

RED LEGION
(In Her Name, Book 10)

Michael R. Hicks

This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, organizations and events portrayed in this novel are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

ISBN: XXX-XXXXXXXXXX
RED LEGION (IN HER NAME, BOOK 10)

Copyright © 2020 by Michael R. Hicks

All rights reserved, including the right to reproduce this book, or portions thereof, in any form.

Published by Michael R. Hicks
AuthorMichaelHicks.com

This ebook is licensed for your personal enjoyment only. This ebook may not be re-sold or given away to other people. If you would like to share this book with another person, please purchase an additional copy for each recipient. If you're reading this book and did not purchase it, or it was not purchased for your use only, then please return to Smashwords.com and purchase your own copy. Thank you for respecting the hard work of this author.

*This book is dedicated to all the readers who so patiently waited
for my long-lost muse to return.*

FOREWORD

RED LEGION has been a long time coming. I started the manuscript in 2016, and — as I write this — I’m hoping to finally have it done in 2020 as the COVID-19 pandemic sweeps across the globe (make of that coincidence what you will). This is the longest I’ve ever taken to write a novel. The original version of IN HER NAME that I published in 2008, which I later broke apart to become EMPIRE, CONFEDERATION, and FINAL BATTLE, also took four years to write, back when my muse wouldn’t let me sleep unless I put in a good round of writing for the day. Maybe I’ve just gotten old and soft, and my muse took off with some younger guy, or maybe I’m just getting old. Regardless, I’m pushing through to the end on this book, and I hope you’ll find it worth the wait.

NOTE: THIS FILE IS A PREVIEW THAT CONTAINS ONLY THE FIRST TEN CHAPTERS OF THE BOOK! The complete novel will be published as an ebook on Amazon, B&N, and the other major ebook retailers. I hope to also publish a print version, but no promises on that (doing print is a pain and I sell very few copies).

PLEASE FEEL FREE TO SHARE! This is a sample/teaser, so please feel free to share it however and wherever you like. And please also feel free to let your friends know that FIRST CONTACT, EMPIRE, and SEASON OF THE HARVEST (not one of the IN HER NAME books) are free as ebooks at any major ebook outlet, and you can check out my site at AuthorMichaelHicks.com for a complete list of my books and where to get them.

Second Lieutenant Rachel Ortiz sat alone in her quarters aboard the Confederation corvette *CSS Leander*. While the compartment, which measured two meters long by one point five meters wide, was listed as a stateroom on the small warship's deck plan, it was smaller than a solitary confinement cell in a Confederation prison. In a way, she reflected, a prison cell is exactly what it was.

Three months had passed since her assignment as the commander of *Leander's* Marine detachment after her graduation from the Officer Basic Course on Quantico 17. She had been fourth in her class and had expected a good assignment. She had *earned* a good assignment. Such was her surprise when she opened her orders to discover that she'd been assigned to the Marine Corps' 12th Guards Regiment, also infamously known as the Red Legion. She wore the regiment's patch on the left shoulder of her uniform. Turning to look at herself in the small wall mirror, she could see the patch with its red lion rampant on a black background. When she had first put it on, she'd felt as if it had burned her skin like a brand. The Red Legion was the dumping ground for the worst of the worst in the Corps. Half of the Legion's personnel were prisoners, from non-violent drug users to soulless killers, who had been given the promise of a pardon in exchange for surviving twelve months of combat duty. The other half were malcontents, slackers, general ne'er-do-wells...and a few decent Marines, primarily officers, who were given the impossible task of molding them into a fighting force against the warriors of the Kreelean Empire. Some deserted, preferring to take their chances against the Internal Security Service and summary execution. Others kept a low profile, hoping to live long enough to transfer to another unit. And more than a small few reveled in the brutality and cruelty that were the rule, rather than the exception, in the Legion's twelve battalions. Six of those battalions fought as complete units, usually used to augment Marine divisions in major engagements. Those were the cushy assignments, and generally received better personnel (such as they were) and, even though they typically fought in large battles, had a higher survival rate.

The other battalions, including her own parent unit, the 1st Battalion, were parceled out to the smaller Navy warships as on-board detachments commanded by junior officers such as herself. She snorted in disgust. *Commander* was a grossly optimistic term for what she really was. Prisoner, or perhaps hostage, would have been more appropriate.

In frustration and anger, she delivered a savage kick to the metal bulkhead below the fold-out desk where she was doing her best to focus on her detachment's paperwork. A hand's breadth above the floor, the paint had long since been chipped away by the toes of her combat boots, revealing bare steel that was rusting in the ship's overly humid atmosphere.

She closed her eyes and took a deep breath, forcing herself to calm down. After a moment, she returned her attention to the screen in front of her. The administrative tasks for which she was responsible were her only real respite, for the mind-numbing paperwork allowed her to depart from her otherwise brutal reality for a short while. She stopped as she called up the next personnel record she needed to update, a flame of pure hatred, something she'd never known before coming aboard *Leander*, flaring in her core.

The name on the screen was that of Staff Sergeant Besarion Khutashvili, the detachment's senior NCO, who was known by the less than affectionate name of Stalin. A convicted murderer who had been given the chance of a pardon if he fought the Kreeleans as a member of the Red Legion, Khutashvili had instantly volunteered. He was big, easily twice the size of Ortiz, and the

most brutal human being she had ever known. Everyone was terrified of him and he fed on their fear, lived for it. The damnable thing was that he also boasted a chest full of decorations earned in combat against the Kreelans. Feared as he was, he had survived more battles than anyone else in the platoon, and had even saved a few of his fellow Marines in the process.

As for Ortiz, “Stalin” treated her like he might a stray cat. The Corps insisted that an officer command the detachment, and even Stalin knew that he would never be promoted beyond his current rank. So he intimidated and cajoled the junior officers placed over him. She knew quite well from reviewing the unit records that those who went along with him lived quite a bit longer than those who didn’t. Most of the latter suffered mysterious deaths, in combat or otherwise.

To Ortiz’s everlasting shame, she had given in to his intimidation, which was tempered by the promise of protection from the less savory of the detachment’s personnel. She was willing to sacrifice her life for the Confederation against the Kreelans, but didn’t want to die at the hands of this maniac. While she would die before admitting it, she was also grateful for his protection: the detachment boasted six convicted rapists who shamelessly tore her uniform off with their eyes every time she stood in front of them. Surprisingly, Stalin didn’t care much about sex one way or the other. He just enjoyed killing. As long as she didn’t get in his way, he’d told her, she’d be just fine.

She kicked the bulkhead again, furious with herself for being such a tool, and a useless one at that.

A sudden knock at the door almost made her yelp in surprise. “What is it?” She looked at the sturdy deadbolt she’d had one of the ship’s crewmen weld onto the door. It was locked.

“Lieutenant!” It was Lance Corporal Waylon Davis, who had been released from a mental institution as a “salvageable” patient. He was completely crazy, but he was one of the few Marines in her detachment she felt she could trust. “You’ve got to come see this!”

Resting her hand on her sidearm, which was strapped to her right thigh when she was awake and under her pillow when she slept, she went to the door and unlocked it. “Did the replacements arrive?” She’d been expecting two new bodies to replace a pair of Marines who had been killed in a brief but savage engagement with a Kreelan destroyer.

“Yeah, el-tee, but...I have no words. You’ve got to come see.”

Ortiz pursed her lips as she considered venturing from the safety of her cabin. Stalin would eventually bring them around to see her, anyway, but she was possessed with the sudden perverse desire to actually do what she wanted to do, not just what he told her to do. “Okay,” she said, throwing open the deadbolt.

Following Davis, who mumbled unintelligibly to her, to the walls of the passageway, and to himself, not necessarily in that order, she made her way to the small galley that was reserved for the Marines of the corvette’s detachment. As she drew nearer, she could hear her Marines (she tried to think of them as hers, even though she knew that they truly belonged to Stalin) hooting and cursing. They sounded like a pack of dogs after a cat had been thrown into their midst.

Forcing some steel into her spine while resting her hand on the grip of her sidearm, she stepped through the hatch into the galley. “What the hell’s going on in here?”

“Fresh meat!” Davis crowed from beside her, gleaming at the newcomers as he clapped his hands.

“I don’t believe it,” Ortiz said to herself.

“Believe it, lieutenant,” Stalin said, stepping forward to clap one of his big hands on one shoulder of the smaller of the two new recruits, who flinched in pain as Stalin squeezed. “This one, he is nothing but another meat sack. But *this* one...” He put his other hand on the second Marine’s shoulder, grinning as he contracted the muscles that could snap the bones of a man’s wrist. The second Marine showed no reaction at all. The young man continued staring straight ahead, his face relaxed, serene. Stalin’s grin faded, and he let go of the smaller Marine to focus all his energy on bringing the other one to heel. He was squeezing his hand so hard now that his entire arm was quivering, and Ortiz couldn’t believe that the bones hadn’t already snapped in the new Marine’s shoulder.

“That’s enough, Stalin,” Ortiz ordered quietly. The man glared at her for a moment, then smiled. But like with all his smiles, it never reached his dark, dead eyes.

“As you say, lieutenant.” He slapped both Marines on the back in a false show of camaraderie. “As you say.”

Stepping closer, Ortiz took a closer look at the two newcomers. The first one could have been any mother’s son, not much younger than herself, who had signed up to be a Marine.

The other one, however, was something else. His eyes were a brilliant green, like emeralds set into a face that wasn’t white, wasn’t black, but lay somewhere in between. He would have been handsome, gorgeous, even, had it not been for the scars that marred his skin, especially the one that ran vertically across the skin of his brow and cheek, above and below his left eye. Oddly, his skin was smooth, without the slightest trace of stubble or hair growth, as if all the follicles had vanished. But the same wasn’t true of his hair: it was raven black, and she felt a cold trickle of fear when she saw that it wasn’t cut in the mandated Marine style, but was formed into braids that flowed down his back, mimicking the style worn by Kreelan warriors. His shoulders were wide, his waist narrow, and he stood with a quiet confidence that was totally out of character for a mere private right out of training.

The trickle of fear bloomed into a torrent when her gaze landed on the collar around his neck. Made of the same black metal as the Kreelans wore, it bore at his throat a strange oval sigil of a peculiarly beautiful blue, into which had been inscribed a Kreelan rune that glowed cyan as if lit from within. Then she noticed the short sword that he wore at his waist and the handle of a much longer sword, protruding over one shoulder, that he wore on his back. It was as if a Kreelan warrior, born of humankind, were stuffed into a Marine uniform and delivered to her doorstep.

“Who...what the hell are you?” she asked softly.

Those green eyes moved a fraction to stare directly at her, and she felt as if she’d been struck by a pair of emerald lasers.

Holding her gaze, the stranger said in a heavily accented voice, “Private Eustus Camden and Private Reza Gard, reporting for duty, lieutenant.”

The room fell dead silent.

Ortiz let out a breath of surprise. “So you’re the one,” she said into the hush.

Reza cocked his head. “Lieutenant?”

“You’re the one we heard about on the news feeds,” she explained, forcing herself to take a step closer, “the boy who was kidnapped from an orphanage and raised by the Kreelans as one of their own.”

“Then came back to us as a fucking spy,” Stalin hissed into Reza’s ear. He’d been circling the pair after Ortiz called him off, and was now standing directly behind Reza.

“The Supreme Commander of the Confederation High Command would beg to differ with you, staff sergeant,” Reza said evenly as he withdrew his orders from a pocket of his combat uniform and handed it to Ortiz.

Eustus followed suit, handing her his orders. While he remained at attention, Ortiz could clearly see that he was angry.

Taking their orders in her hand, Ortiz opened Camden’s first. Flicking her eyes across the boilerplate text, she saw nothing out of the ordinary.

Then she looked at Gard’s and sucked in her breath. Instead of being undersigned and authorized by the Marine Corps Personnel Activity, which was typical for first assignments, his bore the electronic personal signature of Fleet Admiral Hercule L’Houillier. “You don’t see that very often,” she said under her breath.

“Carrying Kreelan steel is a crime, little man,” Stalin said as Ortiz was reading over their orders, reaching for the handle of the great sword Reza wore on his back, the weapon that the ancient armorer Pan’ne-Sharakh had crafted for him.

Eustus caught the movement out of the corner of his eye and, breaking the discipline of being at attention, snapped his head toward the staff sergeant and was about to warn him not to touch it when Ortiz saved him the trouble.

“Believe it or not,” she said in a disbelieving voice as she folded up their orders, “he’s authorized to carry any Kreelan weapon he wants. So says Fleet Admiral L’Houillier.”

Stalin’s hand froze a hair’s breadth from touching the sword. His mouth curling into an ugly sneer, he pulled it away, but not before he saw Eustus looking right at him. “Eyes front, Marine!”

Then he aimed a brutal blow with a ham-sized fist against the side of Eustus’s head.

His hand was intercepted by Reza’s with a slap of flesh upon flesh that sounded like thunder in the confines of the galley.

Ortiz blinked and her mouth dropped open in surprise. She wasn’t sure what shocked her more, that anyone would dare stand up to Stalin, who must’ve outweighed Reza by at least twenty kilos of murderous muscle, or the incredible speed at which Reza had moved. But what amazed her more was the inhuman strength and speed demonstrated by the younger man. Somehow, in a movement that her eyes hadn’t been able to fully capture, perhaps due to the poor lighting in the galley, Reza had whirled toward Eustus and wrapped his hand around Stalin’s much larger fist, stopping it in mid-strike...

...and was now holding it completely immobilized.

The other Marines were gawking at the sight, every bit as astounded as she was, as Stalin and Reza engaged in a silent battle of wills. The Georgian stared at his smaller opponent, a smirk on his face that Ortiz knew from horrifying experience was the mask of the murderer who lurked in the man’s soul. If she didn’t do something fast, he would kill Reza where he stood.

But something inside her, perhaps a flicker of hope for justice, or even retribution, led her to keep her silence. Around the galley, the detachment’s hustlers began calling odds for bets, and the others quickly joined in. They would bet on anything from cockroach races to the outcome of battles to help save them from the tedium of shipboard routine.

“Twenty to one on Stalin!” said one of the hucksters.

Another scoffed. "Please! Give me a hundred to one."

She was surprised when Eustus, who had taken a quick look around at the others, dug into his pocket for his pay chit. He tossed it to the oddsmaker who'd called the hundred to one odds. "Put my next month's pay on Reza," he said in an almost casual tone. "All of it." To Ortiz, he raised an eyebrow and shrugged. "My parents could use the money," he told her before turning back to watch the standoff.

He obviously knows something I don't, thought Ortiz, while also wondering how any of the losers would cover such a bet if Reza won. For a moment, she almost succumbed to the urge to do the same thing. Money out here meant nothing, anyway, and doing something, anything, to help put Stalin in his place would have been incredibly gratifying. But she didn't. She was their commander, and good commanders didn't bet against any of their own. Bastard that he was and as much as she despised him, Stalin still belonged to her.

The standoff continued, the two men staring at one another as Stalin sought to push Reza off balance and Reza held him at bay, almost as if the two were arm wrestling. Stalin's arm, the upper part of which was as big around as one of Ortiz's thighs, had begun to shake, and tiny beads of sweat had broken out on his forehead and upper lip. Reza, by contrast, showed no reaction at all. He stood still as a statue, not wavering in the slightest.

Stalin grimaced and grunted as he tried to thrust himself forward. With slow grace, Reza repositioned one of his feet, bracing himself, but without allowing their hands to move.

The confidence of the oddsmakers began to falter, and a new flurry of betting began. Most of the wagers were still in Stalin's favor, but not at such outrageous odds.

Lance Corporal Davis, whom Ortiz thought of as the Harmless Lunatic, darted forward to tie a weighted string around the joined hands of the contestants. At the end hung Davis's combat knife, just above the floor. Dropping to his hands and knees, he quickly inscribed a circle in ink about the length of his forearm, with the knife dangling over the center.

Cheers went up, now that the bettors had a clear win/lose line, and even more money and personal items were tossed into the kitty. Most of them began chanting, "Stalin, Stalin, STALIN!"

The chant fell to ragged silence when a cascade of wet snaps echoed through the room and Stalin, stifling a scream, went down to his knees, clutching his right hand, the one he'd been dueling with. Every finger had been broken between the knuckle and first joint.

With his left hand, Stalin snatched his knife (which, Ortiz had long since noted, was a thoroughly illegal Kreelan blade) from his belt.

Reza countered by drawing the short sword at his waist in a blinding flash. Stalin blinked at the glittering blade, the tip of which rested on the pulsing jugular vein in his throat.

"That's enough," Ortiz ordered. She'd tried to use her command voice, but to her own ears, and much to her shame, it came out sounding like that of a terrified little girl. "Both of you, put the weapons away. You've had enough fun for now. Davis, Shiloh, get Stalin to sickbay. Now."

With a nod to his opponent, Reza took a step back and sheathed his weapon. Stalin shot Ortiz a venomous look before he did the same.

"Aye, lieutenant!" Davis agreed with manic enthusiasm.

Shiloh, whose ancestors hailed from the Pacific island of Guam back on Earth, was huge even compared to Stalin. He stepped forward and offered Stalin a huge paw.

“Don’t touch me!” Stalin hissed as he got to his feet. He glared at Reza for a moment, then his mouth curled up into an ugly smile. “You impress me, boy. But we are not done, you and I. Not done at all.” Without another word, he turned and stomped out of the galley in the direction of sickbay.

Ortiz turned to Davis and Shiloh. “Go with him and make sure the crew doesn’t get in his way. They should know better, but...”

“Yes, ma’am,” Shiloh said in his basso voice. To Davis, he said, “Come on, lunatic.”

“Right.” Davis bobbed his head as he and the giant followed in Stalin’s footsteps.

“Here, asshole.”

Eustus looked up to see his pay chit flying through the air, and he grabbed it.

“Don’t get used to all that money,” one of the female Marines said, in a soft, deadly voice. “We’ll get it back or flay it off your hide.”

In twos and threes, the Marines drifted away, all of them a lot poorer than they had been just a few minutes before.

“Reza,” Eustus said quietly, “what the hell have we gotten ourselves into?”

“Hell is the operative word,” Ortiz said in a wry voice. “Come on. We need to talk.”

Reza considered their situation as he and Eustus followed Ortiz through the narrow passageways that led to her cabin. He had engaged in a very similar contest with his friend Washington Hawthorne just before graduating from their Marine training. Hawthorne's motive for challenging Reza was to test his own strength and skill, not because he had anything against Reza. To the contrary, Reza considered him a friend.

This "Stalin," on the other hand, clearly harbored ill will toward everyone around him, relying on his strength and size to intimidate and cow his comrades and, Reza gathered, Lieutenant Ortiz. The staff sergeant had a great deal in common with the enemy Reza and Eustus had faced during their training, Captain Markus Thorella. The main difference, Reza worried, was that Stalin had a much freer hand here than Thorella had enjoyed at the academy. He was not concerned for his own safety, but for that of Eustus...and for his commander.

What strange beings the humans are, he thought for the thousandth time since returning to the Confederation from his home, from his love, in the Empire. Even when faced with the threat of annihilation, the humans still found energy and excuse to quarrel among themselves. Reza was bound to them by virtue of the blood and honor that had cost him everything that he had come to hold dear, but he doubted he would ever understand them. And he knew for certain that, beyond a handful of souls like Eustus, Nicole Carré, and Jodi Mackenzie, they would never understand or truly accept him. He would forever be an alien in their eyes. The thought brought a momentary pang of sadness that he quickly banished from his mind.

"In here." Ortiz pushed open the hatch to a small compartment that served as the auxiliary sickbay. It was the only space in Marine country outside of the galley where more than two people could discuss something in privacy. "Close the hatch," she snapped after Reza and Eustus had followed her in.

Eustus turned and did as she asked, dogging it shut, then spun around and stood at attention with Reza.

With a scowl, Ortiz said, "At ease." She looked at them for a moment, her gaze shifting between them. "Do you idiots have any idea what you've done?"

Reza glanced at Eustus, then said, "I saved a fellow Marine from potentially serious injury in an unlawful assault by the unit's senior NCO. Eustus will not press charges, I am sure."

Eustus nodded agreement.

Ortiz buried her face in her hands and burst out laughing. "Lord of All, please save me," she said. Dropping her hands to her sides, she went on. "Sure, that's pure genius: you won't bring charges against Stalin for an assault he didn't quite have the chance to commit, then *you went and broke every finger on his trigger hand*. I'm going to save wondering how the hell you did that for another time. And you," she jabbed a finger at Eustus, "you're an even bigger idiot for wagering a month's pay with those cutthroats out there. A month's pay at a hundred to one? You bankrupted the lot of them for who knows how long. And you knew that Private Long Hair here would win, didn't you? It was basically a rigged bet, even though you didn't start it. Am I right?"

"Yes, ma'am," Eustus said. "But I didn't take their money."

"Castle was the oddsmaker you gave your pay chit to. He's a scumbag, but when it comes to honoring wagers he's solid as a rock. He gave you the damn money."

Eustus shook his head. "I locked the chit. He could add money to it from the others in local mode, but the transactions will dump the next time I use mine or they use theirs to buy anything

or transfer money. They haven't lost a single credit, and the only thing I took from among their personal items were a couple bars of chocolate. And those weren't for me." He shot a sidelong look at Reza.

She stared at him, an incredulous expression on her face. "Why would you do that? You don't even know these clowns, let alone owe them anything."

"I don't steal from people, and I'd never take anything from a fellow Marine."

"That probably — *probably* — saved you from having an unfortunate fatal accident in the airlock." She leaned back against one of the sickbeds and folded her arms across her chest. "I've gotta say, you two came to the wrong place to be a paragon of virtue, Private Camden."

Eustus grinned. "Oh, I'm not that, ma'am." He hooked a thumb toward Reza. "But he is."

Reza favored him with a look of annoyance.

Ortiz shifted her attention to Reza. "A paragon of virtue, huh?"

"I make no such claim, lieutenant."

She pursed her lips, then asked, "So, is it true, all that stuff on the news? You being brought up by the Kreeelans and all that?"

Reza nodded. "It is so."

"If you'd been there all that time, why'd you bother coming back? You were an orphan without any family, right? What was the point? Why didn't you just stay there?"

Hers were fair questions, and this was not the first time they had been asked. Even so, every word still cut him to the depths of his soul. "It was a matter of honor," he told her softly. "I made a vow when I first reached the Empire that I would not bring war to my own kind. For that, the Empress banished me." He would have liked to tell her how much he had sacrificed, but she could not understand, even had she believed him. No human could.

"Bully for you. Now for the real question, which sort of gets back to our friend Stalin's concern: are you a spy? Are you going to stab my Marines in the back when they're counting on you?"

"Your Marines are also my brothers and sisters in arms now," Reza told her, fighting to keep a rising tide of anger from his voice. Always, his honor and motives were questioned. His blood was beginning to burn, yet no voices sang to him, filling him with the spirit and will of the Empress and the symphony of the souls of Her people. The Bloodsong within him, the spiritual bond that united the Kreeela, had been silenced. *Focus, priest of the Desh-Ka*, he told himself. *She does not understand what you are, and she, like the others, fears what she does not understand.* "I swear to you that I will protect them to my last breath, at the cost of my life." He drew his dagger and, closing his left hand around it, drew the blade across his palm. A small trickle of blood fell and splattered on the floor. "In Her name, it shall be so." Wiping the blade across his sleeve, he replaced it in its scabbard at his waist.

"Holy shit," Ortiz whispered. "You're as crazy as Davis." Shaking her head, whether in disgust or disbelief, Reza wasn't sure, she grabbed a tube of liquid bandage spray and said, "Here, give me your hand. Open your fist, dammit."

Reza did as she asked, and observed quietly as she first cleaned the wound with an antiseptic pad, then sprayed the bandage over the cut. In only a few seconds it had set, acting like an artificial skin.

"That's deep," she said, frowning. "I want you to have the ship's surgeon look at it."

“It is no matter,” Reza told her. “It will heal in a few days.”

“This?” She said, pointing to the cut. “Healed in a few days? I can see bone in there, Reza.”

He smiled, gratified that she had used his first name.

Eustus answered for him. “I give him three days to heal. Four days, tops.”

She tossed the bandage tube and used antiseptic pad in the trash chute. “Whatever. But if you start another wager, Camden, I’ll flush you out the airlock myself.”

“Lieutenant,” Reza said, “may I ask you a question?”

“You can ask all you want. Maybe I’ll answer it.”

Reza stood there, an uncertain look on his face.

Rolling her eyes, Ortiz said, “That’s a sarcastic way of saying go ahead, private.”

Eustus and Reza shared a look, and Eustus shrugged. “Yes, ma’am,” Reza said. “I was wondering, why are you in the Red Legion? You are not like the others here.”

Ortiz laughed. It wasn’t a happy sound; it was sad, bitter. “I wish I could tell you, Reza. I worked hard at the academy and did pretty damn well, if I do say so myself. But orders are orders, and my orders sent me here, just like yours sent you.”

“Then perhaps we have something in common, after all,” Reza told her quietly.

“Maybe,” she granted. “I’ve got to admit that I’d sure love to have a couple of people I can really count on if the shit hits the fan, someone who can watch my back.” A shadow of fear clouded her expression. “I think the only reason I’m still alive is that Stalin happens to like me, if you can call it that, for some reason. He treats me like a pet, and the others are too afraid of him to touch me. But eventually I’m going to do something that puts me on his shit list, and when that day comes my life is over. Today might very well have been that day.” She let out a breath. “All I want to do is be a good officer and a good Marine, not the victim of some murderous lunatic.” She stared at Eustus, and then Reza. “So what do you say? Can I count on the two of you?”

“Yes, lieutenant,” the two men answered in unison.

“I’m going to hold you to that,” she said with the faintest trace of hope in her voice.

“Ma’am,” Eustus asked, “why don’t you just bring Stalin up on charges and send him back to prison?”

“I can’t,” she said. Ortiz narrowed her eyes at his confused expression. “You didn’t know, did you?”

“Know what?” Eustus asked.

“The standard articles of military justice are suspended in the Red Legion,” she explained. “As their commanding officer during wartime I can administer corporal punishment of my choice, or even summarily execute them if I want to. The only thing I can’t do is send them back to prison where they belong. And there’s something else you should keep in mind: they don’t send these guys to the Marine Corps Academy on Quantico 17 or any of the other regular training facilities. They send them to Quantico 9.”

Reza frowned. The Marine Corps had twenty-six designated “Quantico” facilities spread throughout the Confederation, most of them designated for various types of specialized training. The largest of them was Quantico 17. “Quantico 9 is a logistics base, is it not? On a planet with a low pressure atmosphere?”

Ortiz nodded. "It is. And on the far side of that planet, thousands of kilometers of lethal terrain from the logistics base, is the training facility that turns these guys from cons into something that sort of resembles a Marine. And casualties during training, as you might imagine, are high." She didn't have to add that casualties in combat were far higher: that was common knowledge throughout the Corps.

Eustus frowned. "Which means that the system weeds out all the weak or less violent ones that might be easier to command."

"Exactly," Ortiz agreed. "The men and women you'll find in the Red Legion are the survivors, the hardest of the hard core. Most of them are hellacious fighters, but sociopaths have a bit of a difficult time fighting as a cohesive unit. In the Corps' infinite wisdom, the Legion is then leavened with regular Marines, mostly to fill the officer slots like mine. Most of them have been court-martialed and are given a second chance in the Legion." She grimaced. "And some, like you and me, just get tossed into the meat grinder to meet the quota of some pencil pusher at Corps HQ."

"Our coming here wasn't random," Eustus muttered.

"Why do you say that?"

"Thorella," the two men said in unison. "He was our bane on Quantico 17," Eustus added.

Ortiz wrinkled her nose in disgust. "They made that pig an instructor at the academy?"

"Do you know him?" Reza asked.

"Only by reputation, which is bad enough. Jesus." She glanced at her wrist com. "All right, I guess we've screwed off long enough. I've got to get my weekly reports filed and you boys need to get yourselves settled in." She fixed them both with a hard look. "And watch your backs."

"Yes, ma'am!"

As Ortiz made her way past them toward the hatch, Reza touched her arm. As she looked up at him, he told her, "I will allow no harm to come to you."

She smiled. "I appreciate the thought, but that's not a promise you can make, Reza."

As she opened the hatch and stepped out, he said quietly after her, "Yes, I believe I can."

After finding their assigned bunks in one of the three cramped squad bays, they stowed their gear in their assigned lockers before locking them shut.

"Hey! Camden!"

Eustus and Reza both looked up to see Castle, the oddsmaker, standing at the end of the bay with Shiloh looming behind him.

"What do you want?" Eustus asked.

"You didn't cash the bet. How come?"

"I didn't want to steal your stupid money."

Castle glanced at Shiloh, who raised his thick eyebrows in surprise.

"Nobody's gonna love you for that, you know. Like you think they weren't gonna pay up. We always pay up."

"Okay, you're right," Eustus said, stepping up to him, nose to nose. "I did the whole thing just to make a point, which was obviously lost on all of you."

"And what point was that, Mr. Professor?"

"That you never bet against Reza. Ever."

Reza took a step forward, “Eustus...”

“Oh, yeah?” Castle looked over Eustus’s shoulder at Reza, then laughed. “I guess we’ll see about that. See ya around, Marines.”

As he and Shiloh left, Reza came to stand beside Eustus. “I do not think that helped.”

“I know,” Eustus said with a downcast expression. “I don’t think I like this place very much.”

“You have a knack for understatement, my friend. Come, let us see if anything in the galley is edible, and if anyone knows how to properly cook meat.”

As it turned out, the food was passably good, thanks to the Navy cooks in the main galley who sent the food down in a dumb waiter after the Marines placed their order. A few of the other Marines were there playing cards with a battered deck. They gave Eustus and Reza cold stares before turning back to their game. The pair sat down at the table farthest away from the others, near a freshly painted bulkhead along the outer hull.

Just as Reza was about to put a chunk of perfectly rare meat into his mouth, Davis, the lunatic, hustled over and sat down with them.

“New guys,” he said to the salt shaker after he snatched it out of Eustus’s hand. “New guys. Love new guys. Don’t you?”

The salt shaker must have replied, because Davis went on talking to it. “I know, I know! I wish they weren’t dead meat. That’s how it goes sometimes, though. Much better when we get new guys replacing guys who made their time and can leave this chicken shit outfit. That doesn’t happen very often, does it? No, not often at all. More like never.”

“What do you mean by dead meat?” Reza asked as Eustus tried, unsuccessfully, to grab the salt shaker from Davis’s hand. The man’s limbs were constantly in motion, his feet tapping, his hands — fork in one, salt shaker in the other — moving restlessly in random directions, his head bobbing to and fro as if he were listening to music no one else could hear. He simply couldn’t keep still.

“They just don’t know, do they?” Davis asked the shaker in a sad voice, ignoring Reza’s question. “No, they don’t. Dead meat.”

Reza narrowed his eyes in surprise when he realized that he could sense Davis’s emotions almost as well as he could his sisters in the Empire before his empathic link was severed. He could sense the emotions of other humans, as well, but at best they were like a very faint scent on the wind. What puzzled him was that he hadn’t felt Davis’s emotions earlier. It was like a switch had been thrown. Reaching out, Reza laid his hand on the man’s bare arm.

Davis stiffened and his eyes went wide, his head whipping around toward Reza.

“Be calm,” Reza whispered. “You are among friends here.”

“Friends,” Davis repeated. His eyes blinked, then his gaze locked with Reza’s. The random movements of his body ceased. “I don’t have any friends here,” he said in a dreamy voice, as if he’d been drugged. “No one does.”

“You do now,” Reza reassured him. He could sense in Davis an ocean of suppressed pain.

“He must’ve taken some sort of medication,” Eustus whispered. “He wasn’t like this when we met him.”

“Palaniadone three times a day,” Davis said in a mechanical voice, “Dexatrine, Hypertromazine, Tri-oxyalanadone, Melanazine, two aspirins, and a laxative once a day, every day.” He blinked. “The laxative is the only one I like.”

“What happens if you don’t take all that?” Eustus asked him.

Davis’s face flinched as if Eustus had slapped him. “Bad things,” Davis whispered. His hands began to tremble and tears welled in his eyes. “Bad things.”

Reza sensed a huge wave rising from the ocean of torment within Davis’s tortured soul. “There are no bad things here,” Reza assured him in a soft voice. “There is no pain, no fear.”

“No pain...no fear,” Davis echoed, and the trembling ceased. The ocean within him gradually stilled.

“What did you mean that we were dead meat?” Reza asked him again, hoping the question would not trigger another emotional tidal wave.

“When Marines die,” Davis said, “more come to replace them. The living replace the dead, on and on, forever and ever.” His gaze shifted to the hull where the paint was new, and a single tear rolled down his cheek. “Right here, right where you’re sitting, they died. My last two friends. They were sitting right here when the enemy destroyer appeared, opening fire on our ship. No warning.” He pointed at the hull. “Out they went, right through there. The only thing left of them was blood on the edges of the hole. Dead meat. We’d all have died if a cruiser hadn’t been with us. It killed the destroyer, but couldn’t save my friends. They were the only two we lost. And I couldn’t help them. I wasn’t here. I had just left to take a shit. And they were gone.” His eyes focused on Reza, as if truly seeing him for the first time. “That’s why I can’t have any more friends. They all die. You’ll die. Soon. And I’ll be all alone again.”

Blinking his eyes as if he were waking up, Davis looked down at his plate. “I’m not hungry anymore,” he announced in a tired voice. Reza let him go as Davis stood up and slowly shuffled toward the passageway, dumping his uneaten food in the waste chute as he went.

Reza looked at the meat still stuck on the end of his fork. A drop of crimson fell from the nearly raw steak to splash on his plate. With a sigh, he set it down.

“Yeah,” Eustus said, dropping his own fork into the untouched mashed potatoes before pushing away his tray. He looked at the hull beside him. “Damn.”

Meals were the highlights of a typical day for the Marines, because eating was a brief escape from their otherwise boring routine. As the others queued up in the chow line for lunch the next day, Reza and Eustus read over the standing orders posted on the communal board which hung at the aft entrance to the galley.

“So,” Eustus summarized, “we’re basically stuck in Marine Country except for damage control drills where we learn to help the squids keep the ship from blowing up, or when general quarters sounds and we have to hop in our armor and do God knows what. Reading between the lines from the captain’s orders, we’re basically in an oversized brig.”

“It appears that way,” Reza said, unable to keep the disappointment from his voice. “I must confess that this is not exactly what I was expecting.”

“At least we have PT with Stalin every morning except for Sunday to keep us entertained,” Eustus added with a grimace as he read over the rather imaginative physical tortures that lay in store for the coming week. “That should be interesting.”

“It will probably be the closest you will ever want to come to combat,” Reza told him. Leaning closer, he pointed to a series of quotes from the Holy Bible, one for each day of the week, that had been posted by Stalin. “What are these?”

“Daily devotions to help us get through our trials and tribulations?” Eustus shook his head in bewilderment. “I never would’ve figured him for a godly man. Luckily for us, he should be out of action for a bit, so maybe Lieutenant Ortiz can—”

“No,” Reza said, turning around to face the passageway that came from the forward part of the ship where sickbay was located. While he had kept his second sight on Ortiz, watching over her like an alien guardian angel, he could sense Stalin’s approach. “We are not that lucky.”

“Comrades!” Stalin grinned as he strode forward like they were all the best of friends. “Look. Look!” He held up his right hand, the fingers of which Reza had broken earlier.

Eustus tensed. Reza put a restraining hand on his arm.

“The ship’s surgeon did not put it in a cast,” Stalin explained. He flexed the hand slightly, showing a circular wound patched with liquid bandage just below the first knuckle of each finger. “He set the fingers, then drove thick surgical steel pins through the broken bones. *Stahl, da? Stalin...steel!*” He clapped Reza on the shoulder. “I should have you break the fingers of my other hand so he can make them all the same, yes?” He leaned closer and said in a soft voice, “And maybe I will let you do that after this hand has healed, and before I skin you alive.”

With another gleaming smile, he playfully slapped Eustus on the cheek, then went to take his place at the head of the chow line, cutting in front of everyone else while showing off his new enhancement.

“You know,” Eustus said, considering, “Thorella was a terrible human being. Evil, even. But he wasn’t a lunatic. This guy is bad *and* a nutcase.”

“It is all an act for their benefit,” Reza told him, nodding his head toward the other Marines who crowded around their platoon sergeant. “He is not a...nutcase, as you called him. He is a ferocious predator in a chameleon skin, probably more dangerous than Thorella, and knows exactly what he is doing. Do not ever forget that.”

“I won’t, believe me,” Eustus said. “I’m just glad you’re here. If I had to deal with him and the rest of these jokers on my own...” He shook his head.

“We are brothers, you and I. We shall always be so.” With a grimace, he added, “Come, let us see if we can get something to eat this time without Davis spoiling our appetites.”

“Amen to that.”

They joined the end of the line, which seemed to move at a glacial pace as food was served down the dumb waiter from the main galley.

Reza felt someone fall in behind him, could sense the hatred like heat from a flame. Turning around, he found himself facing a female Marine, as tall and broad-shouldered as he was. Her skin was deep black, a shade not unlike Washington Hawthorne’s, and was covered in tattoos of intricate geometric designs. Her face, neck, arms...every centimeter of exposed skin was tattooed.

She pointed at his collar. “You dress like them,” she said in a voice that was much higher than Reza would have guessed, the Jamaican accent overlaid with fiery anger. “You wear your hair like them. The news said you talk like them and think like them.” She leaned toward him, her nostrils flaring. “You even smell like them. You’ve got nerve coming here, wearing *our* uniform. You fucking traitor.”

“That’s enough, Sergeant Walker.” Lieutenant Ortiz stepped up behind her. “He’s already gotten that lecture.” With a look at Reza, she added, “More than once, I’m sure.”

“I don’t trust him,” Walker hissed.

“You don’t have to,” Ortiz told her in a voice that was hard as steel. “You just have to follow orders. And I’m ordering you to stow that shit.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Walker’s voice was icy. “I’ll come back later.” Tossing her tray back into the bin, she stalked out of the galley.

Ortiz watched her go, then turned back to Reza. “Her whole family was killed in a Kreelan attack. Her parents, husband, and two little kids, all of them put to the sword.”

“I grieve for her,” Reza said softly. He had been deeply conflicted about Kreelan warriors killing children and the helpless, or anyone else who was not a warrior and could not raise a hand against Her Children in battle. It brought the Empress no honor, no glory, to slaughter the weak and innocent. But the Empress did not yet see them as beings with souls, for their blood did not sing. Humans were no more than animals in Her eyes, and it was a source of tremendous grief in his soul. The only thing he could do was to survive and hope against hope that someday he would be reunited with Esah-Zhurah, and that somehow he could convince the Empress that the slaughter must be stopped. But that would not happen today, and perhaps it would never happen at all. “I grieve for all of them.”

“Doesn’t do them much good, does it?” Ortiz said as she moved past him and Eustus as the line shuffled forward.

“That’s not fair, lieutenant,” Eustus told her.

“Nothing in this life is fair, private, or haven’t you noticed?” She glared at Eustus, then at Reza. After a moment, she shook her head. “I’m sorry. Mood swings. They’re hard to avoid when we’re all stuck aboard a tin can like this. Sleeping in a bunk that smells like dirty socks, not being allowed any room to move, let alone do real PT, and putting up with the squids treating us like the shit that comes out of the heads when they back up, which is about every two days.” She snorted. “It’s bad enough for the regular Marine detachments, but ten times worse for Legion units when the ship’s captain doesn’t trust us.” She gestured at the rabble of convicts ahead of

them in line. “And I don’t blame him. I sure as hell wouldn’t.” Looking at the men and women ahead of them, she added, “It’s a wonder we all don’t just poke our eyes out to see if we can still feel anything.”

“Lieutenant,” Eustus asked, “are we ever going to see action? I mean, other than just being blown to bits if the ship gets hit? Or are we just going to sit in this prison for the duration?”

“Be careful what you wish for, private.” Ortiz finally reached the ordering screen and looked over the choices for what the kitchen was serving up. “Hey! They’ve got enchiladas today, boys. Heaven awaits, ‘cause sure as shit eating them’ll kill you.” She punched a few buttons on the screen, ordering the enchiladas anyway. “According to the logs of my deceased predecessor, which was a continuation of the log of his deceased predecessor, *Leander* has been in sixteen different engagements and managed to survive, which is pretty amazing in itself. But in the process, the entire complement of our detachment except for Stalin, Walker, and Davis has been killed off and replaced twice over. Once when the ship was attacked by boarders — and *that* doesn’t happen often these days to warships — eight times when our detachment was sent aboard damaged civilian vessels to try to save the crews or passengers or fight off enemy warriors, and seven times during assaults on ground objectives in company with detachments from other ships. That, of course, doesn’t include the casualties inflicted when the ship’s taken enemy fire. The count so far is five engagements where Marines died.” She shrugged. “This ship has the luck of the Irish, but it doesn’t extend to us grunts.”

The reference to the luck of the Irish meant nothing to Reza, for he had no idea who the Irish might be or why they were so lucky, but he understood her point nonetheless.

Her meal appeared when the door opened on the dumbwaiter. She grabbed the plates and put them on her tray. Lifting the tray up, she sniffed at the enchiladas. “They smell like old socks. But you can eat anything with enough hot sauce.”

The rest of that first week aboard *Leander* passed without further incident. Stalin’s physical training regimen was just as brutal as Reza had predicted, weapons training was mind-numbingly boring but took up lots of time, and the Marines happily rushed to their stations during damage control drills like rats freed from a cage to enjoy the brief period of relief from the monotony of their quarters. Stalin and Ortiz managed to fill up the rest of the Marines’ time with a mixture of make-work and training. Beyond that, the Marines entertained themselves with gambling, watching movie reruns, reading, or, on occasion, fighting. Stalin would let them duke it out when an argument got physical, waiting until Ortiz appeared and put an end to it.

The other Marines, except for Davis and occasionally Ortiz, ignored Reza and Eustus, and they returned the favor.

By the end of the second week, Reza was coming down with what Eustus called “cabin fever.” The problem was that Reza had no safe outlet to express his frustrations: one simply did not release an irritable priest of the Desh-Ka upon a group of unsuspecting humans without devastating consequences.

Finally, fearing that he might do something dreadful, he brought his concern to Ortiz.

“I need some open space for sword training,” Reza told her.

“Try opening an airlock,” she said. “You’ll have all the space you could ever need.”

“Please, lieutenant. This is not a joking matter. You do not want me going off, as you might say, on anyone.”

She folded her arms and narrowed her eyes. “When I asked you and Camden to watch my ass, figuratively speaking, that wasn’t an invitation to ask for special privileges.”

Reza clenched his fists in frustration, trying to stem the tide of fury that had been roiling in his blood. He knew this was beneath him, that a warrior such as he should be able to endure whatever trial was set before him. Perhaps that was how he should view his current situation, he thought. It was a trial, and one that the warriors who raised him, Tesh-Dar most of all, would have looked upon as trivial, at best.

The thought of Tesh-Dar shamed him. His mother in spirit if not in flesh, she had entrusted him with the gift of her powers and the trust of her heart, just as she had to Esah-Zhurah. And what would Esah-Zhurah, his love, think of his pitiful mewling? *She would have beaten you when we were but young*, he thought, with a sad smile. Bowing his head to Ortiz, he said, “I am sorry for being so selfish, lieutenant. Please forgive me. Permission to return to my bunk?”

“Permission denied.”

Reza’s eyebrows raised in an unspoken question.

“As it turns out,” she told him, “the captain was looking for some helping hands to scrape rust from the auxiliary water tank. It’s about the size of our entire galley. If you’d care to volunteer for the duty, I probably wouldn’t be annoyed if you took a little extra time to play with your sword. You’re excused from regular duty while you’re doing that.” She leaned forward, poking Reza in the chest with an index finger. “But don’t screw off in there. If the captain’s not happy about the job you’re doing, I’ll lock you in and fill it back up with water. Got it?”

“Yes, lieutenant!” Reza said, relieved. “Thank you.”

Ortiz snorted. “You won’t be thanking me after you find out what a nasty job it is. No one else would volunteer for it, even for the chance to get out of our shoebox for a while. And take Camden with you. He looks like a lost puppy any time you’re not with him.”

The lieutenant had not been exaggerating, Reza thought later as he and Eustus used grinders and scrapers to clean the inside of the water tank. It shouldn’t have rusted, the Navy chief who instructed them on the job had said, but it had been made out of inferior grade steel. Since replacing it would have required an extended stay in dry dock, the Navy had simply decided to use good old fashioned elbow grease to take care of the problem. And so, every two months, the tank was drained and a small team was sent down to clean it out.

That small team this time around comprised Reza and Eustus.

“Hey down there!”

Reza, even with his acute senses, had barely heard the shout over the noise of the two grinders. He switched his off and turned to see the chief peering down at them through the access hatch. He gestured for Eustus to shut off his grinder.

“Shift is over, jarheads.” He took a closer look at their work. “Not bad. Maybe in another week you’ll have it finished.” Then he disappeared.

“Another week?” Eustus moaned, setting down the grinder and stretching his muscles. “I’m going to die in here.”

Reza frowned. Only a week? He was hoping his opportunity for some open space would have lasted longer, but he would have to take what he could get, as Eustus would say.

“I’m starving,” Eustus said. “I’m going to grab some chow.”

“Do not wait for me,” Reza told him as he knelt down beside a duffle bag that he’d put in one corner of the cavernous tank. “I may be a while. And be careful.”

“No worries.” Eustus climbed the access ladder and closed the hatch behind him.

Opening the duffle, Reza carefully pulled out his Kreelan ceremonial armor. After removing his human clothes, he knelt beside the stack of armor plate and black undergarment. Then, in the time-honored ritual, he began to transform into his Kreelan guise. This was the first time he’d been able to wear his armor since they’d left the academy, and with every piece he slipped on, he felt more himself. The warrior priest standing in gleaming black armor with the Desh-Ka rune in glowing cyan on the breast plate, this was his true self.

Taking up the great sword that bore his name and that of Esah-Zhurah, inscribed on the blade as part of a poetic tale of their lives as written by Pan’ne-Sharakh, he began the movements he had first learned as a boy at Esah-Zhurah’s side. He moved with liquid grace, the shimmering blade tracing arcs and lines through the air as he cut and thrust, his mind lost in the quest for perfection of each movement. While the sword was truly among the least of the weapons possessed by a Desh-Ka priest, mastery of the blade was also the foundation upon which all other skills were built.

The labor of stripping rust from the innards of the water tank had served to warm up his body, and so he quickly dispensed with the simpler drills and moved on to those that became far more complex; the simplest of them was achievable by a master (or mistress) of the sword who was not a priest. But any one of the movements that came after, that he had learned during the strange dream state while he had been in the great arena with Tesh-Dar and Esah-Zhurah, would have taken a normal swordsman a lifetime to master. The knowledge seemed to trickle into his mind during his dreams, there becoming memories. But he knew he had learned so much more in that instant, those long years, when the Desh-Ka Crystal of Souls had touched him with cyan fire. He could sense a great mountain of knowledge, of skills, behind an invisible barrier in his mind, like water behind a high dam. Try as he might, he could not reach past that barrier on his own. Memories came to him as they willed, as if some ethereal keeper controlled the flow. Perhaps, Reza thought as he whirled and slashed, that might not be so far from the truth. Could the Empress somehow still be guiding him, even with the Braid of the Covenant severed? Or perhaps the Ancient Ones who dwelled in the place beyond death? He still had so many questions, and no one to provide any answers.

He was nearing the conclusion of the Third Challenge, a collection of movements combining sword and claw that were as intricate as they were deadly, when Ortiz opened the hatch and looked inside the tank. He had known she was coming, of course, for his second sight was always upon her, even when he slept.

“Holy shit,” she breathed as she watched him, or tried to. His blade was moving faster than the human eye could see. She knelt beside the hatch, watching him with wide eyes, as he finished the final movement. Climbing down into the tank, she came toward him. He could sense curiosity and fear warring within her, but curiosity finally won out. “Okay,” she said. “Next time we’re dirtside and go to some sleazy bar to get drunk and fight, you’re definitely coming with me.”

Reza bowed his head. “As you wish, lieutenant, although alcohol does not affect me quite like it does you.”

“I didn’t mean it literally, Reza. Or maybe I did.” She looked up at him, trying to see behind his eyes, into his soul. “You really don’t understand us, do you?”

He managed a smile. “I am learning. Or trying to.”

Ortiz stepped closer. “After all that samurai stuff you were doing, you’re not even breathing hard, and there’s not a trace of sweat on your skin.” She raised a hand to his neck, gently putting two fingers over his carotid artery, just above his collar. “Your heart rate is maybe seventy beats per minute, if that.”

“It should be slower,” Reza lamented, looking down at his sword as Ortiz withdrew her hand, her fingers lingering for just a moment on the black living metal of his Collar of Honor. “It is hard for me to concentrate properly without...” He was about to say *without the Bloodsong*, but he knew it was something she could not understand.

“Can’t find your groove, huh?”

“Something like that.”

She was about to say something more when the ship’s klaxon began to blare. “General quarters,” the tense voice of the executive officer, the XO, boomed through the passageway beyond the hatch. “General quarters, man your battle stations!”

“Oh, crap,” Ortiz breathed. “Here we go.”

As Ortiz dashed to the ladder, Reza turned to retrieve his uniform.

“There’s no time for that!” Ortiz shouted. She snorted as she began to climb. “Come as you are, Marine!”

“Yes, lieutenant.” Reza could not imagine what the others would say when they saw him in his Kreelan regalia. *They will see you as you truly are*, he thought. Whirling around, he turned to follow her. When he reached the passageway above, he slammed and locked the hatch behind him, then took off after Ortiz. The lieutenant, while much shorter, ran at an impressive speed through the narrow equipment- and cable-festooned passageway. She barely had to duck her head when she darted through the bulkhead hatches, encouraged by the shouts of the sailors who were responsible for making sure all the hatches, even the automatic ones, were closed to isolate the various compartments in case *Leander* was hit. “Move it, Marines!” one such sailor shouted. Then he caught sight of Reza. “Move...it...” The man’s mouth fell open and his eyes flew wide with surprise as Reza flew past him.

“He’s with me!” Ortiz yelled over her shoulder, not bothering to slow down. “Now close the goddamn hatch!”

She kept repeating “He’s with me!” to other sailors they passed who were heading for their own battle stations. One of them whipped around so suddenly that he banged into a conduit junction box and went sprawling. Reza stopped long enough to haul him to his feet and propel him in the direction the sailor had been going before taking off after Ortiz again.

Despite the serious nature of going to general quarters, Reza found he was grinning. This was the closest he’d come to being able to run free since he and Eustus left the academy, and it brought back bittersweet memories of running through the forests of the Homeworld with Esah-Zhurah in his youth.

Ortiz shot through the aft hatch of the galley, which was the Marine detachment’s assembly point during general quarters. From there, the captain would give them specific orders, as necessary. Otherwise they worked with the damage control parties under the guidance of the XO.

“Lieutenant!”

It was Stalin, holding the upper half of Ortiz’s battle armor, while Davis held the lower half. They had already suited up, as had the other Marines, who were quickly drawing their weapons from the arms locker.

“*Kreelan!*” Walker, who stood beside Davis, cried, bringing up her rifle as Reza entered the galley on Ortiz’s heels.

“Hold your fire!” Ortiz screamed. She skidded to a stop in front of Walker, grabbing the rifle’s muzzle and pointing it toward the ceiling. “He was demonstrating some things about Kreelan armor and weapons for me,” she lied, loud enough to be heard throughout the galley. “On *my* orders. Understand?”

“Yes, ma’am,” Walker said through clenched teeth, her gaze boring holes into Reza.

“You must get into your armor, lieutenant,” Stalin said.

Pausing just a moment to make sure Walker wasn’t going to act on her impulses, Ortiz stepped into the lower half of the vacuum-proof battle armor, helped by Davis. Then she bent over and held out her arms, wriggling into the upper half of the suit held by Stalin. Davis latched the waist couplings, after which Walker set — slammed might have been more accurate — the helmet in place and latched it.

“Reza,” Eustus called in a worried voice. “Your armor!”

Confused for just a moment, Reza glanced down, thinking something was amiss with the armor he wore.

“No, your *other* armor!” Eustus cried, pointing at the locker where Reza’s battle armor was stored.

“Marine detachment to the cutter, on the double!” The XO’s order came over both the galley PA system and the individual suit radios.

“Gard, stay here,” Stalin ordered. “You can’t fit into your battle armor wearing...that.”

Ortiz shot Reza an unhappy look and nodded agreement. “Marines, by squads to the cutter!”

Turning toward the forward hatchway, which still stood open, Ortiz led the others out at a trot in single file, their armored feet hammering in time on the metal deck.

Eustus shot Reza a look of helpless misery as he fell into his place in the first squad, which was led by Davis.

Reza stood there a moment, glaring at the Marine battle armor that hung in its locker. He debated stripping out of his Kreelan armor and donning the vac suit, but even as fast as he was, he probably couldn’t catch the others before they boarded the cutter. The passageway to the boarding gangway was only fifteen meters forward of the galley hatch, and Ortiz was probably stepping aboard the compact ship now.

Making up his mind, he followed after them, palming the switch to close the forward galley hatch behind him as he went. He would rather face Ortiz’s wrath than be left behind.

Eustus was terrified. Except for the time he had saved Reza when Reza’s combat suit had malfunctioned in a training accident, he had never before faced a do or die situation. No one had ever tried to kill him, nor had he ever had to kill anything more than the deer he sometimes hunted back home to put meat on his family’s table.

He also no longer looked at the Kreelans as nothing more than alien killing machines. His view of them as faceless enemies of humanity had forever changed after he’d gotten to know Reza. Reza didn’t talk much about his time in the Empire, but he had revealed enough, especially about his love for Esah-Zhurah, that Eustus had come to think of the Kreelans as people. He knew that he was being naive, and that any Kreelan warrior he encountered wouldn’t bat an eye at taking off his head. He also couldn’t help it.

“You’ll do your duty,” he whispered to himself. “Just aim and pull the trigger...kill or be killed...”

“Camden, you’re on the detachment push,” Ortiz snapped.

Eustus died right there from total embarrassment. Every one of the Marines had heard his little self-pep talk.

The radio channel was momentarily filled with sniggers and guffaws from the other Marines.

“Shut the hell up, all of you,” Ortiz growled. “Get your heads in the game.” A moment later she added, “SITREP from the captain! This is a search and rescue mission. A convoy was ambushed and a passenger liner got hit pretty bad. The Kreelan ships were driven off by the escorts, but warriors boarded the liner and some of the freighters. *Leander* is answering the convoy’s distress call.”

Stalin was standing by at the hatch as the last of the Marines stepped aboard, counting to make sure everyone was accounted for. The cutter's crew chief stood beside him, his hand hovering over the button to close the hatch. "That is all, lieutenant," Stalin called over the radio, "except for—"

Reza strode on board, his armor reflecting the cutter's overhead lights like a black mirror. The crew chief's jaw dropped and he went for his sidearm. Stalin grabbed the man's hand and shook his head as he favored Reza with a disbelieving look.

"Dammit, Gard," Ortiz shouted. "I told you..." She realized that he wouldn't be able to hear her over the radio, since he wasn't wearing one, and her voice wouldn't carry past the helmet. "Goddammit," she cursed to herself as she switched on the suit's PA system. "I told you to stay aboard the ship!"

"I must respectfully disobey, lieutenant." Looking at the panel beside the crew chief, Reza reached over and hit the control to close the hatch behind him. "We are wasting time."

While Eustus was tremendously relieved that Reza was with them, he was also afraid for his friend. Switching on his PA, he said, "Reza, what if we have to fight in vacuum?"

"Then he'll have to hold his breath," Walker said in an acid voice.

Ortiz came up to him, a look of fury on her face. "I'm not going to endanger the lives of the others for your stupidity," she told him. "I told you to stay on the ship for your own damn good, as well as theirs." She reached out and poked his breast armor, right in the center of the cyan rune, with an armored index finger. "You disobey my orders again and I'll shoot you right between the eyes. Understand, private?"

Reza bowed his head. "I understand, lieutenant." Then he looked her in the eye. "I came because I believe I can help, perhaps more than you realize might be possible."

"I—"

Whatever Ortiz had intended to say was lost as *Leander*, with the cutter still docked, shuddered, and a dull boom echoed through the ship. That was followed by the unmistakable thrum of the ship's main energy weapons firing.

Ortiz was nearly thrown from her feet and would have fallen had Reza not grabbed her and, in one smooth motion, pushed her into one of the stand-up restraints the Marines used for combat drops.

"Take your stations!" Ortiz shouted as she nodded a silent thanks to Reza, who flipped down the restraint bar. "More Kreeelan ships just jumped in!"

The handful of Marines who weren't already strapped in did so, and Reza followed suit. He was opposite Stalin, who stared at him with emotionless eyes, a smile plastered on his face. Beside Stalin and closest to the hatch was the crew chief, who looked at Reza with a mixture of distaste and disbelief.

"Stand by," the cutter's pilot announced in an anxious voice.

A moment later the cutter was cut loose from *Leander* with a loud clang.

"Maneuvering," the pilot announced. Reza wondered why she bothered to say that, for the Marines could see nothing. Being on the cutter was like being on a smaller rendition of the corvette; the Marines were blind and deaf inside a metal can, with no idea of what might be going on beyond the walls of their cage save for what the captain and crew might happen to tell them. It was a state of enforced ignorance that Reza found most unsettling.

The Marines also had no sensation of motion as the cutter maneuvered, due to the effects of the ship's artificial gravity and inertial dampers. Without them, the cutter would have only been able to accelerate and turn at a fraction of its true capabilities without turning its human passengers into bloody paste.

However, the Marines could definitely feel the sharp kick of a near miss, which was accompanied by curses from the pilot and copilot.

"Stand by!" The crew chief called, raising a hand with two fingers in the air. "Two minutes!"

The hull reverberated with a deep thrum and the artificial gravity fluctuated. "We've been hit!" cried the pilot. Above the Marines, the metal plating turned red hot in a line that ran halfway across the compartment and a shower of sparks erupted from an electrical conduit that melted under the heat.

"Energy weapon grazed us," the crew chief said. Looking again at Reza, he said, "For your sake, I hope the hull doesn't blow out."

"Do not worry about me," Reza assured him.

The man laughed. "Believe me, I'm not." Then he shouted, "One minute! Exit the rear hatch!"

"It's time, Marines!" Ortiz shouted.

In unison, the restraints lifted and the Marines stepped out into the cargo area. Led by Ortiz and Stalin, they quickly formed into two lines facing the rearward hatch. Reza took his place behind Eustus. All of them reached for the safety lines that ran fore and aft above their heads.

"I feel like I'm going to puke," Eustus said quietly over the PA after making sure he wasn't on the unit push.

"You will be fine," Reza reassured him.

"Yeah, right. You know that most casualties in boarding actions happen when the boat's about to dock and we're not in our restraints? If our cutter gets hammered and the dampers go out, we get splattered on the walls."

"No warriors are near the airlock the pilot is approaching," Reza told him, "and the Imperial warships are otherwise occupied."

"I wish I knew how the hell you know things like that," Eustus replied with a weak smile.

A jolt ran through the cutter as it made forceful contact with the passenger liner's airlock.

After checking the control panel, the crew chief announced, "Good seal, good atmosphere! Good luck, Marines!"

Then he hit the button to open the hatch, and the twenty Marines prepared to charge forward into the stricken passenger ship.

As the door opened, the lead Marines collided with a mob of screaming passengers who'd gathered at the airlock, hoping for a ship to come to their rescue.

"Get back!" Ortiz screamed over her PA as the terrified civilians began to punch, kick, and claw their way past the Marines to reach the relative safety of the cutter. "We'll get you all off, but we can't take you all at once!"

That only made the passengers more determined to be among the first to get off the stricken ship.

Stalin raised his rifle, pointing it at the passengers over the shoulders of the Marines in the front rank.

“No!” Ortiz made a grab for his weapon, then stumbled and went down as the Marines in front were shoved back by the crowd, knocking her over. Those Marines, in turn, tripped over Ortiz and fell as the passengers surged forward. Stalin and the others were swept aside as the civilians flooded aboard the boat...

...and came to an abrupt halt as they came face to face with Reza, who stood before them in his gleaming armor, his great sword of living metal drawn. Brandishing the sword over his head, he let out a blood-curdling war cry that echoed above the screams and shouts.

“The Kreelans are in here!” a woman shrieked.

“They’re in the ship!” another one bellowed in terror. “The Blues have taken the ship!”

In unison, they whirled around and began pushing back against their companions who were still trying to force their way aboard. The momentum of the boarders quickly waned as more and more of them picked up on the shrill screams that the Kreelans were in the cutter. Like a school of fish that had encountered a hungry shark, the passengers reached a collective tipping point and turned back, fleeing en masse from the airlock and back into the liner’s passageways.

“Everyone all right?” Ortiz asked angrily as Davis helped her up.

“I think I peed myself,” someone quipped.

“All accounted for, lieutenant,” Stalin reported after a quick head count. “No injuries.”

Ortiz shot him a furious glare. “If you ever try to shoot civilians again, there’ll be more than injuries for you.”

Stalin shrugged, the gesture largely lost in his armor. He clearly was not moved by her threat.

She looked up as Reza stepped forward, sheathing his sword. “Okay,” she admitted, “maybe you coming along in that get-up wasn’t the worst bit of luck we’ve had. Now let’s get the hell off this boat.” To the crew chief, she said, “Shut the damn hatch and don’t open it unless one of us tells you. We’ll gather up some of these sheep and bring them back in numbers you can manage. Oh, and have the pilot see if *Leander* or any of the other ships can come alongside. We’re not going to be able to get all these people off with toy boats like this one.”

“Yes, lieutenant.” The crew chief, who’d been knocked off his feet and nearly crushed by the civilian stampede — his vac suit wasn’t armored like those the Marines wore — was still pale behind his helmet’s faceplate.

“Davis!” Ortiz called. “Let’s get this circus moving!”

The Marines moved quickly along the main passageway down which the civilians had fled. As they reached the first junction, Ortiz called a halt. The passageway that intersected the one they were on was very utilitarian-looking.

“Probably goes to the crew quarters or engineering,” Walker commented. The hatches were open, but when Walker cycled one closed, it blended into the artful wall decoration, with *Crew Only* inscribed in small but easily visible letters at the center of the hatch. “How big is this ship, anyway?”

“It’s the *Venetian Star*,” Davis blurted. “She displaces four hundred thousand tons, is eleven hundred meters long, with eight casinos, fifteen restaurants, seven pools, and every possible entertainment option, all spread through twenty passenger decks for the enjoyment of seven thousand pampered passengers.”

“Where did you come up with that bullshit?” Ortiz asked, gaping at him.

“Travel brochure,” he said in a wistful voice. “I’ve always wanted to go on a cruise.”

Reza looked about him. They hadn’t even reached any of the main passenger areas yet, and so he had not yet seen any of the luxuries of which Davis had spoken. Yet even the passageway where they were standing was fitted with plush carpet, beautiful wall coverings, and graceful light fixtures. He had stayed in what Jodi Mackenzie had told him was a very expensive hotel when he had first come to Earth, and it looked much like this. “What purpose could such a ship as this serve in war?” he wondered.

“The war’s been going on for a hundred years,” Davis told him in a dreamy voice as he ran a hand over the expensive fabric adorning the walls, “and people didn’t want to give up all their luxuries. Besides, the war isn’t everywhere, you know. The Kreelans have never been seen in most of Confederation space, and ships like this have been sailing throughout the Rim and most of the core worlds for decades.”

“And every once in a while, one gets whacked,” Ortiz interrupted. Stepping closer to one of the deck plan holograms that hung along the walls of every passageway, she took a closer look at the layout of the huge ship. *Four hundred thousand tons? Eleven hundred meters long? Seven thousand passengers? Shit.* “I know that other Marine detachments are being sent aboard, but we’re going to need a damn division to search this tub and a carrier to get them all off.”

“Not all of them can be saved,” Reza told her soberly. He had been standing beside Eustus, staring off into space as he sent his second sight through the ship. “Everyone from main engineering aft is lost. The enemy warships targeted her main drives and lifeboats, intending to wound her and prevent the passengers and crew from fleeing.” He blinked, returning his attention to his current surroundings. “The enemy landed in the bow and warriors are moving aft, killing as they go. Many passengers have barricaded themselves in their cabins, but the doors will not hold against Kreelan steel. Others have sought sanctuary in the forward theater, but there is no safety for them there. They will be slaughtered.”

Narrowing her eyes, Ortiz asked. “How could you possibly know all that?”

“Because he’s a damn spy,” Walker hissed. “He’s still one of them.”

Ignoring her, Reza told Ortiz, “The answer is...complicated.”

Ortiz snorted. “My ass.” After chewing on her lip for a moment, she asked Reza, “How many do you think are in that theater?”

“Lieutenant!” Walker protested. “You don’t actually believe all this bullshit, do you?”

“Why the hell not?” Ortiz snapped. “We don’t have shit to go on otherwise, and we’re not going to waste time wandering aimlessly through thousands of meters of passageways before this tub’s hull finally gives out. We’ll gather up everyone we can find as we go, but at least the theater is in the deck hologram. It’s an objective we can shoot for.” To Reza, she repeated, “How many passengers are there?”

“At least three hundred, perhaps more,” Reza said. “It is very crowded.” After a pause, he added, “Many of them are children.”

“*Leander* could take that many aboard,” Ortiz mused. She turned to Stalin. “What do you think?”

“If heading forward is where we can find Kreelans to kill,” he said, grinning at Reza, “then that is where we must go.”

“Goddammit.” Ortiz slammed her fist against the wall as a gaggle of passengers turned and fled from her detachment. She turned on Reza. “Every time passengers see you, they take off running the other way!”

“Just wait until we meet up with one of the other Marine detachments that are supposed to be here,” Walker added, giving Reza a stony glare. “As soon as they set eyes on him, they’ll take care of the problem for us.”

“Then I will move forward on my own,” Reza said. “You rescue the passengers, and I will try to slow down the advancing warriors.”

Walker moved closer, raising the muzzle of her weapon. It wasn’t quite pointed at Reza, but was close enough that the threat was clear. “So you can just switch sides and join them to kill the rest of us? I don’t think so.”

There was a collective murmur from the rest of the Marines, all save Eustus, who stood alone in defending his friend. “He would never do that! He—”

“Shut your mouth, little man,” Stalin said in an icy voice. Unlike Walker, he made no pretense at all about where he was pointing his weapon: he leveled it at Eustus’s heart. “You are even worse, a traitor who loves a traitor.”

The dam Reza had built within himself to hold back the anger and resentment toward those who would never accept his honor finally broke and his blood flashed white hot with fury. His sword hissed through the air, the glittering blade slicing Stalin’s assault rifle in half. As time contracted in Reza’s mind, his body and sword moved with inhuman speed while the others reacted in slow motion. Pivoting to one side, he cut Walker’s rifle in two, even as Stalin was just beginning to react to the destruction of his own weapon.

Moving with the grace and power of a fast flowing river, Reza turned and slashed, making his mark upon each of the Marines except for Eustus, Davis, and Ortiz.

When it was done, he allowed time to resume its normal flow.

Stalin stared at the remains of his rifle, the rear half held by his right hand, the front held in his left by the fore grip. A fountain of sparks exploded from the destroyed electronics and power pack.

“*Shit!*” Walker tossed the remains of her weapon to the deck as the power pack arced and flared. She looked up at Reza, her eyes now filled with fright. She found herself staring at the tip of his sword, which was a hair’s breadth from her faceplate.

“I will tolerate no more.” While the words were in Standard, he spoke not in the voice of a lowly private, but as a warrior priest of the Desh-Ka.

“Holy shit,” Ortiz breathed. Taking her eyes from Reza. “Look at your name stencils.”

Each Marine’s name was painted on the front of his or her chest plate in black letters. Now those names bore a pair of deep horizontal slash marks that went halfway through the metal.

As one, they turned to stare at Reza.

“If I wanted to kill you, all of you, I easily could,” he told them, lowering his sword. “I do not need to resort to treachery or subterfuge to do that. Those things are unknown among Her Children.” His voice softened. “I did not return from the Empire to do you harm, but to offer my sword and my life in your service.”

“Hey, why didn’t I get some of those?” Davis’s voice registered his indignation as he eyed the slashes on the other Marines’ breast plates. He looked at Reza with a hurt expression. “I don’t want to be left out.”

Reza’s lips turned up in a sad smile. Davis reminded him a great deal of his surrogate father, Wiley Hickock. With a few flicks of his wrist, he granted Davis’s wish.

“That’s better,” Davis said happily.

“Okay,” Ortiz said in an unsteady voice, “you made your point.” While Marine officers technically weren’t supposed to carry rifles, she always did, along with her sidearm. Now she handed her rifle to Walker and drew her pistol. With a look of disgust, Stalin threw the remains of his rifle to the deck and drew his own sidearm.

“But you’re not just going rogue on me,” Ortiz went on. “I want you to scout forward as fast as you can to that theater and hold off the enemy until we get there. I guess it goes without saying that you should avoid contact with the other Marines and don’t scare the shit out of civilians if you can help it.” She reached out and took his arm. “Then we all get off this tub together. I’ve had Marines die under my command, but I’ve never left one behind. Understood?”

Bowing his head, Reza said, “Yes, lieutenant.”

“I’ll go with him,” Eustus volunteered. “He needs someone to watch his back.”

“No, my friend,” Reza told him, glad that Eustus had offered. *You have more courage than you know*, he thought. “Not this time. I can move faster on my own.”

Turning to the deck plan, Ortiz focused the attention of the Marines on the way forward. “If I’m reading this right, we’re going to have to go up two decks to the solarium, cross that, then drop down five decks to the theater. What do you think Reza?” She turned around. “Reza?”

He was gone.

“What the hell?” Walker gasped. “He was just standing right there!”

Eustus sighed. “Get used to it. He does that all the time.”

Sai-Kel led her warriors aft through the angular passageways of the ship. She could not understand how the humans could build things that were so offensive to the senses. All around her were straight lines and sharp angles, utterly lacking in the grace found in even the simplest creations at the hands of the builders. This ship, and the others she had boarded in the past, had no sense of beauty or grace. *One cannot expect such of soulless animals*, she conceded.

Worse was the smell. Humans smelled bad enough, with their sour sweat and the strong perfumes they used to mask it, but their ships were worse. The stink of the humans mixed with the noxious chemical odors of the materials from which they made their ships sometimes caused Sai-Kel’s nose to bleed. The smell of their fear was particularly noxious and made her stomach roil with nausea. She was near to vomiting now, so overpowering was the reek in the passageways and compartments. She would far more have welcomed cloying smoke, which was now beginning to seep through the air ducts from the wreckage of the ship’s engineering section.

Pausing in her advance, she nodded to a quartet of warriors who stood by, a pair on either side of the passageway near the endless rectangular doors along the passageways that led to sleeping quarters. One warrior of each pair sliced through the door’s locking mechanism, the other warrior kicked it open, then the first stepped through. It was a process they all had performed many times in the past. The humans cowering within screamed in terror. Sai-Kel

cringed, the sound clawing at her brain. The screams ended quickly, silenced by the swords of the warriors. Humans who did not stand and fight were killed quickly. Her Children did not delight in making animals suffer.

The warriors quickly returned from their bloody work, taking their places now at the rear of the phalanx attending her. Each would take her turn at the slaughter, which was part of Her will but was not something in which any of Her warriors took pride. No, they longed to find human warriors who would offer resistance, who would give battle that would glorify the Empress. Alas, aside from two humans who had given good accounts of themselves in hand to hand combat, all she and her warriors had thus far come upon in this ship were the weak and the helpless.

Raising a hand, indicating a halt, she looked at the hologram of the ship's deck plan, one of many that were throughout the ship. She marveled that the animals could not find their way around without such things. Reaching out, she traced a path with an ebony talon toward a large compartment not far aft of her current location. Humans typically gathered when threatened, like terrified meat animals being hunted by a genoth, and she suspected that many would be there.

"Here." She tapped her finger on the compartment in the hologram. Other such compartments were spread throughout the ship, but this was the nearest. She could not read the alien letters that spelled *Theater*. "I tire of slaughtering animals," she told her First. "Let us go here and see what we might find."

Ortiz led her detachment into the solarium, which was made to look like the beach of a tropical island and was at least a hundred meters across. The Marines trudged across fine white sand, weaving their way between stands of palm trees, beach chairs, and tiki bars. Waves still lapped at the beach from the pool which, with the aid of holographic projection, looked like an ocean that reached to the horizon. Looking up, she breathed a sigh of relief that the exterior shield was still in place over the enormous ceiling of clear panels overhead.

"Just imagine the view if that was open," Davis murmured in wonder as he gawked at their surroundings.

"Just imagine all this — and us — getting blown into vacuum through those clearskin panels," Walker chided. "The shield isn't armored, but it's a lot better protection than the glass."

"Cut the chatter," Ortiz growled.

Gunfire erupted off to their right, on the far side of the solarium, the distinctive sound of Marine pulse rifles hammering on full automatic.

Ortiz's Marines dropped to the sand or found cover.

"No contact!" Stalin called out. "I see nothing."

"There!" Eustus blurted as he saw distinctive black-clad figures pour from one of the other entrances to the solarium. The Kreelans' attention was focused on the Marines on the far side, who were still blocked from his view.

"Where, dammit?" Ortiz snapped.

"Sorry, ma'am! Two o'clock, behind that restaurant."

"I don't see anything...wait, there they are!" Kreelans spilled out into her field of view. "Contact right!" Ortiz shouted. "Engage, but watch for friendlies!"

As one, the Marines opened fire, the energy bolts of the rifles tearing into the Kreelans who had no idea their flank was totally exposed. The detachment's two pulse guns chopped the restaurant to pieces, giving the other Marines a clear field of fire into the entire Kreelan formation that was now reeling on the sand-covered beach.

"Shit," someone hissed as more Kreelans boiled out from another entrance on this side of the restaurant.

"Get down!" Stalin bellowed.

Ortiz and the others who weren't already prone on the sand dove to the ground as a volley of the lethal alien throwing stars whistled overhead. "Cut 'em down!" she ordered as the newly arrived Kreelans charged their position.

Fire from the rifles and pulse guns raked the approaching enemy, but the Kreelans didn't make it easy. The warriors had an uncanny ability to dodge aside at the last moment, even while running across the powdery sand. Dozens went down, but dozens more continued to sprint toward Ortiz and her Marines.

"Grenades!" Ortiz ordered.

The Marines were already prepared. The word had barely escaped her lips when a dozen gray spheres sailed from her line toward the approaching enemy. Some reached their programmed proximity detonation height and exploded about three meters above the ground, while others were swatted away or sliced in half by warriors who leaped into the air, slashing at the incoming weapons with their swords.

"Wow!" Davis exclaimed, as if he were watching a circus act.

"Goddamn acrobats," Walker cursed as she swapped in a fresh power pack for her rifle. "Shit!" She dodged aside as a bolt from a pulse gun fired by the Marines on the far side missed the hundreds of intervening Kreelans to sail a centimeter above her head.

"This is not a good position," Stalin observed.

"Ya think?" Ortiz chewed her lip. "Our orders are search and rescue, not to get tied down in a shootout. Stalin, have first squad keep these bitches busy. Second and third squads, head for the forward exit." That was where they were originally headed when they'd stumbled into this firefight. "And keep your heads and asses down!"

The attention of the Kreelans was split by another detachment of Marines that suddenly appeared out of what must have been a maintenance portal in the middle of the holographic projection of the ocean horizon. The newcomers opened fire as they spread out over the narrow deck on that end of the pool.

"That's our cue," Ortiz said. "Go!"

The men and women of the second and third squads jumped up and scrambled across the sand toward the ornate hatch that led forward while Stalin and first squad poured fire into the Kreelans. Over a hundred bodies littered the beach, yet more warriors continued to emerge into the kill zone.

"Second squad, cover!" Ortiz ordered as second and third squads reached relative safety. "First squad, move your asses!"

Stalin and the members of the first squad ran toward the others, with Stalin bringing up the rear. Just before he reached the exit, he slowed down, then stopped, his eyes fixed on the enemy.

"Stalin!" Ortiz ran out and grabbed his arm, intending to haul him out of harm's way.

“Look,” he said, gesturing toward the enemy. “They are pulling back.”

“What?” She looked at the Kreelans, and her mouth fell open in surprise. Stalin was right. They were retreating. *But Kreelans never retreated*, she reminded herself. Never. They either killed every human in sight or died trying.

The two other Marine detachments began brandishing their weapons in the air in celebration.

But something odd struck her about how the Kreelans were acting, beyond the fact that they never retreated. Normally when pulling back, some of the retreating forces were turned around to face the enemy, to offer at least token resistance, but none of the Kreelans were doing that. They’d simply turned their backs on the Marines and were running from the solarium as fast as their sandaled feet could carry them. “They’re not running away from us,” she said. “They’re running toward something else.”

“It’s Reza.”

Ortiz and Stalin turned to face Eustus, who wore a worried expression.

“They found out he’s here.”

Sai-Kel gestured for her warriors to slow as they approached the end of the passageway. Before them lay an enormous open plaza that, from the display of various wares, she took to be some sort of marketplace. Screams and human gunfire echoed down the passageway from somewhere beyond the plaza, but the plaza itself seemed deserted.

And yet it was not. Her senses twitched and her hand tightened on the handle of her sword as she slowly eased forward, her warriors right behind her. *They can sense it, too*, she thought as she picked up on the growing sense of anticipation building in their Bloodsong. But what was causing it?

Coming to the end of the passageway, she slid against the wall. The strange sensation was trilling in her blood, inexorably drawing her onward. She peered around the corner and gasped at what she saw.

There, near the center of the plaza, stood a human clad in Kreelan armor. He stood tall, his legs shoulder width apart, the tip of his great sword resting on the deck, blade pointed downward, his hands clasped on its handle. His head was bowed, his eyes closed.

Around his neck was a Collar of Honor, and at his throat was the unmistakable rare blue of a genoth eyestone with the rune of the Desh-Ka inscribed upon it, with a matching rune upon his breastplate.

She pulled back, her eyes wide with surprise. “Reza,” she whispered to herself in disbelief. Then she stepped out into full view.

The priest of the Desh-Ka opened his eyes and favored her with his gaze.

“Come,” she said to her warriors, and together they filed out into the plaza. They quickly formed into ranks behind her, just as the tresh did at the kazhas. As one, they followed Sai-Kel’s lead when she dropped to one knee and saluted. “We offer thee our humble greeting, priest of the Desh-Ka.”

“May Her blessing be upon you,” Reza replied as he returned her salute. “Do you seek the right of challenge?”

“What warrior worthy of the name would turn away from such an honor?”

“Come forth.”

Getting to her feet, the strange sensation Sai-Kel had been feeling transformed into breathless elation. She had no expectation that she would survive personal combat with Reza, but she could think of no better way to honor the Empress than to die by his hand.

She approached him, he who was the consort of Esah-Zhurah, and again knelt. The blade of his sword glittered before her eyes.

“Rise, Sai-Kel,” he told her. They had never before met in the flesh, but he would know her name as he would any of Her Children by the first five pendants, the Five Stars, that hung from her collar. After she had gotten to her feet, he said, “I would ask you of my love, Esah-Zhurah. Do you...do you know how she fares?”

His question brought on a wave of sadness. “She mourns thee, my priest,” Sai-Kel told him. “She mourns thy loss now as much as she did the day you left us. Hers is a lonely, tragic voice in the Bloodsong that has touched us all.” She dared to raise her eyes to meet his. “I grieve for thee, and for her. So do all of Her Children.”

“It was Her will,” Reza whispered. “I thank you.” Taking a deep breath and clearing the expression of sadness from his face, he said, “Tell your warriors that in this challenge I will use none of the powers given me by the Crystal of Souls. It will be sword against sword, claw against claw, warrior against warrior.”

Sai-Kel’s mouth dropped open in wonder. For a priest or priestess to offer such a condition in combat was unheard of. Dying by the hand of a priest of the Desh-Ka was a wondrous honor. But to kill one, or even draw blood, in a ritual challenge would be something unheard of in the Books of Time. Granted, Reza could still probably kill every one of her warriors easily without the powers of the Desh-Ka, but it gave them a chance, albeit slight, of victory. “You would do this... for us?”

“I do it to honor Her,” Reza said. He reached out to put a hand gently on her shoulder. “Should I fall, I would ask thee to return my weapons and my collar to my love.”

Bowing her head, feeling as if the skin beneath the armor where he held his hand was afire, she said, “So it has been said, so shall it be done.”

After a brief moment, Reza took his hand away and stepped back, gripping his sword in one hand.

They waited as the other warriors circled around them, forming a makeshift arena.

Then Reza said, “Let us begin.”

“*Leander* is pulling alongside to help take off the passengers,” Ortiz told the others over the unit channel. “She’s extending a flex-dock to the forward starboard side airlock. The XO says to direct all survivors there. Our cutter will stay near the aft airlock to take off any stragglers. Two destroyers are coming in to dock on the port side.” The ships were taking a horrible risk conducting a rescue in the middle of a battle, but if they didn’t, most of the passengers would be doomed. The cutters would never be able to ferry off the survivors before the starliner’s hull gave out.

“It’s nice when we get good news,” Davis said in a cheery voice that was in stark contrast to the dire situation. “That doesn’t happen very often.”

“Hold up,” Ortiz ordered, ignoring him. Turning around, she looked over the chain of terrified passengers they’d picked up as they’d made their way forward. Doing a quick count, she came up with nearly a hundred. The last time she’d looked, only two dozen had been trailing after them. She’d let them come along, unsure of where to send them until she’d received confirmation that *Leander* was coming alongside. “Walker, I want you to take your squad and escort these people to the airlock and get them aboard the ship. Gather up everyone else you can along the way, but don’t stop and don’t slow down. I don’t think we’re going to have a lot of time.”

As if to punctuate her concern, a deep boom rang through the ship and the deck under their feet shuddered.

“Look!” Eustus, who was peering out one of the many viewports along the side, pointed. Somewhere aft a bulkhead had given way and a fountain of debris and passengers, their arms waving and legs kicking frantically, spewed into space.

“Walker,” Ortiz ordered, “move!”

“Aye, lieutenant.” Turning around, she bellowed over her PA system to the passengers. “We’re heading to the forward starboard side airlock. Let’s go!” Turning back to Ortiz, she said, “Good luck.”

Ortiz nodded. “You, too. Now get your ass out of here.”

The other squads stood aside as Walker and her Marines shepherded the passengers to the nearest stairway that led down to the deck where the airlocks were located.

“The rest of you,” Stalin ordered, annoyed at the distraction, “move out. We have enemies to kill.”

Reza sparred with Sai-Kel to grant her the honor of individual combat. She was a spirited fighter and a good sword mistress, and he could not bring himself to take her life. He recalled the brief and bloody battle he had fought against his sisters on the bridge on Rutan right after he had been banished from the Empire. It had been nothing more than slaughter, and brought the Empress no more glory than if they had stepped into the sea and drowned. What honor would the death of Sai-Kel bring, facing a priest in single combat? She might revel in such an ending, but it brought him only sadness. She deserved better. They all did.

She attacked again, thrusting her sword at his midsection. He deflected it, then stepped back.

“Kazh,” he said, and she instantly stopped her attack.

Sheathing her sword, she stood tall and bowed her head. “I have disappointed you, my priest,” she said in a voice laden with misery.

“Far from it, warrior. You honor the Empress and your sisters. But none of us — least of all myself — honor or bring glory to Her through meaningless sacrifice.” Reza’s eyes swept the ranks that now stood many deep around him and Sai-Kel. With his second sight he knew that nearly all the warriors on the ship were now gathered here, and those few who weren’t were on their way. Without having to fight, the Marines would be able to get the passengers off unmolested, and Reza would buy them the time they needed. “If we are to cross swords,” he went on, “then let us make it a worthy challenge.” With his blade he pointed to the next nine senior-most warriors, as determined by the pendants they wore below their collars. “Ten shall face me. Those who fall will be taken from the field and replaced with the next most senior warriors. And should I fall...” He looked at Sai-Kel, who reluctantly met his eyes and nodded.

“Come forth, then,” Reza ordered, and the other warriors joined Sai-Kel in a tight circle around him. To Sai-Kel, he said, “The honor is yours.”

The warriors saluted him, then drew their weapons. Around them, the onlooking warriors tensed, both in anticipation of the coming battle, and also to dodge or deflect any shrekkas that might come their way.

Each of the ten warriors assumed her favored stance. Most carried swords, a few favored daggers, and one, Reza was surprised to see, uncoiled a grakh’ta nine-tailed whip behind her.

Reza could feel the tension mount as the warriors sought that perfect moment in time to strike. His own body was loose, his sword held firmly in his hands. He closed his eyes, seeking his own perfect moment while forcing himself to keep his second sight firmly upon Ortiz and the others, both to watch over her and to not dishonor his opponents by using it here.

The warrior with the grakh’ta attacked first. Lunging forward, she snapped the weapon toward him, the nine tails spreading out like the tentacles of a sea beast. Whirling about, Reza brought up his sword and sliced the tails from the rest of the whip, nimbly dodging aside as they flew past him.

That broke the spell. As one, the other warriors closed in around him, and the plaza was filled with the sound of clashing steel.

Eustus stayed close behind Ortiz as the Marines moved forward through the passageways. He was breathing hard, but not from the exertion of carrying around an extra thirty kilos of synthetic armor and weapons. It was because of the peculiar mix of emotions at having killed another being, even if not a human, for the first time. He had cut down two Kreelan warriors during the brief battle in the solarium, and the images of their bodies falling to the stand played over and over in his head. Exhilaration, fear, relief, pride, and guilt warred in his breast, and he was shaking from the adrenalin rush. He wanted nothing more than to find a private place to puke his guts out, but there wasn’t time for that.

More passengers and crewmen had flocked to them like moths drawn to a flame, and Ortiz had told them to follow her Marines, as it would be faster than trying to follow the route Walker had taken the others.

Eustus had no idea how all these people were going to fit on the corvette, which was cramped with just her regular crew and the Marine detachment. But they had to do the best they could with what they had. Pausing for just a moment at another of the countless viewports along the ship’s flanks, Eustus looked out to see *Leander* pulling alongside. The flex-dock, basically a big

corrugated zero-gee tube the ship could extend and retract to dock with other vessels, was already deploying to mate with the *Venetian Star's* airlock.

Beyond, in the dark space around the stricken starliner, he saw the glittering, moving stars of the other ships of the human task force and the Kreelan warships that faced them. The ships were joined by brief bolts of emerald and jade, and the fiery trails of torpedoes raced between the two battling fleets.

A quartet of energy bolts intersected with one of the human ships, which was close enough that he could make out some details of her hull. The ship was momentarily obscured by a huge fireball. As the glare subsided, he saw the bow and stern sections tumbling in opposite directions.

He yelped when someone grabbed him by the combat harness and thrust him back into line.

“Move, little man,” Stalin hissed. “We have no time to sightsee.”

“Yes, staff sergeant,” Eustus automatically replied. With a last frightened glance over his shoulder at the battle raging in space, he double timed back into his place in the formation, clutching his rifle tightly in his hands.

A few moments later, the Marines emerged into the largest of the ship's casinos, which boasted three levels of machines and tables and catered to nearly every means by which gamblers could lose their money to the house.

“Oh, Lord of All.”

Everyone, even Eustus, chuckled at the sound of Castle's voice. He sounded like a man who'd reached the gates of heaven, only to find them locked and no guardian to plead with.

“Lieutenant,” Castle pleaded, “can't we—”

“No, we can't,” she cut him off. “Don't be an idiot.”

“But—”

His protest was cut off by an explosion behind them as one of the viewports failed from the warping of the hull when the ship was damaged. The passengers following the Marines screamed as they were blown back down the passageway, carried away by the air within the ship as it suddenly found a way to escape into space. Some of them wore emergency pressure suits, but most did not.

Eustus didn't have time to activate the mag locks on the bottom of his boots before he was knocked off his feet. He managed to grab a stanchion with one hand, then grabbed Ortiz, who was sailing past him. His rifle twirled in the screaming air, still attached to his suit by its tether.

A split second later, the pressure sensors of the airtight door to the casino tripped. The segmented door slammed down from the ceiling to the floor bare centimeters from Ortiz's feet.

Unfortunately, two passengers were in the way. One was dead, the door having come down on his chest. The flesh and bone, while crushed, kept the door from forming a perfect seal, and air from the casino whistled through the gap. As for the second unfortunate victim, all that was left on this side was her arm, the fingers still twitching. The Marines could hear the woman pounding with her other hand on the opposite side of the door, where she was trapped by her crushed flesh, still bound to her not quite severed arm. Mercifully, the pounding stopped after a few seconds as she suffocated.

“Fuck,” Ortiz whispered as she got to her feet, brushing off Eustus's attempt to help. She stared at the people trapped by the pressure door, her face pale behind her faceplate. “They're

gone. All those poor people..." Every single one of the newly gathered passengers following them was dead.

Stalin turned to her. "Forget the theater. We must go to the ship now."

"No," Ortiz told him. "If they're still there, we're going to rescue those people. Then we can leave."

Eustus stood beside her. Keeping his eyes on Stalin, he said, "We're not leaving Reza behind, either."

Stalin ignored him. Stepping closer to Ortiz, he said, "We go to the ship."

"We have to go right past the theater now, anyway," Davis said absently as he, like Castle, continued to gawk at the gaudy casino, which was empty except for the Marines, as if they had already forgotten the unfortunate passengers. "That's the fastest way to reach the ship." He pointed. "Right down that staircase. Just grab all those little sheep and get outta here."

"Then let's move," Ortiz said through clenched teeth. She brushed past Stalin. "Davis, take point. Move it! I want to get off this damn tub."

Reza whirled and slashed, parried and thrust in a dance of death, in a ritual of blood, that reached back nearly half a million years in the history of his people, to a time of legend when the first blade was crafted from living metal. His sword was one with his body and mind, and fire flowed through his veins as he fought the greatest Challenge of his life. The Bloodsong was mute in his spiritual ears, but he thought he could yet sense the presence of the Ancient Ones watching, always watching. Perhaps it was only his imagination, but he preferred to believe that the feeling was real.

He was pleased with his opponents, for they possessed both great skill and spirit, and he knew that the Empress, hearing the songs of their blood, would Herself be proud. He matched their movements with his own deadly grace. The ancient sword techniques of the Desh-Ka, as fluid as they were brutal, guided his blade, which pierced metal, bone, and flesh.

Dozens of warriors had already fallen by his hand. He grieved that they no longer lived to bring glory to the Empress in life, but knew they had honored Her in the way they had gone to the Afterlife. Living an arduous life in hopes of finding a meaningful death was at the core of Kreelan culture, and had been since the earliest words written in the Books of Time. Reza knew that if on this day he fell, should he die here and now, it would be a worthy end.

But dying here was not his intention. What drove him now, and each and every day since he had left the Empire, was the hope that he might somehow, someday, be reunited with Esah-Zhurah. He would gladly have given what little he had and all that he was to touch her for just a brief moment before he passed into the Darkness.

His love for her was the fuel that made the fire in his veins burn bright.

A trio of warriors managed to pin his sword with theirs for the briefest of instants, giving two of their companions the opportunity to slash at Reza's arms. One blade found its mark, cutting deep into the flesh of his left arm just below the shoulder, while the other glanced off his armor. It was the sixth such wound he had received, and yet he felt no pain. Blood ran from that cut, two on his face, and three on his legs, and splattered to the smooth tile floor that was awash with the blood of his challengers.

Leaving his left hand to hold his sword, he pivoted around and with the talons of his right hand slashed the throat of the warrior who had just cut him. Choking on her own blood, she collapsed to her knees. As she did, a pair of warriors rushed from the circle and pulled her away while another warrior took her place.

Reza continued to pivot, drawing his sword from the cunning trap set by the three warriors, who lunged forward to take advantage of what they perceived as Reza's weakened position in the fight.

That was a mistake, but not a fatal one. What killed them was coming at Reza using the identical form, as if they were training at a kazha. All three raised their swords for overhand slashes as they rushed him. When the blades of the trio were committed to their downward strikes, he lunged to one side. Sweeping his own sword out and down, he drove their blades to the floor before reversing the course of his blade, following their own swords and arms to their shoulders, then taking off their heads in a single slash.

That gave the other seven warriors a moment to pause and consider as their sisters dashed forward to retrieve the bodies and heads of the fallen trio. They backed away, taking a moment to regroup as three more warriors joined the fray.

Reza, who was breathing hard now, used the respite to focus through his second sight on Ortiz. She and the others had nearly reached the theater now, which was just aft of the plaza where he stood. He was torn, for he wanted to go with them, but he also could not dishonor himself by abandoning the Challenge. Silently wishing them luck, as Eustus would say, he gathered his strength once again as his opponents attacked.

Ortiz stood before the theater, gaping in wonder. A plaque said it was inspired by the famous Palais Garnier, an opera house that had been built in Paris on Earth centuries before. She had never seen anything remotely like the grand staircases of marble with intricately chiseled details, sculptures adorning the landings and walls, with elaborate light fixtures glowing with realistic looking candle flames. The entire entryway was a work of art that had her entire detachment standing there staring at it, speechless.

"I told you," Davis said in a wistful voice.

Snapping herself out of the trance, Ortiz said, "Come on, let's see if anybody's home. First squad, take the left side. Second, take the right. Davis, Castle, Camden, and Stalin with me up the middle."

The Marines split up to check the entry doors on all three levels accessed by the ornate stairway. The entry hall echoed with armored fists hammering on ornate, but sturdy, metal doors and shouts of "Confederation Marines!"

When Ortiz reached the first door in the center, she banged on it with her fist. "Confederation Marines! Anyone in there?"

A moment later something in the door, which was double wide, clicked and it opened.

"Thank the Lord of All," a finely dressed man with short gray hair exclaimed. "I thought we were dead."

"You will be if you and anyone else in here don't come with us right now," Ortiz told him. Among the people clustered near the door, she spotted one of the crew, a junior officer. "Hey,

you,” she called out, pointing at him. “Help us get these people moving. We’re heading to the forward starboard airlock and we need to move fast.”

The man just blinked at her.

“He doesn’t understand Standard,” an older woman whom Ortiz took to be the gentleman’s companion said with undisguised disdain. “He’s one of those snobs from La Seyne.”

“Oh, for the…” Ortiz cranked the volume on her PA system. “LISTEN UP!” Everyone standing before her cringed and put their hands over their ears. “We’re taking you to the forward starboard side airlock. Move quickly but calmly, and take nothing with you. We don’t have much time. Now let’s go.” Turning to Castle and Davis, she said, “Lead ‘em out.”

The passengers, many of whom were crying or jittery with fear, followed the pair of Marines. Looking to either side where the other squads had been banging on doors, she saw more people emerging.

“Reza said three hundred or so people were here,” Ortiz said with an accusing look at Eustus. “Looks more like a thousand!”

“They are the rich ones,” Stalin said. He was examining the door. “This is the ship’s emergency shelter. Look: solid durasteel as thick as my hand, lighter than aluminum and tougher than titanium.” He snorted. “With money paid for each of these doors, one could buy a small town on my home planet.”

“Lieutenant.”

Ortiz turned her attention to Eustus.

“What are we going to do about Reza?” he asked. “We can’t just leave him behind.”

“I haven’t forgotten him. But we’ve got to get these people off first.”

At that, Stalin laughed. Waving a hand at the hundreds of souls emerging from the theater, he said, “And where will we put them all? Strap them to the side of the ship?”

“Two other ships are coming alongside,” Ortiz reminded him. “When *Leander* can’t take on any more, we’ll get them to the other ships. Then they’ll be the Navy’s problem.”

“You will die a fool, little girl.” He turned and stomped off down the stairs, elbowing passengers out of his way.

“At least I’ll have died for something worth dying for,” Ortiz whispered to herself.

After what seemed like an agonizingly long time, Ortiz and her Marines managed to herd the hundreds of civilians to the airlock deck. The greatest challenge then was to keep them from stampeding to get aboard *Leander*.

“What are we going to do with them all?” Walker asked as she met up with Ortiz beside the entrance to the airlock. Eustus, Davis, and Stalin were with her, while the other Marines kept the passengers from getting out of hand.

Ortiz shook her head. “Does the captain have any idea how many he can take aboard?”

“I haven’t heard anything from the bridge, but they’re still taking people on.”

Walker scowled. “I’m not sure where we’re supposed to fit.”

“We’re probably going to have to hitch a ride on one of the other ships,” Ortiz said with a sigh.

Castle, who stood nearby shepherding passengers into the airlock, turned and gave her a pained expression. “Aww, man.”

“Hope you locked up all your loot,” Ortiz told him with a grin. “I wouldn’t want to think about all these civvies pawing through your porn stash.”

“If someone so much as touches—”

He was cut off by shouts and screams as a huge chunk of wreckage tumbled into sight through the viewports, arcing over the upper hull of the *Venetian Star* to crash into *Leander* just aft of the bridge, breaking the ship’s back. More wreckage, ranging in size from golf balls to battle tanks, slammed into the corvette, piercing her hull and venting dozens of compartments to space.

Frozen with horror, Ortiz watched as her ship, her home, bent and twisted like a toy being torn apart in the hands of an invisible giant. Plumes of air streamed from rents in the hull, carrying crewmen, civilians, and everything else that wasn’t fastened down, into vacuum. Titanic electrical discharges arced from the engineering spaces, momentarily joining the fore and aft sections of the ship with cyan fire as *Leander* continued to break apart, incinerating anything that got in the way. An explosion erupted from the torpedo room as one or more of the weapons ruptured in their launch tubes, blasting the forward section of the ship away from the stricken liner and taking the flex-dock, which was packed with screaming passengers, along with it.

The passengers still in line to get aboard recoiled to the inboard side of the passageway as those trapped on the stretching flex-dock whirled around and tried to retreat back to the *Venetian Star*.

“Close the airlock,” Ortiz heard herself say, unable to believe that the words were coming from her own lips. Her heart was a block of ice, hammering in her chest.

“Lieutenant,” someone cried, “we can’t!”

The dock continued to stretch and stretch as the forward section of the corvette moved away, and Ortiz could hear the groan of metal at the outer door of the airlock, which was full of panicking people trying to get back aboard the liner.

She raised her voice, both on the radio and on the PA system above the cacophony of terrified screams. “Close the airlock!”

As the other Marines stood, frozen by the horror of what they’d been ordered to do, Stalin went to Castle and took his rifle. Then the big NCO stepped forward to the inner door of the airlock, brutally shouldering aside the passengers in his way. Bringing up the assault rifle, he

fired point blank into the mass of passengers trying to push their way back aboard. Men, women, and children died under the withering fire of his weapon, and his expression registered no more emotion than if he had been shooting targets on the firing range. Then, kicking the bodies that were lying in the doorway clear, ignoring the pleas of the passengers who were still trapped in the flex-dock and the wreckage of the *Leander*, he strode through the blood pooling on the deck and hit the control to close the inner airlock door.

An instant later the flex-dock tore free and began to whip back and forth like a loose fire hose, spraying a torrent of bodies into space as the remains of *Leander* tumbled away.

After handing the rifle back to Castle, Stalin turned to Ortiz. She still stood like a statue, staring at the nightmare tableaux beyond the hull. He took her arm in an almost gentle grip. "We go now."

"You fucking bastard," someone whispered into the terrible silence that had fallen on the survivors, just before the *Venetian Star* itself reeled under the impact of a cloud of debris from the ongoing battle.

Reza witnessed the catastrophe of *Leander's* demise through his second sight, and it sufficiently disturbed him that he would have suffered a serious injury from one of the attacking warriors had not the deck under their feet suddenly shook as if struck by an earthquake. He focused his full attention on the here and now, for he needed no special senses to know that the starliner was suffering damage that would soon leave it completely untenable. If Ortiz, Eustus, and the others had been able to make their way safely off the ship, he would have been content to continue the Challenge. But now...

"Kazh!" he ordered as the latest group of warriors fighting him regained their balance. They immediately lowered their swords and stood tall, heads bowed. Striding to where Sai-Kel lay on the deck, badly wounded, he knelt beside her. "You will gather your warriors and leave this ship."

"The Challenge..." she said with difficulty, a trickle of blood running from the corner of her mouth, "...it is not yet complete."

Reza took her hand and held it. "All of you have brought Her great honor this day, but I would not have your lives wasted needlessly aboard this hulk." The ship shuddered again as it was struck by a large piece of debris, driving the warriors to their knees, and Reza heard the tell-tale high pitched squeal of air escaping.

She held his hand tighter. "And what of you, priest of the Dosh-Ka?"

"Fear not for me," he said gently. Letting go of her hand, Reza stood up. Rendering Sai-Kel a salute, he said, "May thy Way be long and glorious." To the others, he ordered, "Take her and yourselves to safety. You will fight for Her honor and glory another day. Go."

The survivors knelt and saluted him. Then a quartet of warriors carefully took Sai-Kel in their arms and led the other warriors in the direction of the bow.

Rendering a final salute and silent prayer for the dead who remained behind, Reza visualized through his second sight a particular access way several decks below, then vanished into thin air.

After hammering in frustration on yet another damage control door that had just slammed shut, Walker turned around "We're cut off! The other side is depressurizing."

The Marines and the surviving passengers now found themselves in a hundred foot long section of passageway. The pressure door behind them, which led back through several twists and turns to the starboard side airlock, had slammed shut a few moments earlier. They were trapped.

“Dammit,” Ortiz hissed. “*Chasseur*,” she called over the radio to the destroyer, which was still alongside, “this is Ortiz. We...” She gulped as she stared at the nearest holographic display of the ship’s deck plan. “We need some help to reach you. All the passageways we need to reach the port side are in vacuum, and we’ve got a hell of a lot of passengers without suits or beach balls. If a team could set up a temporary airlock and bring us a big pile of beach balls, we might be able to get these people out of here.”

“Wait one.” That was the voice of the ship’s XO, with whom she’d been trying to coordinate their escape.

A different voice came on after a brief pause. “Ortiz, this is Captain Somerville. I can appreciate your situation, but we’ve overstayed our welcome. The ship’s already sustained damage from debris and, in case you haven’t noticed, the task force is still engaged.” He paused. “You’ve got five minutes, lieutenant. Then we’re pulling out. I can’t risk losing the hundreds of passengers we’ve already crammed aboard, not to mention my crew.”

Ortiz felt like throwing up. “*Five minutes?* Sir, there’s no way we can get to you in that time with all these civilians!”

“You can’t save everyone,” Somerville said in an agonized voice. “But maybe you can save yourselves. Whatever you decide, you’d better get moving. Somerville, out.”

She turned to face Stalin. He and the others hadn’t been privy to her conversation with Somerville, but he knew from her ashen expression what the captain must have told her.

Stalking to the damage control door, he pushed Walker out of the way and reached for the override that would force it open. The passageway beyond was the shortest route to the *Chasseur*, and opening that door would kill every one of the civilians.

“No!” Ortiz raised her pistol, pointing it at Stalin’s back, her finger already tensing on the trigger.

The civilians just behind her yelped and jumped back. She looked up in time to see the tip of a gleaming blade slicing through the ceiling, carving out a near-perfect square as big across as a large man’s shoulders.

“Move back!” she shouted just before the section of ceiling, which was made of metal and carbon fiber lattice half a meter thick, crashed to the deck.

A blood-streaked face peered down at her from the deck above.

“Reza!” Eustus whooped.

“Where the hell have you been?” Ortiz said, shaking her head.

“Later,” Reza told her. “We can reach the other ship, but we must move quickly.”

“There’s no point,” Ortiz told him. “The captain gave us five minutes before they abandon us. We’ll never make it, and certainly won’t be able to get everyone to climb up there in time.”

“Have faith, lieutenant,” he told her. “Now do as I ask. Quickly. Post the Marines at intervals beside the civilians, with two here, and have them engage the mag locks on their boots. Then have the civilians hold hands.”

The Marines did so without being asked, and the passengers formed a chain.

“Wait a moment,” Reza said before ducking out of sight.

Turning to Eustus, Ortiz said, “What’s he doing?”

“Beats me — oh, crap!”

The artificial gravity suddenly cut out.

“Lieutenant, Eustus, jump up here!”

After switching off his mag locks, Eustus followed Ortiz through the hole.

“Help the passengers up here. We must guide them up to the shopping mall, then across to the destroyer,” Reza told them.

“We still won’t make it,” Ortiz said, glancing at the life support panel that stood open. Reza had cut the circuits controlling the artificial gravity in this part of the ship. “We can’t move fast enough.”

Reza smiled. “Have faith. But we must hurry.”

Ortiz barked the necessary orders, and the train of passengers was handed up through the hole. Eustus took the first one, an older man, by the hand and began to lead him after Reza, who stood at the far end of the passageway in a junction. Behind him stood another closed pressure door. As Eustus watched, Reza shoved his sword through the metal as if it were paper and air began to whistle as it escaped into the vacuum on the far side. Reza widened the hole just enough that an artificial wind began to gently carry the passengers toward him faster than Eustus could keep up.

“Let them come!” Reza called. “And get a pair of Marines up here. We must...” He had to search a moment for the word. “...leapfrog to our destination.”

“I get it,” Ortiz said in admiration. She still didn’t think they’d get to *Chasseur* in time, but they might at least have a chance. She quickly barked out her orders to get the Marines leapfrogging ahead.

As the lead passengers, who were caught between gratitude at Reza’s help and fear at his appearance, reached him, he again drew his sword and cut a hole leading to the deck above them and led the passengers along.

Like an enormous worm, the ungainly line wriggled its way through the ship, quickly picking up the pace as the Marines came to understand what Reza was doing. He would punch a hole in a door or wall to direct the airflow, which in turn would carry the passengers along like balloons. Then, once the hole was no longer needed, a Marine would cover it with a suit patch.

Ortiz reflected that it would have been fun had they not been running, figuratively speaking, for their lives.

As they reached the shopping mall deck, Reza drifted back to her position, now at the head of the passenger “train.”

“Tell them they need not be afraid of what they see here,” he told her. “They need not fear the dead.”

Before Ortiz could ask any questions, he led her into the open mall.

“Holy shit,” she breathed. Blood was spattered and pooled across a near perfect circle, roughly fifty meters across, at the center of the plaza. Along the edges were dead Kreelean warriors, laid out with mechanical precision like the spokes of a wheel, their heads (most were still attached to the bodies, some were not) pointing toward the center. “There are at least fifty of them here.”

“Sixty-two,” Reza said in a sad voice. “Come, lieutenant. We cannot delay.”

Grabbing his arm, Ortiz asked, “You did all this?”

He nodded.

“Jesus.” She favored him with a frightened look before turning away to face the passengers.

Reza heard the words she spoke to the civilians, but his eyes remained on the warriors who had fallen. He could see with his second sight Sai-Kel and the other warriors, waiting for the human ships to depart before they themselves left this hulk behind.

“Are you all right?” Eustus asked.

“I am not badly injured,” Reza told him. “Do not concern yourself.”

“That’s not what I’m talking about and you know it.”

Reza nodded, but in his heart he was not so sure. He was not distraught over the deaths of the warriors, for that was part of their Way, and his. What bothered him more was the look of fear in Ortiz’s eyes. She had just begun to trust him, but how could one truly trust someone that you would never understand? What would she think if she ever witnessed his true powers? “I will be fine,” he told his friend, “in time.”

“Let’s get this show on the road,” Ortiz said, and Reza led them onward.

“There it is!” Ortiz felt a huge weight lift from her shoulders as she dropped down the last deck through another hole Reza had cut with his sword. Before her was the port side airlock. She checked her chronometer: more than five minutes had passed, but the *Chasseur* was still there. “Thank you, Captain Somerville,” she breathed. “I’ll marry you and have your children.”

A pair of *Chasseur*’s Marines stood beside the entrance to the airlock. “Hurry your asses up!” one of them shouted over his suit’s PA system.

Stalin and Walker took up positions on either side of the hole, with Ortiz to one side. As the passengers dropped through, still in zero gee, the two Marines propelled them toward the airlock, and the *Chasseur*’s Marines guided them into the flex-dock.

Ortiz was momentarily blinded by a flash that lit up the space beyond the viewports as *Chasseur* fired on something with one of her main batteries. A second later the *Venetian Star*, which was already a groaning, hissing pile of distressed metal and plastic, shuddered again as a tumbling mass of wreckage, clearly Kreelelan this time, slammed into her.

Marines and passengers were sent tumbling about as the destroyer’s pilot desperately tried to match the tumbling motion of the stricken liner to keep the flex-dock from tearing away.

“The ship’s going to cut loose!” cried one of the *Chasseur*’s Marines who, with his companion, was turning to head into the flex-dock.

“No, wait!” Ortiz shouted. Cursing under her breath, she called the ship’s captain. “Captain Somerville! If you seal off the compartments around the airlock and start depressurizing them, but leave the airlock doors open, you can just suck all the passengers across the flex-dock and into the ship!”

“That’s the craziest idea I’ve heard today,” came the captain’s tense voice, “but we’ll give it a try. Stand by.”

“Come on!” Ortiz shouted to her Marines. “Get those people through the goddamn airlock!”

“This is like herding cats,” she heard Davis mutter as he grabbed a man and woman who were crying like children and, using the leverage of his mag-locked boots, tossed them toward the entrance to the flex-dock.

Another set of blinding flashes came from the muzzles of *Chasseur*’s main guns, and Ortiz desperately tried to blink away the afterimages burned into her retinas.

A whistling roar came through the flex-dock as the captain did as she’d suggested.

It worked: the pressure differential between the *Venetian Star* and the destroyer’s airlock worked like a vacuum cleaner, dragging the passengers down the clear, flexible tube.

There was only one problem: not all the passengers could fit in the airlock at once. Not even close.

“Pack everyone into the dock,” Ortiz shouted, “then pack yourselves in after ‘em!” Once everyone was in the dock, which had its own hatch on this end that could be closed to seal air in the tube, they could all cycle through the lock at the far end. It would leave *Chasseur* vulnerable until they had everyone inside the ship, but it would keep everyone breathing in the meantime.

Stalin just laughed as he lobbed more passengers through the airlock. “You think we will live? Look.” He nodded toward the airlock control panel.

It was dark. The airlock had no power.

Ortiz closed her eyes and shook her head. In all his butchery of the decks to get them here, which in a few cases had involved rather impressive displays of electrical arcing, Reza must have accidentally severed the power conduits for the port side airlock. The flex-dock, which had its own hatch at the docking end, couldn’t mate with — or detach from — an airlock that had no power, because both ships were involved in the physical and electronic “handshake” for safety reasons. The dock would have to be released manually from inside the *Venetian Star*’s airlock, which meant someone would have to stay behind.

“I’ll take care of it,” she said to herself in a tired voice.

The last of the passengers sailed by, and the Marines followed close behind. Stalin paused to give her a long look. She nodded. As he returned the gesture, she thought she saw a trace of sympathy in the Georgian’s eyes. Then he was gone.

Walker passed by, giving Ortiz a squeeze on her arm. She bent forward to put her helmet in touch with Ortiz’s. “Godspeed, el-tee,” she whispered.

“You, too,” Ortiz rasped. “Now get out of here.” Something else crashed into the ship, and the destroyer’s close-in defense lasers blasted away at small chunks of debris that vanished in a fireworks show that might in other circumstances have been considered beautiful.

“We’re the last ones,” Eustus panted as he came up to her, Reza beside him. “Let’s go, lieutenant.”

Shaking her head, wishing she could be that green and ignorant again, she said, “Get your ass out of here, Camden.” Taking him by the arm, she flung him into the maw of the flex-dock.

Last was Reza. Captain Somerville was shouting something at her, but she ignored him. “I would’ve liked to get to know you better, Gard. Take good care of your—hey!”

With one hand, he grabbed her combat harness, tore her free of the deck where her mag-locks had anchored her, and sent her sailing after Eustus. Ignoring her curses, he slashed open the panel covering the manual door mechanism and closed the outer airlock door.

He heard Eustus pounding and screaming on the other side of the now-closed doors, and put his hand to the metal, wishing he could reassure his friend. “Do not fear on my account,” Reza said softly. “I will join you soon.”

Then he triggered the manual release, letting the flex-dock separate from the dying starliner. Moving to one side, he watched as the destroyer quickly pulled away, the tube trailing along its flank. He grimaced at the sight, remembering the earlier carnage when the flex-dock from *Leander* had ruptured.

With a quick check through his second sight to make sure his sisters in the bow had also made their escape, he vanished into the ether as the *Venetian Star*'s port reactor went critical, vaporizing what was left of the ship.

Sai-Kel and the surviving warriors sailed through space in tight formation, protected by their energy bubbles. They normally did not use such advanced technology when facing humans, but Reza's command to save themselves had left nothing to their discretion. Once they reached the bow, they activated the bubbles, then launched themselves through the hull of the ship, the bubbles searing through the metal as if it did not exist.

Not long after they had departed the stricken vessel, it had vanished in a titanic explosion. Debris and radiation had washed over the warriors, but the bubbles were impervious to such trivial assaults.

They watched in wonder as the battle raged on between their sisters and the humans, what their eyes perceived merging with the emotions they felt in the Bloodsong. The humans would emerge victorious from this battle, as they often did, for the Empress willed it so. Her Children could not bring Her glory if they defeated the enemy too soon.

At last, it was over, and the surviving human ships departed. Not long after, a ship came to search for survivors, for leaving Her Children to die in the dark of space was not in keeping with the Way.

As it pulled alongside, its great flanks bearing the runes proclaiming its name — the *Kai'lan-Da* — Sai-Kel smiled. It would be a great honor for her last words to reach the ears of the one who commanded this vessel.

Her sisters pulled her inside, for Sai-Kel was very weak now, near death. The warriors made to take her to the healers, but Sai-Kel refused, instead ordering them to carry her to the bridge. Once there, they lay her at the feet of the one in command, a great warrior who had been the First of one of the greatest warriors in the long and glorious history of the Empire.

“Syr-Kesh,” Sai-Kel gasped as the older warrior knelt beside her and took her hand, just as Reza had.

“A healer must attend you,” Syr-Kesh, who had been First to Tesh-Dar, high warrior priestess of the Desh-Ka, told her in an urgent voice.

“No,” Sai-Kel said with a smile as her body began to fall away. “For Her glory...I would die...at his hand.”

Leaning closer, Syr-Kesh asked, “At whose hand?”

Just before she fell into the warmth and light of the Afterlife, Sai-Kel whispered, “Reza.”

“Lord of All,” Eustus gasped as a white light, bright as any sun, speared through the clear view panels in the flex-dock as the *Venetian Star* exploded. The faceplates of the Marines’ helmets automatically darkened to keep them from being blinded, but the civilians weren’t so lucky. The captain had already begun to rotate *Chasseur* about her long axis to put the mass of the ship between the paper-thin walls of the flex-dock and the expanding sphere of white hot debris. Eustus cringed as he saw a cloud of fragments whiz through the empty space where the flex-dock had been just a moment before, and hot tears welled in his eyes as he thought of Reza. *He’s gone*. But Eustus had no time now to grieve.

“Hurry!” Ortiz bellowed over the radio and her suit’s PA. “Get them aboard!”

While her idea of vacuuming the survivors into the destroyer was working, it wasn’t working fast enough. The dock had now collapsed along the destroyer’s flank as the ship maneuvered, and a huge strain was being placed on the seam where the docking ring attached to the ship’s airlock.

“Come on,” Eustus said, grabbing a sobbing passenger, whose hands were covering her flash-blinded eyes. Eustus propelled her forward with one hand while he held onto one of the handhold loops with the other. The other Marines followed his lead, forming a fire brigade of sorts to fling the remaining passengers toward the airlock.

Looking up at a loud popping sound, Eustus saw the telltale vapor stream from air that was venting from a tear in the dock where it met the airlock, courtesy of a fragment of debris that had ricocheted off one of the ship’s gun turrets. The good news was that it made more of a pressure differential in the direction of the ship to help move the remaining passengers along. The bad news, on the other hand, was all too obvious.

“Go on, Camden,” Ortiz said after an agonizingly long time of moving the passengers forward, putting her hand on his shoulder as she tossed one last civilian forward. “We’re the last ones in this conga line. Move your ass!”

He didn’t need any further prompting. Pulling himself forward with the handhold loop, he went sailing behind the last passenger, pausing at the next handhold long enough to turn and make sure Ortiz was following behind him.

“You stop again and I’m going to shoot you!” she shouted. Yanking him free of the handhold as she sailed by, the two of them caromed toward the airlock, where Stalin and Davis were now waiting, their boots magnetically locked to the deck and their arms held out to assist. The inner door had been closed to protect the passengers and other Marines, who were now safely inside the ship.

Stalin grabbed Ortiz and hauled her in, and Davis had a hold of Eustus’s arm when the seam of the flex-dock finally gave way. Even though the pressure in the dock had been reduced dramatically, the resulting decompression into the near-perfect vacuum of space was still explosive. Eustus screamed as Davis lost his grip and Eustus was blown through the hole...

...or would have been, had not Reza appeared right between the two men. One of his hands latched onto the armor of Davis’s upper arm, the gleaming talons of Reza’s armored gauntlets sinking into the metal, while the other grabbed Eustus’s wrist in an unyielding grip. Together, Davis, Stalin, and Ortiz managed to haul the two of them back into the lock before Stalin hit the button to close the outer door. He turned around and took a long look at Reza in the near-vacuum

in the lock. Reza, acting as if the dangerously low pressure had no effect on him, got to his feet and calmly stared back.

“Pressurize the lock!” Ortiz ordered, but Stalin made no move to do so. Shoving past him, she slammed her palm down on the appropriate control, releasing a hissing torrent of air that quickly brought the lock up to pressure. She grabbed Stalin’s arm. “What the hell is wrong with you?”

Without taking his eyes from Reza, he grabbed her combat harness and flung her into Eustus and Davis, who were both dumbstruck by Reza’s appearance.

Before Stalin could move another muscle, the tip of Reza’s dagger was pressing against Stalin’s chest armor, right over his heart.

With a feral grin, Stalin grabbed Reza’s wrist and pulled it toward him, pressing the dagger harder against his chest armor. The tip of the blade scored the tough metal, then began to sink in.

“Go ahead,” Stalin taunted. “Kill me with your shiny knife. But you know this is not how you want it. We are alike, you and I, more than the others can understand. When the time comes, we will see who is the better killer in the time honored way.”

“That’s enough!” Ortiz shouted after Eustus and Davis helped her back to her feet. She took hold of the hand Stalin had clamped on Reza’s wrist. “Let go! That’s an order, staff sergeant!”

Stalin ignored her.

Turning to Reza, she dropped her hands away from Stalin’s and said, “Back off. Now.”

Bowing his head, Reza stepped back, easily snapping his hand free of Stalin’s grip before sheathing his dagger.

“He assaulted you,” Reza said to Ortiz. “Do you wish me to accompany him to the brig?”

“No,” Ortiz said in a tired voice as she took off her helmet, glad to be free of its confinement. With a sharp look at Stalin, she said, “You and I will sort this out later.” She turned back to Reza. “I don’t need someone in Kreelan armor frogmarching my senior NCO through a bunch of scared civvies and the ship’s crew. And right now I have a bigger concern: not that Eustus is complaining, I’m sure, since you saved his life, but just how the hell did you get here from the *Venetian Star*?” She took a step closer. “What the hell are you?”

Reza briefly thought of telling her exactly what he was. *I am a warrior priest of the Desh-Ka*, he could have said. In the world where he had become a man, a warrior, had such words needed to be spoken, they would have told any among those who lived across the ten thousand suns of the Empire exactly what he was, and they would have understood all that it implied. But his human kin had no frame of reference. He was the most powerful warrior who had ever lived among humankind in all its history, with abilities they could only comprehend as magic. Yet, how could he say such a thing and have Ortiz and the others believe that it was anything more than boundless hubris? It probably didn’t matter, in any event: he could think of no explanation that would make any more sense, that would be accepted any easier, than the truth.

“The Kreelans must have had a teleportation device with them,” Eustus blurted, just as Reza was opening his mouth to tell Ortiz that he was a Kreelan warrior priest. “I mean, we’ve known since the first contact encounter that they can do all kinds of things we can’t explain, right? They just choose not to most of the time. The warriors aboard the ship must have had some sort of gadget that sent him back to us.”

“Wow,” Davis breathed, his eyes wide with wonder. Stalin said nothing, but narrowed his eyes in consideration as he continued to stare at Reza.

“I don’t remember asking you, Camden,” Ortiz snapped, thankful that this discussion was taking place in the relative privacy of the airlock, rather than among the entire detachment or in front of a bunch of civilians. As crazy as Camden’s idea was, she couldn’t think of any better explanation. Reza had appeared right before her eyes, and that had scared the shit out of her for any number of reasons. To Reza, she said, “Is this true? Does the enemy have such technology?”

“Yes,” he said. He didn’t think it prudent to tell her that it wasn’t any technology as humans understood it, but was innate to his body and mind. “But I know nothing of how this...device... functions.” That much was true.

“You spoke of this to those who debriefed you when you returned to the Confederation?” Stalin asked.

Reza nodded. “Yes. That was the...mechanism...used to banish me from the Empire.”

Stalin cocked his head to one side. “And why did they save you now, after you butchered so many?”

“Because I wished it.” Reza was uncomfortable with so much as bending the truth, as the warriors aboard the *Venetian Star* had nothing to do with his returning to the other Marines. In this case, however, he rationalized that it was an answer that was truthful enough.

“If their warriors will just do whatever you ask,” Stalin asked him in an acid tone, “why do you not tell them to surrender, or take their own lives?”

“I could not ask them to do anything that goes against their Way,” Reza said. “More than that, I cannot — and will not — say. If you have further concerns, I would direct you to Fleet Admiral L’Houillier.”

“Yeah, whatever,” Ortiz said in a tired voice. “I can’t get my brain around this and it’s giving me a headache. Stalin, Davis, go round up the rest of our detachment and find out what’s to become of us now that *Leander’s* gone. Camden, find Gard here a uniform that’ll fit and a bag he can toss his Kreelan stuff into. He and I will stay out of sight here until you get back.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Eustus said as he made to open the inner door of the lock, with Davis and Stalin behind him.

Ortiz pushed Reza to one side and stood in front of him, hoping to block him from view of anyone still in the passageway beyond.

The door hissed open and the three men stepped out. Ortiz was surprised that the civilians were nowhere in sight and the passageway was empty. Loud voices, dozens of them, could be heard from somewhere down the passageway, however.

She hit the button to close the door again after the others had stepped out, then she collapsed to her knees.

“Lieutenant!” Reza knelt down before her, taking Ortiz by the arms and holding her steady.

“All those people,” she whispered as tears began to roll down her cheeks. She was trembling violently. “All those poor people I killed when *Leander* was hit.” She looked up into his eyes. “How can I ever make up for that?” Looking away, she whispered, “You don’t even know what I’m talking about. You weren’t there.”

“I saw what happened,” he told her. Ortiz looked up at him, disbelief plain in her eyes. “I can see beyond what my eyes show me,” Reza explained softly. “You ordered the lock closed when

the *Leander* was hit. Stalin shot the passengers blocking the airlock and closed the door, then the passengers in the flex-dock died when it ruptured.”

“You really saw all that?”

“As if I were standing there beside you.”

She gulped and was quiet a moment. Then she asked, “Could you have used the teleportation device Camden was talking about to reach them?”

Reza nodded. “Yes, but I could not have saved them all.”

“But you could have saved a few? Even just one?”

“Yes, but there would have been a price to be paid.”

“What the hell does that mean?”

Reza sighed. “If I had fled the...contest to save them, the warriors I was holding at bay would have been free to roam the ship, and could easily have blocked your escape with the remaining survivors.”

“But you could’ve just fought them again!” she cried, hammering one of her fists on his breast plate.

Gently but firmly wrapping his hand around hers, he kept her fist pressed against his chest. “It is not so simple,” he explained. “There are...rules that must be obeyed. I could not simply run from one ritual combat and begin another at my whim. It would have been a terrible dishonor. If I had to face the warriors again, it would have been on their terms.” He did not add that his own life in that case would have been forfeit. To flee a Challenge was a dreadful disgrace for a warrior, even a priest, that would have earned him a sentence of death. “I would have faced such dishonor to save your life, for I vowed to protect you, and to break that vow would be an even greater dishonor.”

Ortiz shook her head, rolling her eyes in a combination of disbelief and disgust. “So, if I had been about to get hurt or killed, you would’ve popped out of thin air to save me, dishonor or not?”

Reza nodded.

“You stupid bastard,” she rasped, pulling her hand away and getting unsteadily to her feet. “Next time save someone who’s innocent, someone worth saving, not me. I release you from your stupid vow. I don’t want your damn protection if it comes at that high a price.”

Burning with shame, Reza bowed his head.

The inner door suddenly opened to reveal Eustus bearing a duffel stuffed with regulation gear for Reza to wear.

“Good timing,” Ortiz snapped as she stalked out, pausing just long enough to slap the control to close the door behind her.

Eustus stood there, uncertain, as Reza remained on his knees, head bowed. “You okay?”

After a moment, Reza nodded slowly. “I am fine,” he said in a soft voice, but Eustus couldn’t miss the track of a single tear running down Reza’s cheek below the scar over his left eye. Eustus put a hand on his friend’s armored shoulder for a moment.

Reza offered him a weak smile of thanks as he got to his feet. Eustus pulled a new Marine uniform from the bag as Reza began to strip away his Kreelan armor.

Several hours after their rescue from the doomed starliner, *Chasseur* transferred the rescued passengers to a support ship and Ortiz's detachment to the assault carrier *Yavuz*, where they were assigned to an empty platoon bay. The former occupants, along with half the battalion *Yavuz* normally carried, had been wiped out in an earlier battle and had yet to be replaced.

"Here's the deal," Ortiz said in an exhausted voice as her Marines gathered around. She had just returned from a brief and frosty meeting with the acting battalion commander, a jumped-up captain who had looked at her as if she were a cockroach. "We're being chopped to the *Yavuz's* Marine detachment for now. As you can see," she waved around to the empty bay, festooned with the personal effects of the previous occupants, "they have some spare bunks for us. But this isn't a Red Legion outfit, so they'll be transferring us off at the soonest possible opportunity."

That was met with a round of hoots and catcalls. While the Legion was looked upon by outsiders as the Corps' garbage dump, those who wore its patch on their shoulder and had managed to survive their first battle often looked upon their parent unit with perverse pride, and upon "regular Marines" with more than a little disdain.

"We obviously lost all our personal effects, a couple of weapons, and extra gear," she continued, "so the first order of business is going to be sending a detail to the battalion quartermaster to top off our weapons, ammo, and equipment."

"What if they give us a cold shoulder?" Castle asked.

Ortiz snorted. "Then do what you do best, Castle. Hustle it for us. But I want us combat ready by the turn of the dog watch." She waved around them. "Box up the personal effects of the Marines who were here and take them with you. Maybe that'll help grease the skids." She didn't add that anything they might find that would be of use or special interest, especially contraband, was subject to the finders-keepers rule. "That's all I have for now. Any questions?"

There were none.

"That's it, then." As Stalin took over to oversee the execution of her orders, Ortiz retreated to her tiny cabin near the entrance to the bay, catching sight of the name plate on the door that read *2LT WILL BENSON*. After closing the door and shutting the world away, she sat down on Benson's bed, which had been made to boot camp standards before he had gone off to die. A holo of a smiling young woman with two babies in her arms looked out at her from the tiny fold-down desk. "Dear Mrs. Benson," Ortiz whispered, "I regret to inform you..." Her voice tapered off as she leaned back against the bulkhead, closing her eyes. But all she could see were the images of helpless civilians being cut down by Stalin's rifle, and so many more blown into space as the flex-dock to *Leander* gave way.

She bit off her cry as she snapped awake, the images of all those she'd killed slowly, reluctantly fading away as her eyes darted around the cramped cabin. Her uniform was damp with sweat and her hands were shaking.

"Lord of All," she whispered.

Someone knocked on the door, and she realized that's what had awakened her from the nightmare. "Come," she said in a shaky voice, thankful for the interruption and wondering if she'd ever be able to sleep again.

The door opened. It was Stalin. "Everything is done, lieutenant," he reported, his eyes narrowing slightly as he looked at her. "Did you want to talk about what happened in the airlock?"

She laughed, or tried to, but it caught in her throat and died. “Would it make any difference?” She waved a hand before he could answer. “Never mind. That was a rhetorical question. Nothing makes any goddamn difference.”

The big man came to stand close beside her, one of his knees brushing her leg, and Ortiz suddenly wondered if this was it, if Stalin was finally going to rape or kill his little pet, his toy. Then she wondered if she really cared. *Maybe you shouldn't have been so quick to throw away Reza's protection*, she thought.

Reaching into his pocket, Stalin withdrew a glass bottle about the size of his palm that contained a clear liquid and tossed it on the bed beside her. Vodka.

“You need sleep, lieutenant,” he said. Then he turned on his heel and left.

Ortiz eyed the bottle for a long time before she reached out and picked it up. Unscrewing the cap, she put it to her lips and began to drink.

Later, alone in the tiny cabin in the platoon bay that was reserved for the senior NCO, opposite Ortiz's cabin, Stalin lay in his bunk and brooded about something he and the others had seen aboard the *Venetian Star*: the sixty-odd Kreelan warriors that Gard claimed to have killed. While Stalin very much wanted to, he did not doubt Gard's claim was true. But how could Gard have struck down so many in the relatively short time *Leander's* Marines had been aboard the starliner? Stalin had more experience in hand to hand combat than most people in the entire Confederation, and he could not imagine being able to kill that many armed and skilled opponents in the amount of time Gard had. A handful, yes, but sixty or more? No. That would be impossible for any mortal man.

That thought brought him to something that the others, including Ortiz, had not yet realized. Stalin understood the significance of the cyan rune on Reza's breastplate and on the oval blue stone affixed to his collar: such insignia had been worn only by a small number of very special Kreelan warriors encountered over the course of the war. The rare accounts of battles involving these warriors had generally been dismissed as having been fabricated, even in cases where video documentation supported the testimony of eyewitnesses, and few believed the recorded feats of these warriors could possibly be true. For to believe that was to believe in dark magic, in madness.

Stalin, too, had always doubted those reports. Unlike most of his colleagues, however, he had a passion for studying his enemy that rivaled that for ridiculing God with the holy verses he posted every day, and he knew that the markings on Kreelan breast plates and collars were far more special than most believed. After getting the platoon settled in, Stalin had spent some time in the ship's library before returning to his quarters to contemplate his findings. Letting out a sigh, he picked up one of the printouts he had made from his research and studied it. It was a drawing that dated back to the first contact encounter with the Kreelans, made by the legendary then-Midshipman Ichiro Sato. He gave the long-dead admiral credit for being a passably good artist, for Sato's hand-drawn depiction of the warrior was true to form. In this case, he had also drawn the silhouette of a one point eight meter tall man beside the mysterious Kreelan to show just how big she was. But what intrigued Stalin was the rune on her breastplate: the design was the exact same as that adorning Gard's chest armor.

“What are the odds?” he asked himself in Georgian. “And what does it mean?”

He slid the drawing and the other pages of information under his pillow when a knock came at his door.

A voice came through the door. "It's Walker."

"Come."

She came in and closed the door behind her. It was after lights out, but neither Ortiz nor Stalin ever enforced the rule. The men and women in their platoon were veteran Marines of the Red Legion, not preschoolers.

"What do you want?" Stalin said, wondering if she'd come for words or something more physical. The two of them had shared both during their long time together.

"Something has to be done about Gard," she said in a low voice. "That son of a bitch has Ortiz and most of the others hoodwinked with his parlor tricks."

Stalin granted her a noncommittal grunt. Walker was so blinded by hate fueled by the loss of her family that she would never consider the possibility that what Gard had told them about his intentions upon returning to the Confederation was true. On the other hand, Stalin agreed that something had to be done, but for entirely different reasons.

"Something will be," he told her.

"When?"

He shrugged. "Soon. Perhaps sooner if..."

His voice trailed off and he smiled as she stripped out of her clothes and joined him in his bunk.

“Welcome to Alpha Company, 1st Battalion of the Red Legion,” boomed Captain Raiden Yamada. Little taller than Ortiz, Yamada had a barrel chest and biceps that strained at the sleeves of his uniform. His close-cropped hair was black, save for the furrow of gnarled scar tissue that flowed from his scalp to engulf the left side of his face like a river delta. That side of his mouth was turned up in a permanent grin.

Ortiz and her platoon stood at stiff attention, ankle deep in mud on the waterlogged parade ground in front of the company headquarters building. The squat structure was neat in its appearance and well-maintained, but its rough-hewn wood siding, wood shake roof, and protruding ridgepoles made it look as if it were a living history museum. Three flagpoles stood before it, just behind Yamada, bearing the Confederation and Marine Corps flags, along with the banner of the 12th Guards Regiment, more commonly known as the Red Legion. The flags drooped without a breeze, soaked by the rain that continued to fall from the leaden clouds.

“He looks almost as scary as you, Gard,” someone whispered from one of the rear ranks.

“At ease,” Stalin hissed from where he stood at the rear of the small formation.

“I have good news and bad news for you,” Yamada continued. “The bad news, as I am sure you surmised the moment you debarked from the boat that brought you from the *Yavuz*, is that our outpost here on Carillon is not the five star resort hotel on a sun-drenched beach that you were no doubt expecting.” The right side of his mouth turned up in a smile, and his comment was rewarded with a round of subdued laughter. “Believe it or not, the thriving metropolis you will find beyond the palisade gate,” he gestured with a hand toward the open gate in the wall of wooden poles with sharpened tops that surrounded the compound, “is the largest habitation on this joyful planet, and the most modern.” The Marines craned their necks, looking through the gate, their eyes following the cobblestones that led to a collection of numerous wooden structures on both sides of the street that comprised the heart of the town beyond. While no chimneys were visible over the rough hewn but sharp tops of the palisade, several plumes of woodsmoke curled into the gray sky.

“Looks like a frontier town from a history book,” someone whispered.

“It’s a shit hole,” someone corrected under their breath.

Yamada didn’t hear, or perhaps just pretended not to. “By all rights, this garrison should be manned by the Territorial Army, but Carillon doesn’t have enough of a population to raise even a single regiment. In such cases, primary responsibility for planetary defense on the ground falls to the Corps, with support from local TA recruits. The men and women who form the detachment here take their jobs seriously, and I have no doubt they will acquit themselves well if the time ever comes.” He smiled again, but unlike the first time it was clearly forced. “Also, as you can see,” he again gestured toward the open gate, “the Confederation has perfected time travel and sent us back about six hundred years. Since Carillon has never been threatened, let alone attacked, it’s not exactly on the top of the priority list for Confederation engineers and modern materials. There’s an endless supply of wood from the forests and stone from various quarries, so that’s what we use here.” He grinned, showing a set of perfect white teeth. “If you have carpentry and masonry skills, you’ll be in good shape. If you don’t have them now, you will before you rotate out, because we’re the ones who build and maintain our fortifications, such as they are.”

That brought on a collective groan.

“You said there was good and bad news, sir,” Castle called out. “What’s the good news?”

“The good news,” Yamada said with a nod of acknowledgement, “is that Carillon’s main export is liquor. As such, it’s plentiful and cheap, so you can drown your sorrows to your heart’s content when you’re off duty. The town, which is also the planetary capital, also has a legal brothel that caters to both sexes. For you nature lovers, when the weather permits,” he gestured to the clouds overhead, “an overnight hike or horseback ride from here will bring you to some of the most amazing scenery you’ll ever set eyes on.”

“Uh, thank you, sir,” Castle said in a subdued voice.

“I’m gonna fucking die before I rotate outta here,” someone moaned.

“If you do not shut your mouth, you are going to die right now,” Stalin growled.

“Sir,” Ortiz asked, “what about the rest of the company? There aren’t enough buildings here to accommodate all the platoons.”

“The rest of the platoons are detached to cover the other major towns,” Yamada told her. “I rotate them each month so that every unit is familiar with all of the locations they may be called upon to defend.” *And to do what I can to prevent mind-numbing boredom from setting in*, he didn’t have to add. “With your arrival I have enough strength to extend coverage to two more towns by splitting the platoon that I’ve been holding here. They’ve already departed, so for the next month you and your Marines will remain here to become acclimatized. Starting next month you’ll begin scheduled rotations to the other settlements.”

“Yes, sir,” Ortiz said in a wooden voice.

Yamada was silent for a moment, then said, “I know you and your people have had a bit of a rough time, and that you lost all your personal belongings. So — and you can consider this another bit of good news — I’m giving you all forty-eight hours of liberty, two squads at a time so we have enough people on duty to man the garrison, to take advantage of the local delights and refill your kit bags. If there’s anything you need to square up your combat gear, see the company supply officer and he’ll get what you need.” He paused. “Oh, and one last thing: every Marine, on duty or not, who goes beyond the palisade that surrounds the town will be armed with an assault rifle. The local forests are home to some large predators that look upon unarmed humans as fast food. Details are in your planetary info downloads, so make sure you read up on those threats before you venture past the walls.” His gaze moved across the Marines, his expression one of sympathy as much as anything else. “Does anyone have any questions?” Silence. “Very well.” To Ortiz, he said, “Carry on, lieutenant.”

Ortiz pivoted on her heel to face her Marines. “Platoon,” she bellowed, “atten-SHUN!” The men and women behind her sloshed to attention. Pivoting back to face Yamada, who had also come to attention, she saluted. He returned her salute before whirling on his heel and disappearing into the headquarters building.

Without waiting for the command to do so, Stalin circled around the formation from behind, coming to stand before Ortiz.

“First and third squads get the first liberty rotation,” she told him as they exchanged salutes. “Now get these people out of this fucking rain.”

“Yes, lieutenant,” Stalin said.

With that, Ortiz left the Marines in Stalin’s hands and stalked off to find the company supply officer.

“Lord of All,” Eustus whispered, “this really stinks.”

Reza took in a deep breath, the aromas of rain and woodsmoke, of the forest and the beasts that lived beyond the palisade. It reminded him so much of home. “It is wonderful,” he breathed in reply.

Syr-Kesh stared through the view port into the vast depths of space, wishing not for the first time that she had the power of a priestess’s second sight. This far-flung region of space was her responsibility, her charge to bring the humans to battle and allow the warriors under her to bring glory to the Empress, but an unexpected challenge now lay before her. Sai-Kel’s revelation that she had fallen to Reza’s sword echoed in Syr-Kesh’s mind, and she had given a great deal of thought to what she should do. His presence here in her realm gave her a unique opportunity to honor the Empress, but she had to do so in a way that would be in keeping with Her will. Great battles raged across many planets in the human sphere, which was tiny compared to the Empire, but here near the edge of human space no planets were under large-scale siege. The human colonies tended to be small and would be easily defeated by even a modest force of warriors, which would go against the Empress’s edict that the humans were to be preserved until such time as the Kreela themselves were nearly extinguished. Then, and only then, would the Empire unleash its final fury upon humanity.

A wave of sadness crashed over her heart at the thought. The knowledge of the Empire’s fate was not a secret, but few beyond the priestesses and the Empress herself knew just how near loomed the doom of their species. Syr-Kesh still clung to the hope that Reza would somehow yet fulfill the ancient prophecy and save her kind from Keel-Tath’s Curse, but she could not imagine how after he had been banished. The sands in the cosmic hourglass that measured the cycles left to the Empire were rapidly draining away, and as the end of her own people drew near, so did that of the humans.

Pushing aside thoughts of what she could not change, Syr-Kesh sought to focus on what she could. She drummed the talons of her right hand on the sill of the view port, a habit she had long ago picked up from Tesh-Dar, whose presence she sorely missed. *Bleed them, My Children*, the Empress had commanded. It was on the face of it a simple command that had great underlying complexity. The task of Syr-Kesh, and the many others like her throughout the galaxy who were charged with carrying out this war, was to provide her warriors the opportunity to fight the humans as long as possible, but without exhausting or exterminating them. It was a difficult balancing act that required constant reassessment of both her foes and her warriors, for while she had virtually unlimited resources, with countless millions of warriors vying in arenas across the Empire for the honor to fight the humans, the resources of the humans were minute by comparison.

Getting to her feet, she approached the two dimensional star map that decorated one wall of her quarters. She had access to more sophisticated three dimensional representations, of course, but she found this simple map better suited to times of strategic contemplation. Her eyes wandered over the human planets in her area of responsibility and the shipping lanes that linked them together. To this point, the focus had been on small-scale space battles, with great care given to ensuring that the losses in shipping did not overly disrupt any of the enemy’s colonies. In this way, these worlds continued to spawn young that would eventually become warriors.

Such a strategy, however, would likely not lead her any time soon to finding Reza, which she was determined to do. Not to confront him in a Challenge, although she would not hesitate if the opportunity arose, but to provide such opportunity to her warriors. Sai-Kel and the other warriors under her who had died at his hand had earned a special place in the Books of Time, for it took great courage to face a warrior priest, let alone one who bore the mark of the Desh-Ka. If she could give more warriors the chance to face him, as well as any human warriors in his company, she would. She must.

Finding him again in another random encounter in space would not suit her desires, nor was there more than a modest chance of it happening again unless she attacked every human convoy and task force in the sector. She might, however, entice the humans to put Reza in harm's way if the non-warrior humans and the younglings among the colonies were at risk. She could not afford to slaughter them, of course, but putting her blade to their throats to draw a trickle of blood might well suit her needs. Just as one of her own warriors would give her life without a thought to save one of the clawless ones or a child of the creche, so, too, were human warriors willing to sacrifice their lives for their helpless and their young.

"Ela'i-Kuran," she called to her First, her decision made. "I have new commands for the fleet..."

Reza was not at all surprised when the others of his detachment decided to head into town to find what comforts they could, notably among the half dozen pubs and the single brightly lit brothel, to begin their brief time of freedom before duty once again called. Eustus had tried to convince Reza to go with them, but Reza had declined. "I have other plans, my friend," he told Eustus. "You know I have no interest in such entertainments. Go with them and enjoy yourself."

"What are you going to do?" Eustus asked.

"I must attend to some chores," Reza told him cryptically.

Waiting until Eustus and the others, moving down the town's main street in a boisterous mob, had disappeared into the nearest pub, Reza followed, although not toward the same destination. Over his shoulder was a duffel that contained his Kreelan armor and weapons. The town was busy at this afternoon hour, and he got more than a few curious glances from passersby. He could wear the same uniform as the others, but he would never look like them, not with his long braids and Kreelan collar, nor would he ever be truly accepted beyond his tiny circle of true friends. The thought saddened him, but he knew all too well that Fate was not always kind.

He ignored the curious and hostile looks of the strangers around him, focusing instead on his errand. He had to make two stops to gather certain basic chemicals he needed, the human names for which he'd looked up long before. Then he continued past the center of town, a block down one of the few side streets that were little more than gravel-covered alleyways, to reach his final destination. While he had located it before leaving the garrison through his second sight, it had not taken him long to find it with his nose, the smells of smoke and hot metal hearkening back to bittersweet times of his youth.

"Can I help you?" A tall, swarthy man, powerfully built, looked up as Reza approached. His silver-streaked black hair was nearly as long as Reza's, formed into dreadlocks that streamed down his back. He stood behind a large anvil, hammer in one callused hand, tongs holding what

looked like a short rod of glowing steel in the other. Behind him two forges glowed, with the other tools of a blacksmith's trade evident in the shop's open front.

"I would like the use of one of your forges and tools," Reza said, stepping closer. "I will pay, of course."

The man laughed. "Listen, boy, if you want me to hammer some steel for you, I'll be happy to oblige. But I'm not going to let some jarhead come in here and get himself hurt."

"I am well acquainted with the craft," Reza tried to reassure him, recalling the countless hours he had spent with Pan'ne-Sharakh, sweating from the heat of the forges used by the armorers of the kazha.

"You are, huh." The man was obviously not convinced. "Come here and show me, then. Let me see you make this," he nodded at the glowing steel he held, "into a horseshoe. You do that, we'll talk." He lifted the hammer, offering it to Reza.

Setting down the duffle, Reza took the hammer by the handle, carefully avoiding the head, which was hot from contact with the horseshoe-to-be, then the tongs. The blacksmith stood to one side and crossed his arms, a bemused look on his face.

Hefting the hammer, Reza struck it once, twice, on the anvil, getting a feel for its weight. Then, adjusting the position of the hot metal bar on the horn of the anvil, Reza began to hammer it with powerful, confident strikes, transforming the straight bar into a curve that matched a newly forged shoe that lay beside the anvil. As the metal began to cool, he transferred it back to the forge, relishing the radiant heat pouring from the hot coals before he again applied the hammer. His body fell into a rhythm, with every strike creating a tiny fireworks display of sparks. When he finished creating the curve, he set the shoe on the anvil's face and beat it to the proper thickness and width, following the contours of the shoe he was copying. He periodically took a large wire brush and cleaned the shoe, removing the flakes from the surface of the steel that sloughed off like dead skin.

When he was finished shaping it, he took a punch from where it hung on a wall and used it to form the holes for the nails that would bind the shoe to the horse's hoof.

At last, when he was satisfied, Reza dipped the shoe into the large pail of water beside the anvil, leaning away from the steam that billowed up. After pulling it out and eyeing it one last time, he lay it beside the original shoe he'd used as a guide and set the tongs down on the anvil. His creation was a perfect copy.

"Son of a bitch," the blacksmith said, shaking his head in wonder. "That's some damn fine work." His lips cracked into a wide smile, and he extended a powerful hand. "Name's Calhoun. Brett Calhoun. All I can say is that your talents are wasted as a Marine."

"My name is Reza Gard," Reza said, bowing his head as he took the other man's hand and shook it. Calhoun's grip, not surprisingly, was strong as iron. Reza applied equal strength, but no more.

The man's eyes narrowed slightly in recognition. "Reza Gard. You the boy who was on the news some time back? The one who was raised in the Empire?"

Reza nodded, wondering if his infamy would ever fade. Releasing Brett's hand, he said, "Yes. Is that a problem?"

Brett shrugged. "Not for me. Not if you can shape metal like that." Taking another look at Reza's handiwork, he said, "Since you saved me the work of making that shoe, the shop's yours

to do whatever you need.” He pursed his lips. “Mind if I ask what exactly it is that you’re working on?”

In answer, Reza opened the duffel and removed his Kreelan armor, which had suffered badly in the Challenge with Sai-Kel and her warriors.

Brett’s eyebrows shot up. “Being the genius that I am, I’m figuring that this is yours?”

Reza nodded.

“I’ve never seen any of their gear up close and personal.” Brett reached out and ran his fingers over the metal. “That’s mighty fine work.”

“It was not made by my hand, but it is left to me to repair it.”

Brett pursed his lips as he looked over the breast and back plates, which had taken the brunt of the damage, although the other plates that covered Reza’s arms and legs were also dented and scarred. “You’re going to be at that a while. You have anything to eat recently?”

At the mention of food, Reza’s stomach growled, and Brett chuckled. “I guess that’s a no,” he said. “How about you join us for dinner before you get started? It’s about that time.”

“Thank you,” Reza said, “but I do not wish to intrude.”

“Nonsense.” Brett checked on the forges, then waved Reza toward the door at the rear of the shop. “Come on, I live upstairs.”

Blinking in surprise at such hospitality, Reza followed the big man through the door, which opened onto a short hallway that had two doorways and a set of stairs that led up to the building’s second story.

Reza’s nose caught the scent of something cooking as they ascended the steps, and his stomach growled again, accompanied by a rush of saliva into his mouth. “That smells wonderful.”

Brett laughed. “Talia,” he called, “I hope you made enough for a guest.”

“Well, it would’ve been nice for you to tell me,” a young female voice scolded with theatrical intensity. A girl in her middle teens with mocha colored skin and long raven hair poked her head around the corner and shot Brett a mock glare. Catching sight of Reza, her eyes widened and her mouth dropped open.

“Put your lips back together before you catch a fly,” Brett admonished her with a smile before he kissed her on the forehead. “Talia, this is Reza. Reza, this is Talia.”

“Hi,” Talia squeaked.

“Hello.” Reza bowed his head. “I am honored.”

Ushering the gawking girl back through the entryway, Calhoun led Reza into his home. Reza stepped into a kitchen with an adjoining dining area that was large enough to seem spacious, yet small enough to be cozy at the same time. A table that could seat eight along two opposing benches stood before a pair of windows that looked out over the few single story buildings that separated Calhoun’s house and shop from the palisade, beyond which lay endless lush forest. A beautiful stone fireplace was nestled between the windows, the chimney no doubt connected to that used by one of the forges below. A short hallway opposite the entryway led to a great room that boasted a comfortable looking sofa and pair of chairs facing a far more impressive fireplace that took up a third of the opposing wall, the smoke taken away by the chimney that served the second forge in the blacksmith shop. The interior of all the rooms was made up of light gray

wood planks broken up by splashes of color that, even to Reza's inexperienced eye, were clearly evidence of a woman's touch.

"Hi." A boy of eight years sat at the table. He smiled and waved at Reza as if they were best friends.

"And that's Ben," Calhoun said.

Again, Reza bowed his head. "It is nice to meet you, Ben."

"Come on." Calhoun gestured to the nearest bench. "Take a seat and make yourself at home."

Reza sat down opposite Ben, who grinned. "You're a Marine," he said with the definitive knowledge of boys his age.

Smiling, Reza said, "Yes, I am."

Calhoun took a seat beside Reza as Talia bustled about in the kitchen. With a gentle scowl, the big man looked at his son. "Aren't you supposed to be doing something?"

"Aw, Dad." With a lingering sigh, Ben got up and shuffled into the kitchen to help his sister, who quietly scolded him for being a lazy brat.

"It's the same thing, every meal," Calhoun said with a grin. "The kid's had to help in the kitchen since he could hold a spoon, but history starts over again every time we eat. You have any kids, or maybe a special someone?"

"No," Reza told him, holding back a wave of emotion as he fleetingly thought of what might have been had he stayed in the Empire. That a human could become one of Her Children, that this same human could become a priest of the Desh-Ka, were both miracles against the most impossible odds. Was it too much to imagine that the love he had shared with Esah-Zhurah, given time, could have brought forth children into the world? But he would never know. He quickly clamped down on the dark despair that threatened to well up from the depths of his soul.

The blacksmith didn't press the issue as Talia came around with a steaming pot filled with a savory meat stew that she carefully ladled into the four bowls set out on the table. Calhoun unsuccessfully tried to hide a smirk as she made sure to give Reza just a bit extra. Ben brought over a cloth-lined basket containing a loaf of bread fresh from the oven and a bowl of butter, making sure to put both in easy reach of where he'd been sitting. Then he ran back for drinks: a pink fruit juice for himself and Talia, and mugs of beer for his father and their guest.

"Hey!" Ben cried out with bone-deep indignation as he saw that Talia, having returned to the table after returning the pot to the stove, had taken his spot on the bench opposite Reza. "That's my seat!"

"Lord of All," Calhoun said under his breath. "Talia..."

She shot him a pleading look as she gestured for Ben to come over to her. The boy stomped across the floor, his face pinched with annoyance at his sister, his mouth turned down in a fierce frown. She leaned over and whispered something in his ear and the frown instantly disappeared. "You promise?" he asked. Talia nodded. Without further complaint, Ben happily plopped down onto the bench beside her as Talia looked sweetly at her father.

"And just what did you promise your brother?" Calhoun demanded with mock severity.

"He gets half my dessert."

"Good grief," Calhoun said. "Okay, hold hands." Calhoun took Ben's hand across the table, Ben took Talia's, and Talia and Calhoun both reached for Reza's hands. Wrinkling his brow in confusion, Reza reached out to them both.

“Lord of All,” Calhoun said, “thank you for your many blessings this day, and for bringing strangers to our door that they may become friends. Amen.”

“Amen,” the children echoed, and everyone let go.

“Don’t you pray?” Ben asked Reza just before he stuffed a huge chunk of bread into his mouth and began to chew.

“Yes,” Reza told him, “I pray every day, but not quite in the same way as you.”

“So, you believe in God, then?” Calhoun asked with no small trace of surprise. “The Kreelans believe in an Almighty?”

Reza gave him a sad smile. “Let us say that I — and they — believe in a power greater than ourselves, but I can tell you little more.” He tried to keep his tone light, but not being able to speak openly of his past was a burden that weighed far more heavily on Reza than he ever could have guessed, and served to isolate him still further from the humans with whom he sought to reforge a meaningful bond.

Thankfully, Ben changed the subject. “Where did you get all those scars on your face, especially that one over your eye? Did you get beaten up a lot when you were a kid?”

“Ben, don’t be rude,” Calhoun admonished, then shot Talia an angry look as she jabbed her elbow into her brother’s shoulder.

“I do not mind,” Reza said. Looking at Ben, he went on, “There was a time when, yes, I was beaten up, as you would say. But most of these scars are from later, when I met fellow warriors in ritual combat, and gave them many scars of their own. A warrior wears them with honor.” He leaned slightly closer to the children, both of whom were staring at him, food still in their mouths, chewing forgotten. “But this one,” he gestured to the scar over his left eye, “was given to me when I was perhaps your age, Ben, by the greatest warrior of the Empire, after I gave her a similar scar with my dead father’s knife.”

“She let you live?” Talia whispered. “Just let you walk away?”

Reza nodded slowly. “At the time, yes. But she came back for me when I was about your age.”

Talia shuddered and Ben looked to his father, eyes wide. “Is that true, Dad?”

“I suspect so, son,” Calhoun said as he studied Reza. “It fits with what I remember from the news reports.”

“Did you take that,” Talia pointed at Reza’s collar and the gleaming eyestone with the rune of the Dosh-Ka, “from a dead Kreelan?”

“No. It was made for me.”

“So someone gave it to you when you lived with them, like a present?” she asked.

Reza shook his head. He paused, choosing his words with care to avoid revealing anything sacred to the Way. They could never understand the true meaning of the Collar of Honor, but he could at least give them an inkling of its importance. “No,” he said gently. “The collar must be earned. Only this,” he tapped the eyestone, “is given, but not as a gift. It is more like a... responsibility, a great burden, in a way, that must be carried.” He smiled. “More than that, I cannot say.”

“Kids, stop grilling the man so he can eat,” Calhoun interjected. Talia and her brother fell into a disappointed silence except for blowing and slurping sounds as they ate their stew. Both of

them kept their eyes fixed on Reza, and he could tell they were bursting with questions. Calhoun was, too, but had the discipline to restrain himself.

“I do not mean to pry,” Reza said, deciding it was time to ask a question or two of his own, “but where is their mother? Is she not here?”

Calhoun shook his head. “Amelia passed not long after Ben was born. A neo-tiger got through the palisade when the sonic fence went down. It took her and four others before we killed it.”

“I am very sorry,” Reza said, saddened. “I should not have asked.”

“Don’t be sorry — it’s a fair question. Life here can be hard and dangerous. That’s why these two,” he nodded at the children, “know how to shoot a weapon straight and true, and know when to run and when to stand their ground, right?” Both children nodded. “You and your Marine buddies need to watch your tail feathers if you go beyond the wall. We’re protected in here by the sonic fence, and the cargo vehicles are big enough to mount mobile sonic defense systems. But the gear is heavy and takes a lot of power, so smaller vehicles, horses, or folks on foot are a lot more vulnerable. Animals are the biggest cause of injury and fatalities among the Marines.” He snorted. “It’s certainly not from fighting Kreeelans, which I’m more than thankful for.”

“Our captain told us to beware of the animals,” Reza said, fingering the eyestone at his throat. “I have had my own experiences with great predators. I plan to explore beyond the wall, and I’m sure the garrison patrols the forest. I will take what you say to heart.”

“Good man. Now let’s finish up and get to work on that armor of yours.”

Reza was happy to accept Calhoun’s offer to help, and was impressed with how helpful the children were, and how careful they were in the downstairs shop. As Calhoun held the hot armor steady on the anvil with heavy duty tongs, Reza rhythmically hammered it into shape, his experienced eye guiding each strike to gradually smooth out the creases and dents in the metal. Talia worked nonstop to keep the primary forge white hot, for Kreeelan armor was a special alloy that demanded high temperatures to make it even moderately malleable. Reza ignored the gasps of the children when he stripped to the waist, revealing the multitude of scars, great and small, that criss-crossed his body.

“You saw some rough times, son,” Calhoun observed over the roar of the forge.

Reza only offered him a smile before he took up the hammer and began to rain measured blows upon the metal on the anvil.

They worked long into the night, for Reza was determined to shape his armor as if he were to present it for the inspection of Pan’ne-Sharakh, whose spirit he hoped was looking over his shoulder, her ancient and strong but gentle hands guiding his own. The children brought them water and food, or fetched tools as required or fresh water for the cooling tub. When Calhoun finally ordered them to bed, Talia protested that they did not have school the next day. Withering under the pleading eyes of his children, Calhoun relented and let them stay up.

After pounding out the damage, shaping, cooling, and fitting each piece, Reza took to the breast plate, which he had saved for last. As he worked the metal, Calhoun stared, transfixed, at the glowing cyan rune. For all the damage, for all the times that Reza hit the metal with his hammer, the coloring of the rune never seemed to change. The glossy black finish of the armor was virtually destroyed under the pounding of the hammer, but never the rune.

“How is that even possible?” Calhoun grunted, sweat pouring from his brow. “I’ve never seen the like. It’s like the color runs all the way through the metal.”

“It does,” Reza told him in between strikes.

“How? And why doesn’t the pattern deform as you shape the metal?”

“I do not know how to explain it,” Reza told him. The particular dye used to form the runes on the breastplates for the priestesses (and sole priest) was itself created from living metal, just as were the blades of edged weapons. It penetrated and transformed the metal it was applied to, and forever was part of it and never lost its own shape, the pattern of its design. The glossy black finish applied to the armor, however, was more conventional: the stops Reza had made before arriving at the smithy were to gather the ingredients he needed for the black coating, and during the course of the evening he had described the process to Calhoun, for there was nothing secret or sacred about its formula or application.

“Damn,” Calhoun said after listening to Reza’s explanation. “I’m going to have to try that on some of my own work.”

Reza smiled before he again brought down the hammer on glowing steel.

“Where the hell is he?” Ortiz growled as she stalked down Main Street, Eustus and the other Marines of his squad doing their best to keep up with her. She had a splitting headache, as did the others who had partaken of the previous evening’s binging, and was in a blindingly foul mood. Like the others, she had been looking forward to recovering from her hangover over the remainder of her allotted shore leave, but that had come to a jarring end when a runner from the company had discovered her asleep in an empty room in the bordello. She had no idea how she’d gotten there, but since she still had most of her clothes on she figured the story couldn’t have been too juicy. The news the runner brought was not at all welcome: the platoon’s shore leave had been curtailed, and everyone was to report for duty to the company headquarters. In addition to the two disconsolate squads left at the garrison that hadn’t yet had their turn on shore leave, she had managed to round up everyone from the bordello and the nearby bars. Everyone except Reza. Even Eustus, whom she had found fully dressed and snoring away in the lobby of the so-called hotel across the street, had no idea where Reza might have gone.

Eustus, just behind her, felt miserable, both physically from the previous evening’s excesses and for letting Ortiz down.

As they continued along the street toward the far end of the town from the fort, they crossed a back street. From a few buildings down Eustus heard a rhythmic banging and saw smoke coming from a pair of chimneys. Something made him stop and look more closely.

“Camden?” Ortiz snapped. “What is it?”

“This way, I think,” he said, uncertain. He hated to move toward the banging sound, for someone was already slamming a hammer into his temples from the inside. *Just how much did I drink last night?* he wondered, not for the first time since Ortiz had rudely awakened him.

Ortiz muttered something unkind under her breath. “Why would he be down here?”

Eustus’s addled brain finally made the connection. “His armor. He needed to fix it.”

As they reached the shop front, which stood open to the street, there he was. Reza, stripped to the waist, his body slick with so much sweat that even the pants of his uniform were soaked, drove a hammer against metal with the help of a big man that could only be the blacksmith.

Toward the back, curled up on some bags, were a young boy and a teenage girl, sound asleep despite the hammering.

With a final bang, Reza set down the hammer and helped the blacksmith move what could only be the breastplate to a tub of water, which exploded with steam as the water accepted the metal's excess heat.

Then Reza turned around, as if he knew the others had been standing behind him, and nodded a greeting.

"Sorry to interrupt your rollicking fun, Gard," Ortiz called, gesturing for Camden to step forward, "but duty calls."

Eustus handed Reza a duffle bag. Reza opened it to find a fresh uniform, body armor, and the rest of his combat gear, which Eustus must have retrieved from the garrison before coming here. Another Marine came forward and handed Reza a rifle.

"What has happened?" Reza asked.

"The captain said the early warning network reported several shooting stars last night over the forest west of town and nominated us to go check them out."

"Shooting stars?" Reza asked, cocking his head to one side in confusion. "Meteors?"

"Maybe meteors," Ortiz said, stepping closer, "and maybe something else. Now get your gear on and let's get moving."

Reza did as she asked, stripping out of his sweat-soaked uniform and donning the clean one, not at all self-conscious that he was for a brief moment virtually naked for all to see. Finally, he donned his Marine body armor and checked his weapon and ammunition bandoliers. After a moment's thought, he went to the bag in which he had brought his Kreelan armor to the shop and reached inside to withdraw his sword.

"Lord of All," Calhoun said. "You didn't say you had Kreelan steel with you!"

"I will show it to you later," Reza promised as he strapped it on his back.

Ortiz nodded in approval. "Let's get this circus moving," she said as she turned and led the others toward the west gate.

Calhoun stepped forward and lightly took Reza by the arm. "I'll look out for your things. Just remember what I told you about going out there," he said quietly.

"I have not forgotten, my friend," Reza said. Behind Calhoun, he saw that Talia and Ben had awoken and were looking at him, expressions of concern on their faces. "I shall return soon."

What upset Ortiz more than being awakened from a blissful stupor was the mode of transportation she and the others were offered by Captain Yamada. “Fuel cells and spare parts are bulky and heavy,” he had said, explaining the obvious, “and since every kilo of transport capacity that comes here is precious, we keep the few vehicles we have in the motor pool unless there’s a military emergency. Which, as you’ve probably surmised, hasn’t ever happened.” He shrugged. “We’ve also used them on occasion for search and rescue to recover folks from the forest, but that’s about it. So it’s either this,” he had gestured at the de facto transportation means of most humans on the planet, “or go on foot. But it’s a heck of a long march to the west end of the ridge, which is as far as you’ll be able to go on this patrol without air transport.”

“Which isn’t available,” Ortiz had said.

“Which isn’t available,” Yamada had agreed with a slight smile. “You learn fast, lieutenant.”

Reluctantly, and against her better judgement, Ortiz had given in to his suggestion and taken in hand...the reins of a horse. *A horse.* She’d never even seen one except in a few holovids.

After putting Stalin in charge of the remainder of the detachment, Ortiz led two squads from the company garrison to the town stables to requisition their transportation. An hour later, after receiving a crash course in basic horsemanship, she was struggling and cursing her mount, a lithe chestnut Arabian gelding with the unlikely name of Monty.

“*The horses know what to do,*” Ortiz said, mocking the leather-faced civilian man who tended the stable and who’d shown her and the others how to ride. “*Just point them in the direction you want to go and you’ll be fine. Monty’s the best of the lot. He’ll take good care of you. The lying bastard.*” For the hundredth time she yanked back on the reins as Monty bent down to snatch up some grass growing along the “road” that was little more than a rutted track through the forest leading west. With her other hand, she maintained a death grip on the saddle horn. “I’ve never had horse meat before,” she told her mount, “but if you do that one more time, I’m serving the whole platoon Monty burgers when we get back. If we get back.”

“Just relax, lieutenant,” Reza called to her over his shoulder. After demonstrating surprising prowess on a docile mare, the stable keeper had elected to give him a larger, much more spirited mount, a silver stallion named Caesar. At the head of the column, taking the point position, Reza rode the beast as if they were a single living thing. “Let him do as he wishes. He will not fall behind.”

“That’s easy for you to say!” Ortiz griped. “I feel like I’m going to fall off every time this stupid beast leans down to stuff his fat face — oof!” Monty dove for another clump of grass, yanking down on the reins, which Ortiz was still clutching tightly, having shortened them up from when she had yanked Monty’s head up earlier. That threw her off balance, and Monty completed Ortiz’s acrobatic dismount by coming to an abrupt stop. With a venomous curse, Ortiz toppled forward out of the saddle to land flat on her back beside the horse.

Monty turned to look at her as he contentedly munched away.

“You...stinking...shit,” Ortiz wheezed, the wind having been knocked out of her.

Eustus, who was riding right behind her, dismounted and handed his reins to Davis, who came up beside him. Aside from Reza’s seemingly inexplicable equine expertise, those two were the only ones who’d ever ridden a horse before. Actually, they were the only ones who’d actually *seen* a horse.

“I’m fine, I’m fine,” Ortiz wheezed as Eustus helped her to her feet. She pushed him away as she fought to suck air back into her lungs. “Why the hell did I ever agree to ride these damn things?”

“And why is this whole stinking colony trapped in the dark ages?” Castle blurted. He’d been having nearly as tough a time staying on his mare as Ortiz. “No vehicles we can use? Wooden walls around the town and garrison? Buildings made of wood and stone? Horses? Hardly any real technology outside of the landing field? What the hell is it with this place?”

“The colony founders wanted the inhabitants to be able to sustain themselves without external supply,” Davis explained in his tour guide voice, and everyone turned to glare at him. “What? Didn’t any of you read the info pack?” He rolled his eyes before summarizing what he’d read. “Everything’s wood because it’s versatile and, in the short term, is in virtually inexhaustible supply. Wood is supplemented by stone from local quarries for construction purposes. Horses are the primary motive power behind transportation, both for personnel and cargo, along with field work in the agriculture industry, which is by far the greatest segment of the planet’s economy and is the cornerstone of the liquor that is Carillon’s primary export. Equines are flexible, hardy, and easily sustainable creatures—”

“That can be eaten when they’re too much of a pain in the ass,” Ortiz interrupted with a poke at Monty’s flank. “That’s enough for now, Davis.”

“But I haven’t gotten to the indigenous wildlife,” Davis protested. “That’s the really good stuff!”

“Can it,” Ortiz said more sharply than she’d intended, and Davis snapped his mouth shut, screwing his face into a pout. Ortiz ignored him. After three unsuccessful attempts to get back into her saddle, she sighed. To Eustus, she said, “Would you mind giving me a boost?”

“Yes, ma’am.” Eustus leaned down and interlaced his fingers, making a stirrup that he used to help her up. After a brief struggle, she regained the saddle, grabbed the saddle horn for dear life and, with an audible sigh, took the reins. “Okay, Monty,” she said to her gelding as Eustus hopped back into the saddle of his own horse, “I give up. Do your thing, just please don’t toss me off again, okay?”

The horse turned his head to look at her, then snorted.

“That didn’t sound like a promise,” Ortiz observed dryly. “Come on, Gard, let’s move.” She checked her geotracker, which was one of the few bits of technology that was both available for use and was actually helpful on this God forsaken, tree infested rock. “We need to make at least another twenty kilometers before dusk, when we’ll make camp.” With a grimace, she added, “I can hardly wait.”

“Yes, lieutenant,” Reza said, whirling Caesar around with a flourish and heading down the trail at a trot.

“Oh, no...” Ortiz cried. She grabbed for the saddle horn with both hands and fought to keep her ass in the seat as Monty happily took off after the silver stallion. Her only consolation was that her dismay was audibly shared by most of the others in the column behind her as the other horses hurried down the trail.

Reza could not help but smile. Riding a horse was little different from riding a magthep, and he had taken to the equines instantly. He had been elated when the stable master had given him

Caesar, a gorgeous animal, powerful, nimble, and sure-footed. Man and beast had immediately bonded to one another, and riding through the great forest triggered a flood of fond memories of a lifetime ago when Reza had sat astride Goliath, riding with Esah-Zhurah by his side among the natural wonders of the Homeworld.

The trees around them soared to heights of fifty meters and more, indigenous conifers that were similar in appearance to those on Earth, or so Davis had told them after Ortiz had relented and let the man regale the patrol on the planet's wonders. Beneath the canopy was a carpet of ferns and lichens amid mounds of deadfall where ancient trees had fallen and were in the long process of giving their essence back to the soil. Here and there were meadows where full sun poked through to illuminate long golden grass and blooming flowers of every imaginable color. Tiny insects and fluttering bird-like creatures chirped and sang in a natural symphony.

Even Ortiz had been captivated by the sights as they moved westward along the trail, for when Reza periodically threw a glance over his shoulder, he saw her gawking this way and that, wide eyes overcome with the natural wonder around them.

Nothing, however, could have prepared them for what lay before Reza after he topped a tree-covered hill.

"In Her name," he breathed in the Old Tongue before the others came within earshot of his soft voice.

"Holy...shit," Ortiz said as she pulled up beside him.

Before them lay a titanic network of canyons that extended to the southwestern horizon and beyond. The steep canyon walls told the story of the planet's history in the dozens of unique strata that were revealed through the work of water and wind over the ages. It was a tapestry of mineral and stone that took their breath away.

Far below their vantage point on the rim, Reza could see the glint of water in what had to be the main river channel. Dismounting, Reza left Caesar to nibble on some grass while he stepped to the edge to get a better look. The drop was straight down for what he guessed was at least two kilometers to the first of a series of steep rocky slopes and more sheer drops that eventually reached to the bottom.

"Careful, Gard!" Ortiz exclaimed. "Jesus, that's a long way down."

"Fifteen point three two kilometers, to be precise," Davis told her in an awe-filled voice. "It's over twice as deep as Valles Marineris on Mars back in Sol System, and it's warm down at river level. Even in winter the temperature is over forty degrees Celsius along the river bank."

Eustus, emboldened by Reza's lead, dismounted and came to stand beside his friend. Leaning down, he picked up a rock and threw it in an arc, as far out as he could. They watched the tiny missile fall...and fall...and fall...until it disappeared from view.

"Wow," Eustus breathed.

"Look at that," Ortiz said, pointing due west. One of the side canyons opened onto what appeared to be a lake, the view framed by an enormous natural arch of stone that spanned the entrance to the waters beyond. Ortiz took out her tactical viewfinder and focused on the arch. "My God," she whispered, "that thing is at least thirty kilometers long!"

"A place in town offers guided backcountry tours into the canyon, even out as far as that lake," Davis offered helpfully.

Ortiz looked at him, astonished. "Are you nuts?"

Davis shrugged. “Well, technically...”

“Never mind,” she said, reluctantly putting the viewfinder away. With a sigh, she turned back to Davis. “So how much are those tours? It’s not like we’ll have much else to spend our pay on while we’re stuck on this rock.”

“Well— ”

Caesar suddenly snapped his head up from grazing and he turned to face the forest, back along the trail they’d taken. His ears strained forward and a trace of white shone around his eyes as he stared into the shadows. He sucked in a deep breath, nostrils flaring, then snorted.

The mood of the other horses changed, too, as if someone had flipped a switch. All of them were now fully alert, looking in the same direction as Caesar.

“What is it?” Ortiz asked, directing the question to Reza, who had already moved away from the cliff edge to take up Caesar’s reins. Eustus did the same, coming to stand beside his own horse, one hand on the assault rifle that was in a scabbard attached to the side of the saddle.

Reza held up his hand to forestall Ortiz from saying anything else. Focusing his concentration, he sent forth his second sight, but after a sweep through the trees out as far as half a kilometer he detected nothing larger than a group of deer-like herbivores browsing in a meadow. With nothing threatening to see, he closed his eyes and breathed in, trying to filter out all the scents that held no threat, hoping to isolate whatever was spooking the horses.

There, he thought after a long moment. He had caught a faint trace of alien animal musk mingled with the fetid breath common to many carnivores. Again, he sent his second sight away into the trees, following the bearing provided by the horses.

And again, he found nothing.

Returning his breathing to normal, he opened his eyes. “Something is stalking us,” he said, looking up at Ortiz, “but I cannot tell what it is, or exactly where it might be.”

“Neo-tiger,” Davis whispered, his eyes wide in what might have been taken as a comically exaggerated look of fear, but Reza could tell it was all too real. Like Davis, Reza had studied the information on the planet before they had disembarked from the *Yavuz*, and learned that there was no shortage of fauna on Carillon that was potentially lethal to humans. The worst of them was a species of dinosaur-like saurians, very similar to the genoths of the Homeworld, that lived in the arid lands near the equator and were large enough to swallow a horse whole. But here in the forests, the two most-feared predators were the neo-tiger and a variety of snake that grew to a length of fifty meters. Other, smaller beasts that travelled in packs were also to be feared and respected, but the oddly named neo-tiger, which was more like a cross between the long-extinct sabertooth tiger on Earth and an orangutan, and the snake were by far the deadliest.

“A neo-tiger, then,” Reza agreed, as he doubted the snake would have a musky smell or the same foul breath as a meat-eating quasi-mammal. “That would explain why I can’t see it.”

“What do you mean?” Ortiz asked.

“They have near-perfect adaptive camouflage,” Davis whispered, his eyes darting around them. “Like a chameleon, only a lot better. A *lot* better. Better than any Confederation tech. Even our thermal scanners won’t see it.”

“What the hell is a chameleon?” Castle asked in a frightened voice. He had drawn his weapon and was pointing the muzzle toward the forest.

“Never mind that,” Ortiz snapped. To Reza, she said, “What should we do?”

“For now,” he replied, getting back on Caesar, whose attention remained riveted on their unseen pursuer, “I suggest we continue on as planned. I think the beast is still some distance behind us.”

“How do you know?” Ortiz asked.

“Its scent is very faint, and there are other animals behind us that are undisturbed. It is stalking us, learning about us, before it decides to attack. We must stay together and watch the horses carefully: they may give us some warning if it comes close. I also suggest that we find a defensible place somewhere along the ridge to camp to limit the directions from which it might approach.”

“All right.” Ortiz took a deep breath. “We keep moving until an hour before dusk, then we’ll start looking for a place to hole up for the night.” To Reza, she added, “Lead on, Gard.”

The patrol continued to follow the trail along the ridge overlooking the canyon. Ortiz periodically rotated the Marines through the point position, and Reza had been relieved by Eustus, who now rode at the front of the column while Reza dropped back to the rear guard position. As Caesar dutifully followed the other horses, Reza tried to find the neo-tiger with his second sight. He caught glimpses several times of something behind them and off to the right, deep in the forest, could briefly sense its presence, but was unable to keep track of it. It was like watching a shadow slipping through other shadows, or a faint disturbance in a cloud of slowly swirling mist. The creature was taking its time, exercising the patience of an experienced hunter. That made it all the more dangerous.

Frustrated with trying to find their quarry directly, he tried watching the other animals, which was far easier to do. Wherever the neo-tiger went, every living creature larger than his finger, save the bird-like creatures that soared above the ground, exploded away from some invisible threat, leaving a swath of terrified animals that moved parallel to the Marines’ course and perhaps two hundred meters deep in the forest.

As the sun sank toward the horizon, Ortiz signaled a halt as they reached a section of the rocky ridge that was clear of trees and large bushes to a distance of fifty or so meters. “This looks like it should do,” she said. “We’ve got decent fields of fire here and there’s nothing it can hide behind if it wants to come for us.”

Reza nodded in agreement. “We should gather as much dry wood as we can,” he suggested. “I suspect the beast will not like fire.”

“Good idea. Davis, make it happen.”

“Yes, lieutenant,” Davis said quietly as he dismounted. He and the others drew their rifles from the saddle scabbards, then Davis issued terse commands to the other Marines.

Reza went to gather the reins of the other horses, but Ortiz said, “Let Camden do that. You get over there on that little outcropping,” she pointed to a small rise near the center of their encampment, “and keep watch. I don’t want to be surprised if that thing decides to make a run at us while we’re setting up camp.”

Bowing his head, Reza handed Caesar’s reins to Eustus and did as she ordered.

The Marines spent the rest of the fading light in a frantic orgy of wood gathering while Reza, Eustus, and Ortiz kept watch. It was an act of will to keep their attention on the edge of the forest

where their fellow Marines were gathering wood, for at their backs was a mind-blowing sunset over the great canyon.

"I've lost track of it again," Reza told her as the sun sank below the horizon, leaving the sky blazing crimson and orange. "It was last in that direction," he pointed toward the forest at roughly two o'clock, "but has moved on."

"How do you know it isn't just staying still?" Ortiz said in a near whisper.

"Because nocturnal animals, small ones, are climbing down from the trees where I think the beast had come to rest after we began to make camp."

"Great," Ortiz muttered. She snapped down the thermal imager and looked into the forest with technology augmented vision. Her people, who were now returning from their wood gathering near the edge of the forest, stood out in bright contrast. Small animals, just as Reza had said, were making their way warily down the trunks of the trees, flashing bright eyes toward the Marines. She could see more animals moving along the ground among the nearest trees, but beyond that the deadfall, massive exposed roots, and undulations in the ground blocked her view. "If this thing breaks cover from the forest, wouldn't it *have* to show up on our thermal viewers?"

"Yes, but only briefly," Reza observed. "As Davis noted, the beast is quite extraordinary in its adaptation. If I recall the planetary briefing correctly, xenobiologists believe that the thermal aspect of its camouflage evolved as a mechanism to protect it against the snake, which hunts primarily by detecting the heat signatures of its prey."

"And you don't see any of those damn things, I hope?" Ortiz asked.

"No. But they are also well-camouflaged, and can move nearly as fast as the neo-tiger over short distances."

"You're not making me feel any better," Eustus commented in a sour voice.

Reza smiled. "I am sorry, my friend. But we should do well here. We have a clear line of sight to the tree line and plenty of wood to keep fires burning all night."

Ortiz nodded. "All right," she ordered, "let's light 'em up." Under her direction, the Marines had set up six small fires in a rough semicircle facing the forest that defined the perimeter of their makeshift bastion. Half the Marines were on watch twenty meters behind the fire line, with those off-watch free to eat or sleep as they chose. The horses were hobbled well back from the fire line, but at a safe distance from the cliff's edge.

Reza stood on the knoll, reaching outward with his second sight and his body's senses, but he found no trace of their quarry.

"Anything?" Ortiz asked. She offered him a hot ration, which Reza politely declined.

"No."

She looked down at the ration, which was some sort of barbecued meat, and dipped into it with a spoon. "You're worried," she observed between mouthfuls.

"I know it must still be here somewhere," he told her, "but everything in the forest seems normal; there is no indication of a large predator anywhere nearby."

"Maybe it didn't like our fires."

Reza frowned. "It would not have stalked us for such a distance to simply give up, and unless it fed somewhere along the way, it must be extremely hungry by now." He shook his head. "No, it is still with us. Somewhere."

“Well,” she looked at her chronometer, “we’ve got another six hours until sunrise and plenty of wood for the fires. The goddamn tiger can just sit out there and starve.”

Ortiz turned and walked away toward the central fire around which the others who weren’t on watch were gathered, eating and talking in low voices.

Reza remained where he was, watching and listening, a knot of apprehension tightening in his belly.

Lance Corporal Viktor Kutuzov finished his meal of synthetic chicken marinara and tossed the biodegradable packet into the flames of the campfire. Getting to his feet, he let loose a tremendous belch.

“Christ, Kutuzov,” one of the others exclaimed. “You could’ve spooked the damn horses.”

“Or set off an earthquake,” someone else quipped.

“Is good thing it came out front end and not back here,” Kutuzov joked in his thick Russian accent, patting his ass. “Now I go make yellow rain on river.”

“Don’t fall in, asshole,” someone said. “The first step is a doozy...”

Kutuzov chuckled and made an obscene gesture as he turned from the fire, carefully making his way past the horses, which were little more than black voids against the jaw-dropping field of stars that stretched from horizon to horizon over the titanic canyon below. His eyes barely had to adjust from the light of the fire to see the ground, so bright was the illumination provided from the countless points of light above. He did, however, place his feet with utmost care as he came near the cliff’s edge. He looked down to see the tiny squiggle of the river glimmering at the bottom of the canyon, and smiled. Kutuzov was an adrenaline junky and had already decided that he would get hold of a parawing: this was simply too good an opportunity to pass up for some galactic quality base jumping. The only trick, he thought, would be to arrange a pickup. Maybe one of those tour companies would agree to meet him somewhere along the path to the bottom...

Such thoughts occupied his mind as he undid his pants and began to empty his bladder into the vast emptiness below. When he was finished, he zipped up, then carefully turned away from the magnificent vista to return to the campfire.

He made only one step before a white-hot spear of pain lanced through his left calf.

Everyone turned as a shriek of agony split the darkness from the direction of the cliff. In that moment, Reza’s second sight flashed ahead of his body, which was already dashing in that direction, to see Kutuzov, screaming and clawing at the ground, being dragged over the edge.

“*Behind us!*” someone bellowed.

Reza flew past the others, sword in hand. He reached Kutuzov just as the younger man lost his grip on the rocks he’d been clinging to. His face was contorted in agony and a terrified scream issued from his throat. Reza lunged forward to clasp one of Kutuzov’s forearms with his free hand. “Hang on!”

From behind, the other Marines dashed forward, with Ortiz shouting for them to be careful not to go over the cliff.

“Take my hand!” Eustus was beside Reza, grabbing for Kutuzov’s other hand. The thrashing Marine was bent at the waist, his upper body prone on the ground while his legs were over the edge, as if he were bent over a table. Together, he and Reza fought to haul him back to safety.

“I don’t have a shot!” Davis cried as he desperately looked over the edge to one side. “The thing’s under some kind of overhang!”

More hands reached forward, trying to get a grip on Kutuzov. With a collective pull, they finally began to drag him up. As more Marines lent their strength to the effort, grabbing his combat harness, uniform, anything they could get a grip on, he came up fast.

“It must’ve let go!” Ortiz shouted.

Reza knew she was wrong. As Kutuzov’s savaged legs came into view, Reza caught the briefest glimpse of a massive paw, prehensile as a primate’s hand, wrapped around the man’s foot and ankle, with two inch long claws sunk into the flesh, into the bone. With reflexes even faster than Reza’s, the beast yanked on the young man’s leg with inhuman force. The other Marines, holding tight to Kutuzov, and in some cases with their hands entwined in his combat webbing, were thrown off balance and went tumbling toward the edge.

With a glimmering flash of steel moving too fast for the human eye to see, Reza’s sword severed Kutuzov’s leg just below the knee. As the beast snatched away the severed limb, Reza launched himself backward with all his strength, arms spread wide, to prevent the startled Marines from sailing into space. They fell backward and collapsed in a cursing heap, Kutuzov still screaming in terror and pain. Davis let go a burst from his rifle at their attacker, but the crimson bolts found only air and rock below.

“What the hell?” Ortiz cried as she got to her feet. She grabbed Reza by the front of his uniform. “You cut his goddamn leg off!”

“We had him, you bastard,” one of the other Marines snarled. His words echoed the angry starlit faces of the others, who gathered in a semicircle around Reza, save for two who knelt beside Kutuzov and tried to staunch the bleeding from the cleanly severed leg.

“He saved your lives, you idiots!” Eustus shouted, then turned to face down Ortiz, who was furious. “Think! We all would’ve gone right over the edge with Kutuzov if Reza hadn’t...” He couldn’t quite bring himself to finish the thought.

Another shriek tore through the night, punctuated by an ear-splitting roar. As one, the Marines whirled to watch in open-mouthed horror as Kutuzov, his hands battering in vain at the claws of a massive paw that had sunk deep into the vulnerable flesh of his lower belly, was snatched away from the two Marines trying to help him. The Marines got a glimpse of great yellow eyes, glowing in the flickering fire light, before the beast and the screaming Kutuzov disappeared over the edge.

Leaning out as far as he possibly dared, Davis fired another, longer burst.

“Did you hit it?” Ortiz gasped.

“No,” Davis whimpered. “It moves like greased lightning. The planetary guidebook said they were fast, but...” He took several steps back from the edge, well past where Kutuzov had lain, and the others followed suit. All save Reza, who stood still as a pillar of stone, sword in hand, staring at the trail of blood left by the young Marine, whose screams could still be heard somewhere below.

Another long, spine-chilling moment passed before the screams ended with a wet crunch.

After that: silence.

Oh, nooooo! That's it for the teaser! I hope you enjoyed it!

To keep up to date on the book's progress, just visit my web site at AuthorMichaelHicks.com or visit my page on [Facebook](#). I'm also on [Twitter](#) if you like to hang out there.

Last but not least, stay safe and take care of yourself!

- Michael R. Hicks