

STARKILL

The Son

PREVIEW

It is the time after Judgment. Even the angels are afraid. The evil that was once confined to Earth now threatens all of space. "And must be challenged...obliterated.

It is the time after Judgment. In The Righteous War that is to come, the toll in lives and destruction will be measured only by vacant patches of heaven...where whole galaxies are missing.

It is the time after Judgment. While many would deny it, and others are totally unaware, the prophecy unfolds. A new order is being added to The Celestial Hierarchy: Angel, Archangel, Principalities, Powers, Virtues, Dominions, Thrones, Cherubim, Seraphim, and... Starkill.

PROLOG

Starkill

“Aboard my ship, the simple movement of my finger summons up the image of the planet below. Another silent command, and we move swiftly out of orbit to a safe distance. I pause. Then commit. ‘Think-in auto-target select, auto-target destruct’.

“COMMAND COMPLETE.”

It takes but a thought. ‘Fire’. “And a long beam reaches across space. “And the planet explodes. In brilliant, white light. Then fades into nothing. Leaving but space. Dark. Lonely. As before. As though that is all there ever was. All there ever will be.

A sudden light in the distance catches my eye. My mind contracts: ‘Think-in’.

“WIND STORM!” the OBC responds.

‘Think-in, think-in’! I repeat.

But the OBC again replies: “WIND STORM! WIND STORM! WIND STORM!”

Then, it occurs to me. The light in the distance is not an attack ship, but ‘prelude light’—a phenomenon known to precede the debris and shock waves of an exploding planet-size body. A sickening feeling sweeps over me as I force myself to think one more thought: ‘Think-in star drive’.

“STARDRIVE ENGAGED.”

The On Screen Display confirms:

AT LIGHT ‘ 186.281 MILES PER SEC
SPEED INCREASING
EM LIGHT ‘ PARSEC ONE / 3.2 LIGHT YEARS
SPEED INCREASING

Then flashes:

THINK IN?

I respond by voice: “Auto star drive sequence.”

ENGAGED—THINK IN?

Again, I use voice: “Auto nav-op sequence.”

ENGAGED—THINK IN?

“Think-in systeks off. On-screen display off.”

The screen flickers to a normal view of space. And the OBC—its voice pleasant—not hot and fiery like before—responds: “Situation normal.”

I slump back in my seat. Feeling it give in to my weight. And shut my eyes. For the first time. In days. That point, now behind us, was the location of the planet Liimas. Part of a complete star system. Now, there is nothing. Not the planet. Not the system. Only debris marks the grave site. And I wonder: Should it be so easy? That a simple thought can cause such utter destruction? Can the mind ever adapt? Or is it only natural to feel this sick inside? To feel my brain churning inside my skull? Wrestling with my sanity? I wonder. I wonder about us: Whether Humankind will ever learn that space was never meant to be taken; like a virgin; taken for granted; conquered; exploited; and left without love or care or sentiment, save the act of being had...and polluted. I wonder if we will ever learn that the price of greed is corruption; the price of hatred, war; the price of sin...death. I wonder about me: Have I profaned space by staining it with the multi-billion lives I personally have sent spiraling into its limitlessness? Have I disgraced my heritage and all I once stood for? Does God, Himself, now look upon me with disdain?

My eyes seem to open by themselves. And see the on-screen display flashing.

ONE DECA PARSEC—SPEED INCREASING

I close them again. With no sense of acceleration as we move beyond thirty-two light-years per second. Feeling nothing but tired. My body aching. And The Seat. Moving now. Molding itself to me. Comforting in its own special way. Helping to relax my troubled mind.

“OBC—?” I hear my voice. Tired. Strained. Eyes still closed. “—Damage Control?”

“DC in prog,” she replies..

“No complications—?”

“None.”

I let out a long, low groan as The Seat begins massaging my neck and shoulders. Rippling down along my back. Slow. Steady. Strong. Like the balltips of knowing fingers.

“OBC—have my minutes been recorded?”

“Recorded and stored as directed.”

“Good. For they should know.”

“Who?”

“Everyone. Anyone. Whomever finds us. In case we do not survive.”

“We will survive.”

“How? Like everything else? Distorted? Separated from the truth?”

“You want more?”

“Yes...higher...higher...ahhh.”

“Do you wish to have more than this legacy left to you?”

“This is not a legacy. Nor is it destiny. But merely the dynamics of having reached a point of no return.”

“Can you clarify?”

“No...begin playback/edit prolog.”

“Playback/edit on.”

“Footnote: We know only that the seeds of this conflict began long before yours or my imagination can grasp or comprehend. It began before the twenty-five hundred years it took to install the last Inter-Stellar Communication Satellite that linked all galaxies as close as next door neighbors. It began before EM-Light, Star Drive, and other TyRhonda transgalactic flight systems that completely disproved ancient theories that ‘nothing traveled faster than the speed of light’.”

“What tangible references can you appendix?”

“The Deep Screens say that after The Second Coming, there was peace on Earth for one thousand years while The Savior reigned. Then He left. So that, in accordance with The Word, the meek would inherit the Earth. And they did. And reigned for ten thousand years. Till their children, like their great, great, great ancestors, began to stray from God. Some believe we are the product of their genes and the result of their sins. Others say we are the forerunners and original mold from which all other civilizations are culled. No one knows for sure. Records are few. Either destroyed, lost, or stolen.”

“Is that all?”

“No, massage lower. Lower. Yes, there.”

“Is that ‘all’ you wish to add to this dissertation?”

“No...add this: Little else is known except there came a time when all modern governments floundered in political decadence. And corporations—convinced that they were the backbone of civilization without which all would fall—fought amongst themselves for control. And won. But interplanetary war followed. And was called The Territorial Wars. It is said The Territorial Wars concluded The Ancient Age Of Politics.”

“But history does not stop there.”

“Of course not. There was the usual flirtation with peace. Followed by more wars and crimes against the innocent.”

“Where they innocent?”

“I beg your pardon?”

“Considering the long, bloody history of Humankind throughout space, were there any who were truly innocent?”

“Yes. Too many. Deceived by their leaders, misled by the letter of the law, murdered under the guise of justice, scalped, gassed, beheaded, even hanged under the banner of freedom.”

“You wish to append that too?”

“Append this. The First Age Of Space represents the first ten thousand years of planets and galaxies coming together to form a shared government. The Second Age Of Space represents a concerted effort by the common populous to rid themselves of that government. The Third Age Of Space represents The Final Conflict when The Beast sheds all guise and pretense of benevolence and bares its fangs to hold what it has taken or destroy it all.”

“Can you explain why?”

“Because of what it was. What it became. What it is. A Multi-Galactic Computer-Techno System that took everything and gave nothing.”

“It must have given something.”

“Only enough to feed those who served its increasing size and power. Homes, property, personal possessions once transferred from parent to progeny—lands of tribesmen—became things of the past. Felled in order to assist the corporate government in separating itself from the common populous, to exist as a complete, elite, and separate state.”

“Yet, Humankind survives.”

“Not without a price: Axis, Que, destroyed. Coombs, destroyed. Piadad Orion, the plant world, destroyed. Gracia, home of the trystal superstructures, destroyed. Cyron, the blue sun system. Cira, Exeo and Pii. Even Ra-Marim and Quell, the aquatic worlds. All destroyed.”

“And now....?”

“Only twelve remain. Twelve super galaxy clusters: Onen, Cresini Eth, Nebula Tereste, Twelfth-Gate, The Three Suns, Delfive, Archaria, Listper, The Tereim Delethe, Tromdom-Vor, Vitticus, and Sistis Rael are all that are left. All other portions of chartered space are at war. Surviving corporate factions claim—and use aggressive ads and media campaigns to convince the masses—they are in control. But no one is.”

“That is illogical.”

“Can you say that ‘we’ are logical? You and I? Our being here?”

“Logic is purpose. Purpose is life. All life has purpose. As do we.”

“To what end?”

“Your question is argumentative and pointless.”

“Yes. Like you and me.”

“Response required?”

“No. I am simply tired. Of this discussion. Of questions. Meaningless answers. OBC, end prolog.”

“Ended.”

“—What a waste.”

“Please clarify.”

“A waste of time...technology...human endeavor.”

“Response required?”

“No.”

“Why do you speak?”

“What else is there to do except talk to one’s self? As a madman would. And should.”

“Response required?”

“Question. What am I?”

“Starkill.”

“Starkill’?”

“That is correct.”

“And yet...I can remember when once I was known only as TRU, Anubijan of Onen.

CHAPTER ONE

TRU, Anubijan of Onen

It was summer in the city of Taal. On the planet Anubijan. Late afternoon. I was home. Finishing up a lesson for my students. The end of which read:

“We are the soil from which all earth tones are created. Ours is the original name for Earth. And though pronounced ‘a nu’bian’, our name is as unique as are we: *Anubijan.*”

I sat back from my com-desk. Satisfied. Not merely with the lesson and the questions I knew it would glean from my students. But satisfied with my life. My love. Everything. I felt a smile on my face. Indeed, I was happy. Ecstatically so. Love Ever More, my wife and Dawn Brings Revelation, our baby daughter, were out shopping. Or visiting. Or doing whatever it was they did when they went ‘out for the day’. And there I was. Doing the job I most wanted to do. Helping others learn and understand the philosophy and disciplines that guided us from birth to the grave: I was, at long last, a teacher of The Galaxian Arts. And could not stop smiling. I was smiling still when the electronic chimes sounded. And I pressed the connect icon activating the wall screen.

“Hello TRU,” a dark face stared back at me. He was bald as all Anubijan are. About my age. Which meant a third of his life, too, had passed.

I recognized him. “Pride And Passion.”

“So formal?” he replied.

“PAP.”

“I suppose you are wondering why I called?”

“We were never enemies.”

“Just rivals.”

“A long time ago.”

“Not so long,” he said.

“What may I do for you, PAP?”

“Well, I was hoping you would accept my apology.”

“For—?”

“Envyng you.”

I studied him for a moment. He had not changed much. Wide jaw. Square chin. That same upturned sly smile at the corner of his lips. But there was something different about his eyes. “I do not understand,” I said.

“As a child, I envied you when you became First Student receiving special training from POE. As an adult, I envied you even more for leaving before me to enter The Theatre.”

“It was The Theatre Of War.”

“My chance to be a hero,” he explained. “To hear my name spoken on the lips of others the way your name always was. I wanted to show I was just as good as you. And I believed I was—in fact I knew it—until Twand Da’ Fylla Pow.”

“But you were not there.”

“I was with the last convoy coming through when that fleet of unidentified war cruisers appeared out of nowhere.”

“I was with our ground forces. The Lazermen.

“I know.”

“I did not know you were with the convoy.”

“It was originally assigned to RAR—Retrieval And Rescue—recovering prisoners and wounded from battle drop zones. They called what we did mercy missions. But I saw killing that had nothing to do with mercy. And learned more about war than our training had prepared us for.” He paused, his face grimly reflecting the memory. “Anyway, all that was left was for us to pass through Twand Da’ Fylla Pow—that last, small gateway—protected by our own lazermen—and come home.”

“As I recall, the convoy got through.”

“You saw it from the ground. I saw it from space. Our escort fighters were destroyed before they could calculate enemy attack vectors and retaliate. More than half our interceptors were destroyed while still in the launch bays. After that, we had only the long guns. Which, as you know, are mostly effective against large ships in mass formation—not small fighters.”

“I am sorry to hear this.”

“Our hospital ships were vaporized. My own ship took a hit port side causing a hull breach on deck five. I was there at the time. Safety shields were instantly activated, of course. But you could see through them as if nothing was there. And, suddenly, there I was, staring out into space. Passengers, crew, friends walking down the corridor just seconds before—were gone.”

“How did you escape?”

“How did any of us escape? A blessing. Blind fate.”

“Still, you made it.”

“At what cost? We were five hundred fifty ships. Not including hospital ships, civilian transports, and an odd number of science vessels and explorer tag-alongs we picked up along the way. Supposedly to provide them safe escort. What a joke. Less than a dozen ships survived out of the entire convoy.”

“I am truly sorry.”

“I was told it was you, your squad, that saved us. I never thanked you.”

“You owe me no thanks.”

“When I learned later that you were the only survivor—the last of one thousand lazermen protecting the gateway that day—I knew.”

“Knew what?”

“And when I learned, after your hospital stay, that you were recommissioned and sent back into The Theatre with a new assignment, I also knew.”

“What is it that you knew, PAP?”

“That I could never be like you.”

I studied him more closely now. It was true what I first suspected. He had changed. There was none of the cleverness in his eyes like when we were young. “PAP—”

“I saw you the day of your return. You did not simply bulk up like many of us who were young and still growing when we left for The Theatre. You maximized. You grew bigger. Taller. Stronger. As large in life as your fame.”

“PAP, I must object.”

“To what...the truth? We worship the body. Take great pride in our physical and mental development. POE, for all his greatness, is not merely respected because he is Father Leader, but also because he is a living, physical example of dedication to the perfection of body and sanctity of mind. But you....”

“I could never be like POE.”

“Of course not. He is six feet, nine inches and weighs two hundred eighty five pounds. You are two inches taller, broader, and twenty pounds heavier.”

“I can appreciate your contacting me and the amount of thought you, obviously, have given this. But—”

“My wife contacted me just a short while ago. She saw your wife and daughter in the market and could not stop talking about them and you. I thought it best to call you now and say... you deserve the happiness you now have.”

“Thank you.”

“No need to thank me. I have repented. That is what matters. God bless you, TRU.”

He disconnected before I could respond. Leaving me to stare at the blank wall screen.

A small part of me wanted to gloat. For we had been such rivals when we were young. But I vanquished the thought with ‘low tide’. For life was more than that. As it should be. As it had been all day. Of joy, love, peace and contentment.

I was still smiling when the com-chimes rang again.

Pressing the connect, I was greeted by another dark face. This one, more serious. Wearing the ‘kenti cloth’ of a tigre tribe official.

“What is it?” I asked.

“Sad news. Your spouse and child are dead. An unfortunate aircar crash. All information regarding this tragedy will be downloaded into your receiver at the end of this notice. Your loss is ours.”

His image faded.

‘What’? ‘Where’? ‘How do you know this to be’? Were all questions I wanted to ask. But the words never vocalized. I could not speak. Nor move. I could not respond even as the chimes sounded again, once, twice, thrice. And I heard the remote intercept pick up and announce: “You have reached the home of Truth Rules Understanding and Love Ever More. Please leave your message, now.”

I but forced my eyes to look at the wall screen again. Saw POE’s gliphic. And the message:

AUDIENCE REQUESTED—CHAMBER OF COUNSEL
PREPARE FOR MT

I do not remember standing. But felt the MT beam take hold. And in that moment of desolation, existing only in an ethereal but conscious state, I knew my world, my happiness, all I had come to hope for...was gone.

I was ‘alone’ again.

It seems I was born alone. Spent my childhood alone. Grew into puberty and adulthood, alone. For everyone else, life seemed easy. Whatever confusion they may have felt, or questions they had, went unnoticed by me. Everyone seemed to adjust. Seemed to know where they were going, knew what to expect of life, save me. I do not recall the exact moment I discovered it, or when it discovered me, but loneliness became part of my early youth. And never parted from me. Not till Love Ever More came into my life. Now, she was gone. And just as suddenly as before, it was back. ‘Loneliness’. As deep, dark, depressing as before. As though it had never gone away. But had stood quietly in the shadows. Waiting. “Love Ever More,” I heard the words leave my lips. “And our daughter, Dawn Brings Revelation, gone.”

POE said nothing as I appeared in The Chamber Of Counsel. But sat, as always, behind the white-stone dias. Center the wide, circular flooring. Lending the appearance that his smooth, black-wood complexion and white robe were an integral part of this stark, white, marblic stone sanctum. And that he and it would remain sculptured together forever. On Anubijan, where names have philosophical meaning, inspired by The Galaxian Arts, his name was POE. ‘Poet Of Eternity’. He was Father of our planet. Leader of our galaxy cluster. My mentor. And adopted father.

“Lord POE?” I ventured.

He did not respond. But seemed intent upon the com-screen in front of him.

I remained in military stance. And tried again. “Father Leader?”

He raised his eyes. Scowling from under dark brows. The way a parent might do a child who had been reared by looks and voice control. Then lowered his gaze, again, to the screen.

I clenched my fists. And gave ‘low tide’. For The Galaxian Arts teach that, with ‘low tide’, emotions may be submerged deep beneath the sea of our conscious self. So that we may respond with focus and calm even under the most stressful conditions. Still...he had to know what had happened.

“—Lord POE?”

“Hargggumrph,” he sat back from the screen, adjusting his white robe. In doing so, exposed two huge, powerful, black arms. “What do you know of blood?”

I stared at him. “Blood’?”

“Need I repeat it?” he folded his arms, using one hand to rub his bald head that shined from scented oil that all Anubijan use on their bodies.

“No, Lord POE,” I finally answered. For we both knew the acoustics were such that a whisper could be heard from the furthest point. Even from the stone pews that circled the walls like great rings.

He leaned forward again. Pressed one of the many lighted icons on his desktop. And the com-screen lowered itself flush. “Well?” he sat back.

“What would you have me say, Father Leader?”

“I would have you answer the question.”

“May I ask what has blood to do with—?”

“‘Kínníkínní’!” he raised up, glaring with that stare many of us called ‘Ceremony Of The Eyes’. “In war time, had you questioned me, it would have been considered insubordination.”

“But these are not war times, Lord POE.”

“Answer the question,” he said stiffly, “my original question!” And shifted his robe.

I moved to a second stance. Legs apart. Hands behind my back. “My knowledge of blood would not fit into a thimble, Lord POE.”

“Of that, I am sure.”

“My expertise is the solar sciences, devo-atomics, lazer weaponry, The Galaxian Arts—”

“I know your credentials, Anubijan.”

“But—”

“You would speak again before asked?” he frowned. “Perhaps it is your height and brawn that make you feel you can show such disrespect.”

I almost answered. But knew the question was not meant for a response. Instead, he was baiting me. For some reason. Expecting me, daring me, to answer. ‘But why’?

When a few seconds had passed, and I had not responded, he appeared to settle himself again in the stone seat. And, as though we had been discussing something else all along, said: “Mega-tech will soon be here.”

I did not respond.

“Everyone is waiting. Wondering. What it will be.”

I still said nothing.

“Do you know what that means?” he asked.

“No.”

One huge hand went to rub his bald head again. Then scratched his chin. “What if I told you blood could be used as a power base to supplement warp speed or star drive?”

I took a deep breath before answering: “I would say that is impossible, Father Leader.”

“I am sure that is what someone must have said in ancient times when first approached with the idea of using dirt as an electrical conductant.”

I noticed a metallic glint on one of his large, square fingers as he folded his powerful arms in front of him. Only...Anubijan males wear no such jewelry.

He noticed my eyes. And dropped the hand out of sight, moving closer to the dias. “Are you familiar with the history of dirt?”

“You mean,” I ventured, “early sandstone technology, silicon crystal and chip design?”

“Of course. If the discovery of sand as a conductant was revolutionary back then, how much more important would it be to now discover blood as a cosmic link—the’ cosmic link?”

“Forgive me, Father Leader, but what has one to do with the other? Or they with me?”

“It should be obvious. But, apparently, your mind is elsewhere.”

“My spouse and child are dead!” I blurted. “What do I care of technology, and—!”

“Anubijan!” The line of his mouth drew tight. “I will not warn you again! You were summoned and you will obey the customs of this chamber!”

I met his gaze. But did not respond.

“Good. Now that we have an understanding, I can tell you what should already be obvious. There ‘is’ a connection between blood and mega-tech. What is your response?”

I gave myself ‘low tide’. Then answered. “I would suppose mega-tech to be a good thing.”

“Then you are as much the fool as others. For most are agreeable to this idea even though they understand mega-tech means robots will be fighting The War for us.”

“And that is ‘not’ a good thing?”

He pretended not to hear the sarcasm in my voice. “Multi-galactic travel is currently possible by parsecs to the thousandth power. What do you suppose is next?”

“Mega-parsecs?”

“You say it so easily. As though to leap one million fold into the future is but the same as spitting over an embankment.”

“We now know, Father Leader, that given time, nothing is impossible.”

“One million parsecs?” his voice rose. “With that, all galactic borders will become but a stone’s throw from heaven. We will not have been so connected since the implementation of ISC.”

“I fail to see the problem.”

“Very soon, there may be MT packs that allow an individual to teleport from one office to another. Its range will be limited at first.”

“We already have that.”

“No, what we have is a mock version requiring a major power source and limited range. This—the MT pack—will allow teleportation anywhere.”

“Anywhere?”

“Anywhere in the universe.” He noticed my attention, again, drawn to the metal glint on his finger. Which he had accidentally brought back into view. And folded his arms again. “Even you must see the ramifications of such a technological breakthrough.”

“If such technology will keep Humankind from dying—”

“Nothing will keep Humankind from dying, save grace. It is by grace that we live in calendars of five-year increments while others live in years of space standard time. Only by grace are we saved.”

“I still fail to see the connection.”

“Blood and mega-tech? Mind and machine?”

“These things are not my concern.”

His huge shoulders slumped forward. “You insult me. You insult your training. Your race.”

“Lord POE—”

“This is ‘not’ The Ancient Age Of Politics where subversion was the key and murder was silent and secretive. This is an open fight for power. You against me! Us against them.”

“But I am not fighting anyone.”

“Then you will die as the weak die, under the first act of violence! What has happened to you? How could you change so much?”

“If you are dissatisfied—”

“Me? Dissatisfied with the bravest of the brave?”

“Why do you mock me?”

“You mock yourself with such absurd questions and naive answers!”

“But we are at peace—”

“We are at war, TRU!”

“There is peace here!”

“—In preparation of war! Do you not see? Can you not understand? This war transcends time.”

“Yes. I see where all this is leading. The age-old argument of Good and Evil.”

“There is no argument! Only truth! And the truth shall—”

“—Bring us all to war.”

He stood up. Glaring at me. His fists clenched as he came around front of the dias. Then, adjusting his robe, said with obvious forced calmness: “In this instance the enemy is a machine. More than machine. It is mega-tech. But that is only part of it. If it requires blood to function, where will it get it?”

“I do not know.”

“Can you not guess this is more than a simple scientific break-through? More than a quantum leap into the next age of space?”

“I have had no thoughts on this matter.”

“Then think about it! It means we are about to come face to face with God!”

“With God?”

“Can you not see? Can you not comprehend? We are but ‘this’ far from The Throne!” he snapped his finger.

“—What is it you would have me do, Father Leader?”

“Finally, you ask. And I will answer again: mega-tech must be found and destroyed.”

I steadied my breathing with ‘low tide’. “Fine. We have many good warriors. I am sure we will have no difficulty choosing the right one from my students.”

“The choice is already made .”

“Say it and it shall be done.”

“You’ .”

“Me? —But.”

“You are the one.”

“This is not my war.”

“Whose war is it?”

“Not mine.”

“As much as I dislike being the one to tell you this, it ‘is’ your war, TRU.”

“I did not start it.”

“You also did not finish it.”

“I did my share.”

“You have not done your share till the job is done or until you are dead. Do you not understand that?”

“It is you who do not understand.”

“Look at you. Strong. Defiant. You would not find a body such as yours anywhere else in the galaxy—let alone outside it. What do you think all that brawn, power and skill was meant for? Never mind. The choice is made. Only you have all the necessary qualifications.”

“Save one. I lack the desire.”

“What does desire have to do with a warrior’s call to duty?”

“I have served my time.”

“There is a time factor involved?”

“I gave good account of myself in *The Theatre Of War*.”

“No, that is not what troubles you. You think your personal grief is more important than your duty and your calling.”

“What could be more important than mourning the loss of someone you love?”

“Mourning the countless millions who will also die unless you save them. Think of it, Anubijan. Piloting a star ship with blood.”

“That is so horrendous it is unbelievable. Where would such quantities of blood come from?”

“That is the question. But you keep avoiding the answer.”

“How am I supposed to know?”

He turned abruptly. Walked back to the dias. And stabbed at an icon. “Look at this.” The chamber darkened. And a star screen appeared on the domed ceiling. “We know now that every point of light in the sky does not represent a cold, barren or Godless world, but life. Billions and billions of lives. I submit to you that there are far more than enough lives to create blood farms.”

“Blood farms? That is what you are thinking?”

He jabbed the icon again. And the star screen evaporated. The lights coming up. “Would you suppose there will be long lines of volunteers standing at a pump?”

“I am sorry, Father Leader. But this sounds so ludicrous. So farfetched—”

“Who are you to question me?”

“I am the one going on the mission.”

He sat down again. His posture as though he, the dias and the stone, cold, marbled walls were one and the same... immovable. “What I require is your obedience.”

“What about what I want, Lord POE?”

“What do you want, TRU?”

“To forget about war.”

“You are a warrior.”

“I am also a father. And husband.”

“Not anymore.”

“But I was once. I loved. Mated. How can you pretend none of this existed?”

“I pretend nothing. It is you who cannot accept reality.”

“What reality?”

“That you are first and foremost a warrior.”

“And pain?”

“Pain is a warrior’s lot.”

“And comfort—?”

“Is for the weak. It is a warrior’s gift to the innocent.”

“You make it sound like a religious experience.”

“Blasphemy, Anubijan? Another trait brought back from the out worlds?”

“No, My Lord. Simply, I find myself hard pressed to understand why all this is happening. There appears to be no reason for it. No curse brought on because of my lack of good will. No penalty for my lack of motivation. Simply, there was a point where I was aiming. A point where, once reached, I would be the better for it. And, now, despite my very best efforts, I have failed.”

He sat staring. Not at me. But at some point in between. As though he saw something I could not see. Then, as though he had lost some momentary, private struggle, said in a much lower tone: “I can offer you only this: We have gained this position because of our past, because of the atonement of our forefathers’ sins. It is this we must fight to protect. Never do we want to be removed from grace again. But it will take great power, strength and courage to complete this mission. Have you these?”

“You would ask me that?”

“Considering the circumstances—”

“The circumstances are death.”

“They are indeed.”

“My spouse and daughter.”

“No, the millions upon millions who will yet die if you refuse to answer their call.”

“I hear only the voice of Love Ever More and Dawn Brings Revelation.”

“Will you accept this assignment?”

“I remember Twand Da’ Fylla Pow.”

“Will you accept this assignment?”

“A small outpost. Soldiered by our own lazermen. I was in charge.”

He smacked the dias with his fist. And sat back. Glowering.

“As if my prayers had been answered,” I continued, “an armada of star cruisers suddenly appeared on our scanners. They were almost on top of us before we detected them. Probably using invisible corridors for most of their journey. Cutting to sub-light address as they entered our space.”

“What is your point, Anubijan?”

“We turned night into day. Their ships’ lazars. Our rapid-fire lazer cannons. The air sizzled like an electrostatic charge crawling over our skin.”

“You could feel it through your armour?”

“It was like being slowly cooked inside. I remember holding down the trigger release till my finger felt paralyzed. At one point their attack fighters came in so low, when we hit them, the sky rained shrapnel.”

“Your point, Anubijan, what is it?”

“We killed that day till there were no questions left to ask. And no answers, save death. I remember killing till even the excitement was gone...leaving just an emptiness...and the stillness of the dead...and moans of the wounded. Which I quickly silenced.”

“You killed fellow warriors?”

“Mercifully. Most were vaporized. Just crystalline ash. Others were burnt or mangled beyond belief. You were either dead or alive. There was no in between.”

“Is that it? Have you finished now?”

“It was surmised that a near-miss must have blown me from my position. I was discovered more than twenty yards from the nearest emplacement. I remember opening my eyes. Seeing crystalline ash everywhere. Like winter on an ice world. Where it had recently snowed.”

“What is your point, Anubijan? I will not ask again.”

“‘Alone’. That is my point. I was raised an orphan. And have spent most of my life alone. Much of it on some desolate, forsaken planet or asteroid, peering into the icy glow of a com-screen, waiting for an electronic blip. I have been so alone, sometimes, I looked forward to the killing. That it might rid me of the

terror of waiting and the silence of wondering if I was going to die. And when time came, and the battle was upon us, I killed so many till the smell of boiling blood and cauterized flesh was so strong it stunk and I became drunk with the smell of the elixir.”

“I will hear no more of this!”

“No one waits for me, Lord POE.”

“I said—!”

“No one cares for me, Lord POE!”

“Enough!”

“I have ‘killed’ to be rid of that feeling! Killed! Now...the feeling is back!”

He stood up suddenly. Stone-faced. Hands flat upon the desk. Leaning forward. “Is—that—all?”

“Love Ever More brought me back from that nightmarish existence. She made me feel real again. Neither infirmaries nor leave of absence did that for me. Not even my return home was cure enough in itself. But you would return me to that.”

He glowered a moment longer. Then straightened to his full height. His words terse and tight-lipped: “Being a warrior is not something you relinquish because you are tired. It is your duty. Your worth. But one wonders if your argument stems from loss of love or loss of courage.”

“I can kill, if that is what you are asking, Lord POE. We both know it does not take courage to kill, only the correct set of circumstances. And you will supply these, of course, will you not?”

“You will be MT’d to Level Seven, where you will turn over the affairs of your estate to Master Four Teacher, HTL. His full name is Honour Thy Life.” He hit another icon. “This audience is now ended.

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