

Prayer for the Technocrats

TECH INFANTRY

MARCUS JOHNSTON

Tech Infantry:
Prayer for the
Technocrats

by

Marcus Johnston

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“Caedite eos! Novit enim Dominus qui sunt eius.”

*To Nathan,
from whom all blessings flow.*

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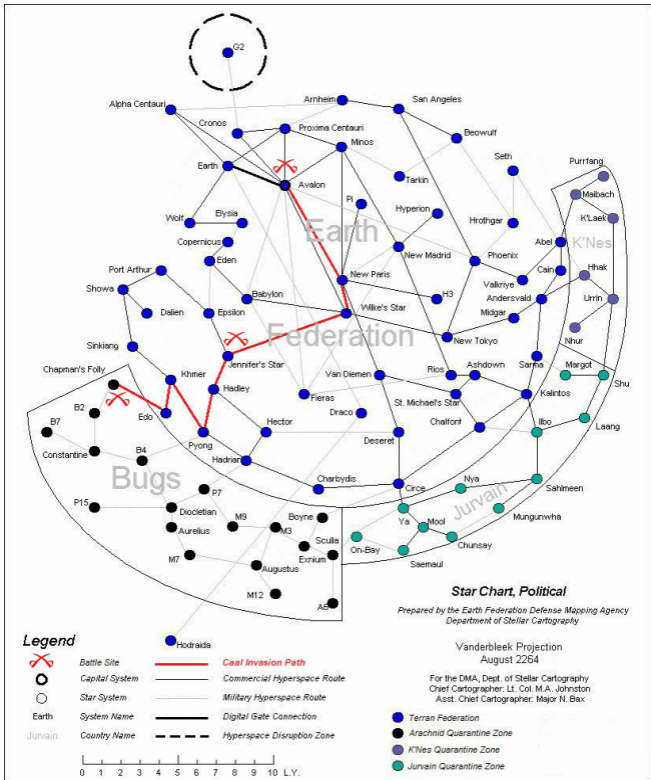
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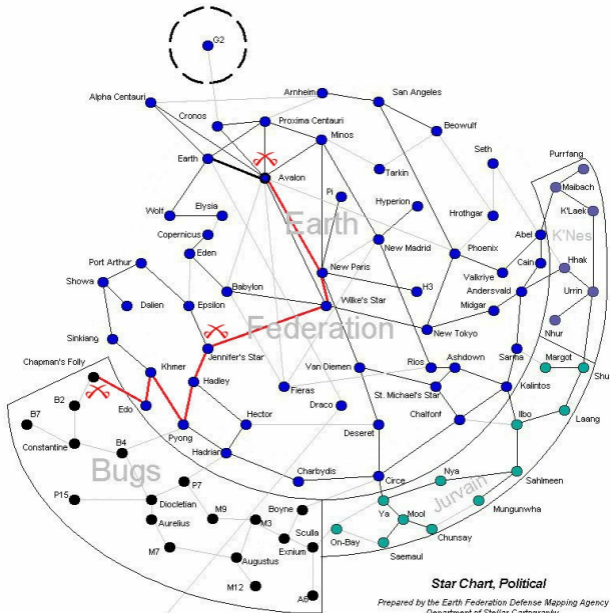
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About the Author





Star Chart, Political

Prepared by the Earth Federation Defense Mapping Agency
Department of Stellar Cartography

Vanderbleek Projection
August 2264

For the DMA, Dept. of Stellar Cartography
Chief Cartographer: Lt. Col. M.A. Johnston
Asst. Chief Cartographer: Major N. Bax

Legend

- Battle Site
- Capital System
- Star System
- Earth System Name
- Jurvaim Country Name
- Caal Invasion Path
- Commercial Hyperspace Route
- Military Hyperspace Route
- Digital Gate Connection
- Hyperspace Disruption Zone

- Terran Federation
- Arachnid Quarantine Zone
- K'Nes Quarantine Zone
- Jurvaim Quarantine Zone



Prologue

Time is a river, flowing through our lives, washing away our bodies as it passes along. However, a drop of water does not a river make. Streams of time flow in the same direction, but there are eddies, branches, and dams in the river.

One of these streams mirrored ours for some time. Then, after the millennium had passed, an amazing thing happened, branching our timeline from theirs. Humanity discovered they were not alone in the universe. Against their

expectations, however, it did not turn out to be friendly.

In order to save them from destruction by an insect-like race, another unexpected thing appeared. A man appeared and stopped the invasion in one brave act. It had been televised worldwide, while millions watched the Bugs eating their way out of Buenos Aires. He created a fireball and made it grow by simply moving his hands. It incinerated the whole city, himself, and the alien invasion force with it. A mage had saved the world.

However, he released a paranoia that drove mankind insane. Other unnatural things appeared which

previously had only been myth.

Werewolves that could grow into huge powerful monsters, mermaids and fairies which could charm mobs into submission, vampires which terrorized the night, but most importantly, true magi could make or unmake the world around them.

The United Nations enacted a special military force to combat these creatures and called them the Technical Infantry Force. These men and women engaged in a life or death struggle for control of the planet for five years. In the end, they put down many of the unnatural creatures, but they started to organize against the TI.

Within a year, the war against the creatures was over, and the TI was ordered to disband. Instead, they overthrew the United Nations and formed the Terran Federation. They instituted draconian measures to fight the Bugs and all others who would oppose humanity. To that end, they made these unnatural creatures outlawed, unless they “earned” their citizenship through military service. Over time, these magi and changelings have become the backbone of their marine force.

Now almost three hundred years have passed. As this galactic empire expanded, many alien races were fought off, three civil wars crushed, and

several invasions stopped. Many believed that there was nothing the Federation could not handle.

Until now...

Chapter 1: The Four

Chapman's Folly, August 8th, 2264

He was adrift in the sea of stars.

Alive, Ivan thought, this is where I'm alive; nothing but stars around me. He turned his head and saw the other fighters of his squadron behind him in formation. They did not disturb his illusion.

Lieutenant Commander Ivan Sun was completely immersed in the AI of his S-27 Wraith, the finest starfighter the

Federation had built. Through years of training, he was able to manipulate the craft by instinct. His body *was* the fighter, as long as he was hooked into the cockpit.

“Axe to Stone, you reading that lidar contact?”

Ivan willed a screen to appear before him, the glowing ball of his lidar/radar detection screen. His squadron, Lightning, was scouting ahead for the Ares Battle Group. They were deep in Bug space and didn't want anyone sneaking up on them. The commander had no idea why Chairman Clarke wanted them to get so close to the Bugs... but that really wasn't his field. *I*

get paid to blast things, he smiled inside, the Chairman gets paid to tell me what to blast.

At present, though, there was nothing to blast. “Negative, Axe, I don’t see...” Suddenly, the blip appeared. “That’s affirmative. I’ll call it into the barn.”

The text about the lidar screen said CHECKING SILHOUETTE AGAINST DATABASE but Sun wasn’t about to wait for the comp to finish processing. *This trip has been boring enough as is.* “Lightning Leader to *Ares*, contact at 342 mark 43.”

“*Ares* to Lightning Leader, can you identify contact?”

Ivan looked at the lidar/radar globe

just as the text changed to SILHOUETTE NOT FOUND. *Great*, he thought before he replied, “Negative, *Ares*, contact is unknown.”

“Lightning Leader, transmit information back to *Ares*.”

“Confirmed.” Sun was so used to the interface that simply thinking about his actions willed them into operation. He didn’t need the heads-up display menu anymore. Ivan could *feel* the data transmitting back to the star control ship.

With a whim, a zoom screen replaced the lidar/radar globe. The commander finally got his first look at the intruder in his space. Cone-shaped, protrusions stuck out of the ship at

asymmetrical angles. There was an organic look to it, like a Bug ship, but Bugs make ugly ships, like they were slapped together out of their own body parts. This design was fluid, like it was grown that way.

The Bugs took it over, he considered, but if they did, why are they sending only a single ship? Unless there's a Bug fleet waiting to ambush us, or it's a floating bomb, it's rather stupid. Of course, those Bug queens could be sneaky...

“Ares to Lightning Leader, make a pass of the ship. Alert Status Two.”

AS2, Ivan shuddered, if the target's hostile, run like hell. I love playing

canary. “Confirmed, *Ares*.” Ivan switched frequencies. “Stone to Lightning. Spread out and follow me. Let’s see what’s hiding in that tin can.”

His squadron signaled acknowledgement and followed him forward, their Wraiths activating thrusters, screaming towards the strange ship.

A quick look at the lidar showed another squadron filling in their point position. *Good*, Ivan thought, *we’ll get to the bars early*. The FOF signal told him which squadron took their slot: *Vulture*. *Commander Grayson’s flight*, Sun knew. *He’s an asshole*. *Good*. *Let him lose some sack time; let the rest of*

us do the real work.

Ten minutes passed as they approached the alien craft. Once they were within their own weapons range, Sun called out, “Scanners on full, AS2. Spread out around the ship and record everything you can. If you see any power surges, break off.”

“Walk in the park, Stone.”

“Shut your mouth and fly, Axe. We’re on the clock,” Ivan growled back.

Sun had always thought that Lieutenant Mike “Axe” Prodan was a good executive officer, but he had a tendency to go overboard. *Sound like someone familiar?* he wondered... then smiled. *Yeah, guess we’re too much*

alike. Now I just need to keep him alive long enough to make his next promotion board.

The squadron fanned out around the cone-shaped spiky ship, keeping a safe distance from the hull. The twelve fighters of his flight raced past it... except for Axe. His craft slowly veered towards the larger craft.

“Axe, what are you doing?” another pilot called out.

Sun checked his back and noticed Prodan’s fighter heading for one of the spikes. “Axe, *veer off!*”

Right before Axe’s fighter could be smashed into oblivion, he hit its thrusters, vectoring off at an extreme

angle and narrowly missing the pylon.

Ivan was mad as hell. “Axe, what the hell were you thinking?!”

“Sorry,” was the only reply from the comm. *That’s not right*, Sun thought. *There’s something wrong with that voice*. Yet he knew the voice was Mike’s, just as he confirmed that the comm came from that fighter. *He’s probably just shaken up*, the commander thought, shrugging off his worries, while the rest of his squadron cleared the ship. The fighters scattered and made a wide swing back around, heading home to the *Ares*.

Sun gathered the squadron’s scanner summaries into his comp for his report

to send back to the star control ship. The readings were strange, giving a view of the ship's interior; the exterior and interior were both asymmetrical, like nothing he had ever seen. Without a doubt, the craft was truly *alien*.

However, there was one glaring fact that burst out from the data. No life signs.

They were tracking a ghost ship.

“Lightning Leader to *Ares*, ready to transmit scan.”

“*Ares* to Lightning, go ahead.”

“Transmitting.” Sun willed the communication to go through. “Be advised, *Ares*, there are no life signs on the alien craft.”

“Confirmed, Lightning. Upon arrival, report to the bridge.”

“Understood, *Ares*. Lightning out.”

That's the military way, he knew as he flew back to the giant floating city, hurry up and wait. Report immediately. Debrief upon arrival. As if I could tell them anything more than the scanners.

It took an hour to get back to the seven-mile long ship and dock. When the fighter finally settled on the flight deck, the system disengaged, and Ivan was freed from his metal exoskeleton.

After the initial shock of leaving the AI immersion, Sun felt a few moments of disorientation, as he always did. The

commander had learned long ago not to look back. If one saw the fighter after immersion, the shell of what you recently just were, nightmares would follow. Several of his class at the academy had dropped out after their first flight in an immersion craft. They couldn't take the transition from man to machine.

When Ivan finally saw Mike, his executive officer didn't look quite himself. Ivan couldn't explain the feeling. After all, Mike looked exactly the same as when Ivan had last seen his friend, but there was something in Mike's actions... the way he walked. It was difficult to put a word to his

anxiety, so instead Ivan called out, “Hey, Axe!”

The lieutenant didn’t immediately respond. As Sun walked toward him, however, Prodan noticed and smiled. “Hey, Stone.”

Ivan waited until he got close to Mike’s face before he whispered, “Axe, what the hell happened out there?”

“What do you mean?”

“What do I mean?!” Sun felt the anger rising in his cheeks. “How ’bout almost smashing yourself against that ship?!”

“Oh, that...” Prodan shrugged.

“Yeah, *that*.”

“Well... hey, this is me, right? I had

to take a closer look.”

“Closer look?!” Sun was turning red. “That’s not just some frigate out there you can buzz, that’s a unknown alien ship! Did you want them to blast you by mistake, or were you *trying* to start a war?!”

“They wouldn’t hurt me.”

“Why? ’Cause they’re all dead?!”

Mike looked hopelessly confused, but Ivan ignored it. By now, the squadron commander’s temper had taken over. “It doesn’t look good on my record if I can’t control a pilot on my flight. You’re a fucking maniac!”

Prodan gave a blank look, as if he were completely lost. The look defused

Ivan's anger. Sun took a deep breath and tried again. "Look, Mike, they'll never give you your own squadron if you keep pulling stunts like that. I'm trying to watch your ass." Ivan sighed. "Just make sure you don't get it shot off."

"Okay, I'm sorry." The blank look changed, but only slightly.

Ivan patted Mike on the shoulder and forced a smile. "Come on, I've gotta report to the bridge, but I'll buy ya a drink afterwards."

"All right."

As they walked towards the transit shuttle, Sun couldn't shake the feeling that there was something wrong. Axe just wasn't himself. *The attitude*, Ivan

finally realized, *he doesn't have the attitude*. Most pilots had the devil-may-care attitude—live today, die tomorrow—but Mike had always taken it a step further. It was in his voice, the way he walked, the way he lived. The man beside Ivan now had none of those traits.

Maybe he's still shocked, Ivan decided as he tried to forget the incident. *After all, if I had swiped past certain death, it might take me a while to recover.*

Within a few minutes, they reached the bridge. It was a gargantuan place, heavily armored and electromagnetically shielded, filled with monitors, holographic projections, and controls,

all designed to run this floating city. Fleet personnel were rushing around like angry bees. In the center of this particular madness, the captain was busy signing datapads and consulting holograms, displaying the recent operational data. The two pilots went over to her circular desk and saluted.

The flag captain grunted while signing a database. “Not me, gentlemen,” she replied, gesturing towards the row of panels, “him.”

They turned to look and saw what she was pointing at. Admiral Montambo, black as night, was overseeing the fighter squadron’s sensor readouts. He was practically a mythical

creature, almost never seen beyond the senior officer's decks. Why he was here instead of the Combat Information Center, a room twice as large and better equipped than the bridge, was beyond Ivan.

With trepidation, the pilots walked over to the battle group commander and stood at attention. Montambo turned to look at them; he seemed bored and stared at them like one would look at an insect. "You flew past the alien craft?"

"Yes, sir," Ivan chirped.

"It didn't react in any way?"

"No, sir. There were no life signs, no automated systems registering of any kind."

“Your scans confirm what you say.”

The admiral turned slightly, scoffing a lie he couldn't prove wasn't true. “But what I don't understand is how a dead ship can change course?” Montambo pointed to the hologram in front of him. Sure enough, the alien craft *had* changed course. *But how?* Ivan wondered.

The admiral tapped on the worried sensor tech's shoulder. “When will the target reach the fighter screen?”

“Five minutes, sir.”

“Send comm to—”

“Captain!” another tech chirped,

“Com signal coming in from alien craft!”

“On screen,” she replied.

A large hologram appeared at the far

end of the bridge. Ivan turned to look at the admiral... and saw Mike touch him on the shoulder. A shiver went up the senior officer's spine and Prodan stumbled away. No one else saw it; everyone else on the bridge was focused on the strange alien face staring back at them. It was a big brute of a thing; at least four appendages (with hooves) that they could see. The creature was covered in fur that was falling out in clumps. His... her... *its* voice was deep and booming despite its emaciated frame. "*Ja-ree! Mayto run kalares puto. Es chen patrain nurak daema deh suron sota. Ner ilta deh sur oento?*"

The admiral looked over at the

captain. “Send a copy to the linguist and open a comm channel on me.” She did as ordered and soon a beep sounded. Montambo straightened up and replied, “This is Admiral Montambo of the Terran Federation.” He pointed to himself and then raised both hands. “We advise you to stop your engines until we are ready. Discom.” The hologram disappeared.

The admiral turned to look at the two pilots. “The dead speak, too.” Montambo gave them a huge grin. “Dismissed.”

Both of them saluted and walked out. When they got in the transit tube, Mike leaned against the side and shook

his head. “Hey, Stone. What just happened? Why were we on the bridge?”

Ivan shrugged. “I don’t know, Axe. Guess the admiral wanted to hear it himself.”

“No, I mean...”

“Forget it, Axe. Let me get you that drink.”

Avalon, Patton Base

It was the same every time; she’d be on the verge of figuring it out and someone would walk in the door. It was that extra distraction that would always ruin her concentration. When Dr.

Miranda Mayfield looked up to see the source of it, she froze. It was a man she never thought would walk into Raptor Headquarters. “Colonel Dane, pleasure to see you. Shouldn’t you be dead?”

Vin Dane, with a face that looked stretched and hair so slicked that it didn’t appear natural, smiled a little too widely at her. “And a good morning to you, Miranda.” He took a seat on the stool next to her. Dane stared at her, his eyes spaced a little too far apart.

Mayfield’s brown eyes set in her black skin stared back at him, her hair caught in tight braids running to the center of her back. She couldn’t help but smile back. “I thought the guards had

orders to shoot you on sight?”

“Guards don’t look at faces, only rank. They salute, check the clearance, which I have—”

“Head of Military Intelligence, I know.” With a wave of her hand, the hologram she was working on sank back into the desktop. “And so you somehow avoided any officers who knew you and snuck back all the way to my lab.”

“Back doors, secret traps...” Vin shrugged.

“The obvious question is ‘Why?’ More accurately, I should ask, ‘What do you think you can get out of me?’”

“Miranda, I’m hurt!” His smile dripped with sarcasm.

She rolled her eyes. “Two weeks of your occasional attention...”

“It was more like three.”

“Twenty years ago?”

“Nineteen.”

“Whatever. Making out in a foxhole while all hell was breaking loose does not ensure undying devotion.”

“It was a hell of a way to meet.” Vin winked. “And besides, I saved your life.”

“I saved yours,” Mayfield reminded him.

“I thought we were friends.”

“We *are*. But that doesn’t mean you can use me as your link into the TI Special Service.”

“I wouldn’t *dream* of using you to get to the Raptors. Besides, I thought we were on the same side?”

“We are, but we work in different areas. You spy outside the Fed, we spy inside.” Miranda scratched the side of her head with her stylus. Her head always itched when Vin was in the room. “Perhaps I should rephrase the question. What do you want?”

“I’m here to offer you a transfer.”

“I’m a civilian now.”

“All right, I’m offering you a job.”

“I’m happy here... and I told you no before.”

Dane sighed. “Then let’s call it a challenge.” Vin leaned closer to her.

“And I know how much you *love* a challenge.”

She snorted in disdain. “What have you got?”

The colonel pulled out a small disc and handed to Mayfield. “Load this up.”

Miranda took it from his hand, her eyes lighting up, betraying her curiosity. “What is it?”

“That’s a copy of an ethereal scan done at a monorail station on Arnheim.”

“Near the border? An ethereal scan? That takes a lot of juice. Why would they do an ethereal scan at a train station?”

“Because MI was tracking a human inbound from Jurvain space who didn’t

bother checking in at Customs.”

Even Miranda couldn't hide her interest now. She inserted the disc in the slot right next the embedded hologram projector. While it was processing, the doctor couldn't help but ask, “How did you find him?”

“He wasn't very clever. Customs tally showed one missing from the ship passenger list. Once we ran his ID through the surveillance comps, they located and tracked him. Then he boarded the trans-planetary shuttle.”

“Why?”

The hologram popped up showing the contents of the ethereal scan. The colonel just smiled and said, “Take a

look.”

Miranda turned to the hologram and stared at it. The three-dimensional image showed his physical attributes, as would any scan, but his kirlean and arcane auras were present as well. “The color isn’t right.”

Vin kept smiling. “Go on.”

“There are some normal human auras present, but they seem to be... overlapped by another.”

“Overlapped?”

“As if there’s two people occupying the same body.” She flipped through the physical scan. “Body temp, correct. DNA checks out, pulse rate... Vin, this man is dead.”

“Vampire?”

“No.” Mayfield continued to scroll through the sensor reports. “Night walkers have lower than normal body temperature. Besides...” She looked back at the colonel. “They have a distinctive... singular aura.”

“Just a thought.”

“Vin, you wouldn’t come to me with this if this was just a leech.”

“I know. Keep looking.”

Miranda shrugged and turned back to the hologram. “This one is distinctly human, but the dominant aura,” she said, tapping her stylus to separate the two characteristics, “is something else.”

“Like someone’s hitching a lift?”

The doctor stared back at Dane. “If one were to make a rough analogy,” she scoffed, “but the only kind of creature that could accomplish this would be a mage...” She flinched at her use of the archaic term. “Er, an *awakened* of such skill that...”

“That what?”

“That they wouldn’t have to do it at all!”

“Why not?”

Miranda pursed her lips. “The training required to reach that level of control, to animate a dead body and use it as a shell... well, they could project themselves astrally a whole lot easier.”

“But they wouldn’t be able to affect

reality.”

“Not necessarily. Given a sufficient strength...” The doctor shook her head.

“No, this is pure speculation, we have no facts. Besides,” she pointed to the dominant aura, “this controlling force is *not* human. But it made itself to *look* human in order to pass our regular scans. A customs scan would never have caught it.”

“Is it Jurvain?”

“Don’t think so. There are no mag... awakened among those aliens, as far as we know.”

“They have the commonality.”

“Perhaps. I’d need more time.”

“Take it, but hurry. I need to know.”

Dr. Mayfield turned to look at her friend. “There’s something you’re not telling me.”

“Quite a bit. In fact, I have a whole universe of secrets, Miranda, none of which I want to fall into Raptor hands.”

“Specifically this.”

“Right now, I only have a guess. I need someone uncluttered to take a look at it.”

“Independent verification?”

Dane shrugged. “If you like.”

“Is it that important?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“Because...” She could see the colonel was thinking, trying to find a

way not to reveal too much. “Because if it’s what I think it is, it means invasion.”

Miranda laughed. “Who would notice another?”

“I’m serious...”

“Come on, Vin, since the 3rd Civil War, we’ve been invaded by every race we know.”

“The Vin Shriak and Vulthra were nothing...”

“You call losing half the fleet in one battle *nothing*?”

“Compared to this.” Vin pointed to the hologram. “We need to know what it is, so we can stop it, while we can.”

Miranda shook her head. “Don’t put any pressure on me, will you?”

“I’ll try not to.”

Port Arthur

Before Sergeant Palencia could turn the corner, a flurry of bullets rained down the corridor. *Stupid, Demar thought, real stupid. One of those hits the outer hull, and this mining station will be sucking vacuum.*

Demar bit down on his dentcom. “Hostiles located. Level 4, Junction 6A. B Quad, flash ’em.”

While his troops were moving into position, Demar ordered part of his nanotech-armored suit to extend itself around the corner. The Mark 100 Power

Armor allowed automatic camouflage; the nanobots adapted to look like the scenery behind them. It worked beautifully while staying still... but troopers were rarely still.

The nanotech could mold itself into other things—in this case, an extended sensor. Soon enough, it transmitted the image to the heads-up display inside his helmet.

There they are, he thought, *unlucky bastards*. Then he saw a visual distortion in the distance. *B Quad... here they come*. The second he saw something fly through the air, Demar order his suitcomp, “Retract sensors. Blinders.”

Every sensor on his suit went black as the flash grenade went off. When Palencia heard the screams, he removed the blinders and walked into the corridor. As he did, B Quad moved faster, hitting the two gunmen with electro-shock fletchettes, knocking them out.

Demar tongued his dentcom to change frequencies. When he found his battalion channel, the sergeant signaled, “Level 4 secured.”

“4 Platoon, return to HQ. Port Arthur is secured.”

“Confirmed. Discom.” Palencia then turned toward B Quad, shifting over to the proximity frequency. “All right,

you punks, back up to HQ. We've saved this floating tin can.”

The quad roared with cheers, made frighteningly loud by their suits' amplifiers. Then Palencia walked away towards the elevators; he was glad it was over.

The Bloc Insurrection had cost too much in personnel and equipment, but Demar was the only one who saw it. As he pondered it on the trip up levels, the more it made no sense. *Why not let these orientals have their own country back?* After the 3rd Civil War, Chairman Clarke had done nothing but invade and fight off other invasions. Palencia's precious Tech Infantry had

been decimated to its bare bones.

The Federation needs time to catch its breath, the sergeant knew, or it'll fall apart.

The elevator opened and Demar stepped out into the commercial center. Deactivating his camouflage, he ordered the suit to remove the head protection so he could breathe the air. One sniff filled his nostrils with the smell of burnt wire and ozone.

He walked over to the party; the brass hadn't waited until the orbital station was secure before throwing a wild blowout. Palencia knew that his platoon's commanding officer was somewhere in the crowd. With some

careful searching, he found him, half-soused already and flirting with a fellow lieutenant from another battalion. His CO noticed him immediately. “Sarge! Glad you could make it. Here, let me get you a drink.”

“Sir, I just came from Level 4—”

“I heard!” the lieutenant replied, speaking a little too loud. “Damn good job. I’m sure we’ll all get medals for this.”

“Sir, what about securing the station?”

“The LI will take care of that.”

“If the Light Infantry could ‘take care of it,’ we wouldn’t have been called in to clean up the mess,” Demar said, anger

creeping into his voice, “sir.”

“Listen, Palencia,” his CO said, emphasizing his point by gesturing with his beer, “just because they’re not awakened or... changelings,” Demar tried not to notice how the lieutenant avoided the old term *werewolf*, “doesn’t mean they can’t do their jobs. Now we’ve got a whole division of Tech Infantry here and another division of LI. We’ve bagged the angry slant-eyes, and the others are too scared to come out of their rooms. So, sergeant, there’s nothing to worry about!”

“Are we being shipped out in the—”

“Damn it, sarge, do I have to *order* you to have fun?!”

Demar took in a deep breath. “No, sir.”

“Good. Now get... to... it.”

The sergeant didn't bother saluting before he left. In fact, he doubted the lieutenant would even remember the conversation. *He may have gone to OCS, Demar thought, but he still thinks like a grunt.*

As he was still in power armor, the crowd parted before him. When he reached the edge, his platoon was waiting for him. Demar tried to hide a smile, but a grin still leaked out. *At least I beat some discipline in them,* he thought. “I suppose you maggots wanna join the party?”

“Yes, sergeant!” resounded in perfect unison.

“Report to the *New Paris*, plug your armor back in, stow your gear, and change into some decent fatigues. *Then* you can come back. Just remember not to get *too* drunk. You’ve still gotta run maintenance checks on the suits tomorrow.” There was a pause as he looked at the fine group of boys and girls, knowing that they couldn’t conceive of a time like ‘tomorrow.’

“Dismissed.”

They whooped and hollered as they ran off back to the ship. Demar just shook his head and resealed his suit. The sergeant wanted to make one more

sweep of the station before he could sleep tonight. *Can't trust the LI to do anything right*, he knew.

As the sounds of partying slowly died away, Palencia had time to think. *No, the Light Infantry weren't completely worthless. Those 'normal' humans went through similar training, were drafted the same way I did, but they're glorified policemen. Speeding tickets, breaking up fights, dispersing assemblies; that's what they're good at. But in war, they're nothing but cannon fodder. They don't have the right instincts for survival.*

Then again, if Clarke keeps killing off my boys—the TI filled with

awakened and changelings—there won't be anyone but LI left. Demar coughed out a laugh. “I’m getting too morbid,” he said aloud. “I should have taken that drink.”

Avalon, Capitol Executive Building

Chairman Clarke looked bored... *or maybe that's just me*, Amanda Kait thought. General John Walters, head of the Tech Infantry and member of the Grand Council, was summarizing yet another glorious victory for the Federation... *whatever*. Personally, Amanda didn't think that some Asian ex-monarchists with obsolete weapons

posed *that* much threat to Clarke's ego. *But apparently they did... 'cause now they're all dead.*

Guess it's not their fault for dying; no one told them that their emperor got killed in the last Vin Shriak invasion. Once the Eastern Bloc fell apart, it was only right that the Fed send in the fleet to save them. But we never told them they couldn't have their country back... oops.

Walters continued to drone on; Kait repressed a sigh. *If someone had told me how pointless it was at the top, she thought, I wouldn't have worked as hard to get here.*

“...all in all, sir, one hell of a job!”

the general wrapped up to expected applause. Amanda suppressed another groan; *I couldn't take another minute of his thick drawl.*

The Grand Council Chairman leaned forward to check the next item on the agenda. Clarke's ruffled white hair and unkempt sideburns busted out of his marshal's uniform. Despite his appearance, he was in great shape. He still had an animal look to him, thanks to his changeling heritage. "Now we will hear from the Minister of Production, M. Kait."

Amanda stood up from the table and ran through her speech. It was the same speech she always gave. After "Ladies

and Gentlemen of the Council,” she stopped paying attention. As long as she changed the numbers, no one noticed that she was saying the same thing.

Production is increasing, new factories were being built, and we’re restoring levels back to pre-war standards.

None of it was true, of course, but no one remained Minister of Production by telling the truth. Clarke didn’t want to hear the truth, even after twenty years as dictator in all but name, and anyone who *did* tell the actual facts never remained long on the Grand Council.

When she finished droning on, a wave of relief came over her. As Kait sat down, she thought, *At last, I can get*

back to work.

“Thank you, M. Kait,” Clarke rumbled out, “but what I don’t understand is how your report conflicts with the one submitted by the Minister of the Fleet, Admiral Nirav Patel?”

Oh shit, she realized, the old buzzard actually paid attention! Well, that answers where Patel was. No one drops a negative report on Clarke’s desk and sticks around. So now I get to take the heat... time to backpedal. “In what way, honored chairman?”

“Admiral Patel states that he has been unable to receive prompt shipment of replacement parts for the Fleet. Spare parts are *vital* to the continued health of

our ships. Now if production is increasing as you say, why do our fighting forces lack for spares?”

When in doubt, reroute. “Spares are available, sir. However many of them remain at the factory or in orbital warehouses. Since the Five Acts places all civilian merchant ships under the control of the military, you may remind the admiral that if he wants parts, all he has to do is pick them up.” Kait suppressed her smile; freedom of the merchant marine was her own pet project.

“You are well aware, M. Kait,” Minister ben Itzak spoke up, “that those craft are needed to support our fleet’s

maneuvers. There is no use blaming Admiral Patel when you do not produce enough freighters to supply demand.”

What are you playing at, Jakob? she wondered, staring at his curly salt-and-pepper hair. *You think by supporting Patel's attack, you can grab my position? Well, I suppose the Ministry of Education is lower on the totem pole.* “It is true,” Kait lowered her head, “that in increasing our ship building facilities, we must strike a balance. However, since the fleet lacks the spare parts it needs, then it seems pointless to produce as many warships.” Amanda raised her head, desperately repressing a smile.

“Therefore I ask the Council to increase the percentage of civilian construction to 75%.”

“There’s no need for such drastic measures,” Clarke scoffed. “With the end of the Insurrection, there will be less need for long-range maneuvers. I will instruct Patel to release more freighters to the maintenance of the shipping lanes.” The old werewolf looked down at his datapad. “Since there’s no further business, this meeting’s adjourned.”

All the ministers stood up as the chairman got up and left. Once Clarke left the chamber, all the members of the executive body milled around and gathered their belongings, but none of

them were about to leave. *This* was the time for political maneuvering, right after their audience with “King” Arthur.

“I thought you were gone for sure,” whispered General Kathryn Wagenecht, head of the Light Infantry. Although her army was the largest force in the Federation, they consisted purely of unawakened, and were little more than policemen. That made her one of the most junior on the Grand Council.

“It takes more than Patel to get rid of me.”

“Gutless,” the general spat. “He didn’t have the courage to attack you himself.”

Amanda simply smiled; Kathryn was

one of those rare breeds who rose through the ranks on ability, not ambition. *Poor woman*, she thought, *she's really not cut out for this battlefield*. "Patience, general. I'm sure Patel has more broadsides in mind for me."

"Then I'm probably next. The admiral has no love for me. He'd rather replace me with one of his flunkies... Nishijima, no doubt."

She is really bad at this, Amanda realized. *The general's making such an obvious alliance that anyone could see through it. However, one shouldn't refuse it either...* "I've been told that LI are being placed to run the freighters,

due to a lack of qualified Fleet personnel.”

“Usually with a chief around to play captain. It’s embarrassing to have our officers bossed around by ratings.”

“Do you think you could accelerate the transfer program?”

A smile appeared on Kathryn’s face. “It’s possible. They’re wanting to free up as many of their own as they can.”

“Good. I’d hate to deprive the fleet of their resources.” Kait warmed her new ally with a brief smile, they collected her datapad and walked towards the other side of the table. As she was angling toward Antonio

Villeneuve, Minister of Finance,
Amanda saw Jakob ben Itzak
maneuvering next to General Walters.
*Well, she thought, it's obvious which
side he's chosen.*

Villeneuve was a rather ugly short
man, but he compensated for it with an
immaculate taste in clothing and
jewelry. In her opinion, it made for an
interesting balance.

Antonio noticed her approach with
amused disinterest. When Amanda was
close enough, he said, "It's interesting,
don't you think?"

"What is?"

Villeneuve waved toward ben Itzak.
"The sheep without their shepherd.

Without Patel, they can't even manage a simple character assassination," he said, turning to smile at Kait, "unless you are more formidable than you seem."

"People must say the same about you."

"People mostly ignore me." Antonio shrugged. "After all, why bother with the old man's bookkeeper?"

"Because the old man won't be around forever, and the bookkeeper knows where the secrets are kept."

The finance minister turned to look at her again, his repulsive face strained in a quizzical stare. "I am not a sheep, M. Kait."

"Nor am I, M. Villeneuve." Amanda

sat down beside him. “Shepherds exist to protect sheep from wolves.”

“Wolves get shot.”

“So do sheep.” Kait smiled. “It simply becomes a question of how you want to live.”

Antonio leaned back in his chair, a smug look on his face. “I could live quite well as a sheep.”

“Fattened up for the kill? Look at them, Antonio, you’re no use to them. Money isn’t real to them.”

“You make it sound as if I have only two choices. What makes you think I don’t have my own pack?”

“Because you would have leapt on me before Patel did. After all, you’ve

got more dirt on me than the admiral does.”

“Before today, I couldn’t tell who was the bigger threat, you or him.”

“And now?”

Villeneuve sat up and checked his datapad. “We should talk some more of this, say... over lunch tomorrow?”

“A sheep among wolves?”

“Predators over a carcass.”

“Appetizing.” Amanda smiled. “I’ll be there.”

“Excellent. O’Kim’s should suffice. I find a good meal can help even the hardest things to swallow.”

Chapter 2: Whispers & Warnings

Chapman's Folly, August 9th

The battle group sat there in the middle of Bug space, opposite the alien craft, waiting for someone to break the silence. Ivan Sun and his squadron were set to head out in another couple of hours, but until then, he tried to work out and forget his worries.

We're just sitting here, Ivan thought, while punching at the training bag. *The*

bugs on the planets below obviously know we're here. Right now, they're building the mother of all fleets to kill us.

I don't know why the admiral is so goddamned determined to talk to them. Of course, since most aliens we meet just start shooting, I guess it's an improvement.

As he drilled his frustration into the last punch, the general quarters alarm rang out. Sun grabbed the towel and ran for the transit tube. The commander knew that he was three levels up and a mile away from the launch deck where his fighter was. His sweaty body ran into the mass of frenzied personnel

rushing to their posts. Ivan just made the cramped transit tube before it slammed shut.

Sun managed to turn his sweat-drenched head around to see a lot of faces he recognized. There were 16,000 Fleet personnel on board the TFS Ares, not including the TI and LI elements that made up the marine element. However, there were few fighter jocks. Sun spoke to one or two before the tube stopped and out poured the pilots into the flight deck. Ivan raced across the deck, scrambling across power lines, technicians, and other pilots. Finally, he reached his craft, watching the rest of his squadron stumble in.

“Prep craft for launch,” Ivan ordered, “we’ll need to be ready when the deck boss...”

A squawk came through and the admiral’s voice went out to the entire battle group. “We have been able to decipher the alien’s transmissions and determine that its intentions are benign. Their fleet, which is approaching our fighter screen, are refugees from a war with the Vulthra. To avoid unnecessary conflict, I am ordering the withdrawal of our fighter screen.”

Murmurs went through the flight deck and the thought was the same. *Withdraw the fighter screen? Is he mad? Even if they are peaceful, keeping them at*

arm's length is the wiser move.

“We will remain at battle stations until I’ve determined that we are completely out of danger. That is all.”

“That is all?” Prodan mocked.

“We’re still on station, so let’s prep those birds and get ready to jump in five. Move it!”

The pilots rushed to their fighters, going through the pre-flight launch sequence. A neural interface was not a simple thing. Although a pilot adjusted to it, the craft’s comp had to be in perfect working order or chaos would ensue.

Sun went through the checklist without a conscious thought. This

sudden change of events was still upsetting him. *No self-respecting admiral would do this. Montambo was no fool; his squadron saved the day against the Vulthra. Why the sudden change now?*

Near the end of his check, a pilot closer to the force field, separating the flight deck from open space, called out, “Hey, they’re bringing their ships in!”

Ivan activated a subroutine and the feed from the external sensors popped up on a hologram. The commander couldn’t believe it; *the admiral was letting an entire fleet of aliens park right next to our warships! I don’t care if they look like freighters; they could*

be anything!

With fear causing adrenalin to run through his veins, his senses heightened, and so he saw the first of the sailors drop at the end of the bay.

His head turned and saw a wave of faintings, nausea, and screams; the newly recovered having the same glint in their eye that Axe and then the admiral had.

Like they weren't the one in control.

As the invisible wave was rushing towards them, the commander yelled out, "Emergency launch!"

"What?!" one of his squadron's pilots called out, but Sun wasn't responding. With lightning speed, he immersed into the fighter interface and

became one with the machine. In his feverish panic, the thrusters pulsed too quickly, banging against the side of the flight deck.

Narrowly missing the freighter in front of him, he checked his sensors and saw that half his squadron got out. *I may be mad*, Ivan thought, *but something's taking over the ship.*

Switching to the squadron frequency, he announced. "Follow me."

"Stone, where are we going?" Prodan asked.

"Out of here. Something's happening back there and we don't wanna be near it."

"Uh, sir... aren't you..."

Suddenly, Mike's fighter veered off, then slowly came back.

“Axe, what's wrong?”

“I think this is a bad idea. We should head back to the *Ares*.”

Ivan felt, rather than heard, the change in Mike's voice. “Axe, you need to trust me on this one.”

“You'll lose your commission, Ivan.”

“Rather that than my soul!”

Sun regretting saying it the second it left his lips. It was the panic in his voice talking. He was sure the rest of the squadron would turn back.

They probably would have... if Axe hadn't fired and destroyed one of his

wingmen.

The flash flared across Ivan's sight. *My God, he thought, he's one of them... whoever they are!*

To the three remaining with him, the commander called out, "Full thrust and spread out! Run for the jump point!"

This time, there was no hesitation; what remained of Lightning Squadron would follow him through a black hole, if only to escape what possessed Mike Prodan.

Axe, meanwhile, moved to match velocities and fired his plasma cannons again; another fighter down.

Sun swung beneath an outlying destroyer, temporarily masking his lidar

signature. Another of his wingmen tried to skirt around the back, and was evaporated by the larger craft's engines.

Prodan was catching up to the remaining two as they cleared the battle group. They could only run in the open space between the fleet and the jump point.

“Stone, Axe is gaining on us.”

“How?”

“He must have cut life support to give his engines a boost.”

“Damn it!” Ivan cursed. “Well... he can't keep it up forever. Continue full burn until we reach the jump point and try and stay out of his weapons lock!”

“No good, Stone. My comp says

he'll reach us a minute before that point.”

“We can still maneuver, Goat.”

Ivan's wingman turned his fighter around and hit the thrust. “Stone, keep running for the point. Warn the Fleet. I'll keep Axe busy.”

“Goat, what are you...”

“Just do it, Stone! If you survive, there's still a chance for the rest of us. GO!”

Sun never cut his thrust; he simply watched as Goat raced back to meet his doom. Axe had five years flight time and had survived the last Vulthra War. Goat was an ensign and straight out of the academy.

No chance at all.

Ivan deactivated his lidar and concentrated on flying. *Goat was right; the ensign only has to delay him a few seconds. Force him to maneuver to dodge his attack and he wouldn't reach me before I reach the jump point.*

Minutes ticked away as he approached it. The generators would open up a path into hyperspace, but he wouldn't be able to trust the smaller fighter comp to handle the navigation alone.

Sun knew he was right, as the gate opened into interstellar flight, and many others had paid the price. Still, with that knowledge, he had desperately hoped he

was wrong.

Avalon, Old City

Amanda never liked waiting; that's why she always arrived late. Besides, after finishing her morning paperwork, Kait remembered to authorize the immediate production of a broad spectrum of naval supplies, just in case Patel actually wanted them.

When she finally found time for lunch, the Minister of Production snuck out of her office, avoiding her bodyguards, and reached the monorail to take her to the Old City. O'Kim's was an exclusive bar near the river, known

for its discretion, as well as its strange mixture of Irish and Korean food.

Kait walked into the rich wood-paneled bar and found Villeneuve in a booth near the back. As she passed a flat hologram pretending to be antique television set, she smiled at Antonio, delicately grazing on a salad. “Not hungry today?” she asked coyly.

“Merely whetting the appetite,” he replied, forcing down another forkful of lettuce. “I assume you brought the main course?”

Amanda shrugged. “If this is the place to eat it?”

Villeneuve opened his jacket to reveal a black device clipped to the

inside with a pulsating light. “O’Kim’s has a good reputation, but I don’t put as much faith in its patrons. Please sit.”

Kait accepted the ability of his scrambler, just as much as she trusted her own in the heel of her shoe. She sat down and flashed another smile. “In the council chambers, you were talking of a possible alliance?”

“*You* were talking of an alliance,” Antonio corrected. “I was merely hinting at one.”

“Indirectness is our stock-in-trade, M. Villeneuve, but I thought we might dispense with it for once.”

“Why? Are you running out of time?”

“We all are, Antonio. When Clarke falls...”

“*If* he falls. He’s the lynchpin upon which the Federation is based. The troops are loyal to him alone. We can not remove him.”

“I’m not saying we should. Not yet. But Clarke is old and he may die. When that happens, we need to be in a position to keep everything together.”

“With us on top?”

“Would you rather have Patel?”

Villeneuve smiled and bit down on another bite of salad. “Then I guess it comes down to what you want.”

“What do *you* want, Antonio? In the long game?”

“Simple. Free commerce and the Five Acts removed.” The ugly man leaned forward. “Finance is always in the red when the government runs everything.”

“What about for yourself?”

“Finance Minister is high enough for me, but absolute non-intervention into commerce is the price for my acquiescence.”

“And what does it cost for your *active* support?”

Antonio smiled. “Selection of ministry appointees, approval of general-level officers...”

“The power behind the throne?”

Amanda summarized.

“If you prefer to call it that.”

Villeneuve took a sip of his beer.

“Considering that you want the throne itself, I would think it’s a small price to pay.”

“I won’t be your straw lady.”

“And although you would make a lovely one, Amanda, that is not what I had in mind.” He leaned back, folding his arms as he stared at her. “You wished to dispense with the verbal fencing. Very well. Let me be frank... I don’t trust you.”

“Naturally. I don’t trust you either.”

“You see our dilemma. We don’t trust each other, but we recognize each other’s power. Therefore, the solution

is obvious.”

“It is?”

“Yes, we need another person to balance us.”

“A triumvirate?” Kait’s eyes bulged. “You want to restore everything to the way it was before the last civil war?”

“Not everything. For instance, I don’t want the Raptors, Internal Security, or any other kind of secret police force. I’m tired of dealing with their kind.”

“No more spies?”

“No, of course, not.” Villeneuve smiled. “We’ll each have our own spies, of course, but it won’t be

centralized. I don't want another Rashid King to appear.”

Amanda unconsciously shuddered at the name. King had been head of Internal Security right before the 3rd Civil War, then tried to seize power for himself until another coup raised up Clarke.

“A true balance... between three people? It could never last.”

“It *did* last in the early days of the Federation.”

“They were fighting the Bugs. You don't fight amongst each other when there's a threat.”

“Now who's being naïve?” Antonio raised his eyebrows. “Three civil wars,

Amanda, and they were all done under external threat. Hell, Clarke has kept the thrice-damned Five Acts in place by *constantly* being at war!”

“You can’t blame Clarke for the Vin Shriak or the Vulthra.”

Villeneuve finished his beer and rose to stand. “I’m sorry... I thought you wanted to get rid of the ol’ buzzard.”

“Antonio, sit down,” Kait moaned. “I get your point. I’m sure a triumvirate could last.”

“Nothing lasts, Amanda, but maybe we can set a foundation for a free Federation.”

“I didn’t know you were such a revolutionary.”

“I’m not, but after seeing the other extreme... well, anything’s got to be better than this.”

“I know. Production is sliding as well. With Clarke pushing for total war production, we can’t build new factories, and—”

“Save me your sad story, Amanda. We all have our own.”

Kait smiled. *For a second, the galactic accountant sounded like a Resistance fighter of old.* “You still haven’t said who you want as the third member.”

“We are hardly ready to make our move. We need time to get our pieces in position. The third man will appear

when the time is right.”

“I don’t like uncertainty.”

“Politics *is* uncertainty, Amanda.

How you manage it shows how good you are, even if it’s hard to stomach.

Drink?”

Jennifer’s Star, August 10th

Homebase. Garrison Duty.

Downtime. Whatever the brass decided to call it, Demar was always glad to get it. *Sure, the grunts always complain about missing out on ‘the action,’ but those were the newbies talking. Port Arthur was not a true battle, he knew. Picking off untrained civilians might be*

a challenge, but it's nothing against troopers in power armor. Action? Heh, they haven't seen action yet.

Not that I want them to, either, he thought. I need time to train these fresh faces on how to survive before the next disaster strikes.

The *New Paris* burned through the atmosphere to make its landing on the planet's only military spaceport. Their ship was a small planetary landing craft, capable of maneuvering inside and outside an atmosphere. It easily made the descent and landed with a minimum of gravity pull.

Palencia was never happier to see the sun. As his platoon roamed out of

the craft, waiting MP's guided them to an entire complex of empty barracks.

The place was enormous; the hall of beds was only one of many on base, and his entire battalion only filled one corner of it.

“Now don't get too comfortable,” the MP warned. “We just got word that the *Ares* has been called back from the Bug front. So all of their troops are going to bunk here, too. Enjoy the space while you can.”

Demar acknowledged with a grunt, then turned back to his platoon. “You heard the man. Get your gear stowed, put down all your teddy bears from Mommy, and then file back to the *New*

Paris. Since we're going to have guests, I want our suits in the local armory *today*.”

“Come on, sarge!” Phillipe whined. “We just got off the boat!”

“You'll have plenty of time to drink all the booze in town before those Fleet boys get here. Now move it, maggots!”

Despite a whole barrage of groans and sighs, his platoon was heading out the door right as Demar's commanding officer arrived. “What's going on here, Palencia?”

“They're just stowing their gear, sir.”

“I can see that, sergeant.” The lieutenant gave him a questioning stare.

“But why are they headed back to the ship?”

“Equipment, sir. It needs to be secured here on base.”

“A little quick on the draw, aren’t you?”

Demar had no idea what he was talking about. *Probably watched too many 2-D vids*, he figured, and shrugged the comment off. “If the *New Paris* needs to take off on another mission, it’ll take our suits and gear with it.”

“There’s no war on...”

“You should know better, sir.”

“*What* did you say?”

The sergeant realized that he let his frustration slip. His anger focused on

his CO was starting to show. “I mean, sir, that fights can start without warning. Better to be prepared.”

“And I know that my platoon has been out in the field for a few months. They need recreation. I’m planning on giving them three-day passes.”

Demar bowed his head. “You’re right, sir. But let me get the gear off the ship first.”

“Fair enough.” The lieutenant strode off to the officer’s barracks.

Time off will do them good,
Palencia thought, *but I’ve got a feeling that all hell’s about to break loose.*

Oh, well... might as well relax in the eye of the storm.

Avalon, Patton Base

Miranda hadn't slept in two days. The problem of the ethereal scan drilled at her brain and wouldn't stop. Her initial hypothesis, that an awakened was holding sway over this dead soul, had been destroyed within the first twelve hours. *Well*, she thought, *at least a human mage*. Then she ran through all the known alien brain patterns and possible hybrids to make a match. Nothing. Then she widened the range of attributes, guessing that there might have been some arcane interference. Even that failed to match.

Thus passed the first day. She spent the next exhausting the Federation's galactic databases trying to find a match. As a second day was passing without success, Dr. Mayfield shifted into the archives. While sifting through the results, one of them caught her attention.

Normally it wouldn't have; it was a military psychiatric evaluation that had only recently been declassified. The search wouldn't have found it only a few weeks earlier. It was a record that had been found in the old Internal Security files, later turned over to the Raptors, but it had originally been in the TI mainframe.

The strangeness of the file's history might have been enough to attract her curiosity. The fact that it had previously been beyond her security clearance intrigued her to read on; only the head of the intelligence agencies and Grand Council members had higher access.

It read like a horror story; something you would see on the upper-band vid channels. A platoon of kids had found themselves on a ghost ship, which led them to release an object named simply the "Orb." The release of this object caused a chain reaction which altered the timeline, leading to an invasion of the Federation by a race known as the Caal.

The race's description was what matched the search filter. They apparently had no physical form; they only existed by feeding from one host to another, surviving on their emotions.

After that, however, the story unraveled so much as to be completely unbelievable. To stop the invasion, the Orb was removed from this universe, disintegrating the alternate time line, and leaving the adolescents back in our timeline—but their previous roles had changed.

The incredible story ended there, but a lot of the details were missing. Miranda scanned through the whole of the file and realized that the names of the

participants had been blanked out. It took no time for her to decrypt a forty-years-old government file. Soon all the names reappeared, after being hidden in the margins of the electronic file. The doctor immediately saw whose psychiatric evaluation it was: A.C. Eddington.

The name sent a shock through her body, eliminating all vestiges of sleep from Mayfield's mind. *Eddington*, she wondered, *not the Eddington?* She quickly ran back through the revealed names of the story. *Eddington, Clarke, Harrington, Spencer, Fox... the same names that are listed in the history books—the power brokers of the*

Federation right before the 2nd Civil War. These were their children!

No wonder it was kept quiet, Miranda realized. After all, if this file had been released, the madness of their offspring would have caused a scandal throughout the Federation. The brokers were all listed there. At the time, Lwan Eddington, A.C.'s father, was Marshal of all Federation Armed Forces. Maeve Harrington was the head of a multi-billion-credit business empire. Fox was the head of Internal Security. Spencer was the Fed's leading arcane researcher, and even Chairman Clarke was there... though at the time, he was only a colonel, commander of the

fledgling Raptor division.

Despite the players involved, she had to agree with the evaluator's synopsis: *mad as a fucking hatter*. The story was too fanciful, too outrageous to be true. Even if an alternate timeline *could* be created, how was someone able to remove the one element holding it all together? For that matter, why should these 'Caal' be able to leave that timeline in the first place? *And if the story was true*, Miranda thought, *the Caal never came back because the Orb was removed from our universe. So how can this match what I see on the ethereal scan?*

The answer she had found only left

her with more questions than she started with. Yet after all this searching, it was the only thing that fit. There was only one place to turn: the person who brought the question to her in the first place. Colonel Vin Dane.

With an unconscious flip of her hand, a vid screen appeared before her.

“Vidcom Vin Dane, Avalon, Hyperion Sector West, 7874-2681.”

The comm program beeped for several moments as it patched the call through. Finally Vin picked up the call, obviously roused from sleep. “This better be dammed... Miranda?”

“Vin, I need to see you.”

His eyes glanced over to the side,

then came back. “Do you know what time it is?”

“The time stamp says 3:00 AM, Capital Standard.”

“Can’t it wait?”

“Look, you wanted answers about that scan—”

“Vishnu on a fucking stick! This is an unsecured line!”

“Fine, I’ll meet you at your house.”

His expression softened. “Of course, Miranda, you’re always welcome...”

“Then when we talk, I want some answers of my own.”

“You know what it is then?”

“Yes. I’ll see you when I get there.”

Discom.”

Even at night, with few commuters on board, it took Miranda an hour on the monorails to reach Dane’s place. The doctor always wondered why her friend chose to live in the farthest extremes of the planet. The colonel lived on a small island near the southern polar region. Even the monorail only reached the nearest peninsula; luckily, there was an aerodyne waiting there with a driver to fly her over.

Once they landed, Dr. Mayfield shivered in the brisk air between the vehicle and the cabin. She quickly ran to get inside. When she shut the door

behind her, Dane was waiting for her, dressed in a robe. “I was wondering how long it would take. I’ve been waiting for you to rush into my arms for years.”

“Activate your comp.”

“Not our usual foreplay, but...”

“Vin, I’m serious. Activate it.”

The colonel shrugged as he revealed the disguised hologram projector. Soon enough, the rotating icon of Military Intelligence hovered above the fireplace.

“Computer,” Miranda spoke, “open link to personal local net account Mayfield, Miranda Ann. Password: Seventy times seven.” The icon disappeared and a bare account listing

took its place. “Open last incoming message.”

The letter appeared and Dane read with amusement. “Congratulations, you have won an all expense paid trip to—”

“Decrypt message,” the doctor said, ignoring his reading. “Use cipher seven-nine-six-B.”

Suddenly, the tourist ad disappeared and was replaced by the government file Miranda had found buried in the archives. “Read it.”

The colonel stood and looked at it carefully, reading over the file until it was finished. When he was done, Dane lowered his head and sighed.

“You knew what that thing was

before you gave me the scan, didn't you?" Miranda asked.

"I had a theory. I needed you to prove it."

"So these Caal are real?"

"Quite real... and quite dangerous."

"According to the file, the timeline collapsed and stopped their invasion. So how can they be here now?"

Dane deactivated the hologram and sat down. "I could say that the Caal existed *outside* of time and space, but that's not exactly true."

Mayfield sighed. "So what *is* true?"

Vin held up his hand. "Miranda, please—"

"All I want is the truth."

He smiled, an automatic response for him, but there was something uncertain behind it. “I spend my whole life hiding secrets. It’s hard for me to reveal them instead.”

The doctor opened her mouth; a reply was begging to be said, but she closed it instead. *Is that fear in his eyes?* she wondered. *I’ve known Dane all these years, and I’ve only seen him frightened once... now twice.*

Something inside, however, told her that it wasn’t a *fear* of the Caal, but of something else. She sat down beside him and listened.

“The Orb,” Dane began, “is a sort of arcane beacon that can be felt throughout

the universe. You just have to be sensitive enough to feel it.”

“Then why haven’t I *felt* it before?”

“You have to know what you’re looking for, otherwise it fades into the background, like static.”

“So these Caal were after the Orb?”

Vin shrugged. “The Federation was just in their way. When the Orb was taken out of this universe, the Caal were sent back to where they were before, as they had no pull to this sector of space.”

“So why are they coming back?”

Dane’s eyes darted back and forth across the room. “We don’t know that for certain...”

She put a hand on his knee. “Vin,

you wouldn't have come to me if you weren't." Miranda leaned forward to look into his eyes. "Tell me."

He sighed. "Ten years after that report was made, the Orb reappeared on G2..."

"The prison colony?"

"Yes. Luckily, the man who found it recognized it for what it was. He didn't have the power to remove it again from time and space, so he placed inside a containment device, which shielded its presence. During the brief time it emerged, however, a Bug fleet appeared to capture it. This prompted a prison break, where our unlucky man was aboard, and he took the shielded Orb

back to the Federation.”

“A Fed prisoner took it back to the Federation? Why?”

“Because he believed they had the power to protect it. Through his connections, a special depository was constructed on New Tokyo—”

“Wait a minute,” the doctor interrupted. “An *escaped prisoner* was able to get the Fed to build a depository? Who *was* this guy?”

“It’s not important.”

“Come on, Vin, this story sounds even *less* believable than what those kids made up.”

“They didn’t make it up.”

“Then who was the prisoner, huh?”

Who had enough pull to get something like that built on one of the major systems?”

Finally, Dane relented. “Lwan Eddington.”

Mayfield snorted out a laugh.

“You’re kidding. Everyone knows that after he was convicted and removed as Marshal, he escaped, then went missing right as the 2nd Civil War broke out. Everyone knows that story.”

“But what they *don’t* say was that he was captured again, placed very quietly on G2, and left to rot.”

“By whom?”

“Arthur Clarke. Colonel Clarke, back then, but he still had a grudge

against Eddington. That's why he dumped him there.”

“But Eddington... of course, the Marshal would have known about it. It was his son who filed the report.”

“And one that the authorities could believe,” Vin finished her thought.

“However, in the last days of the 3rd Civil War, another man broke into this depository, stole the Orb, and once again revealed its power.”

“Why?” Miranda asked, then shook it off in favor of a better question.

“How did he know it was there?”

“He stole it for its power. What more do you need?”

“But how did he *know* it was there?”

“Simple. Someone told him.”

“Who? Lwan?”

“No.”

“Then who?”

“Miranda, the Federation is not without its leaks. Any number of people knew why the New Tokyo Depository was built. When that information passes into some... rather unscrupulous hands, they told the man who stole it where it was.”

“Who *did* steal it?”

“A man by the name of Xavier Pollos. He was an assassin before the 3rd Civil War on New Madrid...”

“Rough spot.”

“It gets better. Turns out he worked

for Internal Security during the war, until he helped stop their coup and killed Rashid King.”

“*He* killed King? He must have been powerful.”

“He was. Then he left Avalon, determined to increase his power by any means. He was obsessed with becoming even more powerful.”

“So *somebody* told him about the Orb.”

“Yes. When he finally got it, he managed to wipe out half the K’Nes fleet over New Tokyo, and a large part of their invasion force... singlehandedly.”

Mayfield paused in awe of something *that* powerful. “What is this

thing?”

“Our best guess is that it’s a controlled pocket of unreality, conforming to whatever shape its owner desires. Its power is immeasurable since it has the ability to unmake reality around it.”

“Bullshit.”

“What’s bullshit, Miranda? You and I unmake reality every time we cast a spell. The only difference is that this Orb *naturally* does it, and to a degree that you and I can only *dream* of.”

“And this thing is on the loose?”

“Somewhere within the Federation. We’ve had sightings of Pollos several time in the past twenty years, but nothing

we can track him with.”

“So the Orb is powerful. But why would the Caal, a race of creatures without even bodies, travel all this way to get it?”

“It can take any form its owner wants, remember? That means that with the Orb, the Caal can make bodies for themselves that will not be drained of energy when they inhabit them. Simply put, the Caal will live again.”

“And when they do, they’ll take over the universe.”

Vin nodded. “That’s why it was vital that I knew if I was dealing with the Caal or not. If we have enough warning, humanity may still have a chance, and

we can be prepared when they strike.”

“I see.” Miranda was about to accept this information, but one question still nagged at her. “How did *you* know about the Caal?”

“They’ve been an obsession of mine all my life. The stories have come down through my family for generations. For years, I thought they were myth... but then I saw that scan. I realized that the invasion had come.”

Dr. Mayfield was skeptical. “Why do I feel like you’re holding something back?”

Colonel Dane smiled. “Well, I *did* warn you. I’m not good at telling the truth.”

Chapter 3: Sic Transit Tempus

Edo, August 11th

Ivan hadn't slept for two days. Although his fighter chrysalis could feed the stimulants needed to keep him conscious, the mental drain of flying a craft manually through hyperspace pushed him to the breaking point.

Finally, as he reemerged into normal space, Sun found himself in the Edo System, on the edge of Federation

space. A wave of relief swept over him as he finally reached safety.

A comm screen activated in front of him and the face of an LI officer appeared. “This is Edo System Control. Identify yourself.”

“Lieutenant Commander Ivan Sun, Lightning Squadron Leader, *TFS Ares*. Serial Number: 8X93E9238002.”

The orbital traffic controller looked confused, then typed in the information. When the interface reported back to him, the officer replied, “ID confirmed, Commander Sun. May I ask why you’re so far from your ship?”

“I’ll need to speak to the system governor about that.”

“Well, sir, I don’t think—”

“I *need* to speak with the governor!

This is an emergency!”

The controller was flustered. “Well, I’ll send a comm to his office.”

“Good! I’ll arrive at the orbital station in three hours. Discom.”

If only I can warn them, the fighter pilot thought, we can stop them... I hope.

Hours later, his fighter docked at the small orbital station holding position over Edo 3. Once his mechanical exoskeleton had landed, Ivan popped the hatch and severed his interface.

Although he usually felt disoriented

after traveling in his fighter, this time, exhaustion fell on him in waves. At first, he wasn't able to get up. Then, when he tried to stand, Sun collapsed face first into the deck.

When he woke up, the commander was lying in a hospital bed planetside. He knew this because the blinding sunlight coming through the windows. Ivan shifted his head into his pillow to hide the glare. Once he did, the pilot heard the door slide open. *Must be the doctor*, Ivan thought, and said, "Hell of a sun you've got here."

"You could have told *that* to the tourist committee," an annoyed voice shot back.

Not the doctor, his mind revised before turning his head. Before him was a rather large man, somehow shoved into a business suit, and looking incredibly pissed off to see him. *Guess I have that effect on people.* “How long have I been out?”

“A day, I guess.” The man huffed over to a chair and slumped down. “You fly in, scare the hell out of traffic control, and interrupt my afternoon nap. *And you have the indecency* to just collapse when you get here! *Now*, do you mind telling me what this is all about?!”

It didn't take a genius to figure out who was sitting before him. “Governor,

the entire Ares Battle Group is lost.”

“Lost?”

“Well, not exactly lost,” Ivan backpedaled, “but taken over...”

“Commander, what are you saying?”

“I’m saying that something took over the *Ares* while I was on it...”

“And you escaped.”

Sun nodded.

“So...” the governor groaned, “what do you want me to do?”

“Warn the Federation. We need to stop these things before they take over.”

“Take over? Who’s going to take over?”

“I tell you, I don’t know!” Ivan shot up in bed, propelled by his anger, but the

sudden wave of nausea dropped him back down.

The governor was not impressed by his little display. “You say we must warn the Fed, but you don’t tell us what from. If I was to transmit that, my next assignment would be to govern the prison colony on G2!”

“I don’t know what to call them. Ghosts, maybe... or some sort of demonic possession...”

“Of an entire fleet?”

“That’s what I saw.”

The governor sighed and leaned back in his chair. “M. Sun, I’m have serious doubts...” As the planetary leader was about to launch into another

rant, an aide rushed in. “What?”

“Sorry, sir. System Control reports that the *Ares* and its fleet have just jumped in. They want to speak to you.”

“Ghosts?” the governor snorted at Ivan, then turned to his aid. “Patch it in through here.”

The aide ran out while the governor activated the room’s hologram generator, delicately pushed out of Sun’s view. Within a few seconds, they heard the chimes of an activated transmission.

“Governor Stark,” came the voice through the comm, “this is Admiral Montambo, commanding officer, Ares Battle Group. Sorry to burst in here unannounced.”

“Not a problem, admiral. How can we help?”

“My sailors need some down time... shore leave. Do you mind if we drop on down and let my boys and girls relax? I’ll make sure to send some Marines in with them to keep ’em in line.”

The governor beamed like he had a choice. “Of course, admiral. I’m sure our local merchants wouldn’t mind servicing your fine sailors.”

“Excellent. We’ll be in orbit within a few hours. *Ares* out.”

As the governor turned away, he just shook his head at Sun and walked out.

Ivan wasn’t about to wait for them to land. As soon as Stark left, the pilot

managed to pull himself out of bed. A few more tries got him to his feet. Once he grabbed the suit from the closet, Sun struggled for the door, his strength returning with every step.

If I can just reach the spaceport, he thought, a small freighter will do me fine. All speeds are the same in hyperspace. It'll take a while to take over Edo, which will buy me enough time to get to the next system. Maybe if enough people die... maybe then they'll listen.

Avalon, Patton Base, August 12th

In the end, her job was simple; find

the Orb. *No, Miranda thought, find Pollos and you'll find the Orb. No, it's a bit more complicated than that. Find Pollos, a former free-range assassin who's been on the run for twenty years, and convince him to give up the most powerful object in the known universe. Oh, sure, it's all for a good cause, saving humanity... but this guy doesn't sound like the charitable type.*

The doctor's head slumped from her hands to the table. *God, I'm tired*, she thought. *I'm sick of having the fate of mankind on my shoulders.* Her extensive search engines had been grinding away for some time trying to answer her first problem: Where is

Pollos?

They were compiling all known data from every scan, report, hint, and odd occurrence from the entire Federation. Having the highest of all clearances helped to speed the process along.

Of course, the fact that the best bounty hunters and military brains couldn't find this guy did nothing to dissuade her. In fact, it only whetted her appetite. A challenge of this magnitude was a hunger growing inside her that went beyond food, sleep, or any other distractions.

She shifted through the results with her scrutinizing eye; a feature that even the best AI couldn't quite duplicate.

There were many false leads and dead ends but, bit by bit, the assassin's trail was piecing together.

Pollos had kept busy; every six months he'd move to a new system, always to the other side of the Federation. He would follow this pattern regardless of what war zone he'd have to cross. Referencing military archives, anything that tried to stop him got obliterated.

He didn't care, Miranda realized. He was the baddest motherfucker in the universe and he knew it. Which is why he kept moving. Within six months, someone who *didn't* know it tried to challenge him, and would end up

destroying that part of the planet.

The last report of a Pollos sighting was out in San Angeles. The former assassin was camping out on one of the fourth planet's moons. Apparently he didn't ask permission from the Tremontites, the religious cult that owned the moon. Three months ago, they tried to get rid of him; most of that rock had vaporized, the rest of causing meteor showers on the planet below.

Miranda knew that Pollos tended to skip to the other side of the Fed, which meant that he was somewhere galactic west of Avalon... or on Avalon itself.

After she eliminated all systems on that end of the great empire from her

search, the process of searching went a lot quicker. With the statistics of the man already confirmed, he could be locked down every time he passed by a scanner.

Within an hour, scanner traces led to one place: Jennifer's Star. She activated the vidphone and called Vin Dane. He would know how to stop Pollos... she hoped.

Jennifer's Star, August 10th

The second Demar saw the colonel, he knew their vacation was over. The platoon lieutenant led the way with the brass in tow. "Ten-HUP!"

Palencia's platoon rose to attention, a bit sluggish after killing their brain cells all weekend, but he pretended not to notice.

"All right," the lieutenant announced, "I'm afraid we're being called back into the firing line again. This is Colonel Dane, he'll be explaining what's expected of you."

"I've heard you're the best," the man with the stretched face said, "so I came here. Informants have spotted a man by the name of Xavier Pollos here on Jennifer's Star. This man is armed and *extremely* dangerous. Local law enforcement is unable to handle this guy, so it's up to the Tech Infantry to get him.

That's why I called on you."

Private Phillipe didn't seem that impressed. "Mage, wolf, leech..." he said, running through the standard questions.

"He's awakened and *very* powerful. He's committed crimes across several systems."

"Why haven't we heard about him then?" another trooper asked.

Vin Dane was not phased by the question. "He's very good at escape, which is why once he's located, maximum firepower must be unleashed on him. Make no mistake. The Federation considers M. Pollos to be a threat to the further well being of its

citizens. We want him destroyed.”

There's something wrong here, Demar thought as he listened to Vin speak. *There's something this pale-skinned colonel isn't telling us.* He knew this Dane guy wasn't his divisional commander, so he asked, “Sir, why doesn't your unit execute this operation?”

The lieutenant grinned. “Colonel Dane is the head of Military Intelligence.”

Oh shit, Palencia thought, suppressing a groan, *we're going to die.*

Two hours later, they were all suited up in their gray nanotech power suits,

their chameleon circuits turned off to conserve power. Demar was checking his platoon's suit stats, making sure there were no irregularities. The sergeant was trying to keep himself busy. He thought he would retch if he kept watching the lieutenant brown nosing the colonel. *He thinks he's going to get a medal out of this,* Palencia thought, with bile building in his throat. *He doesn't know that this colonel isn't a field commander; he's a politician. Dane could have got the Raptors to do this work, after all, they're better qualified. That means the colonel's aiming for a promotion himself... or it's something he wants to keep quiet.*

Either way, we're going to die.

The command circuit clicked on.

“Sergeant, get the men moving. There’s a utility aerodyne waiting for us over at Gate 7. The colonel’s had a Pollos sighting over in Simmonston. Time to bring this guy down.”

“Yes, sir,” Palencia answered, with no enthusiasm in his voice.

The power armor could have made Simmonston in a few hours on their own, even though it was on the other side of the planet. The utility aerodyne, though, would save their suits’ power and get them there faster. Plus, it was the perfect disguise; power armor at full speed tended to be noticed.

“Move it, grunts!” Demar shouted, then led the way towards the aerodyne.

An hour later, they had made a landing in a discreet location outside Simmonston, a regional spaceport with convenient warehouse facilities. Once they had stopped, the platoon disembarked and Dane stopped. Demar knew why; he was checking his information off the local database.

Sloppy, he thought, any officer doing that in combat wouldn't live long enough to do anything again.

The colonel switched on the platoon circuit. “Sensors have Pollos heading east, out of town. The tactical computer

has located the optimal placements for an ambush; these squad locations are being downloaded to your suit comps.”

Palencia felt like his brain was in a fog; following orders that made no tactical sense. *At least it's outside the city, he thought. Fewer civilians would die that way. Still, we're going to straight to hell... and I can't stop it.*

The platoon quickly dispersed to their ambush points ahead of the target's projected path. Then the waiting... every second added dread to the sergeant's soul.

Then he appeared. There was nothing magnificent to his appearance; he looked like any person you might pass

on the street. His jacket and pants were dusty from too much travel. A mane of long black hair seeped out from beneath an equally dusty hat. Xavier Pollos carrier no obvious weapons, no pack... nothing but the clothes on his back. The only sign of possessions was a simple gold ring on his right hand; Palencia could see it with the zoom function on his optical sensors.

Pollos walked without a care in the world, oblivious to the sixteen heavily armed troopers waiting for him. Waiting to *kill* him.

Demar watched his heads-up display as the former assassin walked perfectly into the computer-projected kill zone.

Another step and “Fire!” blared out from the lieutenant’s speakers.

In that brief pause between the order and the massive barrage of interlocking fire, Xavier Pollos looked up. The sergeant watched his face; there was no shock or excitement in his expression, just mild annoyance. The assassin managed to raise his right hand before the deadly rain fell.

So much ammunition was expended in five seconds that one couldn’t see the target from the cloud of smoke and fire that bellowed out. When the “cease fire” signal was transmitted, the smoke cleared, and Pollos had disappeared.

The cheer of victory rang out over

the amplified speakers of the power armor. In that surreal release, only Palencia noticed the flash of metal off to the side. Demar tried to signal a warning through his dentcom, but all his actions seemed slow compared to what happened next. As his tongue changed frequencies, a trooper was sliced in half. As his jaw came down, another soldier was impaled. Demar bit on the warning signal; a trooper got a brief glimpse of the destruction behind him before the invisible enemy bisected the armored trooper like he was made of tinfoil.

The alert signaled and the platoon stopped cheering, looking for the threat.

Then the screams began. Demar grew angry at Pollos... it *had* to be Pollos, killing his boys. *His!* The animal within him raged, transforming his body into his lethal alter ego. Those in past times called them *werewolves*; now they were simply *changelings*.

Demar's power armor, designed to take the stress of the change, shifted with him. In his rage, though, Palencia couldn't have cared if he was fighting naked. The sergeant rushed forward, every footstep speeding his movements to match those of the invisible assassin.

The suit's comp kept up, giving him the approximate coordinates of Xavier's location. By the time Pollos had

dissected his fifth trooper, Palencia was next to him... and leapt.

Changeling flesh in a nanotech shell slammed into the invisible foe, knocking him into the ground. The suit extended its armor around the claws he grew and Demar struck...

...hitting ground. Pollos was on the move. The sergeant leapt; the whoosh of air left by passing blades beneath him was registered by the armor. Palencia tried to land on his foe but only found dirt. The suit told his animal brain that the assassin was straight ahead; the sergeant went for the legs.

The invisible blades threw up dirt behind Demar, but by then the werewolf

had Pollos' legs. With the impact, Xavier was knocked to the ground. Palencia went for the kill, but Pollos was faster. In a blink, the assassin's hand appeared. A wave of visibility rolled across his body, knocking the sergeant off him. Once Demar flipped back to his feet, he saw Xavier with a sword in his left hand, and a ring reappearing on his right.

They faced each other and began to circle, looking for an opening they could exploit. Stunned troopers, given time to realize what happened, wheeled their weapons towards the now-visible Pollos and opened fire. The intensity of the blast forced the sergeant to step

back, but he saw the ring expand into a sphere around him, absorbing the energy of their plasma weapons.

The platoon backed off as Pollos gave a deadly smile. The sphere shrank down into a sphere in the palm of his hand. “You want this, do you?” That predator’s smile grew larger as he taunted Demar. “You think you can take my Excalibur away from me?” As the assassin said the name, the sphere changed into another sword.

The sergeant took that moment to step forward.

It was a bad move, he knew it, but it was one he did on purpose. In the innards of his animal, his brain simply

hoped to keep him fighting, so that his own rage wouldn't die.

Pollos' blades flew like lightning as he advanced, trying to trap the sergeant into his killing zone. Palencia, however, knew this dance all too well; he bobbed and weaved in time to the deadly swords, matching the assassin's pattern perfectly. To the outside onlookers, they were a blur of metal and man.

Then when Xavier leaned too far forward, Demar lunged at the opening. The sergeant raced towards his foe's chest, unaware that 'Excalibur,' having overextended his master's hand, now coiled around Demar like a snake and held him inches from Pollos' body.

“Now you’ve lost, my—”

Before the assassin could finish gloating, Demar leaned forward, extending his hands and claws, and pierced his flesh. The scream was horrible; the coiled sword reacted to its owner’s pain and uncoiled like a spring, launching the source of his pain away.

Sergeant Palencia saw the ground shoot away from his body and stars soon replaced the sun as he reached orbit around the planet.

Great, he thought, as his calmed back to human form. *What am I going to do now?*

Avalon, Archimedes Orbital Station,

August 14th

The bums all wore uniforms now, but it was still a slum in space. Minister Kait was revolted by the patchwork of impromptu welds and shoddy workmanship. There were no proper techs to do the maintenance, she knew, but on the Ark, there never were. Since the Five Acts, all the civilian orbital stations were turned over to the military... but that didn't mean they were tended any better. Archimedes—or the Ark, as it was better known—had been built over a hundred years ago. *It should have been scrapped, she thought, but the demand for transfer platforms*

to shuttle down to the capital was too great. At least they cleared out the shanties.

Amanda held her nose against the smell of burning wire and made her way towards the docks. Under a burnt-out sign, she found the entrance to the *TFS Nicodemus*.

Through the umbilical, her steps felt light as she walked between the artificial gravities of the station and the ship. Finally she reached the end, guarded by the two fully armored TI soldiers. Their chameleon circuits weren't active, so they were rather intimidating at eight feet tall.

Kait showed no fear as she handed

over her ID. The multiphasic card made them stand at attention... once they saw *who* she was. Once the identification was made, an ensign emerged from nowhere and guided her through the labyrinth of the dreadnought.

The *Nicodemus* was half as old as the Archimedes, but you could never tell. As Amanda walked through the corridors, she could see plenty of modern upgrades, with everything as clean as a museum piece.

Through several passageways and a transit tube, the Minister of Production finally reached her destination, the flag bridge. At one time, the *Nicodemus* was the bright star of the Fleet. Now it was

just another aging hulk. *It should have been decommissioned years ago*, Kait added in her mind. In its heyday, however, they provided for admiral's accommodations.

Kait stared calmly at her now-evident rival, the rail-thin, lightly graying, Admiral Nirav Patel. His skin was a stark contrast to his smile, reluctantly given when he saw her. "Ah, Minister Kait, I'm glad you accepted my invitation." He turned to the guide. "Ensign, you are dismissed."

The young officer saluted and walked out, leaving them alone in the empty flag bridge. Once the door slid behind them, Amanda just stared,

waiting for him to explain why he dragged her to this rust bucket.

Admiral Patel looked back at the hologram, detailing repair schedules. “I’m surprised you’re here, Amanda. I thought you would have spit it back in my face.”

“I was curious,” she said, walking closer to her foe. “What do you want, Nirav?”

“You... off my back.”

“Why, admiral,” she said, batting her eyelashes, “whatever do you mean?”

“Word is that you’re turning the Grand Council against me.”

“Depends on whose *word* you hear.”

“Hmph, nice try.” Patel turned to

look at her. “What are you up to?”

“Trying to protect myself.”

“Protect?”

Amanda slunk a little closer. “What do you call that report you sent to Chairman Clarke?”

“A legitimate concern. Surely you can see the number of broken ships we have in orbit.”

“You’re in Fleet, Patel, you understand the chain of command. You have a problem with Production, you talk to me. You knew *exactly* what that report would do... it was an attack on ME!”

“My fleet is in ruins, minister. On paper, I have four battle groups—but in

reality, I've got two of them in dry dock, one scattered around the Federation, and another blasting the Bugs. To get the other two moving again, I need those parts!"

"Which you can get if you simply release enough freighters to pick them up."

"Yes... *now*. Not before!"

Amanda crossed her arms. "It's not my fault if you don't check your own stores."

"Don't take that tone with me."

"Nirav, listen. I didn't come here to be yelled at. You can do that just as well in the council chambers." The admiral opened his mouth to protest, but

Kait didn't leave him a chance. "Now why don't you cut the crap and tell me what you want?"

He sighed. "An alliance."

Kait repressed her laugh. "Really? After what you did to me?"

"A miscalculation. Before that report, I mistook you for some upstart. After all, we get so many in the Council. Now I know differently. You're a power to be reckoned with... I would rather have you on *my* side."

"As what?"

Patel leaned against the rail. "What do you want?"

Amanda paused before she spoke; she knew that Nirav wanted what she

did, the chairmanship. “To keep my position,” Kait said, even though it was only half true, “but more importantly, to be able to *do* my work.”

“Without interference?”

“Without ridiculous restraint. You can’t build more ships without more shipyards, even if that means a decrease in ship production in the short run.”

There was a pause, as if Patel was waiting for her to say more. “That’s all?”

“Well,” she shrugged, “obviously if we’re talking about an alliance, we’re talking of *shared* power. The chairmanship can no longer be absolute.”

“Of course.” Nirav smiled.

“And my allies would demand the Five Acts removed.”

“What?” Patel bolted upright.

“The wars are over, admiral, and the Federation is exhausted. The draft can stay, but its duration will have to be greatly reduced.”

“You’re talking about eliminating my manpower base.”

“Nirav, you don’t have enough ships for all your personnel!” The admiral backed off as the minister continued.

“With more manpower in the workforce, we’ll be able to repair your ships, get the parts you’ll need, and restore the Fed back to the way it should be.”

“The way it should be,” Patel echoed. “You’re talking about dismantling our whole way of life.”

“Tell me, Nirav, could we hold off another invasion with the fleet we have?”

The admiral paused for a second, pondering the question. Then he shrugged. “Maybe. I’m sure I could probably scrape together enough...”

Kait stared at him. “Come on...”

“It’s a rhetorical question, Amanda. It all depends on many things. Ships, equipment, the technology level of the enemy... a thousand variables. Every enemy the Fed has met has been different.”

“But you couldn’t just swat them down like the wrath of Clarke.”

Patel smiled. “Probably not.”

“And no more spies, that’s the other condition. No more Raptors or Internal Security.”

“You can’t be—”

“You said you wanted an alliance? Those are the terms. Then once Clarke leaves, we’ll support you as Chairman. Face it, you need us.”

“You need the military; without us, the Federation falls.”

“Perhaps, perhaps not. Do we have a deal?”

Patel nodded. “Deal.”

Amanda smiled as she walked out

the door. *After all, with a smooth transition after Clarke dies, and the draft lowered, it'll only be a matter of time before Patel's power base is weakened. Then, she knew, it's my turn.*

Chapter 4: Declaration

Wellington Base, Jennifer's Star, August
15th

Demar woke to a terrible headache. When he opened his eyes, the throbbing got worse.

“We were afraid you wouldn’t make it,” Colonel Vin Dane said, towering about him. “CSR found you in the gravity well of the second moon. You were lucky. You could have been flying out there forever.”

Demar turned his head to the side and spit out the bile in his mouth. Just looking at Dane made him want to vomit. “What happened?”

“Well, that sword uncoiled—”

“What *happened* to my *platoon*?”

Vin sighed. “The lieutenant died... as did most of your unit. Five of us managed to escape; I managed to create a force field to buy us some time...”

Denmar's heart was pierced by a cold feeling; *my boys are dead*. Feelings seemed to flow out of him as he felt a dull hole where his heart used to be. *My fine boys, strong girls... all dead*.

Somehow his hearing returned

halfway through Dane's speech.

"...more powerful than anyone could have imagined. He only needed a second's warning before the explosives hit him. That kind of reaction time is..."

Palencia's cold heart suddenly returned, warming up into a growing rage. As the colonel droned on about Pollos' ability to eviscerate his boys and girls, the sergeant only grew to hate the man who sent them to their death.

"...threw you off the planet. I mean, it's only blind luck that you got caught by that moon's orbit..."

The rage grew into a heat, flowing through his entire body. Demar felt the animal ready to burst out.

“...amazing that you even survived...”

Palencia surged up, enraged as he broke the small forest of tubes and connections keeping him alive. He was about to leap onto Vin when he was stopped; frozen in mid-air, staring into the face of annoyed Colonel Dane.

The beast didn't care, but he was still locked into his human form. *How? Why can't I rage?!*

The colonel answered his unspoken question. “You're wearing a collar, sergeant. It nullifies your ability to shift. Now, the field holding you... that's all me. Had I let you actually *touch* me, I might have lost control and killed you

out of hand. But I don't like to waste good material... unless I have to."

Vin stepped closer to the suspended werewolf. "Now are you going to behave yourself?"

"You killed my—"

"Xavier Pollos killed your platoon, Sergeant Palencia," Dane corrected, "*not* me. If you should hate anyone, hate him."

"You sent them to die. You knew we didn't stand a chance."

"There was a chance, Demar. Yes, I knew he was powerful, but I didn't know to what level he'd developed his powers. That ambush should have killed him, but..."

“But it didn’t,” Palencia finished, his words thick with venom. “You should have nuked the bastard from orbit.”

“Demar,” Vin sighed, “I’m sorry. I thought we could have taken him. I was wrong... and too many troopers paid the price.”

“*My* troopers.”

“I know.” The colonel stepped back to lean against the wall. “But there’s more at stake here than just our lives, or the lives of people under our command. You saw that second sword that Xavier wields?”

“A ring.”

“What?”

“It appears as a ring on his hand...”

when he's not using it.”

Dane stood up. “Interesting. Well, as you've seen, it can change shapes. A shield, a sword, a ring...”

“An orb,” Demar added. Then a flash of insight bolted through him.

“*That's* what you're after, not Pollos. My people died for that stupid orb?!”

“The Orb is more than a weapon, sergeant, it's a beacon. Something large and nasty is coming our way and its aiming straight for it. If we don't get the Orb soon, all of humanity is doomed.”

Palencia managed a laugh against the restraints. “You expect me to believe that? After what you did? Go to hell, colonel, you're not taking me with you.”

“Frankly, I don’t care if you believe me or not. I need you.”

“Why?”

“Because you managed to take Pollos on hand-to-hand while the rest of us were standing still.”

“Bio-aug and balls, sir. Any TI trooper can do it.”

“But they didn’t, did they? *You did.* If I stand any chance of stopping Pollos, I’ll need your help to do it.”

“I don’t have a choice, do I?”

“Nope.” With a flick of his wrist, Palencia fell back down to the bed.

“See you tomorrow.”

Avalon, Patton Base, August 16th

“What do you mean, ‘You lost him?’”

Miranda was staring through the vidcom at Vin Dane, several systems away, and she couldn’t blame the connection for what she was hearing.

“I took a platoon of Tech Infantry with me to get Pollos—and he wiped most of it out. Barely got out with our lives.”

“So now you want me to find him *again*, is that it?”

Vin shrugged. “That’s about it.”

“What makes you think you can do better a second time? Vin, you’re just going to get yourself killed!”

“I know what he’s capable of now. I know how I can face Pollos again.”

Mayfield’s concerned crept into hysteria. “You’re out of your mind! He’s a killer!”

“I don’t have a choice!” Dane shouted back. Closing his eyes, he took in a deep breath, and then continued. “*We* don’t have a choice. I have to get to Pollos before the Caal do.”

“All right,” she accepted, running her fingers through her braided hair, “all right. But why did you wait so long to call me?”

“Had to clean up a few things. Governor wanted to know why there was a fire outside a major city,

local commander wanted—”

Miranda held up a hand. “I get the picture.” She brought her search program up on a separate hologram. “So you lost him yesterday...”

“No, the 13th.”

The doctor checked her search file. “That’s impossible, Vin. I only gave you his location on the 12th.”

“So?”

“Vin, it’s a six-day jump from Avalon to Jennifer’s Star. Even with your own gravity drive, it would still take four days minimum.”

“Oh... well, I wasn’t on Avalon when you called.”

“But the prefix...”

“I had the vidphone program patch it to me on Wilke’s Star. I figured it would be a more centralized location.”

“Okay, the 13th then. That means Pollos has had three days to trip records and pass through scanners.” She activated her search program, watching it go through its initial parameters.

“When I get something, I’ll call you.”

Dane’s brow furrowed. “You mean, you don’t have anything now?”

Miranda glared back through the vidphone. “Vin, I’m searching through all the known databases in the universe for a scrap of information that will track one man. It’s going to take time!”

“Sorry, Miranda. I know you’re doing your best.”

“Vin,” she sighed, “are you okay?”

“I’m fine. I told you that already.”

“I know, I’m just...” Mayfield pushed aside her worry. “How are you going to stop Pollos?”

“Carefully, Miranda.” He smiled.

“Very carefully. Discom.”

The vidphone blanked and left her in the middle of her lab... *alone*. For the first time in a long while, she really missed him. Miranda was worried about Vin... *for everyone, really. After all, if he doesn’t get the Orb, humanity is doomed.*

At least, that’s what Vin said, she

thought, *but he never told me the whole truth.*

Jennifer's Star, August 17th

The only reason Ivan decided to land was because he was running out of fuel. Commander Sun had been running from the Ares Battle Group for so long that fatigue was something that seeped into his bones. None of the systems he had jumped through believed him... not that they had the defenses to stop them anyway.

Sun tried to warn them, but all he could do was run and hope that *someone* would believe him. But after running for

so long, Ivan wasn't even sure himself anymore. *What did I see? Did those... ghosts take over the crew? Or was it my imagination?*

No, he decided, it was not my imagination that slaughtered my squadron. Axe—or whatever controlled him—did that. They have to be warned, even if they don't believe me. I have to try. For their sake, I have to try.

Through the jump gate, out of the swirling orange of hyperspace, his little freighter made its way toward the inhabited world beneath him. He told them the usual things; he had to talk to the governor, life or death situation,

etcetera, etcetera. Maybe they'd even listen... but he doubted it.

Once the freighter landed at the military spaceport, he was quickly put under guard and taken into a room at Wellington Base, the main Tech Infantry installation for the system. The system governor took his sweet time getting there, as they always did. Ivan learned quickly that life and death was as important to politicians as their last lunch meeting.

The governor of Jennifer's Star was an anorexic blonde woman with a face that looked like a skull with skin. Her voice was thin and reedy; the kind of sound that grated at the back of your

skull. “Who the hell do you think you are?! Life and death, indeed! Well, *Lieutenant* Commander Sun, do you have a reason for this interruption?”

Normally this might have been intimidating, but since this was the fourth governor he’d dealt with... “Yeah, you’re all going to die.”

“What?!”

Sun smiled as her skin stretched even tighter over her small frame. “I’ve got an entire battle group behind me that’s going to take over your whole planet unless you call for help right now.”

“Battle group?” Suddenly her tone wasn’t quite as grating.

“The *Ares*, bitch! It’s been taken over with all its escorts, and it’s coming this way.”

“Taken over? By what?”

“Ghosts,” was the first word out of his mouth, but he quickly recovered.

“Look, I don’t know *what* they were, but they got their ships close to our and then took over the bodies of the Fleet personel.”

The shock of his verbal attack wore off with the incredulity of his story; the governor countered with disbelief.

“You expect me to believe this dribble?! It’s clear now that you’re suffering...”

Outside the door, there was an

alarmed shout, then a thump. The blonde woman turned toward the door just as it burst open. A man in a colonel's uniform stepped in; his face also having a stretched look to it, followed quickly by a tanned man with sergeant's stripes, who looked like he could punch through a mountain. The colonel looked at Ivan and asked, "You're Lieutenant Commander Sun?"

Ivan's cockiness seemed to drain from his body; the colonel's entrance made it clear that he was *not* to be messed with. "Yes... yes, sir."

The governor rose to her feet. "What is the meaning of this?!"

The colonel turned his head slowly

towards her and stared. “Governor Elisa Yuknis, am I correct?”

“Who the hell are you?!”

“Colonel Vin Dane, head of Military Intelligence.”

A cold breeze seemed to chill the room, but the governor was still burning with rage. “That does not give you the right to—”

“December 5th, 2258,” Dane spat out. “Starlight Casino on New Madrid. I’m sure you would love some of the photos of you and—”

“STOP!” she shrieked in panic.

Vin smiled like a predator. “That is but a fraction of what I can do to you. If you wish to keep your career, I suggest

you be *quiet*.”

Yuknis shriveled back into her chair as the colonel turned his attention back to Sun. “Now, lieutenant commander,” Dane said, grabbing a chair, “I want to hear your story from the beginning.”

Ivan told him everything; the alien fleet, the takeover, the flight and destruction of his squadron, and the numerous attempts to warn the Federation. The colonel sat there and took it all in, not interrupting the pilot’s tale once. When the fighter pilot was done, Sun felt drained.

Colonel Dane looked back at the sergeant. “What do you think, Demar?”
“Sounds like the same bullshit you

were feeding me... sir.”

“No bullshit, sergeant. This is real.” Vin turned back to Ivan.

“They’re not ghosts, commander.”

“Ghosts?” he looked up.

“They’re called the Caal. If you’re right, they now have possession of a quarter of the active fleet.”

“That’s right,” Sun replied, feeling his heart grow lighter. *He believes me. After all this time, someone finally believes me!*

“And since Pollos was last at Jennifer’s Star, they’ll be coming right here.” Anger flowed underneath Dane’s stretched face. He turned to the governor. “M. Yuknis, you are going to

declare a system-wide emergency and activate the defenses. We must not let anyone from the *Ares* land here.”

“Are you insane?” she asked, managing to gain some of her arrogance back. “I can’t authorize that without a statement from Chairman Clarke—”

“DO IT!” Vin barked. Yuknis shuffled out of the room in a dash.

“Sir,” Ivan managed, “the system defenses won’t stop a star control ship.”

“I know,” Dane replied, “but maybe it can buy us enough time to get the rest of the fleet here. We have to stop the Caal here.”

“And if we don’t?” Palencia asked. The colonel turned toward him and

shrugged. “Then there’s still a chance. Come on, there’s a lot to do.” They walked out of the room, leaving Ivan sitting there. Suddenly, Dane stopped and looked back. “Are you coming?”

Sun didn’t wait. He leapt up and followed them out of the base. Ivan did his best to hide the tears in his eyes.

Avalon, August 18th

Clarke had never called an emergency meeting before, Amanda knew, at least not for the years she had been on the Grand Council. *Usually he just gives orders and we have to catch up to him.*

As Kait rushed to her waiting aerodyne, her mind was full of questions. She hated to rush into a meeting she wasn't prepared for; Ministers who did often lost their heads. Once she got in the vehicle, the pilot took off, flying the small craft through the mania of the city's air traffic to reach Capitol Park.

Amanda wasted no time in activating the vidphone. The hologram appeared and she entered the number for the Finance Minister's car.

The face of Antonio Villeneuve soon appeared. "Couldn't wait five minutes to see me?"

"Antonio, what's the emergency?"

“We’re talking on unsecured lines.”

“To hell with security! What’s happening?!”

“I’m not sure myself. All I know is that something happened on the frontier.”

“Then why doesn’t Clarke do something?”

“Be glad he’s consulting us at all.” Villeneuve shrugged.

“That’s what’s worrying me. Why should he start now?”

“Guess we’ll find out in chambers. Discom.”

As the hologram disappeared, all Kait could do was tap her foot as she counted out the beats it took to reach the capitol building.

Once on the ground, the Minister of Production rushed as fast as decently possible into the Grand Council chambers. Villeneuve was already there, looking smug as she walked over. “I told you, I don’t know anything more.”

“What about them?” she asked, waving a hand at the other Ministers.

Antonio shrugged. “They’re just as much in the dark as we are.” He pointed at Admiral Patel. “Even him. At least he bothered to show up this time.”

“He should, he has nothing to fear.”

Villeneuve looked askew at her.

“What do you mean?”

“He wanted an alliance. I gave it to him.”

The short man looked incredulous.

“Really?”

“He guaranteed repeal of the Five Acts in exchange for a limited Chairmanship and the keeping of our jobs.”

“You think the Admiral is the right man to join our triumvirate?”

“No,” Amanda smiled, “but it will save us from attack in the meantime. And if there’s a sudden shift in power, our positions are safe.”

“No one is safe when Clarke dies.”

She shrugged. “Then maybe it’ll buy us some time.”

Suddenly the great double doors opened and Chairman Clarke stomped

in. His white hair was flowing wild and every muscle screamed his anger.

Before everyone could take their seats, Clarke's fist slammed down on the table. "Which one of you did it?!"

The council members were stunned; no one knew what he was talking about. The old man pointed a finger at all of them as he ranted on. "I know you've been conspiring, whispering against me! This is the first step in your plot, isn't it?! Answer!!!"

The council chambers were silent. Clarke waited for an answer but none came. "Fine, you cowards, hide in your lies. The truth will come out." The chairman hit a button and a huge

hologram of a solar system appeared. “Twelve hours ago, Jennifer’s Star went into a State of Emergency and activated their system defenses.” The hologram changed and lit up with all the defense satellites and missile platforms. “An hour ago, the Ares Battle Group entered the system and was attacked by the defenses.” Several blips emerged and flashes of light played out on the outer planets. “Within a few more hours, the fleet will reach the main planet and breach the orbital defenses, as they believe they are under the control of a rebel faction.” A dotted line ran from the blips to the third planet. “Those defenses cannot hold them off for long.

Millions of my citizens will die... and for *what?! You have one chance to stop this farce or my Raptors will hunt you down, as well as your family, your friends, and everyone you love until they are all DEAD! Now ANSWER!*”

The tension in the room was as thick as soup; no one even dared to breathe. Clarke grew even angrier, grabbing his chair and throwing it across the table, smashing it into the far wall. “I will teach all those who oppose me. Computer! Vidcom to Governor Yuknis, highest priority.”

The system disappeared in favor of a simulated flat screen. Soon enough, the emaciated governor’s face floated above

the council table. Clarke verbally attacked. “Elisa, why have you called an emergency?!”

“Honored Chairman, I was ordered to—”

“*By who?!?!?*” Kait was afraid Clarke would rip out the table.

Another face appeared; a man’s face whose features seemed to be stretched. “I did, Chairman.”

Clarke’s eyes went wide. “You? Colonel Dane, what is the meaning of this?!”

Unlike the governor, this colonel showed no fear in addressing the chairman. “I have recently discovered that the entire fleet in this system has

been taken over by the Caal. I ordered the defenses activated to try and stop them from landing. I'm currently organizing every weapon available to destroy them before they land.”

The chambers echoed with the sound of murmurs. *The Caal? Who are the Caal?!*

Only the chairman was not dumbfounded. “You’re sure?”

“I’ve had my agents track their infiltrators for some time. Then a fighter pilot managed to escape the *Ares* before the takeover. It is obvious to me that this is the first step to an invasion.”

“It can’t be... I thought...”

“Chairman Clarke, you must send the

fleet. We can hold them as long as possible, but we must stop them here and now.”

The old man seemed to freeze for a moment. “Jennifer’s Star is a six-day jump.”

“It’ll take that long for them to take over and refresh their ships with the stores here,” Dane replied. “They’ll be at their weakest.”

Clarke didn’t have to think long before replying. “Very well, I’ll order the fleet out. Hold until relieved.”

“We will. Discom.” The face of Vin Dane vanished and the system graphic reappeared.

Clarke’s anger had been replaced

with determination. “Admiral Patel, you will order the entire Home Fleet, both the Poseidon and Hachiman Battle Groups, to Jennifer’s Star and destroy the *Ares*.”

Kait’s eyes, as well as everyone else’s, turned towards Nirav. She had never seen the admiral turn so pale.

“Um... well, sir, the...”

“What is it?”

Patel swallowed. “Those battle groups are not fully operational, honored chairman.”

“It doesn’t matter, admiral. We can leave some of the ships behind. Two star control ships will be more than a match for the *Ares*.”

The admiral coughed again. “No, sir... I mean that *most* of the battle groups are not operational.” A stunned silence fell over the table. “Most of the personnel have been reassigned and... the ships are... they’re not even *close* to completion.”

Clarke’s gaze could burst stars.

“How... *many* ships are operational?”

“In the Avalon system, I would be lucky to muster two squadrons.” Nirav let out a shaky sigh. “Our operational groups have been sent to picket duty throughout the Federation. There’s no way to consolidate them at Jennifer’s Star in six days.”

Clarke’s determination melted into

despair. “The Jennifer’s Star is lost.” With a touch of a button, the system hologram disappeared. “Do you have any *other* revelations to tell us?”

The admiral bowed his head. “No.”

“Very well. Then you’ll order the recall of every ship you can muster to Avalon. Minister Kait!” Amanda’s head perked up. “You will give absolute priority to the repair of the ships here. General Walters, you will activate the reserves, and General Wagenecht, you will enact martial law. I will send out the declaration after this meeting.”

Then Clarke leaned over the table, looking at all the council members.

“Have no doubt. We are in an emergency. We must preserve the Federation at all costs. Meeting adjourned.”

As the members shuffled off, Villeneuve leaned over to Kait and said, “We better hope Clarke stays around, otherwise... we won’t know what we’re supposed to be scared of.” Antonio gave a smile and left.

Amanda was the last to leave the council chambers. The emergency wasn’t real to her; Vin Dane was. She was captivated by the man. He had stood up to Clarke without a hint of deference; even the governor had the sense to be scared shitless.

A man who could intimidate a governor, stand up to Clarke, and face an entire battle group was someone she wanted on her side.

Now only one question remained.

What the hell are the Caal?

Chapter 5: Fire Above, Chaos Below

Avalon, Patton Base, August 19th

Panic was in the air. Martial law had been declared but no one knew why. No explanation had been given for the galactic emergency and everyone feared the worst. Rioting broke out among the frontier worlds and was put down with brutal force. Several attempts at protests in the capital were quickly dispersed. Miranda, however,

was afraid it wouldn't last for long.

Dr. Mayfield hadn't left Patton Base for days, and now she was afraid to leave. The Light Infantry were out in force, but their presence did nothing to calm people's nerves. Homeowners were barricading themselves in; markets were rushed on and supplies hoarded. Factories were shutting down because no one would come in for work.

Miranda was practically alone at Raptor headquarters; Chairman Clarke had called most of the staff off on other projects. No one was there except for her and a couple of troops to maintain the servers. Her only company was her search program, and all it did was hum,

scanning through the myriad of possibilities to discover wherever Pollos had gone.

Not that it seems to matter anymore, she thought, all hell's broken loose. I don't think this Orb is going to stop the Federation from going straight to...

Then Miranda noticed a flash. *Yes, I'm sure of it, there on the computer screen.* Mayfield accessed the display and checked the log. Something *had* changed, and opened the galactic map. Sure enough, it had taken most of the frontier worlds off the search.

“So you're somewhere near Avalon,” she said out loud, “but

where?” *Even with only six systems to search, there are lots of light years between them. It would take time...*

“Dr. Mayfield!” a voice called out from the hallway.

Miranda quickly cut off the search program display and activated the door control. A trooper blundered into the lab, a cyberspace set dangling around his neck. The doctor smiled; *he was too chicken-shit to get the implant.*

“Dr. Mayfield, we just got word. Jennifer’s Star is under attack.”

Her first thought was for Vin Dane. “Attack? By whom?” *He made it out before this, right?*

“Well... the report says the *TFS*

Ares, but... that can't be right, can it?"

The trooper, trained to be a deadly spy, looked as if his heart had been broken.

His faith, Miranda realized, *his faith in the Federation is hurt. He's only known Clarke's enforced peace; he never had to live through the last civil war.* "I mean, the *Ares* is our ship!"

Her lips betrayed her thoughts. "The Caal..."

"What?"

"Never mind. Thank you."

As the trooper disappeared, Miranda couldn't help but think of Dane. *He can't be there... he should know better than to try and fight.* Yet despite herself, somehow, she knew he was

there. *He's been in worse situations,* she tried to console herself, *but I don't know how he's getting out of this one. Oh God, Vin, get the hell out of there!*

Jennifer's Star, August 20th

They held out for two days.

Already, the Ares Battle Group was destroying the last battlestation, as well as its companion satellites. As Ivan Sun readied the antique fighter for atmospheric flight, another rumble shook the cockpit. *That'll be the orbital bombardment,* he knew, *destroying the planetside batteries. It won't be long now...*

The forty-year-old Vampire fighter powered up; Sun was half expecting the damn thing to explode. The onboard systems came to life, then began to fade. Ivan punched the console and the power went back up to full. The pilot already missed his old fighter. *Without total immersion, flying these crates was like having sex in zero gee... a lot of patience and duct tape.*

Once the last light went green, Ivan punched the throttle and blasted off into the sky. His lidar/radar detector went off immediately, indicating the planetary assault shuttles and their fighter escorts heading for the surface. The onboard comp gave him three minutes before

contact.

A little light bleeped to the side; Sun ignored it. It bleeped again and a hologram suddenly appeared in front of him. Vin Dane did not look happy.

“Commander, just what the hell do you think you’re doing?”

“What the Fleet always does for you jarheads—saving your ass.”

“You’re going to get yourself killed!”

“Maybe. Maybe not.”

“I don’t know if you’ve checked your scanners lately, but there’s a lot of squadrons coming down. What do you think you’ll accomplish against that?”

“Against the fighters, not much... but

I figure I can bag a few transports. That'll help you on the ground more than me with a rifle.”

“Not if you're dead!”

“Not planning on dying, sir. I'll pick you up later. Now if you'll excuse me, I've got some fighters that want my attention. Discom.”

The hologram disappeared as warning threats flashed on his antique equipment. Ivan knew that he didn't stand much chance against a squadron in combat. On the other hand, they weren't designed to fight in an atmosphere, even though they had the wings to do it. But his Vampire fighter was designed for this very situation.

I hope the ghosts are crappy pilots,

Sun wished, then plunged toward the first squadron.

Three fighters peeled off from the slower transport to attack. Ivan didn't waste energy on firing back. He cut engine power, nosed down, and dropped like a stone, falling faster than the fighters could follow. Then he hit the power again, swooping up past his attackers, right on target for the dropping shuttle. One kinetic missile flew straight up and shattered it into a thousand pieces.

Sun dived away and went for his next target.

Sergeant Palencia watched as the smug pilot's face disappeared when the vidphone went blank. Colonel Dane smashed his hand against the table in frustration. After being with him for most of the week, Demar noticed a curious fact about his new CO—Vin Dane was the only man on the planet who wasn't scared of the Caal. If anything, he was angry, like a man desperate to get revenge.

The colonel knows a hell of a lot more than he's telling, Demar thought. Maybe that goes with being in Intel, but I know this goes deeper than that. This is personal with Vin. What the hell did the Caal do to him before?

Once Dane calmed himself down, he resealed the helmet on his power armor until the nanotech made it a solid mass. Palencia heard the colonel's voice over the proximity circuit. "Come on, we've got Caal to stomp."

They rushed out of the building and onto the parade ground of Wellington Base. Littered around the field were some Tech Infantry in powered armor, some Light Infantry in white Delta light armor, and lots of military personnel and civilians with assorted weaponry. It was the worst collection of troops that Demar had ever seen.

Vin activated his suit speakers. "As you know, shuttles from the fleet above

will be landing in a few minutes. Our only hope is that we can hit them at the landing sites. We're assigned to stop any landing near this base of the city of Valeria. Other teams have been organized to cover other major cities. However, there is no support, we are *alone*.

“The Caal exist off the life essence of other beings”, Dane continued.

“However, they *can* be killed. Most of the time, they're attached to their host and will die when you kill their prey.”

As Palencia looked over the field of nervous faces, Demar knew that's *not* what they needed to hear.

“Sometimes,” the colonel continued,

“they will jump from body to body, so if someone shoots at you, kill them. I don’t care if it’s a neighbor, friend, lover... kill them. Trust me, they would thank you for saving them from the Caal.

“There’s also no point in running. If they get past us, there’s nowhere you could hide that would be safe. Sergeant, do we have a landing?”

Demar checked the local lidar; there was a blip coming in towards Valeria. “Shuttle coming in on the west side of town, sir.”

“All right, we have a job to do. Let’s do it.”

The militia rushed over to the waiting hovertrucks and aerodynes, the

only transport they could find, and took off for the city limits. Dane and Palencia activated their chameleon circuits and ran towards the expected landing zone. In their suits, they could reach the area before the militia did and scout ahead.

It didn't take long to arrive at the spot. The battlefield was flat as a pancake, except for a little drainage ditch in the middle. Already, they could see the shuttles on their final approach, fighters flanking them.

Dane hit the comm to all units. "All units, form up behind the first row of buildings. Prepare for landing." Then he switched back to proximity

frequency. “Sergeant, let’s go.”

The two of them fell back to the office blocks comprising their barriers. The militia arrived moments later, filing in behind whatever cover they could find.

It didn’t take long for the shuttle to land; half of the fighter escort hovered while the others flew over their heads. Enemy troopers filed out in one great horde, wearing fatigues and carrying plasma rifles, trying to get plenty of distance out from under the shuttle’s thrusters.

“Hold fire until I give the word,” the colonel ordered. Demar could already see the militia itching to fire, afraid of

the enemy in human skin getting too close.

The shuttle quickly lifted off once its passengers were unloaded, dashing back into the sky with its fighter escorts. Vin waited until they were out of sight, then gave the order to fire.

Plasma bolts screamed out across the open field. Enemy troopers dove for cover that wasn't there; their howls filled the air, an inhuman squeal of pain. The militia didn't bother aiming after a while. The field became a sea of bodies and blood. They were winning.

Then it began. Suddenly one of the Light Infantry whipped her gun around and incinerated her entire platoon. Dane

turned and put a plasma bolt through her head. Then a plasma grenade blew up one of their cover buildings. More panicked shots; an entire section of the militia disintegrated. What was left of the enemy horde began rushing forward.

The militia hadn't listened to Dane's words; they ran. A blind panic had infected them once their own people started shooting at them. Demar and Vin worked as a team, dashing from position to position, using their power armor's superior weaponry and speed to destroy as many of the enemy as they could. Still the possessed troopers kept coming. With their own soldiers fleeing, their defenses were broken through

quickly and easily. It barely slowed the enemy down.

“Shit!” Dane cursed. “I told them! There’s nowhere to run!”

“We can rally then!” Palencia shot back. “Come on, they haven’t run far!”

It was impossible to tell emotion through a suit, even if it was visible. The colonel seemed to freeze for a moment, then grunted in acknowledgement. Without another word, they rushed after their wayward soldiers.

The militia ran toward the city center and the two TI grunts raced after them. Dane tried using the rally signal, but no one was listening. The chase continued.

In the center of Valeria, a giant circle park around which the old corporate buildings stood, the militia trickled in. Once the two armored troopers arrived, the colonel activated his suit speakers. “Halt, all of you! There is nowhere to run! We can only survive if we work together—”

Vin’s speech was cut off by the shattering of glass. An old woman and man suddenly tackled a militiaman and began beating him savagely. Civilians suddenly poured towards the park, firing projectile weapons, waving knives, all of them charging towards the defenders.

There was an eruption of fire as the militia desperately mowed down the

mob. Their shrieking bristled the hairs on the back of Demar's neck. Then the inevitable happened—these impromptu soldiers were taken over and obliterated those who weren't possessed. Within a minute, their army was crushed.

“Fuck it,” Palencia spat. “Colonel, we have to leave now.”

“But this city...”

“Is lost! Come on!”

Dane reluctantly ran with the sergeant, escaping the slaughter behind them. “There's nowhere we can go, Demar.”

Palencia ignored him and bit down on his dentcom to change frequencies. “Lieutenant Commander Sun, this is

Sergeant Palencia, are you receiving me, over?”

There was a pause, then a crackly response. “Sarge, is that you?”

“Of course it’s me! We need a pickup NOW!”

“Is the colonel with you?”

“Yeah.”

“The Vampire’s only a two-seater.”

“We’ll cram in—now get us *out of here!*”

The sky above them burned with fire. Once his suit’s optics adjusted, Demar saw the antique fighter come down to land in front of them. The canopy opened and Ivan sat there with a shit-eating grin. “Need a lift?”

Palencia deactivated his chameleon circuit and popped out of his power armor. Wearing only his skin-tight reclamation suit, Demar looked over to the slight light-distortion that he knew was Colonel Dane's suit. "Come on!"

The suit speakers were eerily loud. "There still might be resistance in the other cities..."

"Sir, the situation's FUCKED!" the sergeant shouted back. "Now do you wanna stay with the Caal, or get the hell out of here?!"

There was a moment of silence before Vin's suit reappeared and popped open. "All right."

"Let's go."

The two of them managed to cram into the back of the craft before Sun closed the canopy, sealing them in. They hovered to the rooftops, then slammed the thrusters into overdrive. Blue sky quickly gave way to black as they left the atmosphere behind.

Ivan's lidar suddenly bleeped and the pilot hit the acknowledgement button.

“What the hell was that?” Demar asked.

“That means the *Ares* knows we're not one of its fighters. We've got a squadron inbound.” Target sensors and weapons systems went active around them, playing hologrammatic games on the canopy. “Anywhere in particular

you want to go?”

“Maybe one of the moonbases is still active?” Palencia offered. “If we can hide there, we’ll survive long enough for the fleet to pass by.”

The bleeping became more insistent. “Hope we’ll live long enough to make it. Hold on!”

Ivan banked the fighter towards the nearest ship of the fleet, an outlying destroyer. A Wraith squadron was inbound, coming up behind them. Demar watched in horror as Sun slowed down their speed. “What are you doing?”

“Listen, jarhead, I’m flying this crate. *Not* you, so shut your trap!”

“When those other fighters reach

us...”

“They’ll be within the destroyer’s point defense arc.”

“And so will we!”

Sun smiled, a demonic grin hidden by his helmet. “Makes life exciting, doesn’t it?”

Palencia was in shock; they were going to die thanks to the crazy pilot they thought would save them. What amazed him more was how Dane could stay so calm... maybe he was asleep.

Within seconds, the weapons lock warning sounded, the destroyer’s particle phalanxes opened fire, and the universe seemed to explode with light.

Sun hit the thrusters. As the enemy’s

trailing squadron was destroyed by their own ship, Ivan navigated through the forest of defensive fire, finally swinging around the engines.

The destroyer was in orbit, so its engines weren't firing—but since you couldn't detect anything through the exhaust of an ion drive, no ship designer bothered putting sensors there. Ivan killed the power, using the fighter's inertia to let them coast out of the battle group's way.

After the explosion of light and threat warnings, the sudden silence and dark was too much for Demar to handle. Every part of his body was numb. Finally, his lips managed to mutter.

“W... wh... what hap...”

“We cleared the fleet and killed the power,” Vin Dane explained. “With any luck, they’ll think the destroyer finished us.”

“Won’t they de... detect the fighter?”

Sun unsealed his helmet and looked back at them. “Without power, we’ve got no signals for passive lidar to detect. Their comps will ignore us, think we’re debris.” A smile escaped his lips. “Space trash.”

“Oh,” Demar mumbled, his wits finally coming back to him.

“So, colonel sir,” Ivan asked, “where do you want to go from here? We should clear their short-range

detectors in ten minutes, then I can nudge us with the vectoring exhaust without the fleet noticing.”

Demar spoke up. “Are there are any moonbases still—”

Vin cut him off. “Aim for the dark side of the fifth planet.”

“Why?” the sergeant wondered. “What’s there?”

The colonel smiled. “A ship.”

Riding their inertia, the antique fighter managed to swing into the orbit of the fifth planet. It was a desolate rock with two tiny rings straying around it. Hanging on the edge of the rings, the Vampire was virtually undetectable.

“All right, I’m going to risk it.” Ivan turned the power back on and the fighter’s consoles lit up. Sun tapped on the lidar/radar screen. “Sir, if there’s a ship out here, I don’t see it.”

“Of course not,” Dane groaned, “no one’s *supposed* to see it. That’s the whole point. Give me access to your comm system.”

Ivan hit a few buttons and a hologram appeared on the canopy next to the colonel’s face. Demar, trapped in front of him, could barely make out what he was doing. Once Vin changed the frequency and limited the signal strength, he went to transmit.

The colonel made a sound that was

halfway between a yawn and clearing his throat. Within a few seconds, a similar sound came back through the speakers. Dane deactivated the hologram and said, “Hold position. You’ve been given permission to dock.”

“Dock?” Sun asked. “With what?”

With a burst of blips, the lidar/radar went beserk. Demar turned his head and looked out the canopy. A piece of space seemed to detach next to the rings and come toward them. Vin’s “ship” was as black as night and shaped like a contorted shark without the rear fin. There were no rivets or holes; to the other two, it didn’t look like metal at all.

It came near them, opened a hole like

a mouth, and then tracted them inside.

Once the “mouth” closed, an eerie light lit the cavern where the fighter lay. Dane sighed in relief and said, “It’s okay, you can open the canopy.”

“Where the hell are we?!” For the first time, Ivan sounded panicked.

“My ship, I told you. The air’s breathable. Now... open the canopy.” When the pilot froze, Vin barked, “Do it!”

The cockpit opened and the colonel pushed Demar out ahead of him. Ivan reluctantly followed. The floor felt soft beneath them, giving a little and adding a bounce to their step.

“Welcome aboard, gentlemen.”

Dane smiled. “I’d give you her name, but I doubt you could pronounce it.”

Demar stepped forward. “You’re not Vin Dane, are you?”

“I’m afraid I am. I’m the same man who joined the Tech Infantry at the end of the 3rd Civil War, worked his way up the ranks, and became the head of Military Intelligence.”

“But you’re... not exactly a man,” Ivan murmured.

Vin smiled. “True.” He stretched out his hand as it morphed into a black hook.

“You’re one of the Horadrim,” Palencia realized, “those freaky aliens! *That’s* how you knew about the Caal!”

“My people fought them for ten thousand years,” the alien replied, forming the hook back into a hand. “but unless we stop it, the Federation will fall to them in less than one.”

Avalon, August 21st

Now the people knew what they were afraid of.

Some media affiliate managed to get a camera on Jennifer's Star and patched a feed through the Galactic Net.

Everyone in the Terran Federation had seen what the Caal had done on the planet. Riots broke out all over the Federation, but they were no longer

being put down, simply being contained. There simply weren't enough personnel on the streets to stop the chaos. People were fleeing the capital in droves, taking any transport they could. Those that remained huddled together in the streets and prayed. A new religious fervor had sprung up overnight. Prayers were lifted up to any god who would listen that the spirits of the Caal would pass over them.

Amanda Kait could only sit and watch everything she had built up crumble around her. She gave out orders for the repair of the Home Fleet, but there were fewer personnel each day to receive them. Her own ministry

building, normally filled with people, was now bare. Only a few staff remained to handle the gargantuan task.

This can't be the end, she thought, not like this. There have been so many invasions before, why should one more make any difference?

Amanda knew why, of course. The Vin Shriak, Bugs, K'Nes, Vulthra, Jurvain... all of them were flesh and blood. But the Caal didn't die when you killed them—they just jumped to the next body, taking it over, and continued the attack. As long as they were within range of a living host, the Caal would continue. *How could you stop something like that?!*

Clarke thought he had the answer: blast them in space before they could reach the planet. But the Fleet he had hoped to do it with was in the hands of the Caal. All the Federation had around Avalon was a collection of broken ships, toys discarded from all the wars before. It was almost enough to make her rush out into the streets and pray herself.

She would have... had she ever believed in anything but herself.

Kait's fist slammed on the desk. "Think, Mandy, THINK!" she cried out. "There's always a solution. How can we stop the Caal from coming here? How can we keep the Fed together?"

However, all her thoughts drifted back to the battle that was about to take place over Avalon in a few days. *Wait a moment*, her memory jolted, *the Battle of Avalon... twenty years ago. In the 3rd Civil War, Admiral Erich Von Shrakenberg had destroyed jumpgates to defeat his enemies.* It was desperate move, since the gates were hideously expensive, and destroying one crippled trade afterwards.

Would you rather be possessed? Amanda shook her head. *It won't stop them all*, she thought. *The larger ships are be able to make their own jump points in and out of hyperspace, but maybe... just maybe... forcing them to*

leave their smaller ships behind would make all the difference.

Amanda quickly made some calls.

Chapter 6: The Hunt

Avalon, August 22nd

Ivan and Demar had spent two days in the belly of the beast. The beast was a Horadrim battlecruiser and it was fascinating and terrifying at the same time. On the bridge, they watched as the ship seemed to slip through a tunnel, then appear at its destination. An interstellar jump, usually taking one to three days through hyperspace, took the alien ship less than a minute.

After a while, neither of them could keep track of where Vin Dane was going. He had jumped to several worlds before running into another Horadrim ship. On their version of a vidscreen, Demar was shocked to see this black spiky creature talking to the colonel. It was that same yawning/coughing language they had heard before. The more the sergeant heard it, however, the more it made sense. They would speak one word at a time, drawn out by their long speech. Sometimes, however, the other alien would say the same word back, just pronounced differently. It was still all gibberish to Demar.

Ivan stopped caring what Dane was

doing. *He knew what they were all along, the pilot knew, and he did nothing.* Every pilot who had gone through the Academy knew what Horadrim ships could do. They watched the old Battle of Earth footage from the last civil war and saw how the black vessels could jump around Federation ships like they were standing still. *Vin could have destroyed the Ares if he wanted to... but he didn't.* At first, Sun thought of Dane as a hero, a man who was willing to listen to him and stop the Caal. Now he was just another alien, trying to control humanity by moving pieces on the galactic chessboard.

The two humans didn't have much to

do; Vin largely ignored them and there were no other Horadrim on the ship... at least, none that they could see. If they went into a room, beds or any other furniture they needed would form out of the walls. The ship shaped to their comfort, but after a while, it no longer distracted them from the question: *What was Dane waiting for?*

Two days later, the colonel found them. “We’re jumping into Avalon. Commander Sun, I’ll need you to pilot us down to the capital city.”

“Why? Can’t you land this crate yourself?” the fighter jock said, leaning against the wall.

Vin shot him a dirty look. “You

have a problem with my orders?”

“Well, you haven’t needed us for the past few days. In fact, you’ve kept us in the dark while you’ve run around talking to your... friends. Why do you need us now?”

“Ivan, we can still stop the Caal, but I need your help. That’s what I was doing—getting help. Now I need yours.”

Sun pushed off from the wall. “No, you need a fucking taxi driver. Give me my fighter, open the door, and I’ll take my own chances, *thanks*.”

Demar kept silent as a rush of anger washed over Dane. For a moment, the sergeant was afraid Vin was going to

kill him. However, the colonel took in a deep breath and let it out before continuing. “Ivan, listen to me. All of Clarke’s ships and fighters and troopers aren’t going to mean a damn when the Caal hit them.”

“What about the Horadrim? They just going to sit this one out?”

“No, they’ll be there. That’s what I’ve been up to these past few days, gathering out forces. My people are very reluctant to go into battle, even against the hated Caal, but they know they must be stopped. But all those ships won’t mean a *damn* unless we get to the Orb. That’s what the Caal are after. That’s why they’ve invaded the

Federation. If we can get it, we can use its power to destroy them forever.”

“The Orb?” Demar asked.

Vin sighed. “It’s hard to explain...”

“The ring. It’s that stupid ring?” the sergeant asked. “You told me this before, but I didn’t really understand it... The Caal are after this Orb—and Pollos has it. So we have to defeat Pollos and take it from him, right?”

“Exactly.”

Sun was not in the best of moods.

“Would you tell me what the *fuck* you’re talking about?!”

“Let me make it simple, commander,” the colonel said, facing Ivan. “Fed fleet plus Horadrim fleet is

still a wild card. Even with all of us at Avalon, there's still a chance that the Caal will overpower us. With the Orb, we can win. Now I need your help... can I get it?"

Sun shuffled his feet back and forth, then looked back at Dane. "What are we waiting for?" he groaned, not completely convinced, and made his way to the door. "Let's go."

Patton Base

Miranda Mayfield thought she was dreaming when Vin Dane entered the lab. "Hello, Miranda..."

The doctor rushed forward and

embraced the colonel, grasping onto him with all the strength she had. “You’re real! You’re alive...”

Vin wrapped his hands around her and rocked her gently. “Yes, Miranda, I’m here. It’s all right.”

Tears ran down her face. “When I heard that Jennifer’s Star fell, I—”

“I know. It’s all right...”

Ivan and Demar waited in the hallway, confused as hell, wondering what they were doing in the abandoned Raptor headquarters, and why this woman had a crush on the colonel.

“Miranda,” Vin managed to ask while she clutched onto him, “I need to know where Pollos is. Did you find

him?”

Sun looked over at Palencia.

“Pollos? The guy with the Orb?” The sergeant nodded. The doctor let go of Dane and looked at his two companions. “Vin, who are these men?”

The colonel smiled as he pointed to the Russian-Chinese man in the pilot suit. “Lieutenant Commander Ivan Sun and...” his finger shifted towards the rough-looking Hispanic still in the reclamation suit, “Sergeant Demar Palencia. They’ve been helping me. Gentlemen, Dr. Miranda Mayfield.”

Both of them gave a nod back to her.

Dane looked back into her eyes again. “Miranda, where is Pollos?”

She walked over to the table and activated her holoimager. “Here.”

“What?”

“He’s on Avalon.” The search program popped up an image of the planet. “Xavier Pollos showed up yesterday, just as all hell was breaking loose. I guess he’d hoped that with everyone trying to leave, no one would notice him coming back in.”

“Doubtful,” Demar muttered.

“Excuse me?”

The sergeant shrugged his shoulders. “This Pollos doesn’t care if we know where he is. Why should he? We can’t hurt him.. *no one* can hurt him, and he knows it.”

“We need the Orb,” Vin reminded him.

“But how are we going to get it?” Demar shot back. “Another ambush? That worked *great* the last time.”

“You did *what?*” Miranda asked Vin. “Didn’t you read the reports I sent you?”

“All of them mentioned head-on confrontations. I figured a surprise attack—”

“You figured wrong,” Palencia scoffed.

Dane whipped his head towards Demar like a snake. “Look, sergeant! I can’t keep apologizing for who I am or what I’ve done!”

“Why don’t you get your Horadrim friends to get it for you?” Ivan muttered.

“Horadrim?” Mayfield looked perplexed.

Sun smiled. “Didn’t he tell you, doctor? He’s a fucking alien!”

Miranda stared at Vin. “What is he talking about, Vin?”

“Miranda...”

The pilot continued. “Why don’t you tell her, colonel? How you’ve been masquerading as a human all this time?”

“But, Vin,...” the doctor brushed her hand against her braids. “I’ve known you for *twenty years!* You’ve never...”

“Miranda, it’s not easy to—”

“You lied... to *me!*!”

“*YES!!!*” Dane screamed in anger, every movement bristling with violence. “I lie to *everybody*, don’t you understand! EVERYBODY!” He panted as his head turned towards Sun. “You humans think you’re so *damned* important! You almost kill my entire race, then force us to sign a *damned... peace treaty!* We’re supposed to be your equals, but if we reveal ourselves, we’re ostracized! We’re experimented on, tortured... *that’s* why we clothe ourselves in human skin. Some of us even forgot who we were! We were lost in humanity. Thinking we were human, but knowing we were different. We could look and act and talk and

FUCK like you apes, but we knew we could *never* be you.” Dane paused to take a shaking breath. “Then slowly, we discovered our heritage again. Our language, technology, fellow people... but we are *not* strong enough to reveal ourselves yet.”

“You never answered my question,” Ivan managed to reply.

Vin was still steaming. “One of our ships could carve Avalon into floating chunks—but that’s only in space. On the ground, we’re just as vulnerable as you *pathetic* creatures.”

“But you can do your tricks—”

“*So can you!*” Dane was trying to calm himself, but it wasn’t coming

easily. “Magi, changelings, even normal human have tricks! Ours are just different from yours.”

“But Vin...” Miranda said timidly, confused by the revelation and afraid to make him angry again. “*You’re a mage!*”

“Yes... and that’s our solution.”

Demar knew that Dane was dodging the question... but he wanted to know what the colonel’s plan was more.

“What do you mean?”

“The Orb distorts reality to an amazing degree, much more than any awakened person could do. However, although magi distort reality through their powers, they can also do the reverse. If we can *strengthen* reality, the Orb

becomes weaker, and we can defeat Pollos.”

“Great,” Sun moaned, “then what do you need *us* for?”

Dane gave a wicked grin.

“Distraction.”

Palencia stared back at him.

“What?”

“Yes, I can strengthen reality, but since the Orb is so powerful, it’ll take all of my concentration just to weaken it a little. I need you, Ivan, to keep him off balance long enough to weaken the Orb. Once it is, Demar can go in and finish off Pollos.”

“I beg your pardon?” The sergeant’s eyes bulged.

“You faced Pollos at his full strength and survived; that takes more than luck. If you could do it then, you can kill him now if we take away his advantage.”

Demar was dumbfounded into silence. He remember the panic he felt at fighting Xavier, the pure *fear*, but... the colonel's plan actually made sense. *Maybe I've been around him too long*, he thought, *but it might just work!*

Mayfield's shock was beginning to wear off. “If this is going to work, you'll need another mage.”

“Miranda, no.”

“Vin!” She stepped up to him. “I know more about this Orb than any other person except you. I've read the reports;

I *know* how powerful it is. And if your plan is going to succeed, you'll need some help.”

Dane opened his mouth to object, but he saw the determination in the doctor's eyes. He knew better than to refuse.

“All right, you can come. Now where is Pollos?”

Miranda shifted the planet's hologram to focus on a particular point.

“I've configured the planetary security grid to keep close tabs on Pollos.

According to this, he passed a vidphone two minutes ago in New Chicago.” She smiled widely. “I can give you directions if you want.”

“Fine. Sun, think you can hotwire an

assault shuttle?”

Ivan coughed out a laugh. “Stupid question. I think I saw one out on the tarmac. See you there.”

Palencia followed. Dane was about to join them when Mayfield pulled him aside. “Vin, I want you to tell me something.”

“Yes?”

“If you have all this power... why did you join the Tech Infantry?”

Vin looked down at his boots before looking back at her. “At the time, I... wanted to keep an eye on humanity. With the destruction of the Resistance, I lost most of my contacts, and it looked like Clarke’s Federation was going to

win. I figured that if I could rise in the ranks, I would be able to warn my people of any future threats.”

“That’s all?”

“That’s all.”

“You spent most of your life being a watchman?”

“Twenty years isn’t that long.”

Miranda looked puzzled. “It is to most of us.”

“As Ivan has pointed out several times, I am *not* one of you.”

“How old *are* you, Vin?”

Dane sighed. “When humans first came to our dying world, they stole our last children for experimentation. Many of them died, but I survived.”

“But that’s impossible.” The doctor couldn’t believe it. “That was before the Federation was founded!”

“Yes. Any wonder why the Bugs attacked Earth? *We* sent them.”

“But... that would mean you’ve lived for a couple *centuries*...”

“Yes,” Vin interrupted, “but that was a long time ago.”

“No shit.”

Dane managed a smile. “Miranda, please... shall we go? They’re waiting for us.”

“How am I supposed to go with a man I hardly know?”

“You know me, Miranda. You know me more than I’ve ever let anyone know

me.” He took her hand. “And I wouldn’t want anyone else beside me.”

Mayfield fought back the tears in her eyes. “All right... what are waiting for?”

With the end of the world coming, few people were still on Patton Base, and none of them were guarding it. Thus, no one really cared when Sun broke into a hanger and stole an assault shuttle. It wasn’t a Wraith, like he would have preferred, but a fighter wouldn’t carry three other people.

It didn’t take long for them to pile in. None of them bothered to carry weapons; they were useless against

Pollos anyway. Palencia didn't even bother modifying a suit of power armor for himself. The military mind raging in the back of Demar's head told him they needed better preparation, better equipment, and about a division of TI troops behind them. But these were desperate times... and even that time was running out.

New Chicago was a ten-minute jump away in a suborbital path. None of them said a word; the possibility of their death weighed heavily on their minds. Ivan ignored it by concentrating on flying. Demar thought about his family on New Madrid. Miranda simply looked at Vin and thought about what he

had lived through, how he had seen the Federation from beginning to... *well, maybe the end. Even if we stop the Caal, the Fed will never be the same. Too much has fallen apart for Clarke to put it back together again.*

Of course, she mused, they probably said that to him when he became Chairman in the middle of the 3rd Civil War. Look what he's done since then.

Dane was the only one seemingly unaffected by the feeling of impending doom. His eyes were closed; he looked asleep, even when they rode the heat shield into New Chicago. Once the shuttle landed, Vin's eyes opened and he disconnected the safety harness. As the

other two followed suit, the colonel rushed forward to the cockpit. “Sun!”

“Yeah?”

“Stay here until we find Pollos.

Once we give you his coordinates, come in blazing with everything you got.”

“Colonel...” Ivan looked at Dane.

“If what Demar says is true, it won’t do anything to him.”

“True... but it *will* grab his attention. You only need to distract him for a few seconds. That’s all we need.”

Sun held out his hand. “It was nice knowing you.”

Dane took it and shook. “And you.” Then he disappeared out the hatch after Mayfield and Palencia.

Once the hatch closed behind him, Ivan snorted out a laugh. “You alien bastard. I hope you get your Orb and choke on it.” Then Sun activated the assault shuttle’s weapons systems.

The streets were empty. As the three of them walked down Dearborn Street, they passed vacant businesses, empty schools, and abandoned apartments. The only sign of life was the brush of their shoes against the plasticrete.

“Where is he?” Demar growled.

The doctor pulled out her cybermodem and activated her search program. The tiny hologram projector ran through the results. “Well,” she

strained, “Pollos passed that phone,” Miranda pointed to a vidphone stand, “about ten minutes ago. He couldn’t have gone...” A new result popped up. “Traffic sensor caught him on Kedzie.” A quick map program connected the dots. “He’s headed for downtown.”

“Then that’s where we’re going,” Vin replied, looking around. “How far is it?”

“Two kilometers,” Mayfield answered.

“Too far to run and get there in time. Demar, do you see a parking lot around here?”

The werewolf leaned his head. “There’s a hovertruck in that alley.”

“Close enough.”

They made their way over to the truck with a pizza restaurant's logo covering the entire outside. Vin placed his hand against the lock, closed his eyes, and it unlocked before them. “Get in.”

The three of them wasted no time, driving towards downtown at full speed. The old hovertruck shook from badly calibrated anti-grav emitters, which vibrated more as they increased speed. It only took a minute before they saw the bonfire.

They came to stop at the edge of downtown. Michigan Avenue was filled with people; praying, weeping, huddled

together as they threw things into the fire. A voice called out from a podium, telling them to repent that the Caal might pass over them. Every so often, a shout would go out, a terrified wail of sadness. The sight of the huddled masses sent a shiver through them all.

“Where is Pollos?” Vin asked.

Miranda consulted her cybermodem.

“Right over there.”

Their eyes followed where she pointed... and they saw him. At the other side of the mob, the dusty traveler walked forward, staring at the crowd.

“Demar,” Colonel Dane whispered, “get ready.”

The sergeant looked at him for a

moment, then nodded. The doctor stared at her friend. “You can’t open fire here.”

“If we wait, we may lose our chance.” Vin pulled out his com unit.

“They’ll die!”

“They’ll get out of the way. Get ready.” He lifted the unit to his lips and activated it. “Ivan, you ready?”

The pilot’s voice was cheerful.

“What took you so long?”

“Pollos is a hundred meters north of our position. Have your ship comp lock on.”

“Confirmed. Calculating flight path.”

“Don’t take too long. Discom.” Vin

put the unit away and held out his hand to Miranda. “It must be done.”

“Vin...”

“It *must* be done,” he repeated.

Reluctantly, she took his hand and concentrated. Between them, they could feel the universe constrict around them, growing tighter. The bonds of reality were growing stronger and stronger. With the two of them working in tandem, Miranda was pushing far beyond what her ability could have accomplished before. Everywhere in her perception, the planet grew quiet.

Demar was quickly rounding the mob, hoping to get around in time. Already, he could hear the whirrs of the

shuttle coming in.

Ivan flew just above the rooftops of New Chicago, maneuvering into position. *I'm only going to have one shot, he knew, so it's got to be good.* As the range finder slowly dropped to zero, Sun banked the shuttle into the street below, activating the targeting systems.

Pollos turned towards him as the roar of the craft came through the street. The weapons locked on and Ivan didn't hesitate to fire.

A barrage of plasma and lasers scarred the street in front of Sun. As expected, Pollos' ring expanded into a shield... but suddenly, the strain was

showing on his face. Xavier held for a few seconds, then bolted toward the bonfire, out of the path of destruction.

The shuttle vaulted into the sky and the mob panicked. Screams of terror rose up as they ran in any direction they could from the blasts. Some ran into the fire and ran out as burning torches.

Pollos had also panicked; suddenly, the power of his weaponry was weakened. For the first time in his life, they had failed him. “NO!” he bellowed, as his ring formed into a sword.

At the sound of his enemy, Palencia rushed forward, the beast within raging to get out. Hair blossomed and muscles

bulged, expanding the sergeant into a killing machine.

Xavier saw Demar coming towards him and leapt into the attack. The sergeant dodged the first few attacks and then pressed in closer. As the blades whirled, Demar could see the look of panic on Xavier's face. "No!" he cried. "You can't be..."

Palencia roared with the thrill of the hunt. With every step he took, he was getting inside the swords' attack range. Finally, when his right sword arm swung past, Demar grabbed it, quickly seizing the other arm.

The swords disappeared and Pollos' hands latched onto the werewolf's

biceps and dug in. They were locked in battle, pressing against each other, muscle against muscle alone. Xavier's strength far exceeded that of a normal man—but so did Demar's. They grunted and strained to make the other fall.

Ivan had managed to circle back to the bonfire, grateful that he was alive. As he circled for another pass, the sensor saw them locked together, with Dane and Mayfield off to the side. *I gotta help them, Sun thought, but these weapons would kill Demar as well as Pollos.*

The shuttle came closer, easily finding a landing space in the abandoned street. “I gotta get down there,” Ivan

said aloud, landing the craft.

Once down, his hands scrambled over the cockpit, looking for something—anything—to use as a weapon. Sun found the survival pack underneath the seat. Ripping it open, he saw the shiny gleam of an unused plasma revolver. Ivan smiled as he reached for it and a shiny charged cartridge.

Gun in hand, the fighter pilot raced out the hatch and toward the grunting, grinding combatants. They hardly noticed as he reached them.

Sun raised the plasma revolver at Pollos' head... and froze. He couldn't pull the trigger. Here was a man who would kill all of them without a single

thought... and yet Ivan couldn't fire.

Sun had killed in battle before, many times, but that had always been at range. He had never had to look into his enemy's eye and do it.

His breathing grew faster, his arm grew tired, and his heart sounded like a drum. Finally, his lips managed to work. "Xavier Pollos."

The assassin's face turned towards Sun; disbelief crossed his face. Ivan knew he had to fire... but looking right into Pollos' eyes seemed impossible. Ivan's hand shook from the strain.

Suddenly, Demar managed to push forward. The sudden movement jolted the pilot, his trigger finger pulled, and a

plasma bolt went square into Pollos' forehead. The werewolf shoved the assassin to the ground, rolling with his own fall, leaving Sun to stare at the dying man.

Xavier's mouth opened as if to say something, then he gave his last breath. As the pilot watched, Pollos' body seemed to drain of color, go translucent, then simply fade away. In the body's place, a sword appeared, glistening with symbols along its blade... and the Orb.

Miranda broke her concentration when she felt Vin walk away. Instinctively, she followed him.

Demar, with his enemy gone, allowed his rage to slip away. His body

shrank back to normal and he walked towards what remained of his foe.

All four of them stood around the artifacts in silence. Finally, Vin Dane knelt down to pick up the Orb. He cradled it his hand carefully and stood up, holding it at eye level. “It’s beautiful,” the colonel said as it caught the light. Dane’s eyes flickered to Palencia. “Take the sword.”

The sergeant reached down and took Pollos’ sword, moving it back and forth, testing the weight. “Kuar,” he said. “Its name is Kuar.”

Vin shifted the Orb into one palm and it melted like it was made of wax. It oozed around Dane’s hand until it

formed like a black glove. The hand tightened into a fist and the colonel shuddered as the power flowed into him.

“Now we’re ready,” Vin said, power glistening in his eyes. “Our revenge will soon be at hand.”

Grand Council Chambers, August 23rd

Amanda decided not to tell Clarke about her plan. The Chairman had grown more erratic since Jennifer’s Star fell. The Grand Council met daily now, although its power grew less and less. Many of the outer systems refused to follow their orders. Contrary to the chairman’s orders, no more ships came

to Avalon to strengthen the defense. The remaining operational fleet—the one that wasn't controlled by the Caal—had mutinied, and was now forming in the New Madrid system. Cults had taken over governments in several systems, instructing their followers to pray for their salvation—or be put to death.

Kait looked closely at her leader. If Clarke had been old before, he had aged a century in the past few days.

Then, as Patel once again gave the condition of the Home Fleet, a messenger came over to the admiral.

“What?!” Clarke barked with fury.
“*What is it?!?!?*”

Nirav took a deep breath and said,

“The Ares Battle Group has entered Wilke’s Star.”

“NO!!!” the chairman roared, slamming his fist onto the table. He kept screaming and pounding, at first cracking, then splitting the great table in two. The ministers fled as his rage unleashed itself on the table.

As Amanda raced out herself, the Caal fleet two days away at most, she decided it was good she hadn’t said anything. Blowing up jumpgates was not the best career move.

Chapter 7: Truth Will Set You Free

Avalon, August 24th

Miranda grew more concerned about Dane. The Orb was his constant companion; the glove never left his hand. The Vin that she knew had been boisterous and playful. In these last few days, he had become so focused. He had a concentration so intense, she was afraid if he smiled the earth would split underneath them.

Yet her thoughts were more disturbed. *Did I ever really know him? All these years, he lied to me... to everybody... I thought it was just his job!*

The four of them had gone back to Dane's ship after retrieving the Orb. Mayfield was overwhelmed by the strangeness of it all. *After all, she thought, it's one thing to find out that your friend's an alien; it's another thing to be confronted by the reality of it.*

Dane spent most of the time in communication with other Horadrim. He was trying to convince more of their ships to join the battle. One didn't have

to understand their language to see that he wasn't having much success.

Palencia spent much of his time with his new sword. Demar never had much need for antique weaponry... but Kuar was different. This sword had a mind. It taught him how to use it; how to move, react. Kuar thrilled the sergeant with new possibilities. It made him realize how slow and clumsy his earlier movements had been.

Ivan was bored. His initial shock at killing Xavier Pollos had gone, but he was left with a dull ache inside. No matter how he rationalized it, Pollos' eyes continued to stare at him whenever Ivan closed his eyes.

He wanted to do... something, *anything!* *The Caal are going to be here soon; why are we waiting here?* Sun watched the news through the doctor's cybermodem; it wasn't good. The Ares Battle Group, his old ship, along with its own fleet of transports, had bypassed Wilke's Star completely, entered the New Paris system, and were hours from the digital gate to Avalon.

Unlike a jumpgate, a digital gate sent matter as a dense beam of energy and information, sending it through a tachyon pulse and rematerializing it at another gate. Instead of two days of hyperspace hauling between New Paris and Avalon, it took seconds.

It was impossible, of course—but that didn't stop a bunch of engineers and mages from building it. Once it worked, plans were made to span the Federation with a whole network of them. One thing stopped them: the price. They cost a hundred times more than a normal jumpgate. So eventually the network was abandoned, and only three gateways were ever built. One had been destroyed, leaving two... and now the Caal were going to ride it into the heart of the Federation.

As the last frantic broadcast ended, Dane appeared in the doorway. “It’s soon, isn’t it?”

Sun nodded, turning the cybermodem

off. “Not long now. How many of your friends did you get to come?”

“Ten. Hopefully it’ll be enough.”

“I thought you said the Orb would tip the balance.”

Vin looked at the glove. “It’s hard to... to use. There’s power, but I only have the faintest idea of how to use it.”

“Great,” Ivan moaned, “so what good is it?”

“If all else fails, I can take it out of here. The Caal might ignore the Fed and chase me instead.”

“And run forever?”

Dane gave a glimpse of a smile.

“Let’s hope it doesn’t come to that.”

“So we wait for the Caal to arrive?”

“No, we need to coordinate with the Home Fleet. We can cause more damage working together than separately.”

“How’re you going to do that?” Ivan smirked. “ ‘Oh, by the way, the Horadrim fleet’s going to fight with us? Who’s going to go along with that?’”

“Clarke.”

“You’ve told the Grand Council Chairman that?!”

“No, but I’m about to. Prep the shuttle, we’re going to the capitol.”

As the colonel left, Ivan took the cybermodem and walked down to the bay. He tried not to think about what might happen when they arrived. *Sooner*

or later, he knew, if I keep riding with Dane, he's going to get me killed.

Capitol Executive Building

Since he had trashed the council chambers, Clarke had them meet in his office. Of course, in such an enclosed space, the chairman didn't trust them. Therefore, four of his personal bodyguards stood watch, all of them changeling veteran soldiers. *There isn't much to say, Amanda noticed, just the final review of the Home Fleet dispositions.*

“Our defense,” Admiral Patel answered, “is based around the planet

itself. The planetary battlestations will provide added firepower...”

Suddenly, the doors opened and four people walked into the office. The bodyguards formed a wall in front of the chairman, which Clarke pushed aside.

“What is this?!”

“My apologies, honored chairman,” Vin Dane replied, “but we’ve run out of time for niceties.”

“Colonel Dane?” the chairman growled. “I thought you were dead.”

“No, sir. As you can see, I am very much alive.”

“What do you want then?!”

“I’m here as a representative of the Horadrim Empire. I have managed to

convince them to send their fleet to Avalon's defense, however, we'll need to coordinate—”

“You did *what?!*” Suddenly Clarke was a fountain of rage, contained no longer, fully released at Dane. He didn't care that the Horadrim were coming to save them. The chairman had been fighting aliens and rebels all his life; *nothing good could come from either*. Frustrated at being unable to fight the Caal, helpless to stop his Federation from falling to the threat... all these worries had blossomed into a rage that was barely controlled. The mere mention of Horadrim help was the last straw. “TRAITOR! You sold us out to

the dammed *Horadrim*?!”

“I did no such thing,” Dane tried to explain. “I’m trying to save—”

“I’ve heard enough of your *lies!*” the chairman roared, pulling a red dagger from his belt. In a blink it expanded into a sword as he rushed forward. Amanda watched in horror as Clarke prepared to throw away their only glimmer of hope. Strangely, she thought she saw an expression of joy on his face. In his mind, the old werewolf knew that *this*, at least, was a fight he could win!

Or so he thought; Vin’s glove formed back into a sword and met the chairman’s slash. Clarke’s rage only grew at the resistance, and he

transformed into the full height of his changeling form.

The bodyguards tried to help, but Demar saw them coming. Kuar leapt into his hand and pointed at them.

“Don’t...” Palencia growled. Sun managed to draw his plasma revolver and aimed it as well, keeping them at bay while Dane and Clarke fought.

Metal rang against metal as the two men dueled each other. Excalibur in Vin’s hand glowed like a star, thrilled to fight such a worthy opponent. Clarke’s own sword glowed in its hideous red tone, the blood of his long-dead son having stained the sword forever. Everyone else in the room was afraid to

move.

Vin soon realized he wasn't controlling his sword arm. The Orb had a will of its own. It knew this deadly dance better than the colonel did, and it sang to him as they fought.

Dane soon became a blur of flesh and metal; Clarke, a blur of metal and white fur striped with black. They were both equally matched—and had no intention of stopping.

As they fought, the Orb began to see the impass. The challenge was thrilling to it... but it had to end. Once its sword avatar came from another pass, it molded itself into a deadlier edge. WHACK! Clarke's sword was nicked.

WHACK! A gouge formed in the red blade. *WHACK!* The red sword cracked in two, falling apart in Clarke's hands.

The chairman had no mind for disbelief; he was pure rage. He threw down the sword and lunged forward...

...right onto Excalibur, piercing his body. Dane kicked him off the blade, and Clarke dropped to the floor. Vin went to finish him off, but stopped. Before him, the wererecreature formed back into a man.

In his last moments, Clarke's eyes stared at Dane. "You can't do this..." he croaked.

Dane kneeled down and shook his

head. “Why did you make me?”

“You came to destroy us... destroy the Federation. I couldn't allow... it's all we have left...”

“We cannot live in the past,” Vin offered, “it's over.”

The chairman spat in his face. Blood ran down the alien's cheek. “Power is damnation.” Clarke smiled. “See you in hell.”

There was a last gasp, then silence. Clarke's sword had managed to reform, and before Dane's eyes, the red sword was now striped with black.

Vin lowered his sword and it formed back into a glove. He turned to face the Grand Council, Clarke's blood

splattered across his chest. The Councilors were all terrified at seeing their leader, the man they had feared for twenty years, murdered before their very eyes. Naturally, they assumed they were next.

Amanda Kait felt the specter of death fall across her as well... but she'd be damned if her life ended like this. So she stepped forward and said, "We are yours to command, Colonel... Chairman Dane."

Vin held out his hand. "No, I am not the chairman of this council. But I will lead this fleet into battle... and we *will* defeat the Caal. And I'll need your help to do it." He looked directly at

Amanda. “Organize a Galactic Net override to broadcast as soon as possible.”

Kait looked over at the Minister of Information. “Do it.”

He nodded and walked over to the chairman’s desk. Tapping several buttons, there was a flurry of holoimaging equipment suddenly becoming active. Finally, after centering the signal on Dane, he said, “Sir... go ahead.”

The colonel straightened before he spoke. “My name is Vin Dane. With the recent death of Chairman Clarke, I have been chosen by the Grand Council to lead us. However, there is no more

Federation. What remains is humanity, a desperate race trying to survive extinction.

“Ours is a holy crusade against pure evil. The Caal *must* be stopped. To that end, the Horadrim have agreed to join with us now, united against our common enemy. For the empire of Man to live, the Caal must die. I *will* destroy them, this I promise you.”

Vin looked over at the Information Minister and he cut the transmission. Then he looked at the rest of the Councilors huddled along the walls. “I’m dissolving the Grand Council as of now. The Federation no longer exists. However, I’ll need you to maintain

order until I return. Admiral Patel, report to your flagship. You will be my liaison with the Home Fleet.”

The minister looked down at the Net hologram still hovering over the chairman’s desk. “Sir! The Caal are coming through the digital gate!”

Kait reached into her pocket and pressed a button. She watched the hologram... and nothing happened.

“Sir, I’m getting reports that the local jumpgates are exploding... everything except the digital gate.”

Amanda silently cursed herself. She had told her team to get detonators on all the *jump* gates, not the *digital* gates.

Who knew technicians would be so

literal?!

Chapter 8: Holy War

While the Caal were moving, the Home Fleet was standing still. That was the plan, of course; use the capital planet's firepower to augment their own. However, with the fully-functional Ares Battle Group appearing one ship at a time through the digital gate, just sitting there seemed the worst of all possible options.

Ivan piloted the shuttle back to the Horadrim ship while Vin, Miranda, and Demar waited to get aboard. It didn't

take long before they were back in the unnatural landing bay.

As they disembarked, Sun said to Dane, “I’m going over to the *TFS Nicodemus*. They’ll need another pilot.”

The colonel looked shocked. “We need you here.”

“Vin, you don’t need someone to pilot your ship—I *still* haven’t figure out how you do that—but I *am* a pilot. If there’s a battle out there, they’re going to need me. They’ll need everybody.”

“I can’t afford to lose you, Ivan.” There was a roughness in Vin’s voice, almost as if he was hiding his emotions. *Concern?* Sun wondered. *Desperation? Fear?*

However, the pilot shook it off.

“Hell, sir, I’ve been expecting to die ever since I ran out of Chapman’s Folly. This is no different.”

“Ivan...” *Definitely desperation...*

“Vin,” Ivan said, looking straight into his eyes, “I can’t sit this one out. I gotta fly.”

Dane met his gaze for a moment, then nodded. “See you at the victory party.”

Sun winked back, then programmed the course to the *Nicodemus*.

Vin contacted the rest of the Horadrim fleet to come in. At least, that’s what Miranda *thought* he did; that language was undecipherable. She

would hate to hear an opera in it; a symphony of chainsaws would be the only comparison.

Mayfield chuckled to herself as she held the cybermodem. She was the liaison between Dane and the Home Fleet. The alien craft might have been all-powerful, but its communication systems weren't fully compatible with Terran signals.

So it comes down to this, Miranda mused, a cheap vidcomp connecting through a tachyon net relay is the only communication between an outgunned alien fleet and a barely functioning human one. And this is supposed to save humanity?

Demar, on the other hand, had nothing to do but watch. *I do have the best seat to watch the end of the universe*, he had to admit, *but unless the Caal try to board the ship, there's not much I can do.*

Dane kept the display up so they could all see what was happening. After Vin gave the word, nine other Horadrim ships of various sizes suddenly appeared along side them. No spatial distortion, no hyperspace opening... they weren't there one second, they were the next.

Vin turned towards Miranda. "Is the connection made to Admiral Patel?"

"Yes."

"Tell him that our ships are ready."

The doctor activated the comlink, and Nirav Patel suddenly appeared in the hologram. “Patel.”

“Admiral,” Mayfield repeated, “the Horadrim Fleet is ready.”

Nirav didn’t look impressed. “Does our commanding officer have a plan?”

Vin walked over to the screen. “Admiral Patel, your orders are to engage the enemy fleet once they’ve reached your position.”

“And what will you be doing?”

Dane smiled. “Hitting the enemy from behind.”

“Why don’t we destroy the digital gate?”

“Because we want the Caal here...

all of them. This war ends here and now.”

“And if they get past us?”

Vin paused, then said, “Have one ship prepare a 3D implosion missile targeted on the sun. If the Caal land on Avalon... fire it.”

“You mean...”

“If we lose, we destroy the system. The Caal *must* be stopped... at any cost.”

Nirav blinked, then nodded. “Yes, sir.”

“Good luck. Discom.”

The Ares Battle Group was limited by the digital gate only allowing one ship to pass through at a time. There

was only so much information that could be sent via the tachyon code, and if more than one ship went through at once, they might turn out as metallic mush.

However, they quickly formed a defensive barrier around the gate. The counter-attack the Caal expected never came, and two hours later, the star control ship, its escorts, and a ton of transports had finally gathered in the Avalon system for battle.

They couldn't help but notice the Home Fleet prepared to meet them. Unlike Jennifer's Star, New Paris, or the Wilke's Star systems before, their outer system defenses weren't activated against them. It was like the humans

were inviting them to attack. The Caal weren't about to refuse such an invitation.

The invading armada was massive; as the Home Fleet watched from their hastily repaired bridges, so many ship signals appeared in their tac scanners that it almost appeared as one huge blob.

An hour passed before their outer fighter screen reached weapons range. Then the fireworks began.

Lieutenant Commander Sun was one of the few fighter pilots left to the Home Fleet. As the *Ares*' fighters came closer, Ivan could see that the defenders were hideously outnumbered. Not that the fact

bothered him in the slightest. *After all, he knew, the universe is out to get me. I just didn't expect it to send a star control ship...*

Sun was once again in his element, wrapped in the total immersion of the Wraith fighter. He activated the com circuit. "All squadrons, you may fire at will. I say again, fire at will."

Ivan smiled. *Who would believe that a lieutenant commander would control all twenty fighters squadrons? They were hard up for experienced pilots... luckily, they got me.*

The pilot targeted the nearest fighter in range and opened fire.

“Are we just gonna sit here?”

Palencia asked, watching the plasma blasts grow more intense. The Horadrim fleet hid in the shadow of the capital planet’s moon and waited.

Vin walked over to the wall and massaged it with his hand. An overlay appeared on the screen, showing routes of movement. There was an alien symbol beneath it, surrounded by four smaller symbols, constantly rotating. Suddenly the big symbol changed, but the smaller ones kept shifting. As Demar stared at it, he realized what it was. “A countdown.”

Dane looked back at Mayfield.

“Open a link to the admiral.”

The doctor activated the cybermodem and the thin tanned face appeared. “Patel.”

“Prepare to fire everything in two minutes.”

“I know,” Nirav grunted, “outer system defenses, as well as the local battlestations, are online.”

“Good. Time to roast the Caal.”

Patel wasn't impressed by his confidence. “Discom.”

Dane turned back to his own screen and said another incomprehensible alien word. There returned a flurry of grinding sounds and the ship writhed in acknowledgement.

“We're moving,” Demar noticed.

Vin smiled. “Now we spring our trap.”

As the Horadrim fleet came out from behind the moon, the Ares Battle Group was moving within optimal firing range of the Home Fleet.

“Fire in the hole!” rang out to the fighters already engaged.

Ivan Sun was barreling after two fighters when he heard the call. He had been firing blindly at them to keep them off his wingman’s tail. “Damn!” he cursed, then launched one of his precious missiles and bolted out.

“Get out!” he screamed over the comm line. “All units, withdraw, full

throttle!”

Sun kept his engine under full thrust until he passed the first cruiser, then he curved his maneuvering thrusters to watch the show.

At one glorious moment, the battlestations, outer defenses, and the Home Fleet opened up a barrage. The Ares Battle Group was encased in a cat's cradle of interlocking fire. As laser and plasma hit metal, fire burst in a cascade of explosions. A few of the escort destroyers were hit in the engines and their fusion bottles burst, creating brief stars in the vacuum of battle.

The slaughter didn't last long. The battle group returned fire, adding to the

chaos. Although the Home Fleet had more ships, were less functional. In the crossfire, more of the humans were being incinerated.

As the smaller Horadrim fleet rounded the battlezone, their scanners showed two enemy squadrons trying to break out. Their black ships accelerated and unleashed their energy beams. The alien destroyers and light cruisers sliced through them, leaving them as fusion balls or carcasses dead in space.

Meanwhile, the pounding continued. The Horadrim vessels continued to pick off enemy ships in the rear, where the outer system batteries were firing. The defender's firepower was weaker here,

and so the enemy tried to escape that way—only to be eaten by the alien crafts.

Trapped between such lethal powers, the Caal went after the weaker of the two: the Home Fleet. The Ares Battle Group surged forward, focusing their fire ahead, trying to break out of the trap. Entire squadrons disappeared as the star control ship punched its way towards the capital planet.

Nirav watched on the flag bridge of the *Hachiman* as the *Ares* destroyed his fleet piece by piece. He knew if he did nothing, they would be able to land on Avalon itself. “Signal the *Zeus*,” he told the lieutenant. “Order them to close the

gap.”

The *TFS Zeus* fired its aging engines and surged forward. Its main guns pounded the *Ares*' escorts that tried to take advantage of the gap. Soon, the star control ship faced its sister ship head-on.

Ares turned and unleashed hell. Although the seven-mile long ship had impressive weaponry, the *Zeus* had taken a lot of battle damage in its fight with the *Vulthra*. As the two massive ships pounded each other, the *Ares* proved better equipped. Grasers tore into the heart of the *Zeus*, and after two minutes of engagement, the star control ship was gutted.

Patel was stunned. With the *Zeus* finished, the gap was widening again. There was only one thing to do. “Order the captain to intercept the *Ares*, maximum speed.”

Dane also watched as the *Zeus* became a useless hunk of metal. “The trap cannot be contained.”

“The *Hachiman* is going after the *Ares*,” Miranda announced.

“Doesn’t matter,” Vin replied. “They’ll be able to punch through anywhere. There’s not enough ships to maintain the barrage. We’ve got to go in and finish them.”

“That’s insane!” Mayfield replied. “Even with your speed, if you send the

Horadrim ships in, they're going to get shot to hell by the flanking squadrons here," she pointed to the readout, "and here. What good are your ships if they're dead?"

"If we don't close that gap, we're dead anyway!"

"What about the Orb?" Demar offered.

Dane stared at him. "What?"

"The doctor said when it was first used, the Orb managed to destroy half a K'Nes invasion fleet. Why can't you do the same?"

At first, Vin seemed to ignore them, turning to his comm screen and uttering that buzzsaw noise to the companion

ships.

While the *Ares* and the *Hachiman* faced off, the Horadrim fleet rushed in, cutting a blazing swath through the Caal-infested ships. As they were warned, however, the flanking enemy squadrons turned their guns toward the black alien ships.

Suddenly the colonel raised his gloved hand straight ahead. He clenched his hand into a fist, then slowly released it. As he did, the flanking squadrons' ships began to detonate; fusion bottles lit their way into the center of the battle group.

Vin, Miranda, and Demar were all stunned at the power unleashed. Fifteen

ships... gone on a whim. The sergeant was the only one who could speak.

“Then all the stars lit their way home.”

The doctor looked at him. “What?”

“A story... I read as a child.”

An eerie voice came from Dane’s lips. “*When all seemed dark and all alone / The children gnashed and did they groan / They feared that they were on their own / Then all the stars lit their way home.*”

Palencia’s eyes went wide. “You read that story too?”

Vin shook his head with equal disbelief. “No. Never read it.”

Commander Sun had been dodging

death the whole battle. His Wraith's energy was getting low and he had only one missile left. Through inertia, saving his engine thrust, he now had a bird's-eye view of the two battling juggernauts. The *Hachiman* was losing badly, but after taking on two star control ships, the *Ares* had several gashes in its armor and was leaking atmosphere at a hideous rate.

Ivan zoomed in on the *Ares*, his old ship, and held back the tears at the damage he had wrought. Then... he noticed it. There was a hole in the rear of the ship, leading right towards one of the fusion reactors. *One missile*, he knew, *would rip that behemoth open.*

Of course, the only way he could make sure it would succeed was to get dangerously close... and there was no way to do that and get out alive...

The fighter pilot thought about it for a second before he made his decision. *Fuck it, he thought, the universe was out to get me anyway.*

Sun hit the engines on full burn and barreled towards the *Ares*.

Ivan watched as space disappeared and the enormous bulk of the *Ares* replaced it. With a quick spin, the fighter ducked into the gash. Sun reveled in the tight maneuvering of the gap. Seconds became minutes as he approached the target. The scorched

metal of the final engine armor revealed itself to him. There was no need for a missile lock; the pilot fired the missile and rode it in to the target.

The missile penetrated the engineering deck, incinerating the techs and controls before finally penetrating one of the fusion reactors. The bottle burst, causing a star of bright light to erupt. This pierced the other fusion reactors, one after the other, until the *Ares* burned like a new sun.

The fallout of the explosion caused the *Hachiman* to also explode, as well as several ship squadrons following the star control ship out of the trap. When the glow disappeared, all that remained

was space and a few fragments of metal.

With their main ship and escorts gone, the Caal only had one thing left to do. Their small mass of transports, filled with the possessed people they had taken from Jennifer's Star, made for the planet. If they reached the planet and unloaded their people, the Caal could disappear once again and return later in force for the Orb.

Despite the damage they were causing, the Horadrim fleet couldn't cut through fast enough. A million Caal were about to be deposited on the capital planet and they were too far away.

Or were they? Dane growled that

whine into his comm line and an angry Horadrim replied. Vin insisted, and the other ship's captain relented.

Demar watched in awe as the colonel rushed around the bridge, getting ready to do... something. Then the ship writhed while the sergeant watched, as they passed through a tunnel, and were suddenly in front of the transports.

Now Palencia knew why the alien was mad. With their ships suddenly in front of the fleet, they were within the weapons arc of any surviving warships. As the black ships carved their way through the transports, a rain of weapons fire fell upon them. The Horadrim fleet ignored the remainder of the battle

group, focused on destroying the freighter craft.

“Why don’t you use the Orb?!”

Demar screamed as they were slowly getting carved up.

“I can’t control it!” Vin shouted back. “One false move, and I could wipe out this entire *solar system!* I can’t afford to take that chance.”

“You’d rather sacrifice us then use it?”

“Yes, damn it! Now sit down!”

The Home Fleet was closing down on them, running in to the Horadrim Fleet's rescue... or what was left of it. But they were still minutes away. As freighters boiled away to vacuum, the

alien ships took the toll. Soon one, then two, then four of the Horadrim were destroyed, crushed by the weight of the plasma.

Vin's ship was no exception; Dane began to weave through the transports, using their exploding carcasses as cover. The other ships followed suit, although their large dreadnought didn't quite make it. As it slowed behind its faster sister ships, fire concentrated on it until it disintegrated into writhing black ash.

Their sacrifice was not in vain, however; the transports were finished by the time the Home Fleet caught up. Then Horadrim ships jumped behind the

remnants of the battle group and pounded the enemy from both ends.

The damaged fleets bashed each other into oblivion, with the aliens picking off those who tried to flee. A few more minutes passed and the Caal were destroyed; their inhuman essences lost in the empty vacuum of space.

Of the Home Fleet, there were only seven ships operational; with five others being abandoned. Another alien ship perished, leaving only three Horadrim remaining.

Vin stood in silence for a moment, watching the billions of pieces that were once ships scatter throughout the Avalon system. He opened his mouth to speak,

but couldn't find the words. Never had he felt so triumphant and so despondent at the same time.

When he could finally speak, Dane told Miranda, "Open a channel to the Grand Council."

The doctor hit a few buttons and nodded. The image of Amanda Kait appeared. "Yes, sir?"

"The Caal are defeated," he whispered solemnly. "We're coming home."

Chapter 9: Empire

Earth, September 1st, 2264

The universe had caught its breath. The Caal had been defeated, humanity was saved, and the Horadrim had walked out of the shadows to unite their races.

Now they were here, in orbit above the ruins of humanity's cradle. *This planet had been fought over more than Avalon, Demar thought, if that were possible.* The Federation was born

here, then an asteroid destroyed it, they rebuilt it, then Admiral Von Shrakenberg crashed the Moon into the Pacific. No one bothered coming back to this perpetual dustbowl.

Except them; Clarke had asked to be buried on Earth. He was one of the last breed that remembered Earth the way it was. Now even that was gone.

In burying the Chairman, they signaled the end of the Federation. After the Battle of Avalon, Vin Dane was heralded as the savior of mankind. With the religious cults that spread across the cosmos, he was declared a god. Vin decided to take the more modest title of Emperor.

As his former bodyguard finished the ceremony, the new Imperial Court watched as Clarke's body fell back down to Earth. The speck of organic matter was soon caught up in the dust storm and disappeared.

The changelings gave a howl to signal their goodbye, an ear-tormenting screech which the court had to endure. Finally they passed by the Emperor, heads held high and defiant, as Vin bowed to each of them.

When they left, Kait turned to Dane. "Your Majesty, may I speak?"

Vin moaned. "Amanda, we're not in court. You are my chamberlain; speak freely."

Kait sighed. “It's a real mess out there. The Jurvain rebelled instantly, of course. They overthrew whatever human occupation forces we had left in their systems, then declared the Jurvain Commonality restored. One of the K’Nes systems broke away already, too... and it’s probably just a matter of time until the rest follow suit.”

Dane nodded slowly, absorbing the news. “And in the Feder—uh, the human systems?”

“Although many of the old Federation’s systems have declared allegiance to your new empire, there are more than a few which have declared their independence. Revolutionaries

have seized power in some of the old Eastern Bloc and Resistance systems. On Phoenix, the Ministry of Public Safety has established martial law until th—”

“I get the picture,” Dane sighed.

“And the Earth Fleet? Or rather, what’s left of it?”

“Well, we’ve received word from Admiral Smythe—”

“With the Poseidon Battle Group?”

Amanda nodded. “He says that...”

Her voice stopped, afraid to anger her new employer.

“What?”

She cleared her throat. “He says that you’re a traitor to the Federation, and he

has restored the Grand Council on New Madrid.”

“With himself as Chairman, I presume?”

She nodded again. “What do you wish to do?”

Dane turned to Palencia. “Sergeant, would you like a promotion?”

Demar shrugged. “The Tech Infantry no longer exists... I guess I’m between jobs.” The werewolf smiled.

“I doubt Smythe will agree to a peace treaty, so I’ll need an army... and someone to lead it.”

“You want *me* as your general?”

“General, marshal, whatever... choose a title you like. I can think of no

one better qualified.”

“I can, Vin.”

“So can I, Demar, but they’re all dead now.”

Demar snorted out a laugh. “Guess so. All right, I’ll take the job.”

Dane smiled. “Good.”

“What about me?” Miranda asked.

“I...” Vin paused as he looked around at the small collection of people who followed him now. “I had a different position for you in mind.”

Looking at his court, Dane asked, “Would you excuse us for a moment?”

The rest of them bowed and left the two of them alone. The observation room looking out over the dustball Earth

now seemed eerily empty. Dr. Mayfield shivered from the imagined cold.

“What?” she ventured to ask. “What is it?”

Vin stepped forward and took her hands in his. “Until all this happened, I always took you for granted. I took advantage of you... and ignored you. Then, when I need you the most, you were there. I suddenly realized how *much* I needed you.”

“Vin, I...”

“Please let me finish,” the Emperor asked. “Miranda, I never want to take you for granted again, and I never want you anywhere but by my side.” Dane got down on one knee. “Miranda, will you

marry me?”

Mayfield was speechless for a moment. She had the look of a frightened animal, completely shocked by the proposition. “I’m not sure what to say.”

“ ‘Yes’ is usually the answer.”

“Vin, you’re not just asking me to be your wife... you’re asking me to be the Holy Terran Empress! I’m sorry, that’s a bit too much of a social jump...”

“Miranda, I don’t care about the titles, I just want you.”

“It’s not that simple...”

“Are you going to tell me you don’t love me?”

She caught her breath. “No, I

couldn't lie to you, Vin.”

Dane smiled. “These next few years are going to be difficult. I'm going to need a good advisor, a friend, and a confidant. You are all these things and more. Please... marry me.”

Miranda couldn't help but smile back. After swallowing her fear, she said, “Okay. I will.”

Then she leaned down and caught his mouth in a kiss. Both of them felt lighter than air, suspended in the light of a dead world.

When she broke away, the new fiancé shook her head. “I'm still not sure about being Empress.”

“Don't worry.” Vin shrugged. “The

way things are going, we'll probably be dead in a year anyway."

Miranda scowled. "Thanks a lot."

Dane smiled as he stood up to put his arm around her. "Come on, let's go tell them."

"Which one, marriage or certain death?"

"The marriage. I don't think they're ready for the other."

THE END



About the Author

As a Navy brat, Marcus has found himself often between places. So it's not surprising that his characters find themselves in the same position. He grew up imagining fantastic worlds and loves telling stories about them. After a long stint as a mercenary teacher, he jumped between Korea, India, and Thailand, until he finally found himself in Cincinnati, Ohio. Marcus had a wonderful wife who puts up with him, and two wonderful kids that can't read, so he tries to share his stories with all those who can.

Marcus Johnston is the editor/writer of the Tech Infantry series, the highly

admired gaming universe created by Nathan Bax. Albegensian Press is proud to present these previously unpublished stories to the world, and hope that future generations of fans can come to appreciate them.

