

89 percent of Strat Recon troopers are killed in action. Commander Seeker knows this as he leads his troops into the gates of Hell. Is he insane?

SEEKER and the CROW

By Marshall S Thomas

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BOOK THREE OF THE SEEKER SERIES

SEEKER
AND THE
CROW



MARSHALL S THOMAS

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Prologue: The Sulfur Range

"They're coming!" Lacey was looking out the front window in alarm. There were only the two of them in the little apartment, Lacey and Marty. Lacey was a slim teen female with rusty red hair and misty grey eyes and Marty was a tall athletic male with short dark hair, just short of twenty stellar years.

"Winter clothing, now!" Marty barked. "Your warmest coldcoat, grab everything from the bug-out bag, stuff it all into the pockets, hide canteens, energy bars, everything we'll need. They'll not give us any time. Stay by my side every moment. Don't let anything lure you away. We go together or not at all."

"What's going to happen?"

"Evil. Evil is going to happen. And we're going to see it."

"Can we escape?"

"Not immediately, but later — maybe."

"And if we can't get away?"

"Then we die."

They both looked around their little home. It was so small, so peaceful, so clean. And it held so many memories.

"I'm going to miss this so much," she said.

"Yeah me too. Forget it. We're going somewhere new."

Someone was banging on the door. "Open the damn door!"

Marty complied, revealing a young soldier in an A-vest, wielding an auto-X. "Get out now! Don't take anything! Let's go! Empty hands, let's see, all right, move, move out." The trooper looked like he was scared to death. Soldiers were swarming over the apartment mod and the inhabitants were filing out obediently.

"Where are we going?" Marty asked. "Is it near or far?"

"Don't ask questions, just go, down the stairs now."

"Yes Sir. Will it be a long walk?"

"Yes. Now get in line, over there." Willow Boulevard was swarming with people, not just from the apartment mod, but from all the buildings lining the road. Everyone was there, husbands and wives, teens and kids and babies, grandparents, the old, the young everyone you could imagine — it was a massive frightening crowd. And it was completely silent except for some crying kids and babies. It was the silence of terror. The soldiers were forming the people into lines and urging them on.

"Sir!" Marty called out. "Have one! You must be tired." Marty handed a sealed cup of dox to the young trooper. He snatched at it greedily. "Who are all these people?" Marty continued. "It looks like the whole city."

"Thanks," the trooper said, popping open the dox cup. "Yeah it's the whole city, we're evacing the entire city. You can't imagine what a hassle this is."

"Oh I sympathize Sir. And I hope it all works out."

"Yeah sure. Um, you'd better quiet down or people will start to wonder about you."

"Oh no worries, Sir. We are obedient servants of Galactica and will give our lives for the cause."

"All right, well let's get moving."



It was a miserable walk, a city full of tragedy, trudging slowly forward along a derelict air-effects heavy freighter road, into a freezing rain, then a light snow. Some people could not take it. They began dropping out. The very old, the very young, the very sick. An old man, exhausted, fallen. His daughter, trying to lift him up – hopeless. A mother, with a sick, dying baby. Two toddlers who can't walk any more. The mother begging for help.

There was no help from the soldiers. The dropouts were left behind, but single gunshots sounded out later, revealing their fate and motivating the living.

"Oh my God, Marty," Lacey moaned. "We're in Hell."

"Not quite yet, my dear," Marty replied.

Hours later, the soldiers directed the civilians off the old freight road and into the fields. By then there were not so many troopers, but recon eyes floated overhead, keeping careful watch.

There must have been close to twenty thousand people in that massive column snaking towards the Sulfur Range, a massive ragged blue line against the horizon.

"They're taking us to the Sulfur Range," Marty said.

"Why?" Lacey asked.

"I think they're going to kill us."

"They're going to kill everyone? All these people? But why?"

"They need a private place to kill us and dispose of the bodies. Why? They don't trust us. They're going to bring new peoples that they can trust. And the new peoples will inherit our world."

"But why did they give us the pill? The blue pill ensures loyalty as well as stupidity. If we are loyal and stupid isn't that enough?"

"No it's not enough. They want to deal with their own blood, not ours."

"This is insane. Sometimes I wish I had taken the blue pill. Just to put me out of my misery."

"Don't ever say that! We may be the only two people in this whole gang that did not take the blue – and nobody knows. And that means we can think for ourselves. Don't you ever say that again. You stick with me, we're going to get out of this mess. That's a promise! We're going to live or die together."

Δ

The destination was located high in the Sulfur Range, right in the former national park, which had been transformed into a people's secret military base. Getting there involved a lot of hands and legs walking. The civilians left a lot of bodies in their wake. The survivors were spurred on by the gunshots echoing behind them.

When they finally arrived, they collapsed into a great grassy field lightly sprinkled with snow, and looked up into a snowy sky. Thousands more had arrived before them, and the troops were prodding the first arrivals to their feet. Marty got up and edged forward to take in the view. It was a spectacular vista. The grassy field led right to a terrifying cliff drop-off falling straight down hundreds of mikes below. Not far off a filmy waterfall cascaded gracefully down, cocooned by mist.

"Forward!" the command rang out. The front ranks of civilians hesitated at the cliff edge but the troops and the recon eyes were both firing electrified vac blasts into the crowd,

forcing them all closer to the edge. Soon the desperate crowd was jammed together shoulder to shoulder, people were losing their balance and falling, trampled underfoot. An awful howl arose as the closest victims neared the drop-off.

One last great push and the screaming mass exploded into action, fighting each other for life, grasping each other for salvation, and the furthest row was now plunging over the edge, into icy air, down down down, to the end. The great crowd of panicked victims turned on the soldiers, charging them, running right into auto X and vac blasts. But the civilians were fighting for their lives and it was a stampede — the soldiers were rapidly trampled underfoot and flattened into the dirt. The newly free captives burst outwards like a human tsunami, desperate to escape as the recon craft strafed them with more e-blasts.

"Now!" Marty shouted, yanking Lacey to her feet. "Grab ahold of me and don't let go!" He charged right into the disintegrating mob at a fast run, pulling Lacey behind him. He was running towards the edge of a scruffy forest, darting through the crowd for cover, praying to his own dark gods for salvation.

Into the forest! Into the dark! He ran like a mad dog and when Lacey fell he scooped her up and ran with her in his arms. Now the forest was thicker, great black trees rising up to a tangled leafy roof. He spotted a few recon craft skimming over the forest above but after a while he did not see any more. No matter. He kept running, with Lacey's arms wrapped tightly around him. For Lacey, he thought. It's all for Lacey. I am nothing. I exist for her. It's my choice. I was put here by the gods to watch over her. And that I will do until I die.



1

Corona

"Looks like the whole town's here," I said.

"Sure does," the colonel replied. Guardians Square was a huge public plaza and it was completely full with thousands — no, tens of thousands of Corona citizens. And it was rapidly getting out of control. The crowd was screaming and chanting, waving flags and banners. Several bullhorns were screeching demands. More and more people were appearing at the edges of the crowd pushing their way forward towards a large impressive white stone building, with the crowd breaking against it like a human wave. The people appeared to be mostly Outworlders.

"What's the estimate on numbers?" I asked.

"It's approaching a hundred thousand," the colonel said. "I'm getting orders to disperse the crowd."

"And what are you going to do?" I asked.

"I don't know," he replied, "but I'm not going to fire on the people. That's what they mean when they say disperse the crowd. These people are patriots and I'm not going to shoot them." It was hot and sweaty, under sullen skies. The noise was deafening. National Police clad in grey uniforms were raggedly

lined up against the building. They were armed with Xtac subguns. I tried to make out what the people were shouting.

"Resign! Resign! Resign!"

"We will NOT comply!"

"We are NOT children!"

"Come out of there and face us! Or we'll come in and make you!"

"Liars! Liars! Liars! Nobody believes you anymore!"

"What happened to our money? It's all gone!"

"We're starving! And you're going to pay!"

The crowd was pelting the police with stones and metal pipes and whatever else they could get their hands on. A lot of it was banging off the building's armored windows. The President's Executive Mansion was under siege. It's clear the people were enraged and were not going to back down.

"This looks pretty bad," I said. "What set them off?"

"Sir, Ace, we're in place." I was connected to the colonel's tacnet.

"Who's that, Sir?" I asked.

"Armored aircars," the colonel said. "Ace High, rigged for anti-riot duty."

Several shots rang out sharply, then a burst of auto fire cut into the crowd. Several of the police had just fired directly into the demonstrators.

"Damn it!" the colonel said. "Eyes, shoot down those cops — whoever was firing into the crowd." More X fire rang out and three policemen fell to the ground, cut to shreds by the X rounds from the colonel's snipers. The crowd was going crazy. Colonel Long was the commander of the Corona Army Special Tac Ops Reaction Team. He was an Outworlder, cold as ice, surveying the situation and preparing to act. He was in camo A-vest and

armed with a Corona CMC—a compact multicapability battlefield superiority weapon.

"You asked what set them off," the colonel said. "Congress just approved the UniTax for all citizens — except government personnel of course."

"They don't like the UniTax?" I asked.

"The UniTax confiscates all personal income — one hundred percent. Every paycheck will henceforth go to Internal Revenue. And the citizens get back an allowance that the government perceives to be fair."

"I see."

"This is the breaking point. The whole citizenry is now opposed to the government. They want to smash the ruling class, the entire structure, Goodhearts and Washed both. The people have been reduced to abject poverty, hunger and slavery. The government is a brutal totalitarian dictatorship and they hate the people. And the people feel the same way about the government."

"Sir, Hqs is asking about the dispersal of the crowd."

It was decision time, I knew. I was in camo A-vest, just like the Colonel's bodyguards and troops. People at the leading edge of the crowd were throwing themselves at the police guard. One young man had ripped off his shirt and was daring the police to shoot him in the chest. Young people — boys and girls — were battering the armored police with their fists.

"What are you going to do?" I asked again. I was a commander, an official representative of the Director General of the Confederation of Free Worlds and my mission on Corona was to provide good advice to friendly government and military authorities, while not interfering, and not getting

arrested by unfriendly government and military authorities. The situation could best be described as confusing.

"I have no intention of serving this regime anymore," the Colonel said. "I am about to attack the President's residence and kill or capture him. We know he's in there. Do you have any advice?"

"Are the people angry with the military?"

"They're angry with everyone."

"That flag – the blue and white – is that your old national colors?"

"Yes. If you display it they toss you in jail."

"Good. Call your armored aircars here but tell them to have that flag flying from every car. Then tell the crowd to stand back and have your aircars attack the building."

"That's a damn good idea."

"I try to be helpful, Sir."

Δ

When the aircars appeared in a haze of dust the crowd screamed and tried to run but they were packed too closely to escape. As the cars neared it became clear they were all bedecked with that blue and white flag, flapping in the breeze. Some of the pilots leaned out the armored windows, waving at the crowd. The crowd milled around and then let out a tremendous cheer, moving towards the aircars, no longer afraid.

Colonel Long's troopers made their way to the Executive Mansion and moved into the crowd pushing them back while explaining what was going to happen. In no time at all the crowd had retreated to a safe distance. The aircars hovered overhead facing the building. Then they fired simultaneously,

deafening auto X, ripping the face of the building to pockmarked dust. When the firing stopped the crowd let out a savage cheer, a hundred thousand voices rejoicing for the future. Of course the X was just a noisy show. Had the aircar unit been serious they would have used tacstars.

Δ

The Colonel's tac ops team kicked in the doors and went in firing after the aircars had ventilated the building. Colonel Long was right with them and so was I. I didn't want to miss the high point of the revolution. Long's troopers blasted their way into every room to ensure all was clear. We followed close behind them. I had an Infinity carbine but was hoping I wouldn't have to use it.

"Got your six, Geeker. Stay alert!" Kidcat was one of my favorite squadies. I didn't like to go anywhere without him. He was a bit of a wiseass but I didn't mind. My war name was Seeker but Kidcat liked to call me Geeker. I just called him Kid.

"Commander." It was the Colonel. "Got a report we just seized the starport. No resistance."

"That's great, Sir." I replied.

A wild volley of X cracked right past us and riddled the nearest wall. Long's troopers fired back and took out a couple of police. We charged up a grand staircase, firing to clear the way. The colonel had made a hard choice, embracing revolution over loyalty to the government, but I knew it was the right choice. The government was clearly rotten and ready for total collapse. And the people were not going to take it anymore.

A sharp bang sounded up ahead. We hustled to reach it. A couple of the colonel's troopers were cautiously looking into a room that they had just hit with a flash-bang.

"He's in there, Sir," one of them reported. I followed Colonel Long into a smoke filled room. A heavysset, bald man was on his knees trying to regain his vision. He appeared to be unwounded. Kidcat and I covered him as a trooper frisked him, uncovering a shiny handgun.

"Well well," the Colonel said. "William Van Dorn, I wish to advise you that you are no longer president of Corona. You are now a prisoner of the Freedom Front. Put the cuffs on him."

Our prisoner was still on his knees, clad in a lightly scorched uniform suit jacket with several medals on the left chest. He was looking around, blinking red eyes. There was something — reptilian — about his pale flesh. His dark fingernails were more like claws. Yes, these were Corona's rulers. They carried faint traces of reptilian DNA. They were highly intelligent but cold and merciless to anyone they perceived to be an enemy. And all humans were perceived to be enemies.

"Colonel," I said. "Shouldn't you check with General Peyton before proceeding further?"

"The general is hiding under his desk, Commander. Or maybe packing his bags. Should we run into him I plan on arresting him. Captain, get some good holo shots of our prisoner here. Then work on a caption and we'll blast it everywhere."

The ex-president was roughly pulled to his feet and holloed thoroughly while standing by a lovely female officer in camfax who was holding a subgun. Now that was a good pix.

"We object to this treatment," Van Dorn hissed.

"Shut down," Colonel Long said. "You are no longer president. You are a traitor and you will probably face execution in a day or so."

"Sir, the Iron Guard CO wants to speak with you," somebody said.

"Put him through," the Colonel ordered. "Hello Redman."

"Sir!" Redman said. "I wish to inform you we are standing down. The Iron Guard will not resist you."

"That's excellent, Redman. An excellent decision."

"And if you need assistance we will assist. Just ask."

"I thank you, Sir. The situation is clarifying rapidly. You are the first to know that we just captured the president."

"Shoot the bastard!"

"No I'd rather put him behind bars and exhibit him to the people. Like a monkey."

"Well that's where he belongs — behind bars."



We worked through the night and by the time dawn broke we were exhausted but happy. Everything was falling into place. The government had collapsed utterly. The Goodheart Peoples Militia had dissolved when facing hardened Corona soldiers. Most of the Corona army and the Stellar Defense forces had welcomed the revolution. It was an Outworlder revolution and the Goodheart alien hateprop fantasy dissolved in reality. The people no longer believed anything the government said. They finally realized that they were slaves to aliens.

We reconvened in a war room in the Ministry of Peace. The place was swarming with officers barking orders into comsets. The walls and ceilings were covered with glowing sitmaps. The former inhabitants were long gone. The colonel approached me and fell into a chair, exhausted.

"Is the martial law declaration finished yet?" I asked.

"Done," he said. "Finally."

"Good," I replied. "Make it crystal clear. Everything will flow from that. That's number one. And it must be deadly serious. Anybody challenges it, attack them immediately, toss 'em in detention. No mercy. That's what we learned."

"All right," he said. "I've got some questions. We're willing to learn from ConFree if it seems to be applicable to us. Our situation is, everything has collapsed. It's all rubble. And this means we can start afresh. I look on it as a once in a lifetime opportunity to build a nation on a strong foundation. We have no laws, no economy, no education, no government — nothing. The Goodhearts took it all and left us with nothing."

"I believe I can help you, Colonel. I'm a soldier but I'm also a historian. I've seen what works — for ConFree. And we've got a pretty good system. Are you the leader of this revolution?"

"Yes I am. For now. We formed an emergency rebel military headquarters to meet the threat — the Freedom Front. All friendly military commands participated. I was voted director, maybe because I was one of the first to take action."

"Good."

"All right, I'll listen," the Colonel said. "So what's first?"

"Martial law is first," I said.

"And what's next?"

"Arrest all Goodhearts — all of them. Put them in detention camps. Then deport them — all."

"And where do we send them?"

"I don't know. Anywhere but here. Just get rid of them — completely. Find some world that's underpopulated. I'm just making suggestions. You decide."

"Commander I like your suggestions. All right, we put them in camps and work on deporting them. Then what?"

"Then abolish your Internal Revenue. Completely. Fire everybody. In one day."

"I'd love to do it. But what do we do about taxes?"

"Abolish the income tax. Completely. No more tax forms."

"And ...?"

"Establish a one percent tax on all goods at point of sale. Two percent if you want. The merchants will auto-send the revenue to a new department of the Treasury that only adds up the total and deposits it in the Treasury. The people never fill out any tax forms. They don't have to deal with any bloodsucking bureaucrats. If they don't want to pay the one percent, they don't have to buy the item. No taxes on food or medicine. The public will worship whoever comes up with this idea and support him for the rest of eternity."

"And what about the millions of tax drone parasites and lawyers who live off the old system?"

"The booming new economy that will result from our discussions will generate many new fast food employment opportunities for them."

"That sounds very promising," the colonel said with a faint smile.

"Sir, it's Colonel Dylan of the Mobile Strike Force," somebody said.

"Patch him in. Hello Douglas. Do you have good news for me?"

"Yes Sir. The 14th Goodheart Militia has just surrendered to us en masse. We're using the laserwire containment system to corral them until we can work out where to send them."

"That's great, Douglas. Good work. Make sure they're all disarmed. Thank you so much. Long out."

"All right, where were we?" the Colonel asked

"We were about to balance the budget," I replied.

"Yeah? Well, the Goodheart's mission was to destroy the nation. They succeeded. Our paper credits are almost worthless. How are we going to balance the budget?"

"Easy. Have Congress legislate a mandatory balanced budget."

"But that's meaningless. They've been talking about that for fifty years but they keep raising the budget and the debt limit and the national debt keeps going up. Forever."

"Congress needs motivation. Under martial law, congressional salaries are frozen until the budget is balanced. Nothing to it. They'll have it done in a week."

"And how are they going to do that?"

"No problem. From what I've learned, about ninety five percent of your government ministries and departments do nothing except spend and waste money. Many of them do the exact opposite of what they are supposed to be doing. Abolish entire departments and keep abolishing until the budget is balanced. It won't take long and you'll wind up with a much smaller, more efficient government. You can start with Education. They hate your children and only want to destroy them. You don't need that department. How about the Ministry of Health? They've been killing millions of your nationals with their lies."

"Are you getting all this?" the Colonel asked his secretary.

"Yes Sir." She was a hot one. I wondered if the colonel's wife knew about her.

"And how about the Ministry of Truth, the Ministry of Distribution, the Ministry of Law," I continued. "And the Ministry of Compliance. Nobody is going to miss them, that's for sure. And Psymed. And Directed Service. You'll never run

out of worthless ministries to abolish. Oh and one more thing," I said. "Why do you keep referring to them as the Goodhearts? Language is important. You should start referring to them as the Blackhearts."

"The Corona people are way ahead of you, Commander. They've been calling them that for years."



2

Redeye

Two days later we were still at the war room of the Ministry of Peace and the colonel and I were seeking a little privacy on a grand balcony that provided a terrific view of the heart of the city. From time to time Freedom Front officers would seek the colonel out on the balcony for resolution of ongoing problems.

The capitol city appeared peaceful, under grey skies. But there was a lot going on out there. Guardians Square was surrounded by white stone government buildings set amidst a lush forest of green trees. There was only a scattering of people in the Plaza, including several armed troopers.

"Colonel," I asked. "How did the Goodhearts manage to seize all power in your government when they are a small minority who do not possess military superiority?"

"Good question," he replied. "It's because we're stupid and they're smart. That's the short answer."

"How did they do it?" I asked.

"They never fooled us — the military. But they fooled everyone else. They appeared as refugees seeking security and peace. Our people are generous and sympathetic. As time passed more and more of these alien refugees arrived. And soon they were infiltrating the government. Then the rest of society.

Their propaganda was brilliant. Our society rapidly divided into pro and anti Goodheart factions. The brainwashed faction supported the aliens and included the rich, the ruling class, and much of the government. We called them the Washed. The Unwashed were those who opposed the aliens. Unfortunately the Washed were more politically powerful than the Unwashed."

The Colonel looked up to the sky as if appealing to a higher power. "And finally they controlled everything, and our people were dispossessed. There's no cure for stupid. We—the military—kept waiting for the government to order us to toss out the intruders. But that never happened. Because the intruders became the government. That's when we realized we had to do it ourselves."

"You did the right thing. Congratulations."

"We're running into problems. Our laws are now insane. Exactly what type of government do you think might be best for us? After martial law."

"I believe a citizens constitutional republic would be best. With a written constitution and bill of rights guaranteeing freedoms for all citizens and severely limiting government power."

"Constitutional republic I get, but why specify citizens constitutional republic?"

"Because it's a government of and for the citizens and not for anyone else. For example, Goodhearts."

"Sir, it's Fleet Command," one of the staff officers said. Colonel Long returned to the war room.

It's good, I thought. What I am doing here is good. I'm giving them good advice and helping them build a strong foundation for the future. But this is nonsense. It's just nonsense. None of

this should be necessary. By now humanity should know how to handle reality. We shouldn't still be dealing with fantasy and pretending it's real. Who the hell are these Goodhearts anyway? Where did they come from? And why are the Corona citizens so damned slow and stupid?

I knew something was very very wrong. I'd had this feeling for quite a while. I was uneasy, very uneasy. I kept falling into these black moods without reason. But I knew something was wrong, really wrong out there in the vac. And ConFree should be dealing with it. But I guess we didn't even know what it was.

"All right, Commander," Colonel Long said as he returned to the balcony. "There's a lot of violence out there. The crime rate is growing. We've got problems with looting because people are hungry and desperate."

"What happened to the food warehouses?"

"The Goodhearts have been storing food surplus in thousands of giant warehouses. They were deliberately starving the people. We've taken charge there, opened up the warehouses, organized access for everybody, recorded who gets what and assigned directed employment for all citizens who are unemployed. However some — people — don't want to wait in lines and have been looting small markets."

"Looters must be shot dead. That's martial law. And ensure everybody knows it. If they loot, shoot them dead. You'll only need a few dead to completely stop looting."

"Yes. I know that."

"How about treason? Are you compiling the lists?"

"Yes. We know all about treason. We'll handle that. No help needed, thanks."

"Sir, I'd like to interrogate one of these Goodheart officials. ConFree knows very little about these people and they want me

to find out more. Maybe one of their information or intelligence officers. Would that be alright?"

"No problem at all, Commander. We'll set that up."

Δ

Detention Ten was only a short walk from our assigned BOQ. Kidcat and I set off on foot along Heaven's Highway, right downtown, under a sunny morning sky. We were both in camfax A-vests, at Colonel Long's suggestion, and Infinities were strapped to our chests. The camfax identified us as friendlies, and the Infinities were because the situation was still a bit shaky.

"Ah, now what?" Kidcat asked. The right sidewalk was choked with pedestrians, and they were not moving. They were blocking the way, spilling out into the road. It was a massive crowd — hundreds, I thought. Thousands. We stepped out into the road to cut around them.

"Calm down, Kid," I said. "These are probably POWs." Kidcat was getting increasingly short tempered. I didn't blame him. He had changed completely after he lost Aine. but I didn't blame him. She was all he had, and after her death he had nothing.

The people were all Outworlders, it seemed. My people. Men, women, teens, kids, babies — they were in very bad shape. Just barely hanging on. Dressed in rags. Some of them had no shoes. Medics and nurses were tending to them, providing milk for the babies and water and snacks for everyone else. I spotted a Corona trooper armed with a CMC.

"What's this all about, trooper," I asked. "Who are these people?"

"Political," he said. "Political prisoners— we just liberated them."

"Do you mean these are Corona citizens who were thrown in detention by the Goodhearts?"

"You mean the Blackhearts. Yeah that's right ."

"What did they do to merit political prisoner status?"

"Nothing. They were Unwashed. They rejected brainwashing. So they didn't have that little W on their earlobe. The rats rounded up thousands of them."

The liberated prisoners were pale, sickly, exhausted and rail-thin. Nurses were feeding the babies milk. The babies were silent. The crowd moved very slowly. The kids were also silent, some of them crying noiselessly, holding hands with their parents if they had any parents to hold on to. I saw one little boy who was all alone, walking by himself. I felt that the angel of death was floating right over that hopeless crowd.

"Where are they going?" I asked.

"Memorial Arena," the trooper replied. "We'll fix them up there."

Fix them up. Yeah well maybe not. I opened up my ratpack, took out all the rations and handed them out blindly to people in the crowd. Then I gave them the last of my dox. So did Kidcat.

Corona was way way way off the starcharts — lost in stardust down in the Underway. An Outworlder expedition looking for privacy had opened up Corona for human habitation and until the Blackhearts arrived it had worked just fine. Then Corona had asked ConFree for help to resolve the problem they had created themselves.

Detention 10 was right past the Memorial Arena. It was a massive bunker hiding behind high walls topped with laser

wire. We checked in at the welcome desk. A giant banner on the wall read:

WELCOME TO DETENTION 10
YOU'RE GOING TO HATE IT HERE

A young prison guard in a blue uniform greeted us, disarmed us, and showed us the way in.

"This is it," he said, stopping at a sealed door labeled 412. We'll be monitoring everything. Need anything, just speak up. Good luck." The door snapped open, Kidcat and I stepped in and the door snapped shut behind us.

Our subject was seated behind a small table. He had long dirty shoulder length black hair, thinning on top, and a weary face. He was clad in phospho yellow prisoner garb. He was unshaven with black stubble and his eyes were slightly red. His black fingernails looked like claws. There was a little W tattooed on one earlobe.

Kidcat and I dragged our chairs over to the table and sat there facing the prisoner. I looked him over.

"Coreo Tan," I said. "Strategic Security Command."

"Correcto," he replied. "We be given your colleagues all me bio. Will we do it again?"

Kidcat placed a shockrod before him on the table and looked over at me with a little smile. I smiled back and raised my hand no.

"I've already got a lot more than I need to know about you," I replied. "But I have some questions that are not addressed in your bio. If you answer truthfully we'll get along fine. If not, this is going to be a very unpleasant morning for you. And for me."

"But not for me," Kidcat said with a cheery smile.

"We be hot to answer any you questions," Coreo said.

"I want your opinion on several issues," I said.

"Ask-o," he replied.

"Your people came to this world as refugees. You were welcomed. In a very short time frame you seized absolute power and ruled as a totalitarian dictatorship. You did that in a little over twenty years. I know the history of those events. I would like your honest opinion of exactly how you did that."

"Ah. Truth be, we got a lotta help from all. And the reason be, sez we, your people were not so bright. We had no secrets. We divvied your pop into hostile factions and then backed the more powerful faction. We rewarded our faction and punished the rest. Rules for them but not for us—or our servants in the Ruling Class. Milforce was never needed. You mean IQ's were so low. It be like we were loosely guiding a national suicide."

"So. You were smart and we were stupid."

"Exacto. Um. No offense meant."

"None taken. Why did your people come here in the first place?"

"It be a lovely world. And the pop was oh so vulnerable."

"At first the Corona thought there were a limited number of you, but you kept coming. Millions of you. Where did you come from?"

"We be from Soliel. That be in me bio."

"Yes. But that was not your home planet was it — originally?"

"Not. We —"

"You subverted Soliel as well — and conquered it. Correct? You are galactic parasites, aren't you? Why did you leave Soliel? Why?"

"No choice, Sir. A rogue star entered our solar system and pulled Soliel right out of orbit."

"A rogue star. Did your captors believe you?"

"Yes sir. Check me file. We told Corona the same. Tis true. They brainscanned me."

"Deadman." It was unbelievable. A rogue star! I had read about it in his file but I had not quite believed it. What are the chances of that happening?

"What happened to Soliel as a result?" I asked.

"Ye be not from Corona, no?"

"No I'm not. Answer the question."

"The rogue star ran hot through our solsystem very close — in galactic terms — to Soliel's orbit. It be sheer terror, watching it come. We named it Redeye. As it passed we went careening off in more or less a straight line into the dark."

"Into the dark."

"Yes Sir. We said goodbye to our sun. Redeye continued its merciless trajectory and left us behind. Thousands died — tsunamis, flooding, earthquakes, volcanoes. Lucky we retained our at. That be the last time we had sunlight. The last day. From then, it be eternal night. The temp dropped and dropped and dropped again. Soon everything be frozen except for the oceans but they be slow freezing too. We did a massive evac. We had prepped for years, every starship we had. But we did leave some behind. Mostly Soliel natives. We be sorry for them."

"That must have really hurt. I can tell you are great humanitarians. Alright Corio." I reached into my tacpack and pulled out a recorder. I placed it before him. "I want you to think back and tell me everything that you remember about this rogue star. Everything. Take your time. I'll be right here. And I'll have plenty of questions."

"Everything," he said. "So. We first heard about it from Astro Central. This was about two years before it approached us but

even then we could tell it was a serious problem. The damned thing was coming right at us."

"I'll see if I can find us some dox," Kidcat said, rising from his chair. "It looks like this may take some time."

"Good idea," I replied.

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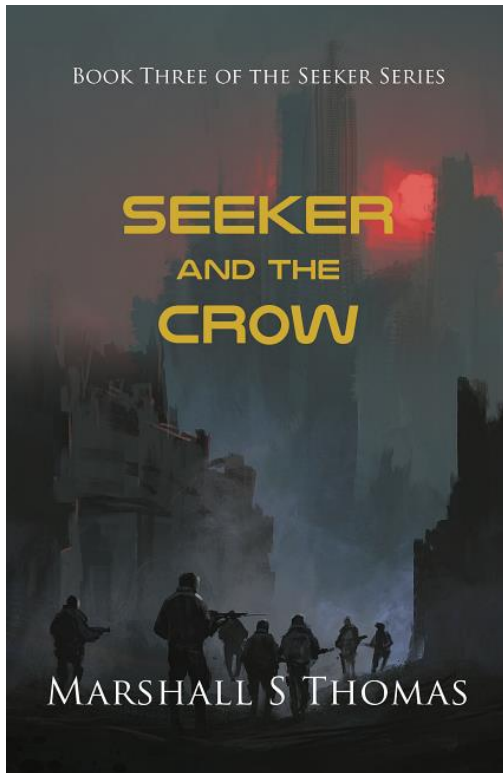
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