

In a dark future the Confederation of Free Worlds is over-run by enemies both foreign and domestic. A new squad of Legion recruits is thrown immediately into the battle. Is it indeed too late or will the embittered new recruits risk it all to do the right thing for the women and children of ConFree?

SEEKER AND THE PATHWAYS OF THE GODS

by Marshall S Thomas

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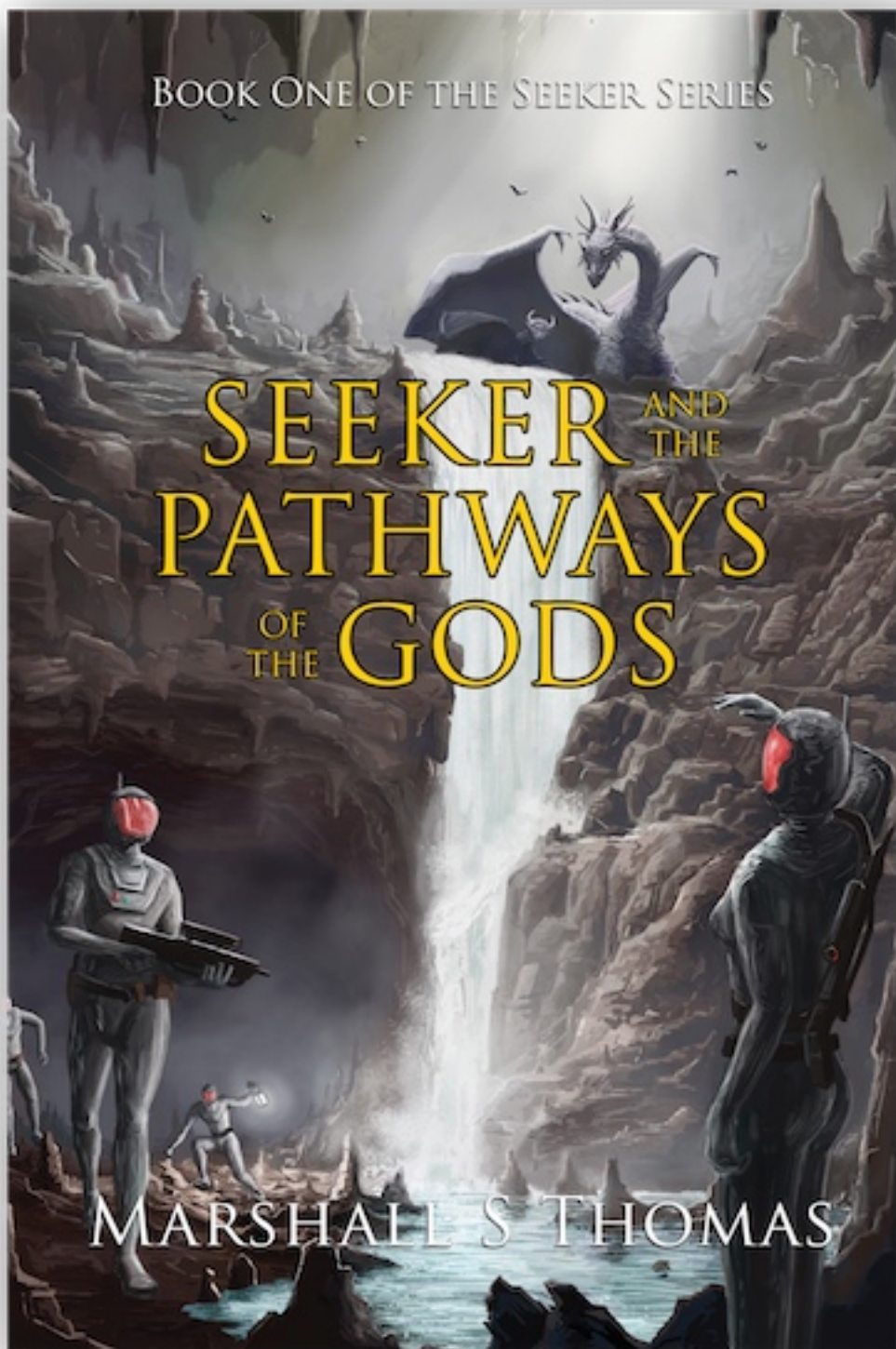
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BOOK ONE OF THE SEEKER SERIES

SEEKER AND THE
PATHWAYS
OF THE GODS

MARSHALL'S THOMAS



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CONTENTS

PART I ALIENS.....	5
Prologue - Blade	7
Chapter 1 - Rules of Engagement.....	11
Chapter 2 - Comrades in Misfortune.....	17
Chapter 3 - Starlight.....	42
Chapter 4 - Alien House.....	63
Chapter 5 - Praying to Deadman	87
PART II - NEWFAM.....	105
Chapter 6 - The Genome from the Past	107
Chapter 7 - The Division of Deconstruction.....	139
Chapter 8 - Hired Gun.....	162
Chapter 9 - Down the Rabbit Hole.....	180
Chapter 10 - This Side of the Dirt.....	203
PART III - RECON.....	227
Chapter 11 - Mystery Man	229
Chapter 12 - The Proud Tower.....	251
Chapter 13 - Beyond Words.....	269
Chapter 14 - Miss X4.....	287
Chapter 15 - First Officer Lan	307
PART IV - PARADISE FOUND	329
Chapter 16 - Tell it to the Realm.....	331
Chapter 17 - Dragon's Way	354
Chapter 18 - In the Heart of Hell.....	373
Chapter 19 - Law of Nature	398
Chapter 20 - A Walk in the Park	426

Seeker and the Pathways of the Gods

PART V - TOUGH LOVE453

 Chapter 21 - The Squadie Heart455

 Chapter 22 - Blood Justice478

 Chapter 23 - The Gods of History502

 Chapter 24 - The Sentinels.....525

 Chapter 25 - Operation Cockroach548

PART VI - THE LOST CONTINENT565

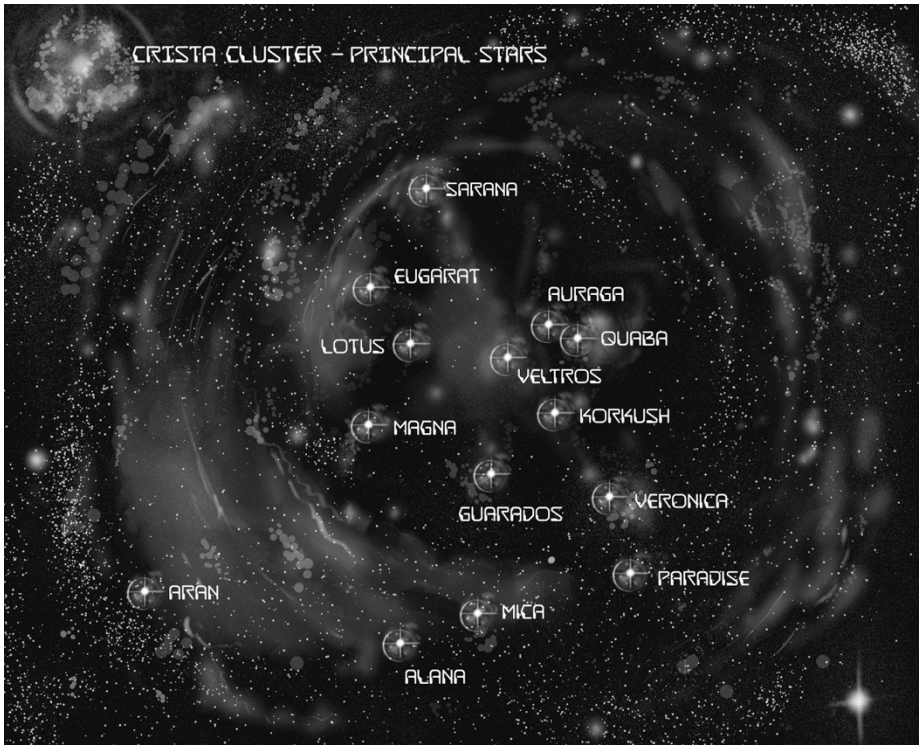
 Chapter 26 - In Velvet Vac567

 Chapter 27 - Black Rain594

 Chapter 28 - Angels.....614

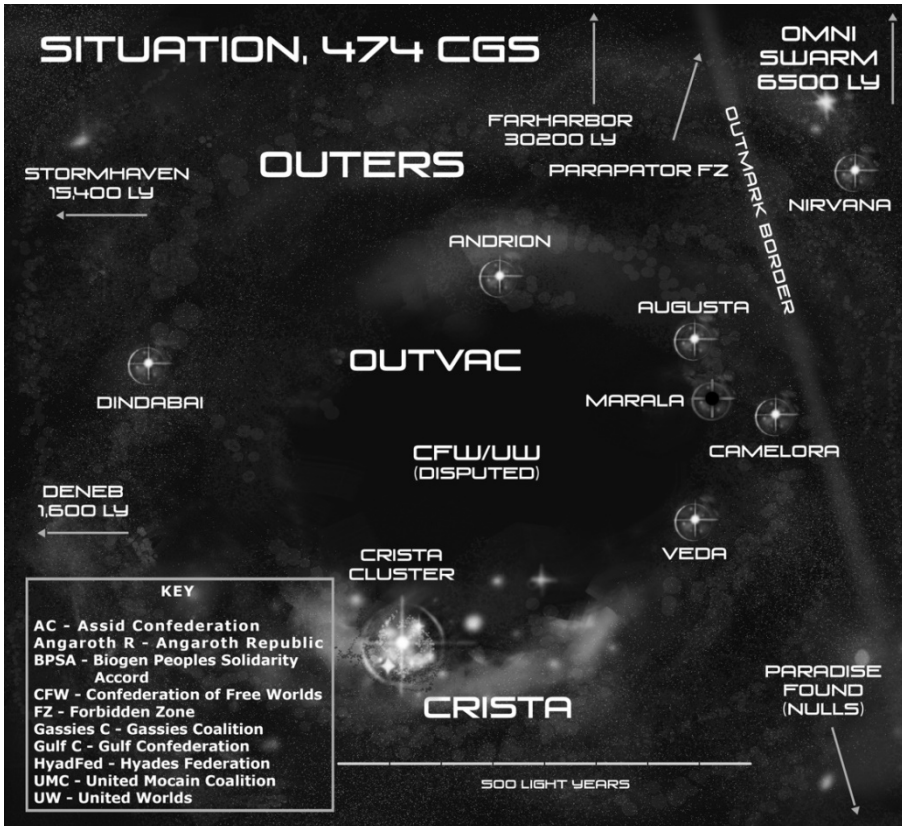
 Chapter 29 - On Deadman's Tacnet643

GLOSSARY.....671

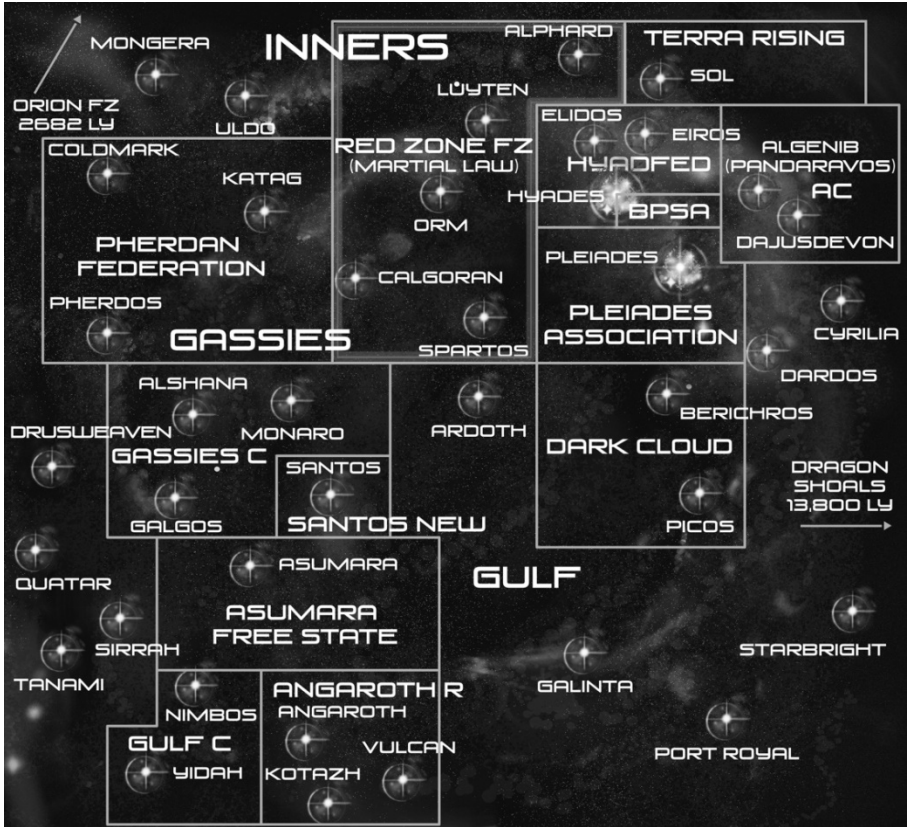


Crista Cluster, 1,400 light years from Sol

When the first Outworlder refugees approached the Outvac fleeing System oppression, the Crista Cluster beckoned them onwards with a view that appeared to form a starry cross in the vac. ConFree's ancestors settled those worlds as a free people and vowed in a constitution written in blood to uphold liberty, justice and freedom, no matter what the cost, and to remain eternally vigilant against all forms of tyranny and slavery. The ConFree Legion was formed to accomplish those objectives.



Seeker and the Pathways of the Gods



PART I

ALIENS



We are very busy and do not have time for troublesome aliens.

An alien, telepathically scolding a human.

If you want to survive, remain strong. Do not take advice from your enemies. But if you become weak and stupid, you will die, and your civilization will die.

An alien, telepathically confirming Seeker's suspicions.

Bleed for ConFree, and ConFree will bleed for you.

Legion dogma.



Prologue

Blade

"Any frac now. Any frac." Blade peered nervously at his chron and looked out past the tangled fronds and creeper vines and fat palm leaves of the monsoon forest. It was a hot night, it was raining hard and the forest floor was turning to mush.

"It's got to work. It's got to! We worked so hard!" the girl at his side said. Both were clad in filthy black camfax fatigues and A-vests and clutching Liberation battle rifles. Blade was a desperate young Outworlder with tangled brown hair, a pencil thin mustache, and flashing dark eyes. His companion was a hot blonde with short hair, pale flesh and smoky hazel eyes. She had a camfax rag wrapped around her head and was sweating in the monsoon heat. So was Blade.

"It be past time! Why has it not gone off?" the blonde asked. She was stressing out again.

"Calm it, Rocko," Blade said. "It be only a few fracs late."

"Well, dammit, why be it a few fracs late? You set it, didn't you? Did you screw up?"

"Oh, we dinna know, maybe, a frac here, a frac there, we do remember activating it, oh yes, we be almost positive about that, eh?"

"Stop it, Blade. Stop it! I'm having a heart attack!"

"Ye dinna have a heart, ya cruel wench."

A blinding flash lit up the entire sky, overcast with thick black rainclouds, and illuminated the forest in a hot burst, a lunatic spider's web of tangled black foliage wrapped around an empire of giant trees. The charge had detonated.

The shock wave hit the forest with a deafening boom, a mighty blast tearing at the foliage, ripping down small trees and large branches. A glittering mushroom cloud slowly arose from the horizon, swirling and burning, hot orange and red and golden hues, shooting up faster now, up up up into the night sky, spitting orange tracers, lightning strikes wreathing the cloud in dazzling blasts.

"Oh, it's beautiful! So beautiful!" Rocko exclaimed.

"That she be!"

"How many dead? How many?"

"A whole helluva lot."

"Great! That's great!"

"It be, girlie. Look, we got to move, right now."

"Do you think Pinky is all right?"

"Dinna know. Let's go!" They rushed into the heart of the forest with that obscene mushroom cloud lighting up the night. It was still raining. When they reached the staging area, black-clad guerillas greeted them with a muffled cheer.

"It worked, you crazy bastard!" A tall, intense man greeted them – Chief Forge. "Is Pinky all right?"

"We dinna know. Is me transport ready?"

"All ready." A soldier loomed out of the dark, leading a gigantic Soarosaur, a mighty lizard-bird with a spear-like beak full of razor teeth, a long neck and massive leathery wings tucked into its sides. It hobbled forward on two legs, looking around alertly. A saddle was strapped to its back. The soldier gave the reins to Blade.

Blade approached the creature and carefully handed it a gemfruit. The enormous reptile snatched it up tenderly with its beak and swallowed it whole. Blade caressed the dragon-bird gently. "Me darling Ladybird," he said, "may our last flight run fast and true. Ye have never failed me."

"There be no other way, Blade," Forge said. "The rats will be shooting down all air traffic with no questions asked. But they won't be shooting at Soarosaurus. She'll take you to Angel Island and your shuttle will be waiting for you by the military starport, camfaxed as a friendly. By the time they figure it out ye should be long gone."

Ladybird croaked and hissed, anxious to lift off. Blade climbed on and strapped in.

"Ya crazy bastard," Forge repeated. "Get us some help. We can't do it alone. Go to ConFree."

"Blade!" Rocko shouted. "Be safe! Return to us, my dear. Return! Bring help!"

Ladybird stretched her leathery wings out, and began flapping them gently. Blade waved a hand goodbye. He was silent. The bird began her takeoff run.

"I love you, Blade!" That was the last thing he heard. Then Ladybird soared into the black rainy sky. The rain hit Blade's face like buckshot. They cruised over the forest, higher and higher. The glowing mushroom cloud was still there. Blade knew the mission was more important than anything else. He

prayed to the Forest Elves for victory. And he prayed for Rocko.



Chapter 1

Rules of Engagement

"What's the weather?" I asked. I had just joined Kidcat at the OP. We were in a deserted habmod highrise that had proved too dangerous for further habitation. It had a great view of the area.

"Light to moderate sniper fire," he replied. "But they're holding off for now – waiting for more targets to appear." Kidcat was my squadie and best friend. I guess we were soulmates. We thought the same way about the fate of our nation. He was a young, tattooed tough who had fought his way out of our cursed school system and joined the ConFree Legion for salvation.

"How many times do we have to remind people not to stroll around near the front?" I asked.

"They have to shop, they have to eat, they have to get clean water and milk and medicine. The aircars don't work, there's no deliveries. They can't just hide in their cubes. Life has to go on."

I brought my Infinity battle rifle to my shoulder and took a peek through the scope. The bastards were just across the road,

invisible in abandoned buildings, waiting for the walking dead. We were in the capitol, Quaba Risen, but it was more like Quaba Fallen by now.

"Sure they're out there?" I asked.

"They're swarming. I can feel them. I can see them too, sometimes."

We were clad in camfax and A-vests, due to the suicidal rules of engagement mandated by our own leadership. No armor for us. Plenty of innocent ConFree nationals, soldiers and civilians were dying to protect the NewFam invaders.

"Did you shoot any?"

"No. Thought I'd wait for you." We were not allowed to fire at the enemy, unless they first fired at us. We could not even fire to defend ConFree civilians under fire. That's what happens when you voluntarily surrender your sovereignty to foreign invaders. Of course, that meant nothing to Kidcat or myself. We were just doing the right thing until they got around to arresting us for doing it.

A young woman hurried along the sidewalk below, carrying a toddler in her arms. She was trembling, but walking briskly. She must have felt the risk was worth it.

A shot rang out and she dropped like a stone. The kid fell to the sidewalk and began crying. I scoped the likely source in the deserted buildings across the street and the Infinity spotted human emanations and outlined the target. I squeezed the trigger the same instant the enemy sniper fired again. The kid exploded and the sniper's head exploded. I followed up with a lightning strike that shattered his hidey-hole, then I raked the entire area, auto lightning, blasting the whole line of buildings. When the echoes ceased a dead silence settled over the area. The civilian lady lay sprawled in a bloody heap, her

nightmares at last over. No more stress, no more fear, no more worries about her child. The toddler's remains were smeared over the sidewalk like human waste. A life cut short. Who knew what his future might have held? These were ConFree nationals. Our people. Betrayed by their own government. Kidcat resumed firing X, single rounds, picking off any survivors.

"I've kind of lost track, Kid," I said. "Are we currently with ConFree or with NewFam?"

"Last I heard we were in the People's Militia, formerly known as the ConFree Legion."

"Let's get across the street and kill whatever is still alive – before somebody stops us."

"You've got it, Geeker." Seeker was my Legion warname, but Kidcat usually called me Geeker. We were close enough so he could get away with that. I just called him Kid in return. Legion warnames, yeah, but it looked like we were not even in the Legion any more.

We advanced while firing, entered the nearest building and went hunting.

We found a lot of corpses, long-dead civilians and newly dead NewFam militia that we had just killed. They had torn holes in the walls so they could move from building to building without exposing themselves. These were Quaba's newest inhabitants. There were millions of them. They were not ConFree nationals or citizens, they were illegal aliens and they were going to inherit the lot, after killing off all the old inhabitants.

But they would have to kill off the ConFree Legion first. And we weren't going to make that easy.

We found one NewFam militia alive – badly wounded, covered with blood. He was on his back, gasping. A young foreigner, his face peppered with shrapnel, dark hair, dark eyes, a ratty militia field jacket, his weapon blasted in two by his side.

"You missed this one, dummy," I said.

"Well, so did you," Kidcat replied.

I aimed my Infinity at the NewFam's face, and paused just long enough so he would realize he was going to die.

"This is for all the women and children you killed," I said. "May you burn forever in the lower reaches of Hell." I fired X, one round. His head exploded, spraying us with blood. And I felt good. I felt real good.

"Let's get back to the OP," Kidcat suggested. "We're probably in plenty of trouble."

"So what else is new?" I asked.

Δ

"Stand at attention, damn you! What kind of soldiers are you?" Captain Grain was furious. Kidcat and I were standing at attention before his desk. I had never met him before. He stood up and glared at us. He was clad in the new grey People's Militia uniform. That said something about his loyalty. We were at District Hqs, and some people were wearing the new uniforms while others still wore Legion black. Security had disarmed us and even took our cold knives. That was an ominous sign.

Grain snatched up a printout on his desk and berated us. "You fools have no idea what our rules of engagement are, do you? You fired first at a militant who had not fired at you, and

you killed him. He was a NewFam United national. How are we supposed to generate loyalty in our new nationals if you are shooting at them without cause?"

"He killed a woman and a child, sir," I said.

"That's a police matter, trooper. It's not your business. Then you continued firing, auto lightning, killing more new nationals. And then you crossed the street and found one more alive, and executed him. That's a war crime, boys. And it's on the record. There's nothing further I can do for you. You will be turned over to the Ministry of Law, both of you, and charged with a war crime. The penalty is death. Security, get these two subs out of my sight and throw them in detention." The Ministry of Law had formerly been known as the Ministry of Justice, a term that was deeply offensive to the NewFam zombies.

They shackled our hands behind our backs and walked us along a corridor into another room. A Legion officer in black was seated at a desk. I was surprised to see the seal of the ConFree Legion displayed on the wall. The Legion was now supposed to be integrated into the People's Militia.

"Headed to the Ministry of Law, are you?" he asked without even looking up.

"Yes sir," we both answered.

"I'm looking for volunteers, boys. It could be a dangerous mission. If you're interested, I'll tell the Ministry of Law that you're busy. If not, you're free to proceed to the Ministry. My!" he was looking at a d-screen. "War crime. That's a death penalty offense, you know."

"Yes sir" I said. "We know."

"Well, speak up. Do you volunteer or not?"

"Yes sir!" we both said. What a break! I didn't care what it was, it was better than execution.

He looked up at us, for the first time. "Good. I have only one more question. Are you loyal to the ConFree Legion, or to the NewFam Union? Think hard before you answer. I need the truth."

A long hard silence followed. The truth. The truth was secret and dangerous and subversive. Speak the truth and it's the end for you.

"I am loyal to ConFree and the ConFree Legion," I said.

"Yeah. Me, too," Kidcat said. "ConFree!"

"All right," the officer said, "Security, take these two to Assignments."



Chapter 2

Comrades in Misfortune

Gatar D was right in the center of the fossil alien city, or base, or whatever it was. The xenos were working on that; I didn't know or care. We approached GD on foot in the usual blinding hail of poison rain. It was morning but the sky was black as night, covered with a thick atmosphere of swirling cyclonic winds. The main GD bunker was ahead, barely visible through the rain. It was a titanic dead-black stone structure that dwarfed us all but it was only one of the thousands of alien installations all around us. Most of them were underground but all of them had been blasted to oblivion hundreds of thousands or maybe millions of stellar years ago. Don't ask me – ask the xenos. Gatar D had a mighty antimat hole in the roof but the dead facility had an extensive underground tunnel complex.

"Alpha, keep alert." That was our squad leader. I was newly arrived on Parapator and glad to be out of the Quaba nightmare. I didn't even know my squad leader's warname yet, nor did I know why we had to be alert. Parapator was uninhabited, except for the dead. And the Legion.

The sky was now a blinding light show, unending blue flashes of lightning and growling, booming peals of thunder, rain pinging off my armor like shrapnel. I stumbled over the rocky terrain. Nothing was there except for rocks and mud. It didn't look like there was any flat land anywhere – just jagged rocks and hills and mountains. I wondered why the aliens had built their city in such awful terrain. This was only my third trek to Gatar D from our squadmod. They kept us pretty busy so I still knew little about my new squadies.

We eagerly sought shelter in the new office, which had been set up inside one of the entrances to Gatar D. It was guarded by a Legion half squad. Several civilians were moving around inside – xenos, from the Ministry of Science. Diggers, we called them. The giant metal hall bore the blackened signs of a prehistoric disaster. We gathered around the assignments table.

"Alpha, listen up," Alpha One said. "You're on for ten hours. There'll be no lunch break so grab some of those rats and stay hydrated. Find your assignment on the table and move out. Keep in touch. Stay out of the way of the xenos. Just stay alert. I want no chit-chat and no trouble. Clear?"

"Yes sir," we answered.

"Seven," somebody said. "We're together." It was Alpha Three, according to the designation on his armor.

"Fine," I said. "Let's go."

Δ

"You been here before? Roses, they call it," Three asked me, peering at the xeno map of the Gatar D tunnel complex. We had it all on our tacmaps of course, but the tacmaps had no

labels and were pretty confusing. We were in a little air-effects pickup that the xenos used to get around underground. I was driving.

Yeah," I replied. "Yesterday. It's deep – way deep. Level forty-one." We were flashing past intersecting corridors, locked onto the auto guidance.

"Forty-one. Man! Should be fun." Alpha Three was a pale Outworlder with watery blue eyes and short blond hair. We were armored and armed, helmets clipped to our U-belts. He radiated confidence.

"Here we are," I said, easing the car out to hover over a gigantic black shaft that appeared to drop straight down into infinity. I set the controls to float us gently downwards. "Keep strapped in," I advised.

"That's a ten."

The shaft had obviously once had things inside it – maybe freight elevators. But whatever had been there was long gone.



We entered level forty-one from the shaft and followed a wide corridor to the end, a large room where four air-effects pickups were sloppily parked.

"It's a short walk to the site," I said as I grounded the car. "Follow me." It was bone-chilling cold, a hard, dry cold that burnt at my throat. The planet had plenty of oxygen in its atmosphere, and it was breathable but it tasted harsh to me. This far down it would have been totally black except the Legion had lit everything up with little portable spotlights tacked up on the walls. The deck was stone, covered with an evil gritty coating of rot – history, I supposed. The decks were

all like that, all over Gatar D. We proceeded into a long narrow corridor not much wider than my shoulders. We had to hunch over to avoid the stone ceiling. It was stifling.

"Man! Are you sure this is it? Those aliens must have been little guys," Three commented.

"No, I don't think this little corridor was for them," I said. "Maybe it was for power lines, or water, or comms, or waste, or something like that. But it leads right to Roses – the site. "

Δ

Roses was a huge rotting hall, with a dark ceiling high overhead. Twelve xeno civilians were gathered around some equipment that was already at work, stripping slices off the wall and feeding it into some exotic filters. Everybody was busy. It was noisy and hazy.

"You're late," one of the civs said, glaring at us. I ignored him and set up shop in a corner with Three. Our mission was to defend and protect the xenos. Our sensors and tacmaps covered all approaches, and we were so heavily armed we should have no problems if anyone – or anything – tried to bother our xenos.

As Three and I sipped dox I looked over the civs. Males and females, several different races, Outworlders, Cyrillians, an Orman, was that an Earther? Who were these people? They looked like zombies – brainwashed slaves. A somewhat scruffy, dirty gang of civilians huddled in coldcoats. That was my first impression. Of course, they were all civilians and theoretically on our side, employed by our government – or what was left of it. It was the Ministry of Science but the xenos called it the Ministry of Truth, and it was concerned mostly

with propaganda and lies. NewFam United had a problem with science – even though these xenos were all scientists. I hated the NewFams and all the political newthought crap that went with it. NewFam United came under the United Worlds on the org charts and I knew United Worlds was a Realm front.

"Three, has anyone said who we are supposed to defend this bunch from?" I asked.

"Well, nobody has told me. I got the impression maybe it was from aliens. And maybe we did not have the need to know." The entire planet of Parapator was cosmic secret – that was the problem. And if you had to know something, they would brief you. Maybe.

"Did anybody tell you it was very important *not* to fire at any aliens we may encounter?" I asked.

"Ah, yes, that too. Righto."

"Any hints how we are to defend these folks if we cannot shoot intruders?"

"No. Harsh words, maybe?"

"Great. Where you from, Three?"

"Auraga. Thirty-third Legion. We were prepping to respond to the Newrat terror attacks against our civilians when Starcom supposedly dissolved all current Legion forces and individually dispersed everyone into new units under the People's Militia. Then they sent me here, and I still don't know why. Legion Expeditionary Unit Two Nine, Twentieth Legion, Parapator. It's supposed to be part of the new militia but it's not. And just try to find Parapator's location. Can't do it. It's not on the starmaps."

"Yeah, so I hear. So – the past is gone. Do you miss your old unit?"

"Yeah. I do."

"That was to smash Legion esprit and solidarity. Force us each to start over with a whole new squad of strangers."

"How about you, Seven?"

"They tried to do the same to me, but it didn't work. I was in Quaba Risen, the Home Guard. The NewFam terror teams were killing civilians at random but most of our civilians were heavily armed – they had refused to disarm. It wasn't a police action, that was a lie. It was war – an insurgency and counterinsurgency. We were escorting the civilian families into the milbases under fire while killing as many Newrats as we could. It was ... intense. I lost some friends. Then I was transferred here and I don't know why, but I do know I've lost my country and I never want to go home again."

"We'd better lower our voices a bit, or we'll be arrested and charged with high treason."

"That would be a badge of honor."

"Seven, righto, I agree with you but let's keep it quiet. We don't know who to trust."

Memories rushed over me like a hot, scarlet wave. I saw what the Newrat snipers did every day to our women and children. It was inhuman, and I concluded the Newrats were inhuman. I had never killed anyone before, but I learned how to kill there, in that baptism of blood.

Δ

The diggers took a break for lunch, shutting down the filters and heading out back to the cars. Our orders were clear enough – stay on post until the working day was over.

"I'm staying here," one of the female civs declared to her colleagues as they filed out.

"Feel free," somebody replied.

Three and I watched her as she worked. It was delicate, painstaking work. She was on her knees, using a hand tool to carefully uncover some crumbling relic from the past. Our whole galaxy was falling apart, mighty nations were committing suicide, millions were dying, and she's lost in the past, salvaging garbage from prehistoric realms. Who cares? Not me.

She was an Outworlder, young and trim, ragged short brown hair, a rather plain face, focused on her work. Not exactly my type.

"I'm going to say hello," I told Three.

"We're not supposed to do that. As you know."

"Well, if it gets too scary, close your eyes." I got to my feet, picked up a sealed dox cup and approached her.

"Hi. Want some dox?" I asked, squatting down beside her.

She was startled, looking me over in surprise. "No," she said. Deep liquid-brown eyes, pale lips, no make-up, some dirt smeared on one cheek.

"It's good – and hot. Go ahead, give it a try."

"I said no. What part of that do you not understand?"

"I'm sorry. I'm just trying to be friendly. What's your name?"

"You have no reason to know my name. We're not supposed to talk with you people."

"Really? Why not?"

"Look. I'm busy. It's very important work. And you are distracting me."

"What are you doing, Miss?"

"Do not call me Miss. I am not a Miss."

"What do I call you?"

"You can call me Doctor, if you must address me."

"Well, Doctor, why are you afraid to talk with me?"

"I'm not afraid of you."

"What is your doctorate in?"

"It is in xenoarchaeology. Now will you please leave me alone?"

"Did they teach you to fear Legion soldiers?"

"Yes, they did. We study history, and you kill people. We have nothing to discuss."

"I'll leave you alone now, Doctor."

"Good. What is your name?"

"My name is Alpha Seven. And I am at your service." I wanted to add "in case there's anybody you want killed", but I didn't.



That evening Alpha One called me into his little office in the squadmod. We were all new here, including him. And he was getting to know his squad – one person at a time. His warname was Conan. He looked like your normal officer, but his eyes cut into my soul and made me think there was probably a good reason for his barbarian warname. He was a tall, wiry redhead and instinctively aggressive, I could tell. He could have been a poster boy for the perfect Outworlder Legion officer. He sat behind his desk and I stood braced at attention before him.

He asked about my background and I told him about Quaba, the Home Guard, and the NewFam.

"You know, we're supposed to integrate all our units into the People's Militia," he said. "What do you think about that?"

"I have no comments about politics, sir."

"And what if Parapator Command chooses not to participate in the People's Militia? What will you do?"

"I will follow my orders faithfully, sir."

"Orders from who?"

"From my immediate superior, sir."

"That's a wise answer, Alpha Seven. Our nation's survival will depend on the continuing faith and unity of the ConFree Legion. Remain faithful to the Legion, and the Legion will remain faithful to you."

"Sir – yes sir!" I was thrilled to hear those words – "the ConFree Legion". The NewFam called us the "CrimCon" for Criminal Conspiracy. Under the new rules, it was a felony to use the term "ConFree". And that was my country.

"What was your last warname?" he asked.

"Seeker."

"And what were you seeking?"

"A whole lot of things, sir."

"Well, we'll see if you can find some of those things. Don't ever give up on your dreams, trooper."

"Sir. Yes sir."

"You'll keep your warname. Everyone keeps their warnames. NewFam seems anxious to erase the past. But the past is our heritage, the past is us. Now get to know your squadies."

"Yes sir." I was thrilled with my squad leader. And I was thrilled to be still in the ConFree Legion, rather than the People's Militia.



I followed Conan's suggestion that evening, looking over my companions carefully as we chowed down at the squadmod dining table. Before, I had been ignoring them all, hostile to any approaches, assuming they were all enemies or spies. That was the best survival strategy for a collapsing ConFree. But now it appeared there was hope. Conan remained in his office as we ate.

"Got to admit they feed us well," Alpha Two said, devouring his food. His warname was Popeye. As he was the squad deputy, it was worth listening to what he said. He was a wiry little bundle of energy, covered with savage, colorful tattoos from some lost realm. A real little guy, yes, but absolutely fearless and easy to offend. I'd personally seen him demolish a giant muscled Legion goon who had laughed at him. The fight lasted about five frags and ended with the goon on his back, bleeding freely and whimpering like a child.

"The baby poo is not bad," Alpha Three said, slurping his soup. This was my first friend in the squad. He had told me his warname was Speedo. He was a solid citizen and was not afraid of taking action – that's what he told me about his warname.

"We should find out who preps the food – and be nice to him," Alpha Eight growled. This was Quannah – named after some great historical Terran warrior. He was a large, formidable man with bronze skin, a primitive flat face, jet black hair and bottomless dark eyes. He moved slowly but looked like he could crush you with one blow.

"I'll find out," Alpha Five said. Let's see, she was Aine, named after some Irish Summer Goddess. "I'll be nice to him

and he will be nice to us." She was a statuesque honey with flaxen hair, bright blue eyes and a lovely pale complexion. I thought if she was nice to me, I would certainly be nice to her.

Alpha Four was seated next to Aine. Four was another girl, warname Blues. She was a tempting Outworlder brunette, but she was silent and gloomy – maybe that explained her warname. She concentrated on her food, ignoring everyone else.

Alpha Six was Solo, a young Outworlder male with brown hair and clean features, average build. Also an introvert, it seemed, picking at his food. I had heard he was a tech, who had turned down a promising future in order to join the Legion. Unbalanced, I thought. I'd have to learn more about him.

There were four females in the squad. Alpha Nine was our medic, warname Isis, after the ancient Egyptian goddess. She was some kind of exotic, not an Outworlder. She had dark hair, pale brown flesh and slender, lovely features. Another honey!

Our last squad member was Ten, also female, warname Anzu. She had short ragged reddish hair, a pale freckled face, and bold hazel eyes looking over everyone in the squad. She was casual to the point of arrogance. Self-confident. This one was first-class dynamite, but she'd need careful handling. And she'd probably want to get on top – if she even liked males at all. Well, I'd find out, sooner or later. This was our aircar pilot so our lives were in her hands. I had overheard somebody asking her what "Anzu" meant, and she had replied "chicken from Hell".

I wondered what had happened to Kidcat. I missed him, but I had no idea where he was. We had been separated in Assignments. He could be anywhere in the galaxy.

Δ

The following day, Speedo and I were thrown together again in Roses. The xeno gang was swarming over the work areas, examining and tearing holes in the metal walls and the deck. They seemed pretty excited about something. The filters were raising choking clouds of dust. They darkened the lights a few times, then restored them.

"How much you bet she's going to stay here over lunch break?" I asked.

"What is it with you? She's got a face only a mother could love. And she hates us. Why do you want to chat her up?"

"Hey, she's got a great personality."

"I never dated girls with great personalities."

The xenos did eventually break for lunch, and once again Doctor X remained at the work site, on her knees, ignoring us. Then she stood up and darkened the lighting until we could barely see. She looked over at us.

"You!" she said. "Alpha Seven. Come over here." I walked over and stood there facing her.

"I know what you're thinking!" she declared. "You think our work is a big waste of time. Looking into the past, into the dark, into lost worlds. Who cares, right? You're wrong! Ignorant and wrong! We're saving history, shining the light into something that was gone forever, eradicated and gone. And now we can see it, we can touch it. You people burn history, and we uncover it, we save it. Lost worlds, lost

languages, lost cultures. Speaking to us, through the ages. Now I'm going to show it to you, so you'll understand. Get down! Join me!" She fell to her knees, facing the wall they had been working on. So did I.

She raised a little flash that glowed a violet light, illuminating a section of the wall.

"See that?" she asked.

"No." It was just a filthy wall, peeling with the grime of centuries.

"Wait. Wait a bit. It's appearing. Be patient." She was trembling.

Yes, something was there. Something was appearing, barely visible in the violet light. A smudge, against the wall.

"Do you see it? Do you see it?"

"I see it. But what is it?"

"It's clear now. You can see it all. What does it look like?"

"It looks ... kind of like a ... a handprint."

"Yes! But not a human handprint. Four digits, all of different lengths. One long, two medium, one short. This is an alien handprint. Something over two hundred thousand stellar years ago, an ancestor of the Chorran Horde placed his hand on this wall, which had just been hit with plasma. We don't know if he was a defender or an attacker of this site, but we know he was here – right exactly here. We can touch his handprint! Look at that! Look at that!" Tears were running down her cheeks and she probably didn't even know it. And I was thrilled. An alien handprint! Wow. All right. I thought it was pretty neat, but I was not moved to tears. I guess she felt very strongly about this subject and her role in it.

"Doctor." I said. "I thank you for showing this to me. It's truly awesome. Could I ask your name?"

She wiped the tears from her cheeks with the back of her hands. "I ... I guess so. Did you really like that?"

"Yes. I did."

"I am Doctor Neuves. So, you see what we do. And it's a lot more than that. Sorry about the tears. You'd best not talk with me when the rest of the gang is here. They have a low opinion of the Legion."

"Why's that?"

"It's what they teach us in school. Hate the Legion, hate the CrimCon – it's part of the curriculum." Yes, I knew that. It had been part of the curriculum for about eighty years, when ConFree's agonizing suicide attempt had begun.

Δ

AREA ALERT! LEGION ALERT! ATTENTION ALL UNITS! SIX LIGHT PROBES HAVE APPEARED WITHIN GATAR D. CIVILIAN CONTRACTORS CEASE ALL ACTIVITY IMMEDIATELY. LEGION SECURITY STAND BY TO DEFEND THE XENOS. PROBES ARE CLOSING ON WHITESIDE, NARROWS, ROSES AND THE DROPOFF. REPORT ALL SIGHTINGS.

"Cut the filters! All sensors on! Freeze! Just freeze!" It was the next day. Speedo and I were at Roses again and the xeno chief was barking orders to his guys. Speedo and I snapped our helmets on and dispersed to our preset zeros where we could best defend the xenos. Conan had finally briefed us all on the light probes threat so we were ready. We were not to fire unless the alien probes attacked the xenos. These things had shown up before, long before our squad arrived on-planet, and so far, they had not attacked anyone so we were hopeful

that trend would continue. Speedo and I were both armed with Infinity battle rifles, which can take out whatever you want – except maybe alien light probes. Nobody really knew.

We waited, in total silence. The xeno chief knew our rules of engagement.

ATTENTION, LIGHT PROBE APPROACHING ROSES.

I felt I was about to choke on my own adrenalin. I clutched my Infinity tightly. Conan had told us the probes were likely riding artificial wormholes to approach Parapator, or possibly were from alternate dimensions, maybe even time benders. Past efforts to capture them had failed spectacularly. Why they were interested in GD was unknown.

The xeno civs were frozen in place, evidently terrified. I didn't blame them. A pale white glow flickered around the main entrance to Roses. Then it brightened. A blinding little ball of glittering white flame floated into Roses. It was so bright it was hard to look at directly; the diggers were shielding their eyes. The darksight on my visor took the edge off it for me. It appeared to be a miniature star, spitting and slightly crackling. It cast shadows like a spotlight. And it just floated there, up near the ceiling.

Conan had told us the Legion believed these light probes were recon eyes, recording all they see. And the aliens were unknown light years away, manning some datadesk while monitoring the probe images and sipping their equivalent of dox. Well, maybe – but what was their interest in this extinct city?

"One, Seven," I said on the tacnet. "We've got one probe in Roses, see the images, it's taking no action so far."

"Seven, One. Keep sending those images, reinforcements on the way."

"One, Seven, tenners." I had the thing centered in my sights.

"Isn't this fun?" Speedo asked me.

"It's looking over the xenos. It wants to know what they are doing."

"I wonder why."

"I don't care why. Just so long as it doesn't don't shoot at us."

"Your goals are really short-term. Aren't you interested in the mysteries of the universe?"

"Not if it involves somebody shooting at us."

The light probe shot out the main entrance abruptly. And I felt a lot better.

"One, Seven, the probe has departed. All is well here."

"Seven, One, good. Carry on."

"Sounds like we done good, Seeker," Speedo said. "Bold prudence, above and beyond. We should get a medal."

"I'd settle for lunch," I said, taking off my helmet. "You got any dog vomit?"

"Yeah. I'm saving it for myself. You want any petrified fish?"

"No thanks. Never mind."

Δ

Rocky Base was quite civilized and only a short walk in the rain from our squadmod. It was Legion Hqs for the planet, and the xenos had offices and residential quarters there. Squad Alpha was visiting for an update briefing on whatever they had decided to reveal to us. The base was named after a Legion boot who had died for his squad. This was, of course,

unacceptable to the NewFam zombies so they ordered the name changed. Since Parapator Command was part of the Confederation of Free Worlds, and not of the NewFam United terrorists, it never happened.

The base was great – they had a giant swimming pool which nobody had time to use, an extensive modern theater/library complex that nobody had time to visit, several luxurious lounges that were deserted, a big unused indoor sports park, a superbly well-equipped gym with no customers, a running track with no runners, and a shooting range that was busy only on mandatory qualification days. There was no time for nonsense and we were all expected to be working if we were conscious.

I had continued my campaign to chat up Doctor N. She found it hard to turn me away if I asked questions about alien prehistory or xenology, and at one point she had handed me her callcard. When we visited the base and our business was over it was late and I figured she'd be at her quarters. I called her and asked her to join me at one of the many snack bars scattered around the base. To my surprise, she agreed.

We had dox and muffins. We were alone in the self-service snack bar at a little table. She appeared fresh and clean, wearing a clinging civvie pantsuit, and her short silky hair was well combed. She blinked sparkling brown eyes at me.

"Do you know anyone in the Futures Corps?" she asked. She was certainly direct, I thought.

"No. But what do you want? I can make inquiries."

"Oh no, no. I was just wondering. They're wonderful. They're so advanced." The Futures Corps was the Legion's primary cosmic-secret center for reverse engineering ancient alien technology. And a lot more. Information flowed in to

them like a tsunami, but nothing flowed out, except what the Legion wanted to release.

"How are you doing? How do you like the work?" I asked.

"Why did you ask to see me?" she asked. "You know they discourage contacts."

"My side told me the same. The hell with them. They just don't want contact so there'll be no problems for the bureaucracy."

"But why do you want to see me?"

"I'm very interested in what you've told me about the aliens that used to live here. The Ministry of Science and the Legion are here for the same reasons – we should be cooperating."

She just looked at me. What a lame story. I was seeing her because I like breaking the rules, seeing how far I can go, seeing if I can turn a hostile into a friendly.

"Here," I said. "Put this on." I slipped a thin golden ring across the table to her.

"What is that?"

"It's a tracker chip. Slip it on, don't ever take it off. If anything happens to you, we'll be able to locate you instantly."

"Who's we?"

"Me. Just me. Nobody else."

"It looks like a wedding ring."

"It's not a wedding ring. It's a tracker."

"Why should you want to track me? And why should I want you to track me?"

"Sorry. I'm worried about you." I lowered my voice, and my eyes.

"Worried about what?"

"Think about what we're doing here. This is the most important research project in human history. Right now, it's

nice and quiet. But that's not going to last. Our enemies are going to drop in here, attack the Legion, seize Gatar by force, and kill everyone who resists."

She picked up the ring and slipped it onto a finger.

"You're really worried about me?" she asked.

"Sorry. Yes." Females are like space aliens. You can never know what they're thinking, but they'll believe anything you tell them if it resonates with them. And this was my way of saying "I like you".

"Well, thank you," she said. A faint smile. And, thinking about it – maybe it was true. I did like her. Funny – she was growing on me.

"Does the Futures Corps share information with you folks?" I asked.

"No. But we know one thing they're working on, because it was our discovery. They seized it and took over the project. I guess I can tell you because the FC never gave us any subsequent info on it, classified or not. But we discovered it."

"Tell me."

"It's the most thrilling discovery in history. I get cold chills just thinking about it."

"What?"

She looked around guiltily, and spoke. "Don't ever say I told you this. We've determined the residents of this city called themselves 'Starlight' – the Starlight people. Their enemies sacked the city, killed everyone, and burnt everything with plasma. We found their hall of records – millions of crystal discs full of data. The discs were blasted with plasma as hot as the face of a star. It looked like petrified slag when we found it. Most of the discs were destroyed but when we tested a few of the discs, the slag fell away and the data was still there. We

found thousands of discs with the data intact. Those discs were close to invulnerable. And the data will last for billions of years. We don't know what the Futures Corps is doing, but it means we're going to decipher the Starlight's writing and their language – and learn their history. All of it! The sacred history of the Starlight people! Rising from the ashes, after two hundred thousand years! This is our greatest triumph!" She was beaming, giddy with joy.

"I love it when you're happy," I said.

"What in the world is this?" someone asked. It was the chief of Doctor N's xeno diggers, a wiry, cranky, short-tempered autocrat, standing by our table. I had not seen him enter.

"What in the world is what?" Doctor N calmly replied.

"Why are you talking with this soldier?"

"Alpha Seven, this is Supervisor Wayne. Supervisor, this is Alpha Seven."

"Doctor, you know perfectly well what the ground rules are in this unit," Wayne said.

"Super Wayne, you are my supervisor, not my mother," Doctor N snapped. "What I do on my own time is none of your concern."

"Really! Well, when you ignore the non-fraternization guidelines you are setting a bad example and lowering unit morale ... wait! What is that ring? Are you engaged? Are you married?"

Doctor N leaped to her feet, furious. "It's none of your damned business! No, I am not engaged and not married. And I'll talk with anyone I please! Now stop bothering me!"

I stood up. "It seems like the lady wants you to go away," I said.

"You shut down! I'm not talking with you!"

"But *I* am talking with *you*. And if you don't disappear right quick I'm going to toss you right through those doors." I took a step towards him and he scrambled for the exit.

"I'll see you in my office tomorrow morning, Doctor," he snarled on the way out. "Be there!"

We settled back into our seats. We were once again alone in the snack bar.

"That was fun," I said.

"That's not the end of it. He's petty and vengeful. I'm likely to get fired, or demoted, or reassigned. I shouldn't have lost my temper. I've gotten in trouble before because of my temper."

"Well, I'm sure I'll hear about this as well. I'll let you know what happens on my end. Oh and, by the way, now that we are comrades in misfortune, can you let me know your name? Your given name?"

"Sure," she said with a faint smile. "My name is Aurora."

"Aurora. Lovely. And my name is James. But please don't use that. Call me Seeker – that's my warname. We lose our birth names when we enlist in the Legion."

"Seeker. All right."



The following day I was assigned to another site, still with Speedo but watching over a new group of xeno civs scratching in the dirt. The duty was uneventful and Conan did not ask me any questions about the incident with Supervisor Wayne. When we returned home to the squadmod my objective was to crash in bed but my comset immediately buzzed.

"Seeker here," I answered.

"Seeker! It's Aurora. I have to see you right away. It's important. Can we meet? Same place as last time."

"Yeah, sure. When?"

"Now."

Now. Damn it! "See you soon," I said.

I took an air-effects pickup and was at the snack bar in a flash. She was awaiting me impatiently, nursing a dox. She looked terrible – weary and troubled. I sat down.

"He transferred me to Admin! Admin! I'll be doing everybody else's paperwork, sitting in the bullpen with the other rejects."

"Oh, that's not so bad, huh?"

"Not so bad! It's unacceptable! I have a doctorate in xenoarchaeology! I should be working in the field, discovering wonderful things, not manning a desk, sending requests for resupply. I submitted my resignation. He accepted it, with a smirk."

"What did you do that for?"

"I will not be insulted!" Her face was twitching. Uh-oh. Tears on the way. Can't fight that.

"All right," I said. "I'm on it."

"You're on it!" She was startled. "What does that mean?"

"It means you should stop worrying, and let me do the worrying."

"What can you do? Don't hurt him! That won't solve anything."

"I know that. How much time do you have before they send you back to Quaba?"

"I don't know. Maybe a few days. Or maybe they won't send me back at all. When we arrived here, they said the assignment was indefinite. Maybe they'll toss me into some

kind of punishment detention. Or maybe I'm already there. But what can you do?"

"I don't know. I'll let you know once I do."

No tears. She was staring at me as if stunned. "You know, I just realized. I had no one to go to in Roses. Nobody I could trust, nobody I could talk to. Only you, a Legion soldier. I didn't hesitate to call you. Those NewFams – I hate them all. I didn't admit that before, to myself. Hate and distrust, that's what we had. I can trust only you – a Legion soldier!"

"Perhaps your teachers were lying to you. Well, I've got to go. I've got things to do."

"Oh, thank you oh thank you so much!"

"Save the thanks. I haven't done anything yet."

"But you're going to. You're taking action!"

"See you next time." And I took off quickly, hoping to avoid a deluge of tears.



The following day there was a tapping on Aurora's cube door. She was slumped in an airchair, eyes red and swollen from crying, face pale and strained from a night of hopeless rage and hatred and resentment, one fist clenched in fury. She wondered what would happen to her if she actually killed Supervisor Wayne, burying a rock pick in his forehead.

Her fitness report lay crumpled on the floor and made it clear that she was dangerously unstable and unfit for further employment. She was unemployed and would likely soon be leaving Parapator, a failure. Her professional life was over. Nobody would touch her now. All her dreams were gone.

Now there was nothing. Why should she even answer the door?

She opened the door. A young lady in government grey stood there smiling, clutching a little docpak.

"Doctor Neuves? I'm Susan Graves. I'm so happy to find you at home. I've got the documents for you. Shall we sit over there?" She indicated the snack table in the kitchenmod.

Aurora shuffled over to the table in her slippers and they both sat down.

"What documents are these?" Aurora asked.

"These are just formalities. First, is your previous employment with the Ministry concluded?"

"Yes. You should know. What do you want with me?"

"We just have to make everything legal. Please DNA all the little yellow boxes." She slid the docpak over to Aurora, who began touching the yellow boxes on the d-screen with a fingertip.

"I thought I did all this yesterday," she said.

"That wasn't us," Susan Graves said.

"Oh? And who are you with?" Ministry of Endless Forms, Aurora thought. Ministry of Maddening Repetition. Ministry of Slavery.

"I'm with the Futures Corps. And this is your contract. Didn't you apply for employment with us?"

Aurora was stunned. She sat there, eyes and mouth wide open, at a total loss of words.

"Doctor Neuves? Are you all right?"

"Aah ... ah ... yes."

"Are you still interested in the position?"

"Yes! Absolutely! It's just – nobody told me you were coming."

"Oh. I apologize for that. We're moving so fast because we don't want to lose you to anybody else. You have a superb record! You'll be perfect for us. Just sign these documents and it'll be done."

"Could you excuse me for a moment?"

"Certainly."

Aurora went into the bathroom, closed the door behind her, and cried like a baby. Great gulping sobs. The Futures Corps! A superb record! Tears of joy, for her new life. Then she hurriedly dried the tears and went back to the kitchen to sign her contract.

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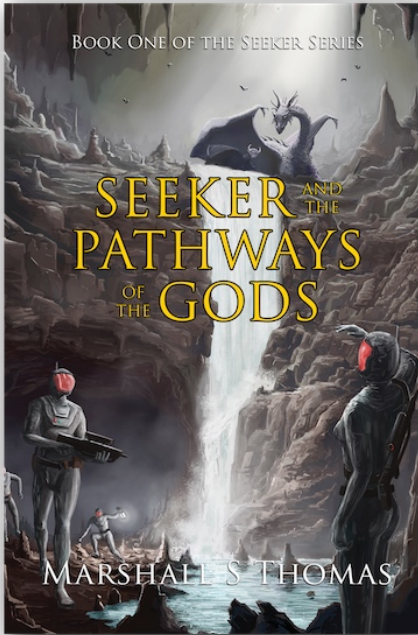
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