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Prophet and the Fields of Glory

by Marshall S Thomas

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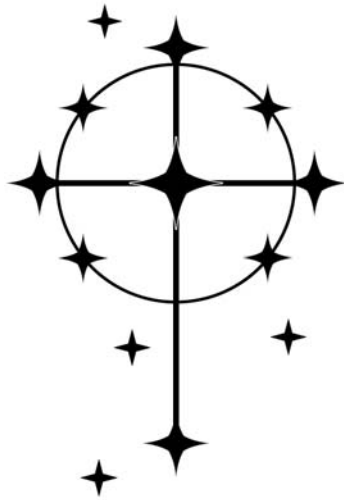
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BOOK FIVE OF THE *PROPHET OF CONFEE* SERIES

PROPHET AND THE FIELDS OF GLORY

MARSHALL S THOMAS

Prophet
and the
Fields of Glory



by
Marshall S Thomas

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ISBN: 978-1-63491-901-2

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Published by BookLocker.com, Inc., Bradenton, Florida.

Printed on acid-free paper.

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BookLocker.com, Inc. 2016

First Edition

Layout design by Chris Thomas

Editing by Carol Woods

Starmaps by Hatton Slayden

Shields and seals by Chris Thomas

Galactic Info shield by Michael J Sullivan

Cover photo – STSci-2013-51, Hubble Watches Super Star Create Holiday Light Show, Cepheid Variable Star RS Puppis. Credit: NASA, ESA and the Hubble Heritage Team (STSci/AURA)-Hubble/Europe collaboration. Acknowledgment: H. Bond (STSci and Pennsylvania State University). Public domain.

Dedicated to

Bouddica, Warrior Queen of the Iceni

Victory or Death!

"In stature she was very tall, in appearance most terrifying, in the glance of her eye most fierce, and her voice was harsh; a great mass of the tawniest hair fell to her hips. Around her neck was a large golden necklace; and she wore a tunic of divers colours over which a thick mantle was fastened with a brooch. This was her invariable attire."

— Cassius Dio, Roman historian

Nothing is safe from Roman pride and arrogance. They will deface the sacred and will deflower our virgins. Win the battle or perish, that is what I, a woman, will do.

— Boudicca, according to Tacitus

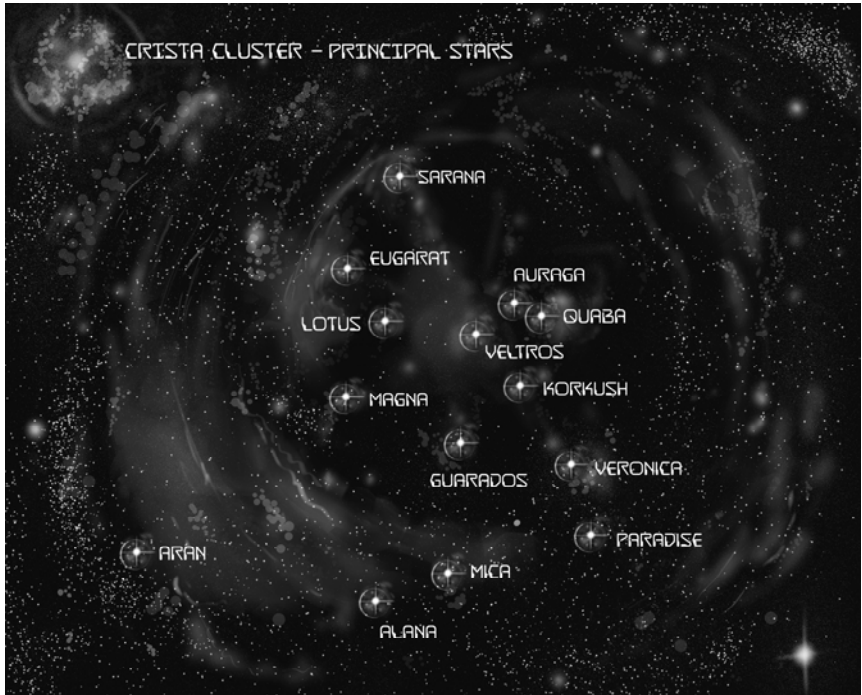
I was whipped by the Romans when they tried to take our lands — and now I am fighting for my freedom. Think how many of us are fighting and why. We must win this battle or die. Let the men live as slaves if they want. I will not.

— Boudicca's last speech, as recorded by Cassius Dio



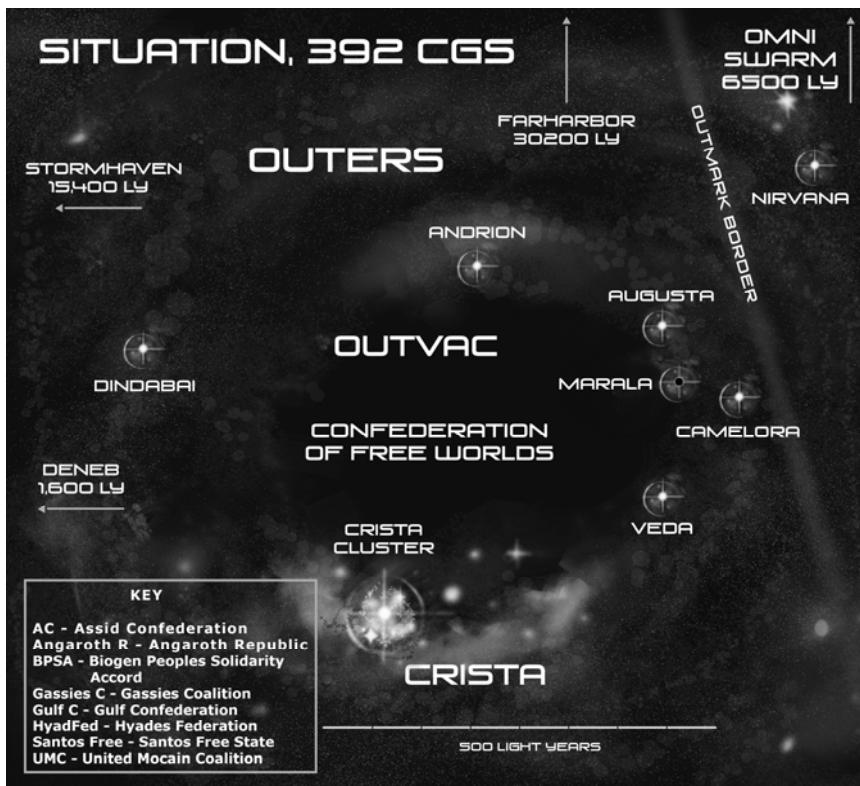
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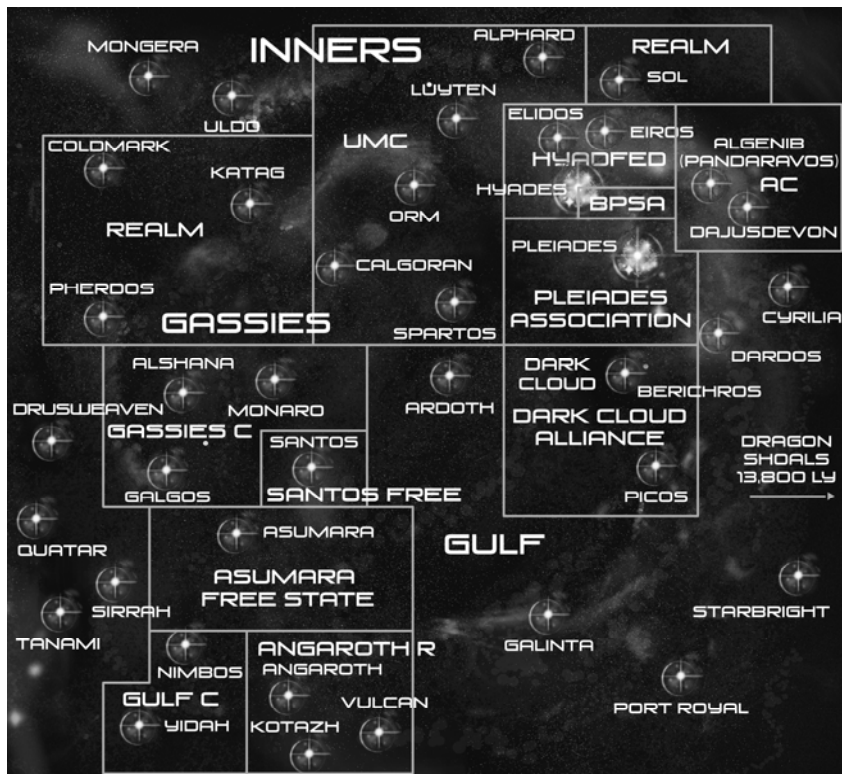
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Crista Cluster, 1,400 light years from Sol

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.





PART I

OUT OF THE DARK



Bleed for ConFree, and ConFree will bleed for you.

Legion Motto



Prologue

Year Zero

The Supreme Commander stood beside the helmsman, hissing quietly. He was a frightening figure, especially to those who knew him well. His scaly, dark-green skin was shedding, giving a mottled effect. His unblinking cold yellow eyes were bloodshot because of the shedding, and it made him crankier than normal. Nobody likes shedding their skin or their eyes, but it was nature's way and not to be avoided. The Supreme Commander was clad in his metallic golden Stellar Naval uniform. They were at the bridge, at the very heart of the great migration, tied to every ship in that mighty starfleet.

"Steady on, steady on," the helmsman hissed calmly, his clawed hands resting lightly on the mag master steering mechanism. He wore his formal, silver duty uniform and his quiet chant was a traditional naval term meaning that all was well. It soothed the SC. The SC loved to hear it. He had to deal with so many awful problems that it was comforting to stand here in the beating heart of his flotilla, his fleet, his people, and hear the reassuring, traditional

chant. Tradition was important to the SC. The helmsman's duty station had an old-fashioned ship's wheel mounted above the mags and antimat and quantum guidance systems. Both the SC and the helmsman and everyone else in the fleet were Choakars, descendants of the reptilian swarm that fought its way out of the savage swamps of Krakoan and developed high intelligence and planetary superiority and subsequently launched itself into the stars and met every racial challenge – until now.

The SC knew the entire Choakar race was in his hands, right now. He was personally responsible for the survival of his race, his people, his species. And he would not fail them. Failure was not an option. His star fleet was more than a collection of tens of thousands of gigantic passenger starships and the military strike force that was accompanying them to defend the fleet and destroy whatever enemy civilizations might oppose them. The fleet was the people – the entire people. It was a racial migration, a racial pilgrimage, to a new homeland. And it was the whole race. Nobody had been left behind except the dead – and all Choakar's history and traditions and culture, thousands of years of progress and knowledge. The graves of our ancestors, the SC thought, clenching his fists until his claws bit into his palms. The graves of our ancestors!

This was the scythe of history, he knew. The strong survive, and the weak die. The Z had ravaged the empires of Edgeveil for close to a hundred stellar years. They swarmed with numbers like the stars in the sky, an endless, savage horde that brought down the proud Starlords and left their realm a smoking wasteland. Then they moved on to Helmshound, mighty Helmshound. And Helmshound fell, its people extinguished from history. But the Z were not finished. Choakar was next.

We fought bravely, the SC thought, but we were overwhelmed. All our tech superiority did us no good. Perhaps we have grown weak, in recent decades. But they were bold, and fearless, and seemingly infinite in number. It was a long struggle,

but hopeless. We lost half our population, the SC thought. Half! The scythe of history. The bold survive; the weak perish.

That is not going to happen again, he vowed. Not on my watch!

"Steady on, steady on."

"Sir! Tech Recon has an initial report." It was the captain of the *Starry Seas*, the SC's own flagship of the fleet. The captain reported directly to the Supreme Commander, who was also Admiral of the People's Fleet. He was holding a techscan.

"Tech Recon," the SC repeated. He was thrilled. "What do the gods have for us, Captain?"

"Sir!" The captain was braced at attention, reading from the techscan. "'The tech probes confirm the target area, Quadrant Twenty Four, is swarming with life.'" The Choakar language had a hissing, snapping, clicking sound. "It is within the primary galactic habzone, as we knew. Scan confirms that thousands of separate planets are fully suitable for life as we know it and most are already inhabited. EM freqs are filled with endless communication, radiating out into the vac. The vac is full of starships. The highest life form is humans. Initial readout is these creatures are not, repeat *not* united. They speak many different languages, they are divided up into separate worlds and geographic areas. They war with each other over territory and put a lot of effort into that."

"They're fighting each other?"

"Sir yes sir!"

"What a break! Continue!"

"Sir! The techs are still gathering info on alien military and tech capabilities and details on all the different peoples and boundaries. There are many billions of humans and other races. Initial impression is that they are confused, disorganized, and not at all united. However, Recon is planning to drop in recon teams to gather more details, to determine their defensive capabilities and to determine how our weaponry and tactics will compare to theirs."

"I want a conference with Chief Recon as soon as he can get here to ensure there will be no warning to the aliens when we drop in the recon teams. Our attack must be totally unexpected."

"Sir yes sir! It certainly appears promising so far, does it not?"

"It does. Fighting themselves – how stupid. I'm surprised they've achieved space flight."

"So ... if there are no unexpected surprises, will we proceed as planned?"

"We will. First, choose the initial targets – then antimat all major cities and bases. Drop our troops into the initial DZ's and cleanse the area of all aliens. Choose an appropriate genetic weapon to finish them off en masse. Then build our own bases – invulnerable to attack. Then move on to the next target, and the next. Repeat until they surrender in despair. Then enslave the survivors and have them build the next few bases. And, when it's safe, allow our civilians to land and welcome them to their new homeland."

"So ... we will allow some of the aliens to survive, to serve as laborers?"

"Perhaps for a few years. But history shows that is a dangerous plan. It would be best to kill them all. Leave none alive. Then there will be no future problems for our children and grandchildren."

"I'm sure you're right, sir."

"Of course, I'm right. That's why I'm the admiral, and you're the captain." They both laughed, an eerie croaking. The SC liked the captain and joked with him from time to time.

"Captain, when that first recon troopie touches down on his target, our new calendar will begin. That will be Year Zero. And it will be a new beginning, for our people. Year Zero."

"Yes sir!"



Chapter 1

Stoneblood

Stoneblood glared at his visitor – almost as if he wanted to consume him. They were both Demons but were so different they could have been separate species. Stoneblood sat in a chair behind a transparent armored plex screen that divided the little interrogation room. His visitor was in a chair on the other side of the screen.

"I am sick of looking at you," Stoneblood said in harsh, grating tones. The language was Demon. Stoneblood was large for a Demon, although only shoulder high to a human. He was completely covered with tangled, sticky, reddish brown fur and clad in a phospho orange jump-suit. He was filthy and his squat, powerful body gave off a rancid odor. He had webbed hands and bluish claws. Wriggling little yellow parasite worms crawled lazily through the fur, leaving an oily, sludgy liquid slime behind. His black face was free of fur – a flat, leathery muzzle with a ridged, fleshy nose. Two small black eyes were set on either side of his ugly misshapen head. He had oversized purple ears.

The differences between the two Demons were stark. Lhwoee was also covered in fur, but the fur was clean and neatly combed. There were no parasites. He wore stylish civilian garb that was human in origin. He sported a shiny chron on one wrist and a few rings on his fingers.

"We are always pleased to see you, General," Lhwoee said with a faint smile. "It is an honor, and I honor you for your selfless service to our people."

"You are a traitor and a coward," Stoneblood snarled. "You betray your people, consort with the enemy and live a life of luxury while your blood brothers are suffering in a Coldmark prison."

"You know I was captured in combat by the Assidics and imprisoned for years. Only now do I approach you, anxious to help my comrades and wreak vengeance on our enemies."

"You speak crap. I only talk with you because you bring dox and choco donuts. They are a welcome relief from the nasty gruel they feed us. So why don't you shut down and give me another choco donut. No, give me two."

Lhwoee almost smiled. The humans had initially softened him up with choco donuts, and now he handed out donuts himself. But it was for a good cause, he told himself as he slid more dox and donuts through the access port on the counter. A good cause!

"Lhwoee – you dishonor your own name," Stoneblood said. "Lhwoee was a patriot who sacrificed himself for the Tribe. A national hero. You are a prostitute to the humans. Where are your worms? They keep us alive. They are part of our history. We owe them everything. And you discard them! You laugh at the gods." He took a big bite of choco donut.

"I do not need the worms," Lhwoee replied. "Nobody needs them. They are parasites. Life is so much better without them."

"How can you say that? We will die without them, and they will die without us."

"I am alive, not dead. A simple formula allows us to live parasite free."

"You lie!"

"It is true, honored general. Please instruct me. Who are our enemies?"

"You are ignorant. Brights and all humans – Assidics, CrimCon, the Mocains – all the former System states. And the Biogens. All of them. Those are our racial enemies. You know this!"

"Almost the entire galaxy."

"Yes!"

"And the Darks?" Lhwoee asked.

"The Darks! They are our comrades in arms, our allies, our strongest friends."

"You think I am a fool, but I am not," Lhwoee said. "And I know you are not either. Do you love your family? Your heartmate, your children? Do you not fight for them? Are they not why you walk into the enemy crossfire? Is that not why you advance, unto certain death? Why you sacrifice yourself for the Tribe, for your distant families, why you have but to raise your arm, and a full century of noble tribesmen follow, into the jaws of death? Is it not so?"

"What do you know of that?" Stoneblood barked. "You dare mention such a sacred mission – to me!"

"You know about Deneb. I know you do."

"Of course I do! What of it?"

"Our mission ended in defeat – and death. What happened to our comrades?"

"They died fighting. They died to save others."

"Oh, yes. The Tribe died fighting. And what happened to the Darks, and the Army of the Spirit of the Realm? A lot of them escaped, is it not so?"

"Yes. Thanks be to us. "

"But there were no thanks, were there? As the Tribe held the line, the Darks escaped – along with their families. Dark women and children, all evaced safely. But there was no evac for the Tribe, was there?"

"No." A quieter tone. "No."

"There were some Tribal women and children also – the families of our highest ranking officers. General officers. Like yourself. When the Legion came, they were all still in the camfaced underground starports, still waiting for evac. And the Legion entered with tacstars and plasma. None survived. Who do you blame?"

Stoneblood stood, rigid with hate, trembling with emotion. "If you were not hiding behind that barrier, I would kill you with my bare hands," he said.

"You should blame the Darks, not the Legion," Lhwoee said. "Why are they so contemptible of tribal families? Why have they never allowed our troopers to cloak themselves properly from the enemy? You know that, I know you do. Not cost effective. There are plenty of Demons – why should we waste the money, they ask. They call us Demons, you know. Same as the humans do. Why do you die for the Darks? To them, we are all cannon fodder."

"I do not die for the Darks." Stoneblood resumed his seat and popped open another dox, his anger seemingly spent. "We are all loyal soldiers, true to our oaths, fighting for our families, for our dead, for our tribal blood brothers who stand by our sides, fighting to the death. Born in Mid Haven to die in U1, that is our fate, and we embrace it."

"It is the Darks who direct your actions, who mistreat you, who cast aside your women and children in contempt, who laugh at you and call you primitive savages, who place you in the front lines to absorb the first blows. And who order you to attack the enemy under suicidal conditions, without cloaking."

"Yes, it is so. It is a cruel universe. And we need strong allies to stand by us."

"Do they really stand by you? Or do you stand by them? And for what? You fought on Deneb. You were a general officer. Were you allowed an accompanied tour?"

"Get out! And don't come back. You are a despicable traitor and liar. I will speak with you no more."

"I will return, honored general. I know you are a patriot and a leader and a fearless seeker after truth. I know you hate the Darks. We all do. I know you discuss these issues with your colleagues, here in the University of Reality. I know you must have a clear vision of the future, a future where the Tribe will make its own way in the universe, strong and united and afraid of nothing. Discuss it with your comrades. We are at a crossroads, here, at this time and place. Anything is possible. It is almost miraculous, that you should all be here, Tribal survivors, a whole army of survivors, leaders and followers, looking into a hazy future, a new reality, if you are wise enough and strong enough to seize it. Yes, talk it over with your comrades. I will return."

Lhwoee was satisfied as the Coldmarker guards opened up the gates for him to exit the detention center. Yes, he had accomplished exactly what he wanted, this visit. He greatly admired Stoneblood. He was indeed a patriot, one who would die for his cause. And it had indeed been a miracle that the Legion's new Hippocrates weapons system allowed such a vast number of Demon officers and men to be captured alive and unhurt on Coldmark. Surely the ancient gods of the Tribe were watching over them all. Lhwoee was so happy that he had the opportunity to participate in this sacred effort for his people. He did not mind what Stoneblood thought of him. He knew he was doing the right thing.



Chapter 2

The Armor of our Faith

"Prophet, Scout. We've got a problem." That was all we had on Pherdos – problems. Big problems. I was getting sick of it. But I was the man who was supposed to resolve all the problems and keep our troops moving.

"Details please," I requested. Scout and I were A & A, armored and armed, bristling with weaponry, flat on our chestplates in the smoking wreckage of a Pherdan milbase that we had just levelled. It was a pitch-black night except for spiderwebs of glowing xmax falling slowly towards us, the flashing of tacstars flickering like lightning, and the occasional doomed starfighter spiralling in to the ground. We were with the 2nd Heavy Recon Strike Force with the Predator Regiment of the 12th Legion. The mission was to strike hard at the base with tacair, overrun it, wait for the tactical response, hit them with Hippocrates, then pick selected prisoners from the disabled troopers, load them into our shuttles and lift off the planet. Simple. Right?

"I have no details," Scout said. "Follow me, but keep your head down." Good advice, from our most experienced warrior. But by now we were all experienced. We cautiously advanced, then fell to our bellies again when a blinding volley of xmax and laser danced all around us. It was followed by three Demon plasmastars that landed too damned close for comfort, shaking the earth.

"All right, let's try that again," I said. We headed forward but the front lines were ablaze with enemy fire aimed at our advance units, who were firing back hotly. The Realm reaction forces were attacking into the milbase, trying to push back the intruders. We ran low, keeping the shells of burning buildings between us and the enemy whenever possible. I had a Hippocrates in my arms and an E, a Magstorm and a Battlestorm dangling from my shoulders. And yes, I needed them all.

"What's the sit, Captain?" Scout asked. We had reached the tip of the spear: a young captain in a fighting triangle with his staff, huddled in a giant pile of rubble. We crawled as close to him as advisable.

"The sit is our cloaking is no longer effective, sir," the captain replied.

"How do you know that, Captain?" I asked. A heavy barrage of xmax exploded all around us, spraying deadly shrapnel that pinged all over my armor. Then another barrage of x, then two horrific tacstars that would have killed us had we not been shielded by all the rubble. I gasped, my ears ringing. I was trying to burrow deeper into the earth but my armor was in the way.

"I do believe the captain is right," Scout said.

"Who are those guys, Captain?" I asked. Somebody was certainly aware of our exact position, and trying real hard to kill us.

"Darks for sure, and Demons for sure, and it looks like some native Pherdan auxiliaries as well. Can't tell about any spooks. But we've got another problem."

"What's that?" I asked.

"Our Hippocrates is no longer functioning properly."

"What! Why the hell not?"

"Give it a try yourself, sir. It looks like it's working, but after we target the enemy, they just keep firing at us." He was armed with a Hippocrates EM rifle. Everyone in the unit had a Hippocrates. The Hippocrates was my baby, an amazing Artificial Intelligence production from Farharbor that disabled the enemy without killing him.

We crawled into alternate positions, auto X blasting all around us. I aimed my Hippocrates and fired noiselessly, spraying the electromagnetic waves gently over the entire enemy axis of advance.

Heavy fire continued from the enemy. They should have been immediately disabled by the Hippocrates. Once again the young captain was correct. The Hippocrates was not working!

"Damn it to Hell," I said quietly.

"So what do we do?" Scout asked grimly.

"Tell everyone to hold positions and fire auto X, laser, tacstars, battlestorm and magstorm. Keep trying the Hippocrates and report any failures. Predator Tech, Prophet. I want an immediate EM scan of those attacking troops. Report anything unusual. Our Hippocrates systems are no longer effective. See if you can spot anything unusual that may be interfering with the Hippocrates EM waves, confirm."

"Prophet, Predator Tech, wilco."

"Tacair, Prophet. Please launch strikes against those enemy troops advancing from the southwest. I'd like them to concentrate on seeking shelter rather than attacking us, confirm."

"Prophet, Tacair, wilco."

I opened my fieldscanner, set it to max, and began scanning the enemy positions. Scout and the captain were doing the same. It was an evil night with brilliant flashes dazzling my eyes. Our nightsight turned night into day and the battlefield came to life before me, a lunatic rubble pile that had been the base, burning

brightly, and a hard-hit local town of glowing skeletonized structures that appeared to be swarming with armored ants on the move towards us.

A hellish burst of plasma and erupting tacstars tore through the town and the armored ants and the ragged front lines of the enemy. I closed my eyes, dazzled.

"Tacair, Prophet, thank you. Keep it up."

"Prophet, Tacair, will do."

I went back to my scanner. What the hell was I doing here? Watching over my beloved Hippocrates, but now the mission was failing, and I'd have to make it right before we left. Our cloaking defeated – well, we had expected that. We knew the Darks had broken our cloaking and were working hard to equip all their troops with the counter. But now the Hippocrates. Oh no. What the hell was next? What a nightmare. How many times had I cheated death these last few days? Life or death, by frags. Sheer chance if you live or die. My lovely Honeyhair was awaiting me – praying for me, on her knees. I could see her. I should not be here. This was suicide. But it was to continue, here or elsewhere, until I accomplished that final mission – to die for the Legion.

"Prophet, Predator Tech."

"Tech, Prophet, go."

"Prophet, the entire enemy advance is heavily saturated with EM interference, and it looks like it's constantly changing frequency, perhaps to counter your EM wave weapon. We have not yet been able to zero the source but we'll keep trying."

"Tech, Prophet, thanks so much. Scout, Prophet. That makes sense because Hippocrates keeps changing frequencies to defeat any EMI. All right, let's keep looking. Does anyone see anything promising?"

"What are we looking for?" Scout asked. Several plasmastars burst almost on top of us. Demons – damn it!

"If they have some kind of device, it will probably be portable and likely be placed on the high ground."

An armored Demon came charging out of the dark, screeching, spraying us with plasma. Scout and I both blasted him with xmax, and the young captain hit him with magstorm.

"Is everybody all right?" the captain asked. The Demon lay sprawled on the dirt in smoking, shot up armor, his faceplate smeared with gore from the magstorm. The plasma burned all around us. The Demon had not had time to activate the plasmastar.

"We're fine," I said. "All right, let's look over what's out there." My heart was pounding. I started shaking – just a little. I hate it when that happens.

Δ

"I'll bet that's it," I said. A six story building atop a hill, untouched by the battle, overlooked the entire area – the town, the milbase. It was blacked out, invisible in that dark night, but not invisible to our darksight. It was raining now, a cold gusty rain. A few armored Darks huddled against the building. "Darks!" I said. "That's why they're there."

"We don't know that," Scout said.

"No, we don't. But we'll be pulling out of the area soon, and this is our best chance. Last chance! One squad, Scout. Right now. We advance, and keep low in case they can defeat our cloaking."

We set out, icy rain pelting our faceplates. Nine Legion troopers, wearing the black armor of our faith, armed with X and tacstars and laser and magstorm and lightning from alien gods. With Scout at my side I knew I would be as invulnerable as possible. But I also knew there were no guarantees in my Legion contract and the Angel of Death could reach out and touch me at any time.

We advanced carefully, haltingly. Nobody was firing at us, although we could hear plenty of fire from the milbase. We slithered

up that grassy, forested hill like lizards, closer and closer to the enemy, following invisible tracks burnt into our faceplates. I could taste the adrenalin on my tongue. The rain was blowing almost parallel to the ground. One of the Darks rose and looked our way. I riddled him with auto X, and we all charged up there. As the first Dark fell in smoking armor another ran towards us from behind the building, raising his StarGuard battle rifle. He went down in a blistering haze of xmax. We lay down a barrage of X and ran towards a doorway. A third Dark was struggling to get the door open but fell in his haste, dropping his Flash lightning rifle, turning to look at us in surprise. We locked eyes. He was just a kid. I shot him in the faceplate with auto xmax. We kicked in the door and assaulted the place, floor by floor. We caught some unarmored Darks inside who were running but there was no escape. Techs, maybe. We gunned them down without mercy, leaving shredded dismembered bodies in pools of blood, under blood-spattered walls. I stopped thinking about them as soon as they fell.

We found a strange looking device on the sixth floor, set in the center of a room as if it owned it. Two little tabs were glowing green. I touched the tabs and they went dark. We snatched it up without a word and wrapped it in a sleeping bag from my tacpack and exited the building behind a veil of xmax. As we ran down the hill enemy fire followed us – xmax and lightning. I fell for cover when the lightning started blasting the trees around me. I whipped out my Hippocrates, terrified, and sprayed the EM cone silently towards the source of the fire. The firing stopped.

"Predator, Prophet. Hippocrates is now effective, at least in our AO. Hose 'em down and let's call for evac."

"Prophet, Predator. Fix on our zero. All units withdraw under defensive fire and evac now."

Δ

As we lifted off from Pherdos in an armored, cloaked shuttle, Scout and I offed our helmets and collapsed in a pile of equipment, surrounded by the rest of the squad, mostly strangers to me. This was not our regular squad.

"You all right?" I asked.

"Still ticking." His dark face was expressionless, his sandy hair sweaty and sticky.

"Can you see what's in this thing?" I asked, tossing him the sleeping bag. I was just too damned tired. He slowly hauled the device out of the bag. He seemed to be just as tired as I was, pondering the device without apparent interest.

"Well?" I asked.

"Dunno. Looks like a dox machine. "

"Yeah? Any dox in there?"

"No. No dox."

"That Dark I shot in the doorway," I said. " We looked right at each other. He was just a kid."

"So?"

"I could see he knew he was going to die."

"Stop it, Prophet. We're all going to die. So don't worry about it." Scout was a stone-cold fanatic and a first-class killer. He always reassured me, whenever I had any doubts.

Δ

It turned out the device was not a dox machine. It was exactly what we had been looking for, an electromagnetic interference generator that was targeted on the EM waves produced by our Hippocrates weapons system. I was pleased to learn it. The Prof turned the device over to Doctor Dimension for exploitation. Of course, we had to assume that by now the Darks had, or would soon have, hundreds or thousands of the devices. But that didn't mean we had to trash Hippocrates. It just meant that we had to counter the

EMI device, fix any vulnerabilities in Hippocrates if possible, and get back in business. Doctor Dimension would likely fix this problem lickety-split. Deedee was a certified genius.

"Congratulations, Prophet," the Prof said. "This is just wonderful! You unexpectedly discover the Hippocrates is no longer working and you charge out there and locate the EMI device and carry it off. I am constantly amazed by your cutting-edge initiatives and daring actions." As a contractor, the Prof was in his low-key, government-grey uniform and looked like a timid, slightly-built man with olive skin – maybe somebody's clerk. But he wasn't a clerk. He was only a few years older than the men under his command and he was a former Brigadier General in the ConFree Legion, and as a contractor he reported directly to Galactic Information. He was a warrior, brilliant, totally focused, totally moral, and totally fearless. I admired him more than anyone else in the galaxy.

"Thank you, Prof. I'm sorry we collected only a few Darks." That was the mission, after all. The Prof and I were in his Galactic Resources office in the ConFree capital city, Quaba Risen. We stood before a wide wall screen that was really a giant simport. Although we were deep underground in an armored bunker, the simport gave us a chillingly lovely view of the city of Quaba Risen under a snowy sky that was gently shedding lovely sparkling veils of fat snowflakes to cover the entire city in a blinding white coat of holy snow. City lights softly glowed behind the falling snow. So lovely, I thought. So far from Pherdos.

"No problem, Prophet. You concentrated on the important part. And those Darks will also prove useful." We had taken those prisoners when first attacking the milbase with Hippocrates, after the initial tacair.

"It was a team effort, Prof."

"Yes, everything we do is a team effort. Prophet, I know it seems like the Pherdan War is going to last forever. But it's not. Your

philosophy and your suggestions serve as the framework for the Legion's efforts to liberate the Pherdan Fed and drive the Realm from the Gassies. The blockade is increasingly effective. We are starving the Realm of critical resources. Fleetcom's terrifying tactics are bottling up Pherdan's commercial fleet as well as the Dark's starfleet. And our tactic of repeated strategic raids and avoiding fixed battles is enraging the Realm. Your goal of winning this war without fighting is illustrated by your wonderful Hippocrates, which strikes our enemies down without killing them, protects our own troops, and brings us masses of enemy prisoners. Don't worry – we'll solve this latest problem. And your suggestion that we expand the vac-active holo weapons system has been approved."

"It has?"

"Yes. It's cosmic secret – don't repeat this, but Legion Command has equipped two full Legions with the Wizard weapons system, as they call it. It works now, and it works well, on a mass scale. Can you imagine two Legions, with every trooper equipped with vac-active holos? Yes, you can, Prophet – it was your idea!"

"They told me it was impractical for large-scale use."

"It was. But not now. Two legions, troopers who cannot be killed, attacking en masse. And the Ghost Legion, to deal with the spooks from the Army of the Spirit of the Realm. You did that, Prophet."

"But they've defeated our cloaking."

"We'll resolve that, sooner or later. But you don't need cloaking with the Wizard tech. And the Ghost Legion doesn't need cloaking either. We're going to win this war. Don't doubt it." The Prof was gazing out at the snow. He seemed lost in thought. "Let's have some dox," he said.

We sat in the cozy little alcove near his desk and popped open some dox cups. Black velvet – it was terrific. The Prof seemed unusually serious. "Yes, Prophet, we will win the Pherdos campaign, but what lies ahead is harder to predict. All we can do is

decide what we should do. But it's harder to predict what others may do – our enemies. Our friends. There's a lot of new technology out there – and some that is not so new – that might win the war for us, but it's all worth considerable thought. If we come up with new technology that will destroy our enemies instantly, by the thousands and millions, without any ConFree casualties, would you use it?"

"Yes! Certainly."

"Don't be too sure. There are several weapons of mass destruction, old and new, that we can use now or in the near future to accomplish that. Some come from our own science, some come from the Brights, and some come from the Farharbor AI's. While you were away, I introduced Ice to the AI's, as you know. I was thinking of inquiring about some more war-winning tech. They gave us Hippocrates, and that has been very useful. So Ice asked about what else may be available. It seems there are a whole lot of weapons of mass destruction that the AI's produce. There is a variant of Hippocrates that strikes the enemy dead, instantly, rather than rendering them unconscious and helpless. They also mentioned genetic weapons that can be focused specifically on whatever race or species you want. And other weapons that will stop the heart of anyone within range of the weapon. A whole city, if you want. And another that will trigger a nova in your star and kill everyone on any orbiting planets. Or a weapon that will target a planet with a guided asteroid that will end all life on the planet when it hits. And self-guided tactical weapons that will swarm like bees and kill everyone who moves. Well, you get the idea."

"Deadman! They can do all that?"

"Yes – they can. And probably more. They asked if Ice was interested and she said no. I think that was the correct answer. You remember the AI's said they did not wish to sell weapons of mass destruction. And they may have been testing Ice – and us."

"Weapons like that – they sound really ugly."

"Yes, Prophet. I agree, but we'd better know what is out there, and how to counter it. Some of these weapons have been considered in the past. Genetic weapons were rejected by all as a bad idea. The Legion once triggered a nova, on Marala, against the O's, and it worked as advertised. Killed everyone on Marala. Including all the humans. And guided asteroids have been used in the past, as you know. We already have stratstars and antimats that will take out entire cities. "

"Satan won't hesitate to use weapons like those. Or worse."

"No, he won't. These are final, awful, doomsday weapons. And if the Realm uses any of these weapons against us, we will have to be prepared to use it against them as well. And if we use them first, we invite retaliation. However, we must be realistic. The Realm is on the defensive, with us. They almost took us out, on Quaba, but failed. Then we hit them hard on Deneb, and then on Coldmark. It's doubtful they will switch to the offensive, with ConFree."

"Killing thousands at once," I mused. "No. No. We can't do that, can we?"

"If it wins the war for us?"

"No. I mean ... no." My head was spinning. Pherdos! It was a curse. I'd never be rid of the place.

"If it ends the war, with minimal Legion casualties. That's what you want, yes?"

"Yes. Yes. Prof, truth is I don't care how many Darks or Demons die. I want to protect Legion soldiers."

"And Polar. Would he accept that?"

"I don't know." Polar was the Director General of ConFree and had been quoted as saying that his goal was the genocide of the Dark and Demon races.

"Prophet. We are going to do the right thing. But we'd best think long and hard about these options, and other options. Before we pitch Legion command and the DG. And make sure we take account of what the enemy's reaction will be."

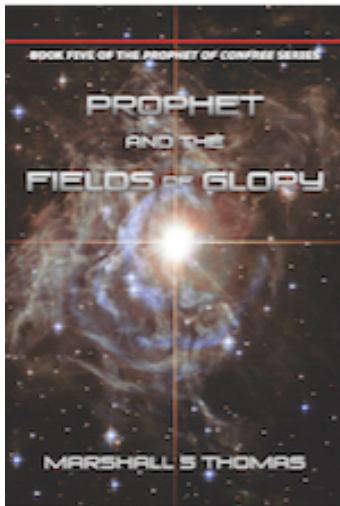
"My goal is to protect Legion soldiers, and ConFree nationals. I saw what the Realm did to my people. They'll get no sympathy from me."

"We don't need sympathy for them. But we do need to predict how they will react to whatever steps we take against them. In order to protect ConFree. Do you agree?"

"Of course, Professor. Of Course."

"Prophet, you're doing a superb job handling the Pherdos account. You continue to make me happy. Now get back to your wife and daughter and make them happy."

"Yes sir! Thank you, sir. I'll do that!"



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