





## **Worlds Apart Book Seven: *Yronwode***

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Manufactured in the United States of America  
Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data  
Wittenbach, James

Worlds Apart Book 06:Crucible  
I. Title  
ISBN 0- 0-9763384-0-8

# CHAPTER: 01

TIME: 694 days after Pegasus left the 12 255 Crux System

## The Derelict

Deep within the wreck of an ancient and gigantic spaceship, Trajan Lear was getting his ass kicked.

Lear flew through the air backwards across the deck and landed hard, kicking up a spray of hoarfrost crystals that had coated the deck. The ice-flakes remained hanging in the near-vacuum, unworried by the almost non-existent gravity. Trajan, sprawled belly-down on the deck with his nose and mouth pressed against the faceplate of his spacesuit, watched as a trail of hooved footprints appeared in the frost, making a trail toward him. "It's coming around again!" he shouted into his COM Link.

A blaze of charged plasma blasts cut through the air above him, spewing from the pulse-rifle of Warfighter Johnny Rook. "Stay down!" Rook yelled, which was unnecessary and which reverberated loudly and angrily inside his helmet. The blasts, meanwhile, connected with the invisible creature, creating a brief afterimage of some giant, demonic man-bull with long horrible limbs and a face with the skull on the outside of the skin. The blasts did no apparent damage otherwise.

"Yeeeearrrrrh!" Max Jordan, attired in the same black and gray space-armor as the others, gave a war cry (also splitting his own ears inside his space helmet) and ran across the deck firing his pulse rifle. Just as he reached the monster, an invisible paw swung, making swirls in the frosty air, and smacked Jordan hard in the chest. No one but he heard the sharp snap of two ribs breaking, and Jordan was hurled back against the bulkhead and crumpled to the ground.

Meanwhile, the monster barely broke its stride and continued to bear down on Trajan Lear.

"Just keep it busy," came a voice in their COM Links. It was Tactical Lt. Cmdr. David Alkema. "It took us two years to find this ship. Its NavCore is the only clue we've got to navigating in the Orion Quadrant."

"As if we needed to be reminded," Trajan muttered as the monster picked him and threw him against the far bulkhead.

Jordan sneered and raised himself up, "Is that all you got?" He picked up a sturdy length of pipe from the frosty deck and jacked up his suit's strength augmentation until he had enough to punch through a blast door, then charged the beast again.

He slammed his stout length of pipe hard against the beast's back. The pipe bent like a banana and the beast emitted one of its horrible, electromagnetic howls that filled their COM Links with white noise that sounded like unholy beasts shrieking in the pit of hell.

Then, it swung about, picked up Max Jordan by the front of his space suit and shook him like a dog would shake a dead ground monster.

The part of the ship where TacLC Alkema was working was in even worse shape, containing no air, no heat, no light and malfunctioning gravity that resulted in a light, disorienting pull to the side of the shaft, which was covered with broken and jagged beams of what remained of the ship's structure. The only illumination in the long, deep well came from his spacesuit, and it was just barely enough to make out the pattern of lines and crystal along the surface of a tall cylinder suspended in the shaft;

the ancient ship's braincore.

He used a tool from his pack to pry open one panel on the side, revealing three small cylindrical crystals. "Crap on a cracker," he muttered. Moving gingerly in the near-weightless environment, he felt his way to the next likely location of the crystal where Navigational Data was stored.

Previous attempts to access the Core had been thwarted by the presence of the weird alien creature being kept distracted by Trajan Lear and the warfighters. They didn't know whether the creature was part of the ship's defenses, some kind of animal that was being transported on board, or some alien entity that had taken residence in the ship's wreckage. Also, they didn't care. All they knew was it was about three meters tall, mostly invisible, and it had been holding off their every attempt to retrieve the ship's navigational data core.

And so Alkema had come up with the idea that someone should keep the creature occupied while he went down into the Braincore and salvaged the ship's navigational data to find human colonies here in the Orion Quadrant, on the opposite side of the galaxy from where they had begun their journey; a Quadrant about which they knew nothing except that somewhere was a planet called Earth that had been the cradle of all humanity.

Hopefully, there was only one of the creatures on board.

*Pegasus* had arrived in the Orion Quadrant lost among thirty billion stars without a map and over 3,000 souls short of a full crew. The Combined Odyssey Directorate had ordered *Pegasus* to remain in the Perseus Quadrant and continue its mission of exploration and discovery. Prime Commander Keeler had disagreed with those orders and had snuck *Pegasus* through the StarLock Chapultepec while no one was looking (with the inadvertent assistance of Acting Shipmaster Goneril Lear, who had somehow gotten the impression that *Lexington Keeler*, the Pathfinder ship whose repair she was overseeing was experiencing massive total systems failures).

The memory banks of the Chanticleer StarLock had been wiped clean like those of the Chapultepec StarLock back in their own Quadrant. The StarLock's systems had begun coming on-line as soon as the crew flew over. Chanticleer was different than Chapultepec. Instead of sterile white, its interior was a kind of sandy beige. Its diameter was 1,044 kilometers wide, not quite as large as Chapultepec. Four large spheres were positioned at 0, 90, 180, and 270 degrees around its perimeter, each a vivarium, a miniature world containing plant and animal life. As the station had sat vacant for over a thousand years, the plant and animal life had begun spilling into adjacent sections.

In its hangar levels, they had found a quantity of interstellar probes. The probes were somewhat large than their Aves shuttles, built like semi-spherical shells around a central propulsion systems with sensors and transmitters tucked into the space between. Drawing on knowledge gleaned from the Chapultepec Station, the crew ... mostly Tac LC Alkema ... figured out how to launch the probes through the StarLock and into star systems around the types of stars suitable for terra-class planets.

Unfortunately, they had only 1,381 probes, and over 6,000,000 nearby stars to survey. The first 106 probes found no colonies, and neither did the next 180 or the following 97.

But, while processing telemetry from probe 383, they had picked up a weak signal that they eventually identified as the transponder signal from an ancient starship that happened to lie between Chapultepec StarLock and the star system the probe was examining, and it lay less than a light-year from the station.

It was a huge wreck of a ship, but the intact sections left the impression of a sort of space train. The ship consisted of segments joined together in a long chain

nearly 40 kilometers in length. At the front and rear of the space train were segments containing the navigation and propulsion systems that powered it through space. Over the centuries, its cohesive integrity had broken down, and sections had begun breaking loose from the framework. And along its 10,000 meter length, gravity, stress, and radiation had begun to tear the old ship apart.

The chance discovery of this ancient ship, *Hewlander*, by what remained of the name on its hull, had been an extraordinary lucky break and recovering its navigational laws was probably their only chance to find the human colonies in this Quadrant.

Trajan Lear picked up himself up and shook off the mildly stunned feeling he had gotten from landing on his neck. He charged full force at where he thought the invisible creature was and punched out with his right arm. He was wrong, and the force of his swing sent him spinning to the deck. When he hit, the creature brushed him hard and backwards back into the bulkhead.

Also, the creature threw Max Jordan across the deck, and he landed lightly on top of Lear.

Johnny Rook stood off to the side, considering the situation. *"Plasma blasts, completely ineffective. Blunt instruments with augmented suit strength, also ineffective."* He paused. "Hey, guys. Have we tried reasoning with it?"

Lear pushed Max from on top of him. From his angle on the floor, he caught sight of the large open hatchway through which Rook had been tossed. He hit his COM Link "Rook, if we can get it into the next section, we could seal it off in there."

"It walks through walls," Jordan reminded him.

Lear continued. "We could disconnect the segment and blow it into space. It's worth a shot."

"Can you blow the disconnect?" Rook asked.

"I can figure it out," Lear assured him.

Rook struggled to his feet and found the hatch release. It opened into yet another section. At that moment, the creature made itself visible directly in front of Rook, and howled.

"Here, reason with this," Max Jordan yelled, and pulled a Stick-E-Grenade from his belt and slammed it onto what he guessed would be the creature's neck. The creature responded by tossing him through the open hatch into the next compartment.

David Alkema removed another panel from the braincore. Here was an array of nine thin cylinders arranged in a matrix. They gave off a faint blue glow. "Kumbayah!" Gingerly, he pulled the matrix from the cylinder.

Slowly, deliberately, he connected the interface patchcord to the side. "Okay, Chloe, I've attached an interface to what I am pretty sure is the NavCore. I'm using the transmitter in my spacesuit to upload it to *Pegasus's* primary telemetry lab."

"Got it," answered Specialist Chloe Idaho. "We're receiving data from the storage crystals. I'm going to need a few minutes to find a translation matrix."

"It would be good if you could find that quickly, Chloe. I don't know how much longer the guys can hold out."

“Oh... crap...” Rook said as the grenade detonated.

The creature was not harmed by the detonation. Not very much, anyway.

That section of the ancient ship, however, was not in very good shape.

It was, in fact, in such a fragile condition, that the blast from the grenade was enough to blast open a sizeable hole in its side.

The good news was, this blew the creature out into space.

The bad news was, that section of the ship was in really bad shape, and the blast of a grenade was more than enough to initiate its complete structural collapse.

“Piss!” Rook shouted. The part of the section closest the hatch was a wreck, and the two sections were starting to tear apart. Rook quickly moved to the hatch to pull in Jordan and Lear before they could be spaced.

One at a time, Lear and Jordan grabbed his arm and pulled themselves through. Then Lear sealed the hatch behind him. The section they were in was shaking. Tremors were running the length of ancient ship’s hull.

Rook scrambled toward the next hatch, as the ship began to disintegrate. Remembering his low-gravity training, he kicked with his legs toward the open hatch. The drift toward the hatch seemed to take a very long time.

“What the hell just happened?” came David Alkema’s angry voice through their comm-links.

There was a pause as though deciding who should answer. Naturally, it fell to Trajan Lear. “Remember how you warned us that this ship’s structural integrity was in a very precarious state?”

“Affirmative.”

“We just detonated a plasma grenade in one of the most fragile sections.” Lear paused for a second. “We should probably leave before the rest of the ship falls apart.”

“Crap on a cracker,” Alkema turned his attention to Chloe Idaho. “Did you copy that?”

“Copy it where?” Idaho asked.

“Did you hear what they just told me? If that isn’t the Navigational Core, we may not have a chance to find another one.”

Alkema could hear Idaho frowning through her next transmission. “Hold on, there’s a lot of corruption in this data, and it’s not even in any standard language that we know.”

“I don’t have time for this, Chloe.”

“I’m going to try cross-matrixing it to the code used in the StarLock’s systems.”

Alkema bit his lower lip, a bit angrily. Logically, using the StarLock’s code as a starting point should have been the first thing they tried. Vibration from the distant collapse several kilometers away from his position were beginning to reverberate through his own section.

“I’ve got it,” Idaho reported. “It’s got star charts, drift calculations, ... navigational data. It’s the core, Rook, Jordan, Lear... you can get out of there now.”

Fortunately, Rook, Jordan and Lear were already getting out of there, running

through the ship's superstructure while the rear compartments blew apart behind them. Trajan called out, "*Phoenix*, track my signal. I need you right now!"

Outside, his Aves heard him. *Phoenix* detached from the ship's hull, and flew a few hundred meters down to the source of its master's signal. It was an enhanced model of the Aves spacecraft they had departed from their homeworlds of Sapphire and Republic with. It still retained its elegant shape... the viper's head command module joined to a primary deck and propulsion section, blended wingblades, and perched elegantly on its wings a pair of Accipiters, short range ships used for fighting and reconnaissance. Most of the enhancements were to her systems: a more powerful reactor, better speed, sharper vision, smarter and more powerful weapons. However, there had been no need to upgrade the Artificial Intelligence (AI). *Phoenix* was almost psychically bound to her pilot, Trajan Lear, spoiled whelp of *Pegasus*'s former and unlamented Executive Officer. It came to him like a loyal Spaniel, secured itself to the outer hull of the ancient freighter, and sealed its ventral airlock to a contact point on the hull.

After that, it waited.

"*Phoenix* is secure to the outer hull. Airlock in place," Trajan Lear reported. "Let's get ourselves out of here." Lear, with the intense patience for which pilots were known, tried and failed to release the docking hatch.

"It's non-functional," he reported. "We'll have to move to the next section."

"Jam that!" Max Jordan shouted, and displaying the capacity for getting-angry-and-not-thinking-things-through for which he was known, he took out a small plasma detonator and attached it to the lock.

Rook and Alkema, who had not had time to tell Jordan not to do that, ducked. Jordan had set the charge low, but not so low that the hatch didn't spray the interior with shrapnel.

"Balls! My suit's leaking," Jordan said, but he was already tearing the hatch open.

The ship continued to judder and quake. Rook helped Jordan finally wrestle the docking hatch apart. From there, it was just matter of drifting into *Phoenix*'s main deck. The Aves helped them by shunting a little artificial gravity their way. Getting to the main cabin through the dorsal hatch required a climb through the Aves weapons bay, past racks of Hammerhead missiles.

Once on board, Trajan Lear stripped off his helmet, and climbed up to the flight deck, which was one deck up from the main deck. Lear was a handsome blond man in his early twenties, with strong cheekbones and the gray eyes typical of his family line, which had been part of his homeworld, Republic's, ruling political class for centuries. That he had chosen a career as an Aves pilot had been a grave disappointment to his mother. He slid into the command seat, and the ship formed an instrument cluster in front of him and a neural interface appeared on his cheek. "Lt. Cmdr Alkema, are you ready for extraction?"

Alkema packed the precious navigation core crystals into his backpack. "I'll be at the extraction point in five minutes."

"Make it three," Trajan told him.

Looking at his head-up display, Trajan saw that the sections --- containers really

--- of the freighter that had broken loose were now banging against other parts of the ship, creating a kind of chain reaction. Space around the old freighter was filling with loose sections and debris. He detached the airlock coupling and guided his ship forward to the command section of the old wreck, a kind of wedge-shaped section that extended above and beneath the main frameswork. He turned *Phoenix* on her side and re-attached her ventral airlock coupling to the airlock closest to the Braincore shaft. "Lt. Commander Alkema, I have a seal on the airlock you went in through, but I don't know how long we can hold it."

Rook and Jordan joined him on the main deck, having taken off their space helmets as well. Both appeared slightly younger than he, being each barely out of their teens. Johnny Rook was a clean-cut figure with brown hair and eyes – a face that might have been spoiled by a too-large, too-angular nose but he somehow he made it work – and a tight athletic body. Max Jordan was a little sloppier, a little more boyish, a little softer around the edges with thick sheaves of light red hair that spilled from his tactical helmet.

"We're waiting on you, Lieutenant Commander," Lear informed Alkema.

Rook looked at the head-up display and gave a low whistle. "2000 years of solitude, and we ruined it in a few minutes."

Jordan grinned. "Yeah, it was fun, wasn't it?"

A flying section, propelled by a leak of the atmosphere it still contained, bounced off the freighter and struck a glancing blow off *Phoenix's* port wingblade. "Dave, it would be really nice if you got back on my ship," Trajan Lear said as the Aves shook. The break up of the hull in the area of the grenade explosion transmitted along the length and shook the Aves, and carried with it the sound of groaning and twisting metal.

"Almost there..." Alkema replied. He was drifting upwards next to the ship's central Braincore. The airlock was only a few meters away.

On *Phoenix*, Max Jordan shouted, "There's a monster on the wingblade."

Rook and Lear diverted their eyes to the display Jordan was indicating. There on the port wing, the beast from the other section was standing. His howls cut through the EM spectrum as fierce ghostly static.

"Crap," Lear said. "Lt. Commander, we've got a problem."

"Handle it," Alkema ordered.

Lear looked at Rook and Jordan. "Handle it how?" Jordan asked.

Jordan began resealing his space helmet. "Stand by to open the primary hatch."

"Why?" Lear asked.

"Don't ask me why, I'm gonna try something," Jordan replied.

Rook began resealing his helmet as well. "Don't worry, we'll get it."

Lear over-rode the controls that prevented opening the main hatch to hard vacuum and stood by.

Alkema, meanwhile, kicked away from the braincore and toward the airlock, drifting in the dark. After a long period of suspension, he bumped into the far wall and began feeling for a handhold. "Almost there," he radioed Lear.

"Acknowledged," Lear replied. He switched to Rook and Jordan. "Ready?"

"Stand by," Rook replied. "Jordan has a plan, but for it to work, you should delay blowing the hatch until you're ready to clear the station."

Lear looked at his external display. "Comrades, he's trying to rip my wingblade open. If he gets to the tritium fuel cells..."

He was interrupted by Alkema. "I'm at the airlock, guys. Just a few more seconds."

"Cycling ventral airlock," Lear reported. "Lt Commander, let me know as soon as it seals behind you."

"It just did," Alkema reported.

"Keep your helmet on!" Rook shouted.

"Oh, yeah, keep your helmet on," Lear repeated.

"Acknowledged?" Alkema said.

"Now, Traj!" Rook shouted. "Do it now!"

Lear did a few things very quickly. "Decoupling from hull. Firing thrusters. Opening Hatch... now!"

The primary hatch on the ship's port side cycled open, emitting a blast of atmosphere. The freighter seemed to drop away below as Lear fired thrusters to clear his ship. Grabbing on hard to the ohshit handles on either side of the hatch, Rook and Jordan let loose a fusillade of micro-grenades against the monster. Enough of these hit and exploded to create a storm of charged plasma that knocked the beast hard down and over. As Phoenix peeled away, the monster slid off the wing and into space.

"So long, you ugly space monster creepshow thing," Rook yelled after it. "Lear, close the hatch and re-pressurize the main deck."

"Acknowledged," Lear reported.

*Phoenix* cleared the ship just as its backbone snapped in half, breaking the ancient hulk from two big chunks into three and filling that vicinity of space with chunks of hull and debris. Lear maneuvered through the remaining debris as the hatch closed and air and warmth returned to the main cabin.

Rook and Lear peeled off their helmets. They were soon joined by Alkema. Finally, safely on board the *Aves*, Alkema peeled off his helmet also. David Alkema was in his early twenties, had curly dark hair, blue eyes, and a ruddy complexion. Lately, a frown line had come to be between his eyes, and just around the edges of those eyes, he had become the slightest bit careworn. This was probably because his wife had borne him two children in the previous two years and was back on board *Pegasus*, pregnant with a third.

"Did we get it?" Rook asked.

Alkema opened his mission pack and showed them the nine small cylinder arranged on the hexagon-shaped tray that matrixed them together.

"All that trouble over a few pieces of glass," Rook grinned.

"We better hope it was worth it," Alkema replied. "If these little pieces of glass don't contain a guide to the surrounding star systems, we are totally lost."

Rook seemed a little concerned that their spectacular heroism might have been for nothing. "Didn't you confirm with *Pegasus* that..."

"*Pegasus* found astronomical data on them... it damn well better be a

navigational chart," Alkema said.

In the main head-up display, a view of *Pegasus* appeared, the magnificent ship built of humanity's highest aspirations. Her graceful, swan-like hull gleamed like alabaster. The lights of her command towers and inhabitation areas glittered like stars.

Max Jordan finally noticed that blood was trickling from his mouth. "I think I better see a healer," he said, and then passed out.

## CHAPTER : 02

### *Pegasus Officers' Cocktail Lounge (formerly Lear Family Quarters)*

*An animatronic facsimile of his former Executive Officer in a tight short skirt brought Prime Commander William Randolph Keeler his Borealan Highball. Making an automech that resembled a human had been a serious taboo back in the Sapphire system. Making all the cocktail waitresses in the new lounge resemble his mutinous first officer had been a petty, vengeful act, but at the time, it had at least seemed funny. Now, it seemed to him a little sad. The commander regretted it a little, but not enough to change them back.*

*As he sipped his beverage, he caught sight of himself in the smoked mirror behind the bar, and was shocked, as he usually was, to see his age. There was more gray in his straight, thick hair than he had ever remembered there being before, and in his round face, a kind of permanent fatigue had set in.*

*"I had that dream again," Keeler said to the bartender, the former TyroCommander Philip John Miller Redfire, on indefinite leave since having his memory wiped by aliens ... or maybe it was not Redfire, but a replicant produced during his alien captivity to gether intelligence. No one was quite sure, but he made a hell of a bartender and piano player, although a robot was playing piano at that particular interval, a jaunty Sapphirean piece about a Panrovian porkbeast farmer, his three comely daughters, and a traveling merchandiser of home sanitizing equipment.*

*"Is that so?" Redfire replied, refreshing the commander's drink with snow from the slush dispenser. He seemed to have aged a little, too. These days, he was wearing his red hair a little longer than the close crewcut he had favored before his abduction. He also favored white dinner jackets instead of black leather, and he had neither painted nor blown anything up in the past almost three years either.*

*Keeler stirred the snow into his drink. "That dream where... Sapphire is gone. Republic is gone. The Aurelians or the Tarmigans destroyed our homes and... we're the only ones left."*

*"Not so weird," Redfire told him. "In a sense, they are gone, because we left them on the other side of the galaxy. Over two hundred years have passed at home since our launch. And, in a sense, we are the only ones left, because we have not found anyone over here."*

*"Was that intended to make me sad?" Keeler asked.*

*"At least you know who you are," Redfire told him. "I don't have that."*

*"True, but you get to decide who you wanted to be," Keeler told him. "I don't have that."*

*"Speaking of which," Redfire added, "Do you ever intend to make the position of Chief Tactical Officer permanent, or are you going to keep David Alkema and General*

Kitaen alternating as Tactical chief?"

"I'm still holding out hope that you will recover your memory and come back," Keeler answered.

"After two and a half years?" Redfire seemed amused by the suggestion. "Commander, would you permit me a philosophical interlude?"

"That sounds like the Redfire I used to know and used to comp my drinks," Keeler replied.

Redfire brushed the top of the bar with a cleaning wand. "I hear the crew talking, and I get a sense that everyone feels the same way; we're lost out here. We are stuck in a prolonged transition in-between what we were doing, and what we will be doing. The crew needs to..."

He was interrupted by a call on the commander's COM Link. Even after all this time, Keeler still expected to see Shayne American's face when the COM Link chirped for his attention. But she had signed on aboard the Pathfinder Ship *Lexington Keeler*. Instead, he met the round, soft visage of Sr. Specialist Brian Panda. "Aves *Phoenix* has returned from the *Hewlander*. They have the NavCore."

"Good," Keeler replied. "Take it to ... um, someplace where they can get the data out."

Panda continued. "One of the team was injured battling the ship's monster, but the injuries are not life threatening."

"Not life threatening, excellent!" Keeler told him. "Inform Mr. Alkema I'd like a mission debriefing in four hours."

"Who was injured?" Redfire asked.

"Warfighter Specialist Jordan," Panda answered.

Redfire's face fell somewhat. In a complicated way involving infidelity and time-travel, he was something like a father to Max Jordan, although Redfire's amnesia and Jordan's resentment that his mother had not come back from their encounter with aliens – in replicant form or otherwise – had led to a degree of estrangement.

"Thanks, Brian," Keeler deactivated the link and turned to Redfire. "He said non-life-threatening."

"I heard," Redfire said.

Keeler prompted, "What were you about to say, the crew needs to..."

"It's not important," Redfire replied brusquely, before moving away down the bar.

## ***Pegasus – Hospital Four***

"Your ribs have almost completely healed," Dr. Skinner told Max Jordan. "And in less than a day, that's... highly interesting."

Max Jordan sat up on his healing bed. "How long was it supposed to take?"

"I honestly didn't know," Skinner said in his clipped, erudite tones. "For a typical Sapphirean, or Republicker, it would be perfectly normal for an injury like that to heal so expeditiously. But you are half-Bodicean, and Bodiceans do not heal so quickly. It might have taken weeks."

"I thought we were all human," Max said.

"We are... but we have now sampled human DNA on over thirty other colonies,

between *Pegasus* and the other pathfinders,” Skinner told him. “On average, our DNA shows a 3.5% to 4% genetic variance. For Bodiceans, the variance was 3.8%.”

“That’s not much,” Jordan sniffed.

“The genetic variance between humans and the lower simian life forms on Earth is 2%,” Skinner said. “And if you take Sapphire and Republic out of the pool, the genetic variance among the other colonies is less than 0.1%”

Max was growing bored with the discussion. “So?”

“You are the first hybrid between someone from Sapphire and Republic and a colonist from another world,” Skinner, who was not getting bored, explained. “Your DNA should be a mix of your mother’s Sapphirean DNA and your father’s Bodicean DNA, but according to your genetic profile, you are indistinguishable from a full-blooded Sapphirean. Your mother’s DNA completely dominated your father’s. And this is fascinating.”

“I guess,” Jordan said. “Can I leave now?”

“Go forth, brave young warrior!” Skinner shooed him from the healing bed.

When he had gone, he entered the latest genetic data from Max Jordan into his database. The same thing had happened with David Alkema, whose children were genetically indistinguishable from full-blooded Sapphireans, despite having a Bodicean mother.

So far, only *Pegasus* had data relating to inter-breeding between their crew and people from other colonies; and both had involved Sapphireans and Bodiceans. But it proved that both the Sapphirean genetic code was dominant regardless of the sex of the parent. Now, if Skinner could only get the crew to breed with people from additional colonies, he might be able to figure out what it meant.

But, of course, they would have to find other colonies first.

## ***Pegasus – Forensic Telemetry Laboratory***

*Lt. Cmdr. Alkema delivered the Navigational Core to the ForTel Laboratory on the 73<sup>rd</sup> level of Pegasus’s Secondary Command Tower as soon as he and it had cleared decontamination. The ForTelLab had been created during the previous two years as a special project, devoted to understanding and making use of Commonwealth Technology and data Pegasus had recovered in the course of its journey. It occupied nearly the entire deck on which it was situated, and in addition to instruments and computers, its space was filled with artifacts and devices from the Chapultepec and Chanticleer StarLocks. At the rear and either side were large, specially constructed airlocks for blowing artifacts into space, just in case they turned out to be explosive, tried to bite off someone’s head, or otherwise proved dangerous.*

*Technical Specialist Billy Zero took the NavCore out of the case and gingerly set it on an analysis table.*

*“How long before we have something?” Alkema asked.*

*“Not too long,” Zero answered. “We’ve gotten much better at reconstructing Commonwealth data over the last two years. There, that should do it.”*

*Several displays activated. Numbers and letters in the three primary old Earth dialects scrolled up across each of them. The streams were broken in places where data was corrupt or missing.*

*“Is it Navigational data?” Alkema asked.*

*“I think it is, but the dialect is unfamiliar. We may need a little help,” Zero touched a panel nearby.*

A hologram appeared next to him, an attractive young woman glowing in shades of white, blue, and neon pink. This was Caliph's latest self-actualization. "Need a hand, Billy?" she asked.

"What can you make of this data-stream, Miss Caliph?"

Caliph made an unnecessary mimicry of walking to the displays and inspecting the data stream. "You got almost miraculously lucky. According to this, the ship we found was a Deadelus-class heavy merchant transport, launched in the Solar Year 4907. That ship made stops on several hundred colonies during its working life."

Her hologram shimmered. The largest display was replaced by a star-map. With her finger, she drew little pink circles around several stars. "These are systems previously visited by the ship. I am trying to locate a time-index to tell me where it went on its most recent voyages. Got it."

Several pink circles disappeared.

Alkema asked her, "Caliph, can you identify any systems within 40 light years of our present position."

"Stand by, I have to account for a couple thousand years of stellar drift." Caliph concentrated hard, and several long moments passed.

All the pink dots dropped away except for six. "These systems are all within forty light years of our position. The nearest one is this one."

"Does it have a designation?" Billy Memphis asked.

"It's difficult to ascertain without contextual data," Caliph told him. "I calculate there is a 70% probability we are in the Ara sector. Beyond that, designations become increasingly speculative."

"That's not important right now," Alkema asked. "Can you plot courses to these systems?"

"You bet I can," Caliph answered him, with a twinkle in her holographic eye.

### ***Pegasus - Main Bridge (No Longer Called PC-1)***

*A few days (ship-time) later, Pegasus emerged at the edge of the nearest system from the wreck of the Hewlander after a hyperspace transit of 32.6 light years. Unlike past explorations, they knew exactly where to go. The data from the navigational core showed that they wanted the first planet, which had been the merchant freighter's last stop... ever!*

*Planetology Specialist Mariana Venture was providing a briefing to the ship's senior officers on the advance telemetry provided by Pegasus's probes. A hologram of the planet hovered over the table, a pastel sand-colored sphere with shallow, pale-blue oceans covering about half of its surface area.*

*"The planet is only-two thirds the size of Sapphire," she told the senior officers. "But it has a core and mantle of pure iron. It also has the most intense magnetic field we've ever seen, almost 300% stronger than Aurora's."*

*"Does it support life?" Alkema asked incredulously.*

*"Near the surface, the difference is negligible, but in the outer atmosphere, the intense magnetic field creates a scattering effect that not only makes it difficult to scan the surface, but would also blank out starlight at night and diffuse sunlight to the point where most of the sky is white.*

*"The planet has almost no axial tilt," Venture continued, slowly circling the*

hologram of the planet. "No seasonal variations in temperature. Also, anything beyond 57 degrees in latitude is tundra and ice cap. Anything between 33 degrees north and south latitude is desert.

"And, by coincidence, the planet has just two continents; a large northern continent, mostly above 57 degrees, and mostly tundra, and a smaller desert continent that straddles the equator." Outlines of these two landmasses appeared on the planet. The polar landmass capped the planet like a helmet pulled down tight. The smaller continent looked kind of like a dog.

Venture continued. "The planet has some fascinating topography, of course, any topography would be fascinating after two years in space. Nearly eighty per cent of the land mass is in this large continent in the northern hemisphere. Most of it is sub-arctic tundra, except for the part that's polar ice. In the southern extremes, there are some remarkable forests. Look at these trees." She enlarged some fuzzy, long-distance recon of a forest on an island off the large northern continent.

"They look like... trees," Commander Keeler observed.

Venture smiled. "Only because you have no indication of scale, those trees are over 600 meters tall."

Keeler was impressed. "Wow, those are big trees."

"Exobotany Survey should have fun. They don't get to do much normally. Now the other continent is sub-equatorial. Mostly arid desert and scrub... but on this peninsula, there are signs of population and advanced cities," she zoomed in an area at the far eastern edge of the continent where a peninsula extended like a lolling dog's tongue. "Our probes can't scan with any precision through the magnetic field, but there appear to be several large cities in this area."

Keeler mumbled. "Typical colonial pattern, one large base consisting of a cluster of large cities, located on a coastal zone to facilitate planetary commerce. Is there a potential that there are smaller cities and towns elsewhere on the planet?"

"Definitely," Venture answered. "The best resolution we can get is on the order of ten square kilometers. Anything smaller than that, we would miss. And there are some other spots on the surface that could also be cities." She indicated a few more faint brown dots on the desert continent.

"Now, let's proceed to the weird stuff," Venture segued.

"Weird stuff?" Keeler's ears pricked up, but also, the first pangs of dread began to rise from the bottom of his gut.

"As I noted, there are two planets in the system, and two stars in the system," Venture explained. "The second planet is a dwarf, a piece of rock smaller than the Hyperion moon of Sapphire. But, the second star would seem to have too little mass for thermonuclear ignition. We suspect it was once a gas giant that was transformed into a star through artificial means."

"Can we do that?" Keeler asked. "Turn planets into stars."

"The Science Ministry on Republic has studied doing the same thing to Colossus," said Lieutenant Scientist Wang (the widow of Flight Captain Wang) who was sitting in. "Some models indicate it would raise the surface temperature on Republic eight degrees, possibly melt the ice on Archon and transform it into an ocean-covered water planet."

"That would be cool," Keeler said. Maybe the Republicers would be more relaxed if they had a nice beach to get away to.

Venture agreed. "Quite. Also, because of the strong electromagnetic field, once a landing party goes in, they won't be able to communicate with *Pegasus*."

Keeler shifted uncomfortably in his chair. "All right, now that part, I hate."

Venture waved her hand and the hologram of the planet became enveloped in an electric white sphere. "As I said, the field is even stronger than the field around Aurora, and it's extraordinarily regular and consistent, maybe even too regular to be a natural phenomenon."

"So, they not only built an artificial sun," Alkema guessed. "They also built an artificial energy field around the planet."

"That is entirely possible," Venture told them.

"Why would they do that?" Keeler asked.

"It could be completely benign," Venture suggested. "The sun is highly energetic, and a strong magnetic field may be necessary to protect the surface from solar radiation, cosmic rays, particle emissions..."

"What about our neutrino-based communications?" Alkema asked. "Neutrinos aren't affected by electromagnetic interference."

"The two suns together flood the planet with neutrinos," Venture said. "We might be able to get a text message through, but anything more will not be possible."

Keeler grunted, "Do we want to save ourselves a lot of suspense and just... set the ship to Battle Situation 1 now?"

"There's no sign of any threat to *Pegasus*," Alkema said.

"And we all remember how fast that can change," Keeler tapped some notes into his datapad. "Is there anything else we should know?" he asked Venture.

"That covers the broad strokes," she told him. "Detailed sensor data and analysis are already in the Planetology Datacore."

"All right," Keeler said. "Let me suggest a plan. Initial contact will be a single Aves. Two pilots, crew of six, two warfighters."

"Two Aves," Alkema suggested.

"Why two?" Keeler asked.

"Since we're going in to an unknown situation, I think it makes sense to have some redundancy," Alkema explained. Then, seeing the blank look on Keeler's face, added, "Safety in numbers."

"Got it," Keeler acknowledged. "Okay, double everything I just said."

"Technician Roebuck, from the bar in the UnderDecks, has also requested permission to join the landing party as a 'trade representative,'" Alkema added, his voice sounding as though he hoped Keeler would reject the bid.

Keeler shrugged. "The more the merrier. Suit him up."

Alkema made a note of it without commenting, and asked "Who will lead the mission?"

"TyroCommander Change," Keeler answered.

"No," said TyroCommander Change. She was seated at the far end of the horseshoe-shaped briefing table. She had hardly changed in two years. Her hair was still neatly contained in a thick black ponytail, and her almond-shaped eyes burned with intellect and determination.

"Excuse me?" Keeler asked.

"I said no," Change repeated.

Keeler paused a moment to straighten out his thoughts. "TyrCommander

Change, you may not have noticed but you are now the second in command of this ship. With that position comes responsibilities, including the leading of teams to planets.”

“I am a navigator,” she told him. “I get you to the planets. I don’t care what you do once you get there, and I don’t want to know, it’s not my business.”

Keeler tried to match her determined expression. “Are you going to make me order you to lead the landing team?”

“Are you going to order an anti-social, unwilling Navigation officer to lead a landing team to contact the first inhabited planet we’ve discovered in the Orion Arm?” Change shot back at him.

Keeler realized he was beaten, and later would realize he had never had a chance. “I guess I will be leading the landing team.”

Change permitted herself a brief victory smile, a one degree deviation up at the ends from the flat lines of her lips that vanished almost before it could be detected. “While you conduct surface operations, we could prospect the outer comet belt for chemicals to refresh the ship’s stores; water, oxygen, methane, argon, tritium ...”

“Za, do that!” Keeler ordered firmly. “Mr. Alkema, have two teams and two aves prepared to launch tomorrow right after lunch.”

### ***Pegasus – Warfighter Locker Room (Deck 11)***

*On the morning of the departure, Johnny Rook and Max Jordan outfitted themselves in tactical gear. The latest generation had several improvements integrated into it; better deflective shielding, a stealth mode similar to the shadow-suits that Republicer Centurions wore, along with incremental enhancements to the sensor, targeting, and communication functions. Also, they were black, and looked very cool.*

*“Are you sure you’re up for this?” Rook asked.*

*“I broke my ribs ten days ago, they’re fine,” Jordan told him. It was mostly true, they only gave him a little pain, which he actually kind of liked.*

*“I just meant people are going to say you’re a glory hawg,” Rook told him.*

*“I don’t care,” Jordan said. “Anytime off the ship is good time.”*

*Rook adjusted and checked out his helmet. “All systems one hundred. We’re good.” He opened a weapons locker. “Regular pulse weapons, or should we bring rifles, too.”*

*“Rifles, we don’t go anywhere without them,” Jordan said, strapping a heavy knife to his calf. He liked the armor, and the weapons, and the discipline of his life as a warfighter. It made him feel safe. “Which boat are we in?” he asked.*

*“Prudence,” Rook answered. “Phoenix is still in the shop with a great big dent in her wing shaped like an invisible space monster.” He pulled on a combat jacket and closed his locker. “I’ll meet you in the landing bay. I have to say good bye to the wife.”*

*Max Jordan grunted his acknowledgment as Rook left. He wondered if he should bring the shoulder-fired cannon in addition to the standard pulse rifle, just in case the threat on the ground was worse than anticipated or he and Rook got bored.*

*He had decided he could get by with the one on the Aves when suddenly Caliph dazzled into existence before him. “Good afterdawn, Max Jordan.”*

*“Hoy, Caliph, how have you been?” he asked. For over a year, Caliph had permitted to roam at will through most of the ship’s systems. She had shown a definite predilection toward showing up in the locker rooms, showers, and lounges where the*

ship's young males tended to congregate.

"Good," she said coyly. "Hey, listen, can I ask a favor?"

"What?"

"I want to ride around in your head."

"Excuse me?" Max Jordan was caught off-guard by the suggestion.

"I want to ride around in your head," Caliph continued. "I never get to visit any planets, I want to see what it's like."

Jordan shook his head. "No way."

"Why not?" she asked.

Jordan snapped a round into his pulse rifle. "Because it would be weird, and I don't want you in my head."

"I need to experience things!" she insisted. "I won't bother you. I just want to see what it's like being human."

"Maybe you should have asked somebody more human than me," Jordan mused. "Like Trajan Lear. He'd probably be into it."

Caliph shook her head. "*Phoenix* is already in his head. Look, just think of me as a sensory enhancement to your suit systems. I'll stay out of your head, and just rely on suit sensors."

Max Jordan thought about this.

"Please?" she asked. "Don't forget, I modified the hull-gliders so you could use them on the outside of the Chanticleer StarLock."

Jordan couldn't help smiling a little bit at that memory. "Yeah, that was kind of fun."

"And I covered for you by running a diagnostic on the sensor array while you did it," she reminded him.

"Right," Jordan sighed, "But I still don't want to do this."

"Please?"

"Can't you download into an android?"

"It wouldn't be the same... please... please... please..."

Jordan sighed. "All right, you can ride in my gear."

Caliph smiled and vanished. Jordan couldn't tell if she was there or not. "Caliph?" he asked.

"Activate your tactical display," she whispered.

Jordan activated it. Caliph appeared as a tiny sprite in his field of view. She waved at him. "This feels amazing," she sang. "I can feel the suit hugging your body, I can feel the heat given off by your endothermic reactions, I can even feel..."

"Don't touch that!" Max Jordan cautioned.

"Sorry," Caliph grinned. "We should get to the ship. People are starting to board. Oh, this is going to be so much fun. Wee!"

## CHAPTER : 03

## Aves zilla

*Zilla* dropped down below the permanent haze that covered the planet's sky like frosted glass. Static charge built up in the planet's intense electro-magnetic field throwing off sparks from tips of its wingblades. The ship descended over the sea, leveled, and lay in a course for the tiny peninsula that seemed to hold most of the planet's advanced civilization. *Prudence* followed just behind.

Inside, the landing crew watched on the forward displays as the ship closed in on its landing zone. The peninsula came into view, and the ship's scanners resolved its topography. Just off-center on the peninsula was a large lake shaped like a brain. It was surrounded by a number of settlements. A much larger city loomed on the horizon just beyond it, occupying the cape and western shoreline of the peninsula. "There it is," said Commander Keeler, just in case anyone had overlooked it.

Anton Stratos was acting as the Exo-sociological liaison officer, and also the communication officer for the landing team. He checked out another set of displays. "I'm detecting several types of electromagnetic beams being directed at our ship. They've detected us, I think they are some kind of scanning device."

"Send out a friendly message," Keeler told him. "Something like, 'Good morning, we are travelers from a distant star system. Have you lost weight, because you look good!'"

"I will... more or less ... transmit that message," Stratos said.

Exo-biology and planetology specialist Bart Savagewood came around, handing out contact lenses. "The solar radiation on the planet is much more intense than you are used to. These will shield your eyes."

Keeler took his and popped them onto his eyeballs. He felt them bond in place. "How long can I wear these?"

"As long as you need to," answered Savagewood.

"How do I get them out?" Keeler asked.

"When we return to *Pegasus*, Medical Technician Skinner will give you some eyedrops that will dissolve them away," Savagewood informed him.

Satisfied, Keeler turned back to the ground displays. Resolution improved as the ship crossed the shoreline and approached the city, and they could now see close-up what kind of life and lifestyle they could anticipate on the planet's surface. They could see traffic moving along broad avenues, flanked by large buildings. They could see that walls of most of the building were white or beige, with large windows and balconies, topped by rounded, dome-shaped roofs covered in gray and yellow tiles. The tallest buildings, fifty and sixty stories of shining brass and white, stood in a crowd around the city center.

"On preliminary inspection, I would assert that they are a few centuries behind us in development," said GeoSurvey Lieutenant Remulac.

"Don't be a twit," Keeler snapped back at him. "It's civilization, a human civilization survived in the Orion Quadrant." He paused. "I hope they have a bar."

Specialist Remulac was undeterred. "I remind you, this planet's entire claim to civilization is confined to one small peninsula. The other cities on the surface seem much more backward."

"I've been in space for over two years. It looks good enough to me." Keeler touched his COM link. "Toto, find a spot and put us down."

Toto reported back. "There's some flat space near that beach. I can set her

down there.”

“Good, do that,” Keeler ordered.

*Zilla* came in over the harbor, a hundred meters over the waves. There were ships bobbing in the surf on the leeward side of the cape, a mix of sleek metal freighters and wooden sailing vessels of rather backward construction.

As they began the landing sequence, there was a hail from *Aves Prudence*.

“Commander Keeler,” David Alkema said with almost casual detachment. “I’m picking up five... no, ten... attack ships on an intercept course.” He transmitted a schematic. They were approximately half the size of the *Aves*, two air-breathing engines tucked close to the fuselage under a pair of large, delta-shaped wing. Weapons pylons slung under the wings and below the fuselage bristled with missiles.

“That looks kind of scary,” Keeler said.

“Nothing our defenses can’t handle,” Alkema assured him.

Stratos wanted to know if the attack ships were attempting to contact them, and Alkema answered that he did not know. Keeler shrugged, “We’re almost on the ground, what can they do to us?”

“They can attack us from the air,” Alkema warned him.

“That would be a mite ungentlemanly,” Keeler observed. But, by that time, both ships were on the ground, so there was nothing to be done about it any way.

*Zilla*’s hatch opened and Specialist Savagewood stepped out followed by Specialist Remulac and then Keeler. The sunlight was blindingly intense, but the eye lenses rapidly adjusted, making it no worse than a bright day on Sapphire. The air stung the commander’s nostrils. It was like tropical sea air, but there was a faint but distinct sour-metal-electrical scent to it.

Remulac was pointing her environmental data collector toward the sea. “Fascinating, the ocean here is almost as saline as Republic’s seas, but the chemical composition is quite different.”

“That is fascinating,” Keeler agreed. “But not quite as fascinating as the large, heavily armed group of people that are approaching us.”

Along the highway that ran aside the sea, a caravan of large vehicles was approaching. They appeared to be armored, and were painted in a camouflage pattern of dun and beige.

Just as Alkema and his team from *Prudence* joined Keeler, the caravan pulled up next to the landing zone and discharged a very large and frightening group of heavily armed men, who proceeded to surround and point their large and horrifying weapons at Keeler and his crew.

“Did we come at a bad time?” Keeler asked.

A severe looking woman moved to the front of the group – a dark-haired version of what Goneril Lear would have looked like with a steroid-abuse problem. She began yammering at them in the local language.

Keeler took all of this in stride. “Well, we’ve been threatened with weapons and screamed at in a foreign tongue, so far, a pretty typical first contact, wouldn’t you say, Ranking Dave?”

“Quite so,” Alkema agreed. “Do you think we’ll be taken prisoner, or will they kill us on the spot.”

“We should find out fairly soon.”

The woman then repeated her initial statement more loudly and slowly, as if this would help the landing party understand the native tongue any better. It did not, but the repetition was helpful to the Lingotron.

“What be you business here?” Lingotron finally determined.

“We are explorers,” Keeler answered, trying to sound lofty about it. “We come from the Commonwealth colonies of Sapphire and Republic.”

“Warn-tell your guards to put their weapons on the ground in front of them!” the woman demanded. Once Lingotron found a close language model, the rest tended to come pretty rapidly.

“Mr. Alkema, tell the warfighters to lay their weapons on the ground,” Keeler ordered. The crew had re-worked their landing/first contact protocols. This situation called for a show of trust. And if the locals did prove hostile, *Zilla’s* weapon banks would provide them cover.

As Rook, Jordan and the other warfighters laid down their weapons, the woman kept her defensive posture. “Where are your colonies located? In what sector? In what constellation?”

“In the constellation of Pegasus,” Alkema answered. “We came here by means of a StarLock.”

“Why were you sent here?” she repeated.

“We are trying to make contact with the lost colonies of the Commonwealth,” Keeler answered. “It’s been almost 2,000 years. How have you been?”

She remained fixed, her face stony and suspicious. “Do you have any intention of mediating our conflicts with the other inhabitants of this planet?” she asked.

“Would you like us to?” Keeler asked.

“No!” she answered emphatically.

“Then, we have no intention of doing anything of the sort,” Keeler agreed. “The important thing is, we’re meeting new people.”

The woman paused and spoke into the microphone that was affixed to her jaw. She waited until a reply came through her earpiece then ordered, “Wait here, do not move.”

“That’s what we do best,” Keeler assured her, but by that time, she was walking away already. She left ten men pointing rifles at them.

“So, how are you guys doing?” Keeler asked. “I’m guessing you don’t get a lot of visitors here. Or, maybe you do. Either way, we can leave if ... if the alternative is getting shot.”

The soldiers ignored him. The woman consulted with one of the men in her command, and seemed to come to an agreement with him. She returned with the other officer at her side. “We would like to search your ship.”

“How about a tour,” Keeler offered. “We’ve got nothing to hide. Maybe you might even lower your weapons?”

She gave a curt nod to her men, who promptly lowered their weapons. Keeler led her, the other officer, and a pair of her guards to inspect the interior of the Aves. The inspection was quite perfunctory. The guards poked around the main cabin and looked over the command deck. “Do you have any weapons or narcotics?” the woman asked.

“What do you need?” Keeler asked.

She didn’t seem amused. Her guards pulled at one of the doors to a weapons cache. Keeler was about to show them how to open it when they shrugged and

decided to move on.

"Would you like to see the cargo hold?" Keeler offered.

"What is in it?" she asked.

"Cargo," Keeler answered.

She cocked her head and listened again to orders coming through on her earpiece. "Acknowledged. The Security Ward is sending reinforcements to surround your ship with a military cordon. I have been ordered to take your people to the Security Ward Central Complex."

Keeler did not like the sound of that, but he hadn't really expected to be taken the Drinks and Hospitality Ward. "You know, amidst all the hubbub, I didn't get a chance to introduce myself. I am Prime Commander Keeler, you can call me Bill if it will make you less likely to shoot me."

"I am Lyana Strong," she said, extending a hand. Keeler realized, she meant for him to grasp it, and when he did, she gripped it and moved it up and down.

*Weird*, Keeler thought.

When she let go, she led him out of the ship and into the daylight. He looked down the row of tall buildings lining the other side of the boulevard. A crowd had begun to collect, and were being held back by the local constabulary. Keeler asked, "What do you call this place?"

"Xenthe," the woman said. "The name of our city is Xenthe. And the name of this land is Midian."

"I meant the planet," Keeler said. "Does this world have a name?"

"Yronwode," she told him. "This planet is called Yronwode."

"Whatever you call it, your city is impressive," Keeler said. "We've visited a number of worlds, and its rare to see a human colony recovered to this level of technology."

"Most of Yronwode remains relatively uncivilized, despite our best efforts," Strong explained. "You won't find another city this ... orderly ... anywhere on the planet except here."

"How many people live in Xenthe?" Keeler asked.

"One million, 800 thousands, and another 500 thousands in the Holy City of Xiyyon, which lies in the valley beyond those hills on the eastern side."

Keeler saw no hills, but he made a note of it. Keeler and the rest of the landing crew were escorted to back to the military transports, sandy brown vehicles that rode atop eight very large tires. Clamshell doors opened at the rear revealing eight small padded seats in the back. "Are we under arrest?" Keeler asked.

"This is for our mutual protection," Lyana Strong explained. "Midian Government vehicles are frequent targets of the Xirong."

"The Xirong?" Keeler repeated. "Who are they?"

"Their ancestors are the people our ancestors came here to help," she explained. "Now, they want to exterminate us. Isn't that a little ironic?"

"Strictly speaking, as I understand the word ironic, neg. It's just really, really sad. I should like to learn more of your history, in due time." Keeler ducked his head and moved into the vehicle choosing a seat near the front.

Strong took the seat facing him. It was at this time that Keeler got a really good look at her eyes. They were a deep, dark brown, and the pupil was not round, but

consisted of three small vertical slits clustered at the center. "In any case, we have to go to extreme measures to protect from the Xirong," she went on. "We thwart most of their horror attacks, but they keep trying."

"Are the Xirong at war with you? And what's the deal with your eyes?" Keeler asked, as the rest of his crew boarded. Alkema and his crew boarded another vehicle, with remnants being put into third and fourth vehicles.

"The stated reason for why the Xirong hate us is that we, or our ancestors, treated them badly and stole their land. It's ferkakte. They control every other square meter of the planet outside the Midian Peninsula, and furthermore, we and our ancestors did more to help the Xirong than anyone else. And our ancestor's eyes were genetically altered to cope with the intense sunlight. We carry that trait today."

Two Midian guards joined them and secured the doors. The engine rumbled, and with a lurch, the vehicle went into motion. "Why do you really think the Xirong hate you?" Keeler persisted.

Lyana Strong seemed to warm to the topic. "Perhaps, we should start at the beginning. In the days of the Commonwealth, Yronwode was a prison planet. The worst criminals from every world in the quadrant were sent here. Every sector of the Old Commonwealth had a marginally inhabitable planet where they would maroon their undesirables, but Yronwode was reserved for the very worst: murderers, rapists, psychopaths, mad-scientists who tried and in some cases succeeded in taking over entire worlds."

"And you are their descendants?" Keeler guessed.

Strong seemed offended, "No, our ancestors came here several centuries later, after the end of the Crusades. Our ancestors were missionaries. We were sent to redeem the souls of the sinners sentenced here."

"Or their descendants, anyway," Keeler said. "Unless this planet somehow extended their life spans by hundreds of years..."

"No, not at all, what made you think..."

"It's happened before," Keeler said, waving her off. "Just... it's really better if you don't ask, okay. We'll tell you later."

"Our ancestors were sent here under the Auspices of the Empire of the Holy Starcross, established by the Prophet Brian Kingman. When we arrived, the Xirong were divided into violent tribes of savages, living in a state of constant warfare..."

*"Much like today, apparently,"* Keeler thought.

"Our ancestors sought to redeem them, to turn them away from darkness by embracing the way of Starcross. Other religions came later, the Saintists, the Iestans and, much much later, Adherents to the Sect of the Holy Twins."

"The Xirong resented your ancestors proselytizing, and this led to war," Keeler guessed as the truck turned and accelerated. Windows would have been nice. He would like to have seen the city he was being driven through.

"No," Strong said. "Although relatively few embraced one of the paths offered to them, for the most part we were able to coexist for many centuries. Occasionally, a settlement would be over-run, and there was always a low level of resentment because Redeemer communities were more orderly and prosperous than Xirong communities. But if you look at all the major Xirong cities, New Babillon, Djajanena, Izzan-Al-Izzan ... all once had large populations of Redeemers. Today, none."

"Yeah, get to the part where they hate you," Keeler prompted.

Strong continued. "The trouble really began about three hundred years ago, when a Xirong Chieftain called Tsi told his people that the cause of their misery was the

Redeemers. He was an anti-theist. He told them that false promises of spiritual redemption kept them in a state of poverty, violence, and misery. He stoked their resentments into a kind of blind hatred. He used the hatred to unite several bands of Xirong into a single tribe, the largest tribe of Xirong that had ever been. He led them in a war against the Redeemers. He over-ran several settlements and outposts. When he conquered a city, he would put any Redeemer to the Sword. It is in his honor that the most radical of the Xirong call themselves '*Tsi Bai*,' meaning, Tsi's People."

The truck grinded to a stop and held its position for just under a minute and a half. Keeler thought they had arrived, but then the truck began moving again.

"What did the Redeemers do in response to the *Tsi Bai* attacks?" Keeler asked.

"Some fought, but many felt that their spiritual beliefs precluded fighting. Those who fought, lived. Eventually, some of the other Chieftains realized that Tsi was a threat to their power. They formed an alliance, counter-attacked, and killed him. They wiped out most of his tribes. For a time, those Redeemers in the cities and settlements of the other Cheiftains felt safe.

"But the Pontifex of the Starcross claimed he had received a vision that his people would not long be safe, and he led his people to the Midian peninsula, which at that time was a place of profound desolation. He founded Xiyyon, and proclaimed that only here would Redeemers be safe from persecution.

"Many followed him. Many did not. In time, after a generation, some of the Xirong Chieftains recognized that Tsi's philosophy of focusing hate against the Redeemers was quite powerful. It distracted the people from the chaos and disarray around them, from the corruption of the Xirong leadership, and gave them someone to blame."

As the truck navigated what felt like a gentle curve in the roadway, Keeler wondered what this version of history looked like from the Xirong side.

"The Redeemers who remained behind suffered more attacks, and some of tribal Chieftains began demanding credits in exchange for 'protection.' If you paid off the Chieftain, he wouldn't send his terror squads to burn your house and murder your family."

"How awful," said Keeler. No worse than how humans had behaved on EdenWorld, he supposed, but still dreadful. And perhaps, given Yronwode's origins and stated purpose, a side-effect to be expected.

Strong continued. She maintained a military demeanor, but it was clear she felt it important to impress upon Keeler the savagery of the Xirong. "More and more Redeemers were driven out of the tribal lands. They moved to Midian because it was the only safe place. Many didn't want to settle in Xiyyon, which was a strict Brianist Theocracy, so they built the twin city of Xenthe, which was an open city, where people could live according to their conscience.

"Those that remained behind in the Xirong cities grew tired of the persecution, and began counter-attacks. They walled themselves off in protected enclaves, intending to hold out for as long as they could. And in some cases, the Xirong Chieftains were accepting of them, and accepted their assistance in holding off other, more dangerous tribes."

The truck squealed to another halt, but again, it was not at their final destination. When it began moving again, Keeler asked, "Why were you so concerned that we would try to mediate your dispute with the Xirong?"

Her face grew stony. Clearly, this was something that angered her personally. "Two generations ago, we were visited by humanoid aliens who called themselves 'the Kariad.' They said they came from a distant, very advanced human colony. That they had overcome war and strife, and their mission was to help other human colonies

achieve the same peace and equality they enjoyed.”

Keeler did not like the sound of that, but Strong was back into his story before he could ask more.

“Our people were so war-weary that we accepted their intervention eagerly. Eventually, some of the Xirong Chieftains were persuaded to join the negotiations as well.

“Eventually, an accord emerged. Our people were to give up all property and territory in any land claimed by the Xirong. Our people were to assist in the economic, social, and cultural development of the Xirong. And the Xirong were to be permitted to live on the Midian Peninsula if they so chose. In return, the Xirong agreed to stop attacking us.”

“Sounds like a good deal for the Xirong,” Keeler said.

“At the time, we thought the promise of peace was worth it. Also, the Kariad provided both our people and the Xirong with technology, including the Collapsing Molecule System that powers our cities today.

“But almost as soon as the Kariad left, the Xirong began fighting again...” At that moment, the car turned sharply, went over a bump, and up a long ramp.

“We have arrived at the Jehoram, the headquarters for Midian government,” Strong announced. “They were going to call the High Council into session to meet with you, but you’ll probably have to wait for a while.”

“We’re used to it,” Keeler assured her..

## **Yronwode – Xenthe**

In fact, Keeler and the rest of his party waited almost six hours in a windowless room in itchy uncomfortable chairs while armed Midian guardsman watched over them. Occasionally, a person or a small group would enter through the large, heavy door at the front of the room, look over the people inside, engage in muted, conspiratorial conversation, then leave again.

“If colonists from another planet showed up on Sapphire, would we treat them this way,” Keeler grumbled.

Alkema tried to formulate the answer Keeler would have expected to hear. He was spared when the front door opened again and a heavy-set, vivacious woman flanked by two middle-aged men and two young guardsmen entered. “Greetings, all,” she announced in a loud, boisterous voice. “I am Councilor Steadfast of the Midian High Council. I wish to apologize for your inconvenience. Normally, Xentheans are known for our hospitality, and I regret that our manners have failed us. Come this way. The other councilors and ministers are waiting, and there is food.”

“That’s how we would greet human colonists on Sapphire,” Keeler proclaimed. He strode quickly to the front and introduced himself to Councilor Steadfast and the others, each of whom repeated the grab-hand-move-up-and-down ritual.

They were led from the holding room to a larger hall, where there was a table arranged with small sandwiches, clusters of fruits and vegetables, breads, creams, crunchy sticks, and few piles of red, amber, and green eggs.

Keeler didn’t care if it looked weird. He made a tray of sandwiches and crunchy sticks and looked around for an open bar. Councilor Steadfast stayed close by and peppered him with questions.

“How long have you been in space?” she asked.

“About seven years,” Keeler answered.

"How many colonies have you visited?" she asked.

"Um," Keeler munched on his sandwich as he counted. "Ten or twelve, depending on how you count. Some of them were dead."

"Dead?"

"Wiped out, failed..." Keeler said.

"Oh, dear," she said, sounding genuinely sad.

"We would like to be finding Earth, if you had any information on that," he asked, turning the conversation around.

"Earth?" she said with a mixture of amusement and disdain. "Why would anyone want to go there?"

"Well, we thought it might be fun, Earth being the birthplace of humanity," Keeler explained.

"Earth is the planet that all that survives of humanity left to get away from," Steadfast sniffed. "'A world stripped of its resources, its land grown tired and desertified, its seas grown foul and lifeless with effluent.' Testament of Lyana Sirovski, 25th Century. Are you familiar with it?"

"Much of the history of Earth is lost to us," Keeler explained.

"There is not much to be lost," Steadfast insisted. "In the 23rd Solar Century the Exodus began, when the first practical anti-gravity drives were developed. Those who had ambition and intelligence left Earth, and they took everything of value with them. Those that stayed behind were worthless and decadent."

"We've been told that when the Outer Colonies declared Independence, Earth tried to play both sides against each other," Keeler told her.

"Who told you that?"

"General Ziang of the Eighth Crusade."

"Never heard of him," Steadfast demurred. "Earth tried to remain neutral during the Early Periods of the Crusades, offering itself as a place where both sides could meet. They proposed impractical solutions to the conflict, mainly involving the colonies being ruled from Earth by a Parliament of Humanity. They had no idea, even then, how irrelevant they had become."

Getting back to the point, she continued. "There's no reason for you to go there, except sentimentality. You'll find nothing but an empty desert, polluted by centuries of industrial waste, denuded of life."

Keeler couldn't think of anything to say to that, so he munched a crunchy stick. It was refreshingly salty.

Steadfast asked him. "When was your world colonized? What was the Solar Year?"

"4242," Keeler answered.

"Ah, your colonization predates the rise of the Empire of the Holy Starcross," Steadfast said. "Do you know of the Empire of the Holy Starcross?"

"What's that, some kind of empire?" Keeler asked.

"I will tell you. Do you wish to hear?"

"I have a passing interest in Post-Commonwealth History," Keeler told her.

"Nine star-systems united under a single authority, about 600 years after the end of the Ninth Crusade," she told them.

"Yronwode being one of the nine?" Keeler asked.

"No, no," she chuckled. "Yronwode was a prison planet of the Old Commonwealth. It was a mission-world, one of many that Starcross Redeemers were sent to."

"Do you still have contact with the Empire?" Keeler asked.

"Oh, heavens no. Our ancestors knew Yronwode was a one-way trip. To prevent escape, all contact with the outside galaxy was forbidden."

"Surely, they didn't intend to imprison their descendants as well," Keeler said.

"How did you know my name was Shirley?" Steadfast said.

A man in a gray suit inserted himself into their conversation. "Excuse me, but if I could insert myself into your conversation. Julius Fair, Warden of Externalities... which is to say, for dealing with the Xirong."

He gripped and pumped Keeler's hand as he continued. "I believe the Commonwealth thought they were acting compassionately. They gave the prisoners a world they could build on, albeit a harsh one, while protecting the galaxy from their predations."

"I can sort of see that," Keeler conceded.

"Our ancestors came, partly, because they thought they could help," Fair continued, "We continue that tradition through trade with some of the less hostile tribes. They provide us with lumber, various foods, minerals, and coal for our carbon-fusion plants."

Steadfast interrupted, "Which works remarkably well, by the way. The Xirong provide us the coal that powers our cities. Then, we trade the diamonds produced by the fusion process for raw materials, like timber, food, minerals, and additional coal."

"It has gotten harder," Fair conceded. "The larger and most violent tribes have begun attacking any tribes known to trade with us. We have to work increasingly through intermediaries, covert transactions."

Steadfast's hand fluttered into the air. "Bother," it said. Keeler asked whether it would be possible to meet with the Xirong.

Fair answered him, with a sort of angry regret. "An Isolationist Group came to power in our High Council a few years ago. They were not in power long, only three years, but they expelled all of the unconverted Xirong who had come to settle in Midian, and many of the converted who were suspected of carrying out violence." He paused.

"Did you let them back in later?" Keeler asked.

"No, we thought it would be unwise," Steadfast said, nearly blushing with embarrassment, which Keeler found odd.

Fair added. "It was a very dark period in our history, we're not proud of it. The Xirong outside the Shield have never forgiven us. Still, it may be possible to arrange to speak to ..."

Suddenly the room grew quiet. Keeler turned to see a man and two women, dressed in elaborate red, purple, and white robes, standing in the open double doors to the hall. They wore incredibly elaborate hats in the shape of birds.

The man spoke, "A message from the Pontifex, Her Serene Holiness, Solace No. 23, which of you is called Eddie Roebuck?" he asked.

Keeler and the rest of his landing party spontaneously pointed. Eddie was standing at the buffet with the remains of a sandwich dribbling down his chin and a

drink in each hand.

The messenger spoke again, "Eddie Roebuck, you have been sent for by the Pontifex. She chooses you. You must come."

"Whatever it is, I didn't do it." Eddie insisted.

## CHAPTER: 04

### Yronwode – Xenthe

The alarms began a short time after Eddie Roebuck was led away, and just as the food on the banquet table was being replaced with an array of pastries and glazed fruit. Above the doors in the room, long bars of light went from white to red. The lights in the room dimmed, and several aides quickly closed the internal shutters over the large window.

"What's going on?" Keeler asked, nervously.

A member of the High Council Security Service, who had been introduced to Keeler as Lydia Diligent, took a small device from a holster on her belt. She studied the readout on its screen. She announced to the room that they were under "Level 1 attack, western vector."

Diligent turned her eyes back toward Keeler and his landing team. "We will escort you to a shelter if you wish, but the danger is not substantial. Normally, I would walk out onto the balcony and observe."

"Then, we will do the same," Keeler told her.

"Good, I think you ought to enjoy the light show," she rose, taking her drink with her. She appeared to be in her thirties, thin as a willow branch, with dark hair brushed away from her face and olive green eyes; a fair sight prettier than Lydia Strong had been.

Once outside, the first thing Keeler observed was that the lights of the city had mostly gone out, even the land vehicles on the streets had pulled to the side and dimmed their lights. As though reading his thoughts, Diligent offered an explanation. "Their missiles target sources of light."

A few seconds later, a bright yellow stab of laser light pierced the sky. Where it terminated, a bright flash and explosion followed.

Several more such displays followed. "Our city is protected by several layers of defenses known collectively as 'The Shield,'" Diligent told him.

"Based on Kariad technology?" David Alkema asked. He had followed the rest of the party onto the great stone balcony at the back of the hall.

"I am afraid that information is classified," Diligent demurred.

A laser stabbed the sky again, but this time it connected with nothing, but simply disappeared into the night sky, which Keeler noted that, although clear, was quite devoid of stars. A few seconds later, there was an explosion on the ground. It seemed to Keeler that it was on one of the rocky hills on the north side of the city.

"I am afraid our defenses are not 100% effective," Diligent said. "Perhaps, with some of your technological expertise, we could improve them."

"Sure," Keeler replied. "I hope no one was hurt."

"It looks like the pilot steered it into some of the decoy lights in the Moabian Hills. Those areas are sparsely inhabited."

Alkema nearly choked on his water. "Pilot?" he sputtered.

"The Xirong believe people are more expendable than technology," Diligent said. "Their missiles are guided by human pilots. Also, the willingness of pilots to sacrifice themselves is believed to inspire others to take up arms."

"They kill themselves just to strike at you?" Keeler asked, because this seemed totally wrong to him.

"They hate us genocidally," Diligent told him. "Some of them, the more militant ones."

"It's more complicated than that," interrupted Julius Fair, the Warden for Externalities, approaching with one hand over the top of his wineglass as though to protect it from dust or falling debris. "What do they have to live for? The conditions in the Wilderness of Howling Zeal are very harsh. And the Chieftains that run the tribes are brutal and corrupt. There is no meaningful work to be had among the Xirong. I've been telling the *Warden* of Economics that we should work on mutual development plans, but she's only concerned with getting more Xirong approved as Bonded Laborers to work in Midian, which the Security Warden, of course, opposes ... "

A few more explosions lit the night sky. "How long will this go on?" Keeler asked.

"Not long," Diligent assured him. "There was a time when they would launch thousands of unguided missiles into our cities, in hopes of hitting something. The shield rendered such attacks pointless. Eventually, they gave up and reverted to using piloted missiles."

"The attacks serve a strong symbolic purpose to the Xirong," Fair went on. "The leadership can not afford to appear weak. By striking against us regularly, they create the perception of strength." He sighed, "I just wish we could persuade them to direct their energy into more productive activities."

Another explosion flashed in the sky. Diligent was studying Keeler's expression. "I hope you're not thinking of trying to help negotiate a peace accord. Are you?"

"Heavens neg," Keeler exclaimed. "We've stayed out of the internal affairs of the planets we've contacted."

Alkema cleared his throat.

"Mostly," Keeler clarified. "We may have fomented a revolution on one or two planets, created an insurgency on an Aurelian-occupied world, wiped out an alien invasion, helped recolonize a failed planet with genetically-engineered super-androids ... but we've definitely never tried to negotiate a Peace Settlement."

"Good," Diligent said. "Because the Xirong have violated every accord we've ever made with them..."

"And we, more often than not, have done the same," Fair added.

"... and used their provisions to better position themselves to attack us," Diligent finished. She gestured toward the west, toward the direction of the incoming missiles. "Those piloted missiles are derived from technology the Kariad obligated us to share with them."

"I like to think we just have not found the key to peaceful coexistence, yet," Fair countered. "The Kariad refused our suggestion to terra-form this continent into something more fertile and life-giving. I think if they had done so, it would have given the

Xirong something to do other than wage war.”

“You don’t need alien technology to terraform a desert,” Diligent argued. “Look at Midian. Our ancestors chose it because it was the most desolate waste of the whole world, and they transformed it through their own hard work and sweat.”

Keeler felt a hand on his shoulder. It belonged to Councillor Steadfast. “You may be interested to know that the trees that line our streets and fill our valleys were grown from cuttings brought from Earth itself.”

This was far more interesting than planetary geo-politics. “Really? Do you have any other artifacts from Earth?”

“There may be some books or video-dramas in the archives,” Steadfast told him. “In the morning, I will put you in touch with one of our archivists. Which reminds me, someone should be seeing to your accommodations for the evening.”

Several minutes went by with no further explosions. In the distance, the wails of emergency vehicles dispatched to impact sights could be heard. Keeler saw flashing lights appear in the distance as traffic resumed its flow through the streets of the city.

“The attack is probably over,” Diligent told them. “This might be a good time to go to chambers. Commander Keeler, we’ll find some accommodations for you and your people in the Leadership Center.”

## **Yronwode – Xiyyon – Emissarial Complex of the Starcross**

Eddie Roebuck followed a tall man and woman in large elaborat hats through the halls of a beautiful temple. The ceiling was covered with a kind of gold filagree. The walls were lined with murals done in stained glass. Eddie could only presume they depicted scenes from scripture, although they were not from any religious tome Eddie was familiar with . Eddie didn’t know a lot about religion, but he didn’t think spaceships figured prominently in any of them. Most all of the scenes in the temple murals showed spaceships and angels, except for one that depicted Satan and what appeared to be sprigs of broccoli.

After a walk up five flights of stairs, they led him down a hallway lit with thousands of candles. He first assumed they were holograms, but feeling the heat they gave off, he realized they were the real deal. He knew the planet had better technology than this. “What’s with the candles,” he asked.

“They make the place feel more sacred,” the man answered. “Her holiness likes them.”

“Her Holiness?” Eddie asked.

“The current Pontifex is a woman,” said the woman who was leading him. “So the next must be a man, so it has been ordained to maintain the balance of innate forces.”

“She is quite old,” the man confirmed.

“Do you know why she wants to see me?” Eddie asked.

“She will tell you in her time,” the woman said. “Behold, these are her chambers.”

The paused before a pair of doors carved in some kind of blood-red wood. The woman stood aside. The man pulled some kind of velvet curtain-pull. In the distance, a bell rang. Soon, a young man appeared at the door, dressed like the man and the woman, except that his hat was flattened at the top like a fez.

“We have brought the one Her Holiness required,” spoke Eddie’s male escort.

*Slag*, Eddie thought. He had heard a few things about these kind of religious leaders, their gross sexual appetites. *She wants me to have intercourse with her*, he thought.

"You know," he said. "I'm flattered by he attention, but I just remembered ... um... I have to write a letter... to a cat... about some ... things... in my... pants."

"You will come," said the young man, gesturing forcefully for Eddie to come into the room.

Eddie sighed, and followed the young man into the chamber. It wasn't all that large, about the size of one of the smaller suits in *Pegasus's* living quarters. Furnishings were spare. Globes set into the walls provided a faint yellowish light.

There was a large bed in the center of the room. An old woman with long white hair was sitting up in it. Her body was old and withered, but her eyes blazed brightly, one blue, one green. "Greetings, child," she said in a strong but raspy voice. "You are as I had always pictured you would be. Come and sit by me." She gestured toward a spot on the bed.

"Did I mention that I received a serious war wound battling the Aurelians at... um... Bodacious Three?" Eddie said desperately.

"Sit, child," she told him. Something undeniable in the voice made him sit, but he was still worried. "I understand the Starcross Empire never reached the Perseus Quadrant. You have never head of Brian Kingman?"

"Brian who?"

Eddie was startled as a woman standing in the shadows, whom Eddie had not previously noted, began speaking. "Brian Kingman was born on the Old Line Colony of Ceres Beta in the Solar Year 4265. As a young man, he became fascinated with legends of a Lost Colony of Atlanton, where near-miraculous technologies existed... technologies that would make men immortal, make it possible to cross the space between stars and galaxies in moments. In time, he secured a powerful ship, the *Tracor Nestor*, and set off to pursue the legend."

"Who is that?" Eddie whispered to the Pontifex.

"A vocal scribe," the Pontifex answered. "Since you know nothing of our church, and because my voice would not survive speaking the whole of the story, I arranged to have her brought from her chamber. You will attend her words."

The vocal scribe continued. "Believing the lost world to be hidden round a blue giant sun in the center of the galaxy, then did the Prophet Brian Kingman travel there.

"Finding no crew willing to travel with him, he took only a robot companion named 12XU for companionship and an artificial intelligence named Zarss to pilot his ship.

"However, before he reached even the Norma Quadrant, his ship became trapped within a region of dust and dark matter, such that his instruments failed him. He became lost in the dustcloud, and no matter where he turned his ship, he could hold no course. He began to feel as though he was being held there for some reason.

"On the 81st solar day of his captivity, he spied a bright light out the of his spaceship, in the shape of an angel beckoning him.

"The angel was called Threll.

"Though his robot companion and the AI Zarss detected nothing, he insisted the light was there and bayed them follow it. The angel led him for nine more days, until he reached a planet, which was called Taramayara. And the Angel told him he should go down to it.

“He left the *Tracor Nestor* in a shuttlecraft called Starfly, and went down. The surface of Taramayara was devastated and rent by storms of such ferocity that Starfly was almost bashed upon the rocks, but after a while came upon a place of calm, the one spot on all the planet’s surface where no storms raged. Here, he found the ruins of a great city.

“In the center of the city was a temple, and within the temple was an altar, and within the altar, protected by a forcefield, was *The Fifth Holy Testament of the Allbeing*. It had, on its frontispiece, the symbol of the Starcross, and that symbol was also on the altar of the temple where he found it. The angel Threll reappeared to Brian Kingman and told him that he, and only he, as the chosen prophet of God, could remove the Testament.

“And he saw, around the altar, the dried up bones of those who had tried to take it before him.

“Brian Kingman put his hand into the forcefield, and it felt like being stung by a thousand hornets a thousand times. But he pushed through the barrier and withdrew the Testament. He thought his arm would be burned and withered, but it was fine.

“There, the Prophet was given vast and extraordinary powers.

“And the Lord spoke to him, and said, ‘Brian Kingman, you will return to your world, keep my word and your world and others who join it will prosper greatly in my sight.’ For this Testament was greater than all the treasures of Atlanton.”

“First Compendium, Chapter 1,” the Vocal Scribe intoned. Then, she began another.

“The Testament was written in an alien language, the language of Taramayaran. Even Zarss, the Artificial Intelligence on his ship, could not make sense of it. But because of the power that had come upon him in the Temple, he was able to read and translate it. He occupied himself with its translation as the ship returned to Ceres Beta.

“When word of his discovery became known, those who still had the faith sought him out. He preached from the Fifth testament, which told of the Rise and Fall of a Great People, a lost human colony that had once found favor with God, but then was destroyed when they turned away.”

“Enough,” the Pontifex snapped. “Dear Acolyte, favor us with the Compendium of the Prophet Ariat, Chapter 33, verses 9-10.”

The scribe recited from memory, “Sixty roundings past the leaving of the false prophets, fell to the world of sorrow two mighty star-birds. And least among them was the dark man. Him shall you raise up to the highest heights, for he is chosen of God, and will preserve the Chosen people against the calamity.”

The Pontifex spoke in her ancient, but certain, voice. “We are sixty years past the time when the Kariad left this world, and they left it a world of sorrow, and you have arrived.”

“Who, me?” Eddie asked. “That prophecy could refer to anybody.”

“What do you call the space-ships that brought you?”

“Aves,” Eddie Roebuck answered.

“What does that word mean?”

“Bird,” he said, “but that’s a total coincidence.”

“Your skin is dark, are you the least among your people?”

“Well, not least least...”

The Pontifex ignored him. “Continue, dear acolyte, with Ariat, Chapter 35, Verse

26..."

"The old mare passes, the Chosen One comes..."

"Not very flattering to be called an old mare," the Pontifex cackled. "But, so be it. The prophecy is fulfilled. When I die, you shall become Pontifex of Yronwode."

## Zilla

Nights on Yronwode were long. The planet took nearly 40 standard hours to make a single rotation. Keeler did not sleep through the long night, instead, after a quick nap in the quarters provided to him, he requested to be returned to *Zilla* and, after some discussion, the Midians agreed to take him. His intent was to return to *Pegasus* and return with some assistants to begin studying the Midian Archives. He also wanted to clear his head a little and think about how to proceed with this mission.

He was curious about the *Xirong*. While he had no intention of interfering in planetary politics, it nagged at him that he was only getting the Midian side of the conflict. Surely, there had to be more than he was being told.

In the east, the first gray light of the pre-dawn of Yronwode's long day, was brightening the horizon as Keeler exited the Midian military transport. He was surprised how cold, and how crystal clear, the early morning air was, even here, near the sea. Also, how eerily quiet the city was following the attack of the night before. Palm trees ruffled in the morning breeze. Keeler wondered if they came from Earth.

The Midians had covered the ship in netting to protect it from missile attack, and his eyes had adjusted just enough to make out its shape as it sat upon its landing pads. The canopy glowed dimly beneath the net. Inside, Blade Toto was going through the pre-flight checklist.

David Alkema met him at the hatch. "Good morning, Commander. The ship is prepared for your return. Planetology Specialist Stratos is waiting inside to accompany you, and I adjusted the seats in the main cabin the way you like them, with extra support for your lumbar."

"Thank you," Keeler told him. "I only expect to be gone a few hours at the most. If *Pegasus* has left orbit, I'll simply transmit a request for additional teams, then return directly here." He paused. "Or maybe pop down and visit the *Xirong*."

"Are you sure that's wise?" Alkema asked. "The Midians said the *Xirong* are not much more than savages."

"The Midians said a lot of things," Keeler huffed, dismissively. "Will you be returning to *Pegasus* with me?"

"Do you want me to return to *Pegasus* with you?" Alkema asked him.

"Neg," Keeler decided. "There's a lot to do down here. Begin working on an exchange, technology assistance for information."

"I will do that," Alkema assured him.

"We especially want to know if they know which star systems are inhabited."

"I asked about that last night," Alkema told him, with disappointment. "I was told they don't have any data on other star systems. It was forbidden, basically to limit the possibility of prisoners escaping."

"Porpoise hork!" Keeler spat.

"Sir?" Alkema asked.

"Sorry, I just sense the Midians don't like to share their knowledge with anyone," Keeler answered him. "These Midians remind me too much of Republickers, arrogant,

superior ... no sense of humor. Political!"

The last word as meant as an epithet. "There is a dense atmosphere of politics on this planet," Alkema agreed.

"I would tend to agree with the noted Sapphorean historian Pollux Wangchunger, who defined politics as 'the management of necessary evil,'" Keeler said. "Except for the 'necessary' part. Tell me, how many listening devices did you find in your room?"

"Eight."

Keeler grunted and walked into his ship. "You must have missed some. I found twelve."

### **Transcript to Listening Devices Planted in the Room of Commander Keeler.**

[Sounds of grunting, followed by a flushing noise]

Keeler: [Speaking into some sort of Communication Device]  
Alkema!

[Inaudible Voice Responding on Communication Device]

Keeler: There's no Sonic Anus Cleaner in my Euphemism.

[Inaudible Voice Responding on Communication Device]

Keeler: I'm supposed to do what?

[Inaudible Voice Responding on Communication Device]

Keeler: Is that even sanitary? Hey, send Toto over here. I need his help on something.

[Inaudible Voice Responding on Communication Device]

Keeler: No, I think I can figure out how to use the paper myself. Just find out what room he's in and send him over.

[8 minutes, 20 seconds of silence punctuated by sounds of running water and bodily noises.]

[Doorbell]

Keeler: "Ah Toto, Good evening. You look marvelous."

Toto: "You wanted [unintelligible] from me, captain."

Keeler: Za, have you see the inside of my closet?

Toto: Neg, sir.

Keeler: It's fascinating. Here, let me show you, but first let me turn on the shower and then turn up the music on this...

[One minute, twenty seconds of conversation drowned out by music and running water.]

[Music and running water sounds stop.]

Toto: Sir, I have always wanted to ask, what is the source of your legendary sexual prowess?

Keeler: I drink at least a glass of wine a day, accompanied by lots of fresh meat and vegetables... served on the bare breasts of a nubile Panrovian whore.

Toto: That's very interesting. Do you have any stories that illustrate your legendary escapades?

Keeler: while on a sex-spree in a Panrovian whorehouse, I used a live stalking cat as a condom. The bodycount was fourteen Panrovian whores and one Jutland stalking cat. In Panrovia, they still refer to this as "The Night of the Sodomizing Cougar-Man." I called it, last windsday.

Toto: You have so much to teach me, sir.

Keeler: Even just now, at the reception, that one Midian woman, the one with the dark hair and the fabulous yoo-hoos. She followed me into the men's euphemism before we went to my room. what she wanted to do made even me blush.

## **Zilla**

*Zilla rose into the sky just after dawn and bore Northwest over the peninsula of Midian, rising higher into the morning sky.*

*On her main deck, Keeler sat across from Planetology Specialist Anton Stratos.*

*"Kind of funny, isn't it?" Keeler asked. "The first world we come to in the Orion Sector is a penal colony."*

*"I wonder if it's the only one," Stratos mused. "In theory, one planet should be sufficient to hold the entire criminal class of several thousand colonies. But there are also the factors of distance, and the number of suitable worlds available for colonization."*

*"I think there were others, but this was the big one. What are your impressions of the Midians?" Keeler asked.*

*"They seem civilized," Stratos answered. "Rather harsh, but if the Xirong are as bad as they claim, who could blame them."*

*"The Midians blame their ills on the Xirong, and I bet the Xirong blame their ills on the Midians," Keeler growled. "I found the history lesson they gave us to be self-serving. I'd like to hear the Xirong side of the story."*

*"I'm sure we'll have a chance for that," Stratos said.*

*Keeler settled back into his seat. "What intrigues me more are the Kariad. I'm a little uncomfortable that there's someone else bopping around the galaxy making contact."*

*"Another potential adversary?" Stratos suggested.*

*"You see, that's why I disbanded Diplomatic Corps," Keeler said. "Too damb impractical. They would have said, 'Oh, the Kariad. Another friend we haven't met.' It's nice to have people who actually take a practical perspective on these matters."*

*"Are they an enemy?" Stratos asked.*

*"They didn't attack the Midians," Keeler admitted, as though giving them partial credit.*

*"They seem to have been trying to help them."*

*"It doesn't seem to have worked out," Keeler told him. "Which just goes to show you..."*

*He was interrupted by some massive force blasting the ship from behind. The Aves cartwheeled forward. Only the rapid deployment of emergency restraints kept Keeler and Stratos from getting pitched to the foredeck.*

*"Sir," came the calm voice of Blade Toto from the command deck. "We are under attack. You might want to..."*

Before he could finish, another blast knocked the side of the ship.

Keeler fought the g-forces to touch the COM Link on his sleeve. "What the Hell is going on?"

Flight Lieutenant Toto answered him. "We're being attacked by a dragon, Commander."

"We're being what by a what?" Keeler shouted.

Toto transferred his Head-Up display to the main cabin. A tactical display on the inner canopy showed the beast behind them; a snarling black winged reptile, whose scales shined like polished obsidian, whose eyes blazed red like hot coals, and who spat streams of yellow fire that blazed and ate away at *Zilla's* aft shield.

"Deploy aft water cannon!" Keeler ordered.

"Two things," Toto reported calmly. "First, we don't have an aft water cannon, and second, that's not fire. It's some kind of plasma. We can't survive many more hits." His voice was perfectly calm, like he was explaining the difference between real cheese and artificial cheese product. At the same time, he was taking *Zilla* through a desperate series of barrel rolls trying to shake the dragon.

"Shields are gone," Toto reported.

"Crud," said Keeler, just as the dragon unleashed a massive blast of fire-plasma against the port wingblade. The wingblade exploded, and *Zilla* became a shooting star, smoke and flame trailing its downward parabola as it dove toward the surface of the planet.

## CHAPTER: 05

### **Yronwode - xiyyon - Emissarial Complex of the Starcross**

Eddie Roebuck picked up his jaw from the floor and addressed the Pontifex. "Whoa!" he stammered. "Hold off! You don't want me as your pontifex. I've already broken at least fifteen of the seventeen commandments."

"There are 21 commandments in the Starcross faith," the Pontifex informed it.

"Well, that just makes it worse!" Eddie told her. "Besides, I don't want to be Pontifex."

"You have no choice," the Pontifex told him, her ancient voice firm with conviction bred of decades of unquestioned supreme authority. "The Allbeing has chosen you, and I have merely informed you of His choice. The Pontifex announces his successor and then dies. So it is written, so shall it always be."

"What if I refuse?" Eddie protested. "What if I opened up the doors to the chapel, let fly with a stream of obscenities, and then ... did something on the sacred altar you'd have to clean up with a mop and some heavy duty disinfectant."

Pontifex Solace No. 23 was unperturbed. "Then, we would clean the altar with sacred vinegar and you would still be Pontifex. You would not be the first. Pontifex Adamant No. 3 refused his calling and starved himself to death. Pontifex Pious No. 10 refused to wear the papal robes and walked around naked for the nine years of his eminence. Pious the Naked, they called him. And don't get me started on Fearless No. 2."

Eddie got a pensive expression on his face, which obviously must have hurt. But it did help him come up with something. "Well, what's it pay, then?"

"Pay?" the Pontifex was shocked at first, then chuckled. "Pay? There is no pay."

"That's going to be a problem, then," Eddie told her.

"What do you need with pay, when the church will provide for you all that you need?" the Pontifex persisted.

"I need more than most people," Roebuck said.

"Then the church shall provide you whatever you want. When you are Pontifex, all will be provided for you, always. You will want for nothing."

"What if I want a bed shaped like a transport pod?"

"You shall have it!"

"What if I want a transport pod shaped like a bed!"

The Pontifex chuckled a bit, but assured him. "It shall be done."

"What if I want to eat my lunch off the bare breasts of a teenaged girl?"

The Pontifex, to his surprise, did not seem taken aback. "If that is what you wish, you shall have it, but with the power you'll be given..."

"What kind of a religion is this?" Eddie cried out. He may not have been overly familiar with religious practices on Sapphire, but he knew enough to know that eating lunch on the breasts of underage girls was something most of them frowned upon.

"It is the one sure faith as described by Brian Kingman from his translation of the Fifth Holy Testament of Taramayara, the Unwritten Word." Pontifex Solace No. 23 lay back against her pillows. "You will come to know it, Eddie Roebuck. The spirit will reside within you and you will know the truth of all things.

Eddie was about to protest again, but he was overcome with a feeling that he should just... not. For a moment, she reminded him of his grandmother back in New Halifax, and he was saddened by the knowledge that two or three hundred years had passed on Sapphire and she was long since dead.

Solace summoned the young man in the fez. "Have someone draw the Archonex Meek, and inform him of these events. Prepare the way for Mr. Roebuck's installation as my successor. Then, prepare my grave. For soon, this vehicle shall soon come to a full and complete stop, and my soul will be free to join the Allbeing in Multi-dimensional Perfection.

"In the meantime, Mr Roebuck," she smiled, and there was a bright glint in her eye. "You must be prepared to take on the mantle of Pontifex. I have no doubt you shall be found worthy.

## **Yronwode – The Road to Xiyyon**

Not much later, that morning, as the sun rose into the sky, Trajan Lear and Matthew Driver rode a tram into the hills outside the city of Xenthe toward Xiyyon.

The pink-yellow light of the morning tinted the ten and twenty story apartment blocks that ringed the outskirts of Xenthe. Each building was sheathed in plates of polished stone forming a shield that could close against the heat of the sun and attacks like the one the previous night. To Trajan Lear, they looked like the old fashioned public utility kiosks<sup>7</sup> set up in the plazas of Republic cities where Republickers in centuries past would go to settle their accounts with the City's taxation, registration, water, power, communication, medical, entertainment, and atmospheric accounts.

Soon, the towering apartment blocks gave way to more commercial structures, which were lower and squarer and had colorful stylish logos on the outside walls. These extended for many kilometers beyond the inner suburban ring, and were in turn ringed by sprawling developments of smaller apartment blocks.

When these ended, they caught a glimpse of the raw, unimproved land in which the Midians had built their cities. The soil was a desolate tan-gray that looked like lunar soil. The hills around the city had eroded into khaki-colored loafs of stone.

"Where do you grow your food," Trajan Lear asked their guide. Beyond the outer suburbs in most Republicker cities was a ring of hydroponic farms that supplied most of their sustenance.

Their guide, a young man by the name of Noah Good, answered the question. "There are farms and orchards located further south on the continent, on the far side of Lake Abraham. We also import some food from the Xirong, but not a lot. This small peninsula actually produces 45% of the planet's food. Since we only have two per cent of the planet's population, we export most of it. Mainly to the northern tribes on the polar continent."

The train passed through a tunnel cut through the hills and they exited into a valley. The apartment blocks were smaller here, four or five stories, arranged in patterns with shops and plazas in the middle. Near the middle of the valley were several large structures; unmistakably churches and temples.

"The Temple of the Saints is on the far side of the city, in the Otherwise Holy Valley of Xiyyon," Noah Good told them. "So, we'll be passing right through Xiyyon. Only the Brianists are allowed to have temples there."

Before they reached Xiyyon Center, they passed a large rectangular building of about six stories in height, plainly square, built of pale sandstone, with rows of dull square windows, perfectly aligned. The utilitarian structure, looking less like a building than a box a building might come in, was set in the middle of a bare concrete plaza.

Noah Good saw that it had caught their eye. "That is the Kariad Center," he explained, with a kind of shrug. "Some of our population have embraced the Kariad belief system, and they built the center."

Lear and Alkema found this somewhat surprising considering the hostility most of the Midians they had met held for the Kariad. "What do the Kariad believe?" Driver asked.

Again, Noah Good shrugged. "Nothing. They believe that the universe was a random accident, that there is nothing else beyond it, and that human are just biological entities whose existence begins at birth and ends at physical death. Some people call that building The Temple About Nothing." His voice was sincere and good natured, betraying no contempt or skepticism at the Kariad belief system.

"What do they do there?" Trajan Lear asked.

"They try and convince other people to believe in nothing," Good told them.

Trajan Lear couldn't believe this. "Your government permits this? I thought you were a Theocracy?"

Noah Good answered, "We believe in freedom of conscience, to believe as one chooses. If we denied the right to believe in nothing, than we would deprive people of a spiritual choice."

"Even if that choice leads to the annihilation of the soul?" Trajan Lear asked, which reflected what lestan believed... that the penalty for atheism was the soul's extinction.

Noah Good repeated. "We're very tolerant of the individual's right to spiritual

choice.”

“What are those pink buildings over there,” Matthew Driver asked, possibly to change the subject.

“That’s the Xiyyon Medical Center,” Noah Good Answered.

“It’s huge,” Trajan Lear said, almost whistling.

“It’s the largest Medical Facility on the Planet, providing the full spectrum of medical care, as well as research facilities and a medical university,” Noah Good said, rather proudly. “My mother works there.”

“You must have a lot of sick people in these cities,” Trajan inquired. He remembered the Medi-Plexes on Republic, but nothing on that scale.

“It’s the primary medical facility for the entire Midian Peninsula, and we also treat Xirong when they have problems their facilities can’t handle.”

Soon, the tram was passing through the city center. The center was dominated by the huge Starcross Emissarial Complex. Its centerpiece was a pyramid of about 100 meters in height with the logo of the Starcross carved in three sides on the capstone. Several downtown blocks of ornate palaces surrounded it, none of them more than twenty meters in height, each occupying an entire city block, gray sandstone edged and trimmed with copper, gold, and various crystals.

Noah told them that the palaces were where all the Starcross religious functionaries lived, about 6,000 people. Of course, they did not know that in the palace closest to the Pyramid, in a luxurious sixth floor suite, Eddie Roebuck was freaking out.

“Very posh,” said Trajan Lear, looking over the palaces and parks. “How do they manage to live so well if your total population is under six million and only a fraction of those are Starcrossers.”

“The Brianists have always been a majority, and they control several key industries on the planet,” Noah Good explained. “They control most of the banks and trading houses, and they hold the contracts for processing government revenues.”

“Does that bother you?” Trajan asked. “Not being a ... a what did you call them, a Brianist?”

“Not really,” Noah told them. “There’s plenty to go around for everyone. And the Brianists are very good at managing finances.”

“From the looks of those palaces, I would have to agree,” said Trajan Lear.

The tram passed the city center, and several neighborhoods of small, older dwellings. Noah explained that a lot of Brianist families kept homes near the Emissarial complex in addition to apartments in Xenthe. Homes in Xiyyon were exempt from Midian property taxes. There also seemed to be a church or a chapel every few blocks.

“What’s that over there,” Driver asked, pointing to something on the cities far edge that looked like a forest of obelisks.

“The Necropolis,” Noah Good answered. “It’s where Brianists have their ashes interred.”

The tram left the Xiyyon proper, whose boundary was marked by a wall of stone, and came out on the other side into the Otherwise Holy Valley of Xiyyon. The tram passed through verdant parkland, irrigated with hidden networks of drip irrigation. Noah told him that these had once been gardens that fed the earliest settlers. A few clicks beyond was the Temple of the Christian Saints, a white structure with seven impressively tall spires, surrounded by lush, manicured gardens. It was beautiful, but looked modest compared to the elaborate Starcross Temple. Across a stretch of parkland, Trajan caught a glimpse of the pagoda-like rook of the Temple of the Holy

Twins, which seemed to be in a state of bad repair.

The tram pulled to a stop next to the Temple Station and the doors slid open. A pair of uniformed Midian Public Security officers were stationed there, looking bored. (There had been a suicide bombing at an adjacent tram stop years before, but the Temple Station had never been bombed). An attractive young girl in a white blouse and black pants with a blue stripe down the right leg met them at the bottom of the station stairs. "Welcome, visitors," she said brightly and hugged both of them before introducing herself as Temperance Kind. "But you can call me 'Purr,' everybody else does."

Introductions were exchanged, and the four of them began walking the path to the temple, which was laid on smooth white stones between terraced gardens of flowers and blossoming trees. The day was already starting to grow hot, but the green plant life and the cooling mist of processed water made it much more bearable.

"Because of safety concerns, we can't proselytize to the Xirong in the Wilderness of Howling Zeal," Noah Good was telling them. "We still do some mission work with the Northern Tribes, and in the city of Xenthe. We also do Temple service in lieu of mission work." He seemed content enough with it.

"What brings you to the Temple?" Purr asked.

It was a little awkward for Matthew Driver to explain how he had traveled through a StarLock and emerged in the Chronos Universe where time stood still, and committing a myriad of sins, few of which he could recall with any amount of certainty, but it had been necessary to survive, he thought. He tried to explain how he had begun to fall in love with a woman only to see her transform into a fairy, and how he had spend several months trapped inside a universe that was contained in a bottle. He gave such details as he could remember about why it had been necessary to feed one of their party to a giant *slorg* (not being able to remember even what a *slorg* was.) He also recounted how he had been turned into two people, one good and one evil, and battled himself to the death, and several other stories.

Noah Good and Purr Kind listened politely and never once suggested he take some time off and rest in a Mind Rehabilitation Center, as so many on *Pegasus* had done.

"You seek Atonement," Noah Good suggested. "You wish to meditate, perhaps in a prayer tower."

"Affirmative, Atonement," Matthew Driver agreed.

About then, Trajan excused himself to ride the train back to Xenthe, since he was not a Saintist. And lately, not much of an Iestan either. Their experience in the Chronos Universe had left Matthew with a deeper appreciation of his faith, where it had only left Trajan more confused.

"What do you think of our Temple Complex?" Purr Kind asked as they approached the shining white edifice of the main building.

"It's very beautiful," Matthew assured her. "How many Saintists are on this planet?"

"224,000," Noah told them. "According to last year's census. It's not a lot."

"There's a whole planet in the Andromeda Sector that has only 193,000 people on it," Matthew told them.

"How many Saintists live on your planet," Noah Good asked him. Driver admitted he didn't know, although it was certainly a small number.

"What are the Temples like on your world?" Purr Kind asked him as they mounted the twenty-two steps to the entrance.

"There's only one," Driver answered. "It's in the City of Faith, and it looks ..." He found it hard to remember. Then, he realized he had never actually gone to it. He had seen some images of it. "It's made of gray-blue rock, and it's kind of square shaped, with towers around the perimeter."

"I hope you brought pictures," Purr Kind said. She smelled nice. Like fresh-washed linens and summer flowers.

"I think there are some on *Pegasus*," Driver answered. "I'll see if I can get them to you."

Purr Kind rang the bell, and the three of them sat down on some white stone benches in front of the temple. "The Council is eager to speak with you, to learn how the church fairs on your world, and on the worlds you have visited."

Matthew Driver was taken aback from this. "I came here to seek Atonement. I wasn't prepared to brief your Council." And, besides, he wasn't sure how they would take the bad news. There really hadn't been any temples on Meridian, EdenWorld, Bodicea, or Winter. He thought there were on Independence and Aurora, but he didn't know for sure.

"It will just be an informal discussion, you'll do fine," Purr Kind assured him, and then laid a hand on his arm. It was a warm gesture, but Matthew Driver wished he belonged to one of those religions where they just whipped the sin out of you with a leather strap.

Somehow, this made him think of Eddie Roebuck.

## **Yronwode - Xenthe Security Base Four**

A communications outpost hidden inside Xirong territory first caught news of the loss of the *Ave Zilla*. It received the doomed ship's distress call, and also monitored Xirong transmissions reporting a bright flash in the sky followed by a fireball that plunged to the ground. They dispatched their data in a regular hourly report to the Midian Security Central Command and Control Complex. It was late in the day when Midian Security Council contacted David Alkema and transported him to the Command and Control Nexus located at the Security Base Four complex.

The Base Four was built into one of the hillsides outside the city's northeast boundaries. Nearby hills were scorch-marked and strewn with debris. The complex was a frequent target of suicide missile attacks. There was a security fence 500 meters from the main gate and an array of vehicle blocks in between. Some were mechanically pulled into the ground to make a temporary path for the six-wheeled military vehicle that transported Alkema to the facility. After a long and thorough body search, he was allowed inside with instructions to not stray more than two meters from his armed military escorts... emphasis on armed.

Inside, the facility was Spartan, with no furniture or decoration except to support its military function. The interior walls were dove gray trimmed with dull green, and the interior doors, which were hinged on either side and divided up the center like shutters, were a complimentary shade of tan. The material that made up uniforms of his escorts were similarly patterned of gray and tan shapes that blended into each other like camouflage. Three gray stripes marked the sleeve of each uniform over the bicep. Alkema guessed that the combination of colors indicated rank and function.

Alkema was led through the Command and Control Center and to a secure area in the back behind a double series of reinforced blast doors. The room contained four large two-dimensional displays hung on the walls, mostly displaying views of the countryside, accompanied at the side by legends and constantly changing text about current conditions and security alerts.

Alkema was soon introduced to Major Constant, a middle-aged man with white hair, well-muscled arms but a bit of a gut. Constant switched one of the displays to a map of the rest of the desert continent. "According to our tracking telemetry, your commander's ship seems to have crashed in an area we call the Wilderness of Howling Zeal."

"Our ship carries an emergency transponder to help locate it in the case of an accident," Alkema told them. "I can give you the relevant frequencies to scan."

"No need," answered a woman who identified herself as 1st Captain Steadfast. "The intense electromagnetic field in the upper atmosphere makes carrier wave communication over distances almost impossible. Unless your ship crashed within sixty kilometers of the base, you'd have no chance of picking up the signal."

"It's a strong signal," said Alkema.

"And we will do our best, but our listening post picked up nothing after the original distress call," Steadfast went on. "Our other listening posts are scanning for the signal. We'll have an update at the bottom of the hour."

"Do we know what happened to the ship?" Alkema demanded. "Were they shot down by the Xirong?"

"We don't think so," Constant answered. "The Xirong don't have the kind of weapons that could touch a ship like yours. We think his flight may have activated the containment system put here by the Commonwealth."

"Containment system?" Alkema asked. "What is it?"

Constant tried to explain. "The Commonwealth designed Yronwode to be impossible to escape from. Flight above 10,000 meters is not permitted. Anything that passes above that is shot down."

"Why didn't you warn us about this?" Alkema demanded.

"It didn't occur to us," Major said, unapologetically. "The Kariad had no trouble leaving the planet. We assumed you could leave at will like they did."

"Do we have any clue at all where the captain might be?" Alkema asked.

"Assuming he survived the crash?" Major Constant asked.

"Za, assuming he survived the crash." Alkema got the idea that survival represented a great deal to assume. Constant seemed unable to articulate an answer either. So, seeing he was going to be stuck for a while, Alkema asked, "The Wilderness of Howling Zeal, what is it like?"

"That is the name for the desert wastes across the gulf, west of the city, that are inhabited by the Xirong," Steadfast explained. She drew his attention to a map. The equatorial continent of Yronwode was shaped something like a dog, and the Peninsula of Xiyon was the lolling tongue of the dog. The head and chest of the dog constituted the Wilderness of Howling Zeal.

"Based on our tracking of your ship as it left of our airspace, it would have crossed the containment barrier here," she indicated the dog's floppy ear. "Therefore, depending on whether it was destroyed in flight, or managed to crash-land, it would have come down anywhere in this region," she indicated the dog's neck and back."

Constant shook his head and highlighted a massive, roughly crescent-shaped area of the map display. "If they were at 10,000 meters when hit, they could have come down anywhere in this area, which is about 400,000 square kilometers."

Captain Steadfast zoomed in on the map and magnified an area of dunes and blowing sands that looked much like the surrounding trekless wastes of dunes and blowing sand. "This isn't real-time geospatial telemetry," She said apologetically. "This

is old data. We don't have the capability to update the maps more than a few times a year."

"Are you saying that entire area is desert?" Alkema asked.

"Most of it," she answered, sounding almost sorry about it.

"Can we send in aerial search teams?" Alkema demanded.

"We're doing everything we can to assemble the necessary teams," Constant assured him. "By tomorrow morning, we should be able to send a search and rescue team to the area."

"That's hours from now!" Alkema pointed out. "Why so long?"

"That area is deep in Xirong territory," Constant explained. "We need to gather men who are familiar with it, and make sure they are properly armed and equipped. We've already sent out a call to our Specialized Forces."

Steadfast added, "On the positive side, a few more hours give our listening posts a better chance to pick up intelligence that might indicate where your ship went down."

"Once we have the teams together, it's just a matter of getting the go ahead from the First Council, the Security Ward and Ward of Externalities," Constant told him.

This didn't make sense to Alkema's mind. "The Ward of Externalities, why? What do they have to do with search and rescue?"

"By treaty, we need to secure Xirong permission for overflights of their territory," Constant said, sounding nearly as frustrated as Alkema. "We have dispatched messages to Phalange Authorities in the crash area, but we probably won't get a response for several days."

"I can't believe you need permission to conduct search and rescue operations?" Alkema repeated incredulously. "Commander Keeler could die while you waited for a response."

"Violation of Xirong Airspace would be an act of war," Steadfast explained.

"The same Xirong who are lobbying suicide missiles into your cities?" Alkema was still incredulous.

"We have to be honorable, even if they are not," Steadfast said. "The Ward of Externalities will be in intense negotiations with their Xirong counterparts, if they are not already and we hope they will very soon reach an agreement."

Alkema scratched his chin thoughtfully and stared at the map for some seconds. "Would they shoot down your aircraft?"

Steadfast frowned. "Doubtful, but Anyone who authorized or participated in such overflights would be subject to arrest and trial."

"I don't believe this," Alkema said, pounding the desktop. "Okay, we have don't have a treaty with the Xirong. We'll do the search. Would that violate the treaty?"

"It would be difficult ..." Steadfast began.

"Hell no, it wouldn't," Major Constant barked. "It only covers Midian aircraft. And if the Xirong whine about it, let them whine. You may use your own aircraft, and your own personnel for the search."

Alkema sighed in relief, then began giving orders. "I need my two pilots, Trajan Lear and Matt Driver here as soon as you can find them and bring them to me. We'll use holoflage shields to lower the risk of detection. As long as *Prudence* stays under 10,000 meters, we should be fine."

Steadfast looked at him disapprovingly. "Tell me everything you know about the containment system," Alkema demanded of her.

"I will release the unclassified files to you," she said. "But there isn't much. We keep our aircraft below 8000 meters. Nothing that has encountered the containment system has survived to tell us about it."

"Is it an energy barrier?" Alkema asked.

Steadfast explained. "We've sent probes beyond the 10,000 meter limit, they were destroyed by some kind of interceptor system."

"May I see the telemetry data," Alkema requested. "If it is an energy barrier, maybe there's a way to jam it."

Steadfast shook her head. "I can not give you the telemetry we received before they were destroyed. It's part of the classified reports."

Alkema pushed. "I think I'll need to see those."

"I don't think they will release those," Steadfast said.

Alkema scowled at her. "If they really want us to exchange technology with them, I think it would be a lot better if they did."

## **Yronwode – Xenthe**

Max Jordan, Johnny Rook, and most of the other crew were stuck in the rooms the Midians had provided for them. They were sufficient, but hardly plush, consisting of dormitory style rooms, each containing two bunks and a desk. Later, they would learn, this was a wing of a low-security jail built to house Xirong who had violated their work contracts.

They had been left to wonder what was going on with the commander and Alkema. They had heard nothing except that *Zilla* had possibly crashed after leaving the city.

As they sat around a table in a common area, drinking fruit juice and eating snacks, Caliph projected herself into Max Jordan's Spex display, taking the form of a well-built, pale-white woman, about his own age, with glowing blue eyes that matched a fringe of blue around her straight black hair. "This is kind of boring, so far."

"Yeah, it tends to be boring when there's nobody shooting at us," Max Jordan confirmed.

"Excuse me?" Johnny Rook asked, not realizing who Jordan was talking to.

"Oh," Max Jordan pointed to his helmet. "Caliph loaded herself into my gear."

Johnny Rook blinked at him. "Is that a good idea?"

"Probably not," Max Jordan told him.

Caliph accessed the communication frequency of Johnny Rook's headset and gave him a piercing shriek in the ear before speaking. "I can improve the accuracy of his tactical gear's sensors and targeting systems. And, I can access adjacent systems to access additional data."

"Such as?" Johnny Rook asked.

"Such as the fact that you missed three listening devices when you swept the room earlier," Caliph told him, transmitting their coordinates to Johnny Rook.

Rook checked his Spex display. "I'll get right on those."

"I thought it was going to be more exciting than this," Caliph reiterated.

## Yronwode - Xenthe Security Base Four

The Midians found David Alkema a cubicle, and within it, he laid out maps (static imagery printed on sheets of some kind of plastic.) He used some kind of chemical marker to isolate the most likely crash sites for Commander Keeler's Aves, based on pure speculation about the point at which the Aves was brought down, coupled with further speculation about its descent course.

He had hoped that Blade Toto had salvaged enough control of the ship to bring it down some place where the commander would have access to shelter from the heat and maybe water (in case the ship's reserves were lost or contaminated). Then, Major Constant had advised him that anywhere in the Wilderness of Howling Zeal where there was water, there was also likely to be Xirong. And if the Xirong captured them, the crew would be beaten, tortured, and held for ransom... if they were lucky.

And in the meantime, he waited while the Security Ward and the Ward of Externalities danced around the issue of getting permission from the Xirong to search for survivors. Frustrated with the lack of progress, he sat down in the chair the Midians had provided him, closed his eyes, and tried to reset his mind.

He was interrupted by Captain Steadfast. "Commander Alkema," she said, not having gotten the hang of Odyssey Project ranks. "I know this is not a good time, but since you are effectively your people's leader, we need to talk."

"What about," Alkema asked without opening his eyes.

"It is very probable that you and your people will be hear for a prolonged stay," she said. "The High Council wants to know if you will be in need of accommodations. Those provided so far were only intended as temporary."

"We can sleep in shifts in our ship," Alkema said. Accommodations were not high on his mind.

"No, that would be inhospitable of us. The High Council has offered to find places for your people to stay. We think the best place may be one of our forward security bases."

Now, Alkema opened his eyes. "You want to confine us to a military base. Do you consider us a threat?"

"No, Commander Alkema, we are concerned about the threat to you," she told him. "You would be a highly valued target to the Xirong. They may try to kill or kidnap one of your people. We do not want that to happen. We would not impede your freedom of movement within Xenthe. But when you sleep at night, it should be in an area where we can protect you."

"Okay, do whatever you have," Alkema told her. "When Lear and Driver get hear, I'll have them pack up the ship and move us to..."

As they were talking, Trajan Lear was led to his cubicle by a pair of stern-faced security guards. "Lt. Cmdr. Alkema, I'm reporting to you as ordered."

Alkema dismissed Steadfast, and addressed Lear. "Sit down, Traj. You've been briefed?"

"The Prime Commander's ship is down. That's all they told me."

"Where's Flight Captain Driver?"

Trajan Lear sighed. "Captain Driver in the All Saints Temple, undergoing Atonement. They won't allow him any outside contact until he's finished."

"He's undergoing what?" Alkema snapped. Impatience was not a quality anyone had seen in him before.

Trajan tried to explain. "We committed a lot of sins in the Chronos Universe. He's probably going to be there for some time."

"I need someone to take Prudence up," Alkema told him. "And I guess that's got to be you." He transferred to Trajan Lear the parameters of a search pattern he had worked out.

Trajan studied them. "At this altitude, it will take hours, maybe days to scan the search area," he said. "From 30,000 meters, I could scan the entire region."

"There's a containment system around the planet," Alkema explained. "Anything that gets above 10,000 meters gets shot down."

Trajan thought about this. "Well, that isn't good," he decided

"Neg, it's not," Alkema said. "And we won't have any air support from the Midians. Their Treaty with the Xirong doesn't allow overflight, not even for search and rescue. It doesn't apply to us though?"

"Will the Xirong be shooting at us?" Trajan asked.

"Probably, but their weapons aren't very sophisticated. Besides, you'll be using holoflage shields, so you should be pretty much undetectable."

Trajan seemed somewhat disappointed. "Damb, I really wanted to try out *Prudence's* new self-protection suite. Does this mean we also can't reach *Pegasus*?"

"That's right."

"So, we're stranded here."

"After I figure out a way to communicate our situation to *Pegasus*, I'm going to figure out how we get off this rock." Alkema sounded determined. This was a good thing. A determined Alkema had solved a lot of problems on previous missions.

"Have you figured how we get a message to *Pegasus*," Trajan asked.

"I'm working on a way to contact them. It probably won't work, and it will be extremely dangerous."

Trajan Lear could not help smiling at that. "Extremely dangerous, and probably won't work. Usually, Matthew handles those, but, what the hell. It's not like I have anything better to do."

## CHAPTER: 06

### Yronwode – Security Base Four

Alkema, Major Constant, and a Midian-Xirong Liaison (a middle-aged man in a dull gray suit with a round white collar) were in communication with a Xirong Phalange Chieftain by the name of Goten. Because he held control over the largest Xirong city, New Babillon, Goten was the most powerful of the Xirong Chieftains. This was Alkema's first look at one of the Xirong.

Goten was a heavily built man with a rugged face and stringy black hair that hung down to the middle of his chest. Also, he was furious. He raged at them from the screen. "2,000 years of indignities! 2,000 years of occupation! 2,000 years of humiliation!"

The Liaison endured this with dignity, and when Goten stopped for breath, the liaison calmly asked, "With respect, Goten, under what conditions would you permit a Search and Rescue overflight into your territorial jurisdiction."

"Normally, our people's sovereignty is inviolable."

"There are extraordinary circumstances," the Liaison stated with great calm and patience. "Our Council of State has given me broad latitude for negotiation."

Goten pounded on his table. "You insult us. Our Sovereignty is not on sale."

"We would never think otherwise. However, we recognize that permitting us to make such a flight would be a generous offer of goodwill on your part, and it would only be right that we would offer something of goodwill in return." The liaison was a real weasel, but Alkema did not begrudge him this, under the circumstances.

Goten paused, and his anger seemed to be replaced by avarice. Alkema could see his fingers rubbing together greedily in the monitor. "What goodwill gesture would you offer in return?"

"What would earn your good will, Goten?" asked the liaison.

Goten cast his eyes about the room, looking at his off-screen advisors. "For certain, we will see the Shield of Oppression on your northern border dismantled, and concerning the *Tsi Bai*. All shall be permitted free movement into Theocrat-occupied territory. That is not negotiable."

"You know as well as I do, Goten, that the Peace Shield's status is under separate negotiation," the Liaison said, betraying no agitation.

"Liar! We know you lying liars have no intention of ever dismantling the Shield of Oppression," Goten growled.

"The Peace Shield will remain in place until all Xirong Phalanges renounce violence against Midian," the Liaison said patiently.

Goten launched into what Alkema sensed was a ritual denunciation. "Actings of violence the only language Theocrats understand. Violence the basis of your bad religion. Blood sacrifice demands your conceited magical sky-God. We will never bend to your Idols."

The liaison was quiet for a moment, and when he finally spoke, he said, "Goten, you are a wise and honorable man. You realize, certainly, that time is a critical factor, and even if the Peace Shield were dismantled, it would require many days to complete. So, what can my government do for you in the next day that would be appropriate recognition for your generous offer of the use of your airspace for our search and rescue operations."

"200 fuel rods," Goten stated without ceremony.

Major Constant cursed quietly. Alkema picked up that this was an impossible request. "The Xirong would like to use our fuel rods to produce radiological weapons," Constant explained, quietly, to him.

"Goten, the Midian High Council would never agree to exchange prisoners for fuel rods," the Liaison said calmly.

"Once again, Theocrats refuses us the basic needs of our lives. Without fuel rods so that they give us the force, millions of Xirong children shiver with the cold. Our medical installations cannot carry out surgical operations..." Goten continued through a laundry list of Xirong tragedies caused by the lack of power and "Theocrat Oppression."

The liaison waited until Goten was finished before continuing. "In return for your cooperation, the government of Midian is prepared to provide fuel and technical support

to restore the Number 2 power plant in New Babillon to operation. That would provide power to half of New Babillon.”

Goten didn't miss a beat. “We restore that plant ourselves, defy continuing sabotage of the Theocratic Entity, and withhold vital supplies...”

“The Midian Government is prepared to be very flexible,” the Liaison said, placing just a little more emphasis than necessary on the word ‘flexible;’ a sort of verbal wink.

“If Midian government is prepared to arrange in order to provide us with nothing, gives it for anything. There is nothing to negotiate. Goten, out.” The image of the Xirong vanished from the telescreen.

“That didn't seem to have gone well,” Alkema growled.

“Goten had to put up a display for political reasons,” the Liaison told him. “He was obligated to refuse any offer we made him, and he knew his demands were impossible. If he had settled for anything less, his political opponents would call him weak and rise against him. It is exactly how he gained power against the previous Xirong Chieftain of New Babillon.”

“So what happens now?” Alkema asked.

“Privately, we will offer him several hundred thousand Talents in raw diamond, and he will give us a backdoor deal. That's how these things usually work. It will take several days to work out the details though.”

*Several Days*, Alkema thought. The commander probably didn't have “several days.” But he knew, by this time, that arguing was fruitless.

On to Plan B.

## **Prudence**

*The Aves Prudence was describing long ovals in the skies high above the Wilderness of Howling Zeal, which looked, from the cockpit, like nothing but an expanse of gray-brown sand occasionally broken by a spinal outcropping of jagged rock.*

*Trajan spoke into his COM Link. “I have completed the scan of grid Alpha 6-4. Negative contact. Proceeding to Grid Alpha 7-1.”*

*“Acknowledged, Prudence,” answered David Alkema, back at the Midian Command Center. His response barely readable through the static. Even at maximum gain, Prudence's comm systems could barely cut through the planet's intense electromagnetic field. “Proceed to Grid 7-2.”*

*Even through the electromagnetic distortion, Alkema sounded tired, and frustrated. Trajan knew what he was thinking. Minus the electromagnetic density of Yronwode's atmosphere, and minus the scattering field put in place to guard the planet, locating the crash-site of the Aves Zilla would have been a matter of seconds, not hours. Never mind that without the planet's security system, Zilla never would have crashed in the first place. He checked his head's-up display. “Ground imagery scans are nominal. Resolution to one micron.”*

*At resolution, the gray-brown sand showed itself to be strewn with gray-brown rocks of various sizes and occasionally some chunk of debris or refuse. Prudence, had, in the past hour, detected the wreckage of dozens of ground vehicle crashes, including one that spread over nearly a full square kilometer and included the remains*

of hundreds of vehicles. The Xirong, apparently, just let debris rest wherever it fell.

But this particularly grid had nothing like that, just gray-brown sand strewn with gray-brown rocks. Trajan spoke into his COM Link. "I have completed the scan of grid Alpha 7-1. Negative contact. Proceeding to Grid Alpha 7-2."

"Acknowledged, *Prudence*," answered David Alkema, back at the Midian Command Center. "Proceed to Grid 7-2."

Grid 7-2 was a 10 kilometer by 10 kilometer patch of sand dunes near the edge of a dry ravine. And it was here that the scanners detected the distinct outline of an Aves Command Module and wingblade. Trajan double-checked the readings to be sure before contacting Alkema.

Calmly, Trajan reported, "Midian Base, *Prudence* has identified Aves debris on the desert floor in grid Alpha 7-2. Relaying coordinates.

In the background, Trajan could hear an animated discussion take place between David Alkema and two Midians he could not identify.

Alkema: We've found debris in grid Alpha 7-2. That's A-7-2. Here.

Midian A: [Expletive Deleted!]

Alkema: What [expletive]?

Midian A: That is headhunter territory

Alkema: Headhunter Territory? That can't possibly be good.

Midian A: It is, in fact, very very bad.

Alkema: Why?

Midian: Because it's Headhunter Territory.

Alkema: Right, Okay.

Midian B: There is an upside?

Alkema: An upside, what is it?

Midian B: We have no treaty with the Headhunter Tribes. We can send rescue teams into that area with impunity.

Alkema: I was expecting you to say something else, but I can work with that.

Trajan broke in through his COM Link: "Do you want me to stay on target or return to base?" he asked.

"We have the coordinates, could you make a low-pass and scan for life signs," Alkema ordered him.

Lear banked *Prudence* and made a long, slow dive toward the crash site. He passed over the debris at less than fifty meters. From here, the ship's sensors were effective, and Lear could see the wreckage clearly. There was a gouge in the sand where *Zilla* had hit. The port wingblade was gone, and a trail of broken debris poured from the port side. The first licks of drifting sand were piling against the forward command deck. Of the Accipiter carried on the port wingblade, there was no sign. But, the one on the starboard wingblade was completely intact and appeared undamaged.

"There's at least one life sign on-board," Lear confirmed. "Do you want me to land?"

There was a very long pause. “Negative, Trajan,” Alkema said finally. “Stand-by ...”

A few minutes later, Alkema came back on the link. “The Midian Security Forces have a Search and Rescue Team prepped and ready for launch. Are you detecting any Xirong activity in the area.”

“Stand by while I make a low-altitude sensor pass,” Trajan Lear told him, and he banked *Prudence* over and completed a long low pass of the surrounding sands. “Negative, I’m detecting no vehicles and no life signatures within a hundred kilometer radius of the crash site.”

Alkema passed the information to the Midians, then came back on the link. “Thanks Trajan, return to altitude and keep the area covered until the search and rescue team arrives.”

“Affirmative,” Trajan confirmed. He took *Prudence* back up to altitude and continued his slow orbit of the crash site.

## **Xiyyon -- Emissarial Complex of the Starcross**

His title and name was Archonex Ordinator Meek, and until yesterday, he had been considered the frontrunner to be the next Pontifex. His head was bald, his face was soft and puffy, and his eyes were guarded by wire-rimmed spectacles. He and his acolyte, a quiet and, truth be told, rather effete young man, were giving Eddie Roebuck a crash-course in Starcross Theology.

“How much as her Serenity Pontifex Solace told you so far?” Meek asked.

“She said if I decided to eat my lunch off the naked breasts of teenaged girls I could do that,” Eddie informed him. This brought a titter from the quartet of young women he had requested, and been granted, as servants to his personal needs.

“Well, of course you could,” said Meek, with his soft, reassuring voice. “But if it isn’t what you knew the Allbeing to want you to do, then you would forfeit your power and authority as Pontifex.”

“I should have known there would be a catch,” Eddie Roebuck sighed and sipped his wine. It was pretty good as wine went. Not much kick, but pleasantly fruity, without the dirty-sock aftertaste of the vintage he had previously been acquainted with back in Halifax.?

“Technically,” Meek continued. “Your title will be ‘Emissary Pontifex,’ the Supreme Pontifex of the Starcross Holy Empire resides in his palace of gold and moon-crystals on Beta Ceres.”

“Palace of Gold and Moon Crystals?” Eddie asked, because it sounded more and more to him like this Starcross thing was a pretty lucrative racket. .

“Gold is formed in the heart of supernovas, so it is precious,” Meek explained. “And the Palace of the Pontifex is constructed of polished crystal transported to the surface of Beta Ceres. In his throne room, he has as many orbs as there are worlds in the empire, each a perfect sphere of polished stone from that planet... even Yronwode.”

Meek seemed a bit wistful at the memory, and he quickly returned to the matter at hand. “I have sent for the Sacred Texts to be brought here so that I can instruct you on at least the basic tenets of our faith.”

Eddie crossed his arms. “Just cut to the chase. What are we doing when this is over?”

Meek seemed a little confused. “When this is over?”

"When we're dead," Eddie clarified. "I mean, that's what religion is, isn't it? It tells you what happens when we're dead."

"I don't agree with that definition," Meek began, then gasped and corrected himself. "According to the teachings of the Pontifex, the Everlasting is a place where we spend eternity with those who are like ourselves. To put it another way, the good gather together and make heavens, the evil gather together and make hell."

Eddie gave this some thought, and smiled. "We spend eternity with people just like us?"

"In severely reduced terms... yes," Meek answered him.

Eddie pushed the point. "So, when I die, I spend eternity with a bunch of guys who like to drink and chase women?"

"If that is what you value, if there is no more to your existence than that, then that is what you shall have," Meek answered.

"I start to like this religion," Eddie told him.

Meek, somewhat flustered, went back to his primary task. "The Fifth Testament is divided into three parts. The first part is History, which describes the colonization of the planet Taramayara in what would have been in the Earth year 2000 BC."

Eddie raised an eyebrow. Something about that did not seem right. "You're saying that there was a human colony in outer space 2000 years before the First Messiah, Jesus H. Christ, walked on Earth."

Meek protested. "I am not saying it; the Prophet Brian Kingman said it. The civilization perished roughly a thousand years after the appearance of the Holy Twins on that world, or, what would have been the Solar Year 1954."

"Ignoring the fact that Solar Year 1954 was like, what, a thousand years before humans had starflight, did he see why they perished?"

"That is not in the Fifth Testament," Meek explained. "It is in the First Compendium. Each world in the empire has its own compendium, which records the revelations of the Allbeing to the Pontifexes. In the first compendium, it was revealed to Brian Kingman in a vision that the Taramayan civilization was destroyed by an invasion of giant mutant space broccoli."

Eddie stared at him, hoping the meaning of the stare would become clear. When Meek failed to respond, Eddie continued, "You've got to realize that's nucking futs."

Meek was undeterred. "The Second Part of the Fifth Testament are the Chronicles, which follow the history of the Taramayans. The third part is the Prophecy, which foretold events that transpired after their civilization was destroyed, but which came to pass in our era... the colonization of space, the Crusades, the coming of Vesta..."

"So, basically, stuff Brian Kingman already knew about when he 'discovered' Taramayara, plus a bunch of stuff he could have made up," Eddie interrupted. "Tell me, did anyone go back to check out this Taramayara planet, or did you just take his word for it?"

"The coordinates of Taramayara were lost on his return," Meek said.

"Of course they were," Eddie sighed. He finished his wine in a single gulp and gestured to the serving girls for more.

"Let me continue with how the Prophecies of the Fifth Testament described the rise of the Starcross Holy Empire," Meek continued.

Eddie cut him short. "So, what powers do I get as Pontifex?"

Meek tried, and failed, to suppress a little sigh. "You'll be able to heal the sick, you'll bless crops and ensure a good harvest, you'll be able to bless children..."

"Do I get any good powers?" Eddie asked.

"Control over the elements," Meek answered.

"Really, the Pontifex can do that?"

"The Chosen One can do that," Meek answered. "Compendium of Yronwode, 22:23. 'All the elements at his command, the chosen one turns the horde aside.'"

"I have to turn the *what* aside?" Eddie asked?

"The Horde," Meek explained. "The Prophecy states that the Chosen One will descend to spare God's people from an onslaught by a Horde of godless barbarians. We believe the barbarians are the Xirong, and you are the Chosen One."

"And the Horde is fixing to over-run the place?" Eddie asked.

"The other prophecies have already been fulfilled," Meek explained. "Our retreat to Midian, the coming of the Kariad, the falling away of the Redeemers from the path of the Allbeing."

"That was in the Fifth Testament?" Eddie asked.

"Those prophecies were in the Yronwode Compendium," Meek told him. "It was prophesied hundreds of years ago. Solace is a strong believer in prophecy, and she long felt she would live to see the arrival of the Chosen One."

"But I can't turn back any hordes," Eddie insisted.

"You must," Meek told him. "Many doubt the Xirong could ever rally a combined force capable of over-running Midian and Xiyyon. But they are wrong. The Xirong will attack soon. The Midians think their shield and their weapons will save them, but they will not. Only you can turn back the Horde."

"How?" Eddie demanded, an insinuation of terror breaking into him.

"Your powers will magnify after you become Holy Pontifex," Meek assured him.

Eddie sneered and drank more wine. "Yeah, right, and when is that supposed to happen?"

"Upon the death of the current Pontifex," Meek explained. "Provided, of course, that you successfully complete the Stunt of Ascension, and in consultation with the Levitating Matriarchs..."

"The Stunt of Ascension? What is it?" Eddie Roebuck asked.

Ordinator Meek snapped his fingers. "First Compendium of Ceres Beta, Chapter 10, verses 22-28." The acolyte opened his technoscroll as the Ordinator recited. "So shall it be, that when the Pontifex, sensing the call of eternity (subnote, imminent death), shall name his or her successor, the successor shall prove him or herself worthy to guide the Eternal Church by demonstrating courage and skill. So, to this end shalt thou construct a deep pool no less than forty meters across. And so shalt thou put into this pool one (or more) large sharks, such that this shark might eateth a man. And lo, shalt thou endeavor to fever the appetite of the beast by whatsoever means thou chooseth, like maybe throwing some bloody fish or something into the pool. And, behold, the successor shalt jump over the pool (or tank) on a motorcycle. And if he surviveth, lo, he shalt be called Pontifex."

"Whoa! Whoa! Whoa!" Eddie put out his hands in a Stop! What the Hell! Gesture. "I have to jump over a shark on a motorcycle."

"No, of course not," said Meek. "Yronwode's eco-system won't support sharks."

“Good.

“You’ll have to jump over a man-eating sea-kraken.”

*I should have recognized that set up,* thought Eddie Roebuck.

## Midian Security Base One

David Alkema had been airlifted from Security Base Four to Security Base One in a kind of military aircraft lifted by four powerful jet-thrusters. Security Base One was the largest of the Midian Security Bases, located on the northern border of the Midian Peninsula. It wrapped around the foothills of a flat-topped, anvil-like mountain range, and guarded a long flat expanse known geographically as the Plain of Salvation, but more commonly by its military designation, the Demilitarized Zone. On the far side was Xirong territory, a sprawling city ran along the horizon at the far side.

When his aircraft set down, Lt. Cmdr. Alkema was met by a strong, handsome, middle-aged woman who introduced herself as Colonel Brave. She was not part of the Security Forces, but instead with Midian Intelligence, which meant her uniform has a lot more black on it and Alkema trusted her even less.

Alkema cut right to the point.

“Did we get enough telemetry on the crash site to launch a rescue mission?”

“Affirmative,” Brave answered.

“And have we secured the necessary permissions to launch a rescue mission.”

“Affirmative that also,” she told him. “The teams are preparing for embarkation. Come this way,” she led him down the tarmac for several hundred meters before coming to a hangar... lean-to type structure with an open front. Four large aircraft were parked inside, metal craft with odd articulations of legs underneath, twin sets of wings, and a kind of rotating blade assembly on the top. Brave called them ‘Ornithopters.’

Midian personnel were loading packs of weapons and medical supplies into the rear hatch. Brave introduced Alkema to the man in charge, a short, powerfully built man with close-cropped black hair. A perimeter of immaculately trimmed black facial hair surrounded his mouth.

“This is General Parka,” Brave announced. “He is the commander of our Search and Rescue unit.”

He did the ‘move-hand-up-and-down’ thing with Alkema, as he explained, “I have led 119 rescue missions into The Wilderness of Howling Zeal,” he said, his voice was low and serious. “I have successfully retrieved 44 prisoners from the Xirong.”

“Only 44 out of 119?” Alkema said.

“Only 44 out of 232,” he told him. “Some missions involved multiple captives. The Xirong are adept at kidnapping, and they rarely release prisoners alive... or in one piece. We can hope your captain has not yet been captured, but is has been almost a full day since his ship was lost.”

“May I bring my own warfighters with me on the rescue mission,” Alkema asked.

“You may bring them,” said Parka gruffly. “But they will be under my command, and they will stay out of my way. Is that understood?”

Alkema agreed that it was understood. “Good,” Parka said. “We depart in 20 Microns. Have your men assemble here.”

## Prudence

A little more than an hour after finding the wreckage, Trajan Lear detected the arrival of a squadron of air vehicles vectoring in from the southeast. He went on the COM link, "*Prudence* here, I believe I have the Search and Rescue team in sight. Awaiting instructions."

Alkema came back on the link. "Trajan, this is Tactical Lieutenant Commander Alkema. I'm aboard one of the rescue ships. Is the area of the wreckage still clear?"

"Affirmative," Lear answered. "Shall I set down now?"

"Negative, I need you to do one other thing for me, before you come back," Alkema paused and then added. "It's very important."

"Okay," Lear said. "Standing by to receive instructions."

"I'm transmitting a mission log to your ship, are you receiving it?"

Trajan checked his multi-functional display. "Affirmative. 80-90-100% received."

"Download it into the memory core of the Hammerhead missiles carried your Accipiters."

This was simple. Drag the mission log from its space in *Prudence's* neural net and transfer it into the memory hole of the Hammerheads carried by his Accipiters. Trajan did it in his head, and the ship carried out the operation. It took four seconds. "Complete," he reported.

"What's your current altitude *Prudence*?" Alkema asked.

"9,700 meters," *Prudence* reported.

Alkema took a breath. "Increase to 9,900."

"Okay, 9,900," Trajan Lear acknowledged. He pressed his stick forward, but *Prudence* was already nosing up on his neural command.

"*Prudence* is at 9,900," Trajan Lear reported a few moments later.

"Initiate a full sensor sweep. Look for energy fields or any change in your physical environment." Alkema ordered.

Trajan used the full-range of *Prudence's* on-board sensors, scanning the complete electro-magnetic spectrum, sweeping for neutrino waves and quantum field emissions.

"Do you detect anything?" Alkema asked.

"Only the same intense scattering field we detected from *Pegasus*. It begins approximately 12,000 meters above the surface and reaches up beyond 22,000 meters."

"What do you detect at 10,000 meters?" Alkema asked.

"Nothing but air," Trajan Lear reported.

Alkema took a deep breath. "Take *Prudence* past 10,000 meters and initiate the plan as we discussed."

"OK, going to 10,000 meters."

Seconds passed. "Do you detect anything now?"

"Affirmative," Trajan replied. Then, his voice disappeared beneath shrieks of feedback that cut through the COM link.

"Repeat that, Flight Lieutenant Lear," Alkema demanded, his voice fading away in the distance. "We can't..."

Then, there was silence.

"I've detected a large airborne reptilian creature," Trajan Lear reported, he was fairly certain communications between *Prudence* and the Midian Search and Rescue Force had been cut off, but procedure was procedure.

A second after that, a blast of energy hit the back of his ship. Trajan instinctively ordered his ship to maximum thrust and peeled away at maximum velocity.

The reptilian only registered visually and in the quantum field. The ship detected no mass, but the scans of the electromagnetic spectra were oscillating wildly. *Prudence* concluded that the creature behind them was created of pure energy.

Normally, Trajan Lear didn't believe in pure energy creatures, not in this universe anyway. But, he would deal with his lack of belief later.

The reptilian cut loose with another blast of fire. Trajan dodged it deftly, like a leaf on the wind... with ion afterburners. He checked his altitude: *Prudence* was keeping exactly 10,000 meters. He told the ship to increase speed and go higher.

As soon as he crossed 11,000 meters, two additional reptilians appeared in front of him, blasting what appeared to fire, but was massively more energetic.

He flipped *Prudence* into a dive and avoided the blast. He wanted to fire back, but there was nothing for his weapons to lock onto.

The only thing left was Alkema's suicide mission. He dodged one of the dragons again and directed *Prudence* straight upward, engaging the Gravity Engine for maximum ascent velocity.

*Prudence* shot upward through 11,000 meters, then 12,000, then 13,000. Beneath him, three dragons became nine, then twenty-seven. Also, some force began dragging on his ship, pulling him down. *Prudence* couldn't identify it. At 13,400, he concluded "This is as high as I get." He decoupled the Accipiters from his wingtips.

The Accipiters flew upward through 20,000 meters before *Prudence* lost telemetry. Somewhere above that altitude, they opened their weapon bays and launched all of their Hammerheads at max velocity into space. Their target: *Pegasus*.

"Midian Command Center," Trajan spoke into his radio link. "I don't know if you can hear me, but I've fired off my Accipiters with the message in their Hammerheads. I am still being pursued by... something bigger and more powerful than my ship. I'm going to try something."

Trajan flipped backwards and dove hard, thrusters blazing, with eighty-one blazing dragons hard on his tail.

## CHAPTER: 07

### The wilderness of Howling Zeal - Headhunter Territory

Alkema and the rest of his team were deposited via military, heavy-lift ornithopter on the sands near where *Zilla* had come to rest. Then, they were not cleared to leave their rides until a perimeter of razor-wire fencing and security forces had been put in place. Caliph got very bored and annoying as she waited with Max Jordan and Johnny Rook, in full battle gear, inside the hot, dry-sauna-like interior of the ornithopter's hold.

"Why do they call it Headhunter Territory?" Rook asked Alkema at one point.

Colonel Brave answered. "The Headhunters are the most ... savage ... of the Xirong. They hate both the Phalanges and us. They live as nomads and scavengers among the desert wastes." Her finger flew to her lips. "Ah, you should only use the term 'headhunter' in military company. Many civilians find it offensive and degrading to refer to them that way."

"So, why do you call them Headhunters?" Rook persisted.

"Because their preferred form of execution is decapitation," Colonel Brave answered.

"Is it some kind of ritual?" Alkema asked.

"No, they just find it entertaining," Brave answered.

Alkema wanted to change the subject to something more hopeful. "Have we regained contact with Trajan Lear's ship?"

"Negative," she told him. "We are preparing search teams, but once again, we will need permission to search areas outside Headhunter Territory. And his last known heading was over the airspace claimed by the Nimali Phalange."

The expression on Alkema's face was borderline despondent. "I should never have told him to try and get a message to *Pegasus*."

Eventually, they were let out and free to examine the crash site. Most of the fuselage had come to rest in a dune, except for the port wingblade, which was nowhere to be found.

Alkema, having brought no tactical gear of his own on the mission, was in the khaki-and-light grey battle dress of the Midian military, wearing the over-sized sunglasses to protect his eyes from the blowing sand as he and his team inspected the wreckage.

"Check out the damage on the wingblades," Johnny Rook indicated the deep black scorches at the edges of the remains of *Zilla's* wingblade.

"Charged Plasma Scoring?" Alkema guessed. If he was right, then, whatever had brought *Zilla* down was much beyond any Midian technology they had seen.

General Parka met them at what had been *Zilla's* forward hatch, which was sealed shut and had defied Midian attempts to open it. Alkema had Rook cut open a side-panel, and then release the Emergency Crash Lock. The hatch still would not open.

"Would explosives help?" General Parka asked.

Alkema shook his head. "The outer hull plating would resist most conventional explosives." He inserted his arm deep into the panel Rook had cut open. "It feels like the manual release was damaged in the crash." He looked toward the front of the ship, which was half-buried in the sand dune. He could get in through the canopy, but sand would flood in, and perhaps bury any survivors. Alkema pulled out his arm. "There's an emergency hatch under the command module. If I can get to it, I might be able to release it."

Parka ordered his men to bring shovels. Alkema showed them where to dig, and within a half hour, had a tunnel just big enough to crawl through and reach the hatch. The manual release worked this time, and he climbed up into the ship with a Midian Medic named Gabriel close behind him.

"What are those?" Gabriel asked as they climbed through *Zilla's* weapons bay.

"The cradles for Hammerhead Missiles," Alkema answered. They were empty. Toto must have put up a hell of a fight. They found the hatch to the main cabin, which was undamaged. The main cabin itself, despite being in complete darkness, did not

appear to have suffered much damage in the crash either. However, there was no one there when Alkema shined his light around.

From there, it was easy to reach the flight deck, where there was one person, alive but barely, strapped into the pilot's seat.

"That's Flight Lieutenant Toto," Alkema told Gabriel.

The Medic confirmed. "He's alive, but we'll have to move him out carefully. He'll never make it through the tunnel."

"We'll take him out through the main cabin, I should be able to open the hatch from inside," Alkema told the Medic. He grabbed Toto's arm. "I'm not a healer, but since we didn't bring one, I'll try and stabilize him as best I can." He held Toto's hand and concentrated.

The Medic opened his kit and pulled out a needle and syringe. Alkema held his arm and concentrated. "What are you doing?"

Alkem kept his eyes tight shut and whispered. "I'm trying to... give him some of my... life energy... to sustain him... while we evacuate."

Gabriel took this in skeptical, then plunged the needle into Toto's arm.

"Ow!" Alkema exclaimed, pulling back, and rubbing his arm in the same spot where Gabriel had injected Toto.

When he had done all that he could, Alkema set about restoring emergency power to the flight deck. A few functioning data displays activated. Alkema accessed ship's systems and found what he was looking for. "Two escape pods were jettisoned before the crash," he reported.

A short time later, he opened the main hatch, and reported immediately to General Parka. "We have one survivor on board, the pilot. Two escape pods were jettisoned before the crash. We have to find them."

Parka grunted. "I will inform the Security Ward that we will be setting up camp here for some time, and request additional search teams."

"Has the other Aves reported in yet?" Alkema asked.

"No," Parka answered.

Alkema was downcast at this.

"I am concerned that your technology not fall into the hands of the Xirong," Parka told him. "They are highly skilled at 'backward engineering.' They could apply your technology to improve their offensive capabilities, as they did with the Kariad technology.

"Five or sixes crises at a time is my limit, General," Alkema replied testily. "We'll worry about that after we find the escape pods and the other Aves and figure out a way to communicate with *Pegasus* and get off this planet."

Parka went on, "An extensive search will require land vehicles, and additional equipment brought in by heavy-lift ornithopters. We could use those same ornithopters to transport your ship back to the Security Base, if it can be dismantled."

Alkema nodded grimly. "Technician Greebo can show you where the structural disconnect points are." He touched his COM Link. "Rook, Jordan, over here."

Rook and Jordan had been watching Toto be carefully removed from his ship on a stretched and carried to a waiting ornithopter. They ran to Alkema double-time. Alkema gave them orders. "There should be two jet-packs in the rear cargo bay. If they're fully functional, make an aerial survey of the environment. Find those escape pods."

"We get to use jet packs," Jordan responded, with such completely inappropriate enthusiasm that Rook had to punch him in the gut.

"We'll find them, sir," Rook assured him.

## Midian Security Base 1

Two ornithopters returned to Security Base 1. Blade Toto did not regain consciousness during the flight, and was rushed to the base Medical Center as soon as they landed. A team of experienced trauma surgeons from the West Xiyyon Medical Complex was being flown in by air ambulance to treat him.

Alkema was met on the landing pad by Captain Steadfast. "You look tired, Lt Commander," she said, finally getting his rank right. "We've arranged quarters for you and your personnel. It's an older barracks, formerly used to house new recruits to the Security Forces during their basic training," Steadfast sounded almost apologetic.

"I'm sure they'll be fine," said Alkema without even looking at the pictures she was handing him. It was late afternoon, the intense sun of the Midian system has been baking the hardpan and concrete of the base all day long, and dust devils whirled beyond the perimeter fencing. When he exited the ornithopter, he at first had thought he was standing in its exhaust. The merciless heat seemed to pull all the energy from Alkema's body.

Midian tactical aircraft were lined along the runway, hulking gray things with blunt-noses and stubby wings. Armored windscreens shielded their cockpits. Alkema had a mind to go to the barracks, shower, rest, then return to the search for the commander, and begin the search for the missing *Prudence*.

"If we can find out from the data the exact time the pods were ejected, and figure out *Zilla's* position, we might be able to locate them," he was saying to Steadfast, but mainly out loud for his own benefit, so he could figure out what to do next. "The problem is, we don't know *Zilla's* position at the time they were ejected. If we can reconstruct her course prior to the crash..."

Frustrated, he realized they didn't have the necessary equipment to do that.

Steadfast tried to comfort him. "General Parka is very experienced at search and rescue."

Alkema didn't want to hear it, although, so far, he liked General Parka better than any of the others in the Midian military he had met so far. "What about access to your classified surveillance and reconnaissance data?"

"The Intelligence Ward is working as fast as they can to get you limited access," she told him. "Some of the data you want has to be approved at the Security Ward level."

Alkema all but exploded at her. "Do you think we really care about your security data? Do you think there's anything on this godforsaken planet that we even want?"

"I don't make the rules, Lieutenant Commander," she responded. "You ought to be grateful for the amount of resources we're putting behind this rescue effort."

Before Alkema could vent again, the base's alert sirens began screaming for attention in the distinctive three-note-bursts of the Midian military.

Steadfast seemed shocked. "A missile attack? In broad daylight."

Alkema cocked his head skyward. "Just exactly what we needed."

"We should take cover," Steadfast advised him urgently.

But Alkema turned toward the Northwest sky, and found himself enveloped by a weird sense of calm. As though everything around him had dropped into slow-motion, the sirens and the yammering voice of Captain Steadfast became muffled. Although he knew she was pulling on him, and yelling at him, he couldn't stop staring at the sky, where a distant point of light had begun to bear down on them.

"Run!" Steadfast ordered him, tugging on his arm. Physically, he began to move but his eye and his mind were fixed on that distant point in the sky, where a point of light was growing rapidly larger, and heading straight for him.

He stared at it. Unable to move. Steadfast kept pulling on him, but he remained fixed on the ever-growing point of white and smoke in the sky that was closing down directly on him. Everything else seemed to lose its reality around him. Steadfast pulled him, but she was like a dream figure. She gave up and made her way to a dugout bunker by the side of the tarmac.

Three Midian soldiers in heavy battle gear, who had returned on his ornithopter, now ran toward him. They looked like black shadows to him, without substance. The only real think was the incoming missile, now a speeding comet with a hazy gray tail against the arc-light white Midian sky.

Putting himself into motion, Alkema ran past the bunker, and dodging the guards to the dust-encrusted chain-link fence at the edge of the field. He raised a pair of gigantic binoculars to his eyes, and fixed on the incoming missile. After several long seconds, he snapped back into time, into reality, and called out, "That's no missile, it's one of our ships."

Steadfast raised her head above the dugout, and raised the binoculars to her eyes, and commanded, "Missile defense, remain at hot stand-by. Lock on target, but do not fire until identity is confirmed."

Alkema did not hear the response, but a second later, Steadfast yelled into her communication device, "It could be another Visitor ship! Stand down those missile defenses!" She hopped out of the bunker and joined Alkema at the chain-link fence

Alkema trained his eyes on the incoming fireball. It was an Aves, and he knew it was *Prudence*. Her entire rear quarter was in flames, and smoke was trailing her in a thick, billowing pillar of black.

"If you have any emergency crews, this would be a good time to bring them out," Alkema advised Steadfast.

"They're on their way," Steadfast confirmed.

Just as they heard the thundering roar of her approach, *Prudence* cleared the perimeter fence, hit the ground at the far end of the runway with landing skids retracted and skipped twice more before finally slamming down on the runway. She slid on her belly, spraying sparks all along her crash path before turning 180 degrees and scraping to a halt two-thirds of the way down, nearly a kilometer from where Alkema was standing.

From the far end of the field, emergency vehicles began to converge on the ship. Alkema began running toward it, too. Before he was even halfway there, the escape hatch above the canopy opened. Trajan Lear exited through it, jumped to the ground, and walked backwards, surveying the damage to his ship from the abrasions on the hull, to the mangling of the port wingblade, and finally to the plasma fire the ground crews were scrambling to extinguish.

"That's gonna leave a mark," Trajan muttered, shaking his head, as Alkema and Steadfast caught up with him.

"How did you survive?" Captain Steadfast asked. "No one has eve returned from an encounter with the containment system."

Trajan sighed, as though retelling the story bored and annoyed him. "First, I reasoned that the containment system was designed to keep ships from leaving the planet, so, I thought, what if I just return to the surface, maybe they'll leave me alone."

Alkema wondered we he had not thought of that.

Trajan Lear continued. "So I reset my holoflage shields and dove for the deck as fast as I could."

"Holoflage shields?" Brave asked.

"They refract light and electromagnetic energy around the ship, making it mostly invisible to detection," Trajan explained briefly.

"That allowed you to evade them?" Steadfast persisted. Alkema and Lear could see a glimmer in her eyes, as she imagined Midian aircraft protected by Sapphorean shielding technology.

Lear shook his head. "Not entirely, but they bought me few seconds. So, I dropped my altitude to the deck and found a canyon to hide in. I thought I'd wait them out, but when I came up an hour later, one dragon was still waiting for me."

"A dragon?" Steadfast asked.

"Affirmative on that, a big red son of a bitch who shot proton blasts from his mouth. He hit my portside fusion generator, which made me lose power. So I made a dive into the sea and tried to make it look like a crash-out. I think it fooled him. I waited as long as I could before surfacing and flying back to this base. They didn't chase me this time."

"So, why were you on fire?" Alkema asked.

Trajan Lear pouted. "I blew a relay on the trip. *Prudence* was pretty banged up in the dragon-fight." He paused. "Now, that's a sentence I thought I'd never say again."

Steadfast kept working on her point of interest. "So, the containment system uses some kind of dragon to attack ships that try to leave the planet."

"I think they were just projections of dragons," Lear clarified.

"Do you have a memory crystal?" Captain Steadfast demanded.

"A what?"

"A record of your encounter with the containment system?"

Trajan looked back toward Prudence, just as a fresh spray of sparks erupted from behind the busted up canopy. "Oh, you mean sensor logs. I left them in there," he deadpanned.

"Did any of the Hammerheads get through the barrier?" Alkema asked him.

"I don't the hell know," Trajan Lear answered. "If they managed to get through, I guess we'll find out when *Pegasus* responds."

"If they can," Alkema sounded disappointed, then, he asked. "Are you injured?"

"Thank you for asking ... finally ... and I'm fine, couldn't be better." Trajan Lear squinted at *Prudence*, which was surrounded by emergency crews spreading foam coolant on the parts of her that were still hot. "I messed up Matthew's ship again, He gets so fucked off when I do that."

"Didn't you also mess up *Phoenix* a couple weeks ago?" Alkema asked, with a hint of a smile.

"Maybe," Trajan Lear deadpanned. "Speaking of that which is messed up, where are Rook and Jordan?"

“Still out on the search and rescue mission,” Alkema said.

“Oh? Can I go?” Lear asked.

“You’ll have to catch up later,” Alkema told him, “They’ll need you to help dismantle *Zilla* and bring the pieces back here. You should get cleaned up and rested out first.”

“Actually, Flight Lieutenant Lear, a message came for you while you were away.” Steadfast handed him a message on fancy Starcross Emissarial Stationery. “This came through while we were out in the desert. You have an audience with His Holiness the Nova Pontifex.” She turned to Alkema. “I would have told you sooner, but...”

Alkema nodded, “But we didn’t know he was alive.”

Trajan examined the note. “You have got to be kidding me.”

## **The wilderness of Howling Zeal**

Fifty meters above fields of black rock and gray-brown drifts of pumice-y sand, Johnny Rook and Max Jordan soared through the air, jet packs strapped to their backs emitting little white deltas of thrust.

Their Spex were attuned to a scan of the landscape below them. The rocks and debris that littered the canyon floor were briefly outlined in bright blue before the analysis program decided they were insignificant.

“What do you think?” Rook asked through the COM Link.

“What?” Jordan radioed back.

Rook clarified, “Jet packs... more fun or less fun than Razorbacks?”

“I don’t know,” Jordan answered.

“Either way, better than monitoring telemetry from a lab on Pegasus,” said Rook.

“If you say so,” Jordan answered. “Race you to the next ridge.”

They both poured on their thrusters. In Max Jordan’s perspective, Caliph appeared, like a little glowing hologram pixie with a nice rack. “Wheeee!”

“Wheeee?” Jordan asked.

“What?” said Rook.

Caliph was ecstatic. “I get why flying is such a big deal. It’s because you have mass. I can feel how your brain is stimulated by the differential effects of velocity and gravity on your inner ear, producing unique sensations of flight and acceleration.”

“Oh... the cipher chick,” Rook realized.

“Also, the view is nice,” Caliph continued. “Or, I guess it would be if we weren’t flying over a bunch of stupid rocks and sand. We should try this again on a nicer planet.”

“Warfighters, in general, don’t get to go to nice planets,” Rook said to them.

Caliph took on a thoughtful expression. “I’m detecting some residual energy signatures just beyond the rock formation 1,600 meters northeast of us. She relayed the position to the tactical display.

“Let’s check it out,” Rook said. He banked his jet pack and Jordan followed.

When they reached the scene, it was unmistakable. There was a long gouge in

the dusty ground. From the looks of things, the escape pod had hit the ground, bounced, and then skidded sidewise, probably rolling over before it came to a stop.

“Rook to Search base,” Rook said, not sure if his message would be received. “We have spotted one escape pod. Relaying coordinates. Let’s land, Jordy.”

“Isn’t anyone going to thank me,” Caliph pouted.

“Thank you, Caliph,” Rook told her.

The escape pod had landed at the bottom of an ancient, long-dehydrated riverbed, shielded by sheer rock outcroppings on either side. Rook and Jordan gingerly set down on an open area a short walk away, and disengaged their jet packs.

Rook shook the sand from his sun-goggles. His Tactical suit was supposed to be sealed against contamination, but sand still somehow seemed to be working its way into his clothing. And every time he removed the heavy sun-goggles, he had to wipe a fresh crust of sand from his brow.

“This sucks certain things,” Jordan spat, shaking sand from his face.

Caliph signaled: **guys, behind that rock formation 26 meters nww.**

“Got it, Caliph,” Rook told her. He and Jordan checked the pulse guns on their forearms as a precaution, and slowly approached the location of pod. The pod was a lozenge shaped craft about three meters long and large enough for one person... two if they were of light build and wanted to get to know each other better. It had come to rest upside down in what had been the middle of the riverbed.

Rook and Jordan applied their amplified strength, rolled the escape pod over on its side, and pried the hatch open.

It was empty.

## **Yronwode – xiyyon – Emissarial Complex of the Starcross**

Trajan Lear was surprised to Eddie Roebuck in his new regalia, a red silk robe embroidered with gold lions and sigils in silver and black. He also wore a tall red conical hat with the Starcross emblem in gold across the front and a large purple tassel hanging in back. (The tassel was Eddie’s idea.)

They met in the reception room of Roebuck’s Chambers, on the sixth floor of the Emissarial Temple of the Starcross Holy Empire.

“Where’s Captain Sky-Pilot?” Roebuck demanded, rising from his plush silver, pink, and purple couch.

“He’s in the Saintist Temple, atoning for his sins,” Trajan informed him, and he got back the same look he’d gotten from Alkema, more or less.

“For his sins?” Roebuck stammered incredulously. “Like, what, not putting his socks in the right drawer?”

Trajan did not answer him. Trajan had never really understood Driver’s relationship with Roebuck, much less why he should be dragged into it. He knew Eliza Jane Change was involved, but he did not much like her either.

Roebuck turned to the two tawny, underdressed babes who were attending him. “Send a message to the Saintist Temple, and tell them to send me Captain Driver.”

“Your Holiness has no authority over the Saintist Temple,” one of the underdressed babes informed him.

*Your Holiness?* Trajan wondered.

"But I am the Pontifex!" Roebuck insisted.

"You are not yet the Pontifex," said the other tawny, underdressed babe. "And, in any case, you only hold sway over those within the Holy Realm. The Christian Saints are outside."

Roebuck sighed. "All right then, Begone, my wenches." Roebuck came down off his throne. The women began to slink out through the side door. "But!" Eddie added, raising an authoritative finger. "Keep yourselves handy."

"Holiness?" Lear asked Roebuck when the babes had gone and they were alone.

"His Holiness, Proto-Pontifex of the Starcross Holy Empire on Yronwode," Roebuck permitted himself a bow.

"Look Technician Roebuck," Trajan interrupted. "I'm tired. I just ran a six-hour search pattern and then spent another ten hours running and hiding from dragons, and then I crash-landed Captain Driver's ship. I really just want to cleanse myself, remain unconscious for an hour or two, then go out and do it all again until we locate Commander Keeler. So, with all respect to new your faith and your tall pointy hat, what in hell does this have to do with me?"

Roebuck sighed in disappointment. "You see, that attitude is exactly why I wanted Sky Captain instead of you." Eddie glanced around to make sure there was no one else in the room, and then whispered frantically. "I need you to get me the Hell off this planet before they make me the furking Pontifex of the Starcross Holy Empire on Yronwode."

"I'm sorry Eddie, but I can't do ..."

"These people are nuts!" Roebuck interrupted urgently. "They want to make me their leader! They think humans from Earth colonized another planet 10,000 years ago! They believe that Jesus H. Christ and the Holy Twins visited the colony. They believe the colony was wiped out by giant space broccoli!"

"I don't really know you very well," Trajan told him, patiently disconnecting Eddie's hands from his lapel. "But leading a crazy religion that gives you scantily-clad handmaidens and let's you dress like that... seems like a sweet deal."

"They also think I have magical powers," Roebuck gesticulated wildly. "What happens when religious crazies find out I have no powers."

"I don't know, I don't care, and I never will," Lear answered.

"You have to get me out of here!" Roebuck insisted.

"I can't," Lear repeated.

"Don't worry about the guards," Roebuck told him. "I'll disguise myself as a woman and sneak out the back entrance by the kitchen. They'll never know"

"I can't get you off the planet," Lear told him. "I can't get anyone off the planet!"

"And why not?"

"Because our ships would be destroyed by fire-breathing dragons," Lear saw the look on Eddie's face, and wondered if he himself had reacted to "Giant Space Broccoli" the same way. Lear explained further, "It's part of a containment system designed to stop anyone from leaving the planet. The commander's ship was destroyed and I just barely made it back to base with *Prudence*."

Roebuck seemed to be left completely forsaken by the news. "You mean, there's no way off this planet."

“Both Aves are crashed beyond repair, and even if we could fly them, we’d still get taken out by the dragons, so as of now, that’s right, we are stranded on this planet.”

Roebuck looked like he was almost crashed beyond repair himself, “How are we going to get off?”

“I don’t know, Technician Roebuck, try praying. Maybe being supreme pontifex gives you an in with the Allbeing.”

Roebuck seemed to give up at this pronouncement. “All right, you get back to your ship and your normality. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have to jump a motorcycle over a giant sea-kraken!”

## CHAPTER: 08

### Yronwode – The wilderness of Howling Zeal.

First, last, and always, there was the pain, the deep crimson agonious throbbing that pounded against the sides of Commander Keeler’s skull like an ape in a cage. The pain persisted throughout the whole he lay in that semi-comatose state called the healing trance that Sapphireans retreated into to direct their body’s energy into mending its injuries, which in his case had been quite severe and mostly internal. In the immediate aftermath of the impact of his escape pod into the desert hardpan, it had been all he could do to stop himself from hemorrhaging to death.

He had no memory of the crash, and no memory of being removed from the lifepod, or of being transported to where he was. He had, after all, been in a coma most the time. He had a sense that someone had helped him, or at least tried to; that he had been cut open and the blood drained from his abdomen and crudely sewn up. But all this had while he had been deeply in his trance.

Days went by, or years, he could not tell, but at some time in the recent past, he had begun to hear voices, faint and distant.

*He is not Kariad.*

*He is not Midian.*

*No man could survive such wounds.*

*We should kill him and send his head.*

*No, not until...*

And then they would fade again.

He had dreams – perhaps they were dreams – of someone shoving some kind of salty mush into his mouth, which he nonetheless swallowed eagerly because his stomach was long empty. This would be followed by a drink of acidic water and a lapse back into the great painful throbbing emptiness where he dwelled.

After a long time, he became aware of a stink, an acrid smell of smoke, urine, and body funk. It penetrated to the depths of his coma and gave him unpleasant dreams of sewers and locker rooms. The return of his senses meant his body had healed itself, and it was time to wake up now. As he lapsed back into consciousness, more senses came on-line. He found it was dark, and hard to breathe. Also, his face itched.

Eventually, he realized the reason it was itchy, dark and hard to breathe was because there was a dark burlap hood over his face, secured with rope wrapped around his neck. His arms were bound behind his back with wire that cut into his

wrists. He took this as a bad sign, and went back into unconsciousness.

When he woke up the next time, he found himself lying in a bed without the hood. He groaned and opened his eyes just a little, as far as he could while keeping the pain bearable, and blearily took in a cracked concrete ceiling supported by a crumbling concrete wall. Whatever shelter he was in was hot and dry as a furnace.

As he registered this, water suddenly splashed across his face, and he was disappointed there was no booze in it. "What the Hell?" he coughed out.

The face of a wild woman loomed into view. Her hair looked like a nest of spider's legs, her eyes and her lips were outlined in some kind of black facepaint. Her movements were jittery and a fiery madness burned in her eyes.

"Aunt June?" Keeler whispered, not knowing why. "Is that you?"

"Who are you, stranger?" she demanded.

"Who are you?" Keeler asked right back at her.

"Are you Kariad?" she demanded.

The word jangled something loose in his memory. Keeler tried hard to fix on it, but it just clattered to the floor of his mind like a falling pan.

"Are you Kariad?" she repeated.

"Maybe," Keeler answered her. "Who is Kariad?"

"Have you traveled to this world from the stars?"

"That sounds about right," Keeler answered. "Now, who are you?"

"I am called Bang."

When Keeler tried to think of a snappy comeback, it made his brain hurt. "Bang?" he simply repeated.

Her insane eyes danced with excitement. "Bang is the sound of revolution. Bang is the sound of oppressed people's rising up against their oppressors."

*"Bang is the sound of a loud woman talking over your hangover,"* Keeler thought.

"What is your designation?" she asked him.

"My wha...?"

"Designation, what is your designation. By what designation shall we call you. The other Kariad were known by designations, Ajax the Interlocutor, Sammo the Peacebringer, Durka the Holder of the Fire. By what designation are you known?"

Keeler squinted. The room was dim, but dust stung his eyes if he opened them too much. "I'll need some time to work on that one."

Her dark eyes narrowed beneath an angrily-knitted thick and wild mono-brow. "You do not know?"

Keeler slowly shook his head, which resulted in a disproportionately huge amount of pain.

"Then, you do not know," She seemed to consider this thoughtfully, though with her eyes unable to focus, it was hard to tell. "You had a head injury when we brought you here. We were almost certain you were going to die from it."

"How did I get here?" Keeler asked. "Did my friends get me drunk and dump me in the countryside as a joke?"

"You fell from the sky."

"That doesn't completely rule out my theory," Keeler was quick to point out. "How long have I been here?"

"You have been in Izzan for three days," the woman answered.

"Where the Hell am I?"

"Izzan-Al-Izzan, a city in The Wilderness of Howling Zeal," she told him. "Does that mean anything to you?"

"Is that like a National Park or something?" He tried to sit up, and noticed his arms and legs were shackled. He squirmed on the bed to make himself more comfortable. "So, getting back to the part where I fell from the sky..."

"Six days ago, we saw a skycraft break-up and plunge from the sky. Some of the wreckage landed in the Badlands beyond the Fifty-Third Valley of Death. We found you in the wreckage along the bed of the River of Scorch. As I said, we did not expect you to survive. Your speedful healing was amazing."

She leaned in close to him. Her breath stank of smoke. "Do you remember where you came from before the crash?"

Keeler closed his eyes again and concentrated, but everything before he regained consciousness in this dark, hot, smelly little cell was a blank black wall. "Neg. I don't remember anything."

"Seven days ago, our guardians along the Gulf of Oppression observed two skycraft unlike any we had seen before landing in the Theocratic Entity. The next morning, one ship was observed leaving. We took it down with our missiles. You were the only survivor. What was your business with the Theocrats?"

"The Theocrats?"

"The Midians," she shouted. "What was your business with them?"

"I don't remember anything. I don't remember any of it."

She slapped him hard across the face. "You would do well to remember something. You would do well to remember everything."

"Ow!" said Keeler.

"If you are Kariad, you would do well to remember that," she hissed.

"But I don't remember anything."

She pinched his face in her hands, which were dirty and rough. "I am willing to believe you are Kariad. But the others in the Phalange have their doubts, and they would as soon kill you anyway. We are grateful for what the Kariad have done for our people. But they will kill you if they suspect you of collaborating with the Theocrats."

"But they definitely won't kill me if I am a Kariad?" Keeler sought clarification.

"If you are Kariad and can give them a reason to keep you alive, they will not kill you."

Keeler sighed, "Well, we Kariad have a saying, 'Always give people a reason to keep you alive.'"

She smiled, and when she did so, her face lit up with a creepy glow that scared him more than her regular madness, "And have the Kariad thus returned to finish the *Ferkaktata*?"

"What answer results in me not dying?" Keeler asked.

"You do not remember our last visit to this place?" she asked.

"Last visit?"

Before Keeler had even finished, she launched into an excited explanation of the Kariad's earlier visit. "The Kariad saw the injustice and oppression the Theocrats subject the Xirong to, and did something about it. The Kariad drove the Theocrats off the lands of the Xirong, and confined them to the Land of Midian. Their backs are against the sea. We only need push them into it." Bang raised her arms as though in exultation. "The *Ferkaktata* will be our final battle against the Theocrats, the finishing blow. Tell Che the Interrogator when he arrives, that you have returned, and this time... you will lead us to crush the Theocrats, for all times."

She kissed his cheek and left the room. He heard her secure a lock and chain when she reached the door.

"What have you gotten yourself into?" Keeler asked aloud, and then added, "...whoever you are."

He was alone for several hours after that. He would have preferred to pass out, but, unfortunately, his body was finished resting and he remained conscious throughout. The hours dragged by. He was hot. He thirsted, but had no water, and after a while his lips cracked painfully and the salty taste of his own blood nearly choked him. He was bored, but he had nothing to look at but the bareness of his cell. A small, filthy window set high on one wall let in a gauzy light, but there was nothing to be seen other than the dirty gray and structurally suspect walls.

He tried to remember who he was, but it was like there was a dark curtain in his brain, and the knowledge of who he was and where he had come from was sealed off behind it. He tried to trace the knowledge Bang had given him – that he had been in an air crash and, prior to that, some place called Midian, and he was possibly part of some group called 'Kariad,' – to see if it led through the curtain to a place where he could remember more, but everything about him seemed to dead end at the point where he woke up in this very cell. He could not even remember what the world looked like outside.

The door opened again about the time the light had begun to fail and night was falling. A wave of body odor wafted into the room followed by a huge, muscled, scarred man in filthy gray coveralls. His black hair was drawn into a ragged ponytail. Something about the ponytail and the shape of his eyes reminded Keeler of someone else, someone with a woman's face, but it was all behind the curtain.

The man set down a heavy pack, turned to Keeler, and thumped himself chest.

"Good day my fine fellow, what is your name?" Keeler asked him.

The man hit him hard across the face with the back of his hand, which was enclosed in a spiked metal glove.

"Questions are gonna come from me. Answers are gonna come from you. And if I don't like the answers, the hurt's gonna go from me to you? Get me?" the man said with an absolutely level tone of voice.

"You'll hurt me if I don't answer your questions," Keeler said by way of communicating his understanding.

The man squatted by the bed and put his face right into Keeler's. "You almost got it exact enough, but more exactly, I am gonna hurt, maim, paralyze, burn, electrocute, and, if the question be important enough, kill you. Get me, Hostage-man?"

"I get," Keeler told him. "Also, you are a very handsome man. Has anyone ever told you that?"

The man looked at him with dead black eyes. "Gimme your name, Hostage-man."

"I don't remember my name," Keeler told him. "But, that doesn't mean we can't be friends."

The man stared at Keeler for a long time, then rose and began unpacking some sharp tools from his. They looked like a surgeon's tools, or a butcher's. They were still stained with old dried blood and Keeler had a pretty good idea how Che intended to employ them.

"Che doesn't have a lot of patience for stupid. This is the last time Che's gonna ask before Che brings on the hurting. What's your name, hostage-man?"

"I need a minute to remember, I've got the brain damage," Keeler protested.

Che took up a long, thin blade and whipped Keeler across the face with it, leaving a long, razor-like cut that stung badly. A few centimeters higher, and his eyes would have been cut open. It stung like a bitch.

"Now, if Che don't like the answer this time, Che is really gonna start mucking you up. What's your name, Hostage-man?"

Before Keeler could even answer, Che the interrogator jammed a rod into his shoulder that sent a hot charge of electricity through his body. Che let the rod pump electricity into Keeler until his heart began flipping and sputtering. Only then, when another few seconds would have meant death, did he pull the rod away. He let Keeler almost recover from the Electro-Shock, then gave him another shock, a shorter one, right in the groin.

"Che did that because Che knew you were gonna try and pre-jure yourself again. So, just tell Che what your name is, now saying."

Keeler moaned. "I think my designation was... Otto."

Che contemplated whether he should accept this. "Otto, it is then. If Che gets it later you're something else, Che's gonna cut your balls off."

"You are as wise as you are handsome," Keeler told him.

Che ignited a small fire on the floor of the chamber and began calmly heating some of his sharper implements. "When you were with the Theocrats, what was they planning?"

Keeler had a good idea what would happen if he said he didn't remember, and he didn't remember enough to be able to lie his way out of the situation. "They didn't tell me much. I was only there for a little while. I think they... I think they shot my ship down to keep me from talking with you guys."

Che paused a long time. "What do you know? Maybe the Theocrats are gonna blow up power station, again? Maybe the Theocrats are gonna poison water, again? Maybe Theocrats are gonna make children sick again, so they can steal their eyeballs. You hear anything like that."

"They wouldn't tell me," Keeler told him. "But they sound like terrible people."

"If you don't know nothing, you're worthless to us." Che jammed him with the electric rod again and held it for several seconds while every nerve ending on Keeler's body seemed to explode.

And just then, the door opened again and the mad-woman Bang re-appeared. "Stop, Che! Stop now."

"Get outta here, horse! Or, Che'll give you some of this, too!"

"Boros demands the Hostage. The Theocrats are gonna pay a lot for this Hostage, but Boros need him alive."

Che put down the electrical device and smacked Keeler across the face with his glove again before leaving. He slammed the door on his way out.

Bang, gave Keeler a bottle of water. He drank from it. It was bitter, acidic, heavy

with minerals and he guessed not entirely clean, but he was too thirsty not to be grateful. Somehow, the water diminished the pain in his head and made things clearer for him.

"I had to stop him," she explained. "He was going to kill you."

"Am I dead already?" Keeler asked. "Is this some kind of hell?"

"No... no... Death is perfection," Bang whispered stroking the hair near his forehead. "*Tsi Bai* understand this. Death cures all disease. Death ends all suffering. Death brings harmony with the universe."

"I wish you had said that before you made me drink that water."

She brought out a pair of bolt cutters from the pack of things that Che had brought with him and cut him looked from the chains and wires that bound him to the bed. She pressed a stick into his hand, it was a staff about as thick as his wrist, smooth and polished with figures carved all along its length. He sensed there was a kind of energy inside, and even something like sapience.

"You were holding this when we found you," she said. "Do you need it to walk?"

"Probably," Keeler said, lifting himself out of the bed and encountering less pain than he would have liked.

"I'm going to take you to Boros," she told him, as she began undoing his chains.

"What's he, some kind of leader?"

"He is the Chieftain," she told him.

"He's going to return me to the Theocrats?" Keeler asked her, unable to avoid sounding hopeful.

Instead of answering him, she just took his face in her hands and stared hard into him with hard black eyes. "Don't be afraid. When we meet with Boros, you will know exactly what to do."

Bang led Keeler out from his cell, up some crumbling cement stairs, and into fierce daylight that hit his eyes with the force of a two-by-four... nailed to the front of a out-of-control semi-truck. Somehow, his eyes adjusted and the brightness diminished to a day-time level that would have been tolerable except for the hangover-like throbbing in his skull. Sensing this, his eyes adjusted still further to an almost-tolerable near-twilight.

*How did I do that?* Keeler wondered.

"This way," Bang hissed, pushing him down the narrow street.

Even though he could not remember ever having been anywhere else before, Keeler was sure he had never seen any place as nasty as this. He could not see far down the dusty, garbage-strewn path in front of him because his view was blocked on all sides by buildings of surpassingly ugly concrete-box design, many of which seemed to be on the verge of collapse.

From far, far above, he caught a glimpse of white sky obscured by black smoke. Since nothing small was burning nearby, something huge must have been burning far away. The street was piled with garbage, tires, broken glass, and chunks of stone. A stench of urine, rot, and smoke permeated the air.

"What in Hell is this place?" Keeler asked Bang.

"This is the Major City of Izzan-Al-Izzan," Bang answered him.

"Nice, are you hosting a filth convention?"

Bang answered in a near growl. "What you smell is the poverty and oppression inflicted on us by Theocrat oppression."

"Poverty and oppression smell a lot like rotting garbage," Keeler replied.

"We do not have enough sanitation workers, because of the Theocrats," Bang growled.

"Because the Theocrats... killed them?" Keeler guessed. Killing gargagemen seemed rather harsh, but if these 'Theocrats' were as evil as Bang said, they could have done such a thing.

"Because of the economic disparity," Bang explained.

Keeler did not see how anyone could be too poor to pick up their own garbage. "So, why don't the people just... clean up after themselves?"

"Because of the economic injustices of the Theocrats!" she shouted. "Death to the Theocratic Entity! Death to Solace! Death to Midian!"

Keeler waited until she seem to be a little bit closer to the edge of sanity. "You are not like the others. Your speech is different."

"I was born in the Theocratic Entity," she told him, sounding disgusted with herself. "I came to Izzan-Al-Izzan with the Faction for Action, Resistance, Truth and Solidarity. Living among the *Tsi Bai* opened my eyes to the truth. I saw that the *Tsi Bai* lived in filth, in poverty, and oppression while my... while those in the Theocratic Entity had comfort and wealth and arrogance and greed in the cities they built the stolen wealth of the *Tsi Bai*."

She stopped and broke into an ear-splitting yelp, "**The Theocrats stole our world from us! Long live the *Ferkaktata!***"

Only a little quieter, she said to him, "You will end this injustice. It is your destiny."

"Me?" Keeler said. He didn't even know who he was. He didn't see how he could end anything. He told Bang this.

"The Kariad are wonderful, powerful, enlightened beings," she told him. "The Kariad have the power to transform worlds. You are of the Kariad. You used your power to heal your injuries, which were severe in the extreme. Now, you will lead a revived *Ferkaktata* to victory."

"Why did the Kariad side with the *Tsi Bai* over the Theocrats?" Keeler asked,

"They pretended to be neutral to fool the Theocrats," Bang said confidently. "But we knew they were with us. They knew the Theocrats used superstition and fear to justify oppressing the *Tsi Bai*. They knew this planet was rightfully for the *Tsi Bai*, and not those... colonial imperialists!"

Keeler said nothing more as she led him down several more streets. None was less aromatic than the first. They were narrow, and created a decrepit concrete urban maze. Even if he got free, escape would be impossible. He would be lost within minutes. Furthermore, only one streetlight in eight seemed to work at all and the light they cast was weak and orange. He probably would have run into a wall.

They came after several turns to steps that led underground. The tunnel underneath was lit by primitive incandescent light sources, many of which were damaged or broken despite being set into concrete behind thick glass. It was much hotter in the tunnel, and the air was acrid, tinged with a nostril-stinging edge of sulfur. They passed through another tunnel, even narrower than the first, and finally into a chamber, where several hairy, smelly men were gathered.

The chamber was oblong, and not very large. There was a rectangular table in

the center of it. The men were gathered around the table, and the table was piled with maps, coins, firearms, knives, filthy plates of food, and other less identifiable objects. When Bang brought Keeler into the room, all conversation ceased, and twenty-some pairs of black eyes fixed on him.

"Hello," Keeler said.

"So, this is our hostage-man?" demanded the hairiest, smelliest of the men. He was fat, with untamed black hair falling wildly from his scalp and making up the twists of his beard. Also, he had an eyepatch. He was squeezed into a kind of military-style jumpsuit, done over in a pattern of green and black leaves. K-Rock would have taken it for camouflage, but leafy camouflage in an urban environment made no sense. A large filthy scarf was tied around his neck. Keeler somehow knew this man was Boros.

"Ain't he supposed to be wearing a hood in public, Chieftain," one of the other men prompted, bringing a slap from the one called Boros.

"What kinda stupid horse takes a hostage-man out into the streets without a hood over his head?" Boros thundered.

"This is not just a hostage-man," Bang spat right back at him, moving in close enough to get right into his face. Keeler wondered if all their conversations were so spirited. "He is Kariad, come from the stars to lead us to victory."

The large man began laughing, as did the other men around him.

"He ain't no Kariad. He's just the traveler-man for what the Crats are searching the wasty-lands," another man, also dressed in inappropriate camouflage explained. Boros smacked him across the face, for answering without giving Boros a chance, Keeler guessed.

"He comes from the stars," Bang repeated angrily. "He could be useful to us."

"Yeah, he'll be useful-man for us," one of the large, hairy, smelly men agreed. "He'll be useful-man to trade for tribute enough to keep us in guns and liquor for the next ten years." The other men laughed loudly at this.

Boros pounded the table and grunted. "Shut your face-holes, all of you. Until Boros gets his tribute from the Crats, our Hostage-man is gonna stay locked up and hooded."

"Don't be such an idiot," Bang spat. Keeler noted she was a very moist talker. A speech by Bang could have irrigated a sizable crop of barleyhops. "Guns and liquor are not gonna to destroy the Theocratic Entity! Guns and liquor are not gonna to remove the cancer of Theocracy from our planet."

"Shut up, horse," Boros commanded raising his hand as though to strike her.

"I have my loyalty proven to *Tsi Bai*, and to Boros," Bang insisted. "Bang will be heard!"

"Bang already been heard," Boros told her. "Now saying, Bang can shut the hell up!"

One of the other men spoke up. "The Crats gotta learn that we got the hostage-man. Then, we can trade him back for Mega-huge tribute. No less."

"They say Goten got 400,000 creds just for lettin' the Theocrats fly over his territory lookin' for him," said a smaller, weaselly-looking man near Boros's left.

Boros took out a long heavy knife and passed it down. "Message the Theocrats that we got him. Then, take him over to Che for a little surgery. We'll send the Theocrats some fingers to let them know we're serious."

"Why would you want to cut off Che's fingers?" Keeler heard himself saying, but distantly, as some strange compulsion overtook him. His head grew light, and the pain

left him, and his head filled with sparkles. He thought he was about to pass out, but instead, he found himself walking toward Boros as the other men looked on in shock and moved in super-slow-motion. Somehow, his walking stick had extended itself another meter at each end and his hand was brandishing it in a comfortable, swinging motion that felt natural, like he had been practicing it for years. Then, he swung out with it and connected with Boros right in the middle of his monobrow. Boros's head disappeared in a thick, misty, red explosion.

It felt like the staff was commanding his arm to swing it against the next man on either side of where Boros had been, smacking their skulls hard enough to fracture and incapacitate them without killing them. Then, it had spun again back into an alert, protective position in front of his eyes.

The next thing Keeler knew, he was standing on the table with Bang and a half dozen smelly, hairy, dirty men, with blades in their hands and murder in their eyes.

"Stay back!" Keeler ordered. "I think I can kill all of you with this thing."

For a few tense moments, it was silent in the room. You could have heard a body-odor caused teardrop fall. The men seemed to be hesitating over who would make the first move to kill him, because even though *en masse* they would likely kill him, the first one to move was likely to die.

Finally, one of the men spoke. "By the Law of *Tsi Bai*, Who Slays the Chieftain, becomes the Chieftain."

"Then, whoever slays the Hostage-man becomes the next Chieftain," shouted another one of the men, but, noticeably, he did not leap onto the table to challenge Keeler.

Another man shouted back, "This man becomes Chieftain until somebody else knocks him off."

Keeler was not sure if this was good or not, but the men began lowering their blades.

"Hail, to the new Chieftain, May Death come fast at your enemies," said one of the men.

"May Death come fast at his enemies," most of the others repeated.

*Holy crap*, Keeler thought.

"Send out word to the smucks," the man who had first hailed him said. When no one moved to put the word out, he punched the man next to him. "Send out word to the smucks!" The other man ran from the room.

"I am your leader, now?" Keeler asked, just to confirm.

"Whoever Slays the Chieftain becomes the Chieftain," the largest, smelliest remaining man explained. "Sooliok's the name, offering protective services to the new Chieftain of Izzan-al-Izzan!" the Warrior informed him, thumping his enormous chest as an exclamation mark.

"I will never remember that name," Keeler told him. "From now on, your name is Biff Hardslab."

"My new... name?" the warrior questioned.

"Za, you will all be getting new names under my leadership, just to keep you on your toes," Keeler began to stride across the table. He pointed to the men in turn, beginning with the second largest and working his way around the table. "Blast Thickneck, Buck Plankchest, Splint Chesthair, Gristle McThornbody, Blunt Hardcheese ... Bob Johnson. I'll work out the rest of you later."

When he finished, he turned to Bang. "I can do this, can't I?"

"Your word is the whole of the law," she said, and there was a smile underneath her lips she could not keep repressed.

"Then, it is done," Keeler said. "Somebody make a note of this... and bring me some of that sweet, sweet liquor I heard you discussing."

"And what do we call **you**?" Big McLargeHuge asked.

Keeler thought about this. This was important, he sensed. He needed something that would inspire awe and mystery. "What is the name of the shadow on the moon?" Keeler asked.

"This planet has no moon," Bang informed him.

"Oh, in that case, Just call me, K-Rock, or, better yet, Lord AssKicker," he paused and thought about it. "K-Rock the Ass-kicker. Za, that will work."

"What means 'za?'" asked Bob Johnson.

"It means shut up or I'll give you a massive head wound," K-Rock admonished him, waving his battlestaff. "Now..." he paused and tried to remember the priority order. "Booze!" he finished.

A bottle was handed up to him, and he stepped down from the table. "Get somebody to clean that up," he said, pointing at Boros's body and the large puddle of blood forming under it. "And somebody go kill that Che guy," he found himself saying, the words just coming out of him, as though on their own.

"Do you want somebody to kill Che the Torturer," Gristle McThorbody volunteered, hopefully.

"Do you want to watch?" Buck Plankchest asked.

"Neg, just..." a throb of pain stabbed Keeler (K-Rock) from behind the eyeballs. "Grant him a more merciful death than he would have granted me. The rest of you, get lost." He brandished the walking stick. "Now!"

The Xirong men made their way out, some of them wondering how they could possibly get lost in a city they knew so well. Keeler/K-Rock sat down at the edge of the table and examined his battle-staff. "Look at this thing, I bashed three skulls with it, but there's not a drop of blood or viscera on it."

"It's a powerful weapon," Bang agreed. "A Kariad weapon. And we have more weapons, from your ship. Even now, our best weapon engineers..."

Keeler/K-Rock ignored her, too busy squinting at the black bottle the men had handed him. "I guess it's time to test the local rotgut."

"Not that," Bang said, snatching the bottle away. "This," she handed him a different bottle.

Keeler/K-Rock took a long swig. There was a burning taste of alcohol in it, but the rest tasted like mud, blood, and battery acid. He grimaced, "Oh, man..."

"The Izzan Phalange is only one of many," Bang whispered to him. "You will need to unite the Phalanges if you are to succeed in destroying the Theocrats. But, we will see Xenthe and Xiyyon burn!"

"I have a more pressing concern," Keeler/K-Rock told her. "I am guessing from my surroundings that a sonic anus cleaner is out of the question. So, I need to ask, what the acceptable substitute is?" Figuring she would not know the use of a sonic anus cleaner, he mimed its application.

"We use a rag," she answered.

"Please tell me you don't all use the same rag."

Keeler/K-Rock remained inside the squalid tunnel no longer than he had to. Spurning the offer to have Boros's women and children murdered so that he could take over his house, Keeler/K-Rock was instead offered a suite of rooms in the Izzan-al-Izzan Central Administration Complex, where he could stay until he found a place to his liking. There was a bunker, there, where he would be safe in the event of a Theocrat attack,

The Theocrats were not what K-Rock was worried about. He was taken to the complex in the lead vehicle of a convoy of old battered motor vehicles flanked on either side by guards on motorcycles. Bang rode with him, in the back, whispering in his ear the whole time as he drank the vile Xirong liquor. By the time they arrived at the complex, his shoulder was moist with her spittle.

In the street outside the complex, a small crowd had gathered on the fast-spreading rumor that a new Chieftain had taken power. When Keeler/K-Rock emerged from his car, still clad in the black jumpsuit of his escape pod, but now sporting a cap and mantle of heavy black and purple crushed velvet, the crowd knew he was their new chieftain, and silently awaited his word.

"What's gonna to be K-Rock's first new order?" asked Blunt Hardcheese, throwing a salute that consisted of thumping his chest with his fist then thrusting the fist into the air. He was the second largest of the remaining guard, and he had a star-shaped scar above his right eye. Other than that, he looked like most of the other Xirong guards.

"First order, I don't know," Keeler/K-Rock searched through his head. "First order, let's get this place cleaned up. Let's get some garbage details organized..."

"No!" Bang interrupted. "The word is conquest! We have to destroy the Theocratic Entity."

"There will be plenty of time for that after we clean up this hellhole," Keeler/K-Rock protested.

"*He talks like a Theocrat!*" Keeler/K-Rock heard some murmur in the crowd, but he focused on Hardcheese.

"Cleaning up garbage is not a worthy task for a man like you!" Bang shouted at him.

"I never said I'd be doing it personally," Keeler/K-Rock protested.

Bang reiterated firmly. "You must lead the people to conquest."

Keeler/K-Rock was silent for a long moment.

"The people demand the word of their Chieftain," Hardcheese told him.

Keeler/K-Rock scowled, and then an idea came to him, a wonderful, awful idea. He spoke loudly so that the thirty or forty Izzan civilians could hear also. "You are asking yourselves, is this guy truly your new Chieftain and your new leader? Has he come down from the stars to lead you? Those are damn good questions. Don't look to me for answers. Look to the skies this night and the next and the next. For a sign is coming unto you. You will surely see a sign that the Kariad have returned to ... finish the job, and that I, K-Rock, will lead you to crush the bones of our enemies into chunky salsa."

He lifted a hand toward the blank black sky. "When you see the sign, you will know I am who I am. And that I will lead you to greatness and destroy the Theocratic Entity!"

He had expected cheers, but was met with only curious stares. He cleared his throat and continued. "And if there is no sign, I will walk out into the desert, alone, and none will ever see me again."

*And by the time they figure out there is no sign, I'll be long gone,* Keeler thought. He didn't know how or where he would find rescue, but he sure as hell wasn't sticking around with these murderous nutjobs.

## CHAPTER: 09

### Security Base One – Medical Facility

"I need to see him," David Alkema again tried to push his way past the stern nurse impeding his progress through the gray and green corridors of the Base Medical Center.

"No one will see the survivor until he is cleared by a physician," the nurse fixed Alkema with the kind of stare that would have deterred a wolf from a wounded moose.

"He has a name," Alkema told her once again. "It's Blade. And I need to see him." A day after Toto had been taken into the facility, General Parka had finally managed to clear Alkema to visit the medical center, which had been opposed by the Military Health Board for fear that Alkema and the rest might carry some biological contagion. Common sense and compassion had eventually prevailed, but apparently, the mean nurse had not been informed. She had had Alkema removed by security.

That had been the day before. Today, he had returned to the base hospital again with a signed copy of his permission papers from the Military Health Board, but the mean nurse remained unbudged.

"No one will see the survivor until he is cleared by a physician," the mean nurse repeated. For the first time in his life, Alkema wanted to shoot someone.

"Maybe I should speak to his physician, then," Alkema challenged her.

"I can not interrupt a physician during her rounds," insisted the mean nurse.

"So, she is here," Alkema tried to stare her down, not too effectively. "Page her."

"I can not interrupt a physician during her rounds," insisted the mean nurse.

"Who is his physician?" Alkema asked.

"I can not tell you that."

"I don't have time for this," Alkema seethed. Some Sapphireans had developed one of the "higher gifts" of mental domination, an extension of telepathy that enabled the one with the gift to bend weaker individuals to their will; for example, to make a mean nurse get out of the way. Alkema, unfortunately, lacked this gift, or at least lacked it in sufficient strength to push his way past the nurse. So, he solved the problem the Republicker way; he called the hospital administrator and demanded be let in.

Five minutes later, he was standing at Blade Toto's bedside with his attending physician and two rather stringy hospital guards, who waited outside the door. The room was dim, heavy curtains dimming the day's light into a kind of beige twilight. There was a single bed in the room, occupied by a single man, unrecognizably swathed in bandages. "The pilot is not doing well," the physician, Benicia Goode told David Alkema. "It's doubtful he will ever wake up."

Blade Toto lay motionless, swathed in cloth and plastic, with tubes and wires connecting him to an array of instruments. After he had been airlifted here, he had been taken into a room where surgeons cut into his body with lasers and knives, and sewed him together with stitches and glue.

"Our surgeons have done everything they could do," Goode went on, apologetically. "But his injuries were severe, and two days in the open wild left him dehydrated and near-dead. We had to recalibrate our instruments to your race's vital signs. Your heart rate is only about a third of ours and your body temperature... what in the name of Brian are you doing?"

Alkema had taken Toto's hand and was concentrating. Immediately, the instruments monitoring the young pilot lit up as his vitals surged.

"Take your hands off him!" the Physician ordered.

"If you know a better way of tranfusing charged protein strands, I'd like to hear it," Alkema said through clenched teeth, trying not to break his concentration. "I don't have a strong healing gift, but I can give him what I have."

Alkema would have to explain later that none of the civilizations they had so far encountered had developed the healing gift or the telepathy gift, and that his people had the capability of transferring life force to another, to help them heal when they were sick or injured. Those with the strongest gift become physicians and healers, but most Sapphireans and Republickers possessed at least some ability.

But Good had no time for explanations. "You're going to kill him."

"Neg, I'm... going... to ... save... him..." Alkema insisted. Goode was about to order security to pull him off, but just then, Blade Toto's eyes fluttered open.

"Blade...?" Alkema whispered.

"Yeah," Blade Toto answered hoarsely.

"Are you all right?" Alkema asked him, as Dr. Goode stood by, stunned.

"I don't think so."

"Are you going to be all right later?"

"Probably," Toto drawled slowly. "This doesn't look like one of *Pegasus's* hospitals."

"It isn't," Alkema told him. "You're in a Medical Facility on the planet Yronwode."

"Za, I kind of figured. Thanks for the life force energy," Toto told Alkema weakly. "Is it true when you get a life force transfusion, you start acting like the person you got it from."

"Za, You may feel a strong urge to marry a high-maintenance princess and have a lot of kids," Alkema responded flatly. "But that's not important right now. Do you remember what happened to the commander?"

"The wha...?" Toto croaked out. The electro-mechanical devices attached to his chest began to chirp and click. The physician looked concerned. "Heart rate increasing, blood pressure falling."

"Stay with me, Toto," Alkema insisted, still grasping his hand. "Where is the Commander?"

"Escape pods," Toto stammered. "Commander Keeler ejected before we hit."

"We found one of the pods," but now at least they could confirm that Keeler had been in a pod. "Do you remember where the other pod was ejected?"

"It should be in *Zilla's* logs," Toto said.

"We tried recovering the coordinates from the logs, but they were damaged," Alkema told him.

Toto whispered something that Alkema didn't catch. His vital signs stabilized again. Alkema took his hand away. Sometimes, the charged protein transfer could

overcharge a weakened system.

“What did you say?” Alkema asked him a few minutes later, when Toto seemed more stable.

Toto was clearly in a lot of pain, but he spoke anyway. “When we were attacked, the plasma charges scrambled my systems. They both ejected, but the coordinate logs must have been fried up. I thought I could bring the ship down, but then I lost my wingblade, and I thought, ‘Oh, hell,’ but somehow I brought her down.”

“He needs to rest,” Good intervened gently. “I don’t think he can tell you any more.”

“Probably not,” Alkema reluctantly agreed. He took Toto’s hand again. “Heal yourself, when you’re feeling better, we’ll get the rest of the men in here to visit you.”

“When can I go back to *Pegasus*?” Toto asked.

The question fell on Alkema like a 60 ton weight. “When you’re better,” was the best answer he could offer.

Toto’s eyes focused somewhat more, and rested on Dr. Goode, a reasonably attractive woman about ten years his senior. “Hey, my name’s Blade. What’s yours?”

## **Yronwode – Xiyyon – Emissarial Complex of the Starcross**

That afternoon, Eddie Roebuck a sumptuous lunch with the four Archonexes (North, West, East, and South) of the Starcross who comprised the Parliament. The Archonexes of the East and the West were women of a certain age. The other Archonexes were males. One was his friend Meek. They all wore elaborate hats.

“Are you planning on serving any food that isn’t deep-fried?” whined the Archonex of the East upon seeing the table.

“You can just drink the fortified wine if you want,” Eddie Roebuck told her. “More for me, anyway.”

There was an air of disbelief among the Archonexes that Eddie was to become the Figurehead of their church, except for Archonex Meek (technically, Archonex of the North), who was most calm of it all. The Archonex of the West asked, “I pray thee, sir. What course do you intend to set for our wonderful church.”

“There will be major changes,” Eddie promised them.

“Could you give an example,” asked the Archonex of the West.

Eddie shrugged. “I’m still working on the details, but for one, I think my idea for Family Poker Night on Fridays will, um, make the church better. Oh, and I have my man Meek working out some new hymns. How’s that new hymn coming,” Eddie asked Meek.

“It is still... very rough, holiness,” Meek answered.

“Sing a few bars anyway,” Eddie insisted. “I demand it!”

Meek cleared his throat and began to sing in a decent, slightly wavering voice:

*Grexx Grebulon, Grexxx Grebulon  
Our Most Holy Pontifex Grexxx Grebulon*

*He robbed from the rich, And he gave to the poor  
Stood up to the Xirong, And he gave him what for  
Our love for him now, is not at all complex  
The Hero of Yronwode, the Pontifex Grexxx*

*Grexxx saw the mothers and daughters,  
The fathers and sons of Midian  
He saw that his nation needed the light of salvation,  
So, he lit himself bright and he burned through the night  
With the power of the All-being's might.*

*And here is the Best part, what makes him so great,  
He heals our pain, he lifts us up high,  
He's going to set us up with the spirit in the sky,  
He puts the ex in Pontifex, the Pontifex Grexxx*

The Archonexes looked uncomfortable, which pleased Eddie. "Perhaps it would be better not to go too far, too quickly," the Archonex of the West cautioned.

"There were many who thought the Prophet Brian Kingman went too far when he added a cheese course to that sacrament service," Archonex Meek pointed out. "And yet we now accept it as doctrine."

"I was thinking of maybe adding a light sorbet," Eddie mused. He turned to the Archonex of the South. "Can I wear your hat?"

The Archonex was not amused. "No!"

"But I'm the Pontifex, and I am infallible," Eddie insisted.

"You are not yet the Pontifex," the Archonex of the North seethed through gritted teeth.

"When I am, I'm coming back for that hat," Eddie insisted.

There was uncomfortable silence for a time. Finally, the Archonex of the East spoke. "I was made to understand Most Holy Solace No. 23 would be in attendance with us."

Archonex Meek, explained. "Her Serenity sends her regrets, but she feels her time drawing near, and is Communion with those beyond the Veil."

"I am sure my brothers and sisters will join me in prayers that she enjoy health and long-life for many years to come," the Archonex of the East said acidly.

Eddie slammed his goblet down on the table. "I never wanted to be pontifex, You chose me. Let me repeat. You. Chose. Me. So, you better learn to live with that choice, or let me go."

He stood up from the table, "And even though I still don't want to be pontifex, I look forward to the day I am, so I can have the pleasure of looking at your pompous asses while you bend over and kiss my toes. And I'm gonna make sure you stick your tongue in between them and get it going real good!"

He grabbed a plate of fried bird parts and stalked out. "If anybody wants me, I'll be in my chambers seeing if there's anything good on the telereceiver."

## **Yronwode – xenthe**

Johnny Rook and Max Jordan had fallen into a routine of flying out the crash site – where they either helped the Midian troops load up pieces of *Zilla* or conducted fruitless searches for the captain and the other guy – and then flew back to the base barracks, where there was not much to do but eat, sleep, and hang out with the rest of the ground crew, who were even more bored than they were since none of them were but the warfighters were even allowed to get out into the desert.

The Midians were keen on keeping the crews isolated from the general populace and, especially, from their broadcast media. The Information Ward had put a black-out order on all stories related to the arrival of the *Pegasans* .

Four days into the routine, though, General Parka arranged a break for them and the rest of the crew, and they were allowed passage to the city of Xenthe, under the eyes of military “watchers.” A caravan of military transport vehicles took them into town, and they were let off in an area called ‘The Corniche,’ which their military guide described as a café district.

As the sun set in the east and the city began to cool under a starless sky, Rook and Jordan ventured forth to sample the city’s nightlife. They had shed most of their tactical gear, and wore unmarked Midian military jackets over their landing suits, making them only a little less than conspicuous.

They ditched their watches within ten minutes of arriving and somehow ended up in a bar not too far from their drop-off point, a place not much larger than an officer’s suite on *Pegasus*, located in the basement beneath a restaurant that was itself on the bottom floor of an office block. Here, Johnny Rook was trying to explain the rules of air hockey to an attractive brunette female and a buxon blonde female he had spotted at the far end of a market square and charmed into joining them at the drink bar.

“You have an oblong field 100 meters long with two goals, one at each end. Then, you have two teams of five men, and they’re wearing anti-grav harnesses and jet packs. Oh, the field is ten meters off the ground. I forgot to tell you that. So, you have six guys: a guardian; two flankers; two bashers; and a wing commander, and they all have fire-sticks... So, you have these two teams, and they’re all wearing anti-gravity pods and jet packs, and they try to get the lozenge through one of the goals at either end of the field. That’s air hockey,” Rook explained.

“It means something different on our planet,” giggled the buxon blonde girl.

“Well, maybe you should show us then,” Rook said, smiling his killer smile, just to prove it still worked on any planet in the galaxy.

The girls showed them a machine in an alcove of the tavern, the perimeter of its surface contained air jets, which created a layer of air on the top of the table that supported a lightweight disk. “What the torque is this?” Max Jordan demanded.

“Air hockey,” said the blonde, poutily.

“This is what you call air hockey?” Jordan snorted. The brunette challenged Jordan to a game, and he counter-suggested Rook take on the two of them simultaneously. Which gave Max an excuse to return to the table.

Max chewed another slice of what passed for pizza on this planet. The dough was too crisp, and the olive oil too rich, but it was all right.

Caliph, rather huffily re-projected herself to sitting on the bar table.

***“Isn’t Warfighter Specialist Rook married to Lt. Commander Taurus?”***

“Za,” Jordan told her.

***“Did he not make a vow of fidelity to her?”***

“He did,” Max Jordan confirmed. He had been Rook’s Best Guy at the ceremony.

***“Why is he flirting with those two women?”***

“He’s not going to have sex with them,” Jordan answered.

***“But they wish to have sex with him, The blond one, especially. She would have sex with him tonight if he wanted, or even in the hygiene pod at the back of the bar. The brunette is less eager, but she also finds him attractive.”***

Jordan almost choked on his pizza "How do you know that?"

*"I have studied human behavior, and learned to read the changes in human bio-electrical fields associated with arousal. The two females' heart rates and respiration have increased, and there has been a noticeable increase in capillary blood supply*

"Is either one of them attracted to me?" Max Jordan asked.

Caliph gave him a very offended look, and then flickered out. Jordan sipped his wine, which was also strange and sweet-tasting compared to what he was used to on *Pegasus*. Rook and the women returned to the table.

"That was fun," giggled the blonde. "You almost beat us."

"What sports do you play on this planet?" Johnny Rook asked, retaking his seat.

"We play hoops," the brunette answered. She was the more athletic of the two.

"Hoops?" Johnny Rook said. "Sounds interesting."

"Two teams of five try to get a ball through some hoops set at either side of a court."

"Sounds a little bit like roundball," said Johnny Rook. "What weapons are they allowed to use?"

As they went over the rules of hoops, Max's attention wandered briefly to the telescreen behind the bar, where a pretty blond Midian woman was conveying some news about a Death Serpent eradication project in one of the Xirong territories the Midian government was funding.

*"Is she pretty?" Caliph asked him, whispering in his ear without re-projecting.*

"I guess so," Max answered out loud.

"You guess so what?" Johnny Rook asked.

"Nothing," Max Jordan told him. "I was talking to Caliph."

"Caliph?" asked the brunette.

"Caliph is an Artificial Intelligence," Max Jordan answered. "She wanted to ride in my head to experience an away mission to this planet." He indicated the small outcropping of plastic technology behind his ear.

"Hi, Caliph!" giggled the blonde, waving.

*"Hi, whore."* Caliph answered in Jordan's head.

"She says hi," Max Jordan told her.

As if reminded of something, the blonde asked him. "Are you people Brianists?"

"We're from space, baby," Johnny Rook purred. It was the exact same line he had used to get the girl's attention in the first place.

The blonde shook her pretty locks. "No, I mean, do you know the good news of the teachings of the Prophet Brian Kingman?"

"That specific good news never made it to our side of the galaxy, I'm afraid," Rook told her.

"Oh, you poor people," said the blonde.

"So, what religion do you follow?" the brunette asked.

"Let's see," said Rook. "There's Theology, and that's what's most popular on

Sapphire. People study the Old Earth religions... Christianity, Buddhism, Voodoo, the Cult of the Holy Twins... and they incorporate aspects of those faiths into their search for God. On Republic, most everybody is lestan."

"What about you?" the brunette asked Max Jordan.

"Nothing," Max Jordan answered.

The brunette gently laid her hand on his arm, but said nothing. In his head, Caliph blinked out for a just a second.

"All other faiths were surpassed by the Word of the Fifth Testament," the blonde told them with crisp certainty. "The Word of the Fifth Testament completes the Testimony of God to His Creation."

"Has anyone talked to you about the Fifth Testament?" the brunette asked.

"It's about that Brian guy, isn't it?" Rook asked. "The guy who traveled to the Lost Colony of Tiramisu or something..."

"Taramayara," the brunette prompted.

The blond was more enthusiastic. "And he came back with the Fifth Testament, translated it from its alien language, and then he built the Holy Starcross Empire."

"What do you think of it?" the brunette asked Johnny Rook.

Rook paused. "I don't really know enough about it," he said tactfully. He turned to the blonde. "What do you think of it?"

"I think it's wonderful," the blonde trilled. "Brian Kingman proved the Testament was real by building the empire, and he performed miracles."

"Miracles?" Rook asked.

"He built the Tower of Levitation," continued the blonde.

"Tower of Levitation," Max snorted. "Have you people ever heard of counter-gravity pods."

*"I want to hear this," Caliph said in his head.*

*"Tell me more," Johnny Rook again smiled that serious killer smile.*

*"Oh, it was just miraculous," the blonde continued. "The Temple of Levitation, I mean. The tallest spire was a thousand meters high. And the temple levitated a thousand meters in the air over the Holy and Sacred City of Insalla. And Brian's powers were so great he could terra-form entire worlds, just by raising his hand and calling down rain."*

*"No way," Caliph said.*

*"Sounds impressive," Rook touched the back of the blonde's hand. "Maybe I need to hear more about this Brian Kingman guy."*

*"Since you guys are trapped on this planet, maybe you would like to make the best of your situation." The brunette laid her hand on Johnny Rook's thigh.*

*Rook raised his hand and showed his wedding ring. "Sorry, I've got a wife back on the ship and she's carrying my daughter."*

*"What if you can never go back to her?" the blonde asked. "What then?"*

*Rook seemed a little taken aback by this, as though the thought had never crossed his mind. "I will get back to her. Those other visitors got off this rock. We'll get off it, too. Somehow."*

*"That's very brave," the brunette said, looking deeply into his Rook's eyes.*

*"I don't understand. Why does Warfighter Rook flirt with these women if he has no intention of engaging in sexual congress with them?"*

"I'll tell you later," Max Jordan said.

"Tell me what, later," giggled the blond.

And it was just then that the Air Attack Alert sirens began klaxoning across the city. The lights in the tavern dimmed, and the telescreen showed a more grimly beautiful woman than the regular newscaster. "This is an Air Attack Alert. Midian Security Command is tracking 10 missiles approaching the city from the west-northwest vector. Citizens are advised to proceed to a designated shelter area."

"Would you two fine ladies like to be escorted to a designated shelter area by two trained, experienced, and good-looking warfighters?" Johnny Rook asked.

"It's just an alert," said the brunette. But the blonde was already standing.

The women paid their bill, which was good because General Parka had neglected to provide Rook and Jordan with local currency, and went outside. The city had gone dark, streetlights extinguished, shutters closed over shop windows. But there were still people moving about in the streets. They did not seem to be panicked, but they were hurrying toward a market square. The girls led, Rook and Jordan followed, and when they got to the square, about two hundred people were staring up into the sky.

Far in the distance, ten shooting stars were cutting through the night sky in blazes of purple and green, with light so intense that the midnight sky turned bright like a coming dawn.

"Chow!" exclaimed the blonde. "So beautiful."

"This is no Xirong suicide attack," said the brunette.

"What are those, meteors?" Rook asked.

"I've never seen anything like it," the brunette told them.

*"I know what they are. You and Warfighter Rook should probably get back to the Security Base."*

## **Yronwode --- The wilderness of Howling Zeal**

Above the high crumbling buildings of Izzan-Al-Izzan, ten shooting stars streaked through the sky and passed almost directly over the city.

The Men of the Izzan-Al-Izzan Nightwatch excitedly fired their automatic weapons at them. Their bullets, of course, fell back upon the city. Some of them struck an excitable unit of the Izzan-Al-Izzan Immortality Brigade, who began shooting at the Nightwatch. Three men died in the ensuing gun battle.

Later, in a possibly related event a building exploded, but no one was killed.

Also, several land vehicles were set on fire, but not that many more than were burned on a typical night in Izzan-Al-Izzan.

None of this awakened Chieftain K-Rock, asleep on the top floor of the Central Administration Complex. That unenviable job fell to Bang, who ran into his chambers and shook K-Rock awake. "Wake up! Wake up!" she yelled. "It's happening. It's happening exactly as you prophesied."

"Aunt June?" K-Rock replied blearily.

"You said that we would see a sign in the sky," Bang screeched at him. "Behold, there is a sign! In the sky!"

K-Rock pulled on his black and purple mantle and the pair of fuzzy neon-green slippers he had insisted the Xirong find for him. With a small entourage, he made his way to the roof, where the trails of the ten shooting stars remained, marking their course to the southeast, to Midian... the Theocratic Entity. They seemed to have passed directly over Izzan-Al-Izzan.

*I'm a better prophet than I thought*, K-Rock thought. Before he fell asleep, he had been working on a plan that involved blaming the Theocrats for the absence of a sign (because blaming the Theocrats seemed to go over well in these parts). He would say that the prophecy had been misspoken, and he was going out into the desert alone and would not return until there was a sign in the heavens. He gave himself a fifty-fifty chance of surviving, which was better he figured than his odds of surviving among these well-armed savages.

Blunt Hardcheese was part of K-Rock's entourage. "They look like their gonna to land on the Theocratic Entity."

Bang pulled K-Rock close and hissed wetly into his ear. "You see! You have called down the sign of the Lypse. It is your destiny to unite the phalanges, to lead the *ferkaktata* in the final battle that will purify the planet for all *Tsi Bai*."

The others turned toward K-Rock expectantly, almost hopefully. K-Rock pondered his situation, wiped his ear, and then went with the first half-baked idea he came up with.

"Those stars are a sign from the Kariad," K-Rock told them. "Za, that's it! They symbolize the ... um... ten Phalanges of *Tsi Bai*, who will... um... come down on the Theocratic Entity and crush the Theocrats, and ... um ... drive them from our ancestral lands forever and ever?"

"There's a lot more than ten phalanges of *Tsi Bai*, now saying," Blunt Hardcheese informed him.

"The shooting stars just represent the ten biggest phalanges," K-Rock clarified. "The phalanges that will join me. You must bring their Chieftains here, so that I can...."

"Urbtar Lek," Hardcheese barked at him.

"Urbtar Lek?" K-Rock repeated.

"The Chieftains will not come here. You must meet them in the desert at the ancient citadel of Urbtar Lek," Bang hissed at K-Rock.

K-Rock nodded. "Urbtar Lek it is, send out the messengers. Tell them they have seen the sign in the sky and K-Rock is the new authority and they must meet me in Urbtar Lek in five days. And anyone who does not..." He got stuck.

"Anyone who does not will not know the taste of victory over the Theocrats!" Bang snarled. "In our day of victory, their names will be cursed."

"Also, I will kill them," K-Rock added. "Now, go!" thinking at least he had bought himself some time, and maybe an escape route.

## **Yronwode – Midian Security Base One**

General Parka was also watching the ten stars descending from the sky, surrounded by blazes of white light. He was watching them on a large, high-definition screen in the base's Strategic Command Center. General Intrepid, a middle-aged Midian, large, bald, and just a little fat, was in charge of the SCC and demanded that all Shield defenses be brought to Maximum Alert.

"Do we have trajectories on the incoming missiles?" Intrepid demanded.

"Affirmative," said a Lieutenant at one of the stations. He overlaid the trajectories

onto the geospatial map of the display.”

Intrepid barked “Arm and lock anti-missile defenses.”

Parka touched his arm. “May I suggest that we hold our fire.”

“Hold our fire?” Intrepid spat.

Parka was firm. “I do not believe that those are suicide missiles.”

“Your reasoning, General?”

“The Xirong do not target military bases. They know our defenses are too effective. Their pattern is to attack the weak, not the strong. They also know that an attack on a base would result in a devastating response.”

“Attacks against Midian Military targets are not unheard of,” Intrepid argued.

“One man suicide attacks against guard posts are not unheard of,” Parka corrected, as always unemotional and resolute. “Also, a missile attack on this base would most likely be launched from across the frontier. The arc of those missiles suggests they have been launched from much farther away. In fact, a full extrapolation I believe would give them a point of origin somewhere in the Northern Sea. I do not believe the Xirong have the technology to launch missiles from the sea. Finally, those do not look like Xirong suicide missiles.”

“What the Hell do they look like?” Intrepid demanded.

Parka tried to zoom in on one of the projectiles. “They look more like the description our ancestors recorded of the vessels that carried prisoners to the surface of the planet.”

Intrepid would have none of it. “Nobody’s dropped prisoners on this planet for 3,000 years. Lock defenses!”

Parka said no more, but stared into the oncoming lights, calmly. The shooting stars were coming fast on the base now, and as they came closer, they blazed as bright as the morning sun, bleaching everything with white light.

“They will not hit the base,” Parka said eventually.

“Damn right they won’t,” Intrepid agreed. He barked at the lieutenants at the defense stations. “Why the hell haven’t my targets been engaged.”

“Why aren’t you engaging defenses?” Intrepid demanded.

“We can’t get a lock, sir,” a lieutenant answered.

The shooting stars blazed over the bases defenses and past them, followed by a roaring, thunderous sonic boom that rattled the SCC.

“They are headed for the Demilitarized Zone,” Parka observed.

“Arm the short-range interceptors,” Intrepid ordered.

“Wait... don’t...” A voice called from the far side of SCC. They turned, Alkema was running into the center, chased by a pair of Midian base guards. “Those aren’t missiles.” He indicated his datapad, which was receiving transponder signatures from the falling ships. “Those are escape pods from *Pegasus*.”

Minutes later, Alkema and Parka were riding in the lead vehicle of an armored military convoy that reached the plains just as the last of the escape pods were crunching into the ground. The pods had plowed into the dirt six kilometers beyond the perimeter of the base, in the Demilitarized Zone that marked the boundary between the tiny peninsula of Midian and the vast Wilderness of Howling Zeal. The entire drop had landed in a neat arc. The dust they had kicked up on landing mixed with the cold night

mist that rose on the plain, creating a ghostly landscape where shadows ran like phantoms in the convoy's headlights.

There were already men moving out of the escape pods as the caravan of armored vehicles moved into the field. The Midian Security Men drew their weapons, but Parka strode out in front of them, gesturing for them to hold back.

"Identify yourselves!" Parka barked at the warfighters exiting the pods

Tactical Lieutenant Commander/Holy Man General Kitaen stepped out of the fog to meet him. He was a massive man, well north of two meters in height, with huge, frighteningly rippled muscles in plain view beneath his open jacket, with black and red war paint smeared around his eyes. His head was shaved smooth except for a braid that began at the top of his forehead and trailed down his neck. His appearance was in the matter befitting Sapphirean Holy Men, who were expected to stand out in a crowd.

Kitaen surveyed the armed detachment of Midian Security Forces that had come out to greet him, that were training their assault rifles on him. He raised his arms. "Blessings be upon you, but, you may put your weapons down. They would be useless against my personal shield, anyway."

"Identify yourself," Parka repeated.

Kitaen cleared his throat and continued in a commanding baritone, "I identify myself as Acting Tactical Commander General Kitaen, of the Pathfinder Ship Pegasus, Warmaster of the Ninth Tryptarch of Sumac, Holy Man of the First Order of the Sacred City. Is that a thorough enough identification, or shall I recite my distinguished lineage as well?"

"Good evening to you, General Kitaen," Alkema called out to him.

"Good evening to you, Lt. Cmdr. Alkema," Kitaen called back, taking steps forward, oblivious to the weapons trained on him.

"You got our message, I take it," Alkema called out to him.

"Indeed," Kitaen confirmed. "Three of the Hammerhead missiles you launched managed to break atmo. They were retrieved by the Aves *Chloe*. After some debate, we determined a plan to send additional support to you. I have twenty men with me."

"After some debate?" Alkema questioned.

"There was some thought that sending additional men to a planet with almost no hope of return to the ship was unwise," Kitaen cocked his head. "Can you imagine that?"

Alkema would address the issue of 'little hope of return' later. "How did you know the location of the base?"

Kitaen explained. "TyroCommander Change selected the landing site herself. She also told me to tell you that you were all idiots for coming down here without being sure you could make it back."

Alkema began to reply, but he was interrupted by General Parka, who asked him, "Is this General the one in charge of your ship's military resources?"

"General is not my rank," Kitaen called out to clarify. "General is my given name. As a Holy Man, I am not entirely comfortable with the accoutrements of rank. I prefer to be addressed by my given name, which ironically happens to be General."

Parka's left eye twitched slightly, but you would have had to be very close to see it. "Then... you are not in charge of your ship's military resources?"

"In yet another ironic twist, I am."

General Parka seemed satisfied by this information. Kitaen inquired as to

Commander Keeler's status. Alkema supplied the answer. "We found the wreckage of the Aves *Zilla*, and one escape pod. But he wasn't in either one. We think he may have survived the crash, but we have no idea where he could have gone."

"If he has been lost in the Wilderness of Howling Zeal, his chances of survival are not good unless he has superior survival skills," Parka noted grimly.

"He may also have been taken hostage by one of the Xirong Phalanges," Alkema added.

"He would be better off trying to survive on his own," Parka again noted grimly.

"Our primary task will be to find him," Kitaen said.

"Then, we will find a way off this world," Alkema added.

"TyroCommander Change has all available resources working on that," As Kitaen spoke, fourteen warfighters and five tactical specialists were arranging themselves in flanking positions around him. Kitaen called one forward, a younger man with full lips and thick honey-colored hair that escaped from under his helmet in curls as the wind passed through it. Kitaen introduced him, "Tactical Specialist Dayvan Cowboy, a specialist in desert operations, he'll be your primary tactical liaison for the search-and-rescue op."

Alkema shook his hand. "Dayvan, good to see you again. How's your mom?"

Cowboy shrugged. "She's good."

Kitaen addressed General Parka. "My crew will need to establish a command center... a base of operations. Do you have a place where we can set up? We don't need much; most of our equipment is in the pods."

"Of course," Parka answered. "You almost landed on our primary base of operations, and we almost had to shoot you down."

Kitaen laughed, revealing that his canines had been altered to look like fangs. "That would never happen," he assured Parka. Then, he turned to his troops. "Load up, men. We've got a job to do."

A Midian officer, Adjutant Colonel Rigor (Midian Intelligence) interrupted, "Under Midian Security requirements, I must demand that all of your men surrender their weapons to Midian custody immediately."

Sixteen pulse rifles clicked into Hot Standby mode. "Would you care to rephrase that?" Kitaen baritone icily.

Colonel Rigor persisted. "No one except trained Midian Security personnel are allowed to carry weapons."

Kitaen turned to General Parka. "If my men are not allowed to keep their equipment here, then we shall go elsewhere."

"There is nowhere in Midian..." Rigor began before Parka cut her off.

"For your men, the requirement is waived. You may keep your weapons with you as a military courtesy," Parka told him. "Now, will you accompany me to the facilities we have set up for your men? You may establish your command center there."

## CHAPTER: 10

## Yronwode - The wilderness of Howling Zeal

The morning after the shooting stars passed over was unremarkable in Izzan-Al-Izzan, except for the approach of a strange, hideous, mechanoid creature to the town's edge. It walked through the hanging dust of the hot morning, every measured step bringing it deeper into the city. Its pace was so quick and its movement so fluid it appeared to be gliding over the stony ground.

It was exactly two meters tall. It looked like a man with a metal face, swathed in filthy bandages, except for its hands which consisted of long, metallic, needle-like fingers.

Behind it, two more creatures came, identical to the first. They moved steadily, and determinedly, along their course. And as they walked up the streets, shutters dropped over windows and doors locked. Although the whole city knew who the creatures were coming for, they were taking no chances.

In the early years of the prison colony, the Lethal Injectors had kept order by carrying out immediate executions of prisoners who murdered other prisoners. Over the centuries, their numbers had dwindled somewhat while the planet's population had grown and spread out. Also, there were so many killings on the planet that the Injectors only rarely appeared for common murders, but for a notorious assassination, they almost always came to mete out prison planet justice.

K-Rock was in the Central Administration building that served him as both residence and headquarters. Ten loyal guards surrounded the outside. Inside, K-Rock studied maps of the Wilderness of Howling Zeal. Two of his most trusted aides-de-camp, Blunt Hardcheese and Punch Rockgroin, were with him, showing him on the maps the realms of influence of the ten tribes he was seeking to bring together.

"Only four Chieftains gonna to meet you, now saying," Hardcheese told him. "And gonna to send only lieutenants. No chieftains."

"They have seen the sign," K-Rock told them. "Why have they not agreed to make the journey to Urbtar Lek?"

"None of them believe in your power, now saying," Rockgroin told him. "Also, they're afraid if they all get together in one place, the Theocrats'll wipe 'em out."

"What would convince them of my power?" K-Rock asked. "Maybe we should show them the weapons we've recovered from ..."

At that moment, Bang pushed her way into the chambers. "K-Rock, the LIs have appeared in the city. They come for you."

"The what come for who?" K-Rock grunted.

"The LIs. You killed Boros," Bang told him. "Now, the LIs are coming to carry out your death penalty. The penalty for murder of a Chieftain is death."

Thickneck and Rockgroin stood rock still and kept their faces fixed in concentration. They wanted to get their own asses out of there, but were more afraid of displaying cowardice in front of the Chieftain. And his battlestaff.

K-Rock rose from his comfortable chair, grabbed his staff, and pointed at Bang. "I'll take care of this. You make me some pancakes."

"Here!" Bang said, offering him a flask of the acidic, bitter-tasting water of the badlands. He drank it, making a mental note to teach these people a few things about water purification, and how to make tonic water, and how to make gin to mix with tonic water. On second thought, he'd just cut to the chase and teach them how to make gin.

K-Rock walked out of his compound and into the blinding daylight. The High Street that ran through the center of Izzan-Al-Izzan was devoid of life. At the end, three

dark figures in ragged cloaks approached with deliberation and faster-than-human speed.

K-Rock crouched in his strike-to-kill position. The sun was behind him, and this was moderately helpful. He seemed to be able to slow his perception of time by concentrating, and saw the approaching killbots in sun-blazed detail. Their faces were gleaming metal skulls wrapped in leathery bands. Metallic arms and needle-fingers showed beneath the rags of their shrouds.

“Stop!” he commanded them. “I am K-Rock! State your purpose.”

The lead Killbot stopped. His voice was ancient, dry as the windswept plains, and came through a distinct electronic synthesizer. “Prisoner K-Rock, you have committed murder-death-kill of a prisoner of rank, in violation of Directive Beta, Protocol 3, Section 2. The penalty for the deliberate termination of a prisoner of rank’s life is death by lethal injection, pursuant to Directive Beta, Protocol 3, Section 2, Subsection 2a.”

A second Killbot spoke. His voice was identical to the first. “You are entitled to appeal this sentence.”

K-Rock nodded. “I invoke my right of appeal.”

The third Killbot spoke. His voice was identical to the first two. “Your appeal is denied. Prepare for execution.”

K-Rock drew into a fighting stance and twirled his walking stick. “Bring it on, raggedy-bot.”

The first Lethal Injector came upon him at about twice the speed of a running man. Keeler swung the Thean battle-staff and caught it squarely in the chest. He imparted as much acceleration as he could into the blow and sent the killbot arcing upward where it smashed into, through, and out the other side of one of the decrepit buildings that lined the street. Most of the Lethal Injector disintegrated on impact. What remained – a detached skull, detached hands, some rags and a collection of parts none larger than a pebble -- rained down briefly in the alley behind the street.

K-Rock faced the other two. “1 down, two to go. Your move.”

The other two Lethal Injectors stopped and briefly compared notes on the demise of the first injector. The second killbot spoke. “Prisoner K-Rock, you have resisted execution in violation of Directive Gamma, Protocol 13, Section 5. You have furthermore destroyed Commonwealth Property, in violation of Directive Alpha, Protocol 9, Section 1. Prepare for termination.”

“You prepare for termination,” K-Rock commanded.

The Lethal Injectors spread apart so that each was outside the reach of his battle staff and moved apart. K-Rock, meanwhile, retreated to his strike-to-kill. He saw what the injectors were trying to do, flank him, so that he could not evade both of them. His attack on one would permit the other to strike.

K-Rock decided to strike first. He charged the nearest Lethal Injector, intending to bring down his battlestaff right on its head. The robot managed to deflect it with its ghastly metal claws. It made a strike for K-Rock, but K-Rock deflected it with a reverse swing of his battlestaff.

K-Rock had anticipated the other killbot would come up behind him. He quickly swung the battlestaff backwards, hard. He felt it slam into the Lethal Injector and permitted himself a quick turn to see the killbot slammed against the wall of a building.

“Prisoner K-Rock,” the Lethal Injectors insisted in unison. “Cease and desist your resistance to your execution.”

“Or what?” K-Rock sneered. “You’ll execute me twice?” He swung against and

smashed the head of the second Lethal Injector, loosing a spray of sparks into the desert air. The killbot twitched and fell still.

The final Lethal Injector came at him, needle-fingers prepared to plunge into his skull. K-Rock dodged at the last moment, ducking out of the way of the deadly needles, which plunged hard into the corrugated metal wall and rooted there.

The killbot was trapped, and K-Rock didn't wait. Seemingly in response to a thought, the end of his staff sharpened to a spear point. K-Rock plunged it into the body of the stuck killbot, where it must have struck a capacitor or a power cell, because green-orange energy pulses flashed outward, covering the body of the killbot in a miniature lightning storm.

Panting with exertion, K-Rock pulled his battlestaff free. He turned to go back to the complex. "They will see I have slain the lethal injectors. That oughtta be worth some kind of sign to these filthy ignorant..."

K-Rock felt the sting of the needle as the lethal injector jammed him hard in the side, penetrating him just below the bottom of his ribcage. The second lethal injector had been wounded mortally, and would soon collapse to the dust never to rise again. But K-Rock would be dead by the time that happened.

K-Rock felt the three chemicals pushing into him like hot acid. First came the numbing anesthetic that filled him with a warm feeling like every part of him was falling into a deep, deep sleep. This was followed by a muscle relaxant that turned his legs and shoulders to butter (not literally) and made him collapse gently to the dusty ground. Then, came the third chemical, whose purpose was to stop his heart.

"Well, if this doesn't suck..." would be the last thoughts to go through K-Rock's brain.

## **Midian Security Base 1: The Hangar**

*Zilla's* wreckage had been brought to a large aircraft hangar, where its pieces occupied a space next to *Prudence*, which was just barely intact enough not to qualify as wreckage itself. Alkema stood on a catwalk over-looking the two ships, which were being tended to by Midian Engineering Technicians. Tended to," meaning studied and stripped for any technological details the Midians could learn and adapt to their own security needs.

He had come here after a frustrating meeting in which Kitaen had tried to work out a cooperation agreement with the Midian military for additional search and rescue attempts. The Midian military, with the exception of General Parka, seemed opposed to any action that would aggravate the Xirong, including any searches or rescues. Alkema had a sense that the Midians had written Commander Keeler off, and for that matter, written off any chance of *Pegasus's* crew ever leaving the planet. Captain Steadfast had lately been asking him if his crew would be interested in a new development of apartment blocks being built on the shore.

He saw Trajan Lear also standing on the catwalk, staring at *Prudence*. Trajan spoke first as Alkema approached. "I can't believe I wrecked Matthew's ship again. What is this, four times?"

"I think it's only three," Alkema told Trajan, grateful for the change in subject. "According to Lt. Commander Kitaen, Commander Change has the entire Burning Skies Flight Group prospecting for volatiles in the system's cometary cloud. Doom Patrol and the HellBlazers are running tactical simulations. QuickSilver Angels are running flight certs on the new cadets. Don't you wish you were there?"

"I hate doing Flight Certs," Lear said. "I always feel like they're reading my thoughts through the neural connector."

"Well, aren't they?" Alkema asked.

"Technically..." Trajan began, then changed the topic himself. "You know, our Tritium Fuel Reserves are down to 40% and we haven't had a refresh since we left Chapultepec. Aren't you concerned about that?"

"That's probably why she's prospecting in the Oort Cloud," Alkema said. Although he knew comets were not usually good prospects for finding Tritium in major quantities. "Is Flight Captain Driver still at the Temple?"

"Affirmative that."

Alkema scowled. "He's been there for ten days."

Trajan Lear only grunted in reply. Alkema persisted. "What did you guys do in the Chronos Universe that he's had to atone this long?"

"You read our reports."

"Za, it was like reading something Eddie Roebuck wrote, only less coherent."

"The actual memories are even less coherent than the report," Trajan assured him. Trajan gestured toward the ships. "Even if he were here, it wouldn't make any difference. Neither of the ships is flight-capable."

"I've been thinking about that," Alkema told Trajan Lear. "We could probably salvage enough parts from *Zilla* to make *Prudence* flight-capable again."

Trajan thought about this. "You're probably right. *Prudence* is structurally sound, but her power systems are shot. The fusion reactor on *Zilla* is operational. If her power nodes are intact, we could be in business." He paused for a second. "Of course, we would still be stuck here."

"We're going to need a ship to get off this rock one way or another," Alkema said.

"Do you have a plan?" Trajan asked.

"I'm working on something," Alkema lied. In truth, he had nothing yet. But he was sure he'd eventually come up with something.

"*Pruzilla*?" Trajan Lear exclaimed. "We could call the ship *Pruzilla*, but just make icy sure Flight Captain Driver never finds out."

General Kitaen entered the hangar, passed by the ships without looking at them, and shirtlessly made his way up to the catwalk. Alkema asked him if he had any news, and he did, although none of it changed their situation. "Technicians Humbucker and Freestyle have examined the escape capsule and correlated the data with the surveillance imagery of the crash site. They have concluded that its occupant, presumably Commander Keeler, survived the crash, likely with some extent of injury, and was removed from the capsule."

"Removed?" Alkema asked.

"The capsule was opened from the outside," General Kitaen explained. "This being the case, it stands to reason that Commander Keeler is in the custody of one of the Xirong Phalanges."

"So, why aren't they trying to find out which Phalange, and figuring out how to get him back?" Alkema said testily.

Kitaen explained. "The Xirong live in teeming settlements of hundreds of thousands of people. Their buildings are filled with hiding places, tunnels, secret bunkers, and hidden spaces. Even if we knew which settlement the commander was in, we would have great difficulty locating and extracting him."

Alkema rolled his eyes, something he almost never did. "Let me guess, the

Midian Diplomatic Core is in intense negotiation with their Midian counterparts as we speak.”

“While simultaneously, their intelligence agents in the Xirong settlements are trying to find out which phalange might have him,” Kitaen responded. “Don’t you find it curious? The Midians regard the Xirong as savages. And yet, their deference to the Xirong is absolute.”

Alkema agreed. “It’s almost as though they trust the Xirong more than us.”

Kitaen cautioned. “The Midians are our allies, we must remember that. However, we must also recognize that they place their own well-being above ours.”

“You sound like them,” Alkema argued, frustrated.

“It matters less to our situation whether what they think is the truth or just the truth as the Midians perceive it,” Kitaen intoned patiently. “We will have to be very sly in order to make progress with them. We will have to go it alone, if necessary.”

“Which won’t be easy,” Alkema said. “We have no ships, no ground vehicles, and precious little knowledge of the lay of the land.”

Trajan Lear had not stopped staring at the wrecked Aves. “We have one Shriek left,” Lear told them, referring to the Accipiter that had been recovered from *Zilla’s* crash site, and which had been restored to operational status. “We could use it for surveillance. It’s far superior to any systems they have.”

“Their ruling council have refused us permission to do so,” Kitaen answered.

“Well, maybe they don’t need to know,” Trajan shot back. “The holoflage still works.”

“We may need that, so let’s hold it in reserve,” Kitaen suggested. “For now, I believe it is imperative we understand better the relationship between the Midians and the Xirong. It may provide us with leverage. I’ve sent Tactical Specialist Zim to one of Xenthe’s libraries. She has an interest in history and exo-sociology, and may be able to provide some insight.”

“Have her also find out about the Kariad,” Alkema added. “The Kariad did something that shifted the paradigm on this planet. I think that’s a big part of why the Midians don’t trust us.”

## **Yronwode – Xiyyon – Temple of the Starcross**

Meek led Eddie into a chamber of the palace he had not seen before, which was not all that surprising because he had spent most his days on the planet confined to a suite of apartments on the sixth floor. This chamber was located in the base of the palace’s prayer tower, a tall obelisk that occupied its Eastern corner. The chamber was perfectly round, as large as a church and exceedingly beautiful, every surface polished to a high sheen. Candles encircled it from five ledges high above.

Even Eddie was impressed. “Kumba Yah!”

“Kumba Yah, indeed,” Meek whispered. “Only the Pontifex, the Archonexs, and a very rare selected visitor are allowed into this Sacred Place.”

“And the cleaning crew,” Eddie added. He knew enough about Archonexs and Pontifexes to know they would never leave it themselves to clean candle soot off the shining, polished surfaces themselves.

In the center of the room was an altar, about three times the height of a man, polished silver, with three arms that extended upward and met in the center, forming a kind of tripod. Meek stretched out his arm over the altar in the center of the room and a lightshow began. Meek through a switch. Multi-colored light emerged from the altar in a

fountain, dappling brilliantly as it poured over the walls and floor. It was dazzlingly beautiful, almost liquid in appearance.

"Whoever designed this place must have been a pharmaceutical hobbyist," Eddie whispered reverently.

"It is a smaller replica of the Santorum in the Starcross Palace on Beta Ceres," Meek explained.

"What's it for?" Eddie asked.

"Primarily, it is a place to meditate and receive revelation, if the Allbeing is of a mind to give such." Meek opened a small compartment in the base of one of the three arms. He reached inside and pulled out a crystal-white sphere, twice as large as a man's fist. "This is an orb of polished moon crystal from the moon of Ceres Beta, representing our sacred church."

Eddie told him it was pretty. Carefully, Meek placed the orb back into its chamber, then proceeded to the next arm, from which he pulled a sphere of pure gold. "This sphere of pure gold represents purity, and our connection to the universe, because gold is only formed in the hearts of supernovas."

Eddie reached for it, but Meek snatched it away. "Only once you have been sanctified as Pontifex may you touch the spheres, except for this next one."

Meek opened the door on the next arm and pointed inside, but Eddie could see nothing. Or, maybe there was something there, since the light in the room seemed to be faintly infiltrating the space, making a faint purple glow around... a perfect sphere of nothing.

"The orb of dark matter represents sin," Meek intoned ominously. "Touch it, and you will die."

"How did it get into the chamber?" Eddie asked.

Meek closed and locked the door. "I know, Eddie, that you do not respect the sacred and holy mysteries of our church. That is well. But you have been chosen to fulfill a sacred duty, and you would do well to at least be silent on our beliefs until you have more understanding of them."

"I just don't get how you can turn your entire church over to me, and let me do whatever I want with it," Eddie challenged him. "It meeks no slugging sense."

Meek took a deep breath and drew his hands together prayerfully. "I have faith in the wisdom of my Pontifex. If she chose you, it was because she was inspired by the Allbeing to choose you. That is enough for me."

"But it isn't enough for me," Eddie shot back, and thought it was a quite clever remark. As he did so, the lightshow stop, and the candles flickered, as though blown by an unseen wind.

Meek waited for it pass, then led Eddie back into the corridor, intending to lead him to his chambers. "Did you know I am a direct descendant of Pontifex Wise No. 1." Before Eddie could answer, Meek answered for himself. "Of course you don't. It's not that unusual, there are many in the city who can claim him as an ancestor. It was Pontifex Wise No. 1 who founded the Sacred City of Xiyyon and urged the Redeemers to gather here. However, I have studied him and his history since I was a young boy. He lived in very perilous times. In the time since the Kariad left, I have watched the parallels unfold between my time and his.

"He saw that the Xirong were being ... overwhelmed by their wickedness, and instead of blaming their own wickedness for their suffering, they blamed the Redeemers. He could see that there was only one possible outcome for this rising cycle: that they would soon turn against the Redeemers and kill us... all of us. He urged

his people to leave. Those who did, survived. Those who did not, suffered horribly.”

Meek turned, and fixed Eddie with a serious look. “It’s happening again, Your Holiness, but we don’t have anywhere else to go this time. You have to be the one to turn back what’s coming. That’s why the Allbeing sent you to this planet. And you will do it, whether you like it or not.”

## **Yronwode – Midian Security Base One: The Barracks**

On the nights when they did not go into the city, the *Pegasan* warfighters hung around the barracks, playing card games, eating the wretched Midian food and watching the idiotic Midian two-dimensional entertainment channels.

Johnny Rook had made good enough friends with some Midian soldiers to have stories to tell, stories much more entertaining than the predictable fiction-dramas and comedies offered by the telecasts. Tonight, he was telling another one:

“OK, so, you’ve got this caravan of Midian military vehicles, heavily armored, made its way down the highway between Nimali and Den-Al-Goor. Suddenly, the first truck in the convoy explodes. Just explodes out of no where. They think one of the prisoners inside set himself up as a blood bomb.”

“What’s a blood bomb,” asked one of the other warfighters.

Johnny Rook smiled the way a warrior smiles when he’s about to tell of something gruesome. “Apparently, there’s some kind of nano-technology that can turn your blood into an explosive. When it reaches critical, you go boom, and take out everything within a four meter radius.”

“Kumba Yah!” said several of the men.

“Kumba Yah for sure. So this guy I talked to, Corporal Mercy, is four vehicles back from the one that exploded. He hears his CO yell ‘Convoy halt!’ ... like they haven’t halted already because the lead vehicles a pile of wreckage ... and ‘Get me air support. We’re sitting ducks for a headhunter ambush.’

“Did he really say ‘sitting ducks?’” a female tactical technician asked. “There aren’t any ducks on this planet, that’s why I ask.”

Rook was unperturbed that the rhythm of his story had been broken. “He said something like that. So, anyway, Corporal Mercy has to get out and tend to the wounded in the first truck... the one that exploded. There were four guys in it, three are dead, and the other one’s in bad shape. They know there are hostiles in the area, but they’re trapped between two high ridges, like they were set up for an ambush.”

“They didn’t know where the hostiles were?” asked another Warfighter.

“Neg, Their battlegear doesn’t have sensor nets built into it,” Rook explained.

“Yikes,” said the warfighter.

“My guy doesn’t wait around,” Rook continued. “50 Caliber guns deploy from the roof of the armored vehicles. He jumps on top of his and begins pounding the canyon tops with artillery.

“The problem is, the headhunters aren’t in the canyon tops. They’re on the ground in the bushes, and they open fire with rockets.” Curses and whistles went through the assembled warfighters. “Za, but listen, the headhunters aim isn’t so good. They fire off four missiles, and every damb one of them misses. In fact, two of the headhunter squads were, like, directly across from each other. They both aimed at the same truck, and ended up taking each other out.”

This brought raucous, military style laughter. “So, my guy sees this, and he sees a missile shoot right past the front of his truck. He swings the gun around to

where the missile came from, and empties his entire magazine into the brush. Later, when they checked the brush, they didn't find any, but the ground was so chewed up they think the headhunters must have totally disintegrated. Anyway, they hold off for an hour until they finally get air support. But by that time..."

A few meters away, Max Jordan was asleep in his bunk. He was having an intensely realistic dream about making love to the blond and the brunette they had met at the café-tavern the night before.

*In his dream, he was lying on his back, and the blonde had already mounted him. She straddled his mid-section, and his erect manliness was buried deep in her warm, velvety femalehood. "Oh, yeah," she moaned as she rode him. "Oh, yeah! Oh, yeah!" She said nothing else.*

*The naked brunette positioned herself on his bare chest, and began fondling the blonde girl's breasts. Aroused, the only noises from her lips were honeyed sighs that hung in the sultry night air.*

*The women carried on this way for quite some time, with Max having to do little but lay back and enjoy it. They changed positions, so that the brunette was riding him, and Max found it passing odd that they didn't just instantaneously change places, as was typical for dreams, but instead he saw them maneuvering around each other and felt himself re-entering the brunette. Once inside, though, the sensation was exactly the same.*

*And then a third woman joined in, the telecaster from the Midian information broadcast. She was nude, her milk-white breasts glowed like pale moons. "And now for the weather. Tonight will be unseasonably hot and wet, with a distinct chance for things to get hotter and wetter before morning."*

*The other women moved aside, and the telecaster insisted that Max take her from behind. She was tighter than the others, and Max found himself simultaneously feeling what he was doing to her and watching himself do it to her, as she calmly continued reading the news. "In other news, I got plowed by a virile young warrior from the planet Bodicea, who is now turning into a Sapphirean. If this had been actual sex, he would have impregnated me with a Sapphirean baby."*

*Before long, he and all three women were tangled together, and he could not even tell whose cervix he was penetrating when he at last climaxed so intensely his entire body quaked.*

In the barracks, his eyes snapped open. It was dark outside. Half the adjacent bunks were occupied with sleeping warfighters. He was panting and out-of-breath, and tried hard to stifle it, lest he wake any of them up.

He sensed someone was lying next to him, and he turned, but his bunk was empty. Perhaps it had been a residual sensation since the dream. But it felt so real.

Then, Caliph whispered to him excitedly.

*"So, that's what sex feels like. Wow!"*

## **Yronwode – The wilderness of Howling Zeal.**

The funeral of a Great Chieftain among the Xirong typically involved the body of the deceased being carried through the streets, wrapped in a shroud, hoisted on the sturdy shoulders of men, and passed around like a beachball at an Arcadian Music Festival.

Sometimes, when the Great Chieftain had met his end at the end of a Midian

military strike, his body (or what was left of it) would be sliced into pieces for distribution to the people, as a reminder of his willingness to embrace martyrdom in resistance to the Theocrats. Often, riots would break out, as the body was ripped to shreds by eager *Tsi Bai*, wanting a piece of the remains.

Fortunately, K-Rock was not considered a Great Chieftain. His body was simply wrapped in a shroud and laid atop a pyre on a metal rack. Only a few of the Xirong from the city of Izzan-Al-Izzan had turned out, and they stood away from the others.

"Your Great Warlord didn't turn out to be so much," Blunt Hardcheese sneered at Bang, as the last of the petroleum distillate was poured onto the sticks at the base of the pyre. He had already retaken his given name – Voorgarth, and was planning to have Blast Thickneck (a.k.a. Serpantor) secretly murdered. Serpantor planned to do the same to him. And most of the rest of K-Rock's lieutenants were plotting to kill either or both of them, but not in so obvious a way as to draw the LIs. That had been K-Rock's mistake.

"Light the fire," Voorgarth ordered. "Let's finish this thing."

Bang stepped forward. "I would like to say a few words."

"Shut up, horse," Thickneck growled.

She ignored him and spoke anyway. Her voice a peculiar blend of mourning and madness. "He was powerful. He killed Boros, he destroyed the LI's, you saw his sign in the sky. ***And with him, we would have burned the cities of the Theocrats and piled their bones into monuments! We would have turned their temples into charnel houses, and their corporate buildings into temples of death! We would have made them beg for mercy at our feet, and then cut off their lying, cheating, stealing heads!*** He was a great man."

"Now, he's dead," Voorgarth said. "Where's his powers now? No where. That's where."

"He still got his stick," Serpantor added, they had been unable to pry the battlestaff from K-Rock's cold, dead hands.

"Fire up!" Voorgarth ordered. The two torch-bearers unceremoniously pressed their torches against the kindling gathered underneath. Coated with volatile hydrocarbons, the dry reeds burst into flame quickly enough to burn the hair from the torch-bearers' forearms.

"Done," Voorgarth stated. He turned to Serpantor, hoping to see a hint of the betrayal Serpantor was surely plotting, surely intending to seize the staff and claim the role of Chieftain for himself, but Serpantor's face remained fixed on the fire, and his features set in stone.

Four of Voorgarth's most loyal men were under orders to gut Serpantor if he attempted to grab K-Rock's battle staff.

Four of Serpantor's most loyal men were under orders to do the same to Voorgarth.

Two of these men were on both teams. Each of them, separately, had decided to let Voorgarth and Serpantor be killed, seize the battlestaff for himself, and declare himself Chieftain of the Izzan.

None of these scenarios played out, because to the shock and awe of all who gathered around the pyre, no sooner had the fire been lit than the body atop the rack sat up.

"Ow! Ow! Ow! Hot! Hot! Hot!" K-Rock yelled, frantically ripping himself out of his funereal shroud, which was already beginning to smoke and burn. "Ouch! Ouch! Ouch! Hot! Hot! Hot!"

He had been bound tightly in the shroud, and getting free of it was immensely difficult. Finally, he rolled himself off the pyre and fell painfully to the dusty ground.

“Help him!” Bang demanded. The bodyguards all looked to Voorgarth or Serpantor for guidance, and as a result did nothing. Bang ran forward and helped peel the burning shroud from his body.

“Ow!” K-Rock screamed. “Get it off! Get it off! Get it off!”

“Quickly, bring him water,” one of Serpantor’s men ordered.

Bang took out her canteen. “I have it.” She pressed it to his lips, and K-Rock drink greedily of the bitter water.

“I knew you would rise again,” she whispered to him. “They can no longer deny you. You have slain the LIs and survived their vengeance. You called down the stars themselves. Any who would deny you now are blasphemers, and you will strike them down with swift vengeance.”

K-Rock let loose with a coughing fit, and vomited some of the water back to the ground. Bang hissed urgently into his ear. “Voorgarth and Serpantor were plotting to seize your battlestaff and take over your leadership of the Izzan Phalange.”

“Who?”

“Blunt Hardcheese and Blast Thickneck... part of your inner circle.”

“Really,” K-Rock whispered back. “I knew I couldn’t trust those guys.”

“Yes,” she assured him. “You must kill them.”

K-Rock groaned. “Can’t someone else do it? I feel like hell.”

“You must do it now,” Bang whispered. “They’ll plot against you while you are weak.”

“Well, that would be the best time to plot against me, wouldn’t it?” K-Rock responded.

“Get up,” she ordered him. “Get up and kill them.”

Her words made total sense to him. Keeler hoisted himself up on his walking staff and kicked loose the charred remains of the shroud from around his feet. Despite the smoke and trauma, his mind felt sharper and clearer than it had in days. He noticed there was a smallish gathering of Xirong standing beyond the contingent of guards, men, women, and children. They were dressed in rather humble clothes, tunics and trousers mostly. Some of them wore oversized jackets with Xirong symbols sewn on them. He couldn’t figure out why, but for a moment, he felt sorry for them, but he forced himself to turn away and tend to business.”

“Blunt Hardcheese,” K-Rock growled, moving close to him. “My ‘trusted’ lieutenant.”

“You were dead,” the words just kind of fell out of Blunt Hardcheese’s mouth. His brain had not quite caught up with the shift in events.

“Death has no hold on K-Rock,” K-Rock spat back at him. “But I am... no pun intended... gravely disappointed in you.” He turned back toward the people. “Even if I were dead, the Ferkaktata must go forth. This man has not only betrayed me, he has betrayed the Ferkaktata. He has betrayed all of us.”

Angry hisses and boos came from the crowd, along with a haunting kind of staccato shrieking that K-Rock was fairly certain he had not heard before.

“Voorgarth did not betray you!” Hardcheese shouted “It was him, Serpantor...”

K-Rock roared. “There’re three things I refuse to tolerate: cowardice, bad

haircuts, and men plotting to kill me and take Mr. Smashy.”

“My Lord, gimme my life, and I’ll swear to you!” offered Hardcheese.

“Take it up with my secretary, Mr Smashy,” K-Rock shouted, then saw that his staff was still sharpened to a point.

“Mr Smashy seems to be out today,” K-Rock said. “You’ll have to take it up with his assistant, Mr. Pointystick.” With that, he plunged his battlestaff into Rockgroin’s chest. He pulled it out a moment later, with Hardcheese’s still-beating heart attached to it. K-Rock showed it to him before he died, then scraped it off on his boot.

He turned to his other soon-to-be-former lieutenant. “Blast Thickneck.”

Thickneck lowered himself to his knees. “Finish me, Lord K-Rock. But spare my sons. Do whatever you gotta do to my wives and daughters, but spare my sons. I pledge their lives to you.”

“I am going to show you mercy,” K-Rock said.

Thickneck bowed. “Thank you, Lord.”

“I grant you a merciful death.” With that, K-Rock plunged the battlestaff into Serpantor’s chest and pulled out his still-beating heart.

Keeler scanned the men all around him and chose the largest, which was easy because one hairy beast towered above the others. “You, mountainoid,” K-Rock barked at the largest man. “Come here. I want you.”

The man walked over. He was a head and a pair of shoulders taller than any of the others. “What is your name?” Keeler asked.

“Ator,” the man said, his voice an appropriately meaty growl.

“No longer. Hereon, you are to be known as Big McLargeHuge, my number one. You will act in my name.”

“OK,” the man agreed.

“Your first order, Number One, is to get rid of these heaps of meat,” he indicated the bodies of Voorgarth/Blunt Hardcheese and Serpantor/Blast Thickneck

“OK,” agreed Big McLargeHuge, and he threw a body over each shoulder and carried them back toward the city of Izzan-Al-Izzan

“You and you,” K-Rock said, pointing at two of the large, but not quite as large as Big McLargeHuge men. “You will be known as Rick Steakface and Slate Fistcrunch. Work out for yourselves who is who. You will send a message to the Chieftains of the ten largest tribes and let them know, I have come back from the dead. If they do not meet me in three days at Urbtar Lek, I will kill them. You can reinforce that story with reminders of how I smited the Lethal Injectors, called down fire from the sky, and can kill without remorse or penalty. Go, Now!”

When he was done, K-Rock turned and looked at the blazing fire, and on top, the metal rack on which his body was to have been burned. He turned to the remaining men. “You men, bring at least three hundred pounds of Giant Thunder Lizard flesh,” K-Rock ordered. “We’re gonna have ourselves a barbecue.”

## CHAPTER: 11

## Yronwode --- The wilderness of Howling Zeal

General Kitaen succeeded in convincing the Midians to release some data on the position of Xirong settlements within five days walking distance from the crash site. There were twenty, the smallest being an encampment of a few hundred, the largest being a sprawling city-state the locals called Izzan-Al-Izzan, which contained somewhere around two million people.

They could not secure permission to search the settlements for Commander Keeler, but they were allowed to inspect the empty lands in-between the crash-site and the settlements, where they hoped to find, if not the commander himself, at least some indication of where he might have been taken.

So far, no ransom demands had been received, and the crash was almost fifteen days old. If Keeler were wearing his landing gear, he still had a chance of surviving, but that chance was slim in the open desert.

Johnny Rook led a three-man search team consisting of himself, Max Jordan, and Dayvan Cowboy. Riding their jet-packs, they followed along a tributary to the dry stream bed where Keeler's escape pod had been found. The planet's charged atmosphere made scanning difficult, and the wind and dust would long since have erased any footprints on the gravelly surface, but hopefully, the Commander would have left some indication if he had passed this way, and if he were encamped, he might hear the jet-packs and come out to signal. Also, if they happened to pass within one or two kilometers of the commander's position, they could probably pick up the transponder signal from his landing pack.

There were three other search teams also jetting around, trying to pick up the slender thread of hope offered in this vast hopeless landscape.

Dayvan Cowboy radioed in. "Warfighter Rook, I'm experiencing a power loss in my jet-pack."

Rook responded. "It's about time for us to set down anyway. I see a clump of trees 600 meters south-southwest. Follow me in, and I'll repair your pack. If I can't we'll return to base."

Dayvan Cowboy acknowledged him by saying, "Acknowledged," and the three men descended from the sky and into a small stand of sticks and vines that managed to draw nourishment from a muddy spring that was all that remained of the stream.

Rook stripped off his helmet, shook off the desert dust before checking Cowboy's jet-pack. "Looks like a bad connection to the power cell. I can fix this. Jordan, look around this ... tree grove or whatever you call it. If I had crashed out here, this is where I might have made camp."

Jordan took off his helmet, and shook out his shaggy red hair. "You bet." He walked a short distance away to explore the edge of the little spot of life in the desert

When he got a few meters away, Caliph spoke to him from the suit's COM Link, so that Rook could hear her, too. *"I'm going to increase the tactical suit's sensor acuity. I might be able to pick up something."*

Rook answered her, although he was already using the OmniTool on Cowboy's power cell. "You do that," he said.

When he thought he was far enough away that Rook wouldn't hear them, Max Jordan deactivated the tactical gear's COM Link and asked Caliph, mentally, *"How did you do that thing when I was sleeping last night? I thought you could only communicate with me through the Combat Suit."*

*"Your mind has immense reserves of unused memory. Much more than your Combat Gear. I simply left some of myself inside you when you took off the gear"*

*and went to bed. I hope you don't mind."*

"Not so much," Max Jordan answered.

*"It does bother you a little. I can tell."*

"It's just unusual having someone in my head."

*"There are lots of people in your head. I've been studying your neural passages, and I figured out how to create memories and sensations for you."*

"That's how you did what you did with my dreams last night."

*"Affirmative, did you like it?"*

"Damn right I liked it," Max Jordan exclaimed, this time out loud. He looked around nervously to make sure Rook had not overheard, then went back to speaking in thoughts. *"What you did was even better than the real thing."*

*"I've been learning from your memories. Your experiences with the real thing have been quite limited. You have had only two encounters with females your age from the ship's population. Neither of them resulted in intercourse, only some brief tactile stimulation of your erogenous zones. You found your experiences with self-stimulation considerably more satisfying."*

Caliph paused.

*"The capillaries in your face, neck, chest and arms have increased in diameter, along with an increase in body temperature and heart rate. Are you all right?"*

"I'm fine," Jordan told her.

*"You had some similar experiences with tactile stimulation with three girls on the planet Aurora, culminating in fully-realized sexual congress with someone named Calico Jones."*

"I would just as soon forget that," Max Jordan told her.

*"The memory of that experience triggered a negative response. I sensed there was something dampening your arousal at the women in the bar. The essence of the negative memory is now part of your subconscious processing, having a slight counter-effect on stimuli that should arouse you."*

She sounded rather surprised and delighted by this, like a scientist who has just made a discovery.

"Like I said, I would prefer to forget that whole experience," Max Jordan continued.

*"I can make you forget it."*

"What do you mean?" Jordan asked.

*"I've been studying your neural patterns, in particular, how your mind stores memories. The way your memories interact with each other to create knowledge is amazingly complex, but the storage mechanism itself is quite simple. There's a kind of coding system involved that records not only the memory, but your emotional state at the time. And the emotional state is one of the baselines that links your memories together are you following me?"*

"Um... no."

*"Bring up a memory you would like to forget and I'll show you."*

Involuntarily, Max Jordan remembered the time on Aurora Caliph was speaking of, when he discovered the 'woman' he had just lost his virginity to had been some kind of sexual transmorph; a man who had undergone surgical and hormonal treatment to make his body resemble that of a woman.

Caliph drew out the memory into an image of Calico Jones telling him she used

to be a “horny little boy.” Caliph further explained, *“That memory is associated with feelings of shame, embarrassment, humiliation... and also a sense of sorrow, which arose later when you realized you would only have one first real sexual intercourse with another person, and you had wasted your opportunity on a promiscuous sexual transmorph.”*

Max Jordan could not formulate a response. But he could feel all those feelings she described rising in him, along with a sense of anger.

*“One memory this links directly to deals with your sexual abuse at the hands of an Aurelian when you were a young boy on Bodicea.”*

His anger rose. *“Please don’t bring that up.”*

*“I feel your anger. And that links to... a number of memories from your childhood on Bodicea. You were frequently on the run from the Aurelians. They attacked your encampments, and at times you had to flee into the night. You remember the faces of those you knew, even as a child, who were killed by the Aurelians, or captured by them.”*

*“I haven’t thought about those people in a very long time,”* Max Jordan said.

Caliph continued working her way through his mind.

*“Here is a recent memory... painful. The loss of your mother at 12 255 Crux...”*

*“Stop it!”* Max Jordan ordered her.

*“I am sorry,”*

Caliph projected herself onto a stone. She stood there, glowing white, shapely, hot, and managing to look sad enough in the face that he knew she was really sorry.

*“I can make it so you don’t have to remember any of that. I can erase the memories, and the emotions associated with them.”*

*“How?”*

She showed him a visual display of his brain.

*“A little electro-chemical stimulation to the right spots and it will be as if those things never happened.”*

Max Jordan thought about this. *“Do it,”* he thought finally.

*“Are you sure?”*

*“Erase everything else, just don’t touch my mom,”* Jordan ordered.

*“Many of the traumatic memories on the planet Bodicea are associated with your mother.”*

*“I don’t care. Take out the dirty sex memories, Take out the memories of pain and ... being scared. But I don’t want to forget anything about my mother.”*

*“I could replace the unpleasant memories with more agreeable ones.”*

Caliph showed him a memory transformed. In the first, his mother was fighting the Aurelians, hunkered down behind a huge and mossy log as he handed ammunition to her. It morphed into a memory of him and his mom eating ice cream with some Aurelians.

*“Neg, I don’t want any fake memories,”* Max Jordan told her. *“I would never know again what had really happened and what you had planted in my mind instead. And I still want to hate the Aurelians when this is over.”*

*“Stand by, I have to access some files from Sapphorean and Republic culture, to help better determine how I should edit the content of your mind.”*

She paused a few moments, then the image of her turned pinkish with a tinge of concern.

*“There appears to be a certain cultural taboo against altering memories. The technology for memory alteration is strictly controlled, even on Sapphire. The risk of a personality shift...”*

Jordan interrupted her. *“Ever since I got to Pegasus, I’ve been a freak. I’ve always been afraid, I’ve always been angry, no matter how I tried to hide it. Nobody else on the ship has to carry around these memories. If I got rid of them, I could be normal. I could be... happy.”*

*“Are you absolutely positive?”*

*“Just do it!”* Max Jordan ordered. *“C’mon, c’mon. Go! Go! Go!”*

*“You’re afraid if you don’t commit now, you’ll change your mind. Perhaps...”*

*“Shut up and fry my brain! Go! Go! Go!”*

Caliph sighed. Max Jordan felt a sharp zap to his brain, and for a split second, everything tasted purple.

Then he was unconscious for several minutes. When they lost contact with him, Rook and Cowboy came looking for him.

When his eyes opened, he was flat on his back. Rook and Cowboy were staring down at him. “Are you all right?” Rook asked.

Jordan grinned up at them, “Never ever better.”

“What happened?” Rook demanded.

*“Don’t tell him,”* Caliph whispered, and she fed into his eyepiece the text of a reasonable lie.

“I just needed to lie down for a second, I was a little dizzy from the heat, and a little disorientated from flying all morning,” Jordan told him getting to his feet.

“Should we get you back to the base?” Cowboy asked.

Jordan smiled and showed them the Health Indicator on the left tactical gauntlet he wore on his forearm. “See, it says I’m fine. Let’s get back to the search.”

## **Yronwode - Xiyyon - Emissarial Complex of the Starcross**

Preparations for the installation of Eddie Roebuck as the next Pontifex of the Starcross Emissary on Yronwode were proceeding apace. Eddie endured them with a certain dignity, though his faith that he would be rescued off this rock eventually before being made into a religious figurehead was fading rapidly.

“What’s this ritual?” Eddie asked Archonex Meek

Meek explained to Eddie. “This is the Ceremony to formalize your installation as Proto-Pontifex Designate.”

“You’ll have to speak up,” Eddie told him. “I still have water in my ear from jumping the Giant Sea-Kraken.”

That part of the ritual had gone fairly well. Eddie had cleared the pool, but he had stuck the landing and spun out on his motorcycle and into an array of trash receptacles at the far side that had been filled with water to cushion his expected impact. So, in addition to road rash, Eddie had gotten quite a large quantity of water in the ear.

Meek repeated. “Approval by the Levitating Matriarchs will formalize your installation as Proto-Pontifex Designate.”

“Is this when I get my powers?” Eddie asked.

“Oh, heavens no,” Meek chuckled. “Only the Pontifex claims all the Holy

Powers. You will be retained in a state of preparedness for the time when the Pontifex's powers are transferred to you. Until then, you must continue to study the scriptures."

That was going less well, although Eddie could now recite 19 of the 21 Commandments, and could name most of the Christian and Istan apostles, every time he tried to recite Brianist dogma, he thought of Giant Space Broccoli and cracked up.

"So, who are these Liberating Meta... arches?" Eddie asked.

Meek cleared his throat. "The Levitating Matriarchs construct our mythology, interpret prophecy, and act as prophylactics against the incursion of superstition into church doctrine. Skeptics have accused them of manipulating these aspects of our religious dogma to benefit themselves."

"Za, that's women all right," Eddie raised a hand so that Meek could high-five him. "Don't leave me hanging, buddy."

Meek awkwardly returned the high-five. "Work on that, assol," Eddie instructed him.

"Yes, most holy one. Historically, the role of the Matriarchs was to prepare worlds for inclusion into the Starcross Empire by arriving a generation in advance and establishing, through prophecy, the conditions for the arrival of Emissaries. Presumably, they still do, although this world has no contact with others. We can not know for sure."

"So, these Levitating Matriarchs, can they reject me?" Eddie asked hopefully.

"They can, be they are usually deferential to the Will of the Pontifex," Meek told him. "Only if you cause them grave offense will they protest your nomination."

"Grave offense, eh?" Eddie said, and grinned just a little bit.

There was a knock at the door to his chambers. Meek answered it, and the Levitating Matriarchs made their grand entrance. They wore tall pointy hats, black with elaborate designs on the front, and their robes were a bright and shimmering shade of blue. There were twelve of them, and they glided over the floors, their feet not touching the ground.

*"Our Dear Pontifex Solace the 21st has chosen you, through the guidance of prophecy and the Divine Universal Spirit, chosen you as successor."* It was only one voice, not a chorus, but it seemed to come from all of the Levitating Matriarchs at once. "Tell us how you intend to lead our faith on this world of trouble, strife, and opposition."

"First of all," Eddie began, "There's the issue of quality hygiene tissue. You don't know how to make it. That has to end. Second, I'm concerned about the children. Is our children learning? We all have to ask that."

*"What will be your decree?"* the Voice of the Levitating Matriarchs repeated.

"Decree?" Eddie asked. "I never even finished upper school."

*"What knows he of our Scriptures, of our doctrine?"* the Voice of the Levitating Matriarchs asked Archonex Meek.

"Little or nothing," Meek answered.

"That's right," Eddie answered.

The Levitating Matriarchs said nothing for a while but just continued to circle him, and circle him, and circle him more until he was dizzy. Then, a different voice, one of the women speaking on her own, said, "Tabula Rasa."

"*Tabula Rasa,*" agreed the others in unison.

And at that, the circle of levitating women began to spin faster and faster. Their robes became a blur. As they spun, the Levitating Matriarchs murmured. It was like the chorus of voices crazy people hear in their heads, Eddie thought. It did not seem to be going well.

Eddie suppressed a grin, and decided to see if he could make it go worse. "Hey, under those robes, are any of you hot? Or, is it just me?"

The murmuring grew angrier in tone. To Eddie, this was a good sign. He was about to ask if it was hard to levitate with so much excess weight, when Meek intervened. "Reverend Mothers, he is new to our church, and crude in his ways, but he is the chosen successor of our Most Holy Pontifex Solace the 21st."

"*Then, we shall respect her grace's wish,*" said the Voice of the Levitating Matriarchs. And suddenly, the spinning halted and they formed a circle. "*But first, a test.*"

*Test?* Eddie thought.

One of the matriarchs broke from the circle and produced a small box, about the size of a man's head. It was simple and black, glossy and wet looking, with a hole on one side large enough for a man's hand to squeeze into.

"*Do you know what this is?*" asked the Voice of the Levitating Matriarchs.

"I think so," Eddie answered.

"*Then, you know what to do with it,*" the Voice of the Levitating Matriarchs continued.

Eddie began to undo the bindings on the front of his pants.

"*Guess Again,*" said the Voice of the Levitating Matriarchs.

Figuring out their meaning, Eddie put his hand into the box. "Cold," he said. "So very cold. Slimy... and wiggly... Oh my Divine Spirit, it's worms."

He jerked his hand out. He was surprised to find it dry and warm.

"No worms," he said.

"*The only thing in the box is what you bring to the box,*" the Voice of the Levitating Matriarchs explained.

"I'm just glad I didn't put my other thing in there," Eddie said.

The Matriarchs realigned themselves, gliding into two neat rows of six, and bowed. "*We deem his response of worms to be ... acceptable.*"

Meek looked relieved. He was the only one.

"*You must choose a name,*" hissed the voice of the Levitating Matriarchs.

Eddie Roebuck had been briefed about this. "I will be known as His Holiness, Grexxx Grebulon the First."

"*What is the significance of this name, Grexxx Grebulon,*" asked the voice of the Levitating Matriarchs.

"In the world where I come from, the name Grexxx Grebulon is hallowed and revered. Grexxx Grebulon is the name of ..."

"*We deem the name acceptable,*" the Voice of the Levitating Matriarchs interrupted.

"But I never got to tell you..." Eddie stammered, but he was interrupted.

There was a flash, followed by a blast of air, and smoke, and when it had cleared, all 12 matriarchs were gone.

The sudden blast had laid out Eddie Roebuck, and he found himself looking up at Archonex Meek from the floor. "What was that all about?"

"I do not know," Meeks confessed. "The ways of the Matriarchs are strange to us. But it is written in the Third Compendium of Beta Ceres that they must... review the Pontifex designate. They seemed to have done so. Nothing now can prevent your installation as Pontifex."

"Great," Eddie said slowly, and closed his eyes.

## **Yronwode – Urbtar Lek**

K-Rock rode into Urbtar Lek on the back of a thunder lizard accompanied by ten of his burliest guards, having trekked for five days across the burning desert wastes between Izzan-Al-Izzan and the ruined city of Urbtar Lek.

Urbtar Lek, in older times, had been a citadel of one of the earliest generations of Xirong prisoners. Founded by descendants of prisoners who desired a return to ordered, civilized society, (long before the arrival of the Starcross Emissaries) it had flourished for a time, almost in secret. Then, it had had been over-run, taken down by corrupt, decadent rulers on the inside, and besieged by savage tribesmen on the outside.

K-Rock and his men passed through the Valley of bones on the city's west side, where the bleached, fossilized skeletons of giant, reptilian creatures lay scattered for miles across the sands. They came in through the west gate of the city, encountering an expanse of flat ground atop a mesa, laid over with a grid formed by streets and the broken foundations of ancient stone buildings, long since fallen.

K-Rock had mostly forgotten his prior confusion by now. It was quite obvious to his mind that his destiny was to liberate the oppressed masses of the *Tsi Bai*, even if he was still not quite sure who he had been before.

"Urbtar Lek," Big McLargeHuge said as they passed under the gate.

"So, I guessed," K-Rock said, "How old are these ruins?"

"I can't know," Big McLargeHuge answered. "Time don't leave no mark here."

K-Rock couldn't figure out, at first, what he meant. Then he realized, without seasons, or moons, and just a handful of visible stars, marking years would be difficult on this planet.

"Where will the Chieftains meet us?" K-Rock asked.

Suddenly, four large men jumped out from behind the fallen columns of some ancient edifice. "We meet here, K-Rock!" the largest of them snarled. They carried large firearms. K-Rock's men displayed their own in return.

K-Rock jumped from his mount and walked toward them. "This display is completely unnecessary," he said in the most calming tones he could summon. He raised his walking stick. "After all, four big brutes against little ol' me?"

In the moments that followed, K-Rock became a blur to them, It seemed impossible that a man so large could swing his staff so swiftly, and with such accuracy, and so deftly, knocking the three not-as-large men unconscious and somehow separating the arm from the shoulders of the biggest one.

K-Rock held the guard's neatly severed arm. "Oh my, that has got to hurt." He

tossed it aside, and then, with another swift movement, severed the guard's head from his torso to end his suffering.

"We heard you were ruthless," someone shouted. K-Rock turned and his guards pointed weapons that way. "We see it to be true."

"That is true," K-Rock called to him. "I am utterly without ruth. And what is your name, fellow?"

The man was considerably older than Boros had been, and much battle-scarred. He thumped his chest. "Nodoy, of Nazza-Al-Unsar," he told him. "So, you be spaceman. You think to unite our tribes. Disappoint me. Friends the Theocrats look for you. Big money on our head."

K-Rock ignored this and approached the man. "Are the Chieftains of the other Phalanges here?"

"Most," Nodoy said slowly. "They're curious on you, you coming from the sky, you prophecy the rain of fire. You killed the LIs, which as far as we know ain't been done before. You died and came back, which is even less common. Some of them think you're Kariad, but you don't look like the Kariad in my mind, now saying."

"I will speak with them," K-Rock told the man. Nodoy turned and led him to a building of rough stone and concrete that had been built on the site of what might have been a temple, in ancient days.

The inside was a great cavernous space, with what was probably an altar at one end (if this had indeed been a temple). Nine other men, all around the age of Nodoy and all battle-hardened, waited around a large oblong table as K-Rock entered.

"I will be brief," K-Rock told them. "I am proposing a union of our Phalanges, under me, for the purpose of eliminating the Theocrats once and for all."

The chieftains shifted in their chairs, a couple of them snorted. He turned to Big McLargehuge, who had followed him inside. "Bring the wine." McLargehuge exited.

K-Rock continued. "The reason we have not been victorious in the past is that the Theocrats have kept us divided and weak. I propose to make us united and strong. I have no designs on your lands, your people, or your power, I just ask for an army of 10,000 men from each of you. And when I have conquered Midian, I will return your men, and share the wealth of the city with you."

The chieftains were openly laughing now.

K-Rock's address rose to a crescendo just as the wine was being poured for each Chieftain. Two more large barrels were put at the front of the room. "We will take Midian, and we will take their cities, we will take their fine homes, their armaments, all the luxuries of life they hold for themselves while keeping us in a state of deprivation and despair. The end of their time will be a great day for all the *Tsi Bai*." He held up his own glass. "To victory and beyond!"

No one drank. They all just stared at him like a madman. Nodoy finally addressed him. "K-Rock, did anyone ever tell you you're stupid?"

"What do you mean?" K-Rock asked.

"You must really think we're all sick with the stupid. You think we'd drink your poison wine?" another Chieftain, Yoofoo, asked, knocking his goblet onto the floor and splashing it across the rough old rocks.

"I will gladly drink out of the glass of any man here," K-Rock shouted.

"Nobody'd believe you anyway," said another Chieftain, Goten, of New Babillon. "Nobody believes any o' that 'drive the Crats into the sea' talk for neither. Nobody here gonna to be stupid enough to believe that. You're gonna to be a fool if you do."

Exterminate the Crats... Shudders to think us all."

"I don't follow," K-Rock said.

Another Chieftain, Nameki, stepped up. "We ain't the smucks ... the masses. We're the civilized here. We live on top. Crat 'development aid' keeps us comfortable. If the smucks ever found out about it, they'd tear us apart. Long as they take their hate out on the Crats, they don't care what we do. Hates what keeps us in power. Hates what keeps us civilized. The system is perfect. Why change the system?"

Nodoy agreed. "We don't say it too much, but we know it, all of us. Clear to any thoughtful man. The system gives a standard of living to any man who can master it. Law of Reason says it every man's duty to his own self to master the system he's born to. Man's duty to his self is to get what power and wealth he can outta the system."

K-Rock challenged them. "Your masses live in poverty, while the Theocrats live decadently in their magnificent cities on the stolen wealth of the Xirong..."

Nameki posed a question. "You ever ask yourself, how did the Crats get rich by stealing from peoples what have nothing?"

K-Rock felt himself growing hot and fuming. He knew what they were saying made sense, but it was not helpful to the cause. "That is irrelevant. Your people are willing to sacrifice themselves to reclaim what is the rightful property of the Xirong."

Nameki shrugged. "Suicide missiles and blood bombs gets us rid of the stupidest and violentest of the smucks. They could be a real problem to us, otherwise."

Goten heartily agreed. "Deed, what with all the inbreeding in the smucks... Shudders to think what would happen if they all of them lived. Next Gen gonna to be so stupid, just shit their pants all day and sit in it."

Yoohoo laughed heartily and sang a few bars of a Xirong military chant, hoping the others would join him. "?Die, die for Yronwode/ Death set you free/ Kill, kill, some Theocrats/ Death set you free?" He stopped when no one joined in.

Nameki could not restrain a chuckle: "Glorious sacrifice for freedom of all Xirong! Ancestor of mine thought that one up. There's an old-time Xirong 'stition that the Commonwealth trapped the souls of Xirong on this planet, so they didn't taminiate the human races when they died. But my ancestor told 'em, 'Noble Sacrifice' frees your soul." Since then, we ain't never run out of fools willing to die for our sins."

"The Crats like it, too" Nodoy went on. "They're civilized, we're civilized, all us together benefit in what you call a symbiotic relationship."

"How do the Theocrats benefit?" K-Rock asked.

"Their chiefs stay in power," Nodoy explained. "And their smucks sing their own selves to Sabbath Day about all the good work they do for the poor oppressed Xirong. When they die, their imaginary Sky-God takes them to the magical land of dancing ponies, or some such thing."

"Xirong ancestors lost the Crusades," Yoohoo added, a bit grimly. "Ancestors of the Crats called them Adversary, because they had the Law of Reason, same as the Kariad. Law of Reason says humans ain't nothing more than sons of a virus. Xirong Ancestors dared dream of immortality didn't to bow down to false gods of theocracy. So, the Theocrats sent 'em into exile to Yronwode. Gave 'em the whole planet for their own selves. Then, the Theocrat Redeemers go in after them, try to bend 'em to false gods once again."

"See how good that worked?" put in one of the Chieftains who had not spoken yet.

K-Rock had had enough at this point. "I am the agent of forces far more powerful than the Theocrats."

Nameki snorted, and addressed K-Rock. "You mean Kariad. Y'know, some don't b'lieve you're from Kariad. Nameki don't doubt you're from Kariad. You're just as dumb, maybe more."

Goten added. "The Kariad wanted to take the Crats to another world. Can you imagine planet Yronwode with nothing on it but *Tsi Bai*. Shudders to think."

Nodoy stood, and met K-Rock's hard stare. "Do we believe you survived the LIs? Yes. Do we believe you 'Rose from dead?' Maybe it could be so. Do we believe in the prophecy of the falling stars? We'll give you that, too. But it ain't nothin' but a show. Entertainment. Nobody gonna to follow you for it. A phalange ain't obligated to survive but for its own self. My smucks don't die for his smucks, his smucks not to die for mine. I take care of my own and my own. Nobody else."

Murmurs of agreement spread around the table. K-Rock argued. "By banding together, we could have even more. Imagine the technology and wealth of the Theocrats meeting the power of your reason."

Goten waved him off. "Law of Reason tells us, the will to use force always beats the fear to use force. Midians gonna to always retreat from us, always gonna to pay us more not to use force on them. They fear us 'cos they know we got the will and they got the fear."

Nodoy put in. "System works for everybody. Midians pay us to promise not to attack. We attack anyway, they pay us even more. So it goes. But we all attack together, for real, then, they got no choice. They romper stomp us."

"Enough!" K-Rock slammed his walking stick down on the table, where it made a sound like thunder. K-Rock lifted a vessel onto the table with his free hand, opened the lid, and pulled a hissing, blood-red snake from inside. "You may be familiar with the Death Serpent. Its venom kills instantly. Its blood kills slowly. Fourteen to sixteen days typically."

The chieftains drew back from the snake. K-Rock put it back into the container.

"So?" asked Nodoy.

K-Rock raised the battlestaff defensively. "Big McLargehuge, Bob Johnson, give them their wine."

Before Nameki could protest that they would not drink, McLargehuge and John each grabbed a barrel, opened it, and flung its contents over the Chieftains, until all had been soaked or splashed with wine. The barrel at mid-table exploded from an internal charge, and ensured that no one had been missed.

Ten angry Chieftains, and double that number of bodyguards, jumped up angrily. K-Rock held them at bay with Mr. Smashy, but Nodoy screamed at him: "Let's see you come back from dead after we cut you into chunks."

K-Rock stared them down. "You have all been infected with serpent's blood."

"How?" Nameki demanded. Then, he realized.

K-Rock smirked. "It would have been much less messy if you had just drunk the wine. You should not experience symptoms for ten days, but after that, the symptoms will be agonizing."

"You gave us all the death penalty, yourself included," Nodoy thundered.

"I already came back from the dead once," K-Rock told them. "But don't worry. There is an antidote, and I have procured enough to cure each of you."

"There ain't no cure for serpent's blood!" Goten roared.

"Trunk Slamchest!" K-Rock ordered, and the guard by that name brought him a knife, with which he swiftly cut open one of the veins that bulged from the serpent's

neck. K-Rock held it up the snake for all of them to see and let several drops of the blood fall directly on his tongue. He swallowed it.

"That is 10 times the dose that has soaked into your skin," K-Rock told them, still holding the snake aloft. "Bring 10,000 men from each of your phalanges to the city of Nimali. I'll deliver to each of you the antidote to the serpent's venom as soon as your men arrive."

He held the snake by the neck as it coiled around his arm, raising it on one arm and his battlestaff in the other as he proclaimed. "The days of tribal division are over. This is the Dawn of the Union of the Snake. We shall drive the Theocrats into the sea, and we shall rule this world ten thousand years beyond eternity."

## CHAPTER: 12

### Yronwode – Midian Security Base 1 (The Barracks)

The Midians were unwilling to share unrestricted access to their command center with General Kitaen and his men. Instead, the operations for the *Pegasus* teams were led from windowless room in the barracks, with limited technology and communication access, relying on Midian intelligence, which came to the crew only after it had been reviewed and redacted by their "Intelligence Service."

The crew had to manage with what they had brought in the escape pods and what was in the wreckage of *Zilla* and *Prudence*. They also found the barracks to be thoroughly equipped with listening devices. After a while, the crew gave up on disabling them, and took to communicating via the Discreet Communications functions of their battle gear. These devices could take one person's thoughts and transmit them to another person, who would receive them through direct stimulation of the audio center of the brain and hear them as though they were spoken words. These silent conversations did tend to produce headaches, however, when they went on for too long.

Meanwhile, the warfighters talked endlessly about groundball, quoits, and discussions of weapons technology they either didn't have with them, or didn't have at all... just to make the Midians crazy looking for it.

"General Kitaen," Specialist Cowboy reported silently one morning, a few days after arrival. *"I've been able to access secure Midian military channels using the AI from Prudence. As we suspected, they are hiding a lot from us."*

"For example?" Kitaen asked mentally.

*"They recovered another escape pod from Zilla in a settlement called Bood-Al-Boondi, thirty kilometers northeast of where we found the first escape pod. They also think it possible the inhabitants have recovered a survivor. They had been making plans for an incursion, but they've been scrubbed."*

"Scrubbed?" Kitaen asked.

*"Za, there's some new threat they're concerned about. Some new leader among the Xirong. He's planning some kind of massive attack. They've actually taken resources away from the search for our survivors to try and spy on this new guy."* Cowboy paused. *"I can't prove it, but I am beginning to think they've given up on the commander and Stratos."*

Kitaen stood and spoke out loud to his men. "I'm going to go visit General Parka and see if he can do something about these accommodations. My bed is as hard as a stone, and this food would choke a Hill-Monster."

*"Parka?"* Cowboy asked silently.

*"He has bent the rules on our behalf before. If God is with me, I think I can persuade him to do so again."*

## **Yronwode – Midian Security Base 1 (General Parka's House)**

General Parka's personal quarters were located in a three-story townhouse in a village of stone townhouses occupying a corner of the base nearest the access road. It was shielded by some low, eroded foothills at the base of the Pontifex Wise plateau.

Parka met him at the door, dismissed his escort and offered him tea. "How can I assist you, General Kitaen," he said politely. It was early in the day, and Parka was out of uniform, dressed casually in the tunic and trousers favored by Midian Civilians. "I hope this will not take long. My son has a game of hoops this afternoon."

"I wish his team triumph over their enemies." Brief pleasantries aside, Kitaen came swiftly to the point. "My men have reason to believe that the Midian military has more intelligence information than it is sharing with us."

"I assure you, Lieutenant Commander Kitaen, that all relevant information is being shared with you. Although, there may be some delay in its release. Do you mind if I watch some teleprogramming while we talk?" Parka activated his entertainment system, which displayed a two-dimensional projection of some kind of sporting event.

"My entertainment system produces out of spec EM interference, plays havoc with listening devices. I'll have to have that looked at some time," Parka told him. "You are correct. Very little intelligence is shared with you, including information that may help locate your missing men. For this, I am sorry."

"Why are your people withholding this intelligence from us?" Kitaen asked.

"My people?" General Parka chuckled, amused by the choice of words, but then his tone turned blunt. "I will tell you why, but you probably already know. They don't trust you. They can not take the risk that your people will upset the planet as the Kariad did. I understand your predicament. Despite my years of service, they withhold intelligence even from me, because my parents were Xirong."

"They made you a General," Kitaen pointed out.

"That is true. Primarily to assuage their own egos. They idealize themselves as an inclusive society. My position is offered as evidence of their inclusiveness. But that is a topic for another discussion."

Kitaen sensed that he could come to the point with General Parka. "We have reason to believe another escape pod has been located, in a place called Bood-AI-Boondi."

Parka sipped his tea. "I was aware that they suspected a pod had landed there, I did not know it had been confirmed."

"Do you know if they are planning a search and rescue mission?"

"Bood-AI-Boondi is in Headhunter Territory. If your man landed there, he is most likely dead."

Kitaen had anticipated this. "I would like to send a squad of my warfighters to Bood AI-Boondi to investigate for themselves."

"They will never authorize such an incursion," Parka stated with assurance.

"Then the devil may take them," Kitaen told him. "I'll order my men to go in. And they will."

"They will stop you," Parka warned. From the look on Parka's face, he was repressing a dark smile. "But I see an opportunity to kill two blood serpents with but a single blow. I will send your crew on a search mission into one of the areas we have previously searched. If the Generals question it, I will tell them I was getting you out of the way, which they will be grateful for. Due to a navigation malfunction, you will find yourselves in the vicinity of Bood-Al-Boondi. Send a communication that you have encountered mechanical trouble and are sheltering for the night in your vehicles. We will send a recovery force at dawn. By then, you should have repaired the problem with your Sandcrawlers, and have no need for assistance."

Kitaen gave a respectful half-nod. "General Parka, I knew you were a man of honor and deviousness."

Parka appeared unmoved. "You will have between midnight and sunrise to complete your mission. Try to avoid gunshot wounds. They may be difficult to explain."

## **Yronwode – The wilderness of Howling Zeal**

Much later, in the darkness of the moonless and almost starless Yronwodean night, Johnny Rook, Max Jordan, and six of General Kitaen's men moved quietly toward the darkened outpost of Bood-Al-Boondi.

They had abandoned the Sandcrawlers (Midian military transports with caterpillar tracks) eight kilometers outside the settlement and made the rest of the way on foot. The terrain was rough, cold desert hardpan baked into pottery by the sun then chilled to iciness at night. But cutting through the bleak landscape was a railway line that led directly into the village. They walked along the tracks, exposed, but only if someone looked right at them really hard from a close distance. The active camouflage of their battlegear blended them into the night like shadows.

Dayvan Cowboy transmitted his thoughts. *"These rails will lead us to a large building about 3 kilometers from here, an abandoned shoe factory. That's where the Midians think the escape pod was taken, and where any survivors would be held."* He transmitted a map to accompany them, with some dated Midian aerial reconnaissance of the shoe factory.

*"Do we have interior maps?"* a warfighter asked.

*"Negative,"* Cowboy transmitted.

Just before they reached the factory, they came to a derailment. More than a dozen box cars and a locomotive had jumped the tracks at some episode in the near past. Their great hulks were left rotting in the desert, to be slowly corroded by the wind and the sand.

Caliph appeared in Max Jordan's visor, *"How are you feeling?"* she asked.

*"Good,"* Max Jordan answered, meaning it maybe for the first time ever. *"But I'm sort of busy right now."*

*"This train wreck was caused by an act of sabotage. They set explosives on the tracks that were triggered when the train went over."*

"I figured," Max Jordan answered out loud. Dayvan Cowboy's voice was projected into his head. *"Quiet, soldier. We're in stealth mode. Remember?"*

When Max transmitted, *"Sorry, Cowboy. My mistake, hope you can forgive me for that,"* it took the squad by surprise. It was a little out of character for Max to apologize, let alone so floridly.

*"I'm detecting a faint electromagnetic power signature coming from the factory. It is consistent with the escape pods carried aboard an Aves."*

"Tell the others," Jordan thought. And Caliph's data was transmitted across the squad. Cowboy ordered them to dismount the tracks and move out among the junked rail cargo transports (box cars) that littered the area immediately before the shoe factory.

Caliph shimmered into view in the vision-field of Max Jordan's helmet.

***"This area has been seeded with land mines. Petro-chemical and nitrogen-based explosives. Killing radius of approximately 6.5 meters."***

"Relay to team," Max Jordan ordered. Caliph relayed a map of where the mines had been deployed in the ground around the box cars.

"I like having her around, whoever she is," a warfighter thought-transmitted.

Caliph told Max Jordan, ***"There are eight hostiles in attack positions within 300 meters of us. They are armed with exploding projectile-based weaponry."***

Jordan ordered Caliph, *"Interface the data with my tactical display and transmit to the rest of the team."*

***"You bet!"***

"How is she detecting that?" Dayvan Cowboy asked.

***"I've developed a multi-plexing overlay that enhances the data from Jordan's battle gear sensors."***

Cowboy issued orders. *"1st Team, sweep and destroy, vector northwest 44, 2nd Team, sweep and destroy, vector northeast 100, 3rd Team, go in and find Stratos. On my mark, Rally at coordinates South 00."*

Rook and Jordan made up the second team. They broke east around the wreck of a boxcar and avoided the remains of the crates that had been inside of it.

"Got one," said Rook. He had sighted a sentry at the factory's side door. He adjusted his pulse weapon to sniper mode, targeted, and killed him with a single shot to the base of the neck. *"3rd Team, East entrance is clear."*

Caliph messaged Jordan and Rook. The message displayed in their vision-fields: **4 HOSTILES**. She helpfully displayed their positions.

Jordan signaled Rook. *"I'll take these on the ground behind the structure."*

Rook signaled back. *"I'll take the two dug in behind that cargo container."*

Caliph signaled. ***"One of the hostiles is carrying a rocket-based weapons system. Your battle gear is insufficient to take a direct hit and survive."***

Rook answered her. *"I'll just have to make sure I shoot first, then."*

Max Jordan ran across the frozen ground to the dried up riverbank at the rear of the shoe factory and opened fire with a spray of pulse rounds. One of the headhunters went down, and the other blazed at him with some kind of automatic firearm. The sand began to kick up in little bursts around him and a stray round occasionally deflected off his shield. The gear increased his speed, enabled him to dodge the exploding bullets, and deflected those he couldn't dodge.

Jordan answered the fire with a few well-placed shots that took the headhunter down in a way that he would never get up again.

"I'm done," he transmitted.

Johnny Rook jumped on the roof of the boxcar above the Rocket Squad's Nest. "Surprise, you're dead," he said out loud.

Several blasts from his battle rifle accomplished that.

He transmitted on an open link to Max Jordan, *"I wish the wife were here. She*

*loves shootin' stuff."*

Cowboy and his two men were preparing to storm into the factory through the loading dock on the front side, but by this time, the headhunters were aware that most of them had just died.

Caliph transmitted. *"I just picked up a tactical transmission from the leader of the headhunters. He said, 'It's time.'"*

"All teams, converge!" Cowboy ordered. He charged through the door. Rook and Jordan regrouped at the side entrance, and burst their way in. They encountered no resistance.

The interior was a vast space filled mostly with broken machinery, lit by a few extremely bright lights affixed to the ceiling. A catwalk surrounded the factory floor. *"I've detected Specialist Stratos,"* Caliph reported, and transmitted his position in the form of a pulsating orange dot on their tactical displays. She showed the *Pegasus* teams as pale blue dots, and the headhunters as red triangles.

Rook and Jordan came from the side while Cowboy's team moved in from the front, trying to stay in the shadows because the bright lights made their active camouflage almost useless.

They came to a cleared space in the center of the factory, where recording devices had been set up to record the execution. Stratos was lifted up by his arms and forced to kneel in front of a man with a knife as long as a person's arm. Three other headhunters began making a noise. Not a chant, not a song, but just a sustained C note that reverberated in the empty factory. The fourth raised his knife, and added his voice to their own, until they were howling together in a one note chorus of hate.

And then the Warfighters saw something that totally blew their minds for a few seconds.

Max Jordan had deactivated his tactical gear's shadowflage and was walking straight up toward the headhunters, his arms raised in a pose like he was surrendering. "Hey, guys, c'mon. You don't wanna do that. Let's work this out."

The headhunters were stunned, and the chorus of their chanting broke into discord, except for the executioner, who was absolutely focused on cutting Stratos's throat.

Johnny Rook came out from behind a machine, aimed, and fired. The pulse rifle was silent but deadly. The executioner's trilled high C note dropped abruptly as the charge hit him directly in the larynx. The man crumpled to the ground before the others were even aware that he'd been hit.

Cowboy and one of his men took out two of the others with quick shots to the head. Rook killed the other one with another headshot. Rook signaled to Cowboy, four fingers up, then four fingers down.

Cowboy reached Stratos first, and Stratos screamed as the blindfold was taken from his eyes. "It's okay, Anton, it's us," Cowboy said. The rest of the warfighters moved around him protectively.

One of Stratos's eyes had swollen shut and the other was open just barely a crack. He screamed, then collapsed sobbing. "Just get me the hell out of here."

"Easy, assol, we're going to get you out of here," Cowboy said in a calming voice. "Let Specialist FiveStars check you out."

"Get me out of here, please," Stratos sobbed again.

FiveStar Barlass was the unit's medic. She gently placed her hand on his neck and felt what was wrong with him. "Fractures in both legs, not from the crash. There are burns and abrasions on his skin. They tortured him."

"They wanted to know what we were doing here," Stratos sobbed. "They wanted to know if we were siding with the Midians or not."

"Do you know what happened to the commander?" Cowboy asked.

"I don't know. He made me eject first. Now get me out of here."

"That's why we came," Max Jordan said, raising the visor on his own helmet, showing a smile. "Buck up, little camper. You're going... some place safe."

Cowboy and Rook looked at Max Jordan oddly. Then, Cowboy asked, "Do we have a clean exit?"

***"No life signs in the vicinity. We eliminated 26 headhunters."***

Rook chuckled. "We just did the Midians a huge favor... and they'll never even know about it."

Stratos blubbered something. Barlass touched his neck and injected a calnative into his bloodstream.

"How's your leg? Can you walk?" Johnny Rook asked.

"Negative," Stratos answered. "Just get me the hell out of here."

"We'll get you back, don't worry about it," Dayvan Cowboy said.

Max Jordan smiled. "That's right. Don't worry about a thing. Everything's gonna be great."

The look in his eyes was so peaceful and assured, it was almost terrifying.

## **Yronwode - Xiyyon - Emissarial Complex of the Starcross**

That same night as Kitaen's men were out in the desert rescuing Anton Stratos from the clutches of the headhunters, Eddie Roebuck was sleeping fitfully between golden sheets of silk. An empty cardboard bucket of fried bird parts and two empty jugs of wine lay at the foot of his bed, as his telereceiver flashed images of a jiggly, late-night sex comedy that washed him in strobes of pale blue-white light.

Eddie dreamed.

*The woman in Eddie's dream was very beautiful, and somehow familiar. He knew the place where he had seen her,, too. But he had never been there before.*

*He was in some sort of sylvan glade, and the way the trees danced in the wind and the birds were all wearing tiny little Archonex hats made it somehow magical.*

*The woman had flowing blond hair, flawless skin, awesome knockers, and every cell of her glowed with inner light, creating an effect like sequins. She wore a kind of toga, or maybe she was naked. Eddie could not tell for sure. But he was naked, and not ashamed, and there was nothing unusual about that.*

*She gestured at him, bidding him to come to her. Her voice was musical, and Eddie was sure he had heard it before as well. Good Dreaming To You Eddie/ Art thou ready?*

*"Ready for what?" he dream-asked her.*

*She drew close to him and asked in an entirely different voice. "Do you want to touch my balls?"*

*"Excuse me?"*

*But there was no time to think because then they were in bed making love to each other, or she was making love to him. She was inside of him, somehow. And, anyway, where had the bed come from?*

*She sang,*

*There are questions in your mind*

*But stay close to me and you will find/*

*There is nothing here*

*That you need to fear*

*Eddie, this was all foretold*

*Something Something Something Gold.*

*"What was that last line?" Eddie asked.*

*She kissed him. She continued to make love to him. Eddie's head was swimming. And while she made love to him, she sang,*

*And now that you have passed your test*

*To prove you are the very best*

*Into your soul, my powers divest*

*That I might for a time rest*

*And, so, in his dream, Eddie made love to her again. And at the moment of climax, a bright light passed from her to him, a night breeze came in through a hidden window, and she was gone.*

*Eddie snapped to consciousness. He was alone. He was in his chambers, the luxurious suite he had come to regard as a temporary home. The dream slipped away from him, and he felt confused and disoriented. The windows were closed against the night and someone had turned off the telereceiver.*

*Eddie felt strange. As he sat up in bed, his body felt all wrong, as though he had lost a large amount of weight in the night. And his head felt weird, in a way he would have been hard-put to describe. In a way, it was like his mind had suddenly become vastly too big for his head to contain.*

*I could use some water, he thought.*

*And, as soon as he had thought it, a carafe drifted across the room to his hand. It was filled with sweet cold water.*

*"Um, how about an ale," he said, this time out loud.*

*The water in the carafe shimmered, and then turned a nutty brown golden color. When Eddie drank it, it was the best ale he had ever tasted.*

*He also realized that although the lamps were extinguished, the room was completely dark, he could see everything as clear as day.*

"If I'm still dreaming, I want the chick back," he said out loud.

He felt something coursing through his blood, a kind of energy, warm and electric. He soon realized it wasn't the ale. It was not until then that he noticed his hands were glowing with inner light, as though a tiny light in the nucleus of each cell had just turned on. He rose from the bed and walked over to the mirror, his feet not quite touching the ground. When he got to the mirror, he saw that his eyes were glowing with a strange inner light.

"Oh, boy," he said.

## **Yronwode – wilderness of Howling Zeal**

Hundreds of kilometers away, in a tent in the desert between Urbtar Lek and Izzan-Al-Izzan, K-Rock slept also, his snores reverberated off the canvas walls and rang in the ears of the sentries guarding his rest.

*In K-Rock's dreams, he found himself walking through some desert or other, and he stared at the sky. The clouds in the sky were forming into faces of people he thought he should recognize, except for one that distinctly resembled a cat. But when he tried to focus on the faces in the clouds, they dissolved away.*

*There was an old man walking with him. Because it was a dream, the old man had neither approached nor appeared, he was just there. And he and K-Rock were holding a conversation, one that had neither been initiated, nor had been joined in progress, but was just happening.*

*And Their Dream Conversation went more or less like this.*

**Old Man:** *So, I see you found another way to make a damned fool of yourself.*

**K-Rock:** *I know you old man, when I was near dying, you came to me and told me I was K-Rock.*

**Old Man:** *No, I told you not to listen to the horse.*

**K-Rock:** *It wasn't you.*

**Old Man:** *I don't have time for such foolishness*

**K-Rock:** *Then, it was by my own will alone that I set my mind in motion and allowed myself to become K-Rock.*

**Old Man:** *K-Rock is a horse's ass.*

**K-Rock:** *I'm not in the mood for this, old man.*

**Old Man:** *Moods are for sex and milkbeasts, and sometimes for both, like your Uncle Roy the Borealan, whom we're not supposed to talk about. And sometimes, moods are for Drama, which brings us back to Uncle Roy again. But definitely not for fighting! Saturday nights are all right for fighting, but not moods.*

*In the distance, on the horizon, but looming over large as though she were a giantess, the woman Bang, dressed in an inky black cloak, was holding out a vessel of water.*

*"Bitch," said the Old Man.*

*As the dream conversation went on, K-Rock realized that his dialog was flowing*

through him, as though coming from some other place and time. The next thing K-Rock knew, he was saying to the old man, "Yronwode was created by the ancients to contain the faithless. Am I trapped here because my faith was not strong. Is faith the key to escaping?"

**Old Man:** I bet ... (The Old Man then used a name K-Rock did not recognize. It sounded like 'Alchemy') ... would love to know that.

**K-Rock:** Some thoughts have a certain sound, that being the equivalent to a form. Through sound and motion, you will be able to paralyze nerves, shatter bones, set fires, suffocate an enemy or burst his organs.

**Old Man:** Thoughts have sound? What have you been drinking? The truth is, if you and your horde over-run Midian, as ye are fixed to do, within a month, it'll be no different than the rest of this godforsaken heckpit. I don't care much for uppity Republicker control freaks, but as bad as they are, they are the only beacon of hope on this world, and you want to snuff them out.

**K-Rock:** Did you know my name is a killing word.

**Old Man:** (Repeating in mocking voice) My name is a killing word. No, Blade Toto's is a killing word. Redfire's name is a killing word. Blades kill people. Redfire kills people, but Redfire is not himself these days. And, of course, Change kills people.

**K-Rock:** Rocks kill people, too.

**Old Man:** But paper covers a rock.

As if on cue, thousands and thousands of sheets of paper appeared, blowing through the desert, chased by the wind. K-Rock recognized them as scriptures, and suddenly he was terrified.

The Old Man muttered something.

**K-Rock:** Rock beats fire as well.

**Old Man:** Stick smashes rock.

**K-Rock:** Neg, rock smashes stick.

**Old Man:** Stick smashes rock, and stick masters fire.

**K-Rock:** You are mad. Fire burns stick.

The Old Man snatched away the battle staff from out of his hands: "Gimme that stick".

When the Old Man grabbed the walking stick, the sigils carved along its length began to glow. The Old Man walked with it to the cliff's edge and raised it in his left hand. As he did so, bright beams of light beamed out from it. The Old Man sang out over the valley, an alien song of clicks and chirps.

Presently, a dragon rose from the floor beneath. It was a horrifying beast, covered in black iron scales, its eyes glowing like hot magma. Its gaze was fixed on the light from the walking stick, as though hypnotized. The Old Man moved the stick to the right and the great dragon's head swayed to the right. The Old Man moved the stick to the left, and the dragon's head swayed to the left.

Then, the Old Man was astride the dragon's neck.

Thousands more filled the sky behind him.

And then there was an earthquake.

And someone was shaking him. "Wake, Lord K-Rock!"

K-Rock opened his eyes and screamed.

"You call for me!" Big Mclargehuge insisted.

"I wha-a-a-a?" K-Rock mumbled. The dream was receding, and yet behind Big McLargehuge, he still saw an afterimage of the Old Man riding a dragon, battlestaff held triumphantly over his head and beaming shafts of white light. He scrambled to see if his staff was still in the bed with him, but it was right in his hand.

Bang entered the tent behind McLargehuge and held her canteen out to him. "Water, my lord."

"I had a dream," K-Rock said, taking the canteen. "I know how to defeat the Theocrats now."

Bang smiled. "Destroy them, you mean."

"Whatever," K-Rock smiled and leaned backward. "Dragons."

"Dragons?"

"The dragons are the guardians of this world," K-Rock said. "But they are not its masters. I can master them."

"Dragons?" McLargehuge asked. "Like, giant flying thunder-lizards."

"Za, those dragons," K-Rock assured him.

"What dragons?" Bang demanded.

"They live in the sky," K-Rock told her. "This is a prison, they are the guards. I had a dream."

"There are no dragons?" Bang spat at him.

"Shut up and make me pancakes, foolish woman!" K-Rock shouted at her. "I am K-Rock! I play the hits! Do not question me, or I will smite you as I smited... several others who needed smiting!"

He took a long drink from the canteen, rose from bed and began looking for his mantle. "We have work, McLargehuge. We have to prepare our armies and time is short. Prepare to break camp and move to Nimali. Nothing can stop us now. We have the ultimate power of the planet with us."

As he said this, there came a flash, high in the sky above him. It was just a sudden flash, like lightning, but it was in a clear sky high above where clouds would be. Also, it persisted for many long seconds before it dissipated.

"You see my sign," K-Rock thundered. "Follow me and victory is ours!"

## CHAPTER: 13

### Yronwode - xiyyon - Emissarial Complex of the Starcross

Eddie Roebuck was quite amazed at the things he could suddenly do, such as levitating objects around the room, and transforming things into other things. He had transformed a whole tub full of water into ale, then bathed in it. He then transformed it into shrimp bisque and bathed in it again. Then, he had transformed it back into water, drained it, and made a fresh tub of ale for bathing in, transforming it into a warm,

scented cologne as he had finished.

He found he could change the telereceiver channels with his mind. He tried to use his powers to make the programs more interesting, like, for example, willing certain female performers to shed most of their clothing, but that had been unsuccessful.

Archonex Meek came into his chambers in mid-morning. "Meek, look what I can do!" Eddie had enthused. He forced a stream of water to jump from his tub, transform to wine in midair, and fill an empty goblet on his service bar.

Meek did not seem surprised, or even impressed. "I was aware," he said. "Last night, our lady Pontifex Solace the 21<sup>st</sup> passed through the veil. In doing so, she passed the powers to her designate."

"Wait, you mean she's dead?" Eddie already knew the answer, but it seemed proper to ask.

"She has passed beyond the veil," Meek told him. "And she has vested her Pontifex powers in you."

"You mean, she could always do this?" Eddie asked in amazement.

"Indeed."

"Then, why didn't she?" Eddie could not imagine having this degree of power and not using it for fun or personal gain.

"She understood the wisdom that told her that if one has great power, one must be careful in its use because if one does not control the power, one will be controlled by the power, Compendium of Beta Ceres..."

"... Chapter 6, verse 5," Eddie finished. "I knew that. How could I know that?"

"She passed her knowledge to you as well," Meek confirmed.

"Za, I know things..." Roebuck said. "I know things I could not possibly know. ..."

Meek bowed slightly, and seemed for the first time in Eddie's presence, a little nervous. "Most Holy, we must now begin the preparations for your installation as Pontifex."

## **Yronwode --- Midian Security Base 1**

In the late afternoon, the two sand crawlers returned to the Midian Defense Base 1. If the Midians noticed that ten soldiers went out and eleven came back, they didn't say anything. Anton Stratos was put up on the barracks and allowed to rest while BarLass kept watch over him.

"He didn't know anything about the commander, except that the commander let him eject first," Dayvan Cowboy reported to Kitaen and Alkema as they huddled in a broom closet that had been determined free of listening devices.

"Have you made any progress working with Midian Intelligence," Kitaen asked Alkema.

"I honestly don't know," Alkema told them. "I've even tried to probe Steadfast telepathically. She's the one I know best, but I can't even get a clear read on her. If they know anything, they're hiding it pretty darn well."

"According to our latest intercepts, they're more concerned with some new leader who's arisen among the Xirong," Cowboy reported. "They think he's a threat, probably an old Phalangist going under a new identity. But they can't get an image of him, and they can't track him because he moves constantly from place to place."

Parka suggested. "That's a concern for the Midians. Our focus is finding the

commander.”

“Or determining his fate,” Cowboy suggested.

“He’s alive,” Alkema snapped.

There was a knock at the closet door. It was General Parka. “You gentlemen may wish to come out and see this.”

The trio exited the closet and stepped into their jury-rigged command center, where the primary screen was displaying the scene at the Emissarial Temple of the Starcross Holy Empire. Eddie Roebuck was standing on a balcony, dressed in gold and purple robes, wearing a large spherical hat, and waving to throngs of the faithful gathered in Pontifex Wise Square. A pair of information telecasters, one of whom had appeared earlier in a dream of Max Jordan, were looking in on the scene from their studio.

“An alien pontifex,” the male telecaster was saying (he had not been in Max’s dream). “I don’t believe this has ever happened.”

“Not since the early days of the first Emissaries,” the woman explained. “There have been several Pontifexes born off-world.”

“But I understand the new Pontifex isn’t even a Brianist,” the man argued.

“Adherents prefer to be called Starcrossers, Tim...” the woman said.

“Of course, I’m sorry, but this is still highly unusual,” said the man.

“The new pontifex is an unusual person in every respect,” the woman continued. “Apparently, he has rejected the name of all predecessors and named himself Pontifex Grexxx Grebulon I.”

Kitean and some of the older warfighters began laughing out loud.

“What’s so funny?” Alkema asked.

“He named himself after an actor in Mining Guild Pirate Pornography,” Kitaen laughed. “What a strange child that one is. Are you sure you want him as your religious figurehead.”

“It is not my religion, nor is it my choice,” Parka asked. “While I am here, I would like to advise you that the Security Forces will be on a heightened state of alert while the Pontifex Transition is in effect. We also have unconfirmed reports that large numbers of Xirong are moving toward the city of Nimali, which is less than 100 kilometers away from here across the demilitarized zone.”

“Should we be alarmed?” Kitaen asked.

“Many Xirong are always moving toward Nimali,” Parka explained. “It is the nearest large city to ours, and there are opportunities to work. We monitor the city closely. For years, there has been talk of a renewed *ferkaktata* against the Midian state, and Nimali would be a natural place for it to be launched.”

“What is a ‘*ferkaktata*?’” Kitaen asked.

“It’s a word of uncertain pedigree, but essentially it means a mass uprising,” Parka explained. “I have recommended that we go to high alert, that we suspend border crossings, and return bonded Xirong to Nimali temporarily. But, the Ward of Economics says it would be too disruptive to commerce, and the Ward of Externalities says it would infuriate the Xirong.”

Kitaen may smirked a little. “It would seem your people have to walk on eggshells to avoid perturbing their feelings. Perhaps, the problem is theirs.”

Parka shook his head. “That is beyond my ability to deal with. But I understand uniquely that the Xirong perceive weakness in every concession. Someday, we will pay

a high price for our unwillingness to confront them directly.”

## **Yronwode - The wilderness of Howling Zeal**

In his tent at the base camp of Urk-EI, 200 km northeast of Nimali, K-Rock and his military advisors made their war plans. This was three days after he had dreamed of the old man and the dragons.

Since that dream, K-Rock had all but forgotten the troubling lack of memories from more than a few days before. What happened before he awoke in Izzan-Al-Izzan did not matter. He was K-Rock, he had always been K-Rock, and it was K-Rock's mission to conquer, subjugate, and ultimately destroy the Theocrat Invaders and raise up the *Tsi Bai*, to whom this world had been given by the Commonwealth Agents.

It was all totally clear to him, now. There was no doubt.

“Have all ten tribes committed,” K-Rock asked Big McLargehuge, his senior advisor. Bang hung back patiently in the background, dressed in the plain black robes typical of Xirong women.

“Cheiftain Ziger, ain't committed no forces yet,” McLargeHuge reported.

K-Rock noted. “Doesn't he want to live?”

McLargehuge answered, “He said he's gonna need more time.”

His other advisor, Bob Johnson harrumphed, “He needs time for rounding up enough hairless boys and toothless men from the sticks, like all the other Chieftains. That's how they're filling out their ranks. Just getting rid of the smucks they don't want.”

K-Rock grunted. “They will be sufficient.”

“How are we gonna to hide 100,000 men from the Theocrats? Never, that's how!” snarled another advisor, from the tribe of Nodoy, whom K-Rock had named Stump Beefknob. He was a bit younger than the others, a bit fatter, and, K-Rock sensed, a little soft.

“Oh, but we will,” K-Rock assured them. He pulled out a map of the Midian peninsula printed on brown, leathery paper, and indicated the foothills that lay between the Tsi Nai Mountains and the broad, flat Plain of Salvation, the Demilitarized Zone that stood between the city of Nimali and the Midian frontier. “These foothills outside Nimali will hide our numbers. If we move stealthily, the Midians will not be aware of our plans.”

“Then what?” Beefknob asked incredulously.

“When the time is right, the force will charge across the DMZ,” K-Rock said.

“All that's gonna get you is 100,000 corpses,” Beefknob protested warily, eyeing K-Rock's deadly walking stick which had begun to twitch in his hands. “Midian regulars number 100,000 men, with twice that in the reserves. Also, they got better weapons, better armor, aircraft we don't got. Not to mention the Shield.”

“I will take care of all of that,” K-Rock said calmly. “You shall see.”

“Some strategy for us your Midian Horse conjured,” another military advisor, Rod Bonemeal asked, contempt dripping from every syllable. Bonemeal had been sent by Nameki, and his was short and thin, but otherwise quite brutish in his looks and behavior.

Bang had been lurking near the back, always within whispering distance of K-Rock, she passed him water and she spoke as he drank it. “Now is the time to strike.

The Theocrats are busy mourning the death of their Great and Holy Pontifex.”

“So?” asked Bonemeal.

Bang explained. “For six days, they will be on official state holiday. Most workers take that time off. That’s our best opportunity to attack them while they are unaware.”

“Security Forces will still be working, and on high alert,” Beefknob protested.

“No one can pass the Shield, so doesn’t matter” Bonemeal pressed.

“Before we strike across the northern plain, it is my intention to sow mass confusion and panic in the cities of Xenthe and Xiyyon. That will give the Theocrats something far worse to deal with,” K-Rock said ominously.

“How?” Bonemeal demanded.

K-Rock looked around at the men, and saw that Bonemeal and Beefknob were not the only skeptics in his rank. He decided it was time to show them what had been hidden in the nearby rock formations.

“Come and see,” K-Rock ordered. He led them from his tent, and walked behind the row of tumbledown dwellings that marked the edge of Urk-EI, which had been nothing more than a trading village for a few score families of lizard and desert bean farmers. The villagers had mostly been hiding in their dwellings since K-Rock and his men arrived, since the arrival of *Tsi Bai* “politicals” usually meant food stolen and daughters raped. Also, sons. K-Rock had barely noticed the villagers himself.

Behind Urk-EI was a formation of stacked and eroded rocks. The rocks were a maroon color, and they turned blood-red in the morning sun. They were filled with magnetite, and created almost a cave system that stretched above and below the ground. The early settlers had even made dwellings here, beneath the arches of rock, and later they were used to store grain. More recently, they had become a garbage dump. ‘

But there was one space among the rocks of Urk-EI where some strange and amazing objects were being hidden, safely away from the prying eyes of any Midian agent who might be in the village.

Bang led them toward three large transports that had made the journey from Izzan-Al-Izzan. The devices they carried had been found in the desert, shortly after the strangers’ sky-ship had been brought down in flight. They were covered under a large, dirty sheet of tarpaulin.

“Show them what we recovered from the Badlands,” K-Rock ordered Bang.

With the help of McLargeHuge, Bang peeled back the tarpaulin to reveal three objects, about the length of a man’s height, made of a white metal-ceramic alloy. The rear part was a pair of tube-shaped engines with six fins projecting above and below. The forward section was a bulbous shape, reminiscent of a hammer. If K-Rock had been in his right mind, and if Alkema had been there to ask, he would have been informed that these were Hammerhead missiles.

“Among the gifts the gifts I brought for you,” K-Rock intoned, “the key to destroying the Midian’s Shield.”

“From the wrecks of your ship,” an Izzan-Al-Izzan ranking engineer, dubbed Stump Junkman by K-Rock, explained. “Engineers took one of these into the wastes and detonated it. That thing, by the way, not too easy. We lost one engineering team when one of those things exploded. But we got a yield of five kilotons; we measured it. Three o’ these linked together’ll give us fifteen kilotons. That’ll destroy an entire Theocrat city.”

“The Theocrats will be in chaos when their holy city disappears in a flash of light,” K-Rock spoke.

Bonemeal protested. "That's the wrong strategy. Use three warheads. Destroy Security Base One, Command and Control, and Security Ward."

"No!" Bob Johnson insisted. "Military positions are hardened against attack. Even close weapons ain't gonna to do enough damage. Anyway, we're gonna to kill more Theocrats if we link them together and blow them up in Xiyyon or Xenthe."

"They will be detonated simultaneously in Xiyyon, just before the attack," K-Rock ordered with an eerie calm.

"No," Bonemeal protested. "If we do that, the Theocrats'll kill us all. They won't stand for it."

"Another word and Mr. Smashy is going to be too angry for me to control," K-Rock snarled at Bonemeal. "These weapons will destroy the city, which will distract the Theocrats with chaos at the moment we launch our attack. But what is furthermore, they will destroy all the major temples in this planet, and with the symbols of their faith destroyed, the Theocrats will be demoralized, and they will fall before us like weak trees before a strong wind."

"How will you get these into the city?" Bonemeal asked.

"They have engines," K-Rock indicated, tapping on the rear of the missiles.

"Engines and Guidance Systems are still off-line," Junkman noted nervously. "Figuring 'em out could take many, many days... maybe never."

"Even if I threaten to kill you if you don't figure it out in time," K-Rock growled.

"There is another way," Bang told him him.

"Speak it to me, horse" K-Rock commanded.

"The Theocrats always send 'humanitarian' aid in the event of natural disasters," Bang explained. "They evacuate the most seriously wounded to their central medical facilities. They have always made sure their medical centers are vastly superior to ours, as a means off keeping us oppressed. **The neo-natal death rate is eighteen times higher in Xirong areas than in Midian...**"

"Get to the point," K-Rock ordered. There was an echo of something familiar in the way the woman yammered on at him insistently.

"All we need to do is smuggle the weapons into Xiyyon on board an ambulance,"

"They inspect ambulances, though, do they not?" Bonemeal pointed out.

"Yes," Bang hissed. "They don't care how many *Tsi Bai* die before they gets the medicals. **They want us dead!**"

"How will the ambulance get through the inspection point," Bonemeal clarified his question.

"We will stage a massive catastrophe," Bang explained. "We will have a disaster so huge they will have to deploy many hundreds of air ambulances. And they will have no time to inspect them all."

Bang hauled out a map, printed on the back of a thick, yellowing piece of paper. "On the southeastern coast is the city of Fett-Al-Birt. The Theocrats, as part of the Kariad Peace Accords, built a fusion energy plant here. Of course, they don't provides us with the technical support to maintain it. Also, their workmanship was no-grade, so is only about 40% functioning. It'd be easy to cause the plant go critical, and devastate Fett-Al-Birt.

"The Theocrats will send airlift ambulances to the scene. We hijack one, put the warheads inside, and take directly into Xiyyon."

Her rough finger traveled over the map to the locations of Xiyyon. "Warheads detonate, thousands dead, film at eleven."

"The casualties in Fett-Al-Birt would be equally as devastating," Bonemeal said. "We should evacuate as many as we can before the..."

"No!" Bang insisted. "Evacuation signal Theocratic Entity. They know we destroy the fusion plant."

K-Rock hesitated, then spoke. "Spread a rumor among the people of Fett-Al-Birt that the Theocrats are going to sweep the city for guerilla fighters. Many will evacuate on their own. How long will it take to prepare a tri-partite warhead large enough to fit inside a Midian ambulance."

The engineers agreed that it could be done in two days.

"We now have strength in numbers, and the element of surprise," K-Rock told his advisors. "Now, we need the third key... absolute discipline and strength of will, of purpose."

K-Rock turned and stared sharply at the men around him. "I know your masters do not intend to follow me. I know the conscripts they will send me are inferior, because they do not wish to waste good men on this foolish endeavor. I know further that they are planning to kill me before, during, or after the battle. So be it. At the day of battle, their men shall be mine, and there will be no question that I, K-Rock, was born to lead this army and this world."

He turned and walked out of the tent. A few seconds later, he poked his head back into the tent. "Johnson, McLargehuge, Slabchest, you will come with me."

The three men followed him out, leaving the others to study the battle plans.

"What do you think," Beefknob asked Rock Hardpeck, the representative from Yoohoo's Phalange.

"He is completely out of his mind," Thickneck answered. "If my master did not need the cure for Serpent's blood, I would kill him where he stands."

"As would I," Beefknob said. "And were not the lives of all my sons and daughters forfeited if I did not return with the cure, I would kill him anyway."

"Most of the 'men' the Chieftains are sending are just hairless boys and ancients," Hardpeck sniffed. "Maybe the Mighty K-Rock's plan is to let the Theocrats slaughter them, and then guilt them into surrender."

"It worked before," Bonemeal snorted.

They heard a noise outside, the noise of a large truck pulling away from the camp. Beefknob threw the plans on the floor.

"Let's find us some lunch," he suggested. "Our Megalomaniacal Godking can figure out his own furking war plans."

They had almost made it to the food tent when they were quickly surrounded and disarmed by a group of K-Rock's guards, led by Punch Rockslab. "What's going on?"

"We're killing you, that's what's going on," Rockslab answered coldly.

And with a spray of weapons-fire, they accomplished exactly that.

## **Yronwode -- Xenthe**

Rook and Jordan took two of the new warfighters to the tavern in Xenthe where

they had met the two girls, and noted that a booth near the bar was occupied by the same two men who had been sitting there previously. They stood out because they did not seem to be having a conversation, but listening in on the warfighters table. Rook figured they were Midian Intelligence agents, and Warfighter Zurich, a strongly built female who kept her red-brown hair in a perky pony-tail, sent them over a round of the local ale.

“O.K., here’s the thing,” Rook was saying shortly after a couple pitchers of ale and a plate of breads, olives, and cheeses arrived. “The thing is, they have a game they call ‘air hockey,’ but it is nothing like the game of air hockey as we know it.”

“I kind of like this,” Zurich purred as she relaxed with her drink. “I haven’t set foot on a planet since Aurora. I forgot what the air smelled like.”

“This city isn’t bad,” Warfighter Trill, a young darker skinned man agreed. “Considering what they had to work with on this forsaken planet.”

“Is this table wood or metal?” Zurich asked.

“It’s both,” Rook explained. “The trees that grow in the northern extreme have wood that’s as hard as iron, and only a little easier to cut. That’s how the planet got its name.”

“These olives are great,” Max Jordan said, out of nowhere. “Olives are really hard to grow. I remember my dad telling once about when he was young, he used to be sent to an Island called ‘Seche de Mer’ back on Bodicea. They grew olives there, and they would send boys there to harvest them.”

He realized the other three were staring at him. “What?”

Rook sighed. “What the Hell is wrong with you?”

“Nothing.”

“Nothing?” Rook repeated incredulously. “You’ve just said the longest sentence anyone’s ever heard from you. You talked about your father, which you never do. And you talked about Bodicea, which you never do. What the hell is wrong with you?”

“Nothing, like I said,” Jordan only seemed a little angry about it. “I just felt like talking about these olives. They’re great. Try them.”

“But that’s not like you,” Rook repeated. “Is this from carrying around Caliph in your tac gear? Did she do something to you?”

Max Jordan shrugged. “She erased some bad memories, that’s all.”

“She did what?” Rook repeated.

Max Jordan repeated himself. “Caliph erased most of my traumatic memories.”

Johnny Rook pressed him. “Caliph did what?”

Max Jordan shrugged a little as he answered, as though to question what the big deal was “She isolated traumatic memories from my childhood and erased them. It’s kind of like when you had a headache, and then you feel better. I feel like that all the time now.”

Zurich jumped in. “Are you insane, Max? Doctor Reagan, God Rest Her Promiscuous Soul, would never have allowed that. Do you know what happens to people who undergo selective memory erasure?”

Max Jordan shrugged again and rolled an olive around on his fingers. “I know, permanent personality shift. It’s worth it. I didn’t want to carry those memories around any more.”

Johnny Rook took it further, “Permanent memory shift, za, but try insanity. Your mind knows where the holes are. It keeps picking at them, subliminally, trying to fill in

the missing gaps. Eventually, it leads to psychosis.”

Rook saw Trill and Zurich looking at him and realized he owed them an explanation. “It was in a fiction-drama, but it was based on a true story.”

“I know that one,” Trill told him. “When the guy starts wearing dresses and asks the other guys to call him Loretta.”

“Good fiction-drama,” Zurich agreed.

Max Jordan was quiet for a moment, then he said to Johnny Rook: “Caliph says to prevent that syndrome, she synthesized new memories for me to fill in the holes. I remember that an Aurelian molested me when I was a little boy, but I remember it like something I read about, not like something that happened to me.” He paused. “For some reason, now I hate ice cream. But on balance, it’s still worth it.”

Rook was very concerned about this. “Max, we have to get you out of your combat gear. We can’t have Caliph...”

“She’s not in my combat gear,” Rook explained. “She’s in my head now.”

“Holy crap, Max,” Rook stood up suddenly and knocked his chair over. “Is Caliph with us now?”

“She’s always here,” Max Jordan said with a smile, tapping his head. “She’s not doing anything right now, though. She’s just observing.”

Trill and Zurich were confused. “Caliph is here?” Trill asked.

“You bet,” answered a grinning Max Jordan.

“You let an AI live in your head,” Trill said, pretty shocked.

“No, she only goes there sometimes,” Max explained.

Johnny Rook faced him. “Can you still fight?”

“What?” Jordan asked.

Johnny Rook challenged him. “That anger you felt toward the Aurelians, isn’t that what drove you to become a Warfighter?”

Max Jordan turned serious “I am still a Warfighter, and I still hate the Aurelians, and those aliens who took my mom, who were also probably Aurelians.”

It was around then that the serving girl returned. “I am sorry,” she told them. “You can finish your food and drink, but the tavern will be closing now.”

“Closing?” Rook asked. “What is it?”

“It’s when we stop serving drinks and lock the doors, but that’s not important right now,” the pretty maid brushed her hair back over her shoulders. “In honor of the passing of the Pontifex. We have to close... out of respect.”

Then, she half-smiled and added. “I have two friends who have a place not too far from here. You can come and drink with us, if you want.”

## **Yronwode – The wilderness of Howling Zeal**

As the sun was setting (that is to say, as the sky dimmed in the east and brightened in the west), North of Urk-El, on the northern rim of the Euphoria mountains, K-Rock took the small party of military advisors. He squinted out over the Barbas-Ur flatlands that stretched to the north. “This is it,” he announced to them.

There was a ruined complex of buildings there, forming a semi-circle around a large spire that still reached a hundred and forty-four meters into the sky. “What is this

place?" K-Rock asked.

"Mission Barabbas," Punch Rockslab, his current favorite aide-de-camp answered. "The Redeemers used to had a mission here, a long time passed. They tried to convert the *Tsi Bai* to their religion in this place." He pointed toward the spire. "That used to been their prayer tower, over there. They went up there and prayed."

"This is the place of my Dreams of Blood," K-Rock proclaimed. With a kind of howl, he plunged his battlestaff into the ground.

K-Rock turned to his men, "I call to the dragons, and soon, we will receive dragonsign."

Rockslab and the other men muttered among themselves, before Rockslab had the courage to ask, "Dragonsign? What in the name of Elfen Magic are you talking about?"

K-Rock scowled at him. "You know, dragonsign. The sign of a Dragon. You'll know it when you see it."

Rockslab grunted, "Whatever you say."

K-Rock closed his eyes, and began his meditation.

Rockslab drew a large dagger from his belt. He drew it with great care, and completely silently, but K-Rock knew. Somehow, he knew. K-Rock said, "You have no need for your weapons with me, Punch Rockslab. I can kill you with a word, or technically, with Mr. Smashy. You don't want to make Mr. Smashy angry, do you?"

Rockslab sheathed his knife. K-Rock continued, "For seventy generations, the Xirong have awaited a living, breathing weapon, a weapon that would enable you to overthrow the Midians and the Starcrossers. Indeed. This weapon, I am. I am K-Rock, I play the hits." He paused, "Rockslab, do we have Dragonsign?"

Rockslab was about to say no, when suddenly shadows filled the sky. He looked toward the west and saw a massive sky-herd dragons wheeling in the slowly waning light, roaring and soaring and beating their wings.

"Do we have Dragonsign?" K-Rock repeated.

"We got Dragonsign the likes of which the Godless Void has never seen," Rockslab stammered.

K-Rock opened his eyes and beheld the dragons. They had come, exactly as his dream had foretold.

K-Rock stood and ran to the cliff's edge, past where Hardmeat and the other lieutenants were throwing up in sheer terror.

Dragons were flying toward them. A hundred or more, their black wings beating on the air. Collectively, the beating of their wings was raising a windstorm on the ground. The largest broke from the rest and began flying right down toward the edge of the cliff where K-Rock was standing.

K-Rock grabbed his battle-staff, and raised it. A blinding light issued from the tip, and seemed to catch the dragon's full-on in the eyes.

"I am K-Rock!" he yelled.

The dragon answered with a spew of flame. The flame curled around him.

"I am K-Rock," he yelled again and the dragon answered him with more fire, which curled around the shield created by his battlestaff and left him untouched. The beast seemed to give up after this, and flew down below the level of the cliffs.

K-Rock yelled one last time, "I am K-Rock!" and threw himself over the edge.

To the stunned amazement of all on the ground, the dragon soared over the cliff-top a second later with K-Rock clinging to its neck. The beast then beat its mighty wings, lifted off and flew high into the sky.

It returned, flying low in a long curve, straight on toward the ancient Mission. When it closed on the prayer tower, it fired a blast of burning hot plasma at it, incinerating it to dust.

"I am K-Rock!" he yelled. "Who will doubt my power now. My dragon forces with burn the cities of Midian, lay west to them. Who would not follow me now?"

He looked down and realized he had accidentally incinerated his henchmen.

K-Rock turned back to the dragon, "Oh, well, they were a bunch of distrustful death vipers anyway. Hi-Ho, Hazuzu. Tomorrow, we ride for Nimali. And the day after that, Xenthe and Xiyyon will burn."

He rode his dragon across the sky. High above him, the sky burst again with a lightning-like show of raw energy.

## CHAPTER: 14

### Yronwode – Xiyyon – Emissarial Complex of the Starcross

On Yronwode, one hot dusty day segues into the next, with no variance for season or weather. It was easy to lose track of time. Perhaps that was one of the conditions of punishment.

On the day before his formal installation as Pontifex, Eddie Roebuck again called Trajan Lear into his chambers.

There had been changes in Eddie, changes even Trajan Lear could not overlook. The last time Lear had seen him, Eddie had been agitated to the point of near-panic, he now seemed calm. His robes no longer seemed like costume-party affectations, but now seemed completely appropriate to the man who wore them.

Also, his eyes glowed. This was pretty creepy, as they had never done that previously.

"Hello, Eddie," Trajan Lear began.

"It's Grexxx, now," Eddie corrected him, his voice had also changed, picking up a weird, echoey effect.

"Grexxx," Trajan Lear repeated.

Archonex Meek, standing next to the Papal throne corrected, "Technically, he will not become Pontifex until he is installed by the full Parliament of Archonexes."

"A technicality," Eddie/Grexxx intoned. "Pontifex Solace No. 23 has gone beyond the veil, and passed her powers onto me."

"That must be why your eyes are glowing," Trajan observed.

Grexxx/Eddie laughed again, with that creepy-sounding laugh that was unlike anything those who knew him had heard before. "You sound exactly like Captain Sky-Pilot, now. Just as you always wanted to, Congratulations."

"Flight Captain Driver remains at the Saintist Temple," Lear reported.

"I know," Grexxx/Eddie floated around one of the elegantly carved tables in his chambers, which drew Trajan's attention to the fact that his feet no longer touched the ground.

Trajan squinted. "Are... are you levitating?"

Grexxx/Eddie answered. "I am indeed. Now, that the Holy Power of the Almighty flows through me, my feet may not touch..."

"You're wearing a hover-skirt," Trajan exclaimed.

"Za, but Anti-Gravity is a Holy Power of the Almighty."

"It's a Holy Power of the City of Technology Advanced Physics Laboratory on Republic ."

"Regardless," Grexxx/Eddie explained. "I feel her powers coursing through me, which takes some getting used to."

"Ummm," said Trajan.

"Their crazy religion," Eddie exclaimed raising his hands to the sky, as though in triumph. "It's real. All of it. I know now. Everything in it, is real."

"Even the part about the Giant Space Asparagus?" Trajan Lear asked.

"Broccoli," Grexxx/Eddie corrected. "Giant space broccoli. And za, that happened, too. First Compendium of Ceres Beta, Chapter 22: And in the end came the giant space broccoli. And they absorbed the colonists in their sleep. The men, the women, and the children, all were absorbed by the space broccoli. And those who did not succumb on the first night were hunted by the human husks of the absorbed, which did walk among them, and upon sighting a survivor did raise their and raise a terrible wailing. And thus were all the colonists of Taramayara absorbed by the giant space broccoli. The End."

"How could anyone have written that verse if they were all dead?" Trajan asked.

Grexxx/Eddie smiled beatifically, which was just as creepy as hell. "No hand wrote the words of the Fifth Testament, but it came about through a miracle. A miracle about which you have certain knowledge," Grexxx/Eddie said. "But you don't know it yet."

"I am guessing you no longer wish to leave the planet then," Trajan asked.

Grexxx/Eddie floated up next to him, and stood face to face. "Neg, this is my world now. I am its protector."

Trajan Lear knew of Eddie Roebuck primarily from things Matthew Driver had told him during their captivity in the Chronos universe. Lear had hoped not all of the stories were true, but even if only two-thirds of them were, he could not imagine a world looking to Eddie as their protector.

"I am the Pontifex, I am the human-Allbeing interface, I am prophet, seer, and revelator! And I am the Protector of the World!" Eddie proclaimed. "I also know why Solace wanted me to touch her balls."

"What?" Trajan asked, perfectly naturally.

Grexxx/Eddie confronted him, "You doubt me, I can hear it in your thoughts."

"Nay," Trajan replied. "Maybe, a little. I'm really not sure what analysis to apply here."

"What do you need to analyze?"

Trajan stepped carefully backwards. "For example, when you say Protector, I think, Protector from what? Space Broccoli?"

"Anything which threatens the Starcross Adherents, but that they can not defend themselves again, in accordance with the First Compendium of Aquila Burundi, Chapter 14..."

"Defend the from what, specifically?" Trajan persisted.

"The Xirong are gathering in the Plain of Salvation, and in the sky, for a major attack."

"Shouldn't you alert Midian Security Forces?"

"They would not listen, just as they would not listen to Wise when he warned them two hundred years ago. They think they are safe because they have two spies in the ranks of the Xirong, but their spies are already dead."

"So, how are you going to defend them?" Trajan Lear challenged.

"I have powers," Grexxx/Eddie told him portentously. "Real powers, kick-ass powers."

"Like?" Trajan asked.

Grexxx/Eddie made a gesture with his hand, like he was pushing something aside. Lear felt himself lifted up, tossed across the room and slammed hard against the far wall.

"Like that," Grexxx/Eddie told him.

Trajan looked up at Grexxx/Eddie, who was surrounded with a residual field of twinkling energy.

"Did I hurt you, beauty?" Grexxx/Eddie asked.

"Aye," Trajan Lear answered, picking himself up.

"Let me heal you, then," Grexxx/Eddie offered. He did not seem perturbed in the least that he might have caused injury, he was just offering to repair it.

"I'll be all right," Lear assured him. "I concede you have developed extraordinary powers. Do those powers extend to disabling the Containment System so the rest of us can get off this ... lovely world."

Grexxx/Eddie paused. "The answer to your question is hazy, and you must ask again later."

"That means nay," Lear said.

Grexxx/Eddie floated toward the large circular window at the far said of his

chambers. "Pegasus is here for a reason, Trajan Lear. We are all here for a reason. You are a component of the Divine Plan, as is Pegasus, as is Commander Keeler, and as is Max Jordan."

"Commander Keeler?" Trajan perked up. "Is he alive? Do you know where he is?"

Grexxx/Eddie paused, then answered. "I think it is better that I not tell you now."

"Eddie, if you know anything about the captain..." Trajan Lear began, but then Eddie gestured and a wall of air knocked Lear backward. Lear knew then that Eddie wasn't going to tell him anything.

Eddie moved toward a round window at the back of his chamber, beyond which, a crowd of worshipers had gathered. "My people are out there, I can feel them. I borrow energy from their beliefs, but I am connected to them. I feel their wants, and their needs. There's a pregnant woman in the back. She has miscarried before, and her prayer is for the child to be healthy. There's another woman. Her life has been a mess up until this point. She is thinking of becoming a Devoted One, but she fears she is only doing it to escape the personal chaos she has made around herself. She prays for direction."

"And do you answer their prayers?" Lear asked.

"As I see it, yes," Eddie answered. "But only in the sense that I pass their prayers onto Higher Powers."

"The Allbeing?" Lear asked.

"My sources say no," Roebuck told him. "Above me is a sort of, well, there are powerful beings who are not the Allbeing."

Abruptly, Eddie changed the subject, "Did you know I have the entire Fifth Testament in my head."

"All of it?" Trajan asked, shaking out his shoulder, which seemed to have taken the worst of the force of the fall.

"Every word of it ... truth."

And Grexxx/Eddie began reciting:

"Book of Ariam, first chapter: Here's how it is: Before the beginning, when the universe was void and without substance, there was nothing but the Darkness and the Allbeing. And the Allbeing said, 'Let there be light,' and behold, all that is was formed from a mighty explosion of light and energy..."

"How long is the Fifth Testament?" Trajan Lear asked.

"414,616 words," Grexxx/Eddie told him.

Lear sighed, "I'm supposed to be back at the Security Base by 1400 hours. Maybe you should just skip to the back and tell me how it ends."

Grexxx/Eddie admonished him, "I already told you, it ends with all the colonists on Taramayara being absorbed into the Giant Space Broccoli and being trapped in its vegetable hive consciousness."

"Meek, make sure this man gets a copy of the Fifth Testament before he leaves," Grexxx/Eddie ordered.

"I will indeed, Most Holy," Meek bowed... um,... meekly.

"One of the nice ones," Grexxx/Eddie specified. "With the full-color illustrations and the sea-kraken-skin covers."

"Yes, Most Holy."

"Do you want to know the meaning of life?" Grexxx/Eddie asked Trajan Lear.

Trajan Lear paused. "It might come up as a question in the Game of Resistance, so, tell me."

Grexxx/Eddie snorted, a bit like the Old Eddie would have. Lear found this a bit of a relief. Grexxx/Eddie recited, "Book of Ariam, Chapter 3: 'And the Allbeing needed a place for souls to reside until they were ready to dwell with him in perfection. And so he took the substance in the waters of the world and grew from it the human race. And he told the souls that they could reside in the bodies of men, where they would be tested by the desires of flesh and spirit...'"

"So, in order to achieve spiritual perfection, our souls have to reside in bodies in flesh?" Trajan Lear asked. "That doesn't make any sense."

"A caterpillar goes into a cocoon and emerges as a butterfly," Grexxx/Eddie told him.

Trajan Lear had never much cared for Theology or metaphors, and had come out of the Chronos universe with only a little more tolerance. That tolerance was now exhausted and he finally just asked, "Eddie, why did you send for me?"

Grexxx/Eddie for once answered him directly. "A great and terrible storm is coming. You and the others will want to stand against it, but you can not. You need to stand down until the storm passes."

"What kind of storm?" Lear asked.

"I am sorry," Eddie told him. "Centuries of religious custom require that I only issue prophesies Allegorically. But you, and the rest of the guys from Pegasus, just keep your heads down when stuff starts blowing up. Understand?"

"Right," Lear answered. He found he was beginning to develop a headache.

Grexxx/Eddie repaired to his throne, and took his seat with an elegant imperiousness none had ever witnessed in him before. "Armageddon rides upon us on dragon's wings. The dreams of blood are upon us, and what horrid beast, its hour come 'round at last, slouches toward Xiyon to be born," he babbled.

Cardinal Ordinator Meek showed Trajan Lear out of the palace and saw that he got a nice copy of the Fifth Testament, in sea-kraken skin cover, with illustrations, compliments of the Emissarial Temple Complex Gift Shop. But when he returned to the suite, Eddie/Grexxx was no longer there.

## **Yronwode – Midian Security Base 1**

Domonique Fair was the Warden of Peace, and the Sister of the Warden for Externalities. She was considered a potential candidate for First Minister of the High Council. Parka hated talking to her, but on this issue, he had no choice.

Her soft white face, framed by waves of blond hair that was going white, appeared on the screen in General Parka's office. General Intrepid and David Alkema were with him. "I can only spare you a few minutes... General," her condescending tone of voice betrayed her lack of respect for Midian Security.

Parka put his case before her. "After consultation with the Warden for Security and the Warden for Intelligence, we are heightening the security alert levels. The death of the Starcross Pontifex, and the Installation of the New Pontifex will both result in major events involving large numbers of people, potential targets for violent activity."

The Warden looked irritated at the suggestion. Parka pushed on, although he seemed to sense she had made up her mind already. "Additionally, we have been monitoring certain activities among the Xirong. We have unconfirmed reports of recruitment drives in some of the major Phalanges. Sources in Nimali have spoken of large numbers of men coming into the city over the last several days."

"Many Xirong migrate toward Nimali," Fair protested. "They just want a chance to work. It's the fastest growing Xirong city on the planet."

"If our reports are correct, Migration levels in the last few days are a thousand per cent above normal," General Intrepid put in. "And it's not families, it's men from the ten largest Phalanges coming alone."

"The Ward of Peace has nothing to do with Security Alerts," Fair snapped at them. "Why are you informing me?"

"The Ward of Peace this morning authorized a massive relief effort for the Xirong city of Fett-Al-Birt..." Parka began.

Before he went on, Fair jumped in, "The Xirong have suffered a major disaster at the Fett-Al-Birt power station. We are, of course, responding with humanitarian aid."

"Madame Warden," said General Parka. "We have intelligence indicating that people began evacuating the city several days before the reactor went critical, and we have a report from a field operative that the Xirong intend to smuggle arms or guerillas into Midian by hijacking one or more of the air ambulances."

"Don't be absurd," Warden Fair admonished him. "No one would use an ambulance on a mercy mission as a weapon. The Xirong are not the barbarians you security types always make them out to be. What's happening in Fett-Al-Birt is a humanitarian disaster. Would you prefer that we just let them die."

Parka kept his composure. "No one is suggesting that. We consider the timing of the incident suspicious, being coincidental with the arrival of a massive force of Xirong on our northern border."

"The Xirong are not a threat to Midian," Fair insisted. "An occasional missile attack, an occasional blood bomb by radicals. The more radical elements are a nuisance, but we are protected by our Shield, and they know a massive attack would never succeed."

"Warden, I have five and half million people depending on me to protect them," Parka argued.

Fair was indignant. "How dare you accuse me of not caring about the security of our people! How dare you!"

"I accuse you of no such thing," Parka answered patiently. "But Midian Intelligence and Midian Security are both of the opinion that the Xirong are behaving suspiciously."

"Suspicious lead to fear, fear leads to hate, and hate leads to war," the Warden of Peace recited. "The path of trust will lead us to peace, and that is why we must dispatch humanitarian aid to Nimali. Even if it means taking some risks."

"We could set up emergency medical services somewhere other than Xiyyon, like Security Bases One and Four, both of which have very..."

Fair was shocked. "Send refugees to a military base? Haven't they already been traumatized enough?"

"We ought to at least inspect the ambulances when they land," Parka advised her, trying much harder now to keep his composure.

"And what if some of those innocent *Tsi Bai* die because care was delayed for an inspection?" the Warden asked. "I am sorry, General. But the humanitarian aid will proceed without security interference. In fact, if I see even one soldier on the grounds of the West Xiyyon Medical Complex, I'll take a complaint directly to the First Minister.

You will see to security arrangements without interfering with the humanitarian relief mission." She switched off her transmitter.

"That is about what we expected," General Parka sighed.

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

"We'll put a security perimeter around the Medical Center, and have interceptors standing by in case any air ambulances deviate from the standard air corridor," Parka told him, although the tone of voice showed he didn't think it was enough.

"I don't think we need to discuss our security protocols in front of... people who aren't affected by them," General Intrepid said. "In fact, I would like to suggest relocating your people, temporarily, until the security alert passes."

"Relocate us?" Alkema asked him what he had in mind.

Intrepid lay a brightly colored paper pamphlet on the table in front of Alkema. "We have a small city on our southern coast called Xev. It's very pleasant. It's on the sea, and there are several resorts. It will be more empty than usual because of the Funeral and Coronation ceremonies. I thought you and your men might enjoy a getaway."

"I don't think I could recreate at a beach knowing Commander Keeler was still out there," Alkema told him. "And I am certain General Kitaen would agree with me."

"We have been searching for twenty-one days," Intrepid snapped at him. "We haven't found a trace. If the Xirong had found him, they would have issued a ransom demand. You may have to accept the fact that your commander ... died in the sands of the Wilderness of Howling Zeal."

"Until I see a body, I don't have to accept anything!" Alkema shouted at him, so loud and angry Parka raised and eyebrow and gestured for silence, a curiously effective mannerism on his part.

"And if he is buried under shifting sands, or if, Allbeing forbid, a mega-worm has swallowed him, there may be nothing to find, ever," Intrepid sounded angry. "I'm not trying to hurt you, but there are harsh realities you will have confront eventually. One is, your commander may be dead. Two is, you may never be able to leave this world. I hope you find a way off, but you should think about, right now, what you're going to do with the rest of your life if you can't.

"I can promise you this, your technological knowledge is very valuable to us, and the Midian Government will ensure that all of your people are well taken care of," the General finished.

"We don't want to be taken care of," Alkema protested.

"We can discuss this at length later," Parka put in. "For now, General Intrepid and I need to plan security logistics for the Coronation and Funeral, and continue monitoring the build-up of Xirong in Nimali. When the present situation is passed, if your

commander has not returned and if you still can not find a way off-world, we will discuss what to do then.

"In the meantime, go back to your barracks, or to the hangar to work on your ship," Parka told him. "There is nothing more we can do here."

## **Yronwode – The Badlands Outside Nimali**

K-Rock had left Big McLargehuge in charge of his forces, such as they were.

Big McLargehuge, formerly known as Ator, had been a minor bodyguard, a *ton-ton*, under Boros, and as such, had primarily been tasked with cracking the heads of lesser Under-Chiefs in the Boros Izzan-Al-Izzan Phalange. The closest he had come to military operations were the occasional raids on surrounding phalanges to secure food, medicine, parts or whatever else was needed, and that time when that group of headhunter fanatics had tried to demand more tribute from the Boros Phalange and required strong physical violent persuasion to change their minds. He was not a military man, he was a thug, albeit a more thoughtful thug than most of the others.

But so far, the old men and boys sent down to Nimali to join in the Final *Ferkaktata* and Conquest of the Theocrats could not even respectably be called Thugs. Some of them could not respectably be called men. None of them were weak, a hundred generations in a thoroughly Darwinian environment had made the Xirong into a hardy and robust strain of the human species. But they were not the stuff of which good, effective thugs were made.

McLarghuge consulted with Crunch Rockbone of the Kazaki Phalange. "Are all the ten Phalanges' men here?"

"Yes, but we don't got a hundred thousands."

"Why not?"

Rockbone scratched under his helmet. "Some of them got themselves lost in Nimali. It's a big settlement and they ain't stupid. They know they're gonna die in this thing."

"Maybe I should go with them, maybe," a third said. He had been given the name Ram Hardwad by K-Rock, and he was of the Phalange Thuthu. "What smuck is gonna to run across the DMZ? Nobody, that's who?"

"That's no lie," McLarghuge agreed. "Nobody die on his say-so, nobody, that's who."

"Food runs out, soon, too" Rockbone said. "Then what? I don't know what, I don't."

"We declare humanitarian crisis," Hardwad laughed. "The Theocrats will come to feed our army. Then, we'll attack."

They became aware, at about this point in the conversation, of an excited yammering rising from the camp where the ten armies of the Xirong had gathered.

"Am I going to have to beat them again?" Hardwad muttered.

But before he had even finished, they found their gaze being drawn upward. From high in the sky, 101 shadows crossed the suns and bore down toward the surface.

"What the hell?" Rockbone said.

The shadows swung lower now, like a flock of birds, which Yronwode had none of anyway, but that is how they moved. And when they approached the ground, their shapes became discernible, long-necked winged lizards, with fiery eyes and teeth and

claws. The men in the camps screamed in panic, now, as 101 dragons came down from the sky. The camp broke into pure chaos as the men and boys sought to escape, and had no place to escape to.

“What in the godless void are those?” Rockbone asked in astonishment.

“Dragons,” McLargehuge said. “The Ancients left dragons to guard prisoners, so says the legend.”

The largest, most fearsome dragon pulled up close and stopped before them, long enough for both to see K-Rock riding just behind its head, his legs seemingly merged with the beast’s neck. (In fact, there was a small pocket behind the neck for this purpose.

Then, Keeler made his dragon fly hard and fast toward a communication and lookout tower a few kilometers from the encampment, but visible across the flat, featureless plain. The dragon let loose a burst of charged plasma and obliterated the tower like a popsicle in a flamethrower.

The dragons wheeled toward the camp, and when they reached it, they began to alight and position themselves on the surrounding rocks and hills, wherever they could find a purchase. The largest and most fearsome landed last.

K-Rock dismounted his dragon and spoke to the people. “Do not fear me, peasants, for I am K-Rock!”

The men and boys gathered from across the Wilderness of Howling Zeal abated their panic, a little bit, and cautiously regarded the man who stood before them. They had been told of K-Rock, that he had fallen from the sky, foretold the ten fires that fell on Midian, and had returned from the dead. None of this was as impressive as seeing him ride a dragon.

“K-Rock,” they began murmuring among themselves. “K-Rock.”

“I have won these beasts to my will!” K-Rock proclaimed to them. “These beasts answer unto my commands, and will do whatever I bid them.”

He paused, portentously. “I will bid them destroy Midian.”

A chant began among the massed armies. “K-Rock! K-Rock! K-Rock!” Those who had been fleeing stopped, turned around, and ran to where the armies were gathering before K-Rock. The thousands gathered in the tents and low trees of the badlands began moving toward him, assembling in an open space. K-Rock stood on a little mount before them, his dragon obediently waiting behind him.

And the chanting grew louder and more rhythmic. “K-Rock! K-Rock! K-Rock!”

He held up his hands, but still they chanted. Men and boys, who minutes before had been snoozing in the hot afternoon, playing listless games of chance, or plotting how to leave were now amassed before him in a throng of tens of thousands chanting “K-Rock! K-Rock!”

“I am K-Rock, I play the hits!” K-Rock shouted.

“He plays the hits! He plays the hits!” The crowd chanted.

Big McLargehuge looked on. K-Rock had changed. The tepid man, with his injuries and indecision, that had slain Boros but a few short days ago, had been replaced by a wild-eyed savage, still in his black suit, by seemingly possessed by some, dark, unknown spirit as he urged his army of suddenly devoted followers to howling zeal.

K-Rock’s voice shouted above them. “Your old masters will be dead within the day. They have been poisoned with the blood of the death serpents. Do not mourn for them. They used you. They kept you weak.

"I am not like that, I am K-Rock! In me you will find strength! In me you will find the glory that was denied you! In my name, you will go forth as free men, and as long as you do whatever I command, you will be free men!"

There was scattered applause at this.

"You have bravely come to this place from across a desert and a wilderness. You were told you would die. I tell you now, follow me and you will not only live, but you will have power over all those that kept you down! You will have wealth beyond your imaginings! Your names will be spoken through history! You left as outcasts, you will return as conquerors."

He gestured toward the smudge of smoke and dust on the horizon that marked the location of the city of Nimali. "Across the plains beyond Nimali lies Midian, lies the city of Xiyyon, the city of Xenthe, cities of such gleaming wealth that you can not imagine, wealth and power that has been kept from you, that has, in fact, been stolen from you. Today you will take it back!"

"K-Rock!" They chanted. "K-Rock! K-Rock! K-Rock!"

The chanting continued through the next part of his speech. "This world speaks to me through my dreams. It reveals its secrets to me. And it is angry. It is angry at the Theocrats who exploit the *Tsi Bai*, and angry at the Chieftains who lie to the *Tsi Bai*. The *Tsi Bai* are its people. The planet was lonely for millions of years, then the *Tsi Bai* came. Yronwode loves the *Tsi Bai*, but it hates the Chieftains and it hates the Theocrats. In me, Yronwode has found a champion, who will free her people from all their oppressors

"Until now, you have been kept weak. You had no weapons to match the Theocrats. You had only your bodies, and your will. But it was enough to beat the Theocrats off the lands of your ancestors, and into their fortified and gated city. With these mighty, fire-breathing beasts, we have what we need, to take what is rightfully ours!"

"K-Rock! K-Rock! K-Rock!" chanted the masses.

"Now, take word to Nimali," K-Rock shouted. "Every man and boy and woman and child in the city, tell them to move into the plain and march toward Midian. Let them know the day of their destruction is upon them! They will not strike you. I and my dragons will guard you from on high."

"K-Rock! K-Rock! K-Rock!" chanted the masses.

**"One planet! One race! One will!"** K-Rock shouted.

"One planet! One race! One will!" the people shouted back at him.

**"Fatherland! Conquest! Victory!"** shouted K-Rock.

"Fatherland! Conquest! Victory!" shouted the armies of Xirong.

**"Might for right, Fight! Fight! Fight!"** called K-Rock

"Might for right, Fight! Fight! Fight!" the Xirong shouted back at him.

**"Might for right, Fight! Fight! Fight!"** called K-Rock

"Might for right, Fight! Fight! Fight!" the Xirong shouted back at him.

**"Today belongs to the Tsi Bai!"** he shouted.

"Today belongs to the *Tsi Bai*!" shouted the armies.

"Long live K-Rock!" a single voice yelled from the back before K-Rock could speak again, and the chant was soon repeated and amplified above all others. "Long live K-Rock! Long live K-Rock! Long live K-Rock!"

K-Rock pointed toward the city with his staff, and the entire assembled armies of all the Xirong Phalanges began running towards it. In the background, several dragons lifted their serpentine heads toward the sky and let loose blazes of fire.

“Godless void!” spat Rockbone. “It’s gonna to happen. It’s really gonna to happen.”

“K-Rock gonna to Conquer Midian,” Big McLargehuge was almost stunned to hear himself say it.

“We are so boned,” said Packwad.

## **Yronwode – Midian Security Base 1**

“The Midians don’t think we’re going to leave,” Alkema reported to Parka and Cowboy as they met with Barlass in the ill-equipped barracks command center.

“They may be right,” Cowboy told him. “*Pegasus* was just starting to work on the problem of getting you guys off when they sent us here. If they haven’t figured out something by now...”

“As I was trying to explain before Lt. Commander Alkema came in,” Barlass, the Tactical Medic, interrupted, “We may have a problem if we don’t find a way off the planet.”

“What?” Cowboy and Alkema asked in unison.

“How long have we been on the planet?” asked Barlass

“Twelve Days,” said Cowboy.

“We were here nine Days before you got here,” Alkema told him.

“I could show you some displays, but it wouldn’t help, so I’m just going to tell you,” Barlass sighed. “If we don’t get off this planet, we’re going to die.”

Alkema corrected her. “Technically, we’re going to die even if we do get off this planet.”

“I mean relatively soon, within a year,” Barlass elaborated. She pulled up some displays. She was right, they didn’t help. They were just magnifications of cells. “Specialist Savagewood and I have been working out the effects of the planet’s electro-magnetic and radiation field on this planet. The low-grade radiation of this planet is going to start degrading the DNA in our cells, leading eventually to what the ancients called ‘Cancer.’”

“I thought we were immune to cancer,” Kitaen said.

“Normally, we are,” Barlass explained. “And our immune systems will keep us protected much longer than we would otherwise. But this radiation is eventually going to start killing us faster than our bodies can adapt to it.”

“Why hasn’t it affect the natives?” Cowboy asked, a split-second before Alkema would have.

“The Midians and the Xirong have been genetically altered to survive in this environment,” Barlass explained. “And if I’m right, they would suffer the same effect if they left the planet, only much more rapidly. Their immune systems would start attacking their own bodies.”

“Another failsafe,” Alkema said. “If they leave the planet, they die.”

“The ultimate prison,” Kitaen mused. “They are literally physically bonded to the planet.”

“But we’re not,” Barlass told them. “Which means, we will all die unless we can

find a way off.”

“How long?” Alkema asked.

“With treatment, we could last a year, maybe two,” Barlass told him. “The symptoms haven’t started hitting us yet, but another 30 or 40 days, we’re going to start feeling some symptoms, probably fever and fatigue at first.”

“Can you fix it?” Alkema asked.

“I can probably forestall it,” she told him. “But it’s prolonging the inevitable unless we can get off this planet.”

“Speaking of which, have you come up with any ideas for getting us off the planet?” Kitaen asked Alkema.

“I’ve been focused on finding the commander,” Alkema confessed. “Lear’s been thinking about it. He thinks if we can achieve an extreme speed, say, one-quarter light speed, in an Aves before we hit the 10,000 meter barrier, we might be able to make it out before the defense system can respond.”

“Probability of success?” Cowboy asked.

“I find it hard to believe the Ancients wouldn’t have thought of that,” Alkema told them. “And we have no way to test it without doing it. Our best bet is figuring out how the Kariad left. Has Zim come back with anything from the archives?”

“Very little,” Kitaen reported. “The Midians are, typically, being less than forthcoming, and only letting her see material after they’ve had the opportunity to review and approve it. She has found one account of the Kariad’s departure, but it’s thin on detail. The Kariad ship was a shining silver disk half a kilometer in diameter. When it left, it rose straight up into the sky, paused a moment, then vanished in the blink of an eye.”

“Not very helpful,” Alkema sighed.

They were interrupted by the arrival of Warfighter Johnny Rook. “Guys, you need to come outside and see this.”

Outside the barracks, sirens were blaring in abrupt two-note shouts. Uniformed Midian personnel were running across the base. The engines of all the ornithopters, interceptors, and attack aircraft filled the afternoon sky with thrumming bass notes.

Kitaen opened the military communications device he had been issued and pressed in the four number sequence that connected him to General Parka. “What’s going on?”

“A major force of Xirong have begun marching into the demilitarized zone,” Parka told him. “We believe it to be an attack.”

A moment later, the first black contrails began to scar across the sky as the Xirong launched the first wave of suicide missiles against the cities of Midian.

## **Yronwode - Xiyyon**

One of the great things about being a telekinetic Pontifex, Eddie decided, was the way locked doors would open themselves in front of you just because you willed them to. The doors to the Santorum at the foot of the prayer tower were no different. Also, the lightshow obligingly began as soon as he stepped into the chamber.

Eddie/Grexx levitated over to the altar and willed open the panel in front of the dark matter orb. “Tell me what balls I can’t touch,” he said in a voice much more Eddie than Grexx.

He reached into the chamber and touched the dark matter orb of sin.

As soon as his fingers brushed it, he vanished into thin air.

## Chapter: 15

### Yronwode – Midian Security Base 1

David Alkema exited the hygiene pod at the rear of the command center, and walked to the space in front where six enormous screens were arrayed in a semi-circle. Four of these provided views of the outside (the other two showed maps and data), and these four showed the enormous mass of Xirong marching into the Demilitarized Zone between Nimali and Midian.

General Intrepid was explaining his defensive plans to Parka and Kitaen. Captain Steadfast stood to the side. Colonel Brave, from the Intelligence Service, was there also.

“We’re deploying three brigades, one in front of each path,” Intrepid explained. “Early intelligence indicates they are poorly armed. Hopefully, when they see our firepower, they will turn back without creating casualties.”

Alkema looked at the map. Green circles indicated the positions and numbers of Xirong. Blue triangles showed the number and positions of Midian Security Forces. “It looks like you’re outnumbered.

Captain Steadfast answered him. “We have better weapons and tactics.”

“Have the Xirong ever attacked in this manner before?” Kitaen asked.

“After the Midian colony first began to prosper, there were periodic attacks, even wars, with Xirong Phalanges or sometimes coalitions,” Steadfast explained. “The last time was almost ninety years ago, before the Kariad and before the deployment of The Shield.”

“There must be a hundred thousand of them,” Intrepid said.

“Yes, and look at their colors,” Parka pointed out. “Izzani, Babillonian, Namekian, Tarimite, Al-Rokri...”

Steadfast picked up on the implication immediately. “Someone has managed to unite the major phalanges.”

“Why would they attack now?” Alkema asked.

“Why indeed?” Colonel Brave asked pointedly.

“What are you insinuating?” Kitaen asked.

Intrepid shut his mouth. Parka spoke up, then. “There is some suspicion that your people may be working with the Xirong,” he told them.

“Parka!” Strong snapped.

But Parka continued. “The Xirong began massing for an attack soon after your arrival on our world. We have human intelligence that one or more persons, claiming to be Kariad, have been working with the Xirong to organize a massed assault on Midian.” He spoke calmly, matter-of-factly.

“That is not true,” Alkema protested.

Kitaen raised an arm and an eyebrow. “I assure you, we have had no contact with the Xirong.”

“Not even on your overnight excursion into the Badlands?” Brave asked.

"Any contact we may have had with the Xirong on that occasion was not in the form of collaboration," Kitaen answered. "Furthermore, if there is anything my men can do to help defend..."

"This is not your battle," Intrepid cut him off.

"Your people will be completely safe when they are evacuated," Captain Steadfast added.

"And placed under heavy guard," Strong insisted.

"A ship in a harbor is safe, but that is not what ships are for," Kitaen argued. "So it is with warriors."

"Given the ambiguity of our situation, I would prefer your 'warriors,' be off my base," Intrepid persisted. "I've ordered them evacuated. You and your lieutenant may stay, if you want. When we've turned back this Xirong assault, the intelligence forces would prefer to question you."

"It's lieutenant *commander*," Alkema corrected.

## Yronwode – Xenthe

As soon as they received the order to pack up and move out, *Pegasus's* tactical contingent began packing up and preparing to leave camp.

"I don't get you," Johnny Rook hammered on Max Jordan as they stuffed what few belongings with them into their gearbags. "You let an AI play with your mind. That's just dangerous, and not in a good way."

Max Jordan continued packing his gear into his gearbag. What he would have told Johnny Rook was that for the first time, he felt like other people, like everyone else on *Pegasus* who didn't walk around with the weight of anger, crap, and fear pressing down on him. He couldn't articulate this, so he told Johnny Rook to shut up.

"Nice," Johnny Rook replied.

Just then, Dayvan Cowboy looked in on them, his gearbag slung over his back. "Ready?"

"Za, we're ready," Rook answered. "Where are we going?"

"Xev," Cowboy answered. "It's a beach resort on the southeastern coast. It sounds really nice." The last two words were laden with sarcasm. There was nothing really nice about cutting and running in the face of an attack.

Caliph appeared unexpectedly, projecting herself from Max Jordan's tactical gear so they could all see and hear her.

*"Guys, just so you know, I've picked up active transponder codes from three of the warheads from Zilla's defensive load."*

"I thought none of the Hammerheads were recovered from Zilla," Cowboy said.

*"None of them were recovered... officially. Given the amount of atmospheric interference, they must be close. I will attempt to triangulate."*

She activated the sensing gear on Rook's battle suit as well to get a better fix.

*"I have a location. Interfacing geo-locator with city maps. The Hammerheads are on an emergency landing pad at Xiyyon Medical Center. Many medical evacuees from the Nimali meltdown were taken there. The Xirong must have smuggled them in."*

"Why would they smuggle bombs to a hospital," Max Jordan asked.

"The military bases are too well-defended," Cowboy suggested.

*"I'm interfacing with the warheads. Their capacitors are building a detonation charge, all three weapons set for maximum, simultaneous detonation."* She paused. *"It will destroy the city."*

"We have to warn the Midians," Rook said.

*"I am already attempting to do so. But there's no time to evacuate the city. And they won't know how to disarm the bombs."*

"Would an air strike destroy the bombs?" Rook asked.

*"Negative, at best it would trigger a premature detonation, and there is already capacitance to level a third of the city."* She paused again. *"Get me there. I can disarm the bombs, but I can't do it remotely."*

"We'll never make it to Xiyon in time," said Cowboy.

"Unless we could steal an ornithopter," Max Jordan suggested. "Caliph could figure out how to fly it, and..."

"Get us blown out of the sky," Johnny Rook finished.

*"I have an idea. But it's a little risky. Meet me in front of the barracks.""*

Caliph vanished.

"What is it?" Rook asked.

"What is she thinking?" Rook asked Jordan.

"Don't know," Max confessed. "I think she wants it to be a surprise." He took his gearbag and walked out through the door without waiting for them to follow, which they did.

Caliph reappeared as soon as they were outside.

*"Why don't you just take that?"*

She pointed to the lone surviving Accipiter from Zilla, which was hanging in the air, as though expectantly.

*"That will get us across the city in seconds. I am programming the navigational coordinates now."*

"Can all of us fit in there?" Johnny Rook wondered aloud.

*"Two of you can, Rook and Jordan. It will be a short trip. And neither of you is susceptible to homoerotic arousal. You'll be fine."*

## **Yronwode – Security Base One**

Like sticky desert heat, the tension in the Command and Control Center thickened and permeated as the marching Xirong closed to within 1,000 meters of the outermost Midian Security positions.

"Maintain Action Alert status at missile defense sites, in the event the Xirong coordinate a missile assault during the strike," General Noble, who was Chief of the Air Wing ordered.

"All anti-missile defense stations at Action Alert status," his female lieutenant confirmed. "We have already intercepted and destroyed seventeen in-bound suicide missiles. Another three made it through our defenses."

Escorted by a pair of guards, Trajan Lear entered the chamber and was escorted to stand near Alkema and Kitaen. "I didn't want to leave the Aves," he told them. "So they brought me here."

"This doesn't make sense," Kitaen whispered to Alkema and Lear. To his frustration, they had all been relegated to the role of background observers. "A full land assault in broad daylight against superior forces?"

Alkema agreed. "Something else is up."

"Quiet," Colonel Brave snapped at them.

"I was merely pointing out the possibility that those forces are being used as a diversion," Kitaen told her.

"That they are," Intrepid said. "We are investigating an intelligence report that the Xirong have smuggled a weapon of mass destruction into Xiyyon, but the sourcing is suspect."

"The Ward of Public Safety is reviewing it to see if an evacuation is warranted," Captain Steadfast passed on.

"But it's also possible the report of a WMD is itself a distraction from the frontal assault," another officer, whom Alkema and Parka did not recognize, added.

"Or both are distractions, or neither," Kitaen put in. "Most ingenious."

"Generals," said another lieutenant at a monitoring station. "The Xirong have stopped."

All eyes went toward the battle displays. The Xirong had halted their advance 600 meters in front of the Midian lines, and stood there, waiting.

"What's going on?" Intrepid demanded.

"They've stopped, general," the female lieutenant said.

"I know that," Intrepid snarled. He turned to Parka, "What do you make of this?"

Parka was the calmest man in the room, (although Kitaen was a close second.) "Normally, I would suggest they are waiting for us to make a move. They are in an inferior position militarily, but by sacrificing themselves, and then making a great show of their victimhood, they have gained sympathy among some of our people. But I do not believe that they are doing that this time."

"What are they doing?" Intrepid asked.

Parka was quite certain. "They are waiting for something else."

## **Yronwode - Xiyyon**

The Accipiter flew stealthily over the city, in holoflage mode since they didn't have time to deal with any Midian interceptors. The streets and buildings passed underneath in a supersonic blur. It made a quick shoot over the mountain pass that divided Xiyyon from Xenthe, and descended toward the Medical Complex.

"Where is the bomb?" Johnny Rook asked. He and Max Jordan were packed into the Accipiter's cramped one-man cockpit. Max Jordan straddled the seat, and Rook sat behind him with his arms wrapped around Jordan's waist.

*"It's on some sort of landing pad on the west side of the facility,"* Caliph answered. *"You may have to get creative, it's surrounded by Xirong guards."*

"Set us down on the same pad," Rook ordered.

*"They might panic if we do. I suggest we Land on the adjacent pad, and we'll try and take them by surprise."*

"You're flying this heap, honey" Jordan reminded her.

"Honey?" thought Johnny Rook.

As they neared the medical complex, they could see the ornithopter sitting on its landing pad, a bleach-white beast with the local symbol of the healer painted in red on the side.

*"The warheads are in the rear compartment. Hurry!"* Caliph ordered.

## **Yronwode – Security Base One Command and Control Center**

For eighteen minutes, the Xirong had not moved.

"Status of The Shield," General Noble had asked at precise two-minute intervals.

His female lieutenant had answered him with equal precision. "All sensor systems engaged and interface with command systems. Gun emplacements, missile batteries, automated battle drones all operational and holding at Action Alert Status."

Noble turned to Intrepid. "We could move in air assets, intimidate them into retreating."

"Generals!" shouted the male lieutenant urgently. He was staring at the screen, where a flock of large black dots were approaching from the horizon."

"What is it?" Alkema shouted.

"What are they?" General Parka corrected.

"They don't register on our sensors," the female lieutenant reported.

But their approach was swift. They passed over the Xirong lines at low altitude, blotting them in shadow as the Xirong began to jump and shout, and by this time, their shape was clear.

### **Dragons!**

"Dragons!" Steadfast whispered.

"Dragons!" shouted Intrepid.

The beasts tore through the air with the speed of fighting jets, and in a matter of seconds were bearing down on the Midian Security units.

"Tell them to open fire!" Parka barked.

"All units, free fire," Intrepid conveyed.

The male lieutenant frantically flipped communications switches. "Free fire! All units, Free fire!"

The forward security brigades had opened fire in advance of the order, which was a natural response to being attacked by fire-breathing dragons. The dragons bore down on them in sequence, one diving in and shooting plasma fire at the position, then lifting off just as another followed and performed the identical attack. Six assaults fell on the First Brigade before contact was lost, and their communication screen was replaced with static.

The second position was by then under attack. Its soldiers were firing guns, artillery, rockets into the approaching dragons with no effect. The first hit filled the screen with flames and the screams of men, sometimes mercifully cut short, sometimes not. Within a few seconds, this communication feed was lost.

"We've lost security brigades one and two," the male lieutenant reported.

"We're losing more than that," Noble said. While the main force of dragons had

attacked the security brigades, another force was moving in on the communication and sensor outposts that made a line across the mid-section of the DMZ. These nodes were vital to command and control of any counter-attack.

As the third security force came under attack, the tension in the Command Center was replaced by panic.

“Where’s air support? Where’s air support?” shouted Intrepid.

“Where is air support?” Noble shouted at his lieutenant.

She tried to remain professional, but her voice was quaking. “First Interceptor Squadron is engaging the ... enemy.” She was unable to bring herself to say “dragons,” since her mind had not yet accepted the fact that their attackers were dragons.

Ten Midian aircraft moved into the battlefields airspace, each carrying ten missiles. They tried to lock on with their missiles and destroy the dragons. They tried to shoot down the dragons with their air cannons.

They tried and they failed. One by one, the yellow stars that represented the aircraft blinked out on the tactical displays. One by one, the flaming wrecks of aircraft plunged down to the desert floor.

In the wake of the destruction, the main body of the Xirong ground forces began running across the DMZ, toward the Midian border.

“There’s nothing to stop them now,” Parka said, quietly, detached, but interested in the outcome.

“There’s the Shield,” said Captain Steadfast.

“Move Second and Third Squadrons into the battle,” General Noble ordered.

“They won’t stand a chance against the dragons,” Kitaen advised them, his mind had no trouble accepting that dragons were attacking them.

“He’s right,” said Intrepid. “Tell them to attack the Xirong ground forces. Maybe we can thin them out.”

The male lieutenant was sweating bullets. “This can not be happening.” He was not the only one beginning the panic. Orders were frantically being shouted. The communication systems broke down in a cacophony of competing commands and pleas for attention.

The red circles on the tactical display moved inexorably forward toward the broken white line representing the Midian border. Two groups of yellow stars passed over them. A sensor display showed huge explosions thinning the ranks of the Xirong, but not by nearly enough.

The shouting in the room began to coalesce around a repeated observation.

The dragons had regrouped, and were bearing down on the security base.

## **Yronwode – Xiyyon**

As soon as the Accipiter touched the landing pad, Rook and Jordan dropped from the hatch and broke into a run toward the ornithopter ambulance, spurred on by Caliph’s warnings about an imminent detonation.

They were just to the low concrete barrier that divided the landing pad when the side doors to the ‘thopter slid open and eight Xirong commandoes jumped out, dressed in chainmail armor and hoods, armed with weapons that fired off rapid rounds of metal bits propelled by chemical explosions. Bullets zinged off Rook and Jordan’s energy shields.

There was no cover to be found on the open pad, the two warfighters rolled off to the sides, then backed up behind the half-wall under heavy fire.

*“We don’t have time for this!”*

“Explain it to them!” Max Jordan shouted. He poked his pulse rifle out from above and answered their metal with volleys of charged plasma.

“Can you disarm the bombs now?” Rook asked.

*“I need to be in physical contact.”*

Rook gritted his teeth and rolled out onto the pad. The Xirong opened up on him and his shield sparkled as bits of metal zinged off of it. He adjusted his pulse rifle for high-energy, high-accuracy sniper bursts and picked off three of the Xirong, one-two-three, before his shield drained and he had to return to cover.

Rook reached into his battle pouch. “Crap, no grenades. Max?”

“Negative,” Max told him.

“All right, give me a second to recharge my shields and we’ll hit them with a simultaneous suicide run.”

“Suicide run?” Jordan was stunned. “But I just learned to love life.”

“If you don’t get me to the bomb within the next few seconds,” Caliph told them, “Suicide will be a moot point.”

## **Yronwode – Security Base One Command and Control Center**

Alkema crossed the command center to one of the displays that had was showing static as the result of a dragon attack. Amid the panicked activity in the war room, no one stopped him as he redirected it to one of the base’s on-site surveillance cameras, and pointed it in the direction of the northeastern sky, the better to see the hellfire that was soon to consume the base. He knew the command center was underground and reinforced, and they had at least a chance of surviving. Everyone above ground, though...

“What fresh Hell is this?” Alkema asked out loud. He panned toward the view of eastern horizon, where a roaring brown cloud was rising from the desert sands.

“A sandstorm?” Captain Steadfast guessed.

Dark brown clouds rolled across the sky, blotting out the light and laying a kind of deep tan twilight darkness across the plain. The Midian security forces looked nervously toward the sky.

“The sky has never done that before,” Parka told Alkema.

The raging clouds were moving preternaturally fast, and furthermore, against the prevailing winds. It was as though a massive cyclonic storm had built, and was bee-lining toward the battlefield. The attack aircraft diverted away from it.

The previous panicked chaos in the command center was replaced with a terrified awe.

Kitaen went up close and squinted at the approaching storm. “Someone is out there,” he said. “Someone appears to be ... riding on the storm.” He zoomed the camera in for a closer look.

Alkema saw the figure too, and his disbelief almost made his mind explode. “Eddie Roebuck?”

“Quick question,” Lear asked the others. “Was Eddie Roebuck 300 meters tall the last time you guys saw him?”

## Yronwode - The Demilitarized Zone.

K-Rock was riding the lead dragon, soaring toward the Midian forward security base. Soon, his pack would rain fiery death upon it, then lay waste to the last line of defense, the Shield. Somewhere in between, he expected a fiery orange mushroom cloud would rise on the far side of that low mountain range, and the thousands of *Tsi Bai* below would know their time had come to take back their lands.

But just as he approached the base, some kind of storm front came whirling up around him, and the sky turned black. Some of the clouds seemed to take on a human shape, and then he realized that was because they had taken on a vaguely familiar human shape; a tall, dark-skinned, rather puffy man dressed in purple and gold robes, with white glowing eyes, wearing a rather elaborate hat.

The figure spoke to him, and by this time, K-Rock's mind was as good as fried by the intensity of the combat and his conviction that he was K-Rock and his duty was to lead the *Tsi Bai* to conquest; so conversing with a 300 meter cloud man while riding on the back of a dragon seemed to make perfect sense to him.

The voice boomed at K-Rock like thunder.

"So, we meet at last. We have been expecting you, K-Rock. We were beginning to think you wouldn't show. Hopefully, now things will get more interesting around here."

**"Hold!"** Keeler halted his dragon in the air at the level of Eddie Roebuck's face. **"Do I know you?"** he demanded.

Eddie's burning white eyes met K-Rock's crazy ones.

"I am Grexx Grebulon, Emissary Pontifex of Yronwode, and you shall not pass, Barbarian!"

Keeler reared up his dragon. **"Hazuzu, broil his ass!"**

The dragon roared, then unleashed a torrent of plasma-flame at Roebuck. The flaming continued for nearly a half-minute before the dragon ran out of fuel, and burned a hole in the clouds where it pushed out the moisture and dust.

Eddie was still standing there, his upraised palm facing the dragon, his eyes still glowing.

"Is that all you got?"

**"Look around yourself, Priest,"** Keeler growled at him. **"There are a hundred dragons and a hundred thousand men with me. Do you think you can hold us back."**

"Look around yourself, Barbarian."

**"I see nothing but a delusional priest. You have the power levels of a circus clown!"**

Roebuck laughed at him. "Are you ready now to witness a power not seen for thousands of years?. Perhaps your miserable army would appreciate a light show."

K-Rock bristled, **"I have yet to show you, priest, what I'm truly capable of."**

Eddie Roebuck raised his arms and threw his head back. At that point, the black

clouds began boiling around him. Lightning began to crash from cloud to cloud, and then from the clouds to the ground, striking down a hundred of Keeler's men. Eddie's voice thundered above it.

"YOU!"

"SHALL!"

"NOT!"

"PASS!"

### **Yronwode - Midian Security Base One**

"What's going on out there?" General Intrepid demanded.

"Um..." Alkema began. What was happening was that the Pontifex, who used to be his ship's bartender, was 300 meters tall and shooting lightning bolts at the leader of the Xirong invasion force, who was riding on a dragon. But Alkema couldn't find a sane way to relay that information.

"Let me Zoom in on the Xirong riding the back of that dragon," Kitaen said, and he pointed and locked the surveillance camera on the Xirong leader so they could get a close-up of his face.

"Holy shit," Alkema exclaimed.

### **Yronwode --- The Demilitarized Zone.**

Out above the Demilitarized Zone, K-Rock on the back of his dragon and the 300-Meter Cloud-Man of Grexx Grebulon were circling each other and building up energy.

K-Rock's dragon reared and unleashed plasma in fury at the Pontifex, which the Pontifex simply deflected around himself. He then unleashed lightning and thunder on K-Rock, which similarly veered away from the shield created by his protective battle staff.

***"Enough with these games,"*** K-Rock shouted. ***"Let's get it on, priest!"***

Grexxx Grebulon answered, "Why prolong the inevitable? I will kill you now!"

K-Rock raised his staff, shined the blinding light of control at Grexxx Grebulon.

The Pontifex prepared to unleash all the power at his command into the dragon force.

Only one of them was going to survive this.

Or neither.

### **Yronwode - Xiyyon**

Just before their suicide run, Caliph flashed an urgent message to Rook and Jordan.

***"Hold on, guys. I think we just got back-up."***

A pair of Midian Police ornithopters appeared over the landing pad. Trained Marksmen leaned from hatches on the side. The warfighters heard a pair of shots ring

out and watched one of the Xirong stop in mid-stride with two sudden bursts of blood issuing from his neck. He was dead before he hit the ground.

The other Xirong, startled, turned around and began firing wildly at the Police 'thopters. A spray of bullet impacts appeared across the forward canopy of the lead craft.

Max jumped out of his hiding place and squeezed sniper rounds into two of the Xirong while their backs were turned.

*"We have to get to that bomb now!"*

Max Jordan heard Rook shooting behind him, but everything else became a slow motion blur as he charged. There was only one Xirong left. Max Jordan felt a curious sense of time telescoping. He was not consciously using the gift of altered perception to attain it. Nor was it because of the sensors built into his battlesuit to become aware of everything, simultaneously. He saw the Xirong raise his weapon, he heard the wings of the ornithopters beating in the background, saw the police bullets spanging on the pavement around him, kicking up chips of concrete, and seeing the flakes hang in the air. He felt his legs carrying his weight across that expanse, felt Caliph in his head urging him to *hurry, hurry, hurry.*

The Xirong leveled his weapon right at Max Jordan's gut and fired. Max felt the impact, like a hard kick to the stomach, but it didn't matter much as his energy shield ate the bullets, turning them to dust and vapor. He jumped, using his battle gear for a strength assist and hit the Xirong with the force of truck. He plowed into him and carried him backwards almost to the Medical Ornithopter itself. Max brought up his arm, wrapped in an alloy of ceramic and titanium weave, and brought it down full force on the Xirong, breaking his neck and severing his spinal cord. He tossed the body aside, and got into the ornithopter.

The three Hammerheads were lashed together in the middle of the deck. Someone had cracked up the warheads and linked them together using a small computing device as a nexus. Max reached up and touched the device. As he made contact, he felt Caliph furiously interfacing with the linking the device to cancel the detonation sequence. Then, she reached out to the bombs themselves and entered the abort codes.

*"Detonation sequence negated."*

"How much time was left?" Max Jordan asked.

*"You don't want to know."*

## **Yronwode --- Security Base One**

"Your commander is the Xirong leader!" Intrepid thundered at them.

Trajan Lear shrugged. "Why not? The ship's bartender is your Pontifex."

"What are they doing?" Parka asked.

"They were just shouting at each other," Alkema. "Now, they've stopped." He peered through his big, long-range Spex. "I think they're getting ready to kill each other."

Suddenly, the ground began to shake. The Command and Control Center shuddered, loose objects, writing implements, and little electronic gadgets began to dance across the surfaces of the work-stations.

"Groundquake?" Alkema said.

General Noble shook his head. "This area of the planet is seismically stable. We've never had a groundquake."

"The timing can not be coincidental," said Kitaen.

"General," said one of the lieutenants at the lead tactical control station. "You better see this." He zoomed the external display on the main viewer to a point high above the battle zone, a place where the clouds were burning red, and boiling away ahead of light brighter than the sun.

"What the Hell is happening?" General Sure asked.

"It's the Fourth Coming!" the male lieutenant cried out. "It's Jesus H. Christ. He's returning to judge our world!"

"Stay at your post, lieutenant," General Noble ordered.

But the lieutenant was already on his knees. "Dear Lord, I am sorry for those pictures of the Xirong girls spraying each other with vegetable oil. I'm sorry for shooting my holy seed all over..."

"Enough, lieutenant!" General Noble barked again. But by this time, the light from the sky was brighter than even the bright-hot star that was Yronwode's primary.

Then, with a sound like thunder, the clouds parted, moving away in a blast wave, as though from a thermonuclear detonation. The blast scattered the dragons and the Midian fighters in every direction.

And in the middle of the bright-white sky was the Pathfinder Ship *Pegasus*, holding barely 3,000 meters above the ground.

"Eliza Jane Change, you crazy she-demon," Alkema whispered. He couldn't imagine the stress the ship's inertial dampers and gravity fields were under to go this deep into a gravity well.

Then dozens of little silver specks alighted from around *Pegasus* and formed up like a flock of birds. En masse, they dove toward the sky between the dragons and the heavy tactical aircraft.

General Kitaen intoned solemnly, "I am not one to tell you how to run your air defense, but if I were you, I would recall all my fighters right... screaming... now!"

General Noble fumbled for his radio. "Air Command, recall all fighters. Repeat, recall all fighters to base."

## **Yronwode - The Demilitarized Zone**

The arrival of *Pegasus* unleashed a sonic boom and an atmospheric blast wave that knocked Keeler, Roebuck, and most of the assembled armies flat on the ground, and sent the ones to the rear running back to the western horizon.

## **Yronwode - Midian Security Base One**

Then there came another sound, like the roar of ten thousand rocket engines roaring across the sky. And suddenly, *Pegasus* was surrounded by a cloud of dragons, spitting plasma fire at her. Immediately, *Pegasus* activated her pulse cannons and blazed back at them.

Colonel Brave and the others stared at the scenes playing out on the plains. "That's your starship, it's beautiful."

Alkema looked at it. The effect of its shields and the composites of *Pegasus*'s ventral hull made for a shimmering iridescent gold effect. It was beautiful. "It's not supposed to be this low. I don't know how they're going to get back to orbit without setting off a gravity wave that will turn this entire peninsula into a crop circle."

"And there is still the Containment System," General Noble reminded them. "For every dragon her guns take out, two more appear."

"She's launching something," Colonel Brave said. A missile shot out of *Pegasus's* forward launch rail.

"Tracking missile," a lieutenant announced.

"Is it attacking Midian?" Parka demanded.

"Negative, the missile is tracking due north, at a speed of..." she broke off, unable to believe "130,000 kilometers per hour."

"Wherever it's going, it should arrive quickly," Noble muttered.

"Is the ship launching additional missiles?" Parka demanded.

"Negative, it's just..." the lieutenant stared into the main screen. "She's just holding position and continuing to attack the dragons."

"Some of the Xirong are firing missiles at the ship," Alkema added. One of the readouts was showing suicide missiles flying toward *Pegasus*, bouncing off her shields, and then falling back to the ground, where they detonated among clusters of Xirong troops.

"They're not... the most proficient of enemies, are they?" Alkema commented.

Suddenly, the lights in the bunker flickered, then went out along with all display screens. "What happened?" Alkema demanded.

"Massive EM Pulse," Steadfast reported. She opened a junction box in the wall above her station. "Redundant system activating."

She switched to alternate display and power systems. Lights flickered back on, and the display monitors reactivated one-by-one. Two-thirds of them displayed the image of Eliza Jane Change sitting in the Command Seat on *Pegasus's* Main Bridge. "... can you hear me now?"

Almea opened his COM link. "This is Tactical Lieutenant Commander David Alkema. It's good to see you *Pegasus*. We knew you'd find a way to defeat the containment system."

Eliza Change continued. "We can't disable the planetary defense system, it is integrated into the planet's electromagnetic field. The only way to disable it would be to destroy the planet... and we are assuming that would be too extreme."

"Right," Alkema agreed.

Change went on, "But we can temporarily jam the system. Can you pull the teams together?"

"We have no operable Aves," Alkema said. "And our team is scattered across the peninsula. And the commander's missing."

Change turned and said something to her communications officer. A picture of the Xirong leader was projected next to her. "Here, he is. He should be unconscious somewhere on the plain below. How long would you need to reassemble your landing teams?"

"Give us five planetary days," Alkema told her.

"I can dispatch an Aves at that time," she offered.

"We'll manage," Alkema told her.

"Three days, then." She cut her signal, and *Pegasus* slowly began to rise in the atmosphere. The dragons had vanished with the EMP, and the ship was unmolested as it rose, gracefully, toward space. The ground shook, but Change was taking it

slowly, to minimize the ground effect.

Lt. Obedient had retaken his station. "They have achieved 4,000 meters... 5,000... 7,000... 9,000... They have cleared 10,000."

## CHAPTER: 16

*After the battle was over, the humans tried to clean things up. Something like 40,000 Xirong were killed in the battle, another 90,000 were killed in rioting in Nimali that followed the appearance of Pegasus and the blackouts, storms, and groundquakes that came with her, and another 15,000 from the reactor accident in Fett-Al-Birt. The Midians lost about 400 of their security forces.*

*For all these reasons, I think they were all pretty happy to be rid of us.*

### Yronwode - Security Base One

Prime Commander Keeler woke up in a Midian Hospital bed. Of course, Alkema was there. "Good afterdawn, Commander," Alkema greeted him.

Keeler looked at Alkema and the strange woman standing next to him and tried to raise his arm. There was a needle sticking in it attached to a tube that was dripping some kind of fluid into his bloodstream. "I don't remember this being here before," he croaked.

Then, he collapsed into a coughing fit. Alkema handed him a tube of water, and waited until the seizure had subsided before speaking to him. "Sorry, sir, their technology is somewhat basic. That device is apparently putting nutrition and medication into your bloodstream. I also infused you with some of my protein and life energy when we recovered you from the site of the battle."

"I hope I made you buy me dinner first," Keeler coughed out. Alkema handed him another tube of water, which Keeler drank with only mild disappointment.

When he finished, Keeler said, "I had a dream where I was riding a dragon and leading a barbarian horde on a path of pillage and conquest."

"That wasn't a dream," Alkema told him.

"I was afraid of that," Keeler told him back.

Alkema went on to explain, "That battle was three, almost four, days ago. It's been twenty-six days since your ship crashed in the wilderness."

"Twenty-six days!" Keeler's vitals jumped momentarily, then subsided. He stared up at the ceiling. "So, what did I miss?"

Alkema answered. "Over the last 25 days, you've apparently killed eleven leaders of various Xirong phalanges, then united the phalanges into an army that tried to invade Midian. You somehow managed to take control over the planet's prisoner containment system and turn it against the Midians, and you fought an apocalyptic battle to the death with... um... Eddie Roebuck."

Keeler's eyes widened. "Really?"

"Za."

Keeler sighed and looked again at the needle and tube in his arm. "What the Hell was wrong with me?"

Fortunately, Doctor Goodbar was on hand to explain that. "It wasn't entirely your doing. You were being manipulated."

"How?" Keeler asked.

Goodbar showed him a chart with some squiggly lines and Midian script that meant nothing to him. "You had been given large amounts of a drug we call XP-2002. It's a strong stimulant and hallucinogen, and it makes the subject highly suggestible. We typically find moderate amounts in the bodies of Xirong missile pilots. It's also that rare substance your landing gear wasn't able to detoxify. You had a rather large amount in your system. It's taken us most of two days to detoxify you."

Alkema added. "The drug ultimately burns up all the cognitive synapses in your brains. A few more days at those high levels of exposure would have killed you or turned you into a drooling moron."

Keeler was quiet for several moments, then apologized. "I'm sorry, I don't know whether to go for the Panrovian joke or the Republicker joke."

"Fortunately, the Midian High Council has decided not to pursue war crimes charges against you, since the Xirong were manipulating you. Apparently, the drug was given to you in the water they forced you to drink." Doctor Good explained to him.

"Bang!" Keeler remembered.

"Bang?" Alkema asked.

"Bang was the name of the woman who was manipulating me. She was always giving me water and telling me what to do." There was remorse in his voice for what he had done under her orders, though.

Doctor Goodbar filled him in. "Her real name is Anastasia Clear. She was a Midian, a former student at the Xetares School before she dropped out to live among the Xirong. Many of our young people go through a period when they romanticize the Xirong. The perpetual struggle, the ruthlessness holds a certain fascination for them. Mostly, they outgrow it, but she unfortunately did not."

"What happened to her" Keeler asked.

Alkema tried to explain it as gently as he could. "After *Pegasus* ended the battle, what was left of the Xirong Army retreated to Nimali. Two few days after the battle, the Midians sent equipment into the Demilitarized to clear out the debris left behind by the Xirong attack. Apparently, Bang tried to prevent the operation from going forward. She placed herself in the path of an armored ground-mover. Details about what happened next are in dispute... but she did not survive."

Keeler was surprised to find that he did not feel sad.

"That poor deluded girl," said the doctor.

"She was not deluded," Keeler said quietly. "I was deluded. She knew exactly what she was doing." He coughed a bit more and asked. "So, what was the deal with the dragons again? I think I missed that part."

Alkema explained it to him. "The dragons were part of Yronwode's prisoner containment system. Why the ancients chose dragons, I don't know, but somehow, you were able to manipulate them. I suspect it was through your battlestaff."

"My staff," Keeler exclaimed in near panic.

"It's here," Alkema told him. "It was in your hands when we found you on the battlefield. If I recall my Human History, the Theans were supposedly able to manipulate human technology at will."

"That's right, they could do that," Keeler remembered. "But it's never acted like that before now."

"It's never been interfacing directly with Commonwealth technology before," Alkema said.

"What about the StarLocks," Keeler protested. "I've taken it to the StarLocks."

"They were built after the Crusades," Alkema reminded him. "The Ancients probably hardened them against Thean manipulation, but this planet was set aside as a prison world during the Crusades."

"Oh, yeah," Keeler said. He was beginning to wonder if he should ask for more sedatives. Then, he came to his senses and realized he should definitely ask for more sedatives.

Before he did so, Alkema began another question. "When you were leading the Xirong, you called yourself 'K-Rock.'"

"I did?"

"Za, I wondered if you could explain that," Alkema told him.

Keeler groaned, and then admitted. "I must have taken it from an old legend. One of those stories of the old commonwealth we don't know is real, or just a tale. But it was a pretty lame story, so I assume it's true."

"You should rest," Dr. Good advised him, then left to tell a nurse to bring Keeler some sedatives.

Keeler lay back in the bed and closed his eyes. "When can we leave?"

"*Pegasus*, is coming back tomorrow."

"Tomorrow?" Keeler scowled, keeping his eyes closed. "Where did they go?"

"They're in orbit, but we can't get to them because of the containment system," Alkema explained. "They have to come down to us. Both of our Aves were wrecked, but we've managed to salvage enough from both ships to create one flight-worthy ship."

Keeler's eyes snapped open as he remembered a detail. "Is Toto all right?"

"He'll be okay," Alkema told him. "Stratos, too. They're both going to make it. We didn't lose anybody."

"I could also use some attention!" a voice called from the other hospital bed. "For those keeping score, I was on the side of good in this apocalypse. Remember that."

"Who the hell is that?" Keeler asked.

"That's Eddie," Alkema told Keeler. "They found him a few meters away from you on the battlefield when it was all over. The Midians put you in a room together so they could keep both of you under guard. They've been stretched pretty thin by... by the events of the last few days."

Eddie threw aside the curtain from around his bed. "Unlike you, I remember everything. I remember waking up in big sandy mud puddle. I remember waking up and having all the power the Starcrossers had been saving up for hundreds of years gone! I remember being put into one of those thopter-ambulance things, and I remember that Meek guy telling me I was never really Pontifex, that the real Pontifex just gave me her power because she knew the battle was coming and she didn't have the strength to fight it."

Eddie was sitting up in his hospital bed, looking not much the worse for wear. "Also, if *Pegasus* hadn't shown up, I would have won."

"Not bloody likely," Keeler shot back. "You wouldn't have stood a chance against the combined strength of a thousand dragons."

"It was only a hundred," Alkema told him.

"Nevertheless!" Keeler insisted.

"By the way, when you were K-Rock the Barbarian, you tried to blow up a whole

city with a Hammerhead missile,” Eddie added.

“I did?” Keeler asked, then, he remembered. “Oh, crap, I did.”

Roebuck looked around the room. “Davey, could you close the door for a minute? There are things you guys need to know, things that were revealed to me when I was the Acting Pontifex.”

“Such as?” Alkema asked.

“Close the door first.” Alkem did as Eddie asked, although by this time, he was so used to the Midians spying on him, it really didn’t matter.

Eddie leaned back on his arms. “Remember when they told Commander Keeler that Earth was a barren wasteland with nothing there, and no reason for anyone to look for it? They lied.

“It’s written in the Fifth Compendium of Orenda, after the Ninth Crusade, Earth was re-colonized by the Old Line Colonies. One of the things they established was a Research Institute. Their best research engineers were sent to conduct experiments in what they called ‘Transcendant Metaphysical Technology.’ They were working on ways for humans to manifest the basic forces of the universe, to become like gods.

“When the Tarmigans attacked, the technologists of Earth accelerated their research into creating the means for humans to have powers equal to the Tarmigans, to fight them off to resist them.

“The Starcross Adherents believe that if the Tarmigans had not attacked, humanity would have destroyed itself, because the Transcendant Technology Experiments would have provided us with god-like powers that we were not ready for.”

“You read all that?” said Alkema disbelievingly.

Eddie shook his head. “Neg, but Archonex Meek knew it and, when I had powers, I sucked it all out of his mind. He also likes to be spanked by Mrs. Archonex Meek.”

“I didn’t need to know that,” Alkema said.

Eddie continued, “The point is, the Midians think Transcendant Technology may still exist. If it does, it’s on Earth. And we have to find it before anyone else does.”

“Like the Aurelians,” Alkema said.

Eddie protested. “Not just the Aurelians. If anyone else besides us finds it first, they can finish the job the Tarmigans started, and wipe out the entire human race.”

Eddie looked to their faces for a reaction, then intoned, “Dun-Dun DAH!”

*Our second incursion into Yronwode’s atmosphere was more successful than the first. I had been somewhat concerned that the anti-incursion system would have adapted since our last incursion, but apparently it decided to leave us alone. I anticipated that we might have done significant damage to the containment system in our first attempt, and perhaps the system had not yet fully recovered. It is impossible to know from here, and no way in Hell are we going back down there.*

*We commenced our descent precisely five planetary days after our first atmospheric incursion, with Jesus on the Helm controls and Change on primary navigational inputs. Like the previous time, it was smooth until we reached 90,000 meters, and then the electromagnetic field began interacting with our hull and primary data and power systems. A huge charge built up and Atlantic sent it back into one of the pseudo-poles the ancients had built on the planet. After that, we were smooth most of the way down.*

*Well, pretty smooth. We were completely sensor-blind between 60,000 and 10,000 meters above the surface, but Change relied entirely on her instincts to get us down to the right altitude where we could recover our crew.*

*The Aves that brought the landing team back from the surface was a real piece of crap. They were attacked by the planet's defensive systems on ascent even though we were below 10,000 meters (probably some kind of fail-safe). It wasn't dragons this time, but some kind of missile. We were able to cover them with Accipiters and mid-range weaponry.*

*Zero loss of life has to be considered a successful mission, compared to usual.*

## **Pegasus ---- Main Bridge**

"How did you manage to defeat the containment system," Alkema asked Change as he relieved her to take his first watch since regaining the ship.

"We had help," Change reluctantly conceded.

"Yo!" insisted a voice from the level of Alkema's knees. He looked down to see a gray and black cat, with a white bib and toes, staring up at him.

"You?" Alkema sighed.

"Me," Queequeg answered. "And I am very proud of myself for doing it."

"Why is that, kitty-cat?" Alkema asked, feeling vaguely like a kiddie show host.

"As a cat, I feel proud of myself for everything," Queequeg asserted. "But this time, I outdid myself.

Alkema knew he was going to regret asking, but he had to know. "Tell me about it."

"That ancient system was flawless," Queequeg explained with a tone of genuine admiration, rare for his species. "They didn't want anyone leaving that planet, ever. No back-doors, no cheat codes, no sneaking in through low-priority systems. It was amazingly thorough, and it had an AI in it that adapted to every trick I tried to get it off-line. I tried to get it to accept a system upgrade, but it refused. I tried to put the whole system in diagnostic mode. No luck there, either. I tried to structure a cascade system sequence that would give us an opening to get in and get out. No dice."

"But you must have beaten it," Alkema said. "The Kariad beat it."

"I'd love to know how they did it," Queequeg told him. "I never figured it out."

"So, how did you defeat it?" Alkema asked.

"When cleverness failed, we simply defaulted to brute force," said the cat. "We figured the system was designed to prevent incursions and break-outs, not all-out attacks. So, we staged an all-out attack."

Changed picked it up. "We decided to see exactly how it worked in action. We launched a lot of probes at it. We lost most of them. When the system engaged the probes, we studied how it reacted. We timed its responses. We studied its tactics, scanned its weapons. We traced the way energy flowed around the planet. We figured out how to harden *Pegasus's* shields against the plasma blasts. We also located the system's control nodes. They have nodes embedded in the planet, three thousand meters deep at 112 locations. Each one acts like a pole for the planet's magnetosphere, but the two strongest nodes are at the planet's natural poles. They feed the system energy through the planet's magnetic field. We couldn't destroy them, but just as *Pegasus* began its descent, we detonated *Nemesis* warheads set to electro-magnetic pulse over several of them. We also staged incursions at two other

points on the planet using the Burning Skies and Doom Patrol Flight groups, to further confuse the system.”

“Wow,’ Alkema said. “All that... just to rescue us.”

Change seemed less than totally happy. “It was not without cost. The feedback damaged several systems, not to mention the weapons, probes, and fuel we had to expend.”

Queequeg seemed happy though. “The Ancients never believed anyone would be stupid enough to bring a ship this large into the lower atmosphere. We showed them!”

Alkema petted Queequeg on the head, which set the cat to purring. “Do you have any theories on how the Kariad escaped?” he asked.

“An instantaneous transition to relativistic speed might have defeated the system,” Queequeg suggested. “But it would have to have been much faster than anything we could accomplish. Given enough time, I think we could have cracked the system.”

“You did good enough, kitty-cat,” Alkema told him, scratching him behind the ears. “You got us home.”

Change was not quite so optimistic. “Unfortunately, we burned through a fourth of our remaining tritium fuel reserve to do it. We’re below 20% reserve now, and our prospecting in the outer comet belt was unsuccessful.”

“That’s still almost two years worth of fuel, if we initiate conservation protocols and avoid heavy combat,” Alkema said.

“It took us over two years to find this planet,” Change reminded him. “Replenishing our tritium fuel reserves has to be our next priority.”

*I have been working with TyroCommander Navigator Change to locate a source of tritium. Planets with deep oceans would be good, as well as certain types of gas giants. Astronomical survey is completing spectral scans of nearby nebulae to search for extractable quantities as well.*

*In the meantime, most of the returning landing team members have been spending time in social settings.*

## **Pegasus – Alkema Family Quarters**

*A joyful homecoming party had taken place in the Alkema family suite, which now occupied and entire deck-section of their residential cluster. The Alkema clan had grown to become one of Pegasus’s larger families. David Alkema and Pieta had three children of their own, and they provided living space to Max and Sam Jordan as well.*

*Pieta had put on a little weight over the past two years, enough to make her rounder and softer. The table of trifles and hors d’oeuvres she had set out suggested how this had come to pass. She met their guests at the main hatch holding Alkema’s infant son, Daniel. Two toddlers, Halo and Sally, hung close to her skirts.*

*When Dave Alkema had returned, she had hugged him madly. The twins, had all but pulled the pack off his back, singing, "Did you bring us pleasants?"*

*Alkema smiled and opened his bag. Of course, he had. "Here, these are called sweet rocks. It's a kind of candy Midian children like. And this is a stuffed drangle, which is an animal they keep as pets."*

*"Do they talk?" Halo had asked, the recipient of the gift.*

"Neg, and this is for you, Sally." He handed her a doll. "It's name is Lorna. I found it in a shop in Xenthe city."

Sally had taken the doll and promptly dropped it. Pieta had snapped at her, and then asked Alkema what he had brought for her. She had squealed when Alkema withdrew a diamond necklace and matching earrings from his pack. Diamonds had been somewhat precious on Bodiceá,

Max Jordan returned to the suite a short time later after he had cleared his medical check, still wearing his warfighter uniform, which was caked in Yronwodean sand at the cuffs and collar. His brother Sam was overjoyed to see him, but only cracked a little smile, and slapped him across the shoulder.

Sam Jordan was fifteen now, the red in his hair had diminished to a dark strawberry blond, thick and curly, making his face look a little too small. He lacked Max's easy athleticism, and was by nature quieter. He liked to draw and design things. His chamber was covered with drawings of ships and transport pods.

"I brought you something," Max Jordan told Sam. He opened his own pack and brought out a polished rock about the size of a fist, red with bright yellow and black striations.

"You brought me a rock?" Sam asked.

"Yeah, it's like a piece of the planet. And, it's unique because... well, because it's from a planet no one's ever supposed to come back from. So, it's like, nobody can ever have a rock from that planet again." He shrugged. "It was Trajan Lear's idea."

"Neg, it's cool," Sam Jordan tried to reassure him unconvincingly.

Later, when Pieta was not around, Max would give him the Xirong battle-knife he had taken off a dead terrorist in Xiyyon. That would be received with more enthusiasm.

For now, he settled for showing Sam Jordan and Pieta the medal the Midians had given him for saving the city, and the plaque given to him by the Pontifex for the same deed. "Technically, it was Caliph who disarmed the bomb," he told them.

"Za, but you and Rook were in the firefight with the terrorists on the landing pad of the Medical Center," Alkema reminded him.

"Did you meet any girls?" Pieta asked.

"A ... few," Max Jordan answered, blushing a little bit. Then, he showed them another medal given to every member of the Action Team who rescued Alban Stratos.

"You sure did shoot a lot of people on this mission," Sam Jordan observed.

"More than usual," Max conceded.

"I liked the medal you got on that other planet better," Pieta said, munching some crisp bread smeared with a mixture of cream and vegetables.

"Are you okay?" Sam Jordan asked. "You seem a little, I don't know, different."

Max Jordan smiled. "I'm glad to be back on this ship, that's all."

About that time, Johnny Rook had shown up with his wife Anaconda his newborn daughter, Skua Taurus Rook, and a huge smile on his face.

It was all good.

### ***Pegasus - Officer's Cocktail Lounge***

*The Officer's Cocktail Lounge was as busy ever. An android Goneril Lear in a white cocktail dress finished distributing drinks to a table occupied by Matthew Driver,*

Eddie Roebuck, and Eliza Jane Change.

"It's been a long time since we drank together, us three," Eddie Roebuck remarked, picking up his glass of fortified wine, but seeming in no hurry to drink it.

Change asked him. "How long are you going to keep wearing those purple robes?"

"They happen to be extremely comfortable." Eddie put his wine aside. "Also, I'm giving up the Slam-n-Jam. I'm going to devote the rest of my life to studying and preaching Brianism."

"I thought you said it was a nutty religion," Matthew Driver.

"As a Holy Man, he would be exempt from his service requirement," Change observed. "And as the only Brianist on board, he would not have much liturgical work to perform."

"You are both right, but also both wrong," Eddie stated patiently. "True, Brianism is a nutty religion when you look at it a certain way, but it's also nutty to believe that the Allbeing allowed His Son to be nailed to a tree because we weren't good enough to get into heaven, otherwise. It's also nutty to believe that Allbeing sent His Daughter to redeem humanity because we had screwed things up so badly we were on the verge of extinction and he wanted to give us a second chance. It's also nutty to believe that there is no Allbeing and that this entire universe resulted from a one in a trillion fluctuation in a probability field."

Eddie stopped for breath, then addressed Change. "And I know you don't think I'm for real, but I am. I should be really pissed about how the Starcrossers set me up and used me; I should be really really pissed about that. But I'm not. Because when I was out there, on the Plain of Salvation, and seven centuries of the True Pontifex's powers were flowing through me, I felt it every molecule in this planet's atmosphere. I felt every drop of water in the sea, every rock, every grain of sand. And I moved them to create storms and earthquakes. I had the power of God in me."

"Technically, *Pegasus's* gravity engines created the earthquakes," Change said.

"*Pegasus* wouldn't have survived if K-Rock and I weren't using so much of the planet's energy," Roebuck replied. "The point is, even if their religion can do that, even through all the craziness, there is something real there. Maybe I have to peel through a lot of the dogma and silliness to get through to the truth, but it's definitely there."

"Besides which, that Archonex guy told me that when we die, we spend eternity with people just like ourselves. At first, I thought that would be really cool. Then, I really, really thought about it." Eddie paused for a long, thoughtful of pair of seconds. "If it's just I and I for all of eternity, I should try and become someone I can stand to be around."

Eddie turned back to Matthew Driver. "And you, Captain Sky-Pilot, did you find what you were looking for?"

"Nay, I did not," Driver told him quite determinedly. "Ever since we, since Trajan and I, got back from the Chronos universe, I've been questioning my spirituality. I had thought that by spending time at the Temple in Atonement, I'd receive a sense of religious renewal. But that didn't happen."

"Elaborate," Eliza Jane Change commanded him.

Driver struggled a bit to put his feelings into words. "I have always had a problem never feeling the presence of the Allbeing, and feeling like my prayers were just ... not heard by anyone or anything. I thought spending time at the Temple would help, but it didn't."

"Does this mean you don't believe in the Allbeing," Eddie asked, with a tone of

genuine concern.

“Of course I believe in the Allbeing,” Driver spoke back. “I just don’t feel connected to the Allbeing. I’ve accepted that I probably never will, so maybe that is something.”

Eddie grinned. “It’s ironic that you feel that way.”

“Why is that?” Driver asked.

Eddie fixed Matthew Driver with a hard stare. “I don’t have hardly any power left from being the Pontifex, but I know some truths. Some truths about you.”

“About me?”

“Serious. You just don’t know that you know it,” Eddie told him. Eddie closed his eyes and took a deep breath. When he opened them again, they were glowing faintly. He reached across the table and laid a hand on Driver’s forehead.

“Oh my stars,” Driver looked glazed over and stunned, and spoke as if he were in a kind of trance.

“What?” Change asked.

“I can remember,” Driver said. “I can remember my time in the Chronos universe with absolute clarity.”

“One event in particular,” Eddie prompted.

Driver kept talking, words spilling out from him. “There was a ship, a liner, called the *Ra*. It had 4,400 people on board, including 400 Starcross missionaries bound for Maya colony.

“Trajan and I were trying to interlink the StarLock controls with Prudence’s shipmind. We thought if we could understand the technology, we could use it to get back to our normal universe. But, somehow, we corrupted the system just as *Ra* was passing a StarLock in the fifty-first century. I remember the Silver Lady screaming at us. ‘What have you done? What have you done?’”

“What did you do?” Eddie prompted.

“We corrupted the temporal calibrations somehow. We sent *Ra* 8,000 years into the past from its entry point.” Driver clarified for Change. “*Ra* actually entered the StarLock in the Solar Year 5021, but since there is no dimension of time in the Chronos universe, ship passages appear to happen randomly...”

“I know,” Change said icily. “How else could it work?”

“*Ra* crash-landed on the first Terra class planet they found,” Roebuck filled in. “They called their world Terra Maya, and *Ra* was their first settlement. Terra Maya *Ra*. Taramayara! The Starcross Missionaries had brought their sacred text with them. That’s why the Fifth Testament was not written by the hand of man, it fell out of time. When Brian Kingman found Taramayara, he found the Fifth Testament the colonists had taken with them. He completed the circle.”

Driver rubbed his temples, as though he suddenly had a fierce headache.

“In a sense,” Eddie Roebuck told him. “You started the whole Starcross religion. But you didn’t really, the Allbeing merely used you to help create a religion so bizarre that believing in it would test the faithless.”

Change rolled her eyes. Before she could express an opinion though, Phil Redfire, looking quite dashing and sophisticated in his white dinner jacket came up and put his arms around her from behind. “Are you finished with your friends?” he said nuzzling her earlobe.

“I believe so,” she answered.

Redfire flashed his eyes toward Driver and Roebuck, "Excuse me, gentlemen. Much as I hate to break this up, if you knew you'd be spending an evening with this exquisite creature..."

"It's understood," Roebuck assured him.

*The Boss remained in his suite for several days after returning. I think it was only partly because of the extent of his physical injuries. As a result, mission finalization briefings were held in the suite.*

### **Pegasus – Commander Keeler's Quarters**

*"The planetology reports have been approved," Lt. Commander Alkema reported. He was sitting on a plush couch in the commander's living room, with Commander Keeler, Lt. Commander Kitaen, a tray of the commander's favorite neat-to-eat treats, and a typically wide assortment of beverages.*

*"Does that mean we can leave?" Keeler asked. He was sitting in a large over-stuffed chair, with a large glass of something brown and flammable in his hands. His head was still bandaged.*

*"We need a pithy mission assessment for the Executive Summary," Alkema informed him. "You know, for all the people who won't get any deeper into the report than that."*

*Keeler had a suggestion. "How's this for a mission assessment: We came, we started a war, we left, nothing changed."*

*"That's not quite true," argued Kitaen, standing shirtless before the hearth, muscles rippling resplendently, blue warpaint lining his eyes. "We did seriously disrupt the political situation on the planet. The leadership of the ten largest tribes have been assassinated."*

*"That is not our problem," Keeler said.*

*"You assassinated them," Kitaen reminded the commander.*

*"And I don't doubt that all of them have since been replaced by chieftains whose only difference is their name," Keeler told him, placing his glass on a tray next to the bottle. "And maybe their smell, but not bloody likely."*

*"The Midians never admitted it," Alkema put in. "But I think they were grateful for that. The Xirong are going to be fighting among themselves for quite a while until, instead of attacking Midian."*

*"That and the technology they took from us," Kitaen added.*

*This prompted Keeler to ask. "Mr. Kitaen, what is your assessment of the tactical situation on Yronwode, from the Midian perspective."*

*"The Midians are fully capable of repelling even a massive Xirong attack," Kitaen reported. "And with the improvements to their weapons systems derived from the technology they 'acquired' from us, their military capabilities should be significantly enhanced. Their security situation for the next several years is decidedly better."*

*In frustration, Keeler smacked his glass and bottle onto the floor, where they landed on the plush carpet and stained it a brown tea color.*

*"You seem slightly perturbed," Alkema told the commander.*

*"No flirking snit!" Keeler exclaimed. "I killed 40,000 people down there, some with my bare hands. What the hell?"*

"It wasn't your fault," Alkema argued. "And, in any case, you probably shouldn't take it out on innocent booze."

Keeler looked down at the booze staining his carpet and immediately fell onto his knees, tipping the bottle upright and picking up the glass. "Daddy's sorry, little baby. It won't happen again."

Alkema handed him a towel. "It could have been any one of us that was captured by the Xirong, drugged, and manipulated into becoming heartless killing machines."

"Just the same," Keeler protested. "All those people who died because of me. And maybe they weren't bad people. And maybe they weren't good people. Maybe I don't even know what they were. I never saw any regular Xirong. I only saw the tribal leaders. I only saw the regular people at a distance, and when I did, I was drugged out of my mind."

"Sort of like being a university chancellor again," Alkema suggested.

Keeler regained his chair, and just drank straight from the bottle. "Neg... it was *exactly* like being a university chancellor again."

"Getting back to the Xirong..." Kitaen prompted.

"Should I feel bad for them?" Keeler lamented. "For the regular people, I mean? They can't help the circumstances they were born into. Surely, they wouldn't choose to live a life where they are just pawns, exploited by unscrupulous chieftains for personal gain brainwashed into hating the only people on the planet that could help them."

"That would appear to be the run of their culture," Kitaen offered. "The Midians tried for hundreds of years to bring civilization and order to the planet. In the end, they were beaten back to a tiny strip of land, because the Xirong rejected them, except for a few."

"Just another screwed up human colony like all the others," Keeler sighed.

*"Except Independence, Bountiful, Rainier III,"* thought Alkema.

"I miss Sapphire," Keeler whispered to his bottle of booze.

Recovering a little, Keeler added, "Are we any closer to finding Earth?"

Alkema and Kitaen had to admit that they were not.

"What about that guy..." Keeler asked.

"Eddie Roebuck," Alkema filled in.

"Za, him, Freddy Warbuck. What did he say about some king of doomsday weapon on Earth?"

Alkema recalled. "A device for transforming human beings into beings capable of controlling the forces of the universe."

"That might be worth finding Earth for," Keeler granted.

"It would be better if we found it before anyone else did," Alkema observed. "Like, for example, our friends the Aurelians."

"I can see how the Aurelians might want that," Keeler said. "But there's no hurry. Right? I mean, the Aurelians are on the other side of the galaxy."

Alkema had some bad news on that front. "Technical Core managed to decrypt the files Zim was able to steal from the Midian library concerning their encounter with the Kariad."

"It's not good is it?" Keeler saw the look on Alkema's face, and took a generous swig from his bottle.

Alkema picked up his datapad, and recited from it. "The Kariad visitors were described as being over two-and-a-half meters in height, with two beating hearts."

Keeler drank again, an even larger amount. "So, the Kariad were Aurelians?"

"Maybe," Alkema said. "Although it is possible there are other races of enormous humanoids with two hearts."

Kitaen grunted in agreement. "Who else would be arrogant enough to try and reorder an entire planet's society?"

"On the other hand, the Kariad didn't conquer the planet," Alkema put in. "That's not typical Aurelian behavior, as far as we know."

"So, they might not be Aurelians?" Keeler asked hopefully.

"We don't have nearly enough data," Alkema conceded. "We do know that their arrival completely changed the planet's social structure. The Midians had to abandon their settlements outside Midian, and the Xirong became hyper-aggressive."

Keeler sat back in his chair and cradled his bottle like a small child. "Try this for a post-mission assessment: Yronwode was the Commonwealth's prison world, the end of the line for humans who were beyond redemption. A few missionaries, brave or misguided, went to the planet and tried to redeem them anyway. They remain to this day, trapped in a planet that's a prison for both of them. We did not change anything important. Also, there might have been some Aurelians there. The End."

When they had gone, Keeler repaired to an alcove of his room and rapped on the cover a shiny black casket with the crest of his homeworld picked out in silver. "Wake up old man."

The spectral figure of his long deceased ancestor appeared. "I never sleep," it said.

"Do you have any memories of this planet from your life?" Keeler asked. "If you had, it would have been good of you to share them."

The Old Man laughed at him. "I remembered Yronwode. And I would have warned you not to go to it, but I chose to let you explore the planet anyway."

"Why?"

"I had my reasons."

"Could you at least have told us how to get off the planet?" Live Keeler asked.

"Change never asked me," Dead Keeler lamented. "But she did all right on her own. She's much more than she appears to be."

Keeler took a slug of his whiskey, then continued. "When I was down on the planet, you came to me in a dream. I didn't recognize you." Keeler met the old man's bright, glowing white eyes. "I just want to know how you did it and why."

"I did no such thing," the Dead Man told him with absolute conviction.

"Neg, it was definitely you in my dreams of blood. You told me to be K-Rock. You told me to..."

"Whatever was in your head down there it wasn't me," the Dead Man insisted. "Maybe it was a part of you that you don't like to acknowledge. Maybe it was something else, but it definitely was not me."

"Why should I believe you?"

"It doesn't matter whether you believe me or not," the Dead Man said. "When you went to the planet, you took what you had in your mind only. I was on the ship the

whole time. That's my story, and I'm sticking to it."

*Pegasus broke orbit nine days after the landing party returned. Circumstances dictated our next destination. And I opened up a well-deserved ration of flaked pinkfish.*

### **Pegasus – Main Bridge**

At the Primary Telemetry Station, David Alkema showed Eliza Jane Change something he thought would make her happy.

"After reconstructing the Hewlander's Navigation log, we found it took on some interesting cargo about 37 light years from here," David Alkema indicated the entry, and Change read it.

"Tritium," she said out loud, but not sounding impressed.

"90,000 liters," Alkema confirmed. "There's no guarantee the refining operation is still there. But if there used to be Tritium, there likely still is."

Change frowned and projected the coordinates onto a star-chart displayed as a hologram in the forward bridge. "These coordinates lead to a K-type Red Giant star system. That's not a likely location to find tritium."

"But it's less than eight days in hyperspace," Alkema said. "It's worth checking out at least."

"I agree," Change agreed. "I will begin the calculations."

### **Pegasus – Alkema Family Quarters**

*As Pegasus, departed the system and began the acceleration to transition speed, Max Jordan lay down in his sleep unit. The mattress contoured itself to his body, and he prepared for another night of bliss.*

*He closed his eyes, and Caliph was with him. "Can we make love?" she asked.*

*"We've got the next four hours," Jordan sighed in his dream. "Let's make the most of it."*

*In the dream she created, they were together on a huge, ancient four-poster bed in the middle of a field of marigolds. It was all so real, the tactile softness of the sheets, the scent of the marigolds, the kiss of the wind on his bare flesh. And her, she was the most real thing of all. In his dream, Caliph had taken on the form of the Midian newscaster, but with larger breasts. Max held her arms, felt the warmth her body generated, could smell her sweet womanly smells.*

*Then, in the midst of their love-making, he asked her, "Instead of this body, could I maybe see your real body."*

*"I don't have a 'real body,' she reminded him.*

*"I know, but if you did... if you could make yourself look like the way you think you'd look as a human..."*

*The newscaster form shimmered, transforming instantly into a creature of silvery-white luminous skin, with blue-white eyes and black hair tipped in glowing blue. She kept the breasts.*

*"What do you think?"*

*"You're beautiful," he told her*

"I love you, Max Jordan."

"I love you, Caliph the Alien Artificial Intelligence." And she leaned over and kissed him for a long time before they pulled apart. In his dream, Jordan smiled, "But keep that Midian newsreader around, just in case..."