy positions and movement," Stormdawn said. "Four, prep to move south if necessary." I had told Stormdawn he was to act as he thought best if he heard nothing from me. I was slightly dispersed, not far from his position, with Regiment. No matter.

"One, Three, ten."

"One, Four, ten."

Somebody said something in Taka on the net.

"Silence!" Stormdawn ordered. "Say it in Inter or don't say it." Good! I had warned Stormdawn about that. Conversations in Taka were less than useful for all non-Takas, including me.

"Enemy movement!" our tacmod reported. "Seven – eight – nine TR troopers, A and A, see the zeros, note direction of movement."

"We have them, sir," one of the recon troops reported.

"Recon, Three Two One, use your proper call signs when reporting. Three One, Three Two One, no indication they have spotted us yet."

A harsh blast shook the forest, then a ragged volley of xmax.

"Three Two One, Four, Recon Six, we are under fire and seeking cover."

"Enemy is firing on recon units," our tacmod reported. "More enemy TR's appearing. Looks like two squads, heading for the recon units, see the zeroes."

"Three, get your two CATs engaging those enemy units and report back," Stormdawn said. "Four, move south, remain flexible and prepare to reinforce the Third as necessary."

"One, Three, ten."

"One, Four, ten."

We moved cautiously forward towards the firing. My tacmod was filling with new TR hostiles and the forest was flashing with x bursts. There was some confusing chatter on the net, and I could see on the tacmap that the Third was taking some hits.

"One, Three, we're receiving accurate xmax fire and taking casualties. Looks like they have anti-cloaking tech. Medics up!"

"Three, One, attack and destroy your targets," Stormdawn ordered. "Use hyperdarts, xmax, laser and tacstars. Four, move up and reinforce Three and attack the enemy's left flank." Good, so far good. Xmax rounds snapped right over our heads, riddling the trees, autofire, flashing past us. The source was behind us!

"You about ready?" the programmer asked me on private.

"Sure, go ahead," I responded.

"Enemy has outflanked us, see the new zeros," our tacmod reported. "I count nineteen TR troopers, A and A, cloaked, armed with E Mark Elevens." Something hit me hard, my A-suit helmet flashed red, alarms screeched in my helmet and I found myself sprawled in the tangled shrubbery of the forest floor.

"Hit!" my tacmod reported. "You are hit, Prophet, KIA, you are now out of the sim." My A-suit was smoking and splattered with red phospho, and I was presumably dead. The TR's were using training rounds but we were using live rounds.

"Prophet! Oh no!" Stormdawn said. "The commander is down – KIA! All right, warriors, we have been outflanked by new enemy units, see the zeroes, Three, send a CAT here to form up on our

right, Four, move south now and attack the enemy here, one CAT to stop them and one CAT to flank them on the left and attack them from the rear. Do it!"

"One, Three, ten."

"One, Four, tenners! Let's go, soldiers!"

A withering xmax fire was falling right into our position, tearing up the vegetation, shredded leaves floating everywhere. Stormdawn and his staff were down and firing back. My tacmap showed the TR's were attacking en masse – it looked like several squads, maybe a whole CAT equivalent, charging right at us, howling like wolves, firing auto X but running right into our counterfire, which was chopping them to bits. Our troops were howling too, a high-pitched warbling shriek that I had heard before – the Taka battle cry. Our counterfire was tearing over my head, as I lay there trying not to move. Tacstars erupted, harshly lighting up the forest, as our troops let loose on their manlinks. Autofire tacstars! The earth shook, and I could see the fireballs erupting, writhing skywards, glittering and spitting.

"One, Four. CAT Four Three is blocking further enemy advance. CAT Four Four is flanking them, stand by."

"One, Three. We are attacking into the enemy, see the tacsit, CAT Three Three is hitting them on the right flank."

"Three, Four, One, good. Four, report when your flanking units are in position and initiating attacks."

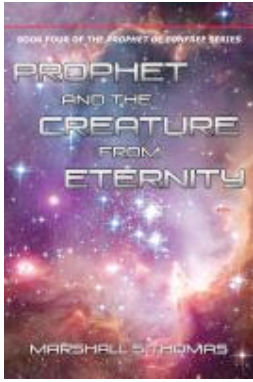
"One, Four, my units report they have successfully flanked the enemy and are now attacking from the enemy's rear." We could hear frantic firing, auto xmax and manlink tacstars. Some shadowy TR hostiles appeared on our tacmaps and on our faceplates – invisible to our eyes, but lit up by our Black Magic tech. They were running right at us. Stormdawn and his Hqs staff fired immediately, hyperdarts and xmax and fighting laser. The TR's began to fall, shot to pieces, crashing into the trees and falling into the shrubbery. I was pleased to see our Taka troopers holding their ground, firing calmly,

as a wave of frantic TR's broke against them. One shot-up TR fell right next to me, burning and smoking. The Legion used up a lot of TR hostiles in training, but they were ideal. It was cheap enough to construct them, and there was nothing like a seemingly live enemy charging right at you while firing to focus your attention on the problem and encourage your decision-making processes.

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"Your performance was excellent, Stormdawn," I said. "I was very impressed, especially after I was shot down and out of action." We were standing in the aftermath of the battle, surrounded by the glowing, burnt, smoking armor of the dead TR hostiles. It was still raining, a cold drizzle, and the rain sizzled as it hit the hot armor. My armor was scorched and stained with phospho-red dye. "Your decisions were fast and correct," I continued. "And these two companies and four CATs performed well. Your Taka warriors knew what they were doing. Their reactions were correct, the commo was excellent, and your tactics worked well against the enemy. Your medics showed up immediately where they were needed. Overall, very good work."

"I thank you, Commander. You taught us well." I had decided it best not to tell Stormdawn that my KIA had been planned in advance, specifically to see how he would react when suddenly deprived of his commander. I did something like that every exercise, although it was always something different, designed to reveal potential weaknesses or problems. So far, both Stormdawn and the regiment had performed well, with a very few exceptions.



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