



A savage tide of alien intruders are infiltrating the distant reaches of the Deadvac and the Icy Way, enslaving millions of kidnapped, brainwashed innocents. The young troopers of the ConFree Legion confront them, intent on victory or death.

SEEKER and the SPIRIT SHIFTERS

By Marshall S Thomas

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SEEKER AND THE SPIRIT SHIFTERS



MARSHALL S THOMAS

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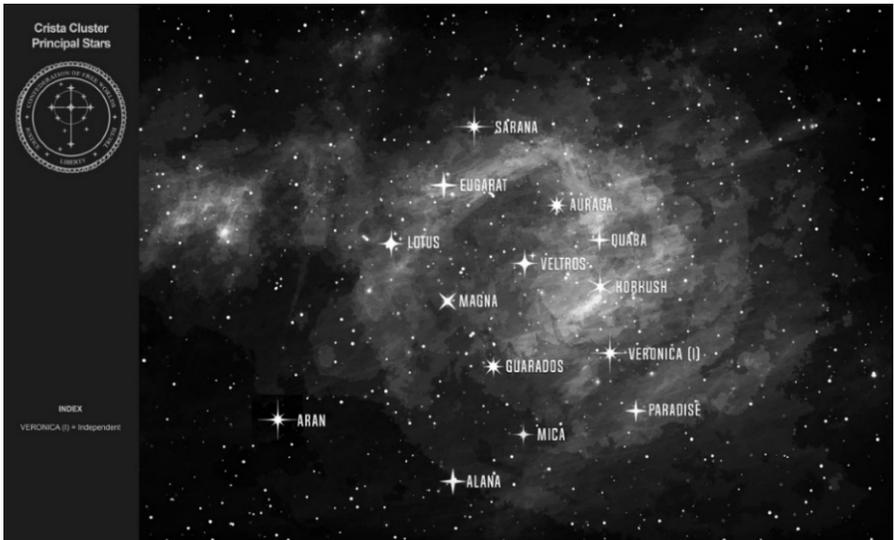
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Crista Cluster, 1,400 light years from Sol

When the first Outworlder refugees approached the Outvac fleeing System oppression, the Crista Cluster beckoned them onwards with a view that appeared to form a starry cross in the vac. ConFree's ancestors settled those worlds as a free people and vowed in a constitution written in blood to uphold liberty, justice and freedom, no matter what the cost, and to remain eternally vigilant against all forms of tyranny and slavery. The ConFree Legion was formed to accomplish those objectives.



Seeker and the Spirit Shifters



PART I

RECON



When Galactic Info gets concerned about something, something had better watch out.

Seeker, to Recon 16.



Prologue

Pilgrim's Rest

Titus Foster was a happy man. Titus was a commo tech. He was happiest when tinkering with his children, although his children were not human. They were high-tech commo devices, local, regional, global, stellar and galactic devices, quantum links, stellar links, millions of live connections mounted on a tall commo tower on a hill overlooking a pleasant little settlement named Pilgrim's Rest. Titus lived in the habmod connected to the techmod near the top of the tower. He very seldom left the tower. He spent his days in the techmod and his nights in the habmod. He knew everything to do to keep his children alive and functioning.

Titus often went for months without any human contact. It did not bother him at all. Titus did not need human contact. He was self-contained and self-content. He never even went into town. No, Titus was not a robot. He was fully human, but he did not enjoy human contact. He much preferred being by himself watching over his quantum children. He received a good salary from United Galaxy and ate at home in his autcafe. His love life was a barren wasteland but he had grown used to

that. He needed nothing else that the world had to offer. He was happy. He was fulfilled. As long as his children continued functioning, his life had meaning and he was making a valuable contribution to society on this newly settled world.

On Six Threemo local, in the middle of the night, Titus awoke suddenly. He did not know it, but his world had just changed. It was completely silent. That was wrong — completely wrong. He had never heard such silence before. The tower and all his children normally emitted a faint hum that penetrated everywhere. But now it was dead quiet. Titus struggled out of bed in the dark. The bedside chron was dark. The lights did not work. His wrist tac was dead. He quickly donned his clothes and found his way through dark halls into the techmod. It was dead — all his children, dark and dead! There was no power at all.

What the hell! He hurriedly checked every device. It was all lifeless. Master Power was dead. He had never seen that before. He tried to call in to TechCheck, but the channel was dead. He tried to activate all simports but nothing happened, so he could not even see outside.

He hesitated, then tried the Emergency Channel. He would declare an emergency. No, no luck, it was also dead. Then he became aware of a faint vibration, a faint hum. Was something coming back online? No — no. It was coming from outside.

Titus ran towards the door to the upper terrace, which provided a spectacular overview of Pilgrim's Rest and the little starport. He tried the door but it did not snap open. He slid it open manually.

Titus ran to the railing and looked out. It was a dark, overcast night, clouds blotting out the stars. He was stunned when he realized that Pilgrim's Rest and the starport were

completely blacked out. Not a single speck of light came from the town or the starport. But there was something else. Three massive glowing white-hot orbs hovered over the town. Starships! Alien starships! He had never seen ships like those before.

Titus sprinted back into the habmod, terrified. He did not know what was happening in Pilgrim's Rest, but he was afraid that aliens were coming, and sooner or later they would examine the commo tower and he did not want to be there when they arrived.

He hurriedly emptied the kitchen of e-rats, dumping them into a large tacpac. He grabbed several bottomless canteens of water and threw them into the tacpac, with as much survival equipment as he could find on short notice, including camfax camping gear, a survival knife, a target scope and a handgun. He put on a camfax coldcoat, a rain hat and field boots.

He took the stairs down a long dark dizzy circular cenite stairway winding around inside the tower. He reached the bottom and stepped out into the dark.



Titus survived for three months in the forests, hiding from the world. He found a cave that he had discovered years ago by chance and moved in. He surprised himself by establishing a fairly comfortable hide-out deep in the cave. After one month in the cave, he took a chance and did a little recon through the forest. He used his scope and examined the town from a distance. Then he got a glimpse of the aliens and it was like a bolt of lightning. It terrified him. He hurried back to his cave and stayed there another two months.

In month five there was a lot of construction in Pilgrim's Rest. Titus did another recon when things calmed down and discovered that somebody had built a brand-new town with a grandiose domed building that looked like a temple. Then he almost ran into three young men, evidently villagers, although he did not recognize them. He froze in the shrubbery and watched them.

They were dressed in identical uniforms, dark grey coldcoats and matching trousers and field hats.

"You have failed us all," one of them said to another.

"No! Please, I am loyal, it's a misunderstanding."

"There is no misunderstanding. We understood you perfectly. So did the Masters."

"But that term — it's perfectly understandable — it's not offensive."

"You used the term aliens. There are no aliens. Use of the term is a thoughtcrime. The penalty is death. We have no choice. If you do not die, they will arrest us and execute us. But we are not thought criminals like you. We are faithful and loyal."

"You'll kill me for one word?"

"Yes. I will. I have no choice." A shot rang out and the sinner collapsed, screaming. After he fell silent the other two walked away without a word.

Titus waited for them to leave, then made his way back to his cave, vowing not to leave it again. He thought he would be willing to spend the rest of his life in the cave to avoid the horrors that awaited him outside.

Δ

It was over a month later when Titus was awoken suddenly in the night by a faint buzzing from his techscan. On his

abandonment of the tower he had tossed his techscan into his tacpac. The techscan had been just as dead as the rest of the equipment so it had been no use to Titus. But now it had come to life! Titus snatched it and looked it over.

Someone had activated several systems on the Commo tower. His techscan showed him exactly which devices were live. Most of them were still dead, but power and lights to Pilgrim's Rest and the starport had just been activated. Local commo and starport commo were also on. Most systems were still dead, but this was a big change.

The techscan was what Titus used every day when he was on duty in the tower. It allowed him to interact with every commo system to adjust or fix whatever needed adjustment or fixing. It was an invaluable tool. So — what did it mean? Power and lights in the town and starport. Local and starport commo. The aliens had used their own power and lights in town, but local and starport commo meant whoever was running Pilgrim's Rest was now opening itself up to the rest of the galaxy, in a limited way.

Titus had no intention of using this new development to call for help or to do anything else that might draw attention to himself. But perhaps there was something he could do.

Local commo. He saw they were using a new system, but the activation of local commo was picked up immediately by the tower. He listened in on many lines. Some of them were in use by the aliens, and their harsh language was incomprehensible. Some lines were for coded data — maybe telepathy. Some lines were used by the human slaves that served the aliens, and their conversations were in Inter. These were the grey-uniformed killers that Titus had seen at work.

These comms channels clustered around the large temple-like building that was their Hqs. The techscan monitored and received everything that was said over those channels but did not reveal itself — or at least that was what Titus believed. He set to record and let the techscan continue recording all conversations on all channels. He did not know what he was going to do with the result but at least he felt he was, at last, doing something against the aliens. And if they killed him perhaps the conversations would prove useful to any human survivors.

Titus was still terrified, but he consoled himself that courage was resistance to fear, not absence of fear.



Chapter 1

Confronting the Gods

I awoke from troubled dreams — sweaty, prickly, worrisome dreams. I could not recall the dreams as I slowly surfaced into consciousness. I became aware of the cool air as I lay there in the bed with closed eyes. I could sense her close beside me, I thought I could feel her warmth. Warmth and peace, flowing over me like a warm bath. She was asleep, breathing deeply. Her presence calmed me down — just like magic. I was blessed. I had no need of any dark dreams. I opened my eyes. It was dark and still. I ignored the chron. I was awake. I felt perfectly alert — no more sleep for me. I glanced at her. She was in deep sleep. The panoramic floor to ceiling window showed a hazy deep violet night, sprinkled with stars. It put a chill to my flesh. The starlight touched her face, revealing an angel — hauntingly lovely, completely innocent, dreaming unimaginable dreams.

I cautiously slipped out of bed, trying not to awaken her. I padded over to the window, barefoot in shorts, and settled down on the sofa. The night was mine. The entire universe sprawled out before me, endless, eternal, dimension after

dimension, trillions of stars, cold measureless distances, infinity after infinity, each universe spawning countless more, forever and ever, without end. And each star called out to me, personally. Stars like grains of sand in God's infinite ocean. It was all out there, waiting for me.

Maybe that was my dream. I could not remember it. The stars were my profession. And when they called, I had to respond. We — we had to respond, hurling ourselves boldly into the dark, without thought, except for the mission.

That was my dream, I realized. The mission. It was always the mission. Coming at me unexpectedly. But that was what we did. And if we didn't do it, somebody else would have to do it.

"What time is it?" she whispered, from the bed.

"I don't know," I replied.

"I was dreaming of you," she said, joining me on the sofa. She was wearing her silky nightgown, snuggling up against me. "Why did you leave me?"

"I guess I was talking with Deadman. I'll never leave you."

"Liar. You'll leave the instant they ask you."

I had no answer. She was right, of course. She lay her head on my shoulder. She was a fearsome child goddess with golden hair and china-blue eyes. She was fearless, fierce, tireless, as brave as a tigress, throwing herself at her enemies, and fully prepared to die for her race. Or mine.

"Look at the stars," I said.

"Our stars," she said.

"They belong to whoever can claim them," I replied.

"No. We don't own them — they own us. We're ants. We're nothing. Our immortal realms will vanish in a galactic microfrac, and blow away in the breeze, and leave no trace that anything was ever there. And the universe will shine down

unchanging for billions of years." The stars were reflected in her glacial blue eyes.

"If you're real quiet you can hear God's heartbeat," I advised.

We were lazily entangled in each other's arms, hypnotized by the magnificent spectacle of the universe. It seemed as if the night was getting darker, or the stars were getting brighter — billions of cold stars and faint creamy nebulae and an occasional comet streaking across the galactic field.

"Ooh, look at that," she whispered.

"Did you have any dreams?" I asked.

"Yes."

"Tell me."

"No."

"We can't have any secrets from each other — remember?"

"Tell me another story," she asked.

"Only one story per night," I said. "I already told you."

"It was too short." She was brilliant, but sometimes she acted just like a little kid. I had found an elementary school book about challenges and choices and sacrifices. The stories were based on real events taken from the history of the ConFree Legion. Foot soldiers, confronting the gods. She loved them.

"Why don't *you* tell *me* a story," I suggested.

"No."

"Well then tell me about your dream."

"It was about you. And a bunch of Outworlder girls."

"What happened?"

"They were whispering — and looking at me. I could hear them. 'That's Seeker's girl. She's just a biogen,' one of them said. 'Not even human. The Systies created them for sex.' I could see the hate and jealousy in their eyes. So I walked over to them and said 'Keep away from him. Or I'll cut you up'."

"That's a bad dream," I said.

"I lied about one thing. It wasn't a dream. It was real."

"Are you kidding? Did someone actually say that?"

"Yes. They don't believe biogens are human."

"Can you tell me who these people were?"

"Yes. But I won't."

"Why not? That's race hate, and insulting a citizen, and provoking violence. All violations of law. They should spend a little time in re-education."

"Hush. Let's listen to the universe."

I was amazed that there were still people out there who had such primitive opinions of biogens. The Biogen Peoples Solidarity Accord was ConFree's most loyal ally. And any biogen who wanted ConFree citizenship could have it. Our alliance was sealed with blood. And my devotion to my biogen wife was total.

By then our eyes had fully adjusted to the dark. We could clearly see the great arc of the Milky Way, a glowing dust cloud of diamonds and faintly tinted nebulae and hot brilliant cosmic ovens where the stars were born. I could float away, before that awesome, infinite vac. How had our tiny species ever arisen under such terrifying skies? Yes, Mia was right — we were ants. Immortal ants. Of no possible interest to the rest of the universe.

"Mommy. I had a bad dream." It was Eva, standing in the doorway in her pajamas, clutching a little fuzzy bear. She approached us and crawled up into Mia's lap. She was a heartbreaker, three years old, silky blonde hair and blue eyes — just like her mom. Mia had specified that much, but left the rest of it up to our genetics. As a biogen, Mia could not conceive a child in the normal way, but she could order up a child from my sperm and eggs created from her own DNA. The child grew

to term in an artificial womb in a biogen science facility named Creation, where all biogens were assembled. And she was a splendid child, half Seeker and half Mia. A new creation, a new race — sealed with blood, the physical proof of our eternal alliance.

"Is that a meteor?" It was streaking gracefully across that awesome panorama.

"Yes, Eva, that's a meteor," I said.

"Where is it going?"

"It's coming to visit us after a long, long journey."

"How long, Daddy?"

"Nobody knows. Maybe a million years. Maybe more."

"Will it land like a space ship?"

"No. It will burn up in the atmosphere and shower us with stardust."

Eva laughed, delighted. "Can I take a shower in stardust?"

"No need for that," Mia said. "You're already made of stardust."

"Really? Really?"

"Really. We're all made of stardust."

"What's all that glittery stuff out there?" she asked.

"That's the Milky Way," I said. "That's our neighborhood."

"Why so beautiful?" She was hugging her teddy bear tightly, hypnotized by the stars.

"It's beautiful for you," I said. "It's to make you happy."

"Who made it?"

"Nobody knows."

"Was it Deadman?"

"No. Not Deadman."

"Miss Florence says Deadman died for me. Is that true, Daddy?"

"Yes. It's true. Deadman died for us all."

"Why?"

"Because he was faithful to his own, and courageous, and he knew the truth."

"What does that mean, Daddy?"

"Miss Florence will tell you, when it's time for you to know."

"I love you, Mommy and Daddy. I love you up to the stars and beyond."

"Tell us about your bad dream," Mia said.

"It was scary. It was black and hairy. It had red eyes and a big mouth with sharp teeth. It wanted to eat me. I ran. And then I was running in the air, and it still chased me. I cried out for Mommy and Daddy but you were not there."

"We'll always be there for you, Eva. Always."

"Tell me a story."

"It's too late," Mia said. "Or too early."

"I can't sleep if you don't tell me a story." Mia would say the same to me. She demanded a story, every night at bedtime.

"I already told you a story, Sweetie," Mia said.

"I want another story." She snuggled up in Mia's arms.

"All right. Try to sleep. Once upon a time there was a lovely little girl."

"What was her name?"

"Cinderella."

"Was she a princess?"

"No. She was a servant girl."

"Was she pretty?"

"Yes. She was beautiful. Almost as beautiful as you."

And Mia spun a wonderful tale, of dream dust, and soon Eva was asleep. Mia put her to bed, then returned to me.

"Look," Mia said. "Dawn is coming." Towards the east the black sky was slowly lightening and the stars were winking out. A very pale pink tint glowed on the horizon. Birth of a new sun, I thought. New sun, new day. Fine — all was well. Our leaders were firmly in charge. The ConFree Legion was cruising the Outvac, alert for the slightest hint of trouble. ConFree was at peace, the Crista Cluster was unified and free, Quaba was peaceful and prosperous and strong. All potential enemies were quiet, for now. We knew what we were doing, we were sick of endless wars and that was over now but we were never going to be caught off-guard again. We were prepared for any enemies, foreign or domestic, and if our own leaders turned soft, we were prepared to hunt them down and kill them without mercy. There was an impressive list of directors-general that we had executed for treason during the recent civil war. We were a hard people and we didn't want any weak sisters in our midst. We knew the difference between sanity and insanity, truth and lies, loyalty and treason, freedom and slavery, love and hate. Most people never figured that out.

Dawn rippled across the sky, a blood-red gash burning forth from the horizon, crimson and phospho orange and streaks of blinding gold, lighting up the clouds. Hello, Quaba. No rain this morning? No matter. It's our world and we'll take whatever Deadman offers.

"We'd better get up," I advised Mia.

"It's going to be a fine day," she replied.



Chapter 2

The Deadvac

"You be good, Sweetie Pie," I said. We were approaching Galactic Info Hqs in our shiny red aircar — I was driving. Quaba City was a lovely spectacle, stretching below us out to the horizon, low modern habmods and commercial outlets and impressive government buildings, scattered among the forest and parks and statues and holos and historical monuments. Flags and banners floated in a light breeze. Off to one side we could see Ladies Lake, gleaming in early morning sunlight from Quaba's two suns.

"Flossie, is Eva finished breakfast yet?"

"We're just finishing up, ma'am." The view popped onto a screen on the dash. Eva could be seen poking at her breakfast.

"No snow cream until she does her morning lessons, Flossie."

"Yes, ma'am." Flossie was a cute female robot who could be depended on to watch over Eva like — well, like a fanatic, brainwashed Legion trooper. Just what we needed, since both Mia and I worked. I guess you could call us a diverse, modern

family, one human male, one biogen female, one human/biogen child, and one robot babysitter. It worked for us.

"Have fun, dear," I said as I glided into the aircar dropoff lane and clicked the side door open and Mia stepped out. Galactic Info was a giant intimidating bunker that could take a direct hit from an antimat with little damage. Most of the base was underground.

"Love you," she said. "You be careful."

"You too." Mia was a biogen officer assigned to the BPSA liaison element with Galactic Info, so I never saw her except at home. The BPSA was the Biogen Peoples Solidarity Accord, their world government.

I shot up into the designated aerial exit lane and headed for Recon. Recon was a brand-new giant hole in the ground with the usual impregnable armor. The latest strategic planning called for a switch to smaller faster ships, smaller more effective units and higher firepower. It was fine with me, but Recon needed its own Hqs as a result so they had moved us to the new base, not far from the Fleetcom Quaba Starport, although we still reported to Galactic Info.

I parked in the staff lot and walked to Recon Hqs along the footpath. The sky was clouding over already. It rained a lot in Quaba. A lot. People were being let off from aircars by the main entrance, mostly Legion troopers in duty camfax or formal blacks. I was in my blacks per orders. A couple of troopers with Infinities were posted on the walkway as I approached.

"Weapons check, sir," one of them said. I lifted my tunic to expose my concealed xgun. He nodded and they waved me on.

That might seem strange to an Inner, or to an Earther or a Realm slave or just about anyone who wasn't a ConFree citizen, but it wasn't strange to me. It was as natural as breathing. All

ConFree citizens are responsible for their own family's defense, as well as the defense of ConFree itself in an unexpected emergency. No, we were not issued a weapon at birth, as claimed by the Realm, but by age twelve all ConFree children, male and female, must qualify with designated weapons. And any adult citizen who is caught unarmed, at any time, is subject to arrest and detention and an uncomfortable lecture.

We like to think we learn from history.

Δ

I walked into the briefing vault. It was a small vault, used mostly for squad briefings. Recon 16 was awaiting me around the table.

"Ten-HUT!" Kidcat ordered. The squad snapped to attention.

"Good morning all," I said. "Is the vault secure?"

"Yes sir."

"Is everyone ready for an adventure?" I asked.

"Oh no, no. No adventures please."

"Not me."

"Nah, I've got better things to do."

"Don't be silly. I love this place."

"Sorry, I'm *real* busy."

"The only adventure I want to experience is what's today's special in the cafeteria."

"You're kidding, right, Seeker?"

"I'm afraid I'm not kidding, girls," I said. "Please be seated."

I stood at the end of the oblong table as they sat down. I looked them over carefully. This was a good squad. This was my old squad. I wasn't with them any more — I had been promoted to commander and Kidcat was the new squad leader.

But I was very close to these folks. That's why they dared to give me so much grief about the 'adventure.'

We had bonded during the bloody revolution against NewFam and the United Worlds. We had three KIA and a hundred percent wounded. But we killed a lot of NewFam rats and took our country back. And we executed a lot of traitors. We grew pretty close. Kidcat and I had been countersnipers together In Quaba, in the days when we weren't allowed to shoot anybody. He was tough and dependable and we had been together so long we could read each other's minds.

Speedo was a real character and my first squadie when I had been transferred to Parapator. He also had acquired a biogen wife, one of Mia's comrades. He was tough and dependable. They all were. Blues was a raven-haired honey who belonged to Anzu, the squad's explosive red-haired fem banshee driver. Anzu preferred females to males but she'd drive straight into hell to extract you and that's all we needed from her. Aine was our supermodel, a tall, golden-haired babe who had chosen Kidcat as her preferred mate. Quanah was the squad's new Two. He was a giant caveman who could drive you into the pavement with one massive fist if he decided he didn't like you. He had chosen our lovely medic Isis as his girlfriend. Or maybe she had chosen him. She was an adorable little exotic from some lost world, always quiet and calm, even when risking her life on the battlefield, shielding your body with hers. We all loved her.

We had been together so long, and through such perilous adventures together, that it was perhaps not surprising that some of us were now pairing off to seek a little love. The Legion did not encourage intra-squad romance for it sometimes led to trouble. But in this case, I was the Legion. And I had no objections as long as it did not hamper the mission.

"I've just been briefed on Recon's new mission, folks," I said. "And now I'm going to repeat it to you. You're Recon Sixteen, and recon is what you do. You may have heard that Legion Hqs has determined that the future mandates smaller ships and smaller strike units with increased flexibility and lethality. Battlestars and heavy cruisers are going the way of the dinosaurs, to be replaced by light cruisers, tacships, corvettes and assault carriers. And that means recon ops are going to become more important than ever. It's a new national strategic plan. For details, see Reconnaissance Tactics and Operations in Support of National Military Strategy (479 CGS), on your tacmods. Holo exercises are not yet ready, but I want everyone to fam themselves with the document."

I activated the holo, the vault darkened and a gigantic slice of the galaxy filled one side of the vault. It was awesome, millions of stars sprinkled across the endless vac, stars without end, with lovely sparkling molecular clouds floating in infinity. It seemed to reach out and touch us.

"This is the Deadvac," I explained. "If you start from the Crista Cluster and head for Andrion, and pass Andrion and leave the Outvac behind, skirting Omni vac and then passing Parapator and then passing Farharbor you will enter the Deadvac." Little labels appeared on the holo as I mentioned the regions. "This at first appears to be an almost empty region of space that is unexplored and seemingly barren of any habstars. But looks can be deceiving. If you are patient and serious you can locate stars with promising habitable planets."

"Why do they call it the Deadvac?" Aine asked.

"I'm told it's because the entire region appears dead, bereft of life, and also because most of the people who have entered that vac have not returned."

"Why not?" Kidcat asked.

"There are several reasons. One is that the Deadvac is now a haven for star pirates. Nobody claims that vac. Nobody wants it. Nobody patrols it. So it's perfect for pirates. The closest civilized world is Farharbor but the AIs of Farharbor have no interest in the Deadvac and the pirates have no interest in annoying the AIs. They know any effort to do so would result in the annihilation of all pirate starports. And probably all pirates. Also — for some time stateless refugees, adventurers, persecuted political groups, starry-eyed pioneers, religious cult figures and homeless families looking for free land and willing to take chances to build a new future have been heading for the Deadvac, looking for new worlds and settling them. They have all been advised to avoid the Deadvac but they don't listen."

"What does all this have to do with us?" Blues asked.

"Let's just say that you'd best fam yourself with the Deadvac starcharts," I replied. "The pirates have been very busy lately, knowing that nobody seems concerned with their activities. The result is a field day for them. They attack anything that moves in the Deadvac and they attack and loot and destroy any settlement they come across and kill and rape and kidnap anyone they please. It's getting downright annoying."

"Are any of the settlers ConFree citizens?" Speedo asked.

"Some are. Most aren't. They're from all over the galaxy — mostly from the Inners and Gassies. Lots of hopeless refugees."

"So what?" Speedo continued. "Like Blues said, what does that have to do with us? I thought our mission was to protect the Outvac, not some wild frontier."

"Well, Speedo, maybe you should contact the Director General and explain that to him. But I'm not going to do that."

And to answer your question, your mission is to do what you are told to do. No more, no less."

"Righto! Please tell."

"Galactic Info is concerned that the pirates are running wild in this frontier area that, although not part of ConFree vac, is close enough to be worrisome. And when Galactic Info gets concerned about something, something had better watch out. Our orders are to enter the Deadvac, map it, recon it thoroughly, attack and destroy any pirate starships, locate and zero any pirate bases, starports or settlements but do not attack. Then report back for further orders. The op is named Catspaw. It's on your tacmods."

"So — recon and destroy," Quanah said. "Sounds like fun."

"Any questions?" I asked.

"What's the timetable?" Kidcat asked.

"We lift next week, not yet set. We'll have one tacship with a total of four recon squads in banshees. Each squad operating independently, missions to change with developments. Holo off." The holo vanished and the lights snapped on. "For now, review the new National Military Strategy and Recon's role in it. Then memorize Operation Catspaw. There will be retention tests on both. With no tacmod assistance."

"What!" Quanah looked up.

"Told you they were going to figure that one out," Isis said.

"But tacmods are supposed to help us," Quanah objected.

"We want to test you, not the tacmod," I said. "And if you blow the test, you get to do it again until you get it right. See your squad leader with any questions."

"How'd you know about the tacmod?" Quanah asked sheepishly.

"Kidcat said his first clue was when you got a one hundred percent on the tacnav test."

"Told you not to do that, you big dummy," Isis scolded Quannah.

"Get busy," I said. "Retention tests will be at 1600 in Vault Six. Try to do it right the first time — do your reviews wherever you like. All right, Kidcat, dismiss your squad."

Kidcat followed me out of the vault and along the corridors to a secure snackbar. He didn't say a word. We selected a table, picked up some dox, and tried to relax. We knew each other well, so words were secondary.

"So what exactly are we going to be reconning, if each squad is going to be in its own banshee?" Kidcat asked. "Pirate starships will be engaged by the tacship, right? And we are not to attack downside bases. So what do we do?"

"How are you treating Aine?" I asked. The dox was smooth and creamy. Life was certainly comfortable here in Recon Hqs.

"Carefully. If I get too affectionate, she may lose interest."

"She's a strange girl."

"How's Mia and your daughter?"

"I'm going to miss them."

"So what will we be doing? In the Deadvac? Really."

"We will be taking prisoners, and obtaining information, and acting on that information."

"Doing what?"

"Rescuing ConFree citizens."

Kidcat gave me a big grin. "That's more like it! Meaningful employment! I'll do the interrogations personally."

"Interrogations? That term sounds so — well — harsh. No, I believe we'll just chat with these fellows."

"Chat. Fine. I can chat."

"No. You tend to be too — judgmental. No, I think this will be a job for Quanah."

"Quanah!"

"Yeah. He'll just talk with our pirates. Nicely."

"I get it. Yeah, Quanah will scare the crap out of them just by walking into the room."

"He'll put them into the right mood. No need for violence."

"They'll be singing like canaries."

"All right. Check out the troops in an hour or so — make sure they're reading up on the mission."

"Will do, Geeker. You the man." When the squad was not listening, Kidcat usually called me Geeker rather than Seeker. And I called him Kid. We were pretty close.

"Just one thing, uh, sir. Will you be on this mission too?"

"Yes. I'm to lead the mission. But I won't be sitting at a desk"

Kidcat smiled again. "You're welcome to join us."

"Yes. We'll see."

Δ

I explained it to Mia that evening after dinner, out on the balcony overlooking our amazing panorama of Quaba City. It was raining drearily under a grey sky as our second sun vanished into the night. The city was awash with soft lights coming to life to greet the dark. We could see the brilliant towers of Fleetcom Quaba Starport off to the west. A wet breeze touched us with a cold mist. Mia moved closer to me as if to escape the rain. Eva was in bed, with Flossie on guard next door, eyes on the babycam.

"How long will you be gone?" she asked.

"I don't know. Maybe a month. Maybe more."

"This is our home."

"Yes, it is."

"It's beautiful. It's just like heaven."

"Yes, it is."

"Are you going into combat?"

"Yes."

"So you may not come back."

"I may not come back."

"And I may become a black widow, raising our lovely daughter alone. And thinking of you all day and all night. For the rest of time."

"I'm sorry."

"We are so happy here."

"Yes."

"You must do your duty, my love. You fight for me, and Eva. And your comrades and your nation. Do not hesitate. Kill your enemies. And return to me with your shield, or on it. If you die, I should join you in death, as is the biogen custom. We learned that from the As. But we have a child. I must protect her, and raise her to be strong and fearless. For her, I will live, and pray to you every day."

I was speechless. She was invincible, resolute, a fearless immortal biogen warrior, loyal to her family, her nation and her culture and history. She had fought her way out of Paradise Found and joined her soul to mine, and we were one, never to be separated, even by death. She understood loyalty, and love, and courage.

I knew I didn't deserve her. I thanked Deadman every night for leading her to me.



A savage tide of alien intruders are infiltrating the distant reaches of the Deadvac and the Icy Way, enslaving millions of kidnapped, brainwashed innocents. The young troopers of the ConFree Legion confront them, intent on victory or death.

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