

AmerIndian 2192
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"The Injuns will catch you while crossing the Plains. They'll kill you, and scalp you, and beat out your brains. Uncle Sam ought to throw them all over the fence, so there'll be no Red Injuns a hundred years hence."

A popular settler campfire refrain, nineteenth century, Earth.

PART ONE: VISION

1972 - The Black Hills of South Dakota

John "Bear" Vajo opened the lid of the army green case. He brushed away straw and pulled one of the six M-16's out of the case, inspected it. The slide of the fully automatic weapon moved with a smooth, fluid action. Smacking a full magazine into the M-16, he walked to the spot he had prepared for testing the weapon. At one hundred meters he sent three tin cans spinning off a low sitting boulder. The weapon's report rang clear and loud over the dry, hard packed hills and echoed back. This did not worry Bear. The only people who might hear the noise would not report it.

"Never been fired. They were one truck away from getting shipped to 'Nam." The thin sallow man flicked a butt and let the smoke roll out of his mouth as he talked. "Three grand, cash, right now for this case. I can supply one case every three weeks."

Bear looked at the smoking butt lying on the sacred ground. "Two grand cash now and two grand more for every case you can get me before July Third." Bear leaned the rifle over his shoulder and headed back to where his battered pick-up broiled under the high sun.

The thin sallow man cursed under his breath. "You know how hard..."

Bear stopped suddenly and wheeled on the thin man. He thrust the rifle into his hands. "You told me you had four cases and you come with one. Two thousand now and I will ignore the fact that you are a lying bastard like the rest of your pale race."

The man backed up a step, startled by the quiet AmerIndian's quick rush of anger. He held the weapon and turned his eyes away from Bear's hard glare. "Don't get all Injun on me, man." He drew a breath, short and shallow with lungs weak from three decades of hard smoking. "And you shouldn't be handing a loaded gun to a man you're calling a liar."

With a grin the man leveled the rifle and snapped off the safety. His thumb was rising off the metal switch when Bear disappeared. In the half second it took him to look down Bear had dropped forward and swept his long leg around in a wide, fast circle. It connected with the thin man's ankle sweeping him to the ground. As the thin man fell, Bear rose.

Just before the thin man landed clumsily in a rising cloud of dust, the rifle let out a quick startling burst. With speed and accuracy born from necessity, Bear snatched the rifle from the thin man's hands.

The thin man coughed from the dust kicked up in the turmoil. He began to sit up. His eyes opened just in time to see the butt of the rifle slamming into his forehead.

The eighty kilometers back to the Wantabi reservation rolled by quickly. Bear turned up the truck's stereo, trying to let Zeppelin's latest drown out his thoughts. The plans that ran through his thoughts were already set into motion. The next two weeks would only be execution.

Sunset was approaching when he pulled his pick-up in near the sweat lodge that had been erected for the meeting tonight. Bear could see the lodge, packed with the figures of tribe Elders. Small, one story, four room reservation houses spread out across the wind swept land a few hundred meters away.

A slim, feminine AmerIndian silhouetted in gold by the dipping sun approached. "How'd it go?" Ashai brushed poker straight strands of black away from her eyes.

"Six units."

Ashai's face turned from concern to anger. "Six! We need twenty-four!"

"Six is all we're getting through Greven. We'll have to go through your Los Angeles contact. Good news is, the six we got cost nothing." Without ceremony, he handed a manila envelope, fat with rumpled, rubber-banded twenties, to her.

"How'd that happen?"

Two AmerIndian youths were now carefully hauling the case of weapons off the bed of the pick-up. They hustled off toward to the houses.

"You don't want to know." He placed his hands on his hips, exhaled. "We are two weeks away from target date. I don't know if..."

Ashai's anger evaporated and she stood on her tiptoes to kiss him softly. "Don't worry. We planned. We worked hard toward this. No obstacle will stop us because our cause is pure. We are strengthened and watched over by the Grandfathers."

She was quiet and Bear became aware again of the AmerIndians around them busily preparing the area for the gathering of four tribes that night. Ashai hugged him. "The Elders wish you to join them in the wickiup."

Bear glanced toward the steam house. Ashai smiled reassuringly and gripped his hand tight before letting him go.

Bear walked to the steam house and stripped off his clothes. He wrapped a long swath of buckskin around him and ducked inside. The wet heat hit him like a soft blow to his entire body.

He squeezed in between One Who Harvests Early and Winosha. Conaqua, Okala, and Sheldoc were across from Bear. None of the Elders acknowledged him. They rocked back and forth in a flowing, steady rhythm as Okala hummed almost inaudibly.

Bear closed his eyes and drank in the heavy heat and the cramped solitude of the steam house. His head fell forward slightly from his exhaustion and he felt himself rock back again without effort as though he were carried by the momentum of the men next to him. Forward and back, the weight of his body melted away.

Forward and back, the soft hum of Okala became louder in his ears. As if carried and twisted by wind, the voice of the Elder became the piercing cry of an eagle as he sang on. Bear lost consciousness of the hours passing outside the steam house, unaware of the hundreds of AmerIndians that waiting outside for the Elders and him.

The spell ended abruptly. Bear suddenly felt the press of the men next to him. Each Elder opened his eyes and realized that night had fallen. The men crawled out of the steam house. AmerIndians helped each Elder and wrapped them in clean, cool blankets. The various activities of the gathered AmerIndians ceased and the crowd of hundreds shuffled closer to the sweat lodge. Bear felt crowded and backed away. He had heard what each of the Elders had heard and his heart ached. He reeled from the impact of the knowledge.

Two AmerIndians clothed in the vibrant colors of the shamans led Okala toward the crowd and seated him on a flat, black rock. Bear realized Okala was still in the trance, still listening to the voice of the eagle. He realized as Okala started to talk that he would now hear in words what he had known in spirit in the lodge.

Okala's voice floated from him and covered the crowd like a light rain. "Brothers and guardians, we are joyous that you come to us, that you seek our wisdom. We understand your questions. We know of your efforts to return the land of your forefathers to its guardian, to the People who live and love her with gentle respect."

"But we will not bless your plans on this day. Your attempts to wrest the land from the White Man, from the nation of beautiful, strong thieves, will fail. Return the weapons you have gathered. Turn back from the path you are prepared to follow. Now is not the time. The White Man will crush you because the White Buffalo is not among you.

"The time will come when the land will be yours again, when the White Man will fall, decimated by your unstoppable might, when the Grandfathers will serve you as invincible warriors. Watch for the signs of that time.

"The White Buffalo will walk among you in his four leg form and his two leg form. The White Buffalo will lead the people to the Homeland, a land where they will remember how the simple life of their forefathers strengthened them, where the new shaman will be truly mighty. In this land the sun, the moon and the stars will be blocked from sight day and night and yet the sky will sparkle like gold dust.

"After this Homeland has been taken and the blood price paid, there will be a season when the people will prosper like never before. The Homeland will call to the shamans and they will ache to kiss the ground where the ancestors are buried, where their magic has no limit.

"Then the true war will begin. A time of devastation for both the Red Man and the White Man. But this time, the White Buffalo will not be with the Red Man. After the White Buffalo leads them to the Homeland he will be sent away from the Red Man in shame, cast out for as long as the winds blow and rivers flow. The battle for the Sacred Grounds will shatter all that has come before and forge a new way of life for all men."

Okala became quiet, his speech dropping off abruptly, like something going over a cliff. Silence blanketed the crowd. AmerIndians shook their heads.

Bear struggled to remain standing. For three years he had lead a network of AmerIndians across the Mid West, making intricate protracted plans. He had developed and crafted a large guerrilla strike; a military blow to the established White Man's system of land ownership and debt based slavery. Bear thought of that system, oppression through blatant and masked prejudice.

His military movement had started with college students then spread to be blessed by the Elders of over two dozen tribes. The rebellion he had planned would spill the blood of hundreds, perhaps thousands of people. Bear's goal; to return the sacred Black Hills to the AmerIndians. The Black Hills were intended to be a foothold for the start of a war that would return thousands of square kilometers of Midwest land to the tribes.

Bear's grief became a physical weight. His body slumped to the ground. All his work was for nothing. Young tribe members huddled around him, lifted him, and carried him away from the crowd. The Grandfather spirits were forsaking Bear and all his efforts for his people. The Grandfathers told Bear to wait for another time. He had thought the time was now. His people had waited for five centuries. Wasn't that long enough?

Young AmerIndians whisked Bear away from the other tribe members. Bear felt the arms of the young men who respected him, believed in him, who had served him. He thanked the Grandfathers at least that these young AmerIndians would not let the tribes see him weep like a child.

CHAPTER ONE

2192 - Ursa Major Galaxy Cluster, twenty-three million light years from Earth.

Keokuk squinted at the perfect ring of blue-white energy signaling the arrival of his ship. He focused and glanced out through the large windows of the forward viewing bay. The ring crackled as the sleek, compact outrider ship surged through it. *Tumble Weave*, an AmerIndian Confederacy lodge ship, came into view. The behemoth ship waited patiently for the small outrider ship that had carried Keokuk across galaxies.

Keokuk tapped his fingers together in a lightning fast staccato rhythm. Embroidered keying bands, fitted tight around his wrists, converted the movement of his fingers to letters and numbers, replacing the antiquated functions of a keyboard. On the inside of the lenses of his blue-hued sunglasses, code flashed down in a growing column. He had worked straight through the firing of the Kellion Cannon, straight through the miracle of correspondence travel. Most tribals were used to traveling vast distances in a fraction of a second by the use of a correspondence plane but few did it as frequently as Keokuk. As one of the Tsimshian top tri-jacks Keokuk's skills were in demand by nearly every tribe. He traveled almost constantly and was known by hundreds of tribals on every lodge ship in the AmerIndian Confederacy.

Keokuk double tapped his index finger and thumb. His comp lenses instantly displayed a graph of AmerIndian Confederacy lodge ships.

Bright icons showing his Tribe's totem marked the four ships he was slated to consult on in the next ten days. Keokuk finger tapped again and his comp lenses became translucent green so he could see his surroundings without any visual obstructions. Keokuk grabbed his embroidered black leather jacket; donning it he as left the room and entered the cold, cramped metallic halls of the outrider ship. The jacket was significantly oversized so it fit even his large, round frame well.

A quick tap of his fingers threw a deck map of the outrider ship onto the lens in front of his left eye. It had been a few months since he had been on this ship so he needed the comp guide. He scanned the deck map while simultaneously sliding down ten meters of ladder that led down to the deck of the ship's main airlock. He took a few turns before he spotted a small group of tribals chatting near the airlock.

A large Nez Perce officer dressed in his tribe's black pants, crew neck cotton tee and poly-lythe tactical vest uniform, handed Keokuk's leather satchel to him. The satchel was embroidered beautifully with the same Tsimshian rattlesnake Totem symbol that decorated his jacket. "The Diegueño have everything ready for you. I believe one of their Tsimshian cross-workers will be able to answer any of your questions."

Keokuk smiled. The Diegueño tribe served as the AmerIndian Confederacy's preservationists. It was their task to care for the thousands of mammals, fish, birds and reptiles that the AmerIndian Confederacy maintained for the day they would all return to the Homeland. The Diegueño also grew the huge quantities of organic foods necessary to feed all 416,000 tribals in the AmerIndian Confederacy. It did not surprise Keokuk that the Diegueño tribals would send a Tsimshian cross-worker to help him. Out of the eight tribes that comprised the AmerIndian Confederacy the Diegueño had the most difficulty dealing with the complex comp technology necessary to keep the lodge ships running.

Throwing the satchel over his shoulder, Keokuk ignored the hard plastic clank as metric tons of the outrider ship's blastplast merged with the Diegueño's lodge ship at the airlock. "Oh before I go, I did some deep maintenance and repair on your Malakim carbon. It was twenty-seven percent deteriorated. It got it back down to twenty-one percent so that should give you anywhere from four to six additional months of solid performance." Keokuk made a

practice of working on the agent programs that ran the correspondence code on every Kellion Cannon ship he traveled on.

"Captain Hathai will be pleased to hear that. Thanks. It was good to see you again, Keokuk. Catch ya at the Steel Circle." The other Nez Perce tribals smiled at the pleasant mention of the annual meeting of all the tribes.

Keokuk nodded and embraced the officer, as was the custom in the Confederacy upon arriving or departing. He then walked through large airlock and was visually assaulted by the always-surprising site of the lodge ship *Tumble Weave*.

He was in a plain corridor of the Diegueño lodge ship but even that was enough to show him the eccentricity of the AmerIndian Confederacy's most lively tribe. Where other tribes left the corridors of their lodge ships unpainted and dark to increase the ship's energy efficiency and accessibility the corridors of *Tumble Weave* were well lit to see the wildly painted murals of animals and landscapes.

Keokuk pacified himself by interrupting the spectacle with a few quick stats displayed on his comp lenses. *Tumble Weave* was a full C5 class lodge ship, three kilometers in diameter, one hundred twenty decks. It could accommodate a community of 25,000 tribals. However, 11,000 Diegueño lived on *Tumble Weave*. The other sixty decks left ample space for buffaloes, wolves, horses, bears, lynx and numerous other animals to roam. The largest space-faring aquarium ever created took up the seven center decks of the ship. In sections divided by invisible gravity fields great white sharks swam near dolphins, blue whales and over one thousand other varieties of fish.

A plump Diegueño woman greeted Keokuk with an embrace. Her flowing, bright skirt and top were strikingly different than his dark attire. She introduced him to Condu, leader of the Tsimshian cross-workers on *Tumble Weave*. Condu was a Tsimshian tribal stationed on the Diegueño lodge ship to oversee the two hundred Tsimshian cross-workers assigned for extended periods to help the Diegueño with comp issues. Keokuk recognized Condu immediately because of the huge wad of bigui, gum made from fir and cedar trees, he constantly chewed. Another Diegueño took Keokuk's satchel and left to prepare a place for him in one of the large communal areas the Diegueño used instead of individual rooms like the other tribes.

Condu explained the problem as they walked through the halls toward the lodge ship server. "This bucket was captured right after the White Earth Massacre. Since then we have added patch code to the original server code to control the hundreds of filters, dozens of grav field generators and thousands of automatic feeders for the inner sea at the center of the ship. The original code was written in 2174 making it now eighteen years old. Despite continuous updates the UDA viruses that we were able to suppress for years now finally overcame our safeguards. All of the automatic systems supporting the marine life shut down simultaneously. The Diegueño do not have the skill to bring even the most basic systems back on line and we don't understand the filtering system well enough to know what to bring them online in the right order. The systems have been down for three hours and already hundreds of fish had died. Diegueño divers are physically keeping the predators away from the prey fish. Great whites attacked two Diegueño. Neither survived. I got all two hundred Tsimshian banging the server with edit undo dances and relinks but I don't think we can get the server back up in less than another three hours.

Keokuk followed Condu into *Tumble Weave's* main comp room. Keokuk shook his head as he saw lush, vibrant plants positioned elegantly throughout the room. It was not the stark, clean interior he was used to seeing around a ship server. Only the Diegueño, he thought. The ship server, the size and shape of a coffin, hovered a meter off the floor. Not a single wire, cable or antenna interrupted its smooth exterior.

The Steady Pulse System invented by Fuchi megacorp two decades before had eliminated cumbersome wires and cables, but only for the AmerIndian Confederacy. The UDA paid Fuchi to mothball the system because it did not want the expense of converting millions of government comps. The AmerIndian Confederacy had stolen the designs for the system within eight months of its completion.

The Steady Pulse System allowed data to be transferred up to one thousand kilometers by high frequency beta waves. It had been a major advance in portable computing. With a Steady Pulse ship server every tribal on a lodge ship could link with a comp set and keying bands. AmerIndian Confederacy comp sets could be commanded by voice or finger tapping (read through keying bands). Light, sleek glasses fixed with audio pickup mikes and tiny speakers extending near the ear, served each tribal as a portable comp. Comp sets read signals from finger tapping or the user's voice and displayed information on adjustably opaque or translucent lenses. The tribal could choose to see data only or his surroundings and data. This unique tool had given the AmerIndian Confederacy a significant technology lead over their UDA opponents who still used traditional wall screens and keypad equipment. Keokuk had, like all Tsimshian, mastered these tools in his youth. Now he commonly walked the halls of a lodge ship as he wrote code and scanned the daily text uploads of various tribals. Disconcerted by the level of multitasking the Tsimshian engaged in, other tribals tolerated their lack of attention and distracted conversations due to their obvious technical value.

Condu frowned. "It's a variant of Bubonic Slide." He fed the anti-virus code to Keokuk's comp set view as well as the rest of the tech-jacks in the room.

Keokuk circled the server. "I presume you ran all of the standard breakers from the '30s and '40s." Keokuk fingers began to move.

"Once we figured out what we were looking at we did. Took two hours. We've only been trying to kill the virus for an hour." Every tribal in the room looked toward Keokuk. All of their comp set views changed, words dropping away to an ugly mass of zeros and ones, binary code. In seconds, Keokuk had cut access to the ship server until and placed it under his sole and direct control.

"It's not a variant of Bubonic Slide, it's a predecessor. Written by Alexander Haim in 2127. Whoever got this bug in here was into the classics." Keokuk stopped circling the server. With irreverence he jumped and landed, sitting on top of the floating server. It's grav field only dropped a few centimeters under his considerable weight. He clumsily pulled his legs into a lotus position. His hands fell to the humming plasteel surface of the ship server. He pulled his hands back up slowly until his fingers pointed up. The lenses of his comp set mirrored and his fingers began tapping.

Less than a minute passed before the tech-jacks staring at him felt the dull boom emanating from the lodge ship's center decks. Hundreds of systems were rebooting in the reverse sequence they had shut down. Cheers rang out as Condu helped Keokuk down from the server, slapping his back and laughing.

"Well played," Condu exclaimed. "Why didn't you leave our comp set views active so we could watch your code though? My boys could use the help."

"You don't want your boys picking up my bad code habits. I find it takes me more time to defend my code than to write it so I don't try anymore." Keokuk grinned.

"We are all a team here, Keokuk. You got to learn to play well with others," Condu jabbed playfully at Keokuk's arm. "You know we will still have days of clean up even after your miracle save."

Keokuk smiled wide. "Wish I could help. One thing concerns me about this is that whoever placed this virus had high level Haida access codes. I will look into it and get back to you with what I find. Listen, can you have Chief Sequoya authorize an outrider ship to rendezvous me with Brule's lodge ship by noon tomorrow. I just gained about eighteen hours on my schedule. Like to take advantage of that if I can."

#

"No." Keokuk shook his head as Condu showed him his area in the common room. Hundreds of families lived on this wide-open deck. No walls separated each family's area from the next. Children ran here and there playing Hunter and Doe. He also saw a young girl changing her shirt in the open with no more concern than if she were reading a book. "I need a place where I can work, somewhere quiet with no people around, preferably."

"Keokuk, quiet places devoid of people are a little difficult to find on a Diegueño lodge ship. Trying to squeeze a 'quiet time', I guess. I had forgotten you're a devout Evangelical Christian, aren't you? Well, relax a while. Enjoy the change of scenery and the people. Go down to the crafts deck and spend some wampum. There is a lot of superb stock right now due to the artisans getting ready for the Steel Circle."

"I have hours of work to do before I sleep and more when I wake. Now please, I don't care if it's an empty fight hangar, I need a quiet work area."

Condu nodded in ascent and lead Keokuk back out of the common room.

It took some searching but in an hour Condu found a spot on the Wolf deck, an observation station resembling a tree fort. "I'll speak to Chief Sequoia within the hour, see if we can get that outrider ship for you. I'll also try to keep your stay here as productive as possible," Condu said.

"Excellent. Thank you, Condu." Keokuk settled and set to work before Condu had reached the grass-covered floor again. He linked with the ship server and set to work on the lodge ship *Tumble Weave's* navcomp. These powerful comps insured that when the ship fired its Kellion Cannon to create a correspondence plane, that correspondence plane would take the lodge ship to exactly the calculated position galaxies away. He lost himself in the work and was shaken from his concentration when his comp set blinked with an incoming message.

TO Keokuk / FROM Wolf Plume - Just hit *Tumble Weave*. Pack is hand delivering some sensitive data we obtained on our last op. Heard about your five-minute crisis crush. Well done. It's been way to long, drook. Meet the boys and I for a drink at "The Cave", 2300 hrs.

#

Keokuk groaned at the interruption. It was 2330 hrs and he still had three hours of work to do before he turned in. But the request came from Wolf Plume, the old Russian who had swung him platinum level access to ship servers when he was eight and kept him reading with a steady flow of TwenCen comic books and even hard copy books throughout his teens. The groan turned to a grin as he pulled his jacket on. He labored his way down the tree and made his way quickly through the fifty meters of light forest toward the corridor entrance. A gray wolf approached and eyed him dangerously and he considered running until remembered Condu's words. He continued to walk slowly, not making any sudden movements. In a moment he exited safely into the corridor. The cold hall air hit him as he finger tapped up a ship map to lead him to "The Cave".

#

Snow's smile was sweet and inviting. Keokuk smiled back as he handed his jacket to her. She took the jacket, caressing the soft black leather. She admired the fine embroidery. The jacket, bearing the Tsimshian symbol, was a gift from Blue Cloth that Keokuk had worn for a dozen years now.

"Hero's drink free tonight, enjoy yourself. Good to see you again, Teddy." She poked playfully at his belly.

"Good to see you again, Snow. I'll tell you if I see any heroes." Keokuk had to lean in to be heard.

"Crazy Eight, the new soft-jack for Crew Emerald Beta--"

Keokuk nodded, "I know Crazy Eight."

"He'll pay twelve hundred wampum for this jacket."

"It's not for sale and I believe I've mentioned that before."

"Sorry, Keo," she said tapping her fingers together. "Did Condu find you a place to doss tonight? Cause I..."

"Yes." He said flatly.

"Don't wait so long to visit again." She stood on her tiptoes and kissed him lightly on his clean-shaven head.

Keokuk walked slowly forward and let the audio/visual maelstrom that was "The Cave" soak into his head. Fast, hard rock pounded out of the large luminescent speakers set in front of the glass aquarium walls. The Cave was the AmerIndian Confederacy's undisputed hot spot. Clear plasteel made up the circular walls and the floors of all seven stories. "The Cave" was a cylinder surrounded by the bright shimmering waters of *Tumble Weave's* center deck aquarium. Keokuk made his way through the undulating, drunken crowd. Diegueño lodge ships were usually occupied by thousand of AC members from other tribes. These tribals, known as crossworkers, served various purposes. Some transported organically grown foods to other tribes. Some delivered Diegueño art and crafts to UDA black markets. Others consulted on research results from the on-ship Diegueño animal habitats.

Keokuk passed a group of young tribals and tech-jacks. Together there were more than ten software, hardware and overall comp experts. They were skinny or fat, distinct from the hard bodies of the Apache or Brule soldiers. The tech-jacks averted their eyes from Keokuk, a clear cyber salute of their subculture. Only the tri-jack among the group, a Tsimshian crossworker known as Tokuga, nodded slightly at Keokuk over his drink. Keokuk nodded back and noticed respect and envy peeking out from behind Tokuga's aloofness.

Keokuk wrangled a few more meters through the packed crowd and found what he was looking for. A back booth overflowed with Jade Dagger Pack. Wolf Plume, a grizzled old pilot bearing Russian features, was telling one of his numerous war tales. Next to him sat a handsome young Irishman tribe-named Slow Turtle. He laughed at Wolf Plume's exaggerations. Cavaho, a wiry soldier, was scanning the crowd, spotting Keokuk as soon as he came close to the booth. Cavaho gave no sign of recognition to Keokuk. Instead he continued staring at him placidly as he closed the last few meters to the booth. Thankfully Wovoka, the leader of Jade Dagger and Keokuk's brother, was absent. A weight of dread lifted from Keokuk's shoulders.

Keokuk broke the sound shield surrounding the booth and piled in next to Wolf Plume. Once inside the shield only the steady vibration of "Pimp Caine" at eighty decibels reminded the group they were in a crowded bar.

"Keokuk, tovarisch! Thank you, thank you for coming." Wolf Plume's eager smile showed his joy at seeing his friend.

"For you, anything, old man. How are you surviving with this blood thirsty pack of dogs?" Keokuk jumped slightly as the massive body of a blue whale slid by meters behind Wolf Plume.

"These boys keep my blood flowing and I get around just fine, thank you."

The Irish tribal sitting next to Wolf Plume tapped his fingers and words scrolled across the steel blue of his comp set. "Can I order you something?"

"Thanks, Slow Turtle. Get me a Philly cheesesteak and an order of cheese fries."

Slow Turtle nodded and finger tapped the order. He refrained from mentioning the meal would do little to help Keokuk's already heavy frame. As an Apache warrior who tempered his body two to four hours a day for optimum performance he couldn't help but think it.

"Is Shakespeare giving you time to breathe between duties?" Wolf Plume took a long drink.

The last two years had been hectic for Keokuk. He had single-handedly written a self-adjusting slip code that allowed Zuni agents to penetrate UDA comm-gate security ICE in the field. He had been raised from tech-jack to tri-jack. The title was a Tsimshian badge of honor that declared a tribal had

mastered three areas of comp expertise. Keokuk had developed expertise in code writing, installing, repairing and adjusting hardware and in getting the myriad of AC comps to talk to each other. Only legacy, the mastery of older model comps and ancient code languages had truly challenged him. As one of only sixteen Tsimshian tri-jacks, Keokuk's assignments came straight from the Tsimshian chief, Shakespeare.

"Shakespeare keeps me busy." Keokuk was an unapologetic workaholic and Chief Shakespeare did not shy from exploiting the fact. Keokuk might have minded if he had something else in his life that work took him away from, but he did not and he allowed the work to consume him. His career progression in the AC was benefiting from the sacrifice.

Keokuk stared into the crowd for moment. He didn't like to talk about himself. When he looked back at the group he met Cavaho's eyes. Cavaho's level gaze was empty, showing nothing of his feelings or thoughts. Keokuk looked away quickly. As withdrawn as Keokuk was, Cavaho made him feel like a lightweight in personal seclusion.

"So how can I help you, Wolf Plume?"

Wolf Plume laughed, "Am I that transparent? I'm sorry, Keokuk. Its just I know you have info could help our pack right now. We're trailing 430 points behind Jade Pelt and one or two good ops would close that gap fast."

Keokuk grinned. As a high level Tsimshian operative, Keokuk worked alone. Almost all of the other tribals in the AC worked in packs, small groups numbering between three and eight members, which vied for position against one another. The packs were ranked by a point system for successful operations and the highest ranked packs got first crack at choice assignments, equipment and new pack members culled from the AC's youth.

"It's no problem. I downloaded the primary daily dump from the mother comp just before I left *Grizzly King*," Keokuk finger tapped and pulled up the available ops for Apache packs.

Wolf Plume, Slow Turtle and Cavaho squinted at Keokuk's comp set. He had left it translucent and the text could be read on the front of his glasses, backwards. The three were discouraged when to see that the lenses only showed backwards V-binary, an advanced code language no one few Tsimshian's could read. Tribe Tsimshian used this rare code to hide sensitive information from others. The three sat back again waiting for Keokuk to interpret.

"Cease fire has ended on Idelas Prime Outpost in the Privilege System. Resistance forces there are looking for a flux crew to assist in setting up an underground railroad to transport escaped mine workers off planet to the nearest starbase." Keokuk sent a map of the Privilege System to each of the three's comp set lenses. Stats on the resistance forces, ship and troop counts, played across the map. "It's a little more covert than your pack's normal ops but resistance forces are paying six hundred tons of tritanium up front to the AC and promising eighty percent salvage after the resistance forces take the capital. AC has six thousand troops allocated for combat on the planet in six months. This will help lay ground work for that assault. Infiltrator and Turtle packs are to be sent for various other ops. Point value for the mission is anywhere from two thousand to three thousand for thirty days work."

Wolf Plume stroked his well-groomed, grey beard. "That's an otter's take of points. Just the kind of numbers we're looking for, nyet? Could even give us some breathing room at the top for a while."

Slow Turtle nodded. "What else?" He swirled the blue liquid in his glass and swigged down half in a hard swallow.

"There's a two week op on Outpost TZ461 in the Freedom System. It's standard sabotage on a uranium mass driver. Negotiations aren't finished but it looks like the AC will net twelve fighters for the Nez Perce. Point values probably around fifteen hundred but that could go up if rumors of Admiral Lige's fleet being in the vicinity are confirmed."

At the mention of Admiral Lige, Cavaho sat forward.

"Last op of note is an interesting one. This is deep access so I need to know each of you are going to keep this under raps." Keokuk waited for each of them to agree. He had to wait for Wolf Plume's reply. The old Russian had a tough time tracking all the data on his comp lenses and watching Keokuk at the same time. Keokuk didn't wait for Cavaho's reply because he knew there wouldn't be one. Nor was there any possibility Cavaho would tell anyone the information.

"Remember rumors some years back about Rowan Cartel discovering a habitable planet in the Periphery. Turns out they were true. Zuni agents have been working on this for about ten months and they confirmed Rowan Cartel did discover a habitable planet in the Canes Venatici Super Cluster. It's a small jungle planet they named Naanac. They have kept it secret from the UDA for six years now. They are using it for a research facility and for Rowan it's the ultimate in privacy. No worries about the prying eyes of other megacorps and no UDA inspectors to bribe. A free-floating orbital asteroid field surrounds the planet. The asteroid field is the original rock crust of the planet blown into orbit by tremendous volcanic activity..." Their comp set lenses showed a graphic of what Keokuk described as he tapped his fingers.

"Skip the geography lesson. What's the op?" Slow Turtle finished his drink and raised his glass at a Diegueño waiter.

Wolf Plume cocked an eye at Slow Turtle and slapped the back of his head. "If you were paying attention you would understand that any op on this planet is going to depend on geography. Please finish, Keokuk."

Keokuk couldn't help himself. He chuckled at Wolf Plume's abruptness. "This free-floating asteroid field, it's called the Free Mantle. It surrounds Naanac and makes it virtually impenetrable. The Free Mantle is over two kilometers thick of free-floating asteroids that will grind and smash even the smallest ship into dust. The only way on or off the planet is to build a channel through the Free Mantle large enough to get a ship through. Costs Rowan Cartel millions of creds to build one channel once a year to take the research data back to their headquarters on Earth. The window of opportunity is coming soon. Rowan Cartel are sending out the annual shuttle and the Elders want an Infiltrator team to slip in and retrieve animals for the Diegueño to add to the AmerIndian Confederacy zoo."

Cavaho's normal stoicism was now replaced with a look of interest.

Slow Turtle tried to regain a semblance of intellectual dignity. "Steel Circle starts soon, won't whatever team takes this miss out on the gathering."

Keokuk nodded. "That's why four thousand to six thousand points are being offered. However, I should tell you now Elder Weaver is leaning toward sending Jade Shark. He was impressed with their work on the Holstice Penetration. Your going have to pull some strings and move fast if you want the Naanac op."

Keokuk finger tapped and cleared his comp set the others' as well. Wolf Plume extended his fist forward toward Keokuk and Keokuk placed his fist against it. "Spasibo. You always come through for us. So what do you pups think?"

Slow Turtle spoke without hesitation, as he often did. "Definitely the mass driver sabotage op. It's right up our alley. We could probably cut the timetable down to a week. Also a higher chance of gun play than the other ops and I really want to break in that new Sledge Decimator I picked up on Privilege."

Wolf Plume nodded, "If Lige's in the vicinity we may get a shot at a force survey that could net us an extra three thousand points off the same op. I'd like to get a good look at his new Atlas class colony ship, *Black Mariah*."

The three men turned to Cavaho. He stared back for a moment and shook his head.

"You don't like the sabotage op?" Slow Turtle asked, surprised Cavaho had any opinion on the matter.

Wolf Plume stroked his beard. "The Naanac op?"

Cavaho nodded.

"You might be right," Wolf Plume said rapping the table. "It would be a challenge for our overall performance. I think we are getting a little too comfortable with the storming-the-gates approach. That's dangerous for an Infiltrator Pack."

Slow Turtle grinned. "Good Point. We beat the hell out of the Trighter back on Upsilon 26. The shield generator only had three undamaged panels left and I have a feeling Kill Spotted Horse is getting a little tired of the repairs. He's already replacing our external plate armor with scryxat rather than our usual plasteel."

Cavaho looked outside the booth. Just outside the sound shield stood three pretty Diegueño women. Keokuk recognized Hana, daughter of Diegueño Chief Sequoya, and immediately stiffened. Walking up behind Hana was Wovoka.

A cold silence fell on the boot as the brothers met each other's gaze.

"I'm sorry, Keokuk. We were supposed to meet Wovoka an hour from now," Wolf Plume sounded flustered.

Keokuk's eyes never left his brother's. "No worries, old man. Why don't you and Slow Turtle go on? The ladies are waiting."

Immediately, Slow Turtle and Wolf Plume bustled out of the booth. Hana was talking to Wolf Plume before the sound shield resumed. Wovoka continued to glare at his brother and Keokuk returned the look with intensity. Wolf Plume physically pulled Wovoka around, away from Keokuk. Quick words passed between the two, blocked by the sound shield. Keokuk watched as Wolf Plume talked, his hands making sweeping motions as the old man soothed the angry warrior. Then Hana was talking to Wovoka, laying her hands on his shoulders. She led him away and Wovoka only shot one venomous look back. Keokuk lips pulled back, baring his teeth in challenge.

Cavaho and Keokuk watched the group go. Slow Turtle spun one of the women onto the dance floor, laughing and spilling his drink all at once. Wovoka was pulled into a tight kiss by Hana and looked like he would have to come up for air soon. The last woman, older and wearing more clothes than the other two combined, leaned back in her chair, readying herself for Wolf Plume's unabridged version of Jade Dagger's latest mission. Her readiness to listen was truly an expression of affection. The seats surrounding Wolf Plume were quickly vacated by tribals who knew better than to start listening to one of Wolf Plume's lengthy orations.

Keokuk looked at all three couples, then at Cavaho sitting next to him. "Feel like kicking someone's ass?"

Cavaho smiled broadly.

CHAPTER TWO

"Fifth round! I'll take that wager and give you three to one," Keokuk laughed and fingered the wager to his comp set. Four Apache infantry troopers made the same wager with him and Keokuk would have taken more if he had any more wampum.

Tumble Weave was typical of AC lodge ships in the fact that ninety-five percent of the inhabitants were from the tribe the lodge ship was designated for, in this case Diegueño. The other five percent were crossworker, tribals assigned long-term duty on a different tribe's lodge ship. Each tribe loaned tribals to others tribes to perform the specialty that tribe excelled at. The Nez Perce provided pilots to every tribe. The Haida provided Shamans, healers and seers. The Kichai provided bean counters and Judges. The Apache and the Brule provided various types of troopers and soldiers. Tsimshian provided tech-jacks. The Zuni served as the AmerIndian Confederacy's intelligence branch.

Keokuk sat in the large barracks area given to the Apache and Brule crossworkers assigned to *Tumble Weave*. The large room, its walls lined with small bunks, floor to ceiling, was strikingly different from the rest of the Diegueño lodge ship. All of the colors, decorations and plants were gone, replaced with grey walls broken only by the matte black and chrome of hundreds of weapons. Tonight the room was packed.

Thinly disguised as "unarmed combat training," the Apache and the Brule weekly pitted their best hand-to-hand fighters against each other for the entertainment and gambling needs of anyone who cared to observe. Officially, the Diegueño abhorred the unnecessary violence but the Apache and Brule kept to their own area and Chief Sequoya looked the other way. Keokuk noticed that more than half of the fifty tribals crammed in the room were Diegueño.

The crowd doubled after Keokuk added Cavaho's name to the fight schedule for that night. Keokuk shook his head in amazement and climbed with Condu to sit in one of the high bunks with a good view of the fight circle. Condu pulled himself up and sat next to Keokuk.

"Who's the feral favorite these days?" Keokuk pulled off his jacket.

Condu pointed out a towering figure a few meters from the edge of the fight circle. "Johnny the Bomb. A UDA pro wrestler six months ago, still a recruit, but the Apaches are warming to him already. He's been waiting three months to get his hands on Cavaho."

"No worries. I'm highly impressed with the effort the Diegueño have put into this lodge ship. Seeing this dark hole these Brule troops live in accentuates the beauty of the rest of the ship."

Condu leaned back against the wall. "Most of the Diegueño hate living on these lodge ships so they make the best of it. Have you seen the arboretum on *Anubis*? Incredible, just incredible. How are the Tsimshian doing with their lodge ships?"

Keokuk thought for a moment about *Grizzly King*, his home lodge ship. "Well, *Grizzly King* is becoming quite polished. Over the last few years the Kichai kicked back over a hundred million UDA creds. They were able to increase the payments the Apache and Brule made for their merc work by eighty percent and the Tsimshian got a nice cut because we facilitate quite a bit of their work. We do a lot of code breaking, data sifts, upgrades on vehicle and ship comps for both tribes. I know those creds should have gone into education or maybe funded the confiscation of a whole new lodge ship but I think the Elder Council is finally realizing the lodge ships are our homes. They have been for all twenty-eight years of the AmerIndian Confederacy's existence. Some creature comforts had to be allowed."

Keokuk brushed the sheets under his seat and continued. "We finished updating all the internal fusion conduits four months ago and so the whole ship is powered at one hundred and eighty percent efficiency. We are getting a lot

more play out of a Nagasphere than we used to. No showering schedules, no power share schedules. It's almost too convenient. Half the tribe is forgetting all the silly stuff we used to do to live in that tub of a ship. The weapons arrays we gained at Gates Beta are phenomenal. We trashed three UDA super class destroyers a couple weeks back without even taking three percent hull damage. No Nez Perce assistance needed. It's like bust to boom. The Apache and Brule merc work is just so profitable."

Condu sat up, craned his neck as the announcer strolled into the fight circle. "You speak truth. Between the raw creds these outposts are offering, the material incentives; plasteel, cases of memory cubes, rail guns, bulk medical supplies and scavenging rights we're booking a fortune. And it's easy money from what I hear. To the Apache and Brule, at least. Seems like the UDA forces are getting easier to flog. Their troops are worthless; no motivation, no ingenuity, no endurance."

"I agree. UDA forces are low-grade fodder. What the UDA lacks in quality though they make up for in quantity. Did you hear about the rout on Fitzgerald 12, NGC 3116? The Apache sent in two P1 outrider ships with sixty fighter escorts to evacuate a farming station. The Brule force commander pushed the sched by three minutes to load another two hundred people. Eight UDA Black Knight cruisers came in and pummeled the outrider ships. All told, sixteen hundred tribals. Four AC survivors, four! That's where we are paying for our newfound comfort. One mistake, one wrong decision, you let the UDA get too close and they swarm you like a pack of dogs."

Cavaho paced into the fight circle. The crowd erupted and swift finger tapping occurred as another round of wagering was conducted. What round; first, third, tenth? The majority of the betting was not on whether Cavaho would win, only when. Few were taking the five to one odds against Cavaho losing.

Cavaho pulled off a simple cotton tee baring a brilliant red AC symbol tattoo. A group of Diegueño women and girls put up their hands and turned their faces as if a bright light had been shined in their eyes.

Condu laughed, "A pity that much lust should be directed at a man so unwilling to enjoy it."

Keokuk laughed, "Got that right."

Cavaho did not flex, stretch, pace or glare. He simply waited. With his shirt off his body art could be clearly seen, a maze of bright red inked vines and thorns covering his back, chest, arms. The message was clear, contact with any part of Cavaho would cause bleeding and pain. His body appeared to be exactly what it was, a weapon. His muscles were cut sharply, not large from repetitious workouts, but hard and balanced, from varied exercise and work. He stood 178 centimeters tall and weighed 70 kilograms. He looked like Wovoka, bearing the same dark AmerIndian skin, but his jet-black hair was shaved close.

"How long has it been since Angela married that Kichai arms dealer?" Condu asked about Cavaho's last lover.

"Almost three years now I think." Keokuk fingered a command and his comp set magnified his vision by fifty percent. "He took his oath of silence over a year before she got married."

Condu paused. "Cavaho really hasn't said a single word in four years? I'll bet he talks to Wovoka."

"Wovoka says he doesn't. Says he has kept the oath. Cavaho is coyote crazy, though. From what Wovoka says, he is nested-If wired twenty-four, seven. He works out six hours a day and does six different katas for another two hours when they are not on active mission. Wovoka says Cavaho is troubled by nightmares, sleeps very little if he doesn't completely exhaust himself. On the battlefield he's a butcher. Goes out of his way to get into hand-to-hand and carves up UDA troops with those scythes he calls knives. Wovoka says sometimes he'll send Cavaho off on an op and he comes back drenched in blood and they have to throw him in the shower because he won't wash or even move for half a day.

It's like he's riding low after coming off of some amazing high. I think he has a huge amount of anger he's trying to channel into something that won't get him banished. I know without Wovoka he would have been dead many times over since the oath of silence."

Cavaho's opponent entered the circle and immediately began pacing from side to side. He rolled his neck, flexed, and lifted his knees. At 230 centimeters he was a good five decimeters taller than Cavaho and had twenty kilograms of muscle Cavaho lacked. The former wrestler showed no signs of nervousness or doubt. He seemed anxious to get started.

The announcer finished the stats report. "And so, gamblers and onlookers, I present the twenty-seventh fight of the legend we know as Cavaho, the Apache pride and terror. His challenger, Johnny the Bomb, a gritty, fast contender - eight and one this season. The hardest kick in the ring, 300 K.S.I. on the repulse pad."

Most of the crowd booed loudly. He was not the man their wampum was on. Cavaho did not react. He waited.

The announcer held his hand high in the air. "In my fist I hold eight stones. Four will be given to each warrior. Each warrior may elect to give as many stones to his opponent as he wishes. The settings on the blast gloves and boots will be set to the amount of stones the warrior has at the declaration. All wagers must be completed at this time before the declarations are given."

The announcer lowered his hand and walked to Cavaho first, handing him the four stones. Cavaho held his hand out flat. The announcer placed his hand over Cavaho's and pulled a piece of red cloth from his belt placing it over both hands. He whisked the cloth away showing only two closed fists. He returned to Johnny and did the same. He pulled both warriors to the center of the ring. The crowd fell silent for a moment as the announcer held up both fists.

A chant rose from half the crowd. "A gift of all to make him fall."

Cavaho's stones were never in question. In twenty-seven bloody bouts Cavaho had never kept even one of his own stones. The only setting above zero he ever received came from opponents who were braver than they were smart. The announcer opened his hand and the number four showed on everyone's comp set view. The crowd harrumphed in knowing approval and waited for Johnny's declaration.

"It appears Johnny the Bomb is brighter than your average recruit. He has elected to give Cavaho the Decimator one stone." The announcer opened his hand confirming the number. "Set blast gloves and boots at one." He indicated Cavaho with his right. "And seven," indicating Johnny with his left. Large neoprene covered gloves and boots were thrown into the fight circle. The steel and black fighting implements landed on the floor with sharp, hollow clacks. Each warrior picked up the set thrown closest and put them on. The blast gloves and boots were tools introduced in the gladiator games on Praltas. The sets of gloves and boots were used to amplify the power of a fighters kicks or blows, but deliver the blow in an even, cushioned manner that avoided bone breakage. Cavaho would be hitting with his force amplified ten percent. Johnny the Bomb would enjoy a seventy percent boost.

Cavaho clapped the bulky gloves together, palms in. He kicked the heels of both blast boots, activating them. Green lights winked on each glove and boot. As the light bathed across his chest, Cavaho flowed into motion. A short, quick step to the right. A wide backing arc to the left. Cavaho looked up and watched as green lights fired in Johnny's hands. Cavaho shot forward, running full force at Johnny. He flew across five meters and leapt at Johnny, letting his speed carry him.

As Cavaho sped forward his knee lifted and his right arm cocked backed into position to strike. He leveled his left arm at the massive wrestler like a spear; his momentum flinging him to the point of impact. Cavaho's explosive run, the sheer speed of it, caught Johnny by surprise. Johnny scrambled through

options, striking Cavaho, dodging his attack or some combination of the two. The decision took only a second, a second he did not have.

Johnny stepped quickly to the side and took his body out of the primary line of Cavaho's leap. The wrestler stayed close enough, however, to snap off a powerful left punch. Cavaho fired, his right glove connecting solidly with Johnny's head. Johnny's left caught Cavaho square in the ribs. Johnny's head cocked back and he stumbled before collapsing to his knees. Cavaho's velocity combined with the force of Johnny's blow carried him another two meters where he crashed, rolled and crumpled.

Johnny shook his head and planted his right hand to stop from falling flat on his face. Cavaho lay on the floor motionless. Johnny groaned and hauled himself upright. He staggered a few steps and stopped a moment to gain equilibrium. As he tottered and the ringing in his ear lightened he squinted at Cavaho lying limp and hopefully broken near the edge of the circle. He could see a large ugly purple patch on Cavaho's back where the floor had marked him when he struck it. No sweat had slickened the surface yet and so the floor had gripped his body and tugged at his muscles before releasing him to complete his two-meter roll. There was no question in Johnny's mind or any of the crowds that Cavaho had gotten the worst of this trading of blows.

Johnny snapped his head twice, hard, shaking off the last of the dizziness. He straightened his back and walked confidently toward the motionless heap close to the wall. He gave a quick nod to the yelling crowd, half screaming for him to finish Cavaho, the other half shouting for Cavaho to get up. Johnny walked faster as he got closer to Cavaho. Just as he entered striking range Cavaho rolled, threw his butt over his shoulders and rode a tight somersault away from Johnny and onto his feet. Without any pause his feet flashed and he was circling; his shoulders bobbing, fists up and ready.

Johnny frowned and readied his own fists. He circled and closed. Cavaho stepped in and Johnny pounced, throwing a hammer jab toward Cavaho's chest. Cavaho shifted sideways effortlessly and delivered a level blow to the recruit's side. Johnny bounced away and hunkered.

The wrestler drifted back and began to circle and widen the distance between the two. He refused to approach Cavaho for the moment. Cavaho closed. He jabbed at Johnny's upheld gloves and then pulled back his right for a heavy punch to Johnny's chest. Johnny twisted slightly and moved in toward the punch. The punch hit Johnny's chest askew and the sacrifice gave Johnny enough time and space to maneuver in close to Cavaho.

Johnny raised his heavy blast gloves and dropped them on Cavaho shoulders. Cavaho attempted to ram his left knee into Johnny's stomach. Too late. Cavaho grimaced as Johnny clamped onto him, pulling him forward. Johnny head butted Cavaho as he jacked his knee into Cavaho's hip, lifting and turning him. Cavaho folded into Johnny and the wrestler let gravity pull his heavy body down to the floor. Johnny's fall was cushioned by Cavaho's now vertically placed rib cage.

Keokuk groaned.

Johnny sprang up, leaving Cavaho on the floor. With a glee born from the taste of victory he kicked Cavaho square in the back. Cavaho skidded a meter, stopped, writhed with pain. The crowd roared in surprise, anguish and delight. Johnny turned to face them, arms raised, soaking up the crowd's emotions as he had a hundred times before on intergalactic television.

Circling dramatically, Johnny moved toward Cavaho. The wrestler pulled his leg up to thrust it down into Cavaho's ribs. Johnny's right leg was up and he balanced awkwardly on his left before the strike. With unexpected speed Cavaho chopped at Johnny's left leg with his right arm and rolled away. As Johnny's body crashed to the plasteel, Cavaho strained to rise. Blood from the head butt covered Cavaho's face and he blinked furiously to clear his eyes.

Cavaho's heavy shoulders were hunched. He was unable to ignore the fire in his side. The crowd groaned at the unnatural lump on his ribs, the cracked bone

pushing the skin upward. Cavaho's teeth were bared and he heaved his breath with fury. Johnny rose to face him, fists up, and as he gazed on the bloody, broken man before him, he laughed. Johnny pulled his fists higher and stepped forward eager to finish.

Throwing a powerful finishing blow, Johnny lumbered forward. Cavaho ducked, landing an upper cut to Johnny's jaw. Johnny struggled back as Cavaho lowered his center of gravity and flung his left leg in a long slow arc sweeping under Johnny's feet. Cavaho swept him cleanly and Johnny landed on his rump. He look more angry than hurt.

Cavaho lost no time in springing back up. Johnny scrambled to recover and stand. Halfway up Johnny felt the lightning blow of Cavaho's foot catch him square in the jaw. He arced back, blood spraying out of his mouth as he crashed again to the floor. Johnny rolled to distance himself from his assailant and hurried again to stand. Cavaho was there, slamming him back down with a punch to the back of his head.

Out of nothing more than fear of losing, Johnny pushed himself to his hands and knees. Cavaho nearly stood the wrestler up with a soccer kick to the stomach. Cavaho reigned down two more blows, another trip to the plasteel for Johnny. Johnny rolled onto his back. Rather than trying to stand he put his hands up and shook his head. Cavaho backed away and lowered his fists. Johnny's head rolled to the side and his hands dropped.

Stripping off the blast gloves Cavaho walked toward his fallen opponent. He bent and grabbed Johnny's hand and hauled the hulk of a man to his feet. His teeth clenched with pain, Cavaho steadied Johnny and raised his fist in the traditional tribal warrior greeting. Johnny placed his fist against Cavaho's. His face was a bloody map of bruises, his head dropped to avoid the stares of his tribe brothers.

The crowd quieted as comp sets were checked with quick glances to see how much had been lost or gained. The combat med tribals entered the fight circle. Johnny angrily waived them away, but was in no shape to stop them from helping him. Cavaho also half-heartedly struggles as they whisked him away to mend his shattered torso.

Condu frowned. "Fifth round, what was I thinking?"

"You weren't thinking, Condu. I made a nice six hundred wampum on that match so don't feel lonely in your loss."

"Cavaho went back alley on that tribal. I've never seen him take a tribal down so hard."

Keokuk spoke while checking his winnings. "You haven't been watching his bouts, Condu. Cavaho gives what he gets. When that Apache kicked him in the back that was when Cavaho decided to get savage on him. Now I got to get gone and see if I can force half these winnings on Cavaho."

CHAPTER THREE

Wovoka grunted the count out on his crunches keeping pace with the blasting rhythm of Neon Corpse. "One hundred fifty-six, 157, 158, 159..." Each surge forward expelled a small bit of anger that had surfaced at the sight of his brother.

Blood red wolf claw tattoos were visible against his bare chest. They marked him as the leader of his pack, the Alpha. On the wall his micromesh matte black body armor hung, adorned by fourteen small laser-painted red handprints. Each marked the completion of an important tactical victory over the UDA that was recognized personally by Apache Chief Coganthan.

While his features were unmistakably AmerIndian, Wovoka took little stock in the purity of his blood. He was proud to be AmerIndian. He cherished his ancestors but he did not believe it was facial features, perpetually dark skin or long, poker-straight black hair that showed he was true AmerIndian. It was his life.

Wovoka's life, like the lives of most tribal members of the AmerIndian Confederacy, showed him to be a free spirit. Fearless to a fault, honoring what deserved to be honored, no possessions he could not carry on his back, no savings, no debt. Wovoka was bound by nothing but the desire to live in harmony with the spirits of the land. That desire had nearly been expunged from his people from over seven centuries without a Homeland. Wovoka was proud to be an AmerIndian and ashamed to be an AmerIndian without a Homeland.

Underlying all of these ways and beliefs was his loyalty to the AmerIndian Confederacy, his home and the center of his life.

Massive breaker doors rolled open with a hiss and a low groan. Hana walked cautiously into the hot, greasy engine room. Wovoka worked out here because the constant heat pushed his body farther faster. The place was also solitary, visited only when repairs were needed.

Hana was dressed in a gleaming white workout ensemble. It contrasted sharply with her dark oak skin. Her straight, jet black hair was tied back with a small white piece of clothe. The shorts and cropped shirt she wore were tight and looked as brand new as her spotless, white athletic shoes. She indeed looked ready to workout but the outfit stated clearly working out was not her purpose here.

"Hana," Wovoka stopped and quickly walked over to the mag converter. "Music off," he said and pulled his shirt on. He was dripping with sweat and the shirt stuck to his chest and abdomen. "I didn't think I would see you until tonight. Did you come to work out with me?"

Hana smiled. "Yes, I thought that might be nice. But first we need to talk, a little."

Wovoka picked up his towel and laid it on the large converter unit making a place for Hana to sit without getting grease and water on herself. She sat gracefully and patted the mag converter for Wovoka to sit next to her.

"You have been gone too long," Hana leaned in and kissed Wovoka near his mouth. "Wovoka, I can't tell you how much I missed you," she took his hand in hers and squeezed. "You know it really doesn't have to be this way, always apart from each other. Wovoka, you could be in a command position within this Diegueño Lodge Ship. My father thinks the world of you. You are very skilled and you are well respected by the chiefs. All it would take is for you to ask and you would be transferred and promoted. We could be together more than three days every two months."

Wovoka looked directly at Hana and paused. "We have discussed this. That is not my path. I thought you knew that. I will be promoted on merit when Coganthan, my chief, determines I have earned promotion."

"I do know that," She paused and looked directly at him. "Wovoka, I am in love with you. Deeply. And your path frightens me. In the past year your pack

has been on two-dozen missions. Out of those 365 days we've spent twelve together. I saw footage from the Miner's rebellion. By Wambli, it was inhuman. How can you do this job for one more day? Your third Infiltrator, Cavaho... There is something wrong with him. He was covered in blood in the footage. Not his own. You, your pack, are destined to be legend. Either you will continue to conquer every foe as you have for half your life or you will be killed by a hail of laser fire and immortalized by the Apache for your sacrifice. You need to slow down. Live normally. You accept missions for your pack three times more often than the quotas demand. It is too much."

"Hana, why are you saying these things? You know who I am, what I am. I am a soldier and a leader. Since I am a leader my standards must be higher than those who follow me and who lead me. This is the goal I have set for myself and I believe that I have been honest with you about that."

"You have been honest. There is a big difference between accepting your philosophy and living it. Wovoka, do you know how much I love you? It's not loneliness. It's an overwhelming desire to be with you. I love you because you are different, driven, passionate. I am beginning to fear you for the same reasons. I fear what you will do to my life. Wovoka, look at me. I am a beautiful, intelligent woman. I could have any man I choose and I pine away for weeks waiting for you to return for a few days. I cannot accept the reality of our relationship. It is unfair to me, Wovoka."

Lowering his head, Wovoka pulled at the shirt sticking to his chest. "It is not fair to you." Wovoka stared at the doors for a moment. "You deserve more. You deserve more time, more attention, maybe even more love. I will not give those things to you. You should find a man who will."

Hana sat motionless. A tear fell from her cheek and for a few moments she was silent. "I should, Wovoka. But I can't. I know my heart and a month with anyone else would not compete with one day with you. I am sorry. Wovoka, I want to hold a star in my hands but I don't want that star to lose any of its power or brilliance."

She leaned in and wrapped her arms around him, pulled him close and lightly kissed his neck. He could feel each tear fall as she clung to him. He could feel her warmth and he breathed deeply the sweet smell of her perfume mixed with the salty odor of his sweat.

"I love you, Hana..." Wovoka pulled away from her and stood. "Enough not to hurt you any longer."

A questioning look spread across Hana's face as she wiped tears from her eyes. "What do you mean?"

"I mean you should not have to sacrifice your happiness to be with me for a few days every few weeks. Also, if you actually asked Sequoya if he would pull strings to get me promoted just so we could be together more you really don't know me at all." Wovoka stood. "Hana, I risk my life and the lives of my pack every week. You think I would rob another tribal of a promotion so I can have easy duty, so I can spend more time with you?"

Hana sat gaping, stunned. As the only daughter of the chief of the Diegueño tribe she had dealt with more suitors than she could remember. Relationships were a delicate dance of power, a game she had mastered long ago. And never had she been in this position, hearing these words. But she had played this game long enough to know how deep she was now. She had forgotten rule number one of the game, the person who cares the least about a relationship controls it. Wovoka had cared the least from day one and now she had tried to leverage him when she had no power. It had backfired, badly. Painfully, she realized Wovoka's words echoed what she had said to so many others.

"No, Wovoka, this is just a disagreement, a misunderstanding. You don't understand what I mean--"

"I understand exactly what you mean," he interrupted softly. "I am being selfish. I am putting my work, my goals ahead of our relationship and that is

wrong. I won't be willing to give you that kind of relationship for years. The goal I have set for myself will take years to accomplish. I was wrong to think I could give you what you are looking for. I am sorry."

"Wovoka, you are what I am looking for," Hana spoke without thinking. As she heard herself say the words she ached. She remembered the men who had valiantly tried to change her mind and failed. She knew the hundreds of thoughts, the dozens of reasons why they should stay together, how she would appreciate and contribute to his goals and dreams, where chaff in the wind now. He was leaving her and there was nothing she could say to change that. Her only chance to be with him again was the last thing she wanted to do. Be silent and act like this was best. Betray her heart.

"If I was what you wanted you would not have the concerns you have," Wovoka shook his head and placed his hand on her cheek consolingly. Hana flinched; his gesture was a hard slap. She felt more tears forming.

"Yes, maybe this..." The tears rolled down her cheeks. They were bright and iridescent against her dark skin and flowed slowly down the smooth lines of her face.

It struck Wovoka as strange, considering the situation, how utterly beautifully she was.

"This is for the best." Hana turned and walked slowly away, moving faster as the huge breaker doors rolled open. Wovoka watched the doors roll shut behind her and knew she was running when they closed heavily.

Wovoka wondered if he was being fair to her. He had been angry with her when she brought up the same tired issue. Was there really room in his life for her or anyone? How long would it be before he could be part of a healthy relationship where he received and gave love in equal parts?

Wovoka served as a top Apache Pack. Accordingly, he was constantly traveling, constantly taking on infiltration missions for the Confederacy. Well, not exactly for the AmerIndian Confederacy. Wovoka stopped himself and thought about whom the missions were actually for. All of Wovoka's goals, his sacrifice revolved around Stone Rain, the man who had been pulled away from him, his mother and his brother thirteen years ago. Killed in the White Earth Massacre with 18,000 other tribals, Stone Rain had left a legacy of service and dedication to the AC that Wovoka now labored to equal. If not for his death Stone Rain would have become chief of the Apache within a few years. Now Wovoka was gaining the experience and reputation it would take to achieve the goal death had stolen from his father. Along with the legacy Stone Rain had left behind the seeds of conflict between Wovoka and Keokuk.

Like his brother, Keokuk, Wovoka enjoyed his work. Serving the AC, even killing for the AC was not labor a to him. His pack was skilled and their success rate was rivaled only by one other infiltrator pack. Like his father before him, Wovoka knew he could write his pack's name indelibly into the history of the AmerIndians' first and greatest goal, regaining the North American Continent, the Homeland, on Earth.

Wovoka strapped on his sparring gloves. He had been wrong to get involved with Hana. Failing to recognize that fact from the beginning had caused her undue pain. His fault. The thought repeated in his mind and each time he slammed a quick jab into the repulse pad. Again and again and again the repulse pad banged back into its mount and slowly the pain in his arms overwhelmed the pain in his head.

CHAPTER FOUR

In the liberty Galaxy Cluster, fifty-six million light years from Earth, shuttle traffic was brisk between the gathered Nez Perce lodge ships. Dean, one of seventy AmerIndian Confederacy recruits, peered out the shuttle's glasteel hull section. An amazing spectacle. So much different than the crowded urban outpost he had escaped from. He thought back to his friends, Lucas and Derek and the gaming group that saved for months to fund his escape from UDA outpost New Angelos. They had worked hard to facilitate his departure, to allow him to serve the AmerIndian Confederacy. He smiled as he thought they might be thinking of him now too, galaxies away.

He turned away from the view and slipped on the comp set a liaison tribal had given him. He softly spoke the commands to link him with the shuttle server. He had practiced with the keying bands but was not yet adept enough to use them effectively. Soon he was linked and he started to explore the AC nets his limited access would allow. A section on new candidate training scrolled up and he read it slowly.

The section explained it was the task of the Nez Perce tribe to take in new candidates and mold them to tribal life. Weeding out the chaff from the wheat was relatively easy. Hundreds of eager new recruits arrive by dedicated shuttles every week to Nez Perce lodge ships. New candidates first went through the Trial, a six-week physical and mental training session. Approximately ten percent of the new candidates left due to the rigors of the Trial.

Starting with the first day on lodge ship all new candidates were subject to the Three Laws. Every tribal was expected to live by the Three Laws. Dean read them carefully.

LAW ONE - No tribal may own more than she can carry on her back or be in debt to another tribal.

LAW TWO - No tribal may harm another tribal or her environment purposefully.

LAW THREE - Work will be the daily contribution for every tribal.

Dean read on. Kichai judges were specifically tasked with addressing infringements of these laws. Dean saw quickly that judges had a great deal of flexibility in dealing with infringements. Every lodge ship had a number of contemplation rooms, which contained no doors or furniture. Tribals could be sent to a contemplation room for as little as one hour or as much as one year to sit and contemplate their transgression.

A tribal had no contact with other tribals while in a contemplation room. Dean was reread the section explaining that a tribal could leave a contemplation room at any time but if she did not stay for the time the judge suggested than she was marked as not truly wishing to improve her behavior and could be quickly banished from the Confederacy for even minor infringements. A judge could rename a tribal, strip her of possessions, separate her from friends and family or assign her as crossworker.

Dean shook his head when he read the AC had no police force. Every tribal was expected to follow the laws and stop other tribals from breaking them. Kichai Judges banished a few hundred tribals each year. Solvers, Zuni investigators, aided judges in determining the truth when tribals lied to avoid banishment. Capital and corporal punishment were not practiced in the AC. Banishments were not uncommon, however.

Beyond the Three Laws, recruits also fell under the Cleansing Law, which forbid the use of drugs (narcotics, alcohol, tobacco) and Sation chips. If a recruit violated any of these laws they were immediately banished from the AmerIndian Confederacy, shipped out and dumped at the nearest UDA outpost. Dean

marveled at the frankness of the AC data files. It stated plainly that twenty percent of all new candidates were banished during the Trial due to violations of the Three Laws. Another twenty-five percent of new recruits were shipped out due to violating the Cleansing Law. Still, some junkies were pulled through their addictions by the Trial. Most of these proved to be die-hard tribals who served the AmerIndian Confederacy out of gratitude for their new lives.

Recruits were put on a strict diet of fruit, vegetables and small portions of protein. In addition all contact with non-AC personnel was forbidden. The first two years were a tempering period that produced healthy, capable tribals. Thirty percent of all recruits made it through this tempering. Those who endured the tempering were embraced into the AmerIndian Confederacy as full members of any tribe they chose. The Nez Perce received most of the black recruits after tempering. Early on in the AC the elders recognized that black recruits excelled as pilots. The Nez Perce tribe naturally attracted more and more black tribals until it was comprised of mostly black members and led by a black chief.

The AmerIndian Confederacy also actively watched for UDA spies posing as recruits. During its twenty-eight years history four UDA plants had confessed their identities during tempering and joined the AmerIndian Confederacy in earnest.

Dean pulled off the comp set and rubbed the back of his neck. He was ready to begin. The shuttle zipped between the many outrider ships that surround each of the lodge ships and began to close on the largest, *Wanderer*. Over fifteen hundred meters in length and sixty decks in height, *Wanderer* cut an imposing figure amongst the smaller lodge ships. The shuttle easily maneuvered into one of *Wanderer's* large docking bays. The bay was meticulously clean and unobstructed. At the side of the shuttle ten dog soldiers in full ceremonial dress stood at attention behind AmerIndian Confederacy officers.

A soft hiss from the airlock signaled the recruits to begin exiting the shuttle. Stepping onto the bay's floor, Dean noticed Nez Perce bay workers on the level below, already preparing for maintenance on the heavy shuttle. One of the Nez Perce waved to Dean kindly when she saw him watching. Dean did not have time to return her greeting.

"Gather round." The old Russian stepped forward and walked slowly down the line of new recruits. He reached the end, turned and smiled. "A fine group of recruits, men and women worthy of the blood. Welcome one and all to the AmerIndian Confederacy. From this moment forward your lives will cut a swath of consequences across galaxies.

"I am Wolf Plume, Senior Guide, member of Jade Dagger Pack. In your initial orientation, I and other guides will show you many facets of life as a member of the AmerIndian Confederacy. I will show you the resources, customs, people... the diversity of the greatest independent fighting force of the twenty-second century."

Wolf Plume noticed one of the recruits shivering despite the insulated three-quarter length coat she wore.

"Indeed it is cold, Tovarisch," Wolf Plume smiled. The integrated mike on his comp set ran his voice through the ship's intercom system so everyone could hear him clearly. "All AmerIndian Confederacy ships are heated only in living quarters. This allows the energy normally allocated for heating other areas of the ship to be diverted to propulsion, weapon systems or other necessary functions. This is just one of many ways we make our ships more efficient than those of the UDA."

Dean saw tribals dressed in functional black cotton pants and lightweight micromesh jackets already taking the recruits' luggage off the shuttle on anti-grav skids. Two of the dog soldiers scanned the luggage carefully as it was loaded. The rest of the dog soldiers stood at attention, watching the recruits.

"All of you are scheduled for a battery of tests to help the AmerIndian Confederacy assess your strengths and weakness and begin the process of

embracing you as productive tribals. You have all traveled great distances and overcome many obstacles to be here. Nevertheless I need to ensure that you understand what the AmerIndian Confederacy is and why it exists.

"The AmerIndian Confederacy is the collective resurrection of the mighty Native American nations that inhabited Earth's North American continent for seven millennium before the year 1492. The AmerIndian Confederacy is the product of the indomitable will of one man, Potlatch Weaver. May Wambli carry his spirit eternally. Since the AmerIndian Confederacy's birth in 2164, twenty-eight years ago, over fifty thousand tribals have given their lives in her service. Still the AmerIndian Confederacy now stands 416,000 tribals strong.

"Our organization is simple. We are divided into eight tribes, each tribe specializing in one service. The Apache are the army, no more or less than the grunts that fight and win land battles. The Brule are our elite forces, performing demolitions, assassination and as well as other tasks.

"The Diegueño are the preservationists, collecting and protecting plants and animals assaulted by the relentless expansion of the UDA. The Haida are shamans of the Confederacy, healers, prophets and Cybershamans. The stories you have heard are indeed true. They wield incredible spiritual power. The Kichai are the merchants. They sell, buy and invest for the Confederacy. Every cred the Confederacy accrues, and that is no small amount, flows through them.

"The Nez Perce control our navy. They pilot and maintain the 30 lodge ships, 620 outrider ships and 5,100 space and aero-fighters in the Confederacy's convoy. The Tsimshian are the Confederacy's comp warriors. They are charged with building and maintaining the Confederacy's vast comp resources as well as penetrating and destroying those of our enemies. The last and smallest of all the tribes is the Zuni. They are the intelligence of the AmerIndian Confederacy, gathering and disseminating information and disinformation from all of the inhabited galaxies. They maintain an intricate network of spies, sympathizers and UDA traitors. Each of the eight AmerIndian Confederacy tribes is lead by a chief. The chiefs are in turn advised by the five member Elder council. As can be attested by your varied ethnic backgrounds the AmerIndian Confederacy tribes are made up of pure blood Native Americans, as well as minorities. There are even some Caucasians, like myself, who have sworn loyalty to her. Once you complete the tempering period and are accepted as a tribal you are considered equal with every member of the AmerIndian Confederacy, whether your blood is pure Native American or lacks even a drop of Native American lineage. The fact that the AmerIndian Confederacy has opened her tribes to members of other races has allowed her to remain as change-tolerant as is demanded by the times we live in."

Wolf Plume finger tapped, the movement of each finger read by his keying bands. "I will now send to your comp sets." Wolf Plume transmitted a graph statistically detailing the tribes to each recruit.

APACHE / Chief Coganthan / Service: Infantry / Total Population: 130,000 / Lodge Ships: 10

BRULE / Chief Satyr / Service: Special Forces / Total Population: 12,000 / Lodge Ships: 1

DIEGUEÑO / Chief Sequoya / Service: Preservationists / Total Population: 65,000 / Lodge Ships: 4

HAIDA / Chief Auspice / Service: Healers / Total Population: 22,000 / Lodge Ships: 1

KICHAI / Chief River Bull / Service: Merchants / Total Population: 41,000 / Lodge Ships: 2

NEZ PERCE / Chief Rail / Service: Navy / Total Population: 54,000 / Lodge Ships: 7

TSIMSHIAN / Chief Shakespeare / Service: Comp Techs / Total Population: 52,000 / Lodge Ships: 3

ZUNI / Chief Koqua / Service: Intelligence / Total Population: 40,000 / Lodge Ships: 2
TOTALS / Tribes: 8 / Population: 416,000 / Lodge Ships: 30

Wolf Plume allowed the recruits a moment to scan the numbers. "But why did the AmerIndian Confederacy form? Why do we exist? The answer is one word. Homeland. The AmerIndian Confederacy exists to reestablish the Homeland, the natural balance of man and nature that our ancestors enjoyed over seven hundred years ago and for seven thousand years before 1492. Homeland, where rivers and streams are the blood of each tribal that inhabits the land. Homeland, where each tribal living with the land knows damaging that land is akin to spilling his own blood. The AmerIndian Confederacy was created to fight for our land, the North American Continent of Earth, now known as Earth. Homeland has been denied us for too long.

"Understand why we fight requires understanding of what we fight. Potlatch Weaver, the creator of the AmerIndian Confederacy, forged the people's resolve, banded hundreds of thousands of tribals together in the quest for harmony and peace by sheer will. He did this in response to the actions of another man, Silus Mar. In 2056 Silus Mar transformed the United Nations into the United Democracy Alliance. Today, the UDA stands as the sole government of humanity, controlling thirty-five billion human lives on eight habitable planets (colonies) and eight hundred outposts across seven settled galaxies. Now, why does the AmerIndian Confederacy oppose this government?

"The primary reason the AC fights the UDA is for the return of the North American Continent as I have said. It is important to understand the UDA values each inch of land on Earth as though it were paved with gold. Its true economic value is actually close to this extravagant concept. The land is priceless because, with the exception of only Periphery radicals, everyone wishes to live on Earth.

"There are many other reasons why the AC fights the UDA. The UDA's treatment of Genetically Engineered Beings, the rampant corruption of the government, particularly the Intergalactic Lottery, which the UDA uses to double and triple tax its constituents, are just the beginning.

"The UDA does not have a balanced environmental policy. While the UDA is taking large steps to halt the ravaging of Earth, it has allowed strip-mining on all eight habitable colony planets. The UDA employs a standard policy of jettisoning refuse by the barge load into the nearest sun from all colonies and outposts. Since the inception of the Core Space Policy in 2142 the UDA has destroyed the two habitable planets that have been discovered. They have used the destruction of two habitable planets by asteroid targeting to declare an end to further colonization by the human race. This is an assault on nature that the AC simply cannot ignore.

"We also believe the UDA and the megacorps have systematically developed an economy in which most citizens are debt slaves. This situation is compounded by the policy of icon literacy. Less than fifteen percent of the UDA populace can read.

"For the first fifteen years of the AC we strove to make the war we waged as bloodless as possible. The memory of the White Earth Massacre has eroded that peaceful resolve. While Potlatch Weaver laid siege to White Earth in 2179 with four hundred AC outrider ships, UDA Captain Gavon Lige lead fifty prime ships to NGC 3703 where our lodge ships, filled with non-combatants, women and children, were hidden. Lige destroyed eleven lodge ships, slaughtering 18,000 tribals. From that day forward we adopted aggressive combat styles and have engaged in merc work.

"If you have come here to join us in this fight, if you are willing to dedicate the whole of your life to these goals, I welcome you. You are embarking on a life of purpose, friendship and beauty laced with sacrifice. If you do not

share the urgency we feel to achieve our goals or you wish only to escape the doldrums of the UDA without giving of yourselves then I urge you now to step forward and we will escort you to the nearest outpost."

Wolf Plume stood silently. No one stepped forward. "Excellent, I leave you to your next guide, Coronado, who will answer any questions you have and continue your orientation. If any of you wish to see me during your free hours I will be available for the next two days. Simply ping me on the comp set or come down Deck 36, Sector 7, where I will be spending most of my time."

Coronado stepped forward and addressed the group in a thick Hispanic accent. "You are all blessed. Today, the Diegueño have brought a unique and wonderful specimen from one of their lodge ship zoos. A perfect albino buffalo has been born and the Diegueño are joyfully taking him to each lodge ship so that all the tribals may enjoy seeing this precious baby. Follow me please. It is said that Bear Vajo prophesied..."

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"Brother, I applaud your clarity and sincerity."

Wolf Plume turned to see John, Elder Wisdom of the AmerIndian Confederacy. A thin, handsome black man, dressed plainly in dungarees, a cotton T-shirt and an insulated, light denim jacket.

A body tank warrior loomed behind the Elder. The armor was Heavy Hammer grade, painted in gleaming white interrupted by jagged red runes. The integrated helmet hid the body tank warrior's faces. A rail gun was clutched in the neoprene and metal grip of the suit's gauntlets. A fine mist hissed out of the helmet as the sealed environmental system cleansed the air for the tribal inside.

"Spasibo, Elder John," Wolf Plume opened his arms and hugged the man.

"Please, I've told you Wolf Plume, just John. Please excuse us a moment." At Elder John's request the body tank warrior clanked heavily away toward the corner of the docking bay.

"Wolf Plume, you old dog. Where have you been the last three months?"

"Jade Dagger has been assigned to several missions since I have been back. I've probably seen all seven settled galaxies since I've slept in my own berth."

John shook his head. "Infiltration missions, right? Sneaking in and out of UDA facilities, megacorp strongholds, blasting your way out if something goes awry. Wolf Plume, do you know how many young bucks I have that can take care of those tasks. Really! What are you doing flying a hopped-up shuttle for an Infiltrator pack? I could have used you here with the convoy. You are one of my best guides and you hardly ever teach. If you were here with the convoy more I could start to groom you for what you really should be doing."

Wolf Plume smiled broadly. "I'm a pilot, not an advisor."

"Brother, there are many questions facing the Confederacy. Celetain Prax warns of important changes coming. I could use a brilliant, open-minded advisor to help me through and a friend to lean on."

"My pack needs me, John. I enjoy working with them. They're good boys. A strong team, capable, bright."

"That's right and I guarantee you they will remain in the prime slot without you. Have you seen some of the cross-tribe pack drafts this year? They are all true walkers, strong as Grizzly and wise as Owl. Give it some thought, old man. The Elders need you more than your pack. Now we have a few more days before the Steel Circle begins. Promise me you'll come and take a walk with me through the viewing decks. Antares' Comet is just coming into view."

"I promise, Tovarisch. I will think over your words, John. I missed our Stones games this last year. I missed you, too."

"Thank you, old friend. Call when you have time. We will walk." John hugged Wolf Plume again before exiting with his assigned body tank warrior following closely.

Wolf Plume shook his head and walked across the bay, close to the force field that kept the vacuum out and the artificial environment in. He looked at the dozens of outrider ships and the other Nez Perce lodge ships and thought of his brother and sister tribals on those ships. Wovoka, Cavaho, Slow Turtle and his hopped-up Trighter were all he could see.

CHAPTER FIVE

In the M101 Galaxy Cluster, thirty-two million light years from Earth, UDA Admiral Lige stood on a raised dais at the center of *Black Mariah's* bridge. Below him the floor screen showed views of an AmerIndian Confederacy outrider ship being decimated by his UDA fleet. "Titan, Atlas and Nero adjust course to intercept the right flank. Recall all fighters and activate Hellfire immediately."

With that order Lige strolled down from his command position, headed toward the anti-grav platform. "Lieutenant Brax, clean up." He waved his hand dismissively and exited the bridge.

His aide, Jaret Tucker, waited for him on the anti-grav platform. "Stock portfolio is up three percent over projection for the week and seven percent for the month. Now totaling at 1.6 billion creds. You have three priority communiqués. One from President Sullivan. One from Delia. One from Decker."

Lige raised an eyebrow. "Decker first." Jaret nodded.

"Unable to discern whereabouts of Steel Circle. Evidence leads to a water world, most likely in the Periphery, possible in the NGC 3218 sector. Have learned Celetain Prax will push for a separate tribe for GEB tribals. Reports indicate Prax is been under great stress. She has prophesied a political upheaval in the AC and the emergence of a new leader. A list of four AC hidden supply cache locations and two Kichai corporation fronts is attached. Next report on 03/08/2192."

Lige smiled. "Excellent. Dispatch one prime ship for each location mentioned with fifty body tank troops each, twenty-five Hammer Grade, twenty-five Nail grade. Report the corporation fronts to the UDA IRS enforcement branch. Decker is performing well. Transfer a bonus of double his monthly pay to his account on Earth. Read Sullivan's communiqué."

The circular grav platform descended through circles in each deck supported by an anti-grav system. The circles in each deck were illuminated with blue or red denoting if the deck was currently pressurized.

Jaret began the President's message. "Thank you kindly for your superb work on the Zealot project. I have already filed petition for a valor medal. I am constantly surprised by the information you are able to proffer concerning the AC. You are my only Admiral who seems to always know the AC's next move. I commend you on the intelligence gathering system you have developed. Yet, I must ask why, with your ability to find hidden credit accounts, supply caches and even battle plans, you have been unable to supply me with the data I need most. Where is my daughter, Alexa? How and why was she kidnapped? When will she be returned home? I am aware that you are solely qualified to return my daughter. Your performance in handling AC issues has proven that competency is not the issue here. I am beginning to doubt your dedication to this issue. The Festival begins in two weeks. If my daughter is not safely back on Earth at that time I will be forced to re-evaluate my support for your progress in my Navy."

Admiral Lige stood motionless, not commenting. Jaret knew better than to interrupt his silence. Lige did not like to be threatened. The Admiral steadied himself, adjusting his uniform. "I will dictate a reply to Sullivan's message tonight. Delia's communiqué, please."

Jaret read, "Father, Thank you ever so much for the beautiful Fucara necklace. I wear it every day. Each day when I am done with classes I go to the observatory deck of the library. It is so beautiful, the trees and pond remind me of home. You can see the neo-classic influence in the architecture of the buildings on campus. I watch the dusk sky hoping to catch a glimpse of your fleet. I look forward to your return. I have missed you. Please return as soon as you can and above all else, be safe. Love, Delia."

The anti-grav platform stopped and Jaret strode out, stepping over the twelve centimeters distance between the platform and the floor of Deck 79. Lige

followed. Jaret was true samurai in every sense of the word but lineage. He had shown on many occasions that he would lay down his life for Lige. Jaret, now twenty-six, had served with Lige for ten years (since Lige had been a UDA special ops platoon commander).

On a wetwork mission on Outpost Lowen Nine, Lige's crew had taken a wrong turn when trying to leave the sight of a successful hit. The crew was barreling down a hallway when suddenly a small canister clinked and skittered toward them ending up in the middle of Lige's men. Each man knew the thermite grenade would vaporize ten square meters. His men skidded to a halt and stood for a short knowing second until Jaret pushed Lige back and jumped on the grenade, yelling, "Run!"

The platoon only had enough time to turn and run a few meters before the grenade detonated. Lige had looked back when he heard the loud hiss of a smoke grenade. Jaret lay there with large clouds of smoke billowing out from under him. Lige ran back, scooped him up and led him out. The smoke temporarily blinded Jaret. Lige lost two men because of the delay Jaret's injury caused but his respect for the boy had been forged then and there. Jaret served as his right hand man from then on.

"What is the report from Decker?"

Jaret tapped the stylus on his datapad. "Decker reports nothing out of the ordinary. Delia is studying hard. One of her professors has shown more attention to her than he should, but like the other two or three suitors she fends off each quarter, she refuses his advances and has paid him no further attention. Her mind is on her studies. Decker's report confirms your daughter does spend twenty or so minutes each evening watching the stars from the library observatory decks. She misses you. Security at Yale is superb. Decker contends he is not protecting her from any real danger. He is one of our best operatives. Perhaps his skills could serve us better somewhere else in the field."

Lige and Jaret entered the busy prison block. Two guards stepped aside to let Lige pass. He stopped in front of a cell built like a vault.

"Decker is fine where he is. My daughter is a precious and rare creature. Her education and growth is as important to my plans as any of our other projects."

He turned and faced the door of the cell. "Ace Taft nine two six." The thick door clicked and swung open automatically at Lige's voice command.

Jaret followed him into a small cell. The floor and walls were all slate grey. There was nothing in the room except a deep sleep chamber, an ancient relic left over from the early days of space travel.

Lige opened a small hatch on the deep sleep chamber and keyed in an opening string. The chamber hissed and the neuro-ice surrounding the chamber's inhabitant melted to a liquid state. It drained into the chamber's reserve tanks. The person in the chamber blinked and coughed as the lid opened and lifted smoothly on pneumatic controls.

The chamber's occupant lurched forward, blinking, gasping. Lige waited. Suddenly, as the figure began to breathe normally, Lige shot his hand out grasping the person's chin, holding firmly.

"Alexa Sullivan, I have questions for you."

CHAPTER SIX

"I think you are going to like the additions," Kill Spotted Horse headed up the ramp of the Trighter. "Two Sand Kings, one top, one bottom. There's a training program on the Trighter's comp. Should only take Slow Turtle an hour or two. I also added thermo and twilight options to the optical package on each of your Mako body tanks."

Kill Spotted Horse finger tapped a blueprint to Wovoka's comp set view. Wovoka's sixty-ton transport/fighter (Trighter) was detailed at 1/20 scale.

Fifteen meters high and twenty-eight meters from keel to stern, the Trighter had a squat, compact design. The Trighter was an amalgamation of two distinct space-faring vessels. The chassis and frame of the Trighter were from a UDA heavy fighter used for high power strafing runs and light bombing missions. The rear end of the heavy fighter, nearly a third of the entire vessel, had been chopped off. In place of the amputated rear was a massive engine, nearly five meters in length, width and height. The engine consisted of two gigantic heavy water hydrogen propulsion systems mounted on a large swivel joint. The engine was originally used to power a troop transport ten times larger than the fighter frame it was now attached to.

This jury-rigged contraption was the brainchild of Jowato, one of Kill Spotted Horse's underling mechanics. The Trighter, the only one of its kind in the AmerIndian Confederacy's fleet, was Wovoka's first and only choice of transportation for his Infiltrator pack once he had seen it. Wovoka admired the uncompromising purpose of the Trighter - pure unadulterated speed, sacrificing maneuverability and concealability to achieve it.

Wovoka followed Kill Spotted Horse through the entry port and through the confines of the Trighter until they entered a small room near the rear. Four body tanks surrounded him. Each mobile armor suit sported in garish neon patterns, except for Cavaho's unit, which was matte black. Kill Spotted Horse smacked his hands against Wovoka's armor. "Replaced six dermal armor plates and ran a complete overhaul of the solid state frames. It's prime."

Wovoka stepped forward and inspected the dermal plates on his Mako grade body tank. He finger tapped a simple command to the suit. The whole surface of the Mako changed color. The pinks and greens muted, disappeared and all that remained was the true plasteel chrome of the Mako's hide. All indicator bars read nominal and the performance benchmarks were well above spec. "I can't thank you enough, Kill Spotted Horse. Superb work," Wovoka threw his ponytail of his shoulder.

"Hey, no thanks necessary. Your pack earns the points necessary for these upgrades. My pack makes it happen."

Kill Spotted Horse walked to the cockpit and sat in one of the comfortable command chairs. "So tell me about Naanac."

Wovoka finger tapped. "Rep Naanac. Core data." A visual of Naanac appeared on Kill Spotted Horse's comp set view. "It's a settled planet owned and operated by Rowan Cartel. They have kept it secret from the UDA for six years. They kept it under raps because their settlement of the planet, if you can call two hundred researchers a settlement, violates the UDA Core Space Policy. "Rowan is currently using the planet as private research area. It's sketchy what they are working on but limited intelligence we have suggests some type of small arms, maybe a new cloaking technology. Real trick is getting on and off of the planet. Once every year Rowan builds a chunnel through this asteroid field that surrounds the planet. The locals call the asteroid field 'the Free Mantle'. The chunnel they build is two kilometers of flexible plasteel fifty meters in diameter. One Rowan shuttle takes all of the research for the year back to Rowan Headquarters. The chunnel lasts for thirty-six hours. After that the asteroid belt breaches the chunnel's structural integrity and it is no longer passable by

any ship. My pack will have a thirty-six hour window to penetrate the Free Mantle, take our survey and get back out before the chunnel collapses."

Kill Spotted Horse shook his head. "Well, the Trighter is ready. No question. I don't think you will use the Makos if this op is done right. What you will need is some good tracking and mapping equipment suitable for severe, wet weather. You are also going to need some type of trick to get you from the chunnel down to the surface of the planet without setting off every sensor suite Rowan will have trained on the chunnel. That's not going to be easy."

Kill Spotted Horse called up pictures and specs of various ship anti-sensor devices. "I don't know, Wovoka. Even our best anti-sensor units won't hide the Trighter well enough with the kind of surveillance Rowan is bound to have set up on a once-a-year entry and exit project. You're going to have to give me a few hours on this."

Wovoka nodded and got up. "Call me when you are ready." He exited and Kill Spotted Horse got to work.

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Wovoka joined Slow Turtle on their regular perch, third cross beam from the Kellion couplers of *Wanderer*. This vantage point gave an excellent view of the eliminator races. Tribal youth used the inner hull of the lodge ship as a racetrack. Large groups of male and even a few female teens dialed in their grav boards.

The grav board races were an important activity among the tribal youth. While *Wanderer's* Nez Perce youth were awarded more freedom at the races than elsewhere in the lodge ship, it was well known among the youth that pack alphas often prowled the high beams checking out young tribals soon to be recruits for their packs. Despite the AC's philosophies of brotherhood and harmony the grav board racers tended toward cliques. The Elders fought against the term "gangs". Violence erupted occasionally, but it never escalated to weapons. A broken nose here or there, certainly. Tribals under the age of sixteen, the age of account, were not bound by the Three Laws AC adults were. The Elders allowed the gangs (Gothoj, Edge and Skree) because each was a chaotic mix of youths from every tribe. Incorporating the sons and daughters of cross-workers with ease, the gangs actually integrated the tribes far better than any of the Elders' efforts.

A new race was about to start and Wovoka and Slow Turtle each pointed out the young tribal they thought would win the race. The cross beam Wovoka and Slow Turtle sat on was perpendicular to the inner hull the grav board riders raced on. The grav board riders had to maintain a speed of seventy kilometers to remain on the inner wall.

The clean smooth surface of plaschrome covering the inner hull walls gleamed. At intervals of ninety meters, two-meter high structure beams divided the surface. The beams had large holes in them by design. The grav board riders had to dodge into these holes as they raced.

The eliminator races featured packs of thirty or forty riders accelerating around the hull. The last racer to pass the start line was eliminated. The grav discs on last racer's board automatically cut out and the young tribal fell (at three quarters gravity's pace) to loose netting just above the bottom of the hull walls.

The race began, grav racers shooting out of a large opened vacuum pipe against the hull wall that was used to vent atmosphere during maintenance of the lodge ship. The riders immediately changed their orientation ninety degrees when they popped out of the pipe. All of the riders did this effortlessly and accelerated their boards.

The pack of riders spread out across the wall so there would be less crowding at the structural beam holes they each had to pass through. This did little to reduce the carnage at the beam holes. The riders shoved, checked and jostled each other off the boards, which was legal in eliminator races. Grav racers fell like rain to the netting below. Half the racers were in the nets

before the second lap was finished. Once the numbers thinned the race became more finesse than force. The riders were spaced apart and there was room to let the boards rip. The riders darted through the beam holes one after another.

A young Kichai led the race. He pushed his board to the point of instability pegging out around 110 K.P.H., the maximum for the custom designed boards. Above 110 K.P.H. and the boards became unstable and threw their riders. If the board was made larger to accommodate more speed it became more unwieldy and could not make tight carves, critical when maneuvering.

Keokuk laughed as the rider in last place board cut off and he whirled down to the net in an iron cross. With only ten riders left and four laps to go it was now an all out speed race. The leading Kichai was tucked low, knees bent, arms thrust straight as arrows behind him. The board vibrated hard beneath him. He pulled away from his pursuers.

Three riders dropped back and another was eliminated. Wovoka and Slow Turtle grimaced as two racers slammed together trying to get through a beam hole simultaneously. They squeezed through, avoiding the brutal breaking rewarded to any rider unfortunate enough to slam into the makeshift padding the young tribals had fitted around each hole.

The next lap took only thirty seconds with no change in position for the riders. As the last lap began, the second place rider, a hard looking Nez Perce, pulled next to the lead rider. The Nez Perce's board shook violently. Both riders realized one of them had to go down or neither would make it through the next hole. Both riders rose slightly from their crouch and braced for an impact. Their boards scraped together, their arms flailed wildly.

The lead Kichai rider amazed his audience by jumping lightly from his own board to his pursuer's, dislodging him. The Kichai's board and the Nez Perce rider plummeted to the net while the Kichai racer finished the race on the stolen board.

Slow Turtle grinned at Wovoka. "Who would have thought a briefcase jockey could ride like that? Let's hope his stock picks are as sound as his riding skills."

The next race was only a few laps in when Kill Spotted Horse climbed up to join them. He pulled out a slate and the other two slid close to him.

In a moment all three were looking at a detailed comp simulation of the mission Wovoka's pack was about to embark upon. The simulation showed a Rowan shuttle exiting a chunnel through Naanac's Free Mantle. A moment later, the Trighter could be seen rocketing through the chunnel. The Trighter would blast through the chunnel at a speed of 3,500 K.P.H. on autopilot. No human would be able to pilot the sixty-ton Trighter through the fifty-meter chunnel without a good chance of grinding the Trighter into dust with one small mistake.

The simulation slowed and displayed a close up of the Trighter. Just before it exited the chunnel the Trighter lit up, blazing bright white. The human eye would see only a brilliant ball of light. The comp then switched to a close up of a torpedo bay on the Trighter releasing a long, jet-black drone. The drone shot out and hovered just a few meters from the Trighter. It broke in two, dispersing sixty twenty-centimeter spheres that shot away in all directions, each mirroring the brilliant ball of light that was the Trighter. All sixty dupes and the Trighter shot toward the ground. The simulation ended abruptly.

Kill Spotted Horse shifted trying to get comfortable on the hard plasteel of the crossbeam. "According to Zuni intelligence there's no more than thirty aero-fighters on the entire planet. The research complex is the only man-made structure on Naanac. There are approximately two hundred Rowan employees and a garrison of twenty mercenary and corporate soldiers on Naanac. Problem is that data is eleven months old and it was stolen off a UDA net. It could be complete drek."

Wovoka frowned, "So if the data is correct they won't have near enough man power to chase all sixty bogeys. Are you sure the drones will fool their sensors?"

"The drones won't fail. It's all top of the line Fuchi tech, high grade. Their sensors won't break them. All part of the Fuchi 'Northern Lights' system. Should come in handy in other ways. It blinds anyone looking at it from closer than thirty meters for over an hour. It can also flash in any color of the spectrum and the comp can even orchestrate light patterns for communication."

Slow Turtle spoke up. "I've had one concern since I first looked at this mission. What if Rowan closes the chunnel early? Won't our pack be trapped on Naanac until another chunnel is built?"

"Impossible, " Kill Spotted Horse shook his head. "It costs Rowan twenty million creds to set up and charge the chunnel for thirty-six hours. One shuttle comes in with one year of supplies and leaves with one year of research. Rowan will not waste twenty million creds and they will not let any delay occur in receiving that data. Allowing the chunnel to close would mean a delay of at least fifty days. There's a strict schedule. Other projects rely on this research. The chunnel closing early is simply not an option. Rowan personnel won't close that chunnel and you can't close it either, Wovoka. Rowan is not a UDA entity, so the AmerIndian Confederacy has no reason to anger them. We are there to gather a few Naanac animals for study and care, maybe some quick eco-scans, in and out, that's all."

"No problem," Wovoka began to stand. "It looks like a solid plan. We'll go with it."

Wovoka checked his comp set. "We have twenty-eight hour before go time. The pack will go over the plan by simulator. Thank you, Kill Spotted Horse."

Wovoka climbed down the beams and back onto the inner hull of the lodge ship. Kill Spotted Horse scooted closer to the edge of the beam to get a better look at the next race. Slow Turtle quickly began to argue with him whether the Skree were more likely to take the Golden Hoop than Edge.

CHAPTER SEVEN

From the top deck of the people's hall on *Iron Bow* Keokuk enjoyed the stunning view of Planet MG 212. The Elders had carefully chosen the water planet as the secret location for this year's Steel Circle. As a periphery planet, MG 212 was seven hundred galaxies away from the nearest UDA colony or outpost. However, MG 212 was not a dead planet. Its endless oceans teemed with life. The tribes could boat, fish and swim, enjoying all the aquatic wonders the planet offered. Four of the AmerIndian Confederacy's twenty-eight annual Steel Circles had been held here.

Apaches filed into the council hall. The older tribals moved down into the closer seats where they could easily see the hard light display. The young warriors were dressed in standard black tactical garb. The older members of the tribe wore softer, more comfortable natural clothing of their choice. Keokuk noticed Peshlakai enter. She was alone and moved briskly despite her age. Only a few strands of gray broke her mane of black hair and echoes of her youthful beauty remained.

"Mother," Keokuk raised his hand to help her down the stairs to sit closer to the hard light display.

Mother and son settled in. "So, why does your brother not attend the Steel Circle?" Keokuk suppressed a rising anger. The first words out of his mother's mouth, after not seeing him for two weeks, were a question about Wovoka.

"He's on an op, Mother. An important one with a limited window of opportunity. You know he would be here if he could."

"They're all important. I haven't seen him since January," she brushed a stray strand of fabric from the thick, colorful blanket that covered the top of her pretty white dress. "But you are right. He would come if he could. They keep him so busy, Keokuk. You would think there were no other packs for the tribe to use. But when you're the best, you are in demand."

Keokuk nodded without a word. This was an old song and dance, his mother singing the praises of his brother in blatant, infuriating ignorance of his own accomplishment. Wovoka was well known as a rising Alpha and his pack was slated for only the most important ops in the future. But Keokuk was, nonetheless, a Tsimshian superstar. Every tribe chief and every Elder knew his name because every one of them had used his services directly at one time or another. In a major comp crisis, no one but Keokuk would do. This meant less than nothing to Peshlakai. All that mattered to her was his broken promise to a father now thirteen years dead.

Keokuk deftly changed the subject. "Been hearing the swag about White Earth? Word on the Tsimshian deep boards is that Stormseeker is pushing for an acquisition assault within two seasons."

Peshlakai chuckled, "That's silly, Keokuk. The loss of eighteen thousand lives is not forgotten in thirteen years. Stormseeker is often over ambitious but he is not a fool. What you speak of would be an act of a fool. UDA forces on White Earth have tripled since the White Earth Massacre. AC forces still need to acquire fifteen percent more equipment and another five percent recruits before we have the forces we took in the first time."

Keokuk nodded in acknowledgment. "You're probably right. Just telling you the rumors."

The lights in the room dimmed until only the stars shining through the glasteel walls lit the room. At the center of the hall the hard light display brightened and scrolling text morphed into an image of the five Elders. They sat in a circle, facing each other, in ornately carved wooden chairs. The image was transmitted from the Zuni lodge ship, *Heidegger*.

John, the Wisdom Elder, opened gatherings. His level personality set a tone of calm before the hundreds of concerns of over half a million tribals were thrown on the table.

"Friends, family, honored members of all tribes, allies to the cause, thank you for gathering here in this far corner of the universe. For the duration of the Steel Circle your daily tasks will be set aside, no projects to press you. This is your time, our time. Enjoy it; relish it. This time will pass quickly. The Elders, of course, have much to consider and we welcome the tribes and our allies to join us in discussion of the many issues that face the AmerIndian confederacy."

Keokuk observed the group of Elders. John was distinctly different from the rest. He was the only one of the Elders who obviously had no AmerIndian blood. He was a Black male of fifty or more years with short cropped black hair. He now wore his distinct wardrobe most tribals recognized him by, a light blue pair of dungarees and nothing else. His body was remarkably fit for a man of his age. He was barefoot.

At John's left sat Stormseeker, Elder Warrior. He had served the AmerIndian Confederacy every day of its twenty-eight year existence. Even now he wore light micromesh, poly-plate battle armor and a hand cannon strapped to his thigh. A combat knife and thermite grenades hung from hooks on his chest plate. His AmerIndian blood was evident and he wore his straight black hair long, no braids or adornments. His face was handsome, yet scarred in several places where combat duty has taken its toll.

Morgan Weaver, the son of Potlatch Weaver, the father and now guiding spirit of the AC, sat regaled in full AmerIndian Chief costume, headdress, ornamental bone chest plate, buckskin pants and moccasins. His father had worn these symbols well. On Potlatch Weaver these symbols were reminders of days long passed but soon to be regained. On Morgan Weaver, the Operations Elder, they were ostentatious and seem to be reminders of what was lost and might never be recaptured.

Kugan, the Resource Elder, was dressed neatly in a simple, stylish suit. Even now he stared blankly into his comp set ignoring John's greeting and introduction. He was a handsome Hispanic, approximately fifty. His well-groomed beard did little to hide his age.

The fifth Elder stood out even among these unusual individuals. Celetain Prax, the Elder Shaman, was the only woman among them and younger than any by half. She was strikingly beautiful with pure blood features. She wore a loose hunter green leather coat over a tight black jumpsuit. Thin, black wrestling shoes covered her small feet. A string of large diamonds circled her neck.

This remarkable necklace was one of the few surviving pieces of evidence that Malgus IX had ever existed. The huge planet had been covered with a layer of poisonous gas that made settlement impossible. However, diamonds as large as escape pods could be found just twenty meters below the surface. The UDA had twenty-four outposts that served no other purpose than to support a brisk intergalactic diamond trade. It took UDA leaders only three days to have Malgus IX blown into fine space dust using 127 Goliath nukes. All reports of the planet had been stripped from UDA files and the UDA ship that discovered the planet was attacked and destroyed by a UDA hunter ship. The UDA officially reported that the ship had been destroyed by an AmerIndian Confederacy ambush.

Five Elders. Five points of power. Five voices leading the AmerIndian Confederacy through the struggles of survival and growth. Each played a distinct role in governing the tribes.

Morgan Weaver, who suffered the burden of his father's shadow, played the less than desirable role of administrator. A weak leader, Weaver, however, was a consummate politician. He held strong influence in economic, military and religious circles. Hundreds of favors were owed him and strong ties to the Zuni information network insured his power. Weaver wielded enough influence to ensure no other Elder or tribe chief could ignore his input. He could facilitate or frustrate the plans of any of the other Elders and often did.

Stormseeker's role was obvious. He was the warrior; revered by every tribal warrior for the length and quality of his service to the AmerIndian Confederacy. Stormseeker oversaw all three of the battle tribes. The chiefs of the Apache, Brule and Nez Perce answered directly to him and he could countermand their orders.

John, the philosopher of the group, was its center of knowledge. He held the Elders and the tribes to a high standard. Serving as mercenaries and bandits, it often became difficult for AC leadership to see the thin line between freedom fighter and killer. What kept the 416,000 members of the AmerIndian Confederacy fed, clothed and sheltered was combat and confiscation. The AmerIndian Confederacy was preparing for a crusade to win back the Homeland. When they were honest it they referred to their operations as merc work and Robin Hood justice. The UDA called it terrorism and thievery. However the tribes viewed their work, there were serious concerns about where the line was drawn between efficiency and savagery. John helped all of the tribes reconcile the blood on their hands without ever letting them forget their goals.

Merc work and confiscation of UDA property had been AmerIndian Confederacy monkeyshines in its inception year, 2164. In 2192 it was big business. The AmerIndian Confederacy was grossing over ninety billion creds per year and the one man responsible for the safety and growth of those funds was Kugan the Moneychanger. An economic genius and ruthless business manager, Kugan was building an economic empire for the AmerIndian Confederacy. Many tribals wondered if the economic force Kugan wielded did not already outweigh the military might Stormseeker commanded.

As the daughter of the greatest Shaman the AC had ever known, Celetain Prax now held the position of spiritual leader. Celetain was also the creator of Cybershamanism; a mixture of traditional Shamanism, Wicca, Chinese Ancestor Worship and Yoga, all filtered and manipulated by complex agent programs. Cybershamanism's performance had dwarfed the slow, methodical results of traditional shamanism and ushered in a new day of power and influence for the Haida tribe. She was a prophet, healer and spiritual leader. Stormseeker had attempted to remove her from the Council several times, but failed due to her support among the Haida and the Diegueño.

Between the five leaders a strong, flexible government was woven and the future of the AmerIndian Confederacy rested in their hands.

John leaned forward and tapped his fingers lightly. "Our first matter tonight is the loss of Turquoise Shark, third lodge ship of the Tsimshian. Currently over twenty-one thousand Tsimshian are crammed into *Chimera* and *Shoeless Joe*. The Nez Perce and the Apache have been gracious enough to accept these temporary residents onto their lodge ships, but the situation has gone on for eight months and their hospitality has understandably grown thin. The time has come to execute plans to secure a replacement lodge ship for the Tsimshian. The Brule strategists have set the force requirements at twenty outrider ships and the monetary requirements at forty-five million creds. Stormseeker, can you release twenty outrider ships for the lodge ship acquisition at this time?"

"I am -" Stormseeker's voice was interrupted.

A young warrior, a perfect human specimen obvious to all as a clone, stood shouting from the second tier. The hard light display shrank and shifted its view to show him in the corner. "You have nothing available, wise and brave Elder for acquiring new lodge ships. You made that clear to the clones at the last Steel Circle."

"Kichai Quill has spoken out of turn," John was quick to address the outburst. "Ex-checker, please deduct five wampum from the primary accounts of each Kichai and place the units in the general education fund."

Quentin Low appeared on the hard light display. He was a powerful Zuni clone and had influence to command speaking time at any Steel Circle. "I grant two minutes of my time to my excited brother. I wish to hear the rest of what he

has to say." Low was known as a sympathizer of Humanitace, a radical clones right group that started in the AC then spread to hundreds of outposts and a few colony planets.

Quill stood again. "We must be allowed our own tribe. The AmerIndian Confederacy has been kinder and more willing to fight for the rights of clones than any other group in any galaxy. But if we are to be considered true brothers, true blood, we must be allowed to establish our own tribe."

John answered this assertion quickly. "Quill, I understand your frustration. The Elders are aware of the difficult social, religious and ethical issues every clone faces. But since the birth of the AmerIndian Confederacy we have strived to make an equal distribution of clones in all of the tribes in order to strengthen and support the idea that clones are not different from other humans. All tribes have clones just as all tribes have skinny or left-handed or redheaded members. Forming a tribe exclusively of clones will only intensify the alienation we have tried so hard to eliminate."

Many tribals nodded in agreement with John's tempered words. He was a careful orator and a peacemaker and his words often muted the anger of one tribal toward another.

Quill continued, his voice level. "But we are different and most of us do not wish to deny that clear fact. We have served the AmerIndian Confederacy with valor. We have earned the right of tribal representation; a chief, a lodge ship, a focused occupation and the right to appoint an Elder. If the AmerIndian Confederacy continues to deny that we are a people unto ourselves, yet brothers nonetheless, we will be forced to separate from the body."

Murmurs and angry shouts rose from the crowd. Quill's statement was the first public declaration of the clones' intent. There were clones that did not wish to form a separate tribe but they were now a small minority. Quill would not have made his statement if not confident he was backed by the majority of AC clones.

The Elders were silent for a moment contemplating the magnitude of Quill's statement. Each knew the timing of the statement was deliberate. The Steel Circle was held only once a year and a decision on whether to allow a ninth tribe would have to be made during this Steel Circle. If no decision was made, Quill might make good on his threat and there would be no or few AmerIndian Confederacy clone tribals at the next Steel Circle.

Stormseeker stood. He walked forward on the platform and pointed a scarred finger at Quill, "Do you think, boy, that you can threaten the Elder Council; make a political power play against the five?"

Stormseeker shook his head and paced. His left hand rested on the massive Sledge Raider hand cannon at his side. "Quill, stand again. Do you know how much the AmerIndian Confederacy has given to the clones; how hard every member of this council has strived to give AC clones rights and privileges that are unheard of on any UDA colony or outpost? In the AmerIndian Confederacy clones are treated as equals. They have every right afforded any other tribal. For decades the clones have fought to be equal. The AmerIndian Confederacy was the first group in any galaxy to treat clones as true brothers. And because the AmerIndian Confederacy's progress in incorporating the clones is not complete enough, not fast enough, you threaten the council with abandonment of all the tribes. You threaten to turn away from brotherhood. You threaten each Elder; myself, Kugan, Celetain Prax, John and Morgan Weaver as though proper discourse will be ignored; as though the Elders will turn a deaf ear to your pleas; as though we will not listen. So it is the clones' decision that an ultimatum is to be leveled at the Elders, not a discussion or communication, but threats. Is this what you think of us, Quill?"

Quill had no more time allotted to speak but by asking him a question Stormseeker automatically allotted two minutes for him to answer.

Quills anger was apparent. He did not appreciate the tone Stormseeker was using and he shook slightly. He was silent for a moment before his muscles relaxed. "Elder, you are wise and you have never turned away a tribal at the Steel Circle without first hearing him in full and listening with an open heart. I spoke in anger. I conveyed the anger of my clone brothers. We ask that the ultimatum be forgotten and that the Elders hear our request to form a new tribe in light of the genuine wish of the clones to serve the AmerIndian Confederacy in a new and vigorous spirit."

Celetain Prax responded. "Thank you Quill for your words, and for your submission to the Elders. I will insure that each Elder gives honest consideration to the requests of the clones."

Keokuk smiled. The Elders were wise leaders, strong when strength was needed, caring when gentleness was needed. This confrontation with Quill was a sign of serious unrest among the clones. The Elders would have to make some concessions or there would be more problems. There was already a great deal of friction between tribals and clones. Clones were inherently stronger, more handsome or beautiful. Many were intellectually superior and these differences caused friction. Disagreements between tribals and clones caused inefficiency and miscommunication. Of the nine lodge ship murders committed by tribals last year seven had involved a clone.

But for now the issue was settled. John was already steering the conversation back to the issue of a new lodge ship for the Tsimshian. Keokuk was curious exactly how critical the need for lodge ships was. He tapped up a data column on his comp set showing the eight tribes.

The AmerIndian Confederacy currently maintained 30 lodge ships, 620 outrider ships and 5,100 ready fighters. Since the last Steel Circle the AmerIndian Confederacy had grown by eleven percent and the rate of growth was increasing. At each AmerIndian Confederacy campaign the group picked up tens if not hundreds of new member candidates. At least three new lodge ships would be needed this year alone.

Keokuk turned his attention back to the Elders. They were now fielding questions on the White Earth situation. As always the Brule pushed for an attack soon, citing the fact that while the AmerIndian Confederacy had fewer bodies than at the time of the last attack, the ships, fighters and arms were all superior. The average AC trooper was stronger, smarter and better trained. All of this was true, Keokuk thought to himself, but as the Haida were quick to point out, the UDA also had better equipment and more of it than they had eight years ago.

Thirteen years ago Potlatch Weaver led 400 outrider ships and 200,000 tribals, into battle to take White Earth as the AC's home planet. The assault was a catastrophe for the AmerIndian Confederacy, 18,000 tribals dead in two hours. UDA Captain Lige had found the secret location of the AC's non-combatants and wreaked havoc on the lodge ships before they could retreat. Potlatch's assault on White Earth was proceeding as planned until the fleet got the news and the tide turned. It was the single bloodiest battle of the twenty-third century. Keokuk did not think it was time to try again. There were still thousands of widows from the White Earth Massacre and only now was recovery starting to be evident.

Recruitment was more a matter of turning away than accepting and the creds were rolling in faster than they could be calculated. Keokuk felt the AmerIndian Confederacy needed time to enjoy this prosperity before it was once again plunged into the turmoil of full war.

The Elders spoke eloquently, each making valid points. The White Earth debate raged for another hour and did not seem to be coming to an end any time soon. Keokuk got up and hugged his mother before he left. He would read the rest of the speeches on the ship server later. He had numerous projects to get back to and talk could wait.

CHAPTER EIGHT

On the surface of Naanac in the Canes Venatici Supercluster, twenty-five million light years from Earth, Wovoka stood motionless as the wind whipped his thin coat around his legs. His three pack brothers climbed carefully over the rock ledge behind him and struggled to their feet, fighting the gales that lashed about the top of the mountain. A thick mist fell steadily and the stone they stood on was slick.

Seven hundred meters separated Wovoka's pack from the Trighter. The ascent had not been easy and even the magnificent view spanning hundreds of kilometers in all directions did little to lift the men's spirits.

The entry run onto Naanac had gone exactly as Kill Spotted Horse had described it. The drones worked perfectly but even now, eight hours after the Trighter had touched down on the damp surface of Naanac, Rowan atmosphere fighters streaked low across the jungle tops looking for the intruders.

"Zuni op data says the weather is usually like this." Wolf Plume had to lean close to Wovoka to be heard over the blustery weather. "Wet and windy, ten months out of the year. But the temperature stays moderate, no extreme heat or cold. Swampy on the ground, due to all the rain."

Wovoka did not reply. He studied the view carefully. They stood on the summit of a small mountain, one in a long range of larger mountains, overlooking Cartel Base Nurai, Rowan's research facility on Naanac. Thirty-five kilometers from where they watched, and far below, massive illuminator rigs mounted around Cartel Base Nurai made the structure visible.

The base was the only man-made thing in view. As far as Wovoka could see the planet's terrain was covered in dense, grey foliage. He had noticed when the pack landed two kilometers from the mountain the compact grey moss that shrouded nearly everything. The trees, which stood from ten to thirty meters tall, had the same grey color. The leaves of the trees were one to three meters wide. From his vantage point on top of the mountain, Wovoka could now see small lakes, five to ten kilometers apart from each other.

Overall, Naanac left Wovoka with an ominous impression of a planet rich with life and yet utterly dank and empty.

"Give me the scope from the rail gun." Wovoka yelled the order over the wind to the pack's sniper, Slow Turtle.

Slow Turtle took off his pack and placed it on the ground gently. In his thick Irish accent he said, "What's got you so locked, Wovoka? Let's scoop up some Naanacian bunnies, birds and bugs and get rolling." He unclipped the rifle strap and removed the sight, "The sooner we are off this mud ball the better."

Wovoka took the sight, squatted and motioned for his men to move in around him.

"Your heart is weak today, Slow Turtle. Is a little cold and rain enough to soften your warrior spirit?" Wovoka smiled, poking at Slow Turtle's chest. "All right, Slow Turtle has a point. Let's get to work." Wovoka put one knee down on the slick stone, resting his arms on his upright knee. "Eight hours since footfall. That gives us twenty-eight hours before the chunnel is impassable."

Wovoka opened his thin coat and snapped the rifle sight into a holding latch on his armor breastplate for later use. "I want you to gather as many Naanacian animals as is safely possible. Obviously, avoid taking any babies or wounded or sick animals. Try to think like a Diegueño as you work. Any data you can collect that would fit within the scope of a standard eco-scan will be helpful. Wolf Plume, monitor Cartel Base Nurai and the Trighter as you work. Cavaho, I want you to focus on getting a larger predator type creature. Split up for eighteen hours, then rendezvous back at the Trighter at exactly 0200 hr, tonight."

Cavaho was throwing a line down below to check the north face of the mountain before Wovoka finished. Wolf Plume and Slow Turtle steeled themselves for eighteen hours of hard work.

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A twenty-centimeter, triangular double-edge blade slid from Wovoka's armored wrist guard. He cut a thick piece of pemmican from his ration and chewed vigorously. He had collected a few small reptile specimens during his fourteen hours of work. He would eat and catch an hours rest before heading back to the Trighter.

Wovoka took pride in working harder than he worked any of his men. His father, Stone Rain, has passed down this leadership philosophy.

Collecting animals on the mountain was difficult work in the steady mist rain that fell. The mist had been constant since Wovoka's pack, Obsidian Dagger, had landed on Naanac. The rain showed no signs of stopping anytime soon. It was not cold enough to use the personal heaters inside his armor to keep his fatigues dry and Wovoka had to stop every other hour to wring out his sopping clothes and redress.

After finishing his daily ration, Wovoka set up a makeshift shelter against the mountain. The shelter consisted of one waterproof sheet, staked securely into the mountain wall. The sheet created a slope for the water to run off. Under the shelter, he made himself as comfortable as possible against the rock.

Thinking back on the day, Wovoka tried again to answer the question haunting him. What was so special about this planet? Naanac was the single most unimpressive inhabitable planet he had ever been on. Beside the unusual animals of particular interest to the Diegueño there was little else of value. Wovoka felt much like Slow Turtle and Wolf Plume. Naanac was about as appealing as a midnight guard stint after a twelve hour march. The answer eluded him.

An hour later Wovoka awoke to the beeping of his field slate and broke camp. He climbed to new ledge, pulled the slate out of his jacket and set it in tracking mode. The omni-directional tracker took only a few seconds to pinpoint the locations of his men. Wolf-Plume was on the other side of the mountain eight hundred meters down and to the west. Slow Turtle was three hundred horizontal meters from Wovoka's position. Cavaho was six hundred meters down and two hundred meters east of Wovoka's position. Their positions told Wovoka his men were executing his orders despite any second thoughts they might have.

Forcing himself to put aside the pervasive question of his sleep, Wovoka freed his mind for the work ahead.

Preparing to descend the mountain, Wovoka readied his equipment; a drill grappling hook, two hundred meters of two thousand kilogram test plasti-line and a motor saddle. Thirty meters to his right and eighty meters below was a wide, flat ledge, a perfect platform to finish the last few of his survey calculations.

Wovoka clicked on the drill grappling hook and held it as he climbed two meters above the small ledge he had been standing on. Once safely above, he dropped the drill grappler to the ledge below. The drill grappler whirred and skittered across the ledge sending out short quick sensing beams, searching for a solid hold. The drill grappler shot out three tempered steel prongs, trailing ultra-thin steel lines. Each prong easily cut five centimeters into the rock floor creating a strong anchor to hold Wovoka's climbing line.

Wovoka clipped the plasti-line to the coupler on the drill grappler, and yanked hard on the line. It held. The plasti-line was translucent red, only half a centimeter thick and weighed next to nothing. The two hundred meters of plasti-line Wovoka carried was standard issue for AC Infiltrators.

The motor saddle looked very much like a dark green adult diaper, except for an eight by eight centimeter box on the front top of the waistband. The box contained a small but powerful motor to pull or let out the thin plasti-line.

The plasti-line was slowly let out of a clear plastic pouch, which ran around the waistband of the saddle. All together the drill grappler, the plasti-line and motor saddle were an efficient climbing system.

It had taken Wovoka four weeks to master the use of the unit early in his training as an Apache mercenary. Let out too much slack and find yourself brutally slammed against the cliff face you were climbing. Pull in too fast and the rig would jerk you up side down.

Wovoka slipped down the mountain face with a grace that eluded many experienced climbers. In moments he repelled half the forty meters he needed to descend to reach the next point on his geological survey. He stopped for a moment to give his muscles a chance to rest.

His legs stretched out before him against the mountain, he leaned at a steep angle. Wovoka closed his eyes and breathed a heavy sigh as he wiped moisture from his face with a gloved hand.

Tek, tek, tek. Tek, tak, tak. Tek, tek, tek.

Wovoka could not remember the last time he had been frightened. He had come close to death many times since he began active service as an Apache mercenary at the age of sixteen; twelve years ago. But as he slowly looked over his shoulder, he was startled.

A six legged insect with a body a meter wide tek, tek tekking its way along the mountain four meters below Wovoka. Its legs spread nearly three meters out from its body, each leg ending in a wickedly sharp, slightly curved claw. The creature had hooked itself into small crevices on the mountain face. The thing's body was a dark reddish-black and its hind section looked fat with curious bulges. Wovoka guessed the creature might be pregnant. Unlike any insects he had ever seen, however, the thing was covered with short hair.

Wovoka's footing held on the slick black stone of the mountain. The massive insect-thing suddenly turned its head, its four dark eyes meeting Wovoka's, locking his gaze.

Wovoka was glad he had not made any sudden movements. The creature could easily have closed the four meters between them for an attack. He did not break eye contact with the thing, but as the first seconds of shock passed he reached for the Sledge Raider at his side.

The creature moved its large head from side to side erratically, assessing Wovoka's threat. After five long seconds, the creature clacked the four mighty pincers under its eyes and let out a low chitter. It tek, tek, tekking one of its forward claws at Wovoka as a final warning and turned away to continue toward its target.

Wovoka knew exactly what the creature had meant by its warning and he had no intention of ignoring the insect-thing's wish for him to leave it alone. He relaxed the slightest bit and undid the saddle-lock on the plasti-line. Once he readied himself to move he turned again to look over his shoulder at the insect-thing.

The creature, now oddly appearing larger to Wovoka, despite the fact that it was farther away, moved incredibly fast over the wet stone of the mountain. The incline of the mountain, at least 120 degrees seemed to have no effect on the movement of the creature. In only the few seconds it had taken Wovoka to switch off the plasti-line lock, the thing had covered a surprising distance.

And then Wovoka saw what the creature was heading toward. Just before the creature was a nest of twigs and brambles, set in a lightly shadowed crag of the mountain. All shadows on Naanac were slight because of the grey cloud canopy that hung constantly in the sky screening the planet's suns' light.

Wovoka had read how Earth made open nests in trees, nests shaped like bowls. This nest was more extensive, built to protect its dweller from all directions. The nest was built more like a spherical cage, with small openings here and there.

Wovoka could just make out a flash of blue underneath all of the nest's protective branches and twigs. After pulling down his comp set and increasing visual magnification Wovoka saw bright luxuriant blue feathers, confirming the prey hidden beneath the brambles was a Naanacian Creose.

Wovoka watched silently. The insect-thing was about to eat the bird.

Leaning at a steep angle against slick mountain stone, Wovoka continued to watch intently as the insect-thing made its way toward the brambled nest cage.

The insect-thing was now a meter from the nest. With blinding speed it thrust out one of its clawed legs, raking at the brambles to expose its prey. Wovoka's eyes widened as he watched the bird move with equal speed to bite the leg that attacked its nest. Surprisingly, the brambles did not snap under the great strength of the creature's clawed leg. Instead the brambles exhibited resilience, stretching and bending away from the thing's claw, successfully protecting the bird.

The insect-thing chattered and snapped its pincers in rage at the Naanacian bird. The Creose bit at the invader's claw as it continued to tear at the elastic twigs and branches of the nest. After four more swipes, the insect-thing backed away from the nest and zig-zagged its head, tekking in frustration.

As Wovoka leaned back on the rope and Naanac's rain covered his face he suddenly saw with clarity he had never before experience.

Wovoka let Naanac show him its secret.

#

The slick stone did not impede the movement of the creature. It stood on slanted stone, tek, tek, tekking impatiently. Only a few seconds were needed for the creature to recoup its nerve for a second assault on the nest and its prey.

Moving in a broken pattern, the creature closed on the bird. Instead of stopping at a safe distance to tear at the nest with one or two of its legs, the creature charged at the nest, screeing its anger into the moist air. The insect-thing's shriek echoed off the mountain, as prey and predator readied for the assault.

Wovoka concentrated on the motion around the nest. Claw legs locked onto the mountain, the creature was now directly on top of the nest, virtually covering it with its bulbous mid-section.

The bird was fluttering its wings furiously inside the nest and vying for a position to strike at the insect-thing.

With pincers powerful enough to cut through bone, the insect-thing ripped twice at the nest, tearing a large hole in the branches, exposing the bird.

And then the bird struck.

The Creose dodged over and up, just out of reach of the grinding pincers, and with a jab of its beak plucked one of the four insect-things eyes, whole, from its head.

Wovoka saw results of the beautiful bird's attack.

The insect-thing let out a scree of agony as its forward legs skittered out of their holds. The pain had loosened its grip on the mountain for a fraction of a second, enough to send the creature into a frantic attempt to secure itself. It's frenzied attempt only served to dislodge its other holds on the mountain. Tumbling down the mountainside, thick yellow fluid trailed after it in long, wet strings from the creature's eye socket.

The insect-thing caught itself after falling twenty meters. Two of its legs had been snapped off in the fall. The same thick, yellow fluid glopped from its body to the ground below. Its pincers slowly closed together as it bore the pain that shot through it. Looking up slowly at the bird, and then Wovoka, the creature chattered softly in defeat. It turned and made its way down the mountain cautiously, painfully.

Stunned by the speed of the battle he had just witnessed, Wovoka continued to stare as the bird simply fluttered its wings gently and settled again in the

battered nest. The bird began to return the brambles carefully back to where they had been.

At that moment Wovoka realized exactly why he had been brought to Naanac. At that moment Wovoka saw what he was meant to see.

And he knew.

Wovoka knew that what he had just watched would change his life. It would change the destiny of the AmerIndian Confederacy and the future of this wet, desolate planet. Wovoka put a name to what he saw in the brambles of the bird's nest.

The Free Mantle.

CHAPTER NINE

The entrance ramp hissed as hydraulics lowered to let Wovoka into the Trighter. He hauled in the Naanac specimen spheres he had collected and removed his gear.

Hanging his wet coat on a nearby hook, Wovoka was relieved to be out of the dank atmosphere of Naanac. The silence in the Trighter was a refuge from the constant howl of the powerful wind's that whipped across Naanac's surface.

He made his way slowly to the three-seat cockpit of the transport/fighter. Kill Spotted Horse, at Wovoka's request, had programmed the ship server to begin all diagnostic checks and take-off preps automatically when someone entered a valid access code to board the Trighter after a long crew absence. The bridge was a cacophony of beeps as he slid into one of the padded control chairs.

The Trighter's status came up on his own comp set and he was pleased to see all was in order. The comp set reported a warning of slightly higher chances of mechanical malfunctions, due to Naanac's moist atmosphere.

Wovoka tensed when his comp set displayed a perimeter breach alert. He set the Trighter's sensors into tracking mode, quickly ascertaining the location and environment status of all three of his Infiltrators. Cavaho was at the three hundred meter perimeter and making his way to the Trighter. Wolf Plume was coming in from the east just a half-kilometer behind. He carried two small spheres, each containing a Naanacian animal specimen for the Diegueño zoo. Slow Turtle was still a good eight hundred meters behind Wolf Plume and did not appear to be carrying any specimen spheres. Wovoka chuckled to himself as he watched Cavaho step carefully into the clearing. He was carrying an unconscious Naanacian predator specimen slung over his shoulders. Wovoka disengaged the perimeter targeting system and finger tapped a command to lower the entrance ramp.

Wolf Plume arrived at the Trighter a half hour behind Cavaho. The two Infiltrators helped Wovoka set the navigation coordinates for the atmosphere jump they would make when Slow Turtle arrived.

Some time later, Slow Turtle breathed a heavy sigh and slumped tiredly onto one of the crash couches. "What a mud ball," he groaned as he painfully put his stiff legs up on a hydro-tool container. "I can't believe they call this a humanly habitable environment. Miserable!"

"Complete lock down in ten minutes," Wovoka growled as he kicked Slow Turtle's feet off the container.

Slow Turtle got up and shed his wet gear. The Infiltrators removed their armor and placed it in their respective lockers. They safetied their weapons and placed them in special compartments above their armor.

Wolf Plume made a quick but thorough manual check of all the hatches on the Trighter making sure each one was secured.

Cavaho made his way back to the cockpit and ran a systems check on the engine, weapons and controls. All read clean and ready. Slow Turtle began his diagnostic of the tower turret, his station. The Sledge CZ40 Defender Laser was primed and the sights adjusted in seconds.

All preparations made, Wovoka, Cavaho and Wolf Plume slid into the control seats in the command pit on the second deck. Slow Turtle fastened the harnesses to keep him steady in the pivoting tower turret seat. He snugged his gloves and undid the red safety caps on the CZ40 Defender's triggers. Finally, Slow Turtle pulled on his comp set which among many other functions kept him in constant contact with the command pit.

Wovoka smiled. "We are going home, brothers, and with more than we came here for."

"What op were you on?" Wolf Plume asked, confused by Wovoka's enthusiasm. "All we have is a small number of animal specimens and a slag heap of analytic data on what has to be the sorriest habitable planet ever found. Spasibo to the

spirits Rowan Cartel didn't have to spill any blood over this wasteland. Plus, Wovoka, you haven't seen our reports yet."

"Ah, but you have not seen what I have seen, Brother. Naanac's precious secret," Wovoka said with excitement.

"All of this is for nothing if we can't get this flying brick through what's left of the chunnel through the Free Mantle." From the tower turret, Slow Turtle's voice came in clear over everyone's comp set.

"Righto," Wovoka said. "We have a difficult task ahead, lets get to it. But first we will ask Wambli, the eagle spirit, to carry us through safely."

"The songs," Wolf Plume said, his words laced with his memories. He thought back to Cale, the UDA outpost in the Carina System. That was the last place Wovoka had led the songs, the last time he had invoked the power of the spirits to guide Obsidian Dagger, protect the Apache Infiltrator pack. Wovoka, Wolf Plume and Slow Turtle had sung with all their hearts to Wambli that day. They had sung together for strength and courage as they prepared for a dangerous orbital dogfight with UDA forces. Fourteen AmerIndian Confederacy tribals died that day. Twelve of those fourteen were AmerIndian Christians who had not sung.

Wovoka rarely used the songs anymore. Few AmerIndians called the spirits anymore, not since the White Earth Massacre in 2179. The AmerIndian Confederacy's loss of 18,000 tribals that day was not the sole reason for the turning away from the AmerIndian faiths, however. Many AmerIndians were turning to Christianity, some to Islam. Both religions forbid the songs. Wovoka's brother, Keokuk, had converted to Christianity at the age of fifteen, infuriating his father, Stone Rain.

There was anger between Wovoka and Keokuk over religion. Wovoka cursed his brother for turning her back on her heritage and the beliefs of their forefathers. Keokuk, in turn, railed against Wovoka, asking him how he could worship and put his faith in a religion with no written text, only word of mouth, as its basis. Wovoka thought of the difficulty Celetain Prax, Elder Shaman, had in dealing with AmerIndian Christians that questioned her creation and practice of Cybershamanism.

But here and now, Wovoka was calling his Infiltrators together in song, the song of the eagle, the cloud toucher. Wolf Plume felt pride in his pack leader, a true tribal in honor and spirit. Slow Turtle was pleased as well for he had missed the songs.

"Wambli, Wambli," Wovoka began the song, pulling the words from his heart through his lungs. "*I am one with you, cloud toucher.*"

Wolf Plume joined in. Cavaho swayed with the rhythm in silent companionship with his brothers. Wolf Plume, Slow Turtle and Wovoka's voices blended as they closed their eyes to see Wambli.

Slow Turtle had clicked off his comp set, which linked him audibly to the command pit. He let the mellow voices wash over him as the song echoed up through the ship to the tower turret. It had been too long since they had joined in the song, too long since they had called upon cloud toucher to guide them. A tear of joy rolled down Slow Turtle's cheek and he refused to wipe it.

"Wambli, Wambli," the three Infiltrators sang fervently, "*carry me to your nest. Carry me high and far. Wambli, Wambli,*" they sang in harmony. "*I see from your eyes. You carry my heart.*"

#

The Trighter's engine crackled hesitantly to life. Heavy water poured slowly into the engine as it began its low dull throb, which would intensify to an ear-splitting howl once the engine was powered up. A brilliant white flame flared a few inches out from the burner's surface.

Wolf Plume finger tapped to disengage all of the ground safeties for flight. "Atmosphere jump initiated," he said evenly. "Check harnesses. Lift off in five seconds. Five. Four. Three. Two. One. Engage," Wolf Plume said. The final word gave no hint of the explosion of speed and force it signaled.

Like a charging bear crashing through the brush, the Trighter burst into motion. Wolf Plume instantly yanked the control stick up with his left, just popping the Trighter over the forty-meter ceiling of Naanac jungle canopy. He leveled again with a quick shove of the stick and the Trighter shot across the landscape, three meters above the trees.

Wolf Plume stared ahead intently. He ignored most of the data blossoming on his comp set and allowed experience and instinct to guide him. The Trighter, five seconds after clearing the trees, rocketed along at a steady four thousand K.P.H.

The mountain range where the Infiltrator pack had done its work flanked the Trighter on the left. Wovoka used the range to hide the Trighter's brilliant white stream of afterburn from the Cartel Base Nurai. The mountain range extended 130 kilometers from the point the Trighter had lifted off.

"We have two minutes of mountain cover from Cartel Base Nurai's sensors. Cut for atmosphere break at my signal," Wovoka as he now focused on his comp set. The Trighter burned straight as a laser over the trees. Cavaho screened the engine's heat and watched for glitches in other ship systems.

A calm came over Wovoka, a knowing-as-one-who-remembers flooded his mind expelling the tension and anxiety that usually accompanied atmosphere jumps. He checked the data one more time to confirm the cut point and jump velocity. But Wovoka's mind was already past the Naanac atmosphere his ship now tore through. His only thought was the Free Mantle.

"Mark 65,10," Wovoka announced to Wolf Plume. "Twenty seconds to cut. Prep for G."

Wolf Plume entered the data into the ship's server. Unlike the rest of the pack, Wolf Plume did not see Naanac's trees and sky in gray. The comp set turned everything in his sight into bold, bright red lines trimming the edges of all solid objects in his view. Larger geographic objects were easily discernible from each other, even as they whizzed by at just over Mach Three. A bright green line showed Wolf Plume the true horizon and as soon as he entered the coordinates a long, bright white line appeared in his sight, tracking down to a circled white X, the cut point. The white line grew shorter and shorter as Wolf Plume twitched his fingers above the control stick waiting for the correct second to pull the Trighter into a sharp curve, sending it straight up through the ninety kilometers of Naanac's atmosphere, through the Free Mantle and into the cold vacuum of space.

The white circled X winked into Wolf Plume's vision. He jacked the control stick without hesitation. Wolf Plume broke the Trighter's horizontal B-line and sent it hurtling upward at a steep eighty-five degree angle. The giant swivel mount on the engine cracked like a whip and the hammer/anvil force smashed each pack member deep into his seat.

Wovoka quickly called out the next set of coordinates. "Mark twenty-five, five," he shouted. "Second cut in forty seconds."

The atmosphere jump from Naanac was significantly different than the atmosphere jumps Obsidian Dagger usually executed. The Trighter had been specifically equipped for running Confederacy Infiltrator missions. Wovoka's pack would normally punch straight through from space to a planet's surface. Capable of fast descent through a planet's atmosphere, the Trighter could set down on most planets in two minutes or less. The ship was equipped with a unique hull that created a nimbus effect in descent. To the untrained, unaided eye the Trighter in descent appear to be a shooting star or a meteorite. Planetary departures were usually equally simple. One minute or two in the air and the Trighter was piercing the atmosphere border straight to vacuum, with an easy coast to their AC outrider ship rendezvous point from there. But Naanac was different because of the Free Mantle.

Wolf Plume's comp set showed what was invisible to the others. A bright white line showed the veteran pilot exactly where the cloud canopy started. It

took the Trighter eighty-two seconds to traverse the sixty-five kilometers from Naanac's surface to the edge of its atmosphere. The top twenty-five kilometers of Naanac's atmosphere consisted almost entirely of cloud canopy.

The white line indicating the inner edge of the canopy flashed and disappeared on Wolf Plume's comp set as the Trighter rocketed through the thick watery clouds. Red filled Wolf Plume's view and all of the bright lines except the cut line blanked, just as dark gray clouds filled the other three Infiltrator's view through the glasteel panes of the ship.

The dark gray view lasted a moment as the Trighter entered the clouds and burst through the other side. Wovoka, Cavaho and Slow Turtle looked up from their instruments to gaze at the incredible sight before them... the Free Mantle.

Wolf Plume reflected that this was the strangest point in any atmosphere jump, where the atmosphere of the planet starts to blend with the cold vacuum of space. A place where that which sustains life ends and that which ends life begins. This was the point where the pull of gravity cut off and the ship catapulted into a realm where the meanings of weight, friction, up, down, night, day became null; space in all its odd and wondrous glory.

The abrupt change from gravity to space pulled at the stomachs of the Infiltrators and each concentrated to let the strange sensation pass without losing their last meal.

The Free Mantle came into view, an artificial sky blocking the black void of space. Huge asteroids smashed against each other. Millions of free floating rocks jostling about in the orbit of Naanac. Each asteroid glistened from reflective specks of minerals embedded in their surface. This shine carried the light from nearby stars through the Free Mantle to Naanac's surface. The Free Mantle was a chaotic tangle of tumbling rocks flying across each other's paths, striking each other in brilliant flashes.

Wolf Plume watched, amazed at the violence of the Free Mantle, the natural barrier for Naanac. It was an asteroid cage separating the planet from space. The Free Mantle effectively stopped anything from coming or going from Naanac to space. The two kilometers thick asteroid field completely surrounded the planet.

Glancing at data on his comp set, Wolf Plume saw the second cut was only fifteen seconds away at current velocity. He gritted his teeth realizing how close he had come to missing the signal. The old Russian sat back in his seat readying himself for the sudden directional change about to come. This cut would be easier because of the absence of Naanac's gravity. Counting down the last seconds to the cut, Wolf Plume hoped Rowan's chunnel through the Free Mantle was still intact.

Wolf Plume deftly cranked the control stick and forced the Trighter onto its new course, a parallel orbit around Naanac just ten kilometers below the Free Mantle's perimeter. The Trighter's trail burned bright as it continued at its four thousand K.P.H. pace.

"Safe orbit established," Wolf Plume reported. "Chunnel point 320 kilometers directly ahead on current course. Beginning negative acceleration now."

Cavaho watched his comp set view closely as the ship comp showed exactly how much power the engine was exerting and how much stress the ship's fighter frame was taking. The second cut had rattled the ship's frame quite a bit because of the small amount of time between it and the first cut. Finger tapping, Cavaho quickly worked the points that had been stressed the most.

Because the transport engine was dozen of times more powerful than any engine that would properly fit the Trighter's heavy fighter frame, Kill Spotted Horse had to tighten the frame where extreme maneuvers had jerked joints, couplings and rivets loose after each Obsidian Dagger Infiltrator run. Maintenance on the Trighter was a nightmare for the Nez Perce's tech packs on *Wanderer*. Without comps to accurately pinpoint where the work needed to be done maintenance would be impossible.

#

As the Trighter slowed, Slow Turtle shifted the view on his comp set. It flashed to life and a blue hue filled the Infiltrator's vision. Target information and weapon diagnostics scrolled down the right lens. Slow Turtle looked at the Free Mantle. Instantly his view was filled with hundreds of bright white lines circling each asteroid as they chaotically hurtled along. Slow Turtle squinted and finger tapped commands to the ship's server, negating the asteroids as legitimate targets. The bright white lines dimmed and a set of red cross hairs came up in their place.

Slow Turtle steeled himself. He knew the Trighter's orbital course (a necessary danger because of the Free Mantle) and slowing down to get through the chunnel where maneuvers that exposed the ship to Rowan sensors on Cartel Base Nurai. Odds were Rowan had one or two atmosphere fighters stationed there. Nothing Slow Turtle couldn't handle, but still a concern.

The Trighter's forward burners ignited, pushing the Trighter backwards, reducing its speed. Dropping from four thousand K.P.H. down to six hundred in just two kilometers the ship was now ready to take the sharp turn that would take it through the two-kilometer long chunnel out to open space. Slow Turtle felt the forward burners disengage and read through Cavaho's data burst on his comp set. Frame stress was high, but there was plenty of reserve fuel.

Slow Turtle continued to scan the skies for atmosphere fighters. He envied Wovoka had much less to do now that both atmosphere jump cuts were successfully completed. Wolf Plume also had it easy now, Slow Turtle thought to himself. The sharp cut up into the chunnel, a maneuver done just below the speed of 1,000 K.P.H., could be handled by direct comp control without any pilot code or input from Wolf Plume.

Slow Turtle continued scanning and was the first to see it - the first to realize how desperate the pack's situation had become. "By the spirits," he whispered. He finger tapped, opening the line to his pack mates, "Wovoka, magnify your current course bubble. We got code-red with a vengeance."

The image on Slow Turtle's comp set told the whole story in a second. He blinked, hoping what he saw would change.

The chunnel was crushed.

#

Twenty-four hours ago Wovoka had snuck his pack through the chunnel only minutes after Rowan brought in a two-man courier ship from Earth. The chunnel was a temporary exit created whenever the Naanac inhabitants had to get their research off planet and back to Rowan facilities on Earth. It took two hundred Rowan workers in vac-suits twenty-eight hours to build the chunnel through the width of the Free Mantle. High-energy deflector shields were used to protect the flexible chunnel as it was built. The project cost Rowan millions of UDA credits.

When Obsidian Dagger leader Wovoka brought his pack through the chunnel, just after Rowan work crews packed up their deflector shield generators and headed back to base in their cumbersome work transport vessels, he had marveled at what an incredible accomplishment the chunnel was. The deflector shields repulsed most of the asteroids surrounding the chunnel quite effectively while the Rowan work crews were building. It had taken hundreds of shields and a great deal of energy. Wovoka had gone over the numbers with Kill Spotted Horse before the op and seen that thirty-six hours was the time it would take for the chunnel to collapse under the constant pounding of the Free Mantle.

When the chunnel was bombarded by larger asteroids, even the deflector shields could not turn away all of the force being exerted on it. The chunnel's flexible design absorbed the remaining force, allowing the chunnel to bend and then toss the large asteroids away from the structure.

Secretly entering Naanac had been straight forward for Wovoka's pack. Kill Spotted Horse's sensor dupe rig had taken care of any sensor activity from the

planet's surface (since the Trighter's normal shooting star guise would not work on Naanac). Rowan operated no sensor arrays or satellites outside of the Free Mantle. Once the work was completed on the chunnel and the courier ship passed through, there was no one watching the chunnel.

Thousands of light years away from the nearest inhabited planet, the last thing Rowan or UDA personnel expected was someone coming through the chunnel. The structure was simply left to be destroyed by the Free Mantle. But Kill Spotted Horse had been wrong in his calculations of the chunnel's strength. He had estimated it would take seventy-two hours for the Free Mantle to completely break all of the chunnel's flexibility and crush it. Wovoka's pack was scheduled to covertly pass through the chunnel, take animal specimens for the Diegueño and be out again within thirty-six hours, long before the chunnel would sustain significant damage.

The chunnel had actually been completely crushed just fourteen hours after the Trighter went through into Naanac's atmosphere.

Now the chunnel appeared on Wovoka's comp set battered down to shattered plexi-carbon and crumpled resisteel I-beams. The chunnel, originally three hundred meters in diameter, was now smashed from end to end with the largest openings spanning two to three meters in diameter. Most sections of the chunnel were crushed to a thin metal straw only a half-meter wide. The natural power of the asteroid field had ravaged the manmade intrusion.

Sparks of light showed in Wovoka's view as the asteroids continued to roam in their ceaseless chaos. Without a word, Wovoka popped his chair harness loose and quickly exited the command pit.

Wovoka jogged down the tight hallway a few meters, then leaned against the wall. He covered his face with his hand and closed his eyes as he slid down to crouch against the wall. He struggled to clear his head. Pushing aside his fear and his anger, he began to rifle through options.

The chunnel was now completely destroyed leaving no plausible way to get the Trighter back to the rendezvous point. Even as poor as Rowan's security was, it certainly wouldn't take them more than ten more minutes to sight the Trighter. The Trighter could not evade pursuit fighters in Naanac's atmosphere for long.

Wovoka did not have to think about what would happen if he or any of his pack were captured. Rowan could not have witnesses to their secret haven. The pack would be terminated without hesitation.

The problem was evident. Wovoka and the pack could not be captured and there was no possible way for the Trighter to escape. The answer then was equally clear. The Infiltrators would have to opt for an early entrance into the spirit realm. Wovoka sighed and stood. They would go out fighting like Apache.

There was no possible way for the Trighter to escape.

Wovoka stopped in his tracks as he walked back to the cockpit. The Trighter didn't need to escape, only he and his Infiltrators did.

Running back to the command pit, Wovoka felt fear rising in his throat. How close he had come to a fatal decision for himself and his men.

"Wolf Plume, abort the maneuver through the chunnel. Shake the numbers out of the comp and lay in an autopilot sequence for our current orbit. Kick the vee to 6,800 klicks," Wovoka commanded as he stepped through the internal airlock of the command pit. Wolf Plume immediately set to work, increasing the velocity and configuring the autopilot.

Turning to Cavaho, Wovoka handed him his field slate, "Download everything we gathered from the survey on Naanac into this slate. Prepare a brief situation analysis. Leave the requested-action section open for me to fill in later. Then I want you to do a global wipe of the ship's server. Everything."

Cavaho did not have time to respond as Wovoka was off and running. Cavaho set to his leader's orders.

"Slow Turtle."

Still strapped into the Gunners chair, Slow Turtle swiveled his cannon chair so that he sat up side down looking up at Wovoka through the tower access port.

"Disengage the locks on the torpedo bay so we can manually remove a torpedo," Wovoka did not hesitate as he commanded his gunner. His sureness and determination steadied Slow Turtle as he listened. "Set your sights for a high precision shot at 600 K.P.H. Ghost target. We'll be using a mid-range Stinger, with a two kilogram insert for the warhead."

"You got it, Alpha."

Wovoka went over each step in his mind, carefully examining his plan for possible flaws as he dashed to the end of the hallway. He quickly knelt and opened the floor hatch covering the ship's central slide way. Most of the Trighter's weapon systems other than the CZ40 Defender Laser were located on the Trighter's underbelly. It would have been a waste of space for a combat ship like the Trighter to have large access halls, so three slide ways were built for maintenance. Wovoka slipped down onto a meter wide slide-plate and closed the floor hatch above him. The slide way was a tight fit.

Wovoka turned on the weapons bay work lights. Shafts of blue-white light filled the small area. Alarm status and activity lights lit as the sliding plate glided down the length of the Trighter. He grabbed one of the rungs directly above him, abruptly stopping the slide plate at the torpedo racks.

The Trighter carried two different types of torpedoes. The short range Ravager, for dog fights. The Ravager was a high speed, low accuracy torpedo with enough raw power to crack a light fighting ship literally in half at ranges up to one hundred kilometers. Extremely expensive and valuable to the confederacy fleet, the Trighter only carried one. The mid-range Stinger was the workhorse of the torpedo bay. Moderate range and moderate power enabled it to hit ships from one hundred to one thousand kilometers away and have a significant impact on a ship's shields. Three stinger hits could take out heavy shields on destroyer class combat ships. The Trighter carried eight.

One would have to be enough, Wovoka thought as he checked the safety lights to make sure Slow Turtle had readied the torpedo bay for a manual removal. Everything was in order so Wovoka carefully began unsnapping the locks on a Stinger. Wovoka slid his body away from the round cylinder slot that held the Stinger; a 130 centimeter long torpedo with a 25 centimeter radius. He thumbed the eject button. The loading mechanism hissed as it kicked the Stinger half way out of the cylinder. The torpedo was built with two distinct sections. The rear half held the torpedo's fuel and engine while the front half contained the warhead (two kilograms of liquid acido-carbon, sensors and a small nav comp).

Wovoka pulled a tool from his work belt and cautiously separated the two halves of the Stinger, placing the rear half on the sliding plate. He placed tools on either side of it so it would not roll. The work space was cramped, the reason for break-apart torpedoes, and Wovoka had to work slowly despite the urgency of his situation. After removing the warhead, he wriggled the needle nose portion to a vertical position in the slide way and passed it down over his body to rest it on the slide plate and clutch it between his legs.

Listening to the targeting comps in the torpedo bay whir and hum as Slow Turtle prepared to shoot from the tower turret, Wovoka placed the rear half of the Stinger back in the loading cylinder and replaced his tools on his belt. With one strong tug, he sent himself and the torpedo warhead sliding back to the hatch above. The work on the warhead would have to be done at the workbench on the Trighter's main deck because the slide way was far too cramped for that delicate, dangerous work.

Wovoka was up and out of the slide way and made his way to the workbench. By now the Trighter had been in Naanac's atmosphere for several minutes on a

steady trajectory. Even with the considerable sensor static the Free Mantle created the Trighter at speed would leave a heat signature brighter than a flaming torch in a cold, dark cave.

#

Cavaho finger tapped the copying of one group of files with his right and finger tapped for the deletion of another group with his left. An alarm bubble popped onto his comp set obscuring his work - "Tracer lock."

Cavaho acknowledged the alarm without surprise and informed the others by sending icon messages to their comp sets.

#

Wovoka set the warhead down gently on the workbench and secured it. He acknowledged the tracer lock warning by voice command. Rowan Security had spotted the Trighter. He estimated there would be at least four minutes before any combat. Wovoka decided to brief his brothers on his plan.

"Slow Turtle, get down to the command pit now," He barked into his comp set as he made his way to the command pit.

He stepped into the command pit and peered over Cavaho's shoulder. "Excellent work," Wovoka said. "Don't forget the buried convoy codes in the recipe files." Cavaho nodded as Wovoka took his seat behind him.

Seconds later Slow Turtle entered and took his seat, clearing the view on his comp set so he could pay complete attention to Wovoka. "Come on up, Wolf Plume," Wovoka called down to his pilot.

"Wambli is obviously preoccupied. We've got one shot to pull our fat out of the fire," Wovoka began, "here's the plan." He swiveled in his chair and finger tapped a schematic onto all of their comp sets.

"The chunnel is crushed. There is no way we can get the Trighter through. There is also no way we can get the Trighter through the Free Mantle without the chunnel. That doesn't mean we can't get through. We're going to space walk through the Free Mantle in the body tanks."

Surprise and questions were written on the faces of all three of his men.

"Wovoka," Wolf Plume started hesitantly, "Those are Hammer grade body tanks, designed for heavy combat, not space walks."

"I know that. Our normal vac-suits would be torn to shreds in seconds from all the debris. I'm betting we can make it through in body tanks."

"That's a risky bet, Alpha," Slow Turtle retorted. "Why are we space walking through the Free Mantle anyway. The outrider ship won't be able to pick up the body tank homing beacons with all that static from the Free Mantle. Wovoka, we can stay here on Naanac and fight it out. Slow Turtle can take out whatever they've got and we can hide on the surface for as long as necessary." There was a gentle respect in Slow Turtle's voice.

"You'll have to trust me on this, that's not the best course. We are walking, but this is going to be like no walk we have ever taken. Every one of us has got to be game-on if we're going to make it through alive. Time to prove we are warriors, not men-with-weapons."

Wovoka looked at Slow Turtle, waiting for questions or comments. Wovoka, occasionally hurried and cross, never refused to hear his men out. Slow Turtle nodded in agreement with Wovoka. He did not understand his leader's plan but he understood that Wovoka would not lead them into extreme danger without a purpose.

"Good," Wovoka said acknowledging to all that the plan was set. Only execution of that plan remained. "Slow Turtle, listen carefully. You are to man your normal post. Rowan Security is already in pursuit. As soon as they approach, I want you to send them a message clear and simple, three times over a shotgun band. 'Discontinue Pursuit immediately or you will be shot down.' It's fair warning. Fire one warning bolt when they're within one hundred kilometers of the Trighter. If any fighter returns fire or if they don't turn back, blow them out of the sky one by one."

Slow Turtle nodded and was gone.

"We're locked in orbit, right?" Wovoka asked Wolf Plume hoping no problems had arisen.

"As tight as you can lock with an auto pilot," Wolf Plume answered.

"Fine. Get back to the ship locker and prep our body tanks. Ignore all the weapon system checks and preps, only the contained environment and suit seals are important. Check the oxygen levels and fill them up."

Wolf Plume interrupted, "Those body tanks have detachable missile launchers on the back. If we took those off we could strap on extra air canisters from our normal suits for reserve."

"Great idea. Get to work, Wolf Plume. Cavaho, finish the wipe and prepare a short message for *Wanderer* explaining what we're doing. Put it and a copy of our geo-survey on the slate. I'm taking the warhead out of the Dodger and replacing it with the slate. We're going to try and shoot it through what's left of the chunnel so that the outrider ship can pick it up in case we don't make it through. Go help Wolf Plume when you're done here."

Wolf Plume popped his head back into the command pit. "What about the animal specimens?"

Wovoka grimaced and remained silent as he thought. "There's no time. We cannot save them. They remain on the ship and Wambli can secure their fate."

Wolf Plume looked down.

"Wolf Plume, focus. Yes, a Diegueño would not abandon even one of those animals. We are not Diegueño, we are Apache, and we will serve our function, to fight. Execute my order, old man."

"There was a time when all the tribes valued animals, nyet?"

"The tribes have changed from necessity. We do not have even one more second for this conversation."

Wovoka let out a heavy sigh as Wolf Plume disappeared. He wondered whether he had just pronounced a death sentence for pack or whether he had manufactured their only chance at escape.

CHAPTER TEN

Slow Turtle pulled himself into his gunner's chair and strapped in. Familiar blue neon filled his vision as he shifted the display on his comp set and scanned the sky for Rowan fighters. "Now this is a change," he thought to himself. Wolf Plume had put the Trighter into a high atmosphere orbit around Naanac cruising at 2,600 K.P.H. The belly of Trighter faced the Free Mantle instead of Naanac's surface, so now Slow Turtle gazed 'down'.

The tower turret was made of a glasteel composite, allowing Slow Turtle a view from any angle. The CZ40 Defender laser cannon, an energy weapon usually mounted on larger ships than the Trighter, had a fixed position in the glasteel sphere.

The sphere, almost two meters in radius, used networked magnets to swivel it almost instantly anywhere Slow Turtle directed through his keying bands. The lack of moving parts gave the gun sphere a fluid precise movement that made targeting easier for a skilled gunner. The turret was attached to the Trighter with the usual chaotic collection of mismatched connectors and hull seals that were MO for AC ships.

Slow Turtle finished prepping his cannon and considered the situation at hand. At thirty-one, Slow Turtle was a battle worn veteran. As a Confederacy mercenary he had seen more skirmishes, police actions, civil insurrections and rebellions than he wished to remember. A smorgasbord of violence and mayhem that other warriors would have relished. To Slow Turtle it was only an endless pool of blood growing larger with every kill he made.

He did not have the bloodlust of his Celtic warrior ancestors, but he had the touch, and that was what mattered. While other gunners could expertly follow and lead targets, Slow Turtle had an uncanny knack for knowing where his target would be and could aim at that point early. His skill at pattern recognition made him an efficient, accurate gunner.

UDA space and aero-fighters were trained to fly in formation. Two-man wings, with several wings comprising an attack. UDA training taught these pilots to fly dozens if not hundreds of different complex patterns, weaving into a multitude of formations. While these diverse patterns, flown at incredible speeds, did an excellent job of confusing most gunners, forcing them to pick a target and chase, they only made Slow Turtle's job easier. The Irishman saw the patterns. He recognized them as they were initiated. He knew the patterns better than most UDA trainers did. On top of this enviable ability Slow Turtle could integrate his firing line with patterns using long, quick sweeps of the turret to lock in on multiple targets. In one dogfight, Slow Turtle had taken out five fighters in one clean sweep. Wolf Plume was his only witness. The other tribals laughed at them when they told the story. But this did not upset Slow Turtle. He knew that somewhere a UDA survivor told his mates of an AC gunner that could scrap half your squadron in less time than it takes most gunners to catch your scent.

Slow Turtle considered the data in the Zuni reports he had read on his comp set to prepare for the Naanac mission. Rowan maintained this isolated planet for the one commercial advantage it provided; complete secrecy for their research. The megacorp had complete control of every piece of information that left the planet. Naanac was galaxies away from the nearest outpost, colony or trade route. Even if a ship were to stumble on the far-removed planet, the Free Mantle was such a significant natural barrier that not only would it stop the ship from entering Naanac's atmosphere, it also blocked all electronic transmissions as well. Electrical transmission beamed at the Free Mantle, which surrounded Naanac entirely, were scrambled in the Free Mantle's own chaotic electrical field.

Because Naanac had been kept a secret from the UDA and other corporations, Rowan had to supply their own security. That meant a private security force;

fighter jock flunkies and cargo ship pilots wrapped in decades-old fighters; big, slow and obsolete. Easy pickings for Slow Turtle.

Bink... Bink... Bink... One by one the Rowan atmosphere fighters popped out of the cloud canopy, out of range at four hundred kilometers. The comp acquired his targets and displayed them on his comp set. He narrowed his field of view and fired his warning shot. If only that could be enough, he thought.

ZT-34 Rattler Kings, newer than Slow Turtle was expecting. Might be challenging than he had expected. A lightweight, high-speed fighter that carried a low energy laser cannon, not enough power to even crackle the Trighter's shield. However, the Rattler King also carried two UDA mid-range Stinger torpedoes. With six bogies on his comp set those Stingers could be a problem.

Without hesitation Slow Turtle activated his sand casters then adjusted his CZ40 cannon to an eighty percent power draw, more than enough to take out any of these flyweight fighters. He finger tapped the single send.

Approaching at 5,400 K.P.H. the ZT-34's were closing thirty kilometers of distance every minute, Slow Turtle read off his comp set. They were following, not pursuing, otherwise they would have the engines wound up to their full 22,000 K.P.H. capability. Probably don't know what to make of us, Slow Turtle concluded. He finger tapped the last single send on the same shotgun band, and hoped they would respond.

Slow Turtle watched in irritation as the six bogeys punched their thrusters and K.P.H. d to 8,800 K.P.H. in a few seconds. Slow Turtle knew the Trighter's top speed of 14,000 K.P.H. was not going to outrun these flyweights. They would have to be discouraged.

"You are not authorized to be within Rowan air space. Break current trajectory and proceed to surface or you will be shot down. You have thirty seconds to comply." The words shined across Slow Turtle's comp set.

"Frag it!" Slow Turtle cursed. One minute, ten seconds until they reached Wovoka's one hundred kilometer warning shot perimeter. In twenty three seconds Slow Turtle would have any where from two to twelve stingers whizzing toward the Trighter. He had five sand casters and three stinger hits could crack the Trighter's shields. The math was simple. Slow Turtle could not let these fighters fire first.

WAMP. Ignoring Wovoka's perimeter, Slow Turtle fired one cannon blast, not a warning shot, but a lure. The bright blue beam sizzled past the lead fighters bow just ten meters to the left. The lead pilot took the bait, hook, line and sinker, commanding his fighters to break pursuit formation.

"Parson's Star," Slow Turtle said quietly, naming the maneuver. And as if following his orders the six fighters banked away at steep angles, placing their fighters into a large, revolving circle designed to regroup them in their original formation a few seconds later.

Slow Turtle switched to personal automatic; all sensory information from anything but the lenses of his comp set removed as he reacted from experience. He mentally saw the pattern, as the fighters broke apart like shards from an explosion.

Aiming the CZ40 at a target that was not there, Slow Turtle swiveled his glasteel cage and began his firing arc. He flicked the trigger with blinding speed a millisecond before each unsecured target chirped into white locked X's on his comp set.

Three searing bolts sundered the three Rattler Kings. It had taken less than a second, and Slow Turtle could hardly believe how easy it had been. He had heard once that the best pilots and gunners were those who could act without thinking. He knew better. The best gunners and pilots could match the actions of their body with sub-conscience thought. Knowing he had stunned this unfortunate fighter pack, Slow Turtle cautiously swiveled back to the lead fighter and braced himself for his reaction.

Having seen three pilots, three friends and companions blasted effortlessly into so much scrap, two of the remaining pilots did not finish their part of the Parson Star, electing instead to break and run. Slow Turtle thanked Wambli and began trying to lock onto the lead pilot.

#

"You have a job to do! Get your scurvy, cowardly asses back in pursuit formation now," retired UDA Lieutenant Colonel Daniel Carpe screamed into his headset. He punched angrily at the cockpit glass above him. Three blasts and his fighter pack of six had become a lone fighter. No less than he expected. Those fat fraggers sat for weeks and weeks munching glonuts and sipping coffee, reading adventure files on sensor screens. Probably prayed every day they'd never have to strap into their ZT-34's and fly against anything that shot back, telling their wives how well they flew in the drills each week. Frag them to hell and back.

But Daniel Carpe wasn't about to let the first bogey he'd seen in six years escape him, wingman or none. Carpe knew this gunner was a vet who had seen plenty of combat. Daniel Carpe had looked in the face of death a few times himself. Now the blood lust from his younger days surged back filling his brain with the pounding rage of a killer too long denied. For the next fifty seconds Daniel Carpe was no longer a retired Lieutenant Colonel Security Specialist flying a rented flyweight fighter for a megacorp, he was the UDA First Regiment headhunter he had once been.

#

One more bogey, Slow Turtle thought. The last ZT-34 broke from completing the Parson Star, but instead of retreating it barrel rolled into a course approaching the Trighter from behind. Slow Turtle began to track the fighter cautiously. The lone fighter presented no pattern for Slow Turtle to recognize and trap the enemy pilot with. Slow Turtle quick-booted his guns and watched with respect as the ZT-34 wove a jagged, unpredictable path toward the Trighter.

Slow Turtle gritted his teeth as the approaching pilot escaped his target lock for the fifth time, and closed within fifty kilometers of the Trighter. The ZT-34 Rattler King's thrusters kicked in again and Slow Turtle knew he wasn't going to lock this target. The velocity reading on Slow Turtle's comp set jumped fast and the Irishman's hands flashed across his instruments as he switched from targeting to shield control. The Rattler King was going to pass the Trighter and unload one or both of its stingers at a range too close for the Trighter to evade. Slow Turtle's eyes widened as the ZT-34 rocketed past the Trighter and kicked off both its Stingers. The gunner yelled wildly, his comp set carrying his words to his pack mates' comp sets, "Incoming." He fired the sand casters.

There was no doubt Slow Turtle's reflexes were faster than Carpe's, yet the veteran pilot had pushed his fighter to the edge, flown too well for the gunner to catch. Now it was Slow Turtle's turn to be on the receiving end. The Stingers came one after another, the first striking the Trighter's sand screen squarely. White fire blew away from the thin barrier, a brilliant flash kept Slow Turtle from seeing that the second Stinger exploded due to the concussion of the first Stinger. Even from meters away the second explosion rocked the Trighter like a bull ramming a matador. As his chair straps dug deep across his chest, Slow Turtle hoped his pack mates had heeded his warning.

#

The ZT-34 shot ahead of the Trighter; cutting a line across the thin mix of vacuum and atmosphere at over 11,000 K.P.H. Slow Turtle recovered quickly from the near missile strike and assumed from the continued course of the Trighter that his pack mates were all right. Slow Turtle swiveled his turret and struggled to lock on the Rowan fighter as it swept and drove through a complex evasion maneuver. Slow Turtle saw no need to worry as the ZT-34 swung around and raced back head on at the Trighter. This enemy pilot, admittedly skilled, could

jab the Trighter with his light cannon until they overheated and never pierce her shields.

#

Carpe whooped and hollered like a UDA cadet after his first kill. One of his Stingers had grazed the Trighter and tested its shields. He knew someone in that ship was checking to see if they still had all their teeth. The elation held a moment before Carpe realized the Trighter still had not averted course. "Fragger's on auto-pilot?" he growled.

It dawned on the retired UDA soldier. Of course, the bogey was on autopilot. You didn't need a real pilot to avoid a fighter that could do nothing more than bounce lasers off your ship. He'd be as effective spitting at the Trighter as he would be firing his light cannon. His heart burned as he realized the game was over. He had lost five to nothing. In that instant Carpe decided he was not going to pass up his last chance to die a soldier, not like those cowards running back to base. He was going out now and he was taking that gunner with him.

#

No need to swat this fly, Slow Turtle told himself, as he watched the lead pilot continue his charge. The pilot was swirling his fighter in, like a feather caught in a wind tunnel. While he would definitely have the last laugh on this ace, Slow Turtle could not help thinking that if the pilot had better equipment and training this encounter might have had a less pleasant outcome. The Irish gunner always had trouble with single targets, but there was no doubt this pilot would have had a good shot at slipping him even in a multi-target pattern.

In the short time it took the Trighter and the ZT-34 to close Slow Turtle wondered why the pilot wasn't sending out tracers. It concerned him as the next fifty kilometers between them disappeared. As the Rowan fighter closed to 130 kilometers Slow Turtle nervously pondered why the pilot hadn't fired. Lasers couldn't be dodged or sand-screened, so why would the enemy pilot hold his fire?

"By Wambli," Slow Turtle cursed.

With seconds to contact, Slow Turtle realized his enemy's intention - to ram the Trighter. Not enough time to take him out.

The fighter closed. Slow Turtle watched as the last few kilometers disappeared between the two vessels. He realized the ZT-34 was coming in high. The pilot would just miss the Trighter or he would scrape across the top. There would be no direct hit. Slow Turtle realized suddenly that the enemy pilot wasn't aiming to hit the Trighter head on. He was going to take out the tower turret directly.

Slow Turtle voice commanded the gun chair up side down and simultaneously unclipped his harness. "Sealing deck two, impact coming!" Slow Turtle yelled into live comp set. He fell four meters from the ceiling of Deck Two to its floor. Bones in his shoulder snapped like dry twigs as he slammed into the floor.

Ignoring his broken shoulder blade Slow Turtle pushed himself up. He dropped immediately back to the floor as the pain from his shoulder shot through him, refusing to be overridden. He howled in pain and cursed the time he was losing. He had seconds to traverse the six meters between himself and the nearest access port before it slammed shut, sealing him and the deck into cold thin oxygen spare atmosphere once the fighter hit.

He pushed himself up with his good arm only and lunged at the door.

#

Carpe blazed his small fighter at the larger ship. He spun and swirled the ZT-34 in a wild approach that stressed the fighter to its limits. Carpe's vision blurred as he spun in toward the Trighter. The life of a young man trained and eager to kill, scenes of war and glory, days Carpe had not wanted to end, filled his mind. He died without fear.

The ZT-34 tore the gun tower off the Trighter with the ease of a butcher beheading a chicken. The light, protruding structure wrenched violently from its jury-rigged moorings. The shield had done little to stop the force of the fighter-turned-missile. The Trighter's system comp automatically, instantly doubled the energy being channeled to protect the turret. The impact turned Carpe's fighter into a flattened slagheap. After decimating the turret the ZT-34's remains continued down the top of the Trighter, impacting explosively with the Trighter's rear stabilizer. Slow Turtle was thrown at the door where his good shoulder slammed against its frame. He dropped to the floor on his broken collarbone.

Intense pain overwhelmed the injured Infiltrator and even his desperation to get through the deck door before it sealed him into near vacuum was not enough to keep him moving. He lay on the floor half way through the door, teeth and fist clenched as he fought to stay conscious.

#

Wovoka froze when he heard Slow Turtle's message over his comp set. He picked himself off the deck floor. He had been thrown from the ladder to Deck Two by the impact. Wovoka cursed as he felt the air around him begin to swirl quickly up through the Deck Two access port. On his feet, up the ladder. Wovoka did not hesitate. Through the access port, Wovoka looked across the room. He finger tapped the command opening the door nearest him. Air exploded around him toward the gaping hole in the Trighter's hull above him. Slow Turtle lay on the floor motionless.

Air screamed passed Wovoka. He ran to the still form of his pack mate and in one strong motion yanked his wounded friend across the threshold of the door. Safety sensors immediately closed the door as soon as the two passed through.

Wovoka brushed hair from his face, checked Slow Turtle. He was unconscious, blood flowed steadily from a deep cut on his face. Wovoka was relieved his Infiltrator had made it out of the tower turret. Cavaho poked his head up through the access port and slid a med kit toward Wovoka.

"Thanks. Check if there are any fighters still around and set a target scan with autoalarm."

Cavaho was gone, Wovoka slowly stood after laying Slow Turtle gently on his back. The air was thin and Wovoka breathed as though he were on top a high mountain. Wovoka finger tapped up the ship's life support system on his comp set. The breach released eighty percent of the ship's life support. They had three to five minutes Wovoka estimated.

Wolf Plume popped up through the port. "There isn't a bogey within a thousand kilometers of the ship," he reported as Wovoka applied an antibiotic coagulator patch to Slow Turtle's face.

Wovoka began to gently tend Slow Turtle's cut, "He did his job, as always. How are the body tanks coming?"

"Checks are almost done. Still haven't got those extra tanks attached."

"We have to get out of the Trighter fast. Put those extra tanks in gunnysacks and tie them onto the body tanks. Hurry!" Wovoka instructed. Wolf Plume left him with the unconscious Slow Turtle. "Come on, drook," Wovoka said to his patient as he slapped an autostim onto his neck.

Slow Turtle's nose tweaked as the autostim kicked in. Opening his eyes, he looked at Wovoka, and closed his eyes again. Wovoka smiled and laughed, "Damn, you'll use any excuse to get off your feet won't you!"

Slow Turtle smiled through the pain and whimpered softly.

Wovoka grinned back at him. "Your collar bone is broken. Bad break." He reached into the med kit, pulling out a hypo-gun and some Negacain. "I'm going to numb it. We got to move. I need you strong, brother warrior." Wovoka fired the hypo-gun deep into Slow Turtle's shoulder. "Wolf Plume told me we don't have a single bogey in the sky," Wovoka took Slow Turtle's hand and squeezed hard.

"You got us this far, we'll take you the rest of the way." He nodded at Slow Turtle reassuringly and stood to help him up.

#

Wovoka helped Slow Turtle through the Trighter to where the body tanks were being prepped by Wolf Plume. The Pack Alpha was pleased to see the Negacain dose had masked Slow Turtle's pain enough that he could function on his own. Wisely Slow Turtle was not utilizing his left arm in order to avoid further damage to his shoulder.

Wolf Plume was carefully attaching the extra air canisters to the body tanks. Wovoka marveled at these unique and impressive pieces of armor. Yet more stolen, haggled, pilfered UDA equipment the Confederacy was now putting to good use against their Earth based enemy. The body tank, a Sledge Heavy Jaguar unit, was among the UDA's most sought after pieces of military gear. A huge, virtually indestructible suit of energy and concussive resistant armor, the suit gave UDA soldiers excellent protection against everything from hand-held firearms to light laser cannons. But the real effectiveness of the Sledge Heavy Jaguar however came from its incredible mobility and agility.

The entire suit was powered so that every move of the soldier wearing it was amplified in speed and power. A soldier's punch was turned into power-packed blow that could smash through the swell of a light infantry hover craft. The soldier could run in an enhanced mode, which turned every step into a long, fast three-meter stride. One strong jump from the soldier sprang the four hundred kilogram Jaguar three meters into the air. UDA Special Forces were trained for weeks to utilize these mobile war machines to their maximum destructive capability.

Wovoka, realizing the considerable potential of these suits, had taken months to train his pack in the use of the body tanks.

Flowing Rivers, a Zuni intelligence agent, acquired the Sledge Heavy Jaguars two years ago. Flowing Rivers had traded thirty kilos of Zeta Clear, a highly illegal designer drug that had been confiscated from a tribe member (who was subsequently banished), to a corrupt UDA requisition officer for the four Jaguar units.

This would be the first time Wovoka's pack used these suits for something other than combat. While the body tanks were fully capable of operating in vacuum their primary design was for use on land. The Infiltrators would have to leverage their training, Wovoka thought.

Wolf Plume turned his attention away from the suit he was currently prepping and finger tapped a link to Wolf Plume in the cockpit. The old Russian spoke, taking his focus off his own tasks. "We're approaching the point you designated earlier," Wolf Plume reported. "I'm decelerating the Trighter to 50 K.P.H. where we want to disembark. The comp has had a rough time compensating for the loss of the stabilizing fin. I have programmed the autopilot to accelerate the Trighter away from the location we disembark at."

"Right on the wampum. ETA on the disembark location?"

"A minute, twenty second," Wolf Plume answered Wovoka.

Wovoka barked an order over the comp set. "Cavaho, grab the hack sack and get up here to Locker Two." Wovoka pulled the opening lever on the second body tank. The body tank hummed obediently to life. The hydraulics in the Heavy Jaguar opened it up to accept its controller. The body tank split down the middle, hinging the two parts of the front half on the outside edge of the arms and legs. Wovoka motioned for Slow Turtle to come forward. He helped him step into the wide-open mobile armor. Slow Turtle was standing in the recess of the body tank, encased in the soft neoprene rubber that held the intricate micro fibers that read and executed the movements of the controller.

"Hey, where's the body tank's wrist cannons?" Slow Turtle asked Wovoka as the Pack Alpha buckled Slow Turtle in to the suit.

"I had Wolf Plume take off all the extra weight of the suits for this walk through the chunnel. We won't be needing any wrist canons in the Free Mantle," Wovoka answered.

"A gun is never extra weight," Slow Turtle retorted. "The wrist cannon is on a slide lock, take five seconds and put one on my right wrist. We may need it."

Wovoka frowned, stepped back and hit the lever to the closed position. The body tank closed on Slow Turtle, an audible sequence of clicks emitted from the inside of the suit as it locked. The body tank hissed as it sealed and switched to its internal air supply. Wovoka quickly picked up the wrist cannon and slid it along the universal rails on the right arm of the suit. Most of the weapons mounted on the body tank could be easily slid onto the universal rails.

Cavaho ran into the room and grabbed the hack sack and began attaching it to his body tank. Wovoka was strapping himself into his suit when Cavaho arrived.

"Thirty second to disembarkation. Move it, move it," Wolf Plume warned Cavaho.

The Infiltrators could feel the hard deceleration of the Trighter as it approached the disembarkation point. Cavaho snapped the last latch hook on the hack sack to the armored handles on back of his body tank and got in. Wolf Plume was in his body tank but had not yet closed it. His right hand flash tapped commands to the ship's server, including an adjustment on when to seal the ship and setting the audio and video recorders on. The Russian hit the open lever to the closed position. His suit sealed last, three seconds from the disembarkation point.

The blast hatch over each of the suits blew off like pressure cooker lids and the Free Mantle filled the vision of each Infiltrator. As Wovoka, surrounded by warriors under his charge, floated freely toward the stone chaos and away from the Trighter he knew if ever he needed Wambli to carry him on his wings, it was now.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Small chunks skipped between the rolling boulders and hulking stones that made up the Free Mantle. Wovoka took in the chaos of the Free Mantle and steeled himself for the arduous task ahead of him and his men. He caught a glance at the Trighter as it screamed away. A good ship. Wolf Plume had programmed the comp to gently land the Trighter six hundred kilometers from Cartel Base Nurai. The loss of the tail stabilizer would make it a gamble whether the Trighter would make it not. Even at that distance there was a little chance Rowan personnel would not pick up the Trighter.

The fact that Rowan personnel had found Wovoka's infiltrator team on their planet would probably mean the construction of another chunnel immediately. Rowan managers could get reinforcements back to Naanac ASAP. Wovoka knew from the Zuni intelligence reports that it would take a minimum of nine days to build another chunnel, which would give them some time at least.

Wovoka and the three Infiltrators reached the edge of the maelstrom of rock. Below them spanned the grey-green marbling of Naanac surface, glimpsed between thick, wet clouds. Above them floated the planet's outer shell. The sparkling churning boulders prohibited Wovoka from seeing far into the Free Mantle.

"How are we going to tackle this, Wovoka?" Wolf Plume asked. Wovoka boosted a few meters ahead of the rest of the group. "I hear static in the lines already. Once we get into that mess we are not going to be able to communicate at all. And judging from the chaos I see, I doubt we are going to be able to stay together. We have to clamber through the Free Mantle's two kilometers of thickness, boulder by boulder. Cavaho, your handle these body tanks better than the rest of us. I need you to take Slow Turtle through with you. The Negacain I gave him should make it possible for him to move long enough to get through. Carry him when he can't." Cavaho nodded.

Wolf Plume grimaced. "Wovoka, I don't know about this. Sure the body tanks will take a hit from a boulder twice their size but some of those rocks are fifty meters wide. If Slow Turtle gets caught between two of them his body tank will crack open like a clam."

"Buck up, warrior." Slow Turtle said. "The only alternative is staying on this marsh planet and that really doesn't sound appealing to me. Let's get back to the squaws and scotch."

Wovoka grinned. He pulled up a time stamp. (0708 hrs - 03/04/2192) "Let's get this done. I'm guessing it should take anywhere from two to four hours per kilometer. I am sending my time stamp to your comp sets, which should be in control of your body tank systems. We rally at 45 degrees north and 72 east of Telt, Naanac's moon, between 1100 and 1500 hours. Understand?"

"Check."

"Check."

Cavaho nodded.

Wovoka turned, as all three of his Infiltrators boosted toward him. The four soldiers clacked the plasteel of their helmets together. "Wambli, will carry each of us on his wings as he has a hundred times before. I'll see you on the other side."

None of them spoke another word, just broke and boosted toward the Free Mantle. Wovoka's momentum gently sent him into the fringe of the Free Mantle. Small rocks began to clack against the body tank. He pushed away a boulder a meter wide. It rolled and smacked against an asteroid twice its size.

The big rocks started a few meters away. Wovoka spotted a twenty-meter boulder rolling slowly through the mass of churning rocks toward the far unseen edge of the Free Mantle. He boosted toward the fleeing boulder, activated the Jaguars wrist cannon and adjusted to its maximum setting. One blast created a

perfect round hole about two and a half meters wide and a meter deep. He used the thrusters to get himself close enough to cram the suit into the hole. The smaller rocks bounced off of the Jaguar and the larger rocks that crashed into the boulder made no contact with the suit.

Wovoka was confident the rest of his Infiltrators would be able to figure out this maneuver. The large rock crashed deeper into the Free Mantle, further away from Naanac. Wovoka spoke into his comp set. "Pack Alpha to infiltrators, echo back." Only silence answered. The Free Mantle rendered their communication system useless.

After a few hundred meters of diagonal progress, a large boulder rocked Wovoka's ride. The boulder beneath him veered back toward Naanac. A boost from his boot thrusters sent him back into the chaos. He dodged smaller asteroids, constantly moving toward the direction of the Free Mantle's outer edge. He progressed another seventy-five meters before he spotted a bulky asteroid heading his way. He maneuvered and snuggled his body tank in for another ride.

The asteroid took him another hundred meters as Wovoka continued to dodge and scrape his way toward the outer space surrounding Naanac.

Wovoka began to sweat inside his body tank, despite the cool jets of air the integral life support system provided. The physical exertion was difficult but Wovoka was used to hard work. Cavaho, Wolf Plume and himself trained constantly. Wovoka exempted Slow Turtle from much of the rigorous training schedule because he proved to be a distraction when he attended. He considered the wisdom of that decision now. The most difficult part of the task was maintaining direction. Every boulder Wovoka attached himself to rolled and arched in a direction askew of where he needed to go. Normally his comp set could easily guide him, but the Free Mantle presented too much interference for the processors to crunch quickly. Each boulder had its own properties, some radioactive. The only way to tell if he was heading toward space or back toward the planet was to look for flecks of grey (Naanac's atmosphere) or flecks of black (outer space).

Six hours of coasting and dodging and firing and tumbling brought his body tank close to the space edge of the Free Mantle. Here the black was in large patches, no longer flecks. Stars were visible. The inside of his body tank stunk from his perspiration.

Sweat rolled off his brow and he blinked furiously to keep it out of his eyes. He rolled the body tank again and landed on a medium sized boulder not more than seven or eight meters wide. Suddenly a strange shimmering winked at his left and he turned to see a spacecraft. It startled him. He calmed himself and made out the clean edges of a CZ-214 Bounty Hunter, a heavy, expensive fighter-bomber.

It was another moment before he saw the shattered glasteel of the cockpit and realized it was deserted hulk. It had probably been junked here after a failed attempt to intercept last year's Rowan shuttle.

Carefully Wovoka moved around the Bounty Hunter. He read the remaining half of the ship's name emblazoned on the front. It was mottled and the paint chipped. "1884-QI 8710 Billy the K," Wovoka took a few stills with his comp set. It worried him that this ship was here. It could mean that Rowan was more prepared than they appeared to be. He was unsure. It was also quite possible Rowan Cartel had never found this ship and the ship had somehow become stranded here without any way to return. Wovoka moved away from the ship and put it out of his thoughts. This short investigation was all he could do now.

He boosted out to a safe distance from the edge of the Free Mantle. A huge weight lifted off of his shoulders. He basked in the beauty of Naanac's moon and its background of thousands of brilliant stars. He would live another day and now he needed to gather his men. He looked right and left to see if he could find any of his Infiltrators. He saw no one.

Wovoka set the lights on his body tank blinking and looked at the arms. The finish was shredded away, showing scored black blastplast. The body tank was dented and worn, yet all of its basic functions were operating. Wovoka turned away from the endless vacuum of space toward the Free Mantle. His heart jumped as something slammed into him. Something grabbed his body tank by the shoulders and suddenly glasteel tinked against glasteel. Shock turned into amazement. It was Wolf Plume, smiling.

Wovoka laughed and spun with Wolf Plume. Two were out now, half the pack. "Any sign of Cavaho or Slow Turtle?"

Wolf Plume shook his head. "It took me longer to get through than I expected. They are probably running into the same problems we did. We can wait here."

Wovoka laughed. "Of course, we'll wait here. Where else would we go?"

The next two hours passed slowly. Conversation with Wolf Plume was strained due to Wovoka concern for Cavaho and Slow Turtle. They spent the time observing, carefully, Naanac's two suns, Venik I and II. Venik I was closer, brighter - a gas giant that gone nova. Its bright electric blue light bathed their body tanks. Venik II cast brilliant green and between the two suns it made anything the light touched appear as if it were under water. Wovoka had just set a watch schedule so that one of them could sleep when Wolf Plume pointed.

Wovoka and Wolf Plume were approximately two kilometers from the edge of the Free Mantle but Wovoka could make out a dull glint of steel. "Optics, twenty." The comp set adjusted magnification and the two thousand meters became one hundred meter. It was definitely one of the pack's Heavy Jaguars units but Wovoka could not tell who's from this distance. Then he realized the body tank wasn't moving, just drifting as boulders banged it about. Wovoka returned the optics to normal and boosted toward the body tank.

Wolf Plume. Wovoka's mind raced. He should have known. He should have known. Slow Turtle was injured. How could he possibly make it through the Free Mantle? Wolf Plume was in front of Wovoka now pushing boulders back away from the Jaguar body tank. Wovoka slowed and stopped just above the battered suit, its back to him. He grabbed the body tank, and boosted clear of the Free Mantle. Once they were clear, Wovoka turned the suit to face him. Tears clouded his eyes. The glasteel of the helmet was covered with blood and Wovoka saw that the body tank had been cracked. Explosive decompression. Slow Turtle, inside, looked as tattered and shredded as his body tank.

"Oh Wambli, what have I done? Wolf Plume..." Wovoka placed a hand to his faceplate.

Wolf Plume grabbed the bulky shoulder of Wovoka's suit, "Not your fault, boy. Not your fault. Don't weep at a soldier's death. Know that crazy Irishman died for the AmerIndian Confederacy and was glad to do it."

Wovoka did not know how long he wept. He simply remembered seeing everything around him suddenly when his eyes were no longer clouded with tears. Cavaho and Wolf Plume were both hovering over him. He was glad to realize that Cavaho had made it through. The joy lasted until he saw the tether leading from the back of Cavaho's suit to the Heavy Jaguar that was Slow Turtle's coffin.

"What happened?"

Wolf Plume frowned. "I questioned Cavaho earlier and best I could make out was that Cavaho's suit was cracked very early on in the Free Mantle walk. Cavaho pushed the body tank through because he thought you would want him to do that."

Wovoka looked at Cavaho. Cavaho nodded confirming Wolf Plume's version. There was no remorse in his eyes. Wovoka realized Cavaho would not process any of the pain he was feeling over Slow Turtle's death. The warrior had been incapable of such feelings for years now.

Wovoka breathed deep. The time for mourning, the time for rage was not now. "Wolf Plume, how long have we been here?"

"Half-hour."

"What does your O2 level read?"

"Forty-two hours" Wovoka finger tapped at link to Cavaho's body tank and found the same reading. The keying bands were slower when used inside the heavy gauntlets of the body tanks, but they were still functional. His suit also had forty-two hours. "Kill Spotted Horse put all suits at max oxygen. We also all have twelve-hour reserve tanks. Cavaho, take the reserve tank off Slow Turtle's and put four hours into each of our suits."

No one spoke as Cavaho scavenged the air tank off Slow Turtle's suit and split it's contents between the three of them. There were another few minutes of silence.

Wovoka swung around and faced Wolf Plume. "Turn off all non-essential suit power drains and max your lights."

"Do you have a plan? Are we supposed to do something?" Wolf Plume kept his voice calm, but his question betrayed his concern.

"Yes, I have a plan. Plan is, we wait."

"Wait for what, Wovoka?"

"I don't know what but I know something will come along."

"Wovoka, we are galaxies away from the nearest colony or outpost or trade route and our rendezvous ship won't get here until four hundred hours on the sixth, three days from now. That's sixty-three hours away and twenty-one hours more than we have. We have to do something other than wait."

"No, we don't. When we were on Naanac, I experienced something. Quanana... A vision, clear and strong. It is my destiny to share that vision with the tribes. I know in my heart I will not die here and I won't let you die here either."

"Quanana, are you sure? What did you see?"

Cavaho circled slowly and he leveled his cold eyes at Wovoka.

"I will tell you when I tell all the tribes, but for now you have to trust me."

Neither Wolf Plume nor Cavaho looked at the corpse floating behind them. They knew Slow Turtle died following Wovoka. He had done no more or less than any of them had always been ready to do.

Wolf Plume spun his suit toward his Pack Alpha, "I trust you, Wovoka. We will not die here. I feel it, too. We wait."

Cavaho nodded and the three huddled closer together and hoped the wait would not be too long.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Celetain Prax sat quietly before the stars. Her chair sat before the far transparent wall of her temporary quarters on the Brule's only lodge ship, *Cold Pyre*. Through twenty meters of smooth force field reinforced glasteel, Celetain watched as AmerIndian Confederacy shuttles, fighters and cargo ships bustled between massive lodge ships. Four hundred and sixteen thousand tribals, all depending on her wisdom.

Celetain thought of her tribe, the Haida. They were responsible for healing, prophecy and spiritual research in the AmerIndian Confederacy. Of the Haida population of 22,000 tribals only 10,000 were shamans, the rest were apprentices, support and researchers. Just as the Nez Perce tribe had attracted blacks (due to their affinity for piloting) the Haida had a large percentage of Hispanics and Latinos who excelled at spiritual arts the Haida performed. The first chief of the Haida and the greatest shaman in the AC's short history was Morningstar Prax, Celetain's mother. From the beginning Family Prax had been integral to the success of the Haida, and consequently the entire AmerIndian Confederacy. Morningstar Prax, a Harvard Doctor in History specializing in shamanic rituals, joined Potlatch Weaver in building the AmerIndian Confederacy three months before the end of the Six Captives Law Suit. She became the chief of the Haida in 2164, the first year of the AmerIndian Confederacy. In 2165 Celetain Prax was born. Her father, a Nez Perce Pilot, died a month before Celetain was born, killed in an attempt to steal a prime ship for the AmerIndian Confederacy.

Despite her husband's death, Morningstar left her research behind and became a practicing shaman. She single-handedly lead thousands of tribals in reviving a level of shamanic activity and power that had not been seen since before the white man walked the sacred lands of America. Celetain loved her mother and emulated her in every way with the exception of her studies, which embraced a broader spectrum of rituals and magic.

In 2180, Crafter, a Tsimshian tribal, launched an extensive program of archiving all available data on shamanic rituals. At the age of fifteen Celetain began speaking with Crafter every day. She used her status as a chief's daughter to keep in touch with him and encouraged him to include other occult material. Crafter became attached to Celetain and considered her a sister after only a year of discourse. Between 2180 and 2183 Celetain worked with Crafter to develop a new form of Shamanism called Cybershamanism.

Cybershamanism was a mixture of traditional Shamanism, Wicca, Asian Ancestor Worship and Yoga, all filtered and manipulated by complex code agents. A most unusual religion, Cybershamanism quickly dwarfed the progress Celetain's mother, Morningstar, had made with traditional Shamanism since 2164. Morningstar grew distant from her daughter as Celetain achieved phenomenal results; healing in seconds, clear, exact prophecy and stunning visual effects used in storytelling rituals.

During the years after the creation of Cybershamanism Celetain grew distant from her mother and fell into dark brooding. However, tribals had never seen anything like the power Celetain wielded. The Elders tried to ignore her results while young tribals embraced her practices and Celetain developed a powerful following. Morningstar was horrified by her daughter's return to blood rituals like the Sundance. Ritual of the Black Heart, a new healing ritual developed by Celetain was the final straw. In this ritual Celetain inhaled sickness out of a person and then wretched it back up in huge, bloody clots from her own body.

Events came to a head in 2189 when UDA President Johanson secretly sent his son to the Haida with C-HIV to be cured. At the request of her fellow Elders Morningstar performed a three day ritual to cure him. Her efforts failed to have any effect on the young man. In one hour, Celetain and her group of acolytes

healed him completely. Celetain's reputation in the AmerIndian Confederacy grew. When the story was leaked to the UDA media, her reputation approached legend. (President Johanson had to fend off an impeachment attempt shortly after for turning to an enemy force for aid.) It was a difficult time for Morningstar and Celetain and they interacted little.

In 2190 Morningstar was killed when her shuttle was shot down on her way to assist serve as a combat medic in a particularly bloody Brule operation. All of the mystery surrounding Celetain, her popularity among the youth and the sentiment surrounding her mother's death propelled Celetain into the position of Elder at the age of twenty-six. The tribe chiefs simply voted the choice of the people, and their choice was Celetain. John welcomed her as an Elder while Stormseeker was furious over the outcome of the vote.

Cybershamanism's affects were as fast and powerful, as opposed to the slow, steady river force of traditional shamanism. However, less than half of the Haida were able to master even minor levels Cybershamanism. Celetain's personal Emerald Acolyte Pack consisted of the twelve strongest Cybershamans in the Haida tribe. They did not work together often, instead training other Cybershaman packs. When they were together, however, their results were nothing short of incredible.

Celetain and her Acolytes wore hunter green leather embroidered with glowing neon runes (controlled by their comp sets) that constantly shifted into new rune shapes. These were tools they used in their work.

Now beginning her third year as Elder Shaman, Celetain felt the weight of duty on her shoulders. She had learned the art of leadership from Potlatch Weaver, the father of the AmerIndian Confederacy and the wisest, kindest man she had ever known. She missed him now. His strength, his hope, and most of all his ability to make every person, including her, achieve the limitless potential within them. She shook her head. She loved what she did. Never had she been as fulfilled as she was in the leadership role she now filled. Still the weight of responsibility grew heavier each day.

Since her acceptance as Elder Shaman, she and the Council had struggled to rebuild the AmerIndian Confederacy. John, Kugan and Stormseeker all had years of experience on her, yet, there greatest years as Elders were still ahead of them. That gave Celetain hope. But Morgan Weaver; she wondered why his father had not been wise enough to see that this son would not be a good Elder. He had no vision, no strength, and at times Celetain thought she saw a dangerous, selfish ambition in him. He had been nothing but an obstacle to the council since his acceptance four years ago.

Celetain thought back on the tasks the council handled since she became an Elder. Even eleven years after the White Earth Massacre, recovery was still the greatest challenge. The AmerIndian Confederacy had been devastated by that attempt to gain a Homeland. The following years had been spent scrambling to replace lodge ships and other resources. New tribals had not been a problem. So many UDA citizens from each of the seven settled galaxies as well as periphery folk had come to join the AmerIndian Confederacy that some had to be turned away.

Thankfully, the UDA had handled fumbled their media handling of the White Earth Massacre. It was well known White Earth was the vacation haven of the elite and few UDA citizens ever set foot on the planet. Most UDA citizens were not pleased to learn tens of thousands of UDA soldiers died to preserve skiing and wind surfing for the UDA's richest. The UDA media aired hours of raw battle footage from the White Earth battle hoping to show the violence and chaos the AmerIndian Confederacy created. What many UDA citizens saw was the first force in the UDA's 136-year history that could actually survive battling with UDA forces. The coverage of the battle looked like a cat fighting a mouse. The fight was long and bloody for both sides. Members of the Anarchists party were amazed at how much the comparatively

minuscule AmerIndian Confederacy had been able to accomplish. Many young Anarchists had joined the underdog force, the AmerIndian Confederacy, after the White Earth Massacre.

The next challenge the AmerIndian Confederacy faced was the building of the Merc Force. The Merc Force was a two-purpose project for the AmerIndian Confederacy. The first and most critical purpose was to build and maintain a diverse, dedicated and deadly army that would not be drilling and practicing endlessly on comp generated opponents but would have battle-earned, war-tempered experience. The second purpose was to put some creds back into AmerIndian Confederacy's coffers.

Within two years both purposes had been achieved. Currently forty percent of the AmerIndian Confederacy served as mercenaries of one sort or another; Infiltrators, infantry, body tank warriors, fighter pilots. Since the introduction of the Merc Force in 2180 the Confederacy's casualties averaged around thirty thousand per year. But new tribals kept coming and an AmerIndian Confederacy death carried more respect and glory for many than anything the UDA offered.

Once there were tribals and UDA credits in adequate amounts the next challenge had been the acquisition of eleven lodge ships to replace those lost in the White Earth Massacre. Most of the ships were taken by orchestrated internal betrayal. UDA navigator officers were not difficult to bribe. The nav officers were bribed to adjust a scheduled jump to a designated point where dozens of AmerIndian Confederacy outrider ships waited in ambush. These UDA colony ships were usually taken without combat. A few UDA colony ships were taken by force. One colony ship was actually handed over willingly by its UDA captain and ninety percent of its crew joined the AmerIndian Confederacy.

All of these challenges Celetain had watched as a teenager. Now she wondered what would be next. She knew from experience the period of success for the AmerIndian Confederacy would have to end soon. The AmerIndian Confederacy currently had over one hundred and fifty thousand tribals involved in seven ongoing merc campaigns. And while body bags arrived at the lodge ships every day, the violence, the blood, was elsewhere. It was at distant mining outposts and on far flung colony planets. For over two years the AmerIndian Confederacy had been able to avoid the attempts of UDA forces to capture or kill an Elder. Only one lodge ship had been lost in the last two years. And the Merc work was bringing in billions of creds.

Another surprising turn of events was the newly developed core competency of the Haida tribe. Faced with the gruesome task of patching up thousands of tribals from a near infinite variety of injuries the Haida had turned their lodge ships into the best trauma hospitals in the known universe. Med students from all the core and periphery colonies flocked to learn with the Haida. And unlike UDA hospitals the AmerIndian Confederacy could give medical service without regard to politics. UDA elites paid through the nose for services that the UDA denied them for one reason or another.

Too much was going well. Celetain had foreseen that it would not last. She sipped at the sweet thick hot chocolate that Broge, her assistant, had made for her. She set it down on the table next to her and relaxed. It had been a long day. Soon she slipped into a shallow sleep.

At first she dreamt of the Elder Council, each member appearing before her in his true form. John was rabbit, wise and swift. Kugan a turtle, conservative and cautious. Stormseeker a bear, strong and fearless. Morgan strangely appeared only in his human form and Potlatch Weaver, his father, stood distantly behind him. This confused Celetain. Each Elder spoke but Celetain heard only music; different tunes emanating from each one's mouth.

Suddenly she could feel her physical body falling and the dream changed from soft fluid vision to a cruel, crisp clarity; everything brilliant and sharp. She could see four men each in a separate shell. One man glowed a

brilliant blue, a powerful illumination showing through his shell. The second man burned with flame, green and black, he was in terrible pain and yet he remained silent. The third man was covered with a dim white light and she could see fear on him, not for himself but for the others. The final man had no flesh and a dark figure, cold and black and not shaped like a man, hugged him through his cracked shell.

Celetain the present danger these men faced, but did not know who they were. The clarity and brilliance began to dim and she realized that she was slipping from the dream. She surged back, pushing and pulling with her mind, refusing to awaken, sliding back into the dream.

She spoke to the men. "Who are you? Where are you?" None responded and she knew why. This was not their realm. Not their place to speak. But she knew who could hear her. "Who are these men and what is this place?"

The dark figure unfurled his arms and released the skeleton in the shell. It came forward moving without movement. She could feel it studying her. "Why should I answer you, witch?" His words spewed forth and speckled on her face.

Celetain pulled herself to a position of strength in the realm. She yelled, "Because if you don't I will bind you by your name and even if I cannot hold you the others will know that for a moment you were mine. Speak, dark spirit!"

"This one," the midnight figure's arm pointed to the brilliant blue man, "is the beginning of the end for you and yours. He will start the flow for the river of blood. Blood is the only payment for that which you seek. This one," the black form extended a tendril arm toward the man engulfed in green and black flame, "will be the blood bringer's strength, and the last," he pointed to the man of white light, "will be part of his wisdom. There will be others."

Celetain looked past the dark figure trying to ascertain where the men were. "This place is the Homelands." The figure said with a strange finality.

Celetain saw thousands and thousands of rocks floating behind the men. Each rock dripped with blood, long strands of the fluid undulating between them as they rolled and crashed. Celetain strained to stay but exhaustion washed over her and she slipped from the dream. She woke to a sharp pain along her cheekbone. She was sprawled on the floor and Broge was kneeling, his face just above her face.

"Celetain, Celetain..." He sounded frightened.

"I am fine now, Broge. Please, help me up." Broge rushed to lift her gently and seated her again. She took another sip of the hot chocolate. In a moment, she was composed.

"Broge, I want a liaison from each tribe to meet me in the Weapons Hall at the start of the next hour." She rose and donned the heavy green cloak she wore in the halls and pulled up the voluminous hood. She left the room quickly.

Broge did not hesitate at setting to his task. He finger tapped and began selecting the liaison from each of the eight tribes.

#

On *Desperado*, an Apache Lodge Ship at Steel Circle, Keokuk closed his physical eyes and let the data flow before his mind's eye. He communicated with the comp at near the speed of thought thanks to over two decades of experience with the tools of his trade. The trick was to be able to ask the right questions in the right way. Right now thousands of figures flashed before his eyes regarding the RZ 140 Slammer Rail Gun.

Kugan's operatives had purchased fifty of these massive ship mounted slug thrower. Firing a twenty centimeters slug at an accurate range of fourteen kilometers the Slammer had been a bargain at any price, the only problem was the guns were now giving the ship's server fits with all the custom adjustments each Slammer's specific tribal gunner was trying to program for it. Keokuk was now stripping out the clumsy programming each gunner had created and replacing it

with clean, fluid code that would give each gunner the custom performance he was looking for without leaving code sludge on the ship server.

Desperado's server ran at eighty-three percent efficiency, four points higher than any other ship in the Confederacy and Keokuk had plans to increase that figure dramatically. Everything had to be tight, every code line, every subroutine. He was half way through the Slammer project when the line appeared across his comp set reading, "Your presence is requested in the real world."

With a finger tap Keokuk made the lenses of his comp set translucent and swiveled his chair. He stopped abruptly. Before him stood Celetain Prax, the Elder Shaman, with a cadre of Acolytes behind her. Keokuk was startled. He saw Elder John on a regular basis and he had dealt with each of the other Elders by indirect communication but this was the first time he had ever been this close to Prax. He also could not remember her being on *Desperado* before.

"Elder Prax," he stammered, standing immediately. "How may I help you today?"

Celetain stepped forward. "Your brother is in great danger. I have arranged for transport to Naanac. The outrider ship's departure waits only for you."

Keokuk stared a moment and then answered, "Thank you, Elder Prax. I have a ready bag in my room. If one of your Acolytes would lead me to the ship."

Ten minutes later Keokuk was on board *Thunder Lizard*, an eighty metric ton outrider ship with a crew of one hundred and berths for fifty body tanks. *Thunder Lizard* was loaded for bear. Troops bustled past Keokuk who sat quietly near a view window. A steady stream of white shooting stars filled his view. The ship was now cruising at 20,000 K.P.H. putting some distance between the gathering of lodge ships and its jump point.

Naanac was billions light years away. The number crunching to accomplish the jump took just over twenty-seven hours and that had been a rush job. Keokuk felt angry and frustrated. He had been unable to contact Celetain after she left him and the Acolytes would give no details about what danger Wovoka and his pack faced. It surprised him that Celetain had known about the situation for over a day now but had saw fit to give him only ten minutes notice.

Keokuk strained to understand why Celetain was bringing him on this rescue op, but could think of no logical reason. It was unlikely whatever struggles Wovoka's pack had run into involved a comp problem. He was, however, selfishly glad that he might have a chance to pull Wovoka's bacon out of the frying pan. That would anger his brother and that was just fine with Keokuk. Keokuk pulled a passage from the Gospel of Luke and continued his personal study on Predestination versus Free Will.

The distinct tremor of surging power could be felt as the catalyst chamber of the outrider ship prepped for the firing that would take the vessel across thousands of galaxies, instantly. The sole piece of equipment that had propelled mankind out into the stars had been the Kellion Cannon. All lodge ships and outrider ships carried one.

Invented in 2052 by Otto Kellion, a German physicist, the Kellion Cannon was the linchpin for the creation of the UDA. The modern Kellion Cannon was the product of two critical technology elements - the theory of correspondence and gravity control. The Correspondence Theory was the doctoral dissertation of Asian Indian Harvard student Tobuton Hasani. It was never published in any journal and actually was given only a satisfactory grade by Hasani's professors.

Kellion found the Correspondence Theory buried on the colossal Harvard web site when he was twelve. He studied it for thirteen years and began designing the Kellion Cannon in 2046. In 2050 he went to a Las Vegas tech convention to look for an investor. Silas Mar put up the creds necessary to begin construction on the first Kellion Cannon ship, *Furor*, in 2051. *Furor* was completed in 2054. Silas Mar waited to use *Furor* as a trump card to aid the creation of the UDA.

The Kellion Cannon had three major components. A Nagasphere, kept in a large draw chamber, powered the unit. The catalyst chamber, located directly behind the draw chamber, was where the correspondence plane was initiated. The square catalyst chamber measured six meters high, wide and long. The barrel of the cannon measured a standard 131 meters long, three meters in diameter. All Kellion Cannons were exactly alike and built to extreme specificity. Attempts to adjust Kellion's final design produced cannons that sent ships galaxies off the mark. Even forty years after its invention, Kellion's design was operational, but not fully understood.

When a Kellion Cannon ship intended to use its Kellion Cannon it sets its navcomp working on the correspondence code to merge two planes of atoms in two locations into one. Traveling by correspondence plane was referred to as "firing." Distance had absolutely no effect on how much time or energy was required to complete the union. What were important were the gravity signatures of the two points to be united. If the areas being traveled from and to were gravity charted then the calculations took significantly less time and were far more accurate in creating the union. Gravity charting was a process by which the interstellar gravity forces of an area were studied and specifically valued. The UDA had a fleet of two hundred voyager ships that did nothing but gravity chart new systems. Charting could be done by telescope research but with considerably less accuracy.

Calculating a correspondence code between two points was simpler for the navcomps the farther away the points were from a major gravity source. The task became impossible if either point was closer than one hundred thousand kilometers from a major gravity source. A body half the size of the Earth's moon constituted a major gravity source. A navcomp took only a few minutes to calculate a correspondence code between two optimum points that were charted and at least two million kilometers away from a major gravity source. Attempting a jump to or from a system that was uncharted would extend the time necessary to calculate a correspondence code to hours or even days. The chance for a slip increased dramatically when a union was attempted to or from an uncharted area. A slip occurred when a Kellion Cannon ship made a correspondence plane and the code used did not correspond to the point the navcomp calculated it would. A slip could place a ship kilometers or galaxies off the mark. There was an eight-day time barrier where no more calculating time will lend accuracy to a correspondence code.

It took another twenty minutes to reach the firing point and during that time Keokuk pondered the fact that Wovoka faced serious danger and still all he could feel was intense anger toward his only sibling.

"Attention, Code Nine in sixty seconds." Keokuk looked up and watched as all the troops around him checked their weapons and keyed last minute code into their comps. All AmerIndian Confederacy personnel assumed battle readiness before their ship fired through a correspondence plane. They never knew if UDA ships would be waiting on the other side.

Keokuk had been through hundreds of firings in his lifetime. The soldiers around him took their seats. He could hear the hum of the Kellion Cannon charging. Soon the cannon would fire a stream of energy into a single plane of atoms one kilometer from the ship's current position. The ship would fly into that plane and travel through to another plane thousands of galaxies away, exactly as navigated. Keokuk braced himself for the firing.

Traveling through interstellar distances was excruciatingly painful. What made it bearable was the time it took a persons body to travel through the source of the pain, the correspondence plane, was only a fraction of a second. It left most travelers with something akin to the memory of intense outward pressure. Keokuk felt the surge, he saw an instant flash of black and he knew he had just traveled a distance of billions of light years. He noticed the soldier's tense, each waiting for the shields to be pummeled with laser fire.

Keokuk carried no weapon and could not directly operate any of the ship's weaponry (although he had written code for most of them). He suddenly felt useless. A minute passed and a soft gong rang over everyone's comp set informing those not near glasteel hull sections that the ship was not under attack. Keokuk looked out on a brilliant star blazing mint green light.

He wandered the ship to keep his mind off the tension. *Thunder Lizard* was an atypical outrider ship. The crew compartments were more spacious than the body tank warrior's compartments. Two to a room with beds and a desk as compared to six berths to a room for the body tank warriors. There was a large gym area for the troops and a huge common room in the center of the ship where crew and body tank warriors could workout and socialize.

Part of the AmerIndian Confederacy's commitment to fighting BTL addiction was to encourage old traditional games such as pool and darts. The ship was also equipped with a shooting and archery range. Keokuk was surprised to see the common room relatively empty. He realized most of the tribal warriors were sitting quietly, waiting for action.

Every Apache troop on the ship knew Wovoka and the members of his pack, Obsidian Alpha. Wovoka's Infiltrator pack had laid the groundwork for many of their mercenary operation. Wovoka was respected and each Apache warrior now eagerly awaited the opportunity to help him. Keokuk considered what they would find. According to an Acolyte, the chunnel would be closed by now and Keokuk knew there was not enough equipment on this ship to build two kilometers of chunnel.

If the Trighter had made it through the chunnel this would be a quick mission. The most likely outcome, Keokuk thought, would be to find the Trighter had not made it through and Obsidian Alpha was still trapped on Naanac. Keokuk found his walk had led him to the ship's bridge. Keokuk entered the bridge. Captain Squahana recognized him and did not shoo him out. He thankfully stood quietly behind the Nez Perce cross-worker pilot.

Naanac grew larger by the moment. The ship's speed became evident as the planet filled the main window. The pilot veered the ship sharply into orbit twenty kilometers above the Free Mantle.

"Scan for life signs and watch for AC hailing signals," the captain ordered.

Keokuk saw nothing below but the pandemonium of the Free Mantle. There were no obvious signs of a ship battle but Naanac had a circumference of eleven thousand kilometers. A great deal of area to search.

"Dispatch all eight Obsidian Tigers. Set six on concentric search patterns around the planet, have the other two, Rogue Four and Six, flank the ship at five hundred clicks where they can keep an eye on us."

Jet Tigers were the AmerIndian Confederacy's workhorse fighters. Thirty years old, the Jet Tigers were mainstay fighters from the Periphery campaigns of the 2160's. They were heavy and slow compared to today's fighters but they ran forever on little maintenance and carried standard four conventional lasers, two under-wing bombs and a rail gun under the nose. Keokuk watched as some of the Jet Tigers arched away from *Thunder Lizard*. Keokuk piggybacked the pilots comp set. Two graphics appeared on his lenses, each a flat bar in a circle. If sensors detected life signs or hailing signals the bar would spike.

Keokuk knew in ideal situations the bars would remain static until something was detected, but the interference from the Free Mantle made the bars jump and small spikes appeared every few seconds. The sensors would be useless. Captain Squahana finger tapped down the sensors and ordered troops to set up watch at every glasteel hull section on the ship facing the Free Mantle. An hour passed with nothing found and Keokuk began to wonder what the chances were Wovoka and his pack were still on Naanac.

Four more long hours passed before Keokuk heard, "Rogue three to Mother, copy tango 659342. Center in. I have found objective. I have found objective."

"Thank you, Jesus," Keokuk said.

He felt the movement of the ship as it veered toward the coordinates. Keokuk forced himself not to rush as he made his way down to the main airlock, a large circular set of doors that split along the middle and rolled back along the hull sections. Six body tank warriors crammed into the airlock. Keokuk watched as the second set of doors hissed open and the warriors floated out randomly then locked in their boosters and shot away. It seemed like forever to Keokuk before anyone returned. Two body tank warriors appeared in the window carrying another body tank. The contrast between the suits was striking. The two *Thunder Lizard* body tanks gleamed bright red and their caution lights blinked brightly. All of the paint had been scraped off the body tank they were holding. It was covered in dents and the left caution light blinked dimly while the other remained off.

Keokuk could not tell who was in the body tank due to the absence of any markings. Two medics ran up to the body tank, putting down ready packs and quickly threw the latches. They pulled away the top half of the body tank and Keokuk approached and barely recognized Wolf Plume when he saw him. His hair and beard were soaked with perspiration and yet his lips were dry, cracked, and bleeding. He drank just a small bit of water the medics gave him and looked at Keokuk.

"Spasibo," he said. Keokuk nodded, "Drink, Wolf Plume. Drink." More body tank warriors brought in Cavaho, who refused to sit and got out of his body tank without assistance, despite his obvious weariness. Wovoka was the next to be brought in. They open his body tank and offered him water, which he pushed away.

"Squahana, thank you, thank you. Now please get us back to the Steel Circle. I have urgent business there."

Squahana cocked his head, he was not used to Infiltrators telling him when and where to take his ship, but for some reason he did not question Wovoka. Just nodded and commanded his 'gator to start running the numbers through the navcomp to get back to the Steel Circle. Keokuk helped Wovoka to his feet. Wovoka stumbled forward.

"Wovoka, slow down. You have to rest a moment. We still have to wait for Slow Turtle. Last as always."

Wovoka looked Keokuk in the eye.

Keokuk had never seen what he saw now in his brother's eyes, utter devastation. It shocked him and he stepped back.

Tears started and Wovoka broke down into deep uncontrolled sobbing. Keokuk was frightened by what he saw because it was completely without precedence.

The last body tank warrior pulled Slow Turtle's suit into the ship and the medics threw open the suit exposing only a corpse. Keokuk lost breath. He had seen Wovoka and his pack return from dozens of missions. He had seen them come back battered, beaten, and bleeding, but always alive. One mission had sent Cavaho back with a three-inch tree limb shoved through his shoulder. The meds had patched him up and he was back with the pack in a week. Keokuk had begun to believe in the pack's invulnerability. He now remembered what Wolf Plume had once told him, "There are only two reasons any of us are alive; our ability to work as a pack and Wovoka's skill as a leader."

Keokuk helped the medics carry Wovoka, limp, to an officer's quarters, trying to get him to drink as they went. Wovoka sipped lightly at the water letting half of it spill on the floor. The medics put Wovoka down on the bed.

"Leave," Wovoka said in a raspy voice.

The medics and Keokuk all looked at each other, none of them sure whom Wovoka was talking to.

"I need to speak to my brother."

"Pack Alpha, we must tend to your -"

"Leave," Wovoka's insisted.

The medics left and Keokuk remained silent. He felt confused, not knowing how to handle what was happening.

"Keokuk. I lost Slow Turtle. I lost..." Suddenly the power was gone and Keokuk only saw a boy. His little brother, in pain. For the first time in thirteen years he stepped toward his brother and spread his arm. He embraced him.

"It's all right, Wovoka. It is all right. Slow Turtle is not lost. He is not lost."

Wovoka wept and Keokuk held him tighter.

PART TWO: CONQUEST

2179 - *Surface of UDA Colony Planet, White Earth*

David Stone Rain knew when he uttered the words that he was ordering the death of six tribals. "Hold position Eagle One. Break out the heavies, do not let Outriders pass your position."

The fat tires of the King Rat combat buggy spun chunks of healthy green grass and moist brown soil as Stone Rain's driver swerved hard to avoid a large rut in the path to the planet gun.

"Papa Eagle, this is Egg One. Breaking out heavies now. We are moving in to cut UDA body tank troops short. Make it count."

Stone Rain shook his head as the King Rat sailed over a bluff. He ignored the maelstrom of violence that surrounded him and his driver and refocused his eyes to the comp set he wore. He saw an overhead view of the battlefield. He finger tapped and his keying bands read the movement and adjust the view on his comp set. "Egg Two and Seven, move now to point 07634. Hover tank, moving in. All units increase spread by 150 meters. Air strike will hit in two minutes, forty seconds."

Stone Rain was pleased to see his go-team was now half a kilometer from the planet gun. He tried to ignore the fact that a dozen small icons blinked off in the little time he had the overview off. A tap of his fingers cut off the overview and with a quick fluid motion, Stone Rain raised his Sledge Lawbringer. He finger tapped a link to the weapon into his comp set and locked onto a fast moving UDA scout vehicle after fifteen seconds of frenzied tracking. When the scout vehicle was suddenly surrounded by bright blinking brackets he squeezed the fire button. The Lawbringer kicked. Stone Rain did not bothering to watch the bolt of energy burn a path to and through the vehicle.

The King Rat was now sliding sideways as the driver adjusted his course to avoid a large area of jutting rocks. Stone Rain took in the beautiful landscape of White Earth. The grassy plain the King Rat now sped over was part of a six hundred kilometer square vacation dude ranch enjoyed by the UDA elite. The entire planet was covered by posh entertainment resorts in varying guises built by and for the UDA elite.

The ground shook as the planet gun rocked off a blazing shaft of hard light. Stone Rain's comp set automatically dimmed to lessen the brief blindness the flash caused. Far above, a lodge ship's aft section exploded into shards of plasteel, destroyed electronics and scattered bodies. The massive ship's engine continued to surge it forward until it careened slowly toward White Earth atmosphere where it would burn to thousands of small wet plasteel globules.

"Papa Eagle, this is Egg Six..." Static jumped across the link as UDA jammers scrambled the feed. A few seconds later when the AmerIndians ciphers defeated the jammers, Stone Rain caught the message repeat. "Approaching Goliath now. We have adequate support fire. Pack will be in position in thirty seconds. Additional twenty seconds for HE plant. Suggest you pull in the transport now. Echo back, Papa Eagle."

Stone rain leaned in into his driver as the Rat King slid across the top of a low hill. "Just the way we practiced it, Egg Six. I'm pulling the transport to us so it's got to be done now. No second shot. The UDA air support is close." Stone Rain tapped his fingers and switched frequencies. "Red Tomahawk, Mescelero and Speckled Snake. Full Evac now on my coordinates." A tap of the finger and he opened all units frequency. "All units rally back to Papa Eagle. Evac in two minutes, fifty seconds -"

Stone Rain whipped his head back as he heard the distinct wail of the UDA Wraiths. Long, slim, black fighters swooped low. They strafed the ground in a tight pattern. The six Wraiths were on a path that took them four or five kilometers south of Stone Rain. His comp set was clear of information. He knew

if he accessed the unit tracker dozens of icons would be blinking off as the fighters mowed down his men. A brief relief came to him as the Wraiths raced past the range of his men and he caught sight of AmerIndian Confederacy Jet Tigers screaming ahead of the transports. His relief died quickly as two Wraiths cut hard and headed straight toward his King Rat.

One fighter burned ahead of the other and began spraying hard light a kilometer before it reached the King Rat. Stone Rain knew the tactic. His driver was now wheeling the buggy around to avoid the approaching fire. The following wingman would watch where the King Rat ran and pin the buggy down. Stone Rain, however, kept his mouth shut knowing his driver was aware of the fighter's plan. The driver would get them out or he wouldn't. The tires sprayed soil and grass in every direction as the driver tried desperately to put them over the next hill. The driver yelled, "We're locked, BAIL!"

The driver finger tapped and their restraint harnesses released automatically. The two dove from the King Rat as it sailed over the edge of the hill. The hard light cannon of the following Wraith blazed, one beam catching the King Rat at the apex of its jump. The King Rat shattered like a glass balloon. Stone Rain hit the ground hard, his bones slamming into his muscles and lungs. He rolled and before he came to a rest he felt a sharp pain run from his lower stomach to his back. He stopped rolling and could not move as his body scrambled to refill his lungs with air.

From where he lay Stone Rain could see the stars. They were beautiful. Everything on White Earth was beautiful. Colored flashes passed from point to point in the sky, AC lodge ships firing on UDA colony ships. Stone Rain began to become aware of the intense pain in his abdomen. It struck him as his blood flowed onto the White Earth plains that he would rather continue to lay and watch the beautiful stars above than sit up and see the piece of ferroplast roll bar that jutted from his stomach.

The stars were gone. Stone Rain recognized the soft light of overhead glowplast. The hallway zoomed by. Even at this speed, with tribals running at the sides of his gurney, Stone Rain could tell he was not on an Apache lodge ship. The bright, carved, curved symbols of shaman magic told him he was on the Haida lodge ship. A sharp right and the gurney entered the medicine house of Morningstar Prax, chief of the Haida and the AmerIndian Confederacy's most skilled Shaman Healer. He could smell the healing herbs and feel the power in the room.

Morningstar's harshly attractive features filled his view. "Attention, warrior. Awaken, Stone Rain. Your battle is not over." Morningstar clapped her hands in his face. It startled Stone Rain and the realization that his body was broken flooded back. Pain assaulted him.

Stone Rain heard the deep, resonant chanting of Morningstar's assistants. Morningstar was now moving her hands in smooth, slow arcs. Stone Rain could feel his blood flowing out of him, slower now. He could hear each drop hit the plasteel floor below. A moment of chanting and ritual passed and Morningstar moved back in. She lowered her hands to Stone Rain's abdomen. He felt her power as she pulled the rollbar fragment out of him.

Morningstar turned, handing the bloody ferroplast to an assistant. She closed her eyes, letting sound of the drums refill her soul with healing power. As she did this, one of her assistants injected Stone Rain and shunted a medicinal lead into his forearm. He could see the pain on Morningstar's face as he watched her gather more power than she could safely contain. Her hands came down again to his body and he was consumed by raw, unabated energy that pulled and wove at his wound. Morningstar fell back, spent and dazed. Two assistants rushed to her side. Stone Rain felt energy, winding, spinning at the imperfections of his body. As the healing began Stone Rain understood the Haida's work more clearly.

Morningstar's healing power did not mend and recreate, it simply vitalized the healing forces within his body. As the magic searched for vitality to be strengthened, there was little to be found. Too much of his essence lay on a dark patch of grass back on White Earth, too much soaked the gurney and floor beneath him. Stone Rain knew he was about to die. "My fam- family..."

The lead assistant stepped forward. "No, warrior. We can heal you. Lie still, but do not surrender."

"No." His voice was laced with weakness. "Bring them to me."

Peshlakai rushed forward. "I am here, brave. Your sons as well." His wife, a dark, striking beauty, spoke quickly, as she did when she was upset.

Stone Rain grabbed her hand. "Th- Thank you, Peshlakai." He squeezed her fingers but there was no force in the gesture. Weakness from a man who had always been her strength made her erupt in tears. Her one and only love lay broken before her.

"I lo- I lo-" he stammered at the words and there was more than the gaping wound that kept him from saying them.

"I know, brave. I know." Peshlakai kissed his forehead. He had never been good at any point in their seventeen years of marriage at expressing his love to her in words. But he had told her one thousand times in his faithfulness, hard work and physical touch.

"My sons..."

Maria nodded and kissed him once again. His lips were growing cold. Two boys stepped forward. Despite the four years difference between the two they were the same height. The similarities ended there. Keokuk, the older son, was heavy and his head was shaved in the style of the Tsimshian codejack. Wovoka, only twelve, was well muscled, lean, and his black hair was long and straight. He wore the black Apache uniform, festooned with the weapons harness, pockets and clips of an Infiltrator.

Stone Rain again reached out. Wovoka took his hand immediately. Keokuk did not move. "Wovoka, son..." He coughed and shuddered with the sheer impact of the action. "I am proud of what you are and I am proud of what you will be. Did my force take the planet gun?"

"Yes, father. G Spec's pack leveled it with the ape load. Evac brought back fifty-six percent of the force."

Stone Rain pulled himself forward with tremendous effort. "Good, Good. I believe I earned my second name today. I would have earned Great Brother status today. When Coganthan passed on I would..."

"No father, you will be chief of the Apache. Let the shaman use her power..."

"No, Wovoka. I pass to the great river today. I am not afraid. But I have failed in my life vision. I have failed in my service to the Apache, in my service to Elder Weaver. But you will not fail, Wovoka. You are smarter, stronger, faster than I ever was." Stone Rain stopped. Tears rolled from his eyes. Peshlakai gasped because it was the only time she had ever seen him shed a tear. "You are beautiful, my son. You will carry our family to great heights in the AC. Now swear to me son. Swear that you will complete what I started. That you will become chief of the Apache."

"Father," Wovoka hesitated, tears streamed down his face as he searched for the words to tell his father that he was only a boy. As he looked down on the man who had served the AmerIndian Confederacy tirelessly every day of Wovoka's life, he could find no such words. "I will be chief of the Apache. I swear this to you and Wakonda. I will complete what you have started. I will claim what you have earned."

Stone Rain leaned up and pulled Wovoka to him, kissing his cheek. He held on to Wovoka and Wovoka straightened, pulling his father upright. A patch of dark red grew around his stomach again as the bleeding intensified from his movement.

"Keokuk." Keokuk did not move. He watched his father. "Your choices shame our family. In one harvest you will become a tribal. Your mother and brother will need you. You must stay with the Apache tribe. Continue playing your tech games if you choose, but you must join the Apache. Swear to me that you will not betray my memory. Swear to me you will not join the Tsimshian. Swear to me that you will serve the Apache honorably under your brother's leadership."

Keokuk stood motionless. No tears formed in his eyes. They were burned away by his hatred. He did not answer. The silence grew thick and arid.

"Swear it!" His father shouted and he fell forward coughing blood onto Wovoka's uniform.

"I swear that I will join the Apache and not the Tsimshian tribe. This I swear to you and Wakonda." Keokuk stared at the husk of the man before him with contempt.

"Good, good."

Stone Rain let go of his life. Wovoka howled in rage and his mother wailed, falling to her knees. Morningstar hung her head. Keokuk turned his back and walked out of the room.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

One by one, sixty-four UDA ships surged into the Carina Galaxy. They loomed like a school of sharks above Outpost Laharl 642. An oblong shape resembling a fat potato, the sixteen hundred kilometer ice chunk blazed a bright white marbled light. Chaotic gasses whipped across its surface, carrying sharp, deadly shards of ice. Surprisingly, the outpost had been terraformed along its topside and now served as plush get-away for those in the UDA elite who enjoyed the game of golf. Outpost Laharl 642 was noted as the best outpost course in all of core space and rivaled mediocre courses on Earth.

Lige gave standing orders to his first and was aboard his shuttle, *Tiberius*, in moments. It appeared that the entire staff of the Calgas golf course was lined up in neat rows to greet him. They applauded as Lige tramped down the ramp. Jaret followed close behind him. Lige stopped for a moment and waved in a friendly manner to those gathered. A man in a brilliant white suit came forward and clasped his hand.

Jaret looked up taking in the gorgeous view, stars shining through the atmosphere dome. Jaret then scanned the hundreds of workers in front of him.

"Admiral Lige, we have eagerly anticipated your arrival. President Sullivan is waiting. Please, if you will follow me." The man in white turned and led the way.

The group walked briskly through the employees flanking them on both sides. All smiled brightly at Lige, particularly the women. Jaret kept pace. They were approaching the end of the employees and were about to enter a tunnel that led down into the hotel sections of the outpost.

Jaret saw the frowns on the faces of the employees being pushed. A young woman wearing the same white outfit as the rest was breaking forward. He could not see the pistol but he knew it was there. He whirled, his hand reaching behind him. The young woman was screaming now, "Libre-."

Employees were now diving away from her. The boom of the hand cannon roared and an employee screamed as his foot exploded. Then there was stillness.

Jaret stood motionless with his diamond-coated katana in both hands. The girl's forearm and hand, clenching the pistol, lay on the ground where it twitched trying again to pull the trigger. The girl's yell halted and she stared as blood fountained out of her arm.

Everyone surged away and into action. Employees were surrounding Lige to protect him. Jaret drew his pistol and stood waiting for a second attempt. None came.

The greeter was now stammering, "Admiral, we can not extend the full extent of our apologies. We do everything we can to hire only productive, loyal UDA citizens. What can we do to make up for this catastrophe?"

Lige laughed and stepped around the man to get a better look at Jaret's handiwork. "And they said these things were antiquated." Lige indicated the long gleaming katana Jaret now wiped with a cloth proffered by one of the employees.

"As you have drilled into our troops, my Lord, it is not the weapon that kills, it is the skill," Jaret said as he returned the katana to the sheath on his back.

The greeter licked Lige's boots a bit more while the medics scrambled to stop the torrent of blood that sprayed from the girl's severed arm. Lige began to walk again and said quietly to the greeter, "You asked what you could do to make up for the insult I have received today. It would save the UDA taxpayers much credit if that assassin were not afforded the liberty of a trial. Perhaps your medics could be persuaded to work at the efficiency they use on their own enemies."

The greeter seemed upset for a moment. This was not within the scope of his usual duties, but soon he smiled and said, "I'll see what I can do." The

employees had now lost their usual smile and a few carried worried grins. Now almost as many eyes were on Jaret as Lige. The tunnel leading below was mirrored and Lige walked quickly on the moving autowalk. Soon they were in the unparalleled opulence of a five star hotel. The elevators featured the latest model wall screens showing fly-over scenes of Outpost Laharl 642's golf course. They arrived at the seventh underground level.

Lige and Jaret were led into a ballroom, geometric shapes and figures played on the wall screens. Lige pointed nonchalantly to a point on the wall and Jaret posted himself there. In the center of the room was a small table draped in white cloth. President Sullivan sat quietly waiting. He rose as Lige approached and extended his hand. Lige ignored it and went to the opposite seat at the table.

The greeter gave up any hopes of exchanging pleasantries with the President and hurried from the room. President Sullivan lost the cheerful demeanor and sat. He opened his mouth to speak and Lige raised his finger and glared.

Lige spoke evenly. "Vincent, you are a politician, a bureaucrat. You have reached the highest level of that profession and you probably believe that you wield a considerable measure of power. Fifty billion citizens are affected by your decisions and yet when it comes right down to it, you are prey. You are where you are because certain men wish you to be there. These men, myself included, are predators. Understand what you are and what I am and listen carefully to my words. Do not threaten me. How many men have you seen me personally grind beneath my boot? Do you honestly believe that there are any less than a dozen ways I can strip you of your power in less than one week?"

Sullivan shook with rage. "How dare you..."

With that Lige reached across the table and slapped Sullivan across the face, hard. Sullivan, stunned, did not speak for a moment. Then he roared, "Arrest this man."

His bodyguards did not move.

"I gave you an order," Sullivan said weakly, surprised.

Lige was out of his seat. He grabbed Sullivan by the hair and yanked his face toward himself. "Your guards are supplied by me, the best of my best. They are soldiers with little tolerance for your weakness. Who do you think trained them? Who controls their military destinies? You do not give orders, politician. I, Admiral Lige, do. I have ordered these men to protect your life with their own. They are not acting now because they know I have no intention of killing you today. You know I control three quarters of the UDA army. What would make you think your cadre of men would escape my grasp?"

He threw Sullivan forward and his head bounced off the table with a clatter of steel and porcelain. Lige sat.

Sullivan was crying. Lige waited. "Now I believe we have taken stock of the true nature of our relationship. There is no need for this to ever happen again. I need you to calm yourself. We have some matters of importance to discuss."

Sullivan did what he was told. "Lige, please, I need to know what is going on with my daughter."

Lige's face changed and he showed compassion. "I know where your daughter is. She is with the Confederacy and I can retrieve her at any time."

Sullivan pleaded, "Then please for God's sake, do so."

"Vincent, what purpose would it possibly serve? What I told you I expected is true. Alexa joined the AC of her own volition. She seems to be deeply involved with some Brule red skin. If I brought her back she would only try to escape. She would be a serious embarrassment to you. Thank God the media doesn't know where she is. Frankly with my resources in the AC I can keep her under closer watch and safer where she is now than if I brought her back. But I know you and Theresa miss her. I have an operative working now to make it so she

will want to come back. Her red skin is a demolition man. He may become accident-prone on one of his upcoming missions. And there are other sources I have that will persuade her that the AC is not her home. Look, I brought you photos of Alexa."

Lige presented Sullivan with three photos on his slate. The pictures had been carefully edited to make sure there was no way to tell they were over two months old. Sullivan looked at the photos, frowning at the red skin soldier draped over his daughter like a cape. He grimaced at the broad smile on her face. "These are two weeks old. Don't worry, Vincent. I am confident we can have your daughter back, by her own choice, in a matter of months."

Sullivan appeared to be about to spit some sarcastic remark at Lige, but thoughtfully held his tongue. Lige continued, "Let's discuss the White Earth matter. The censor bureau has failed completely in controlling citizen sentiment for the AC. The media reporters love them because they give them deliciously bloody vid. We took the angle of demonizing the AC and the citizens warmed to them from a mistrust of UDA media. When we try to ignore the AC the independent producers point out this fact and use the vids to soar their own ratings. Our victory over the AC does not lie in the media. It lies in military annihilation. My sources inform me Elder Stormseeker is now preparing battle plans for the spring to try again to take White Earth. I have expressed our need to do everything we can to encourage Stormseeker's war plans. As we have discussed I need your appropriations committee to grant me five hundred million creds for fifty Hellfire systems and a Nuc Catapult to be built on White Earth. How are we progressing on that front?"

Sullivan picked up a fork and played with it. "Gavon, I have enough pull for perhaps thirty-five of the sixty votes needed, but the preservationists will go nuts if this goes public."

"We can keep this under wraps for four months," Lige answered.

"This could ruin me if it gets out. Conventional and nuclear weapons have been banned on all colonies, you know that," Sullivan whined.

"You have to remember we are dealing with a major threat to our government. The AC has rebuilt itself in the last thirteen years. If we had not massacred them at White Earth, then how strong would they be now? How strong will they be in another decade? You know the answer to that question. Neither the masses nor the political body understand the danger they pose. The masses see them as a romantic band of space pirates living in hippie love harmony. UDA elites are too focused on their own concerns to care. In reality the AC is a violent, uncontrolled cult and we must put it down. I am not asking you to do something unethical, Vincent. I am asking you to embrace the most ethical choice, to save the people from themselves. Appropriate the funds any way you can. I will take care of the rest. By this time next spring White Earth will be a planet arsenal and the AC will be no more of a threat than AIM was two hundred years ago."

Lige stood still and smiled at Sullivan. "Don't worry Vincent. All for the best, no?"

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Thunder Lizard pulled in slowly to the clamping mechanism of *Cold Pyre*, the only lodge ship of the Brule. *Cold Pyre*, true to Brule nature was a stark, simple lodge ship. The Brule were the AmerIndian Confederacy's elite ground warriors, the entire tribe obsessively dedicated to the art of warfare. Celetain Prax made her home on *Cold Pyre*. Elders were not allowed to live on the lodge ship of their respective tribe, a practice that helped each Elder be a fair arbiter.

Wovoka, Cavaho, Wolf Plume and Keokuk all first approached the airlock. Word had been sent to *Thunder Lizard* as soon as it was through the correspondence plane that Celetain Prax wished to speak to Wovoka before he

returned to *Iron Bow*. The airlock hissed open and the pack walked on to *Cold Pyre*.

Celetain stood waiting for him, dressed in a tight hunter green suede suit. Around the sleeves of her jacket and around her pant leg twisted a band of neon colored runes. Her comp set shifted the runes' colors from blue to pink to bright silver. She brushed her straight black hair back away from her round, almond face. Six acolytes stood behind her in the same garb. None carried a weapon or wore any jewelry. They were a perfect AmerIndian Confederacy mix; two true bloods, one Caucasian, a Hispanic and an African. Celetain did not smile, did not speak, simply turned and walked.

Wovoka looked at Keokuk, shrugged and followed Celetain. They made their way through the halls of the Brule lodge ship. In other lodge ships the halls were well-lit, little children played tag and older tribals sat out on cartons playing cards or chess or arguing over politics or showing old war wounds. The Brule lodge ship hallways were dark save for bright red direction beacons. The halls were empty, no playing children. In one area they passed a large gym. Below dozens of tribal warriors screamed and fought a mock battle with coupsticks. Wovoka grabbed the nearest auto-ladder and hung on while it took him down fifty levels. When they finally stopped they were close to the huge hanger door of Celetain's workshop.

Celetain waved her hand in front of the door and the massive breaker rolled back. Keokuk and Wovoka entered a large dark room empty of furniture, equipment, decoration. After everyone was inside, Celetain walked to the center of the room. It was dark except for the dim light that came in from the hallway. When Celetain stopped the floor flashed with a circle of Haida symbols that matched some of those on her suit. She looked at Wovoka and Keokuk. "Come into the circle."

She was both beautiful and frightening to Wovoka. Cavaho, Wolf Plume, and Keokuk all walked into the circle after Wovoka. The Acolytes walked around the circle, each stopping at a designated point. Wovoka thought back remembering Celetain's mother, Morningstar, who had been chief of the Haida and the most powerful shaman in Confederacy history. Wovoka clearly remembered her failed attempt to save his father thirteen short years ago.

Morningstar was sought after to heal many ailments and her advised on matters of the future had been respected. But Celetain Prax had taken her mother's practice of shamanism to a new level with Cybershamanism. Celetain's digitized library of symbols, chant and new magical techniques formed a strange mystical mixture of shamanism, sorcery and cybernetics. Most of the old shamans had rebuked her saying what she did was not of the old ways, not AmerIndian. She had countered that she was pureblood AmerIndian and that her new magic was therefore inherently AmerIndian.

Traditional shaman magic had been passive; fevers cured over a matter of hours with herbs and chants. Celetain's magic was blatant; bullets pulled from wounds by insects or snakes and no scar left in an hour or two. And like so many of the AmerIndian Confederacy's pursuits the UDA world had embraced the successes. The media loved Celetain and presented her as the "Cybershaman Prophet". The UDA media was not wrong to do so. Celetain had already showed she could indeed tell the future. But for all her dark ways, her diversions from tradition, she was nonetheless a beautiful, intelligent woman who cared for the AmerIndian Confederacy and had proved to be a good leader.

Now Wovoka could see many of the rumors he had heard were true. What was most frightening about Celetain's magic was the difficulty in determining what was real and what was not. Hard light displays had made illusions child's play. Celetain channeled spirits back to speak with those left behind, but some wondered if the hard light displays that were often found in work areas provided more than simple room lighting and ready comp data. When a Kichai dealer had called her a fake she had touched his chest and dozens of snakes had

slithered from underneath his shirt. He had screamed like a child and her detractors had kept their distance for a while.

"Comana Hena, he!" The acolytes sung softly in unison and the room changed from the dark empty visage of a storage bay to the grey mossy fertile ground of Naanac. Huge trees sprung up from the ground bearing massive grey leaves. Wovoka looked at his feet and saw a reptilian squirrel-like creature. What Wovoka was viewing was an incredible likeness of Naanac. The program was superb.

Celetain's top comp jockey was Sliver. The tall, thin Caucasian had made a name for himself by creating the Calamari Judas virus, a nasty comp program that performed hit-and-run lobotomies on navcomp systems. The UDA fleet had been grounded for six weeks while every UDA military navcomp was sterilized. Fourteen UDA colony ships and thirty-seven UDA prime ships disappeared after their comps used scrambled data in their correspondence codes. Infected UDA ships were sent to the far-flung corners of the universe. Only three of those ships were able to get back to a colony or outpost. UDA citizens speculated the other ships were still making random firings, hoping to come close to core space.

Something was wrong. Wovoka felt misty rain on his face. He brushed his hand across his cheek. His hand was wet, covered with cold water. Hard light displays could not do that. He watched as a tiny drop of water hit a leaf, rolled to its tip and splashed on his outspread hand. He shook his head, amazed. In a flash, the acolytes disappeared. Wovoka could see Keokuk was flustered and he walked over and put his hand on his shoulder.

"It's all right," he whispered.

Keokuk spat, "She's a witch. It was all true."

Wovoka shook his head. "She is a shaman, Keokuk. Nothing more and nothing less. And she is our Elder. You have nothing to fear."

Celetain turned. She stood a few meters away and looked directly at Wovoka. "Are you prepared?"

Wovoka looked at Keokuk for a moment. He shrugged.

Wovoka turned back to Celetain. "Yes, Elder, I am prepared. I will tell the Elder Council what I saw, the whole of the Vision. I will assist in whatever way I can in whatever decision the Elders decide."

Celetain moved closer to Wovoka. "Wovoka, do you understand what you saw?"

"Yes, I saw what Naanac is."

"And what is Naanac?"

"It is the Homeland. It is the land for which we have searched for seven hundred years."

Keokuk, Wolf Plume and Cavaho looked at each other.

"And what part do you believe you will play in the events that are about to unfold?"

"I, uh... I will tell the vision to the Elders. The Elders will take the vision to the tribals. There will be a period of preparation for war. Wolf Plume says we should be ready for war again in another two or three years. By then I am confident my pack will be widely known from our successes. Perhaps I am over confident, Elder, but I believe by that time I could be in command of the Apache Tribe, their chief. I believe I will be an integral part in the Apache's service to claim Naanac."

Celetain smiled broadly. "You understand much and little. Quarana, Que hasani," Celetain's voice rose and took on an echo. All of her clothes turned white as well as her hair and skin. The gentle brown of her eyes disappeared and she stared at Wovoka with blank white orbs. "You will be an integral part of our victory for you are the prophesied one, the White Buffalo. You will lead our people to Naanac and claim the Homeland."

Suddenly, her eyes swirled with colors and Wovoka stepped back. In an instant her vision was his and he saw himself standing on a field on Naanac as a battle raged around him. Hundreds were dying. He saw himself ordering thousands

more to their graves and the grey mossy patches he saw were replaced with the color of blood. Now he could see Celetain again. Her eyes still blank, white.

Celetain reached out and put her hand over his face, pulling softly. When she removed her hand his face was covered with gold war paint. "You are the White Buffalo. You will deal a mighty blow to the UDA and the AmerIndian Confederacy will inhabit Naanac before three days pass."

Wovoka's mind raced. The White Buffalo, three days. It was impossible.

Celetain moved on as Wovoka reeled from her words. She approached Keokuk, her hand covering his face just as she had done to Wovoka. She pulled her slender hands away and Keokuk's face was covered in green war paint. "You will be the White Buffalo's mind. You will temper his anger with wisdom and you will lay many obstacles low before his path."

She moved to Wolf Plume and drew his war face. "You will be the White Buffalo's eyes. Traps will be shown to you and Wovoka will see that which the enemy has hidden for decades."

At Cavaho, Celetain hesitated, her hand hovering close to his face. Reflexively, Cavaho raised his hands to stop her from touching him. Her hand turned and suddenly Cavaho's arms were flung back. She grasped his face tightly and he struggled against unseen forces holding him. "You will be the White Buffalo's weapon, for you are the destroyer. You will spread your pain like a plague and hundreds of thousands will die at your touch." She released him and the two stared at each other for a moment.

Rage played across Cavaho's face and she stared back blankly. Then she fell. Celetain collapsed to the mossy ground and when she hit with a thud the Naanac scenery melted and the large room was back, the symbols swirling on the floor.

Five of the six acolytes rushed to Celetain, swarming around her and tending her. Sliver stepped forward nodding to Keokuk. He then addressed all of them. "We must get you ready. You speak tonight." He then walked out into the hall.

Reluctantly the four followed. Wovoka had fallen behind and was obviously processing what he had been told. He lagged behind and Sliver was about to turn and wait for him when Keokuk stepped next to him and maintained a quick pace. "I noticed, Sliver, that you did not mention to Wovoka that Bear Vajo's prophesy also says that once the White Buffalo leads the people to the Homeland, he will be banished."

Sliver looked warily behind them and saw that Wovoka was still absorbed in his thoughts. "No, it does not say that he will be banished. Perhaps 'set apart' from the tribes for a time."

Keokuk glared. "Is that how you interpret 'he will be sent away from the Red Man in shame, cast out for as long as the winds blow and rivers flow'?"

"I was told you were a Christian. How do you know the prophecies?"

"I am a Christian because I have studied many religions, not because I am ignorant of them."

"This is not a concern, I assure you. Celetain will explain our view on that particular section of the prophecy to you later."

Keokuk shook his head and became silent as Sliver led them deeper to the center of the Brule lodge ship. The few Brule warriors that crossed their path turned and stared at Sliver's white robes with questions on their faces. He directed the group into a well-lit room. Plush leather couches and chairs sat in the center surrounded by books and scrolls that lined the wall. Keokuk recognized the room as Celetain's library. The books and scrolls, rare and ancient texts from Earth, were worth millions of UDA creds. No one sat.

Wolf Plume spoke first. "What in the name of Wambli is going on?"

Sliver mumbled in old Navaho, "It is as the Elder has foreseen."

"What are you saying?" Wolf Plume growled.

"Celetain believes that Wovoka is the White Buffalo. She believes Naanac is the Homeland foretold of in the prophecies of Bear Vajo. Celetain sees that tonight Wovoka will convince the Elder Council to wage war against the UDA in order to capture Naanac in the next three days."

Wolf Plume stroked at his beard, "'The land where the sun, the moon and the stars will be blocked from sight day and night and yet the sky will sparkle like gold dust.' Da, I can see why she thinks Naanac is the fulfillment of Bear Vajo's prophecies."

Keokuk ignored Wolf Plume's musings, "Wage war? Do you mean a full campaign, an invasion? The AmerIndian Confederacy is not prepared for that, we are still not fully recovered from the White Earth Massacre. Wovoka is a twenty-six year old Infiltrator Pack Alpha. He is going to have trouble fighting other Infiltrator packs for a decent replacement for the man he lost. What on sacred Earth makes Celetain think the AmerIndian Confederacy would follow Wovoka anywhere?"

Sliver sat in a plush leather chair and motioned for the rest to do the same. None of them did. "One question at a time. First, we are ready for war. For the past three years Stormseeker has been gathering all the pieces for the second assault on White Earth. He plans to announce the assault on White Earth soon. Celetain has foreseen that plan will fail and she will not allow it. We have grown too large to surprise the UDA with virtually any plan. Only a fast unpredictable strike will work against them now. Celetain wishes to use Stormseeker's preparations for White Earth to take Naanac immediately. Her reasons for this are many. The mercenary work we have done over the last thirteen years has made us ready for war but if we continue down that path any longer it will corrupt us. We are ready to take Naanac. Your next question is how Celetain believes anyone will follow Wovoka. They will follow Wovoka because he is the White Buffalo. He received the true vision and Celetain recognizes it for what it is. The obstacles to his leadership can be overcome."

Wolf Plume asked, "Celetain's prophecy? Is it destined to occur despite whatever we choose?"

Cavaho cocked his head at this question, obviously interested in the answer.

"No. What she showed you is one path. It is the only path to a Homeland for the AmerIndian Confederacy in this century. What she saw will only occur if you each play the role that has been set before you, if you make the necessary sacrifices. We are looking at a window of opportunity. If we act with courage and determination we can make those foreseen events a reality. If any of you turns away, refuses the mask given to you, the window will close. But how many more generations of AmerIndians will be doomed to live as homeless star wanderers?"

Cavaho turned his back to that answer. He slammed his fist against the hard mahogany bookshelves, making a dull thud.

Keokuk continued, "So what do we do now?"

"First, Wovoka must speak to the AmerIndian Confederacy and tell them what he has seen and where he will take them. We have something that may help to that end. Wolf Plume and Cavaho, the acolytes have some issues you should be aware of, so please go with Simonqua."

The door slid open at Sliver's gesture and an acolyte waited quietly for them. Both Wolf Plume and Cavaho looked at Wovoka. He nodded and they exited.

"Wovoka, would you like some water, sun brewed-tea, milk?"

"Water please," Wovoka said. Keokuk agreed and Sliver rose to get the drinks.

"What you are about to do will appear to many to be a dangerous mixture of heresy and treason. Frankly, your action will waylay the plans of powerful individuals in the AmerIndian Confederacy. Claiming that Naanac, an isolated, distant swamp planet, is the true Homeland of the AmerIndian Confederacy, not

Earth, the birthplace and sacred ground of the original tribes, will upset many tribals. I can assure you, however, there is no other way. The Confederacy needs an upheaval, a 180 degree turn from our current course. Only by surprising our own people can we have any chance of out maneuvering UDA forces."

Wovoka and Keokuk sat in silence looking at Sliver. "Please take a few moments, finish your drinks and then I will show you the first step of a long journey."

In a few minutes they were out again in the cold hallways of the Brule lodge ship. They traveled half the length of the lodge ship, a full kilometer and rode auto ladders up forty decks. It struck Keokuk how similar all of the decks were on the Brule ship. Other lodge ships were diverse with families, occupation blocks or just jovial individuals decorating the halls with paint, plants and pure artistic zeal.

All of the lodge ships were stolen UDA colony ships and they had been originally built with very rigid, conventional architecture. The rooms were designed with the same eye for efficiency and uniformity used to design UDA prisons. All the other tribes had spent time and effort turning the prison cell structures into homes suitable for AmerIndian life. They had taken down thousands of walls that served no structural purpose in the first place and doubled, tripled or even quadrupled the size of many rooms in the lodge ships. On the Diegueño lodge ship every deck had nothing but gigantic community rooms where five hundred to fifteen hundred people lived without any dividers between families. In the Brule ship, no changes had been made to the original stark UDA design.

After a long hall they came into a wide-open, dimly lit mechanics bay. There were two AmerIndian soldiers in the large room with their back to Sliver, Wovoka and Keokuk. One AmerIndian was older appearing perhaps forty by Earth standards and the other, a young man. Both were dressed in Brule infantry fatigues with full compliments of weapons, autoflavs, Sledge firearms and a bandolier of grenades.

"You are not a coward," the older Brule said to the younger. "You hesitated on the battlefield, found yourself fringing." Fringing was a term used by Brule and Apache soldier. It referred to when a soldier purposely stayed toward the back or the fringes of a battle, not fighting to kill, but to stay alive. "There is nothing to be ashamed of. I fringed when I first joined the Brule. The first three battles I was in, I could not throw myself into the fray. My commander brought me here just as I am doing with you now and he told me what I am about to tell you. You have to decide what you are willing to do. You have passed through the Trials and I have seen enough in you over the last year to know that you are loyal to the AmerIndian Confederacy. You believe in our dream."

The old Brule circled and continued, "Now are you willing to serve the AmerIndian Confederacy or are you willing to die for the AmerIndian Confederacy? Seven of the eight tribes have no other purpose than to serve the AmerIndian Confederacy. Say the word and I can have you in any lodge ship you choose serving the AmerIndian Confederacy in any capacity you choose. You can live a long and fulfilling life with any of those tribes. Or you can stay with the Brule. If you stay with us you must remember one thing. The Brule have one purpose and one purpose only, to kill and die for the AmerIndian Confederacy. All the Elders, except for Stormseeker, and all the tribals but the Brule will sugar coat and dance around the truth I am saying now. We as a people aspire to live one with the land and in order to do that we must buy it from the White Man who has stolen it. And there is only one price for land; the price has been the same since the Grandfathers walked the Earth. That price is blood, in large quantities. I know that someone has to pay that price if we as a people will ever regain the Homeland, so that is why I am a Brule."

The old Brule stopped and placed his hand against the glasteel in front of him. A body tank rested in the large display case on which his hand was placed.

The body tank gleamed brilliantly in the bright lights imbedded in the display. The suit was white except for the chest and arms, which were covered by a golden eagle, a beautiful depiction of Wambli. The suit was a Grade One Mako, 1.3 meters across at the shoulders and 2.5 meters high. It was in perfect condition, save one flaw. The one small flaw evident on the body tank was a hole; perfectly smooth edges and no burn marks, located near the center of the chest. It was the mark of a concentrated laser, the weapon that fell the AmerIndian Confederacy's creator.

"Potlatch Weaver was an Apache but he knew what the Brule know, the price of a Homeland, the price of the life that we want for ourselves and our children." The old warrior took his hand away from the display case. "Do you want to serve the AmerIndian Confederacy, or do you want to die for the AmerIndian Confederacy."

The young man looked at the armor for a long moment. "Commander, for a long time I looked down on the non-bloods and took pride in my natural heritage, my AmerIndian ancestors. I guess it's now my turn to determine if I am a true blood or not." He placed his hand on the display where the old Brule had. "I am Brule and I will prove it at Cormorvan."

The old Brule smiled. "You will, troop. You will." He placed his hand on the young man's shoulders. The two turned and walked out the exit at the far end of the room.

Wovoka and Keokuk looked at each other. Sliver motioned to Wovoka. Wovoka approached the armor as he had dozens of times before. He knelt before it, putting his fist over his heart as he had done the day after Potlatch Weaver's death. Keokuk remained standing. Wovoka did not move to touch the glass. He followed the tradition of the Apache. Wovoka remained with his head pointed down to the floor for a moment before rising.

"You were right, Sliver. This did help me in putting what I am about to do in perspective. I have come here before when a particularly dangerous mission approached. It level's me."

Sliver walked forward to the display and finger tapped a command. "I didn't bring you here to be inspired by the creator's armor," the display case hissed and cold air spewed out into the room. "I brought you here to wear it."

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Jaret walked closely behind Lige as he went down the line of troops standing side by side in body tanks.

Lige stopped in front of one of the suits. "Trooper, please explain to me what you have done to your XV-160." Lige had to look up to meet the troop's eyes.

"Sir, I recalibrated the suspension settings and used a laser saw to shave two millimeters and the carrying handle off of my body tank."

Lige paused. "Why, troop?" he shouted up.

"To maximize fluid movement, sir."

"I find you in violation of UDA military law SD-21, troop, unauthorized variation of equipment. You, troop, are telling me, your commanding officer, that you know the operation of this body tank better than a military engineer?"

"Yes, sir."

Lige pushed past the hulking body tank, walked to the back of the hanger bay and grabbed three chocks. He walked back to where he stood. "Show me." Lige threw the three chocks into the air. Before the chocks were a meter out of Lige's hand the troop was moving. His knees bent deep and he sprung forward, the XV-160 whirred and two blasts fired forward shattering two of the chocks high in the air. The body tank reached the top of its leap arc. The troop tucked the body tank into a tight ball. The body tank hit the floor heavy with the squeak and clatter of blastplast on plasteel. The trooper rolled and in a moment he was on one knee, arms outstretched to catch the last chock. He stood and handed the chock to Lige. Plastic splinters from the other two chocks rained down.

"In accordance with military law I sentence you to seven days in solitary confinement, troop. I now waive your sentence because you have followed the one true military imperative; achieve success any way possible."

Lige was continuing his inspection when a soldier in a navy jumper ran up from behind. "We have confirmed the location of the AmerIndian Confederacy's Steel Circle, sir. It is in the periphery. I took officer initiative and began the navcomps working on correspondence codes immediately, sir. Calculations will be done in eight to fourteen hours."

Lige turned, calmed himself. "What is the source of this information?"

"Rictor, sir. Your AC plant. He was able to send a message when one of the Elders broke the close on the Steel Circle. One ship was sent out and returned to the Steel Circle."

Lige was still for a moment. "Superb. Walk with me to Command Central." The officer and Jaret followed Lige. The body tank troop commander rolled out and ordered his men through the grav shield and into the vacuum surrounding *Black Mariah* for drills.

"Have you brought the strategists together?"

The officer answered, "I have, Admiral. They are all at Central now. Planning has already begun."

Soon the three entered bustling Central. Lige walked up a short flight of stairs. Central was located at the center of *Black Mariah*, like most UDA ships' bridges. Central, circular in shape, spanned twenty meters in diameter. In the center of the room, Lige stood surrounded by strategists and officers facing him. No chair had been set out for Lige, as he preferred to stand. The high fifteen meter outer wall was one seamless screen that showed high-resolution vid from cameras on the ship's exterior.

"Status," Lige said.

Remigius, Lige's top advisor, stood. He was a thin man with a balding head and his uniform hung on him like cloth on a skeleton. "We have no sightings of lodge ships in the last four days so it is a safe assumption all thirty lodge ships are in attendance at the Steel Circle. From past data we know the AC uses the Steel Circle nearly as much for socializing as for military and political

planning so the lodge ships should probably be within four hundred thousand kilometers from the closest planet. They like a view."

Remigius continued, "We have a few choices. We can set the distance for a firing exit at six hundred thousand kilometers away from the planet. Of course they might be snugged. There are two primary options. Either they are outside the window or they are snugged close."

Remigius glanced at the wall screen. "That leads me to believe they may be parked in orbit. I assume you wish to go in shallow?" Remigius waited patiently for Lige's answer.

Lige nodded, "Yes, shallow. What is status on the fleet?"

Remigius gestured at Walker, Lige's best correspondence navigator, who brought up figures on the wall screen as Remigius spoke. "Forty-eight of sixty-two ships are ready to fire within our window. We can bring back sixteen more prime ships if you wish to expend the Nagaspheres to fire with us. Of the forty-eight ships ready for firing thirty-one are in fighting condition, fifteen have minimum to heavy damages from the Prelgas campaign. Eight of the sixteen return ships would be in fighting condition, sir."

Energy from a Kellion Cannon ship's Nagasphere was abundant but one firing used one Nagasphere, costing approximately ten thousand UDA credits. Intergalactic travel was not for the poor. The UDA kept tight strings on the production, ownership and use of Nagaspheres. However, the AmerIndian Confederacy had become adept at stealing what they needed.

"Bring back all eight of the primes immediately." One of the comp operators set to work immediately on sending the messages to the eight ships. Intergalactic communication was extremely expensive requiring the same Nagasphere to send one message as to send one ship. After a ship fired its Kellion Cannon it then traveled through the correspondence plane created. Sending communication was the same procedure except a ship fired its Kellion cannon while the ship was stationary and sent a communication signal through the correspondence plane.

Remigius continued, "Assuming all 30 lodge ships are there then all 620 of their outrider ships are there as well. Should be approximately 5,100 AC fighters present. We will match that with 940 UDA prime ships and 12,000 fighters. Battle comps give forecasts as follows. All AC lodge ships will fire nine minutes after detection of our fleet. If our engagement is under two minutes we should destroy 40 to 90 outrider ships only and we will lose no more than five prime ships. The AC outrider ships will be used to hold us back. If engagement is between two and fifteen minutes we will destroy 120 AC outrider ships and one to six lodge ships against losses of 250 to 400 UDA prime ships. If engagement is longer than ten minutes, we will destroy eight to twenty-six lodge ships and 140 to 180 AC outrider ships against losses of 420 to 630 UDA prime ships."

Lige viewed the wall screens, showing the forecast in stark, hard numbers. It was a frustrating fact for him that AC ships dealt considerably more damage than they received in clashes with the UDA fleet. Lige viewed the UDA losses as acceptable as long as one of the few remaining ships was his own.

"I have prepared a communications relay to notify four other admirals. We can swarm them, sir." Remigius said matter of faculty.

Lige didn't hesitate, "Absolutely not. The AC has used the incompetence of my peers as an escape route too many times. I will not have another Grelgas IV incident on my hands. Don't waste the Nagaspheres."

Remigius stammered, "Sir, the entire AC fleet is congregated at one point. It would be irresponsible not to bring in additional forces."

"You are an intelligent man, Remigius. I believe you understand the meaning of the term 'absolutely not'."

"We have not been able to determine the location of a Steel Circle in five years, sir. If we could call in Ramey and Lenel's fleets it could be enough to force a surrender, a bloodless victory."

"Remigius, your ignorance displays for all why you are an advisor and I am a commander. There has never been a bloodless victory, large or small, against the AC because they do not surrender. I alone have killed more tribals than all the other admirals combined because I understand them. I do not under or overestimate them."

Remigius shook. Everyone in the room stared at the advisor. "I am no fool. You are a strutting peacock and I will not allow your vanity to cost us this victory. As a forward officer, I demand communication with HQ. You can not refuse me."

There was a hushed silence. "Only because you have served me as a superb strategist will I ignore my desire to incarcerate you for blatant insubordination. However, your service with me is through. You may communicate with HQ in person. Rogers, please arrange for our smallest medical prime ship to fire back to HQ with Remigius on board as soon as the correspondence code back to Earth is calculated."

Remigius shrunk. In a single moment he realized he had made a grave mistake. The ship now being arranged for him would never make it to HQ. He had worked under Lige long enough to know how Lige handled enemies. The ship would be sent to the farthest corner of the universe where he and its crew would no doubt starve to death because the Nagaspheres on board would all be spent.

Remigius' voice shook as he spoke. "I would prefer to send a communiqué."

The officers on the bridge knew they were looking at a dead man and most dutifully turned to watch the wall screens.

"Roger, escort Remigius out. And, oh, is there anyone else who would like to express their sentiments to HQ?" No one moved or spoke. "And Remigius, thank you. You truly were a superb strategist. I'm sure those skills will serve you well wherever the future finds you."

Lige's smile appeared sincere and showed no malice. "Craven, I will be doing a walk through of the heavies. We fire as soon as the code is go."

Lige stepped from the dais and his men whirled into the minutia of preparing the AC's annihilation.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

"Wear it?" shouted Keokuk. "You are out of your mind! Stormseeker himself carried Potlatch Weaver's body back in that body tank. Stormseeker installed that body tank in that display case himself thirteen years ago. No one has touched it since the founder's death. Celetain herself said she believes the armor is sacred. Half the tribes will believe it is an insult to the Grandfathers, let alone the Creator. You are out of your mind!"

Sliver waited patiently for Keokuk's tirade to end before he spoke. "The fact that he experienced the vision does not give him the right to wear the Creator's armor. The fact that he is the White Buffalo gives him the right."

Wovoka interrupted, "I am not the White Buffalo."

Sliver glanced at the doorway. Two acolytes were now entering. The huge bay door rolled shut at the wave of one acolytes' hand.

Keokuk frowned. He had never seen that door shut in all the times he had been to the Brule lodge ship. The armor was on display for all tribals at all times.

"You are the White Buffalo. Celetain has seen it and she will proclaim you the White Buffalo tonight."

Keokuk reeled, "What? The Elder Shaman only proclaims the White Buffalo after he has won many battles for the AmerIndian Confederacy, only after every tribal and every Elder is screaming his name to be the White Buffalo."

Sliver nodded. "Bull Red River put his stamp of approval on both Tycho Scalper and Wolver Fuller, but neither of them were truly the White Buffalo. If they were, we would be standing on grass, not plasteel. Celetain has seen that Wovoka is the White Buffalo." Sliver stepped closer to the two of them. "Celetain Prax is the greatest Elder Shaman in the history of the AmerIndian Confederacy. She alone has seen is the reality that will take us to our Homeland. There are many tribals that are going to question Celetain Prax and Wovoka. If this is going to succeed neither of you can be one of those tribals. Keokuk, I am concerned by your adherence to Evangelical Christianity. Personally, I am shocked that someone of your intelligence could believe in such an exclusionist, divisive religion and I would prefer not to deal with you. However, Celetain has foreseen that Wovoka will need your support. You must accept what I am saying as truth for now." Sliver backed away.

Keokuk looked down and then moved in front of Wovoka.

He looked into his brother's eyes and after a moment nodded. "My Christianity has been one of several wedges between us since father's death. 'Whoever says he is in the light and hates his brother is still in darkness.' I will be the first to serve you as the White Buffalo. My doubts in Cybershamanism and the AmerIndian belief systems are the same as they ever were but my doubts in you are gone, brother." Keokuk held his arms out wide and the two embraced. Sliver walked closer to the display. "Give me a hand." The three of them gingerly lifted the body tank out of the case and set it down on the floor a few meters away. Wovoka looked shaken. Sliver and Keokuk helped Wovoka don the Creator's armor.

#

Shoeless Joe, one of several Apache lodge ship at the Steel Circle, positioned itself to transmit easily to the rest gathered lodge ships. On a lower deck, Elder Kugan adjusted his three-button suit and spoke evenly. It was unusual to hear the staid Elder speak. He rarely spoke on anything but financial matters. "The Elders have given this a great deal of thought and consideration. We have consulted those who know the concerns involved and have weighed the various aspects of the plea. We have decided to grant the request for a clone tribe."

Shouts rose from every gathering room on every lodge ship.

"Please, hear me out. There are many challenges that this decision will bring about. Clones fill crucial positions in every tribe and strong

replacements must be trained to fill the void that will be created by the creation of the Crow, the tribe of clones. The two lodge ships given to the Crow will come from the Nez Perce and the Apache."

The speaking request bubble filled immediately. Stormseeker interrupted.

"I wish for Torquan to speak." Any Elder could grant a tribal speaking time.

Torquan stood. "Elder, I have made a fool of myself. I expressed anger against the Elders when none was warranted. We thank the Elders for their wisdom and kindness."

Stormseeker smiled and stood. "I have been a strong opponent of a clone tribe because of the division I believed it would cause. I have given an open ear to my Elder brothers and sisters." Celetain nodded and Stormseeker continued, "I have realized there are divisions between every tribe. The Brule are never unarmed and yet not a single Haida holds a weapon while on their lodge ship. The Diegueño struggle to retain all that is natural in themselves and their surroundings and the Tsimshian embrace technology intimately. We have divisions in so many aspects of our lives, and yet, when it comes to our blood we are one and there are no divisions. I have come to believe that everyone who has fought, who has worked, who has sacrificed for the AmerIndian Confederacy is true blood, regardless of their ancestry." Stormseeker clapped Wisdom Elder John on the back. His oak coloring contrasted with John's black skin, but their smiles showed the same joy.

The gathered tribals on all of the lodge ships surged to their feet with thunderous applause, acknowledging a critical point in AmerIndian Confederacy history. Stormseeker had long supported separationist AmerIndian policies. He had encouraged tribe chiefs who purported there were two classes of AmerIndian Confederacy citizens, true bloods (first in line for key positions) and non-bloods (helpful and welcome partners of the true blood). True bloods had long been defined as those who had a quarter or more of AmerIndian blood. Non-bloods included the Russian, Japanese, African and Europeans who served the AmerIndian Confederacy. Slowly the debate over true blood and non-blood service was breaking down to the position that AmerIndian blood was more than heritage, it was loyalty and dedication to the principals the AmerIndians espoused.

Stormseeker accepted the applause and deftly called for a close of discussion on the Clone tribe issue. When the closing comments had been made, Celetain stood.

The Elder Shaman was silent for a moment and she turned slowly to look at all the tribals gathered. Her hand stabbed out, stopping at a Tsimshian. She pointed at him until he stopped looking from side to side. Her voice was cold.

"Who am I?"

The man's face wrinkled and a moment passed before he said, "Celetain Prax, Elder Shaman of the AmerIndian Confederacy."

Her hand remained on him and the man added, "Daughter of Morningstar Prax."

"Who am I?" her voice was level.

"Celetain Prax, Elder Shaman of the AmerIndian Confederacy" the man said again, louder this time.

"This Tsimshian knows who I am. I call forward a respected Infiltrator of the Apache tribe. He has experienced a true vision and I bring him forward to show every tribal what he has seen, a clear message from the Grandfathers to all the tribes."

Tribals on thirty lodge ships sat up. The tribals knew whatever this Infiltrator was bringing would be special. Celetain was the interpreter of visions. Dozens of tribals came to Celetain every year with reports of visions. She turned away many, declaring their dreams and foretelling as false visions. She denied messages that were self-serving or that advocated actions alien to

the AmerIndian Confederacy. In the two years Celetain served as Elder Shaman she had only brought forward two tribals to share a vision.

The first had been a child who foretold the loss of *Sweet Six*, a lodge ship that was disintegrated by the first use of the UDA Hellfire weapon. She had forewarned the AmerIndian Confederacy that a lodge ship would be lost. She urged everyone to brace themselves for the impact of the occurrence. The vision had steadied the tribals for what proved to be a devastating blow after the White Earth Massacre.

The second tribal was a Caucasian female recruit from a mining outpost who predicted victory at Trewellyn. Trewellyn was a plane gate that fired every hour between the colonies Freedom and Privilege. While the UDA could not officially disallow the building of a plane gate after Rowan won an important court battle, it did everything possible to stop the building of the gate (because Rowan had sheltered its future profits from significant taxes). The Brule, hired as mercs, won a brutal battle to give time for the gate to be built. Rowan Cartel successfully rallied the Galaxy Congress to claim the gate as a unity fixture, which meant no military actions could be taken within five hundred thousand kilometers except to defend the gate.

The AmerIndian Confederacy had already been paid billions for eighteen months of merc work on the project and they waived another year's pay in exchange for the promise of one thousand Nagaspheres per year for the next thirty years from Rowan. Rowan was still keeping that promise six years later, although the Elders were concerned with how Wovoka's Naanac mission could change that arrangement.

The doors at the end of the hall rolled open and Wovoka appeared. He walked slowly and the clack of the large blasteel boots rang through the hall. The hush allowed the sound to echo. On *Heidegger*, the Zuni sat speechless. There were cries of outrage heard on Nez Perce lodge ships. A small skirmish broke out on the Brule lodge ship as Pack Alphas pushed back a throng of tribals trying to get out of the meeting room and to a shuttle. It was evident the Brule tribals planned to personally come and pull Wovoka out of the founder's armor. None of them looked like they would take the time to open the body tank first. Just lop the head off and pull the rest of Wovoka out in chunks.

Wovoka stood in the middle of the Elders. All save Celetain were as stunned as the rest of the tribals. Wovoka looked around and realized Stormseeker was busy trying to decide which of his weapons to take to Wovoka first. Wovoka started quickly.

"I am Wovoka, son of David Stone Rain and member of the Apache. I come before you to relate a true vision. I experienced it on Naanac when my pack went there on our last mission. We were sent there to scout a habitable planet that has been secretly held by Rowan Cartel for six years. I was descending a mountain, suspended sixteen hundred meters above sea level completing a geo-survey. I stopped to take a break before I continued. Below me, not more than five meters, I heard the sound of bone against stone. I looked down to see a large creature. In many ways it resembled the arachnids of Earth but it was three meters across. It had six legs, a torso a meter wide and was covered with fur. I began to draw my weapon when I realized that the creature was not after me, it was intent on something else.

Wovoka stepped away from Stormseeker. "I watched as it skittered across the rock face to a nest. It was the nest of a Creose, a Naanacian bird. The Creose's nest was built from a bramble of sticks and twigs in the shape of a dome. The creature approached the nest and smacked at it with its claw. Instead of breaking, the nest flexed. The creature clawed again and again at the nest and each time the nest flexed with the blow. The creature became angry and climbed up until it nearly sat on top of the nest. It reared and I watched as it prepared to crush the nest with all of its mass. With speed and accuracy the Creose ducked its head through a small hole in the nest. With its beak the

Creose plucked an eye out of the creature's skull. Three of the creatures six legs lost hold of the mountain. It fell, battering itself against the rock face of the mountain. Several of its legs snapped off. That is what I saw."

Celetain stared at the crowd challenging anyone to interrupt her presentation. She pointed at a tribal in the crowd again, "What is my role?"

The young girl she pointed to answered in a bold voice, "You are the Elder Shaman, Guide for the AmerIndian Confederacy in all spiritual matters. You interpret visions."

Celetain made the girl repeat the words and she looked directly at Stormseeker (furious now). "Then interpret I will. Wovoka and Pack Jade Dagger were sent to Naanac with a tight mission window. This was not due to the normal level of urgency attached to most AmerIndian Confederacy military ventures. The Free Mantle, a two-kilometer layer of free-floating asteroids, surrounds planet Naanac. The nest in Wovoka's vision represents the asteroid field, the Creose represents the AmerIndian Confederacy and the UDA is the creature. On White Earth we struggled in vain, left blood on fields that would never be our Homeland. Naanac is the Homeland. The Homeland we will take and the Homeland we will keep. It is the Homeland foretold of in Bear Vajo's Prophecies. Of this, I am certain. White Earth was to serve as a stepping-stone to reclaiming our forefather's Homeland, the North American continent on Earth. That land is not and will never be the Homeland of AmerIndians. Naanac is our Homeland. I know what I say is shocking and what I propose will mean massive change for the AmerIndian Confederacy. I speak now on the part of the Grandfathers. Today before every tribal I declare Wovoka, White Buffalo. He is the fulfillment of Bear Vajo's Prophecies and will lead to possession of our Homeland within three days."

Every tribal was silenced.

Stormseeker exploded, "You can not declare this man the White Buffalo. The prophecy states that the White Buffalo will be declared as the tribes are in battle."

Celetain stepped forward and put her hands on Stormseeker's gleaming armor. "You are right. Wovoka is declared the White Buffalo now because we are in battle."

The words fell from her lips as klaxons began to wail. "Fleet detection. Fleet Detection," the comp convoy server warned. "Engagement in six minutes."

#

Lige screamed, "Holy Baal, guaranteed three minutes of battle! Lets make it count. Eisenhower and Powell, you are to adjust by six degrees, swing wide for flanking."

Remigius had been right. The Steel Circle sat just 220,000 kilometers outside the effecting distance of the water planet. Lige longed for more time than he was about to get but it was enough to kill at least a few lodge ships, maybe more. That alone was reason to rejoice.

"Reagan, Hoover and Melbourne, triangulate for Hellfire at coordinates 31449."

The communications officer barked without looking up from the wall screen. "Deflector ships are moving into position now."

"Triangulate for Hellfire." Lige gave the order without emotion. "Paxton, Grellion and Brown, triangulate for Hellfire at coordinates 99742. Smith, Bates and Jomorian triangulate for hellfire at coordinates 87246."

The voice of Captain Telbor carried over the room from Paxton, "Coordinates are in conflict, repeat, coordinates are in conflict."

"Execute command, Paxton. Execute command," Lige stated firmly.

The captain could be heard laughing. "Repeat, coordinates are in conflict."

"First sergeant of Paxton on Screen," Lige said. A view of the Paxton bridge appeared on a third of wall screen.

"First sergeant, activate your sidearm and execute Captain Telbor immediately."

A moment of quiet confusion passed and then the first sergeant's sidearm was out and Telbor was looking into his eyes. It had happened quickly and Telbor looked as though he didn't believe what he was seeing. Suddenly his face twisted and he fumbled at his holster. When he pulled the strap off his own sidearm the first sergeant squeezed and his gun reported.

Telbor's face melted into the five-centimeter hole bored through his head. His body slumped to the floor. The first sergeant turned reluctantly to the camera drone.

Lige said, "Thank you, First Sergeant. Execute command." None of the ships Lige had commanded had diverted course on the initial order. All nine prime ships smoothly flowed into ordered coordinates now. The ships were lined up in triangular sets, each set following ten kilometers after the other.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

The tribals overcame their shock quickly. Tribal on every lodge ship burst into motion exiting the gathering halls. Tribals headed toward their specific battle station.

Thin gaps circled the platform Wovoka was standing on. Without hesitation, the Elders stepped forward, circling around him. Wovoka saw Keokuk a few meters away and motioned him forward. Keokuk followed onto the platform. John gave a command and the platform began to descend.

Wovoka looked realized Cavaho and Wolf Plume would be left behind. A mellow electronic bink rang out as the platform dropped through the corresponding hole in the deck floor below. The platform wobbled slightly as Cavaho dropped from four meters above onto the falling platform. He bent at the knees with the impact, steadying himself between Kugan and Morgan Weaver. He stood twenty centimeters from the edge of the platform and stared head nonchalantly. The Elders stared at him.

Nineteen decks passed and the platform stopped. The Elders dispersed to five command stations spaced throughout the bridge. Dozens of tribals monitoring various aspects of the impending battle occupied the bridge. Wovoka, Keokuk and Cavaho remained on the platform in the middle of the bridge.

Stormseeker finger tapped. "Tally on fighter scramble."

A thin, busy tribal answered. "Eighteen percent, another eighty seconds before full pattern deployment."

Wovoka looked at Keokuk. "What am I doing here?"

Keokuk looked around. "If you are White Buffalo you are supposed to be commanding this."

"I don't know how to command a fleet battle."

Keokuk rubbed his chin thoughtfully. Despite the fact that Wovoka was in the center of the room, no one was paying any attention to him.

"Fighter scramble complete," the tactical tribal said. "Wave One release on Ten, mark now."

Keokuk looked at Wovoka. "Have them cancel that order. Belay the fighter release. Have the Gator dump the correspondence code for all lodge ships and go to Delta Star, delay twelve." Keokuk finger tapped. "Your comp set is now on command band. Everyone's listening."

Wovoka hesitated and then commanded, "Belay fighter release. Gator, dump the correspondence code for all lodge ships and go to Delta Star, delay twelve." Wovoka echoed Keokuk's words.

The bustle of activity on the bridge stopped and all eyes turned to Wovoka.

Stormseeker was out of his chair and walking fast across the bridge toward Wovoka. "That's enough of this drek, soldier. We have seconds to move hundreds of thousands of tribals. Do not test proper command. Tactical tribals, execute my orders. Now, I am going to personally pry your ass out of that sacred armor."

Stormseeker grabbed at Wovoka's body tank. Wovoka stood motionless. He could not raise a hand to Stormseeker, his commander since he was twelve. In a flash of movement Cavaho was at Wovoka's side. He grabbed Stormseeker's hand and in what looked like a dance move, ducked, pivoted and twisted. When it was done, Stormseeker was kneeling in front of Cavaho with his arm twisted a centimeter away from the snap of bone.

Celetain stood. "Elder Stormseeker is right. We have seconds to move four hundred thousand tribals; there is no time to test proper command. Execute the commands of the White Buffalo."

Over the comp sets the main tactical tribal's voices was clear. "Fighters sit tight. Gator, dump the correspondence code for all lodge ships and go to Delta Star, delay twelve."

Wovoka looked down at Stormseeker.

"Yes," Stormseeker said plainly.

Cavaho released the Elder Warrior and helped him to his feet.

Stormseeker glared. No one on the bridge moved.

"We are going to have to shut down life support temporarily. The guns will have to be as hot as possible if there is going to be engagement, White Buffalo." Stormseeker broke the silence.

Wovoka smiled. "All tribals strap on one hour masks. Lodge ships go dry directly after we pass through the correspondence planes."

The bridge became a flurry of activity as each pack member put into action the procedures they had practiced a hundred times, orchestrating the movement of a well-oiled war machine. Each knew exactly what Wovoka had ordered and what it would mean. The tribals steeled themselves to weather the approaching storm.

#

The UDA Situation Officer reported. "Hellfire, triple set, go in 210 seconds. Flanking ships in position. Slow movement from all lodge ships consistent with preparation for a quick correspondence jump. AC outrider ships are staying close, no interference being run. Fighters are being held in."

Lige stepped back, "They want to minimize damages. Outrider ships are being held close to run as blockers for lodge ships. Remove all outrider ships as targets from the firing solutions, target lodge ships only."

It was a gamble. Lige was ordering all of his comp operators to adjust the weapon firing comps so they would not acknowledge any outrider ship or fighter as a target or an aggressor. Normally, the weapons firing comps constantly tracked all targets in range and fed information to the ship's servers to be ready to take fire on any target in range at any instant. Now, following Lige's orders, all of the comp's targeting power would be put on the lodge ships. Unless a UDA ship's gun was manually overridden not a single AmerIndian Confederacy outrider ship or fighter would be fired on by any of Lige's ships.

The entire AmerIndian Confederacy fleet was crawling forward at 10 K.P.H. toward the UDA fleet. Lige understood this tactic. The slow pace ensured the ships were moving and it would only take a bump of speed to send them through the correspondence planes their comps were now calculating. Lige's ships were moving toward the Confederacy convoy in order to use their forward guns and not expose a flank. The lodge ships were now spreading out to a ten-kilometer span.

The Hellfire system sent raw waves of energy from three cooperating ships to a collector-amplifier spaced an equal distance from each of the three ships. After 180 seconds, a wave of energy, 80 kilometers in diameter and a kilometer long, was released. The Hellfire energy wave could bore a hole through Earth's moon. It would turn a lodge ship into fine dust.

"Do we have a mark on the Brule lodge ship?" Lige asked.

"Negative, Admiral, target is random, twenty seconds to release."

Unlike the inside of the lodge ships, which clearly identified the occupying tribe, all AmerIndian Confederacy lodge ship exteriors were painted matt black to confuse the enemy as to which lodge ship housed which tribe. The AmerIndian Confederacy tactical tribals knew that not only could Hellfire be a deadly weapon because of the sheer number of tribals that could be swept away instantly, three Confederacy tribes had only one lodge ship. A hit on the singular Brule, Haida or Zuni lodge ship would destroy ninety-five percent of the tribe (only crossworkers on other lodge ships surviving). If the majority of one tribe were wiped out it would leave the AmerIndian Confederacy severely crippled due to the tribe's specialization that was lost.

Lige frowned. He had his best comp officers searching for any clue in movement, placement of lights on the lodge ships' hulls, anything to discern lodge ships belonging to single lodge ship tribes.

One of his comp officers reported back, "Hellfire Release is ready Admiral. But there is no confirmation on the single tribe lodge ships. New target?"

"No. Keep primed. Be ready to fire on my mark."

#

The five Elders watched the emerging battle ground on their comp sets. A tactical tribal barked. "Sector nine grid."

One section of the comp set view expanded and showed three small points of light. With finger taps the tactical tribal increased the magnification until the ships could be seen clearly.

"Hellfire formation. Three groups all focused on the convoy at ten klick intervals. Only one set of our deflector ships is out."

Wovoka's instinct was to order another set of deflector ship out.

Keokuk stepped close to Wovoka. "Order all the single tribe lodge ships into single file line. *Heidegger*, *Cold Pyre* and *Talisman*. Put them all in one line facing the UDA ships. Have the deflector ships tighten their arc and prepare to send back the beam straight as an arrow right down all three Hellfire sets. The trajectory is where the three sets of UDA Hellfire ships line up."

Wovoka's instincts screamed. He could be sending thousands of tribals to their deaths. He also knew from his service as an Infiltrator that hesitation could be more deadly in combat than a critical mistake. Wovoka shouted the order. He was amazed. No one questioned and the lodge ships began to line up immediately. The five deflector ship set could now be seen in position.

Wovoka asked Keokuk, "Patch me through to the Alpha of that deflector ship group." The link was made in seconds. "Lightbringer, the UDA Hellfire ship sets are lined up like dominoes. Can you send the Hellfire beam straight back down the pipe."

Lightbringer, the deflector ship captain replied, "Tighter I get the grid the more control I have on where the beam is sent back. Keeping my pack safe I say I have a fifty/fifty chance of sending the Hellfire beam right back down the pipe... White Buffalo."

There had been a distinct delay but Wovoka noticed the title had been added nonetheless. Keokuk raised a finger. "Command maximum effort, tell him to send the beam back down the pipe without fail."

Wovoka shook his head. "Do your best, Lightbringer."

"Admiral Lige, By size and sensor data most likely all three of those ships are single tribe targets. It's Haida, Brule and Zuni. Current Brule target is locked."

"Pull all Hellfire sets around to resolve for the single line target."

The UDA situation officer hesitated, "The trajectory of the three Hellfire sets gives the deflector ship a definite line. Possibility of a direct aim back is sixty-two percent."

"Thank you comp officer. Pull all Hellfire sets around to resolve for the single line target."

The UDA situation officer gave the order. "Single line firing solution at 120 seconds."

#

Wovoka stood quiet. It was all in the hands of the deflector ships now. Stormseeker looked at Wovoka.

"White Buffalo, those Hellfire sets can break away at any second. Can we send predator torps their way?"

Keokuk whispered, "No."

Wovoka commanded again. "Hold line. All ships, hold line."

#

Lige licked his lips, "On my mark, group one. Fire."

#

Wovoka watched as the crackle of energy arced from each Hellfire ship toward the collector magnifier. "Ignition, hold line," Wovoka shouted. "Hold line."

The deflector ships adjusted and the cable between the ships pulled taught. A huge reflective sheet of molecule thin gold exploded taut between the ships.

The Hellfire collector from the first Hellfire ship set popped, a streak of blue fire blasted forward growing to its eight-kilometer diameter. The blast hit the sheet square. For an instant it appeared the blast was still, until it folded on itself and shot back from the sheet. Like an arrow splitting another arrow, the beam ate all nine Hellfire ships. The sheet of gold blazed on both sides and all five deflector ships were caught in the terrible heat. The ships melted, transforming instantly into hunks of sulfurous metal.

A roar of celebration rose on AmerIndian Confederacy bridge.

Wovoka barked, "We have nine AmerIndian Confederacy ships destroyed. Everyone back to station immediately."

The bridge snapped back to efficiency.

"Nine Goliath class UDA prime ships destroyed. Terminal engagement in three minutes, ten seconds. Correspondence plane go time five minutes twenty-five seconds..." A brilliant flash on comp sets interrupted the tactical tribal's words.

Wovoka gaped. One of Lige's fleet ships was firing into Lige's command ship, *Black Mariah*. Bright straight flashes Wovoka recognized as Magog heavy lasers blasted into the command ship, hitting it dead center. The attacking UDA ship was boring a hole to the Lige's bridge at the center.

Keokuk was already speaking. "Launch a wave of trackers. They are going to do a correspondence jump."

Wovoka barked again, "It isn't a fire works display, tribals. Launch a battery of trackers."

#

Black Mariah's bridge rocked with the force of the Magog heavy lasers. Havoc reigned. Four UDA officers simultaneous sent messages over the communications link before the senior officer hit his override.

"Twenty-six decks holed, eighteen percent power loss, firing comp damage. Navcomp untouched."

Lige stood still. His rage bubbled up as he struggled to keep control. The fate of his fleet rested in his ability to react rationally. The AmerIndian Confederacy had dealt him a knockout blow. This battle was over. Mutiny was blooming and his only hope was to pick up the pieces and rally.

Lige finger tapped, patching himself into every ship's main communications link. "Gold fleet, this is Admiral Lige. I am now declaring emergency procedure Beta Chi. Every ship's captain is temporarily stripped of authority. First officer, please accept the captain's firearm. All ships are ordered to strip all comp processing from all non-essential functions including firing solutions and direct primary shields at the AmerIndian Confederacy. We are in full retreat. Ships are commanded not to fire on *Hoover*. *Hoover*, I advise you stop firing now and start running. You are going to need every centimeter of distance you can put between you and me. I promise I will see every man on *Hoover* dead before next Veteran's day."

Jaret stepped onto the dais. "What can I do, sir?"

Lige exhaled. "Don't become an Admiral."

#

Wovoka tried as he could to shout the celebrations down, to get people back to their stations but tribals were standing on chairs, spinning, dancing and rejoicing as over nine hundred UDA prime ships retreated.

Wovoka stopped shouting and looked at Keokuk. His brother wore a pleased, guilty smile. "The Steel Circle has to be moved and I can not think of a destination. The second those UDA ships fire their Kellion Cannon's and jump the battle is done and the Elders are calling the shots again."

Wovoka looked around. All across the bridge tribals were celebrating. In front of Elder Kugan's podium three tribals were lined up. A pretty tribal aimed her finger at them and the three fell down like dominoes. Even Morgan Weaver laughed hysterically.

Wovoka gave everyone another thirty seconds and then barked an order the same way he did when his three Infiltrators were following him through the obstacle course on Deck 176. "On line." The blood had already started to flow and it could be a long hard time before it stopped. "Calculate correspondence data to Naanac with every lodge and outrider ships' navcomp. Release *Silhouette* and twenty other outrider ships in pursuit of the renegade UDA prime ship. Mission is recruitment of the men who attacked Lige."

Packs hustled to get back to their seats and work resumed. The next few minutes were spent in unnecessary attempts to tweak the lodge ships defenses in case the UDA ships turned. They did not. Twenty seconds before the UDA prime ships fired their correspondence planes the trackers carved into the UDA prime ships.

#

The second the UDA ships winked out of view Stormseeker was out of his chair and heading back to Wovoka. "Battle's over, boy, and that means you are back to being nothing more than a soldier. And that's why I can now," Stormseeker stopped just inside striking distance, "do this." Stormseeker embraced Wovoka. "Now that was a 'to the bottom of the mag whuppin'. We have a two-hour window at least. The Elder Council obviously has to meet. I want you and your pack out of sight during that time."

Stormseeker turned from Wovoka and caught sight of Cavaho. "You like beatin' old dogs, pup?" There was no smile in Stormseeker's voice.

Cavaho cocked his chin and pointed right at the base. Stormseeker's fist rocketed out and Cavaho sprawled across the floor. He rose with blood spilling out of his mouth. No smile, no expression. He cocked his chin in the other direction and pointed again. Stormseeker shook his head and clapped his hand on Cavaho's shoulder. "Good soldier." Stormseeker turned and headed to where the other Elders were exiting the room.

Sliver, Celetain Prax's aid, approached Keokuk, Wovoka and Cavaho. "This way." Sliver led them out opposite the exit used by the Elders. The crash doors rolled open and a throng of tribals poured in from the hall. Sliver wasted no time and directed Keokuk, Wovoka and Cavaho back through another door. The tactical tribals held back the crowd.

Keokuk marveled. He hadn't seen tribals react like this since the AmerIndian Confederacy hosted Concrete Reams, a rock group from the Carina Local Cluster. In a few moments Sliver led the three into a large lounging room. It was obviously the design work of an over-ambitious Diegueño. Beautiful, large couches formed a square near the center of the room. The room was designed to look like an eighteenth century log cabin.

Keokuk wanted to flop onto the plush leather couch but he nixed the urge and helped Cavaho get Wovoka out of the Founder's armor. The armor cracked open like a shell and Wovoka stepped out. He shook his limbs to get rid of the rigid tension in his shoulders and thighs. Wovoka fell back onto the couch and put his hands over his eyes. Keokuk looked over at Cavaho who had the body tank at the far end of the couch. Cavaho rubbed his jaw in obvious pain and Keokuk found a new level of respect for Stormseeker. Sliver brought each of them a large tumbler of sparkling water. Keokuk drank and for a moment enjoyed the comfortable quiet that surrounded them.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

With speed and precision Jaret lunged, sliced and parried. Jaret beat the man steadily back until his back was against the wall and he could retreat no further. His opponent threw down his sword and the bamboo clattered on the plasteel floor.

Jaret pulled off his wire Kendo mask. His opponent did the same. The soldier was a well-built Caucasian and looked similar to Jaret. Same haircut, same gait and his voice held the same mid-western drawl that youth in Louisville, Kentucky had given them both. Teddy Dewayne hailed from the Kentucky DeWaynes, still the most respected family in horse racing. The purebreds they raised were highly prized and sought after on the colonies and outposts the UDA elite favored.

Teddy, a blue blood whose family sent him into military service to launch a career in intergalactic politics, served Lige as a body tank troop officer. Jaret, the son of a horse groomer employed by the DeWaynes, had enlisted with Teddy and risen into the officers program by merit. Jaret outshone Teddy in every way, even as Teddy's parents eased the path for their son from thousands of galaxies away on Earth. It was the third and final year of their first tour and Teddy was a miserable failure as an officer. Jaret, on the other hand, was Lige's personal assistant and already a minor celebrity due to coverage of the three assassination attempts on Lige that he had personally foiled. His career opportunities were limitless and yet Lige was already exerting subtle pressure for Jaret to stay with him when his tour was done. Soft pressure, as Lige called it, incentives and promises, rather than threats.

Despite the differences between the two young men's military paths they were as close friends now as when they had spent summers riding horses around Churchill Downs. Jaret peeled himself out of the heavy awkward Kendo uniform while Teddy did the same. UDA troops came in to take the Kendo suits away for cleaning and the two hit the shower.

"Word is the fleet is heading toward Chester Outpost Delta Six." Teddy stepped forward into the sonic chamber. The sweat was pulled down to his toes in small sheets and a collection of wet dirt sloughed at his feet. He stepped out of the chamber and a vac system on the floor removed the dirt left behind. "You know what that means..." In a high-pitched voice Teddy sang "Skins..." He looked up when Jaret had not joined him in his homily. "Something on your mind, hoss?"

Jaret looked up. "No, no. Just, uh, getting anxious about yearly recap. I don't know what to decide."

Teddy shook his head vigorously. "What's it matter. You're the golden boy, any way it goes, hoss. Make a fortune in the private sector as a bodyguard or maybe see if they were serious about those offers out of Little Hollywood."

Jaret pulled on a grey jumpsuit. He felt tired and confused. This frustrated him, considering this was his only day off this week. "I'll catch you at Torrie's tonight." Jaret laced his boots and headed out into the hall.

The young officer told himself he was wandering, but soon admitted he was simply taking the long route to the brig. *Black Mariah* held the brig for all of Lige's fleet.

Jaret walked into guard station at the brig. His off-duty jumpsuit showed muted versions of officer stripes. As soon as the brig commander realized who Jaret was, he snapped to attention.

"First Officer Tucker, how may we assist you, sir?"

"Hiscomer 675624. I want all lock down codes."

The words were barely out of Jaret's mouth before the soldier behind the brig commander stood. Jaret handed him his gauntlet comp and all codes were downloaded into it when it was handed back. Jaret walked down the hall passed dozens of tubes. The tubes were capable of supporting a person in various states depending on the person's sentence. The tubes could support a person in real

time (meaning the unconscious prisoner's body aged at a rate of one day for every one day that passed). That rate could be slowed to as much as ten to one. Most prisoners on UDA ships were kept in these sleep chambers, aging at a rate of one day for every ten that passed.

Traditional cells, instead of tubular sleep chambers, were used for prisoners the UDA wished to observe. Jaret stopped in front of one of the cells and waved his gauntlet comp in front of the door. "Voice authorization, Jaret Tucker. Authorization Delta 764909. Lock all recorded material and allow access only to my voice speaking the following keyword - 'Ranger'." As was standard in UDA brigs, the video and audio recording of the cell could not be turned off or altered without high access. The cell door rolled back.

The interior of the cell was simple, a three-meter square room with a ledge where a prisoner could sit or sleep. The floor provided a low blue illumination. The room contained no objects other than its inhabitants and a minimal toilet. The grid on the exterior of the cell showed the exact position of the prisoner within the cell. Jaret entered the cell and the door closed.

Alexa Sullivan sat neatly in front of him. She was thin, thinner than Jaret liked. Her nose was sharp and her lips were as thin as the rest of her. She met his gaze and remained silent. Jaret stood, not knowing what to say. There was no good reason for him to be here. He waited for another moment to see if she would say something. He could react then. Reacting was his strength, waiting for an opponent to move and then violating that change by making the most of its inherent imperfection.

"I need to know how long you were with the AmerIndian Confederacy."

A question played across Alexa's face and she said plainly, "No, you don't."

Jaret's heart raced. She was right. He already knew the answer to the question, and she knew that. He was here for no other reason than to be close to her. She was beautiful. He tried not to focus on that while he searched for an answer.

"Who is the Alpha Defense coordinator for the Apache tribe?"

Alexa stood and walked one step toward him. "What are you here for?"

Jaret could not help but notice the lines of her figure. Her legs were long, her torso sleek. The orange prisoners jumpsuit clung to her. It was obvious that he had failed miserably in trying to pretend he was here to interrogate her.

"I want... I came to see you."

She took a few steps around him. Her disapproval was apparent and it surprised him. He was not used to any woman frowning at him and the fact that she was his prisoner didn't make him any more comfortable with it. Angry, he stepped closer to her.

"I do have questions and you will answer them. Why did you join the AmerIndian Confederacy?"

She did not back away. "I've already answered that question for your master."

"You joined to anger your father? I know a lie when I hear one."

"I'll answer your questions and you will answer mine," Alexa said with confidence.

"What makes you think you can demand anything of me? I can have you killed with a word," Jaret spat.

"You could, but you won't. You could have drugged me for any answers you needed. Like you said, you are here to see me." She sat. "My father keeps a house in Key West Florida. Huge, beautiful. Douglas was a groundskeeper there. I fell in love with him after only two weeks. But he shunned me and would not return my advances. Over a few more weeks we got to the point where we talked for at least an hour every day. It became obvious to me that he loved me and soon he told me he was a Zuni field agent gathering information on my father. I

could have turned him in. Eventually, he told me he loved me but he wanted me to join the AmerIndian Confederacy, for myself, so I could see people who valued life and harmony. I almost never saw my father or mother. I wasn't very happy. I asked Douglas if we could be together if I joined the AmerIndian Confederacy and he said no. He said we could never be together because I needed the AmerIndian Confederacy and the AmerIndian Confederacy needed me. Douglas believed if we were involved before I joined the AmerIndian Confederacy then I would never join and if we were involved after I joined then I wouldn't know if I were staying for him or the AmerIndian Confederacy. I was amazed at his sacrifice. No one surrounding me at the time was true to any principles. So I joined the AmerIndian Confederacy. I was shocked at what I saw. They are a family community. They work together and live with the fact that one person's actions, decisions, and feelings affect the whole community. One month into life with the AmerIndian Confederacy and I felt at home. I have never felt such love from so many people. It did not make me miss Douglas any less though."

Alexa stopped and turned away, tears streaming down her face. Jaret felt that overpowering, uncomfortable feeling that descends on men when a beautiful woman cries. He thought of going to her, holding her. Instead he said, "They are killers. They have made war a business. Their share-and-share-alike love commune is funded by blood money."

Alexa shook her head, "They aren't getting rich. They are preparing to take back the one thing they have been denied for seven hundred years, a Homeland. This time of merc work won't go on for more than another decade."

"You can kill a lot of people in a decade."

Alexa laughed. "What do you care about lives? Lige is an intergalactic butcher. I can't believe I am defending the actions of the AmerIndian Confederacy to the right hand of DeSade himself." She waited, watching him. "Oh, nothing to say. No words in defense of the monster. You are silent because nothing can be said to justify the things he has done."

Jaret did not look away but it was some time before he spoke. "Lige is a necessary evil. Only men like him keep the wheels turning. The balance between the Capitalists and the Universalists and the Anarchists is tenuous. In an intergalactic society, certain stabilizing actions have to be taken at critical points. Lige can do that. Level the field whenever it is needed. His methods are ugly, but he gets things done. You have to understand that even the wrong action is better in most cases than inaction. Lige has taken many lives in battle but his work has saved more lives. He alone averted an intergalactic civil war in '62."

"The reason that civil war nearly occurred was because the UDA is corrupted to the core. It has to fall if there is going to be a better future." There was silence.

"Are they cloning me?"

The question hit Jaret like a blow; it framed exactly how deep he was.

"Yes."

"Lige is a demon. He serves no one but himself and you should know that he won't hesitate to sacrifice you when it becomes necessary."

"Sacrifice me? I would die for him now."

Alexa shook her head. "Why?"

"Lige made me what I am. He knows me and makes me stronger. With him I serve a higher purpose. And while the ride is hard with him, it is always a surprise. There is no limit to his potential, to what he can accomplish."

"When will my clone be finished?"

"It is already viable."

Alexa shook her head. "Sad part is there is no chance that anyone I knew on Earth, including my parents, will know the difference."

Jaret pulled something out of his pocket. He handed her a candy bar. She laughed and Jaret's broad smile came despite his efforts to remain aloof.

"Thank you. Next time bring one for you."

Alexa turned. It was clear to Jaret that Alexa had just told him to leave. He wondered why he did it when it was the last thing he wanted to do.

Kugan's tone indicated anger, an emotion rarely present in the staid Elder. "Stormseeker is right. You blind-sided all of us. You could have discussed this and maybe now we could be working from an informed position instead of winging it. We have an hour to decide if we want to invade Naanac the ninth habitable planet ever discovered, Naanac?"

The Elders were gathered in the ship's council meeting room. Celetain sat in a large mahogany chair. A table made of the same mahogany sat in front of them. Stars could be seen out of the glasteel hull sections. "We just thrashed Lige because he didn't see us coming. Naanac is our Homeland. I have seen this in dreams and Sliver's abyssal calculations confirm it. Naanac has a natural defense. It is a nature-made fortress. Stormseeker, you have to see the military advantages of Naanac over White Earth."

"Oh, no question, it is secure. We have a ten fold better chance of taking Naanac than White Earth. In fact, I don't think we'll have to fight the Rowan Cartel or the UDA at all for the planet. They'll give it to us for a few creds and a corn dog. The entire planet is covered with swamps. That's what the United States of America gave us in the nineteenth century, and now we go back to it? Homeland? That planet is swampland. Nothing more."

Celetain rallied, "There you are wrong. Naanac is like no other world. It is a treasure trove. We just have to know where and how to find its treasures. If any people can make Naanac a home it is the tribals."

Kugan stood. "We have been preparing for eight years to take White Earth. You think one hour of prep gives us enough time to equal the progress we have made toward the true Homeland?"

"You can spend one hundred years preparing to take 'the true Homeland' and you still won't be successful. It doesn't matter how prepared you are, how many lodge ships you have or how well our soldiers are trained. The Grandfathers are telling us that one path leads to ruin and one path leads to a Homeland, to Naanac. We cannot ignore their revelations."

Morgan Weaver interjected, "Celetain, you are being needlessly dramatic. Let's stop for a minute. We are pressed for time so let's focus on the facts before us. If we commit to an invasion of Naanac then we show our hand. All the work we have done to take White Earth in '94 could be lost. Stormseeker, in as few words as possible what is the situation on the White Earth invasion?"

Stormseeker took a long draft from his mug. "Our soldiers perform currently two to three times more efficiently than UDA forces. Support on UDA colonies is five times greater than at the time of the White Earth Massacre. The lodge ships are performing at between eighty-five and ninety-five percent of their potential and there can be no question that we have superior comp power."

This last point had been a major advantage for the AmerIndian Confederacy over the last decade. UDA tech officers were trained in traditional programming languages and most of their education was conventional. Many UDA systems were still paper-based. AmerIndian Confederacy coding training started hands on at age six. Handwriting, a useless skill in a paperless environment, had never been taught in the AmerIndian Confederacy. Tsimshian code crafters learned languages unheard of in the UDA and their unusual approach of apprenticeship made AmerIndian Confederacy programmers far more versatile, flat out superior.

Stormseeker massaged his fist before continuing, "But there was never a question that taking White Earth would be an uphill battle. I don't think any of the tribes will be willing to wage the war that will be necessary to take White Earth."

A disgusted look came across Stormseeker's face as he mentioned the point of contention among the councils and the tribes. Stormseeker believed it would

be necessary to wage guerrilla warfare. Stormseeker called for attacks on major public centers, grav-rail stations, movie theaters and sports arenas. These attacks would cause thousands of public deaths. Stormseeker wanted to continue to pepper these deaths over dozens of outpost, all of the colonies and Earth, causing a fear in the UDA public that their government could not protect them.

Celetain had been furious when she found out Stormseeker had created scenarios for White Earth that had been modeled after John O'Conner's freedom campaigns of 2032. No question the IRA leader's tactic had won Ireland back from the British. But it was considered by most historians to be one of the cruelest wars ever waged. O'Conner had led an orchestrated butchering of over seven thousand British in London before the King had urged Parliament to release all holds on Ireland. Ireland viewed O'Conner as a national hero. The rest of the world saw the IRA leader as a terrorist.

Stormseeker continued, "Current projections see us with a twenty-seven percent chance of victory considering a fifty-six percent loss of our current population and forty-two percent equipment loss."

Celetain was quick. "I guarantee that any simulation run will triple those chances with a quarter of the losses for an attempt to take Naanac instead of White Earth."

Weaver perked up. "That's an easy thing to guarantee now, knowing an accurate simulation would take a week to run."

Celetain did not look at Weaver. No love was lost between the two. None of the Elders respected Weaver. He was simply a leverage piece, a slice of the voting pie to be persuaded whenever necessary.

John spoke evenly. "We have an hour to commit to this idea and mobilize the fleet. We all know that Lige is bound to be back to this location or to send other UDA ships soon."

Stormseeker sat forward. "Then the answer is simple. This is all nonsense. No planning has been done. And moving all the necessary equipment would mean unnecessary death for our men. I will not allow that."

Weaver agreed. "An invasion is not a spontaneous activity. We would be walking into a death trap."

John began to speak but was interrupted by a raised hand from Celetain. "Planning has been done. All the material necessary to construct a chunnel through the Free Mantle is aboard lodge ships *Steam Horse* and *Six Gun*."

Stormseeker looked down. "You have made war plans without consulting me. How can you possibly defend yourself against the charge of holding secrets? How can you say you have fulfilled your duties in an open and honest manner? Shall I begin research on a new healing ritual?"

For the first time Celetain did not feel as confident as she appeared. "I am sorry, Stormseeker. I have not been open or honest. I have known about Naanac for nearly a year. I truly felt the course I was taking was the best for the AmerIndian Confederacy. I have served with you long enough to know surprise is the greatest advantage a military leader can have. And I am offering you that, Stormseeker. I have not made war plans. I have made construction plans." She smiled at him. "And how much planning do you have to have, old man, to defeat Rowan's small garrison. We stand on the precipice of time. A moment we will seize, an action that will stun the worlds and cement the AmerIndian Confederacy as the mightiest independent force in any galaxy."

"It's not the Rowan's small garrison I am worried about. It is the fleets of UDA ships that will arrive after we take the planet that concern me", said Stormseeker. "The AmerIndian Confederacy has had unprecedented success for the passed few years, since White Earth, at least. I think we will set major goals back by decades or more for the tribes. It worries me there will be no time to run simulations. We are going in blind."

John sat forward. "Actually, I think it is good there is no time for simulations. It means we will have to act like human beings, assess the

situation with the limited data we have and make up our minds. Let's set it to decision. We'll break and come back in fifteen minutes ready to vote. Does anyone object?"

All the Elders shook their heads and rose from the table. Celetain and John exited and headed for their places of contemplation. They were gone too soon to see Weaver gathering Kugan and Stormseeker farther down the hall.

#

Lige's fleet fired to a standard correspondence plane, the fastest escape from the situation. The moment his ships passed through the correspondence plane Lige ordered all firearms returned to each ship's armory and all troops confined to quarters with orders for body tank troops to kill any soldier out of quarters on sight. The navcomps had been set to calculate correspondence code for Tycho Command, the UDA Navy's headquarters orbiting Earth.

Lige sat in *Black Maria's* war room with his back to his four advisors. Grant continued, "No question we took it in the teeth but we can still wipe the blood away and give a good smile. We just have to spin this right. I suggest you state that you only set up one Hellfire set, one ship was caught in the back blast of the Hellfire and it sent a Nagasphere critical, taking out the other eight ships. We dig up everything we can about the Captain of the mutiny ship and say he simply cracked under the pressure, which is actually true. I already have the video crews slicing up footage from the Prelgas campaign. We just lay in the star setting from the Steel Circle location."

Lige remained silent.

Smith asked, "What happens when either the AC or the mutiny ship beam the real camera feed back to an communications satellite orbiting Earth?"

Grant shook his head, "UDA censors won't allow something that damaging to air without speaking to Admiral Lige first. We have too many friends there. If it is delayed long enough for us to get some agents in we can either insert something to make the feed agreeable or take control of the feed in some other way. But I hold to what I said. We don't communicate at distance from Earth, only in person. It gives way too much control to the media. If we say nothing the news producers can't put a slant on it. If we give them a three word statement it will be bent six ways to Sunday and spack us regardless."

Grant sat back. Before becoming Lige's media wizard he had handled the Sullivan Presidential candidacy. He worked for Lige because he recognized the future when he saw it. Grant knew the UDA media world inside and out and routinely spun crisis into gold. Lige did not dwell on the fact that Grant viewed lying as a fine art form.

Next to Grant was Aykers. The lean, balding man was Lige's head of intelligence. Aykers had built an arsenal of damaging information on politicians, celebrities and power players in the UDA over the passed two decades. His strength lied not in his ability to blackmail but in his ability to give poisoned gifts. He gave information to his targets that they could use against their enemies. But the end result always favored Aykers. Often Aykers' gift of information about an enemy served to inform the recipient of Aykers' keen ability to brutally harm anyone's image at any time.

Lige's third advisor was Lincoln. Lincoln had built a stable of professional killers and was able to arrange assassinations that served the specific purpose of his clients. Lige knew Lincoln really didn't belong in the category of advisor as he rarely voiced his opinion on anything. However, Lincoln had a wicked intelligence and a clarity that Lige admired. He could be relied on to always see the shortest point between A and B.

Lige swiveled his chair and nodded, "That's acceptable, Grant. Start working now on ways to discredit or get the real feeds off the air. I'm not as confident as you concerning the feeds not making it on air. We do have good friends among the censors and the top news producers, but my distance from Earth

seems to fool them into thinking 'out of sight, out of mind'. Lincoln, I want you to send out some of your hunters to find the mutiny ship."

Lincoln lifted the glass of water in front of him and took a slow drink before replying, "As soon as they have found it I will forward the location to you and you can decide your next step."

"Excellent. I want it done in less than ten days. "

Lincoln nodded.

Lige looked annoyed as he questioned Jaret. "So is this mutiny an isolated incident or endemic problem I need to address further?"

Jaret looked at Lige and said nothing.

"You are at liberty to speak freely."

Jaret blew a breath out. "Were you willing to sacrifice hundreds or even thousands of soldiers to have a slim chance at getting those lodge ships? That's the question the soldiers are asking themselves. You were out there on this one. I suspect I know what you were thinking. We had all of the single lodge ship tribes in one spot, if you could take them all it would cripple the AC. The men sensed they were going to be the fodder. Unfortunately, we do not have the type of fanatics the AC does. Most of our men are here to do three years and then enjoy life in the private sector. They are not the self-sacrificing types."

Lige smiled a bit to let Jaret know he had not overstepped his bounds. "I guess I'm too used to working with you."

Jaret was surprised by Lige's compliment.

"What do you suggest considering?" Lige asked.

"I would tell the troops you were in error. You got over zealous with the prize so close in sight. You will use them as a weapon and not a blood sacrifice next time."

Aykers and Grant burst out laughing. Such a blunt statement of truth with no trap being laid was an alien, repulsive concept to the two of them.

Grant spoke. "OK, honestly, we need to put some agents out to plan another mutiny. Then see which troops respond and dragnet them."

Lige steepled his fingers. "Yes, lets do that."

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Elder John asked the question that had been rattling in his head since he saw Wovoka in the founder's armor. "Celetain, what makes you sure this tribal is the man to lead us to the Homeland."

Celetain padded her answer. "Honestly, it matters not what any of you think of Wovoka. I am within the rights of my position as Elder Shaman to declare the White Buffalo. I can tell you that I believe the vision was given to him because he is the one to lead us. I hear the Grandfather's voice in my appointing him."

Weaver grimaced. "You are within your rights to appoint the White Buffalo, but surely you realize that this man can be nothing more than a figure head. We will have to guide him in his decisions. He has no experience at the game he is playing."

Stormseeker leveled his eyes on Weaver. "None of us are playing a game here, Weaver. Celetain, I detest the way you are going about this. Too much secrecy, back hall dealings. However, despite my reservations, I trust your guidance and frankly I believe Wovoka is the White Buffalo. I have dealt with Pack Jade Dagger's work on several occasions. Wovoka is a tribal's tribal. He works harder, smarter and faster than any of his men but demands they meet his example. I will give my full support."

Kugan followed. "I find this situation too volatile. We are acting on emotionalism and superstition. Wovoka is a good man trapped in a bad situation."

John folded his arms. "If we go forward with an action on Naanac, Wovoka is the White Buffalo and all of us will be bound by his decisions. We will become this man's advisors. We need to be helpful and not allow a power struggle to ensue."

#

Wolf Plume stood and came to sit next to Wovoka. "It's a lot to take in, I know. Celetain has said the Grandfathers are moving us forward. You are part of that movement."

Wovoka shook his head. "I was just thinking of Slow Turtle. Remember how he would spend all his wampum on us at The Cave. Steak, ale..." Wovoka laughed. "He spared no expense. But then if our next mission didn't come in quickly, he would be asking us for wampum and we ended up giving him more than he spent on us in the first place." Wovoka slumped forward and tears rolled down his face. The droplets splashed on the hard wood floor. "Every tribal on those deflector ships meant the same to other tribals as Slow Turtle meant to me."

Wolf Plume kept his hand on Wovoka's shoulder until his sobbing stopped. "Wovoka, Slow Turtle didn't die for you, he died for the AmerIndian Confederacy and for our Homeland. You would have done the same, given your life in service to the AmerIndian Confederacy. Those tribals on the deflector ships gave their lives so that we could feel solid ground under our feet, for a home where we can live in harmony with nature. Wovoka, I can feel the power of what is surrounding you. We have never been this close to the fulfillment of the Old Shaman prophecies and I believe what the Grandfathers are telling Celetain. You will lead the people to the Homeland. Do not cry for Slow Turtle. Remember him as a hero and do not waste the blood he gave for our Homeland."

Wovoka looked up and Wolf Plume smiled at him and hugged him tight.

Keokuk came back into the room. "I'm sorry, Wolf Plume. I need a moment with my brother."

He nodded and left without argument.

Wovoka turned to Keokuk. "I always told you playing those space fleet simulations was a waste of time. Guess I was wrong."

Keokuk grinned and thought back to the hundreds of hours he had spent playing fleet simulations on his comp set, hours spent alone in some dark corner of the Tsimshian lodge ship. In their teen years, Wovoka had urged Keokuk to get

a grav board and join him and Cavaho and Slow Turtle at the races. The fleet simulations had been an outgrowth of his love for comps and while he was now one of the top five programmers in the AmerIndian Confederacy, he had paid a price. He weighed over 120 kilograms at just two meters and in the AmerIndian Confederacy that was rare. Most of the other programmers had been able to balance their inactive work life with the mandatory vigorous exercise programs the Tsimshian tribe used.

In a small way, Keokuk was a victim of his own success. The Tsimshian chief had waived the exercises for him as Keokuk finished important project after important project. He was excused from so many exercise sessions that it became too difficult for him to keep up with the classes when he did attend. He was embarrassed and missed more classes.

Wovoka continued. "I was amazed at how much you knew."

Keokuk shrugged. "I've dealt with projects from each Elder. Beating Lige was easy because he thought he was fighting against Stormseeker. He didn't understand my reactions in the proper context. It won't be easy next time."

Sliver entered the room abruptly. "The Elders request your presence, Wovoka."

Keokuk nodded to his brother as he left and thought about how much progress they had made to resolve their differences in such a short time. There was still the broken promise Keokuk had made to his father on his deathbed. There was still the fact that Keokuk patently rejected the Native American belief system in favor of Evangelic Christianity. However, working together toward a common goal was patching the wounds the two brothers had carried since Stone Rains' death. Perhaps there was hope for a true reconciliation he thought to himself.

#

Wovoka shot upward on one of the lodge ship's automatic ladders. He had left Wolf Plume, Cavaho behind to speak with the Elders alone. For the first time he realized Pack Jade Dagger, his sole pursuit for the last eight years, was now in limbo.

The auto-ladder stopped at Deck 61 and Wovoka entered the Elm Room. It was one of several massive nature rooms the Diegueño kept. The room spanned twenty decks, seventy meters in height and three hundred meters in circumference. Magnificent elms stretched toward the ceiling and the room looked like a lush forest. A mammoth Grizzly walked toward Wovoka. It stood on its hind legs and roared, the sound shaking even the thickest of the elms. Wovoka froze.

John appeared suddenly between the bear and Wovoka. "Elle, you ate not more than an hour ago. Please don't be rude."

The gargantuan bear fell to all four and loped to John. John ran his hand over the bear's furry forehead and the bear gave a low growl. "Now off with you, we will play later." The bear turned and walked back to the trees. "Thank you for coming, Wovoka. Please follow me."

He knew John spent many hours on the Diegueño lodge ships. The Elder Wisdom liked to think and write in their beautiful environments. Wovoka considered what he knew of the other Elders. John led him through a beautiful lightly trod path that ended in a small clearing. The clearing was covered with soft thick brilliant green grass. The other four Elders sat on rough-hewn stone benches and turned to face Wovoka and John. John sat and since there was no other bench Wovoka stood. Wovoka wore only his combat boots, black fatigue pants and a plain black shirt. He felt suddenly out of place, unimportant. He was a tribal. He did not belong here with these decision makers. The grandfathers had chosen the wrong man.

Celetain stood, "Wovoka, I am pleased to tell you the council has decided to invade Naanac immediately. Navcomps are calculating the correspondence planes now. We have all the material we need to build a chunnel large enough for Zeta class shuttles to get through to Naanac's surface. Using Apache construction

packs we will erect the chunnel in twelve to sixteen hours. That gives us a timetable of fourteen to eighteen hours for the invasion of Naanac. If we can get the chunnel up quickly we can get two hundred thousand tribals on Naanac's surface in twenty-four to forty-eight hours. We are going to be extremely vulnerable to attack over the next two days. Everything relies on our ability to completely lock down outgoing communication. We are going to strengthen the guards against unauthorized communication before we announce plans for the invasion. Regardless, the situation will be volatile."

"What role do I play in all of this?"

Stormseeker answered, "You are the White Buffalo. It is your responsibility to lead the tribals in war. You will provide strength and courage and you will go where you need armies to follow. You will lead the tribals through a river of blood to the Homeland."

"Is the council unanimous on this decision?"

"No, we are not," Morgan Weaver said. "I oppose this plan of action strongly."

This surprised Wovoka.

Kugan spoke gently, "It is important, Wovoka, that you understand that the tribes will also not be unanimous on this course of action. Do whatever you can to encourage unity among the tribes."

John rose. "We will be with you throughout."

Wovoka understood the ramifications of what was about to happen. If the tribals were not convinced that Naanac was the Homeland, that Wovoka was the White Buffalo, there would be discord. Everyday was a struggle for the AmerIndian Confederacy, keeping nearly four hundred thousand tribals safe from over millions in the UDA military structure. The Elders were practiced at this task and things ran smoothly when the tribes worked in harmony. Discord put every tribal in danger. Wovoka fell in line with the Elders as they headed out give word to the tribes. He prayed Wambli would be with him.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Derek grabbed his comp and pulled on his tattered Oh'Rioz jacket. It was tight, ragged and covered him with little more than shame. He got on his knees, put his back to the floor and reached high and far under his bed. He felt for plastic and pulled a portable comp out from the tear in the underside of the mattress. He clipped it to the inside of his jacket. He left his room and tried to be quiet as he made his way down the hall.

His mother was in her usual spot, the center of the view room. She did not see him. He looked at her now. Despite her youth she looked tired and worn. The view room was showing a special on the new mansions being built for this year's UDA intergalactic lottery winners. Mother was intent on the special, "ooing" and "ahhing" every now and then. The wall screens showed her walking through the house with a Reis clone companion close at her side. Derek shook his head, his anger rising.

The Henderson family consisted of himself, his mother, a sister and two half-brothers. His father, George Harold Henderson, left his mother five years ago, not for another woman, but for two. George had landed himself one of the polygamist marriages that were becoming popular on outposts. Every month mother got a total of 250 UDA creds each for Derek and Karen. His mother collected 350 creds each for his two half brothers. His half-brothers were each allotted one hundred extra creds because they were born out of wedlock (the UDA Outpost Psyche Department had determined such children needed additional care). Another 800 creds were allotted to his mother because she was diagnosed as bipolar, bringing the monthly total to two thousand creds.

New Angelos, the Henderson's home, was a shipbuilding outpost where frames for beta class UDA prime ships were assembled. The outpost had a relatively low tax bracket (forty percent) and the two thousand creds was only cut to twelve hundred. The rent for their spacious three-room apartment came to eleven hundred creds every month taking the sum down to 100 creds. Food enough for the five of them cost 600 creds - that was why his mother sold her vote.

Since the 2080's UDA citizens had been able to sell their votes to the highest bidder and the megacorps were more than willing to buy. Derek's mother had signed a three-year agreement with Sledge for twelve thousand credits a year. (She was looking forward to the end of that period so she could sell her lifetime voting rights to Rowan Cartel for one hundred and fifty thousand creds.) The extra 1,000 creds every month should have been enough to pay for everything the family could need and a few luxuries to boot. It was far from enough after Xanic.

Xanic was the number one drug used on all the colonies and outposts in the UDA. Now in use by UDA citizens for forty years, Xanic doubled the life expectancy of anyone who took it. One pill a day (starting at puberty) and a person could live two hundred years, instead of the expected one hundred. Megacorp Holstice, who produced Xanic, did not advertise that due to lack of exercise the average UDA citizen's actual life expectancy was only 55. Xanic only took them out to 110 or 120. Xanic was produced as a mild barbiturate, which made the drug addictive and increased user lethargy. Xanic's cost of 750 creds a month for a single user was steep. Derek's mother bought Xanic for herself and Derek. Fifteen hundred creds gone. Which meant the family had a deficit of 1,000 creds a month.

This financial problem was then compounded by the last of the Henderson family's expenses, five hundred creds borrowed biweekly from the UDA to play the Intergalactic lottery. The family accrued debt to the UDA at a rate of eighteen thousand creds annually. The UDA knew the family had no way to pay the loans back. The debt was extended so that the family could never own land or ever send their children to a physical school or college. Instead, the Henderson children would learn Tanglish, a language based on English and Tamil. Anyone who spoke it

could never circle into an executive or management position of any kind. English was the language of the business world.

Derek's often wondered why his mother gave five hundred creds a month to the Intergalactic Lottery. Why not two-fifty, or twenty-five, or as Derek had pleaded a hundred times, zero? Each year the UDA Intergalactic Lottery Bureau released the average lottery expenditure for a UDA citizen. It currently hovered at four hundred creds. Derek's mother wanted to make sure she was at least twenty-five percent over that mark and she still groaned over whether she was buying enough. The prizes were tempting, including raw creds, parts in movies, dates with celebrities, boats, cars, starships and the ultimate prize - one to twenty years of Earth residency.

UDA law mandated a percentage of the major prizes had to be given to colony and outpost residents. The UDA Intergalactic Lottery Bureau ensured every neighborhood had at least one winner of the minor prizes, a new car or a sizable cred amount. The UDA contended the intergalactic lottery was a healthy element for society, giving some way for the billions of low income, icon literate people to pay into the economy. Derek was sure the lottery and Xanic were keeping his family weak and hopeless.

Derek stopped his attempts at silent movement when he realized no one in the apartment was looking or listening to anything other than the wall screens. He closed the apartment door behind him and walked down the dark dirty hall. The names and status of every family unit shined on the display at each door. He came to the end of the hall and looked down out of the glasteel window. Vertical and horizontal sprawl loomed above and below. He lived 425 levels above the south edge and 218 levels below the north edge of the outpost where starships came and went. He watched as autograv taxis shuttled workers to their stations. It was mid-day and the streets were not busy. There were few workers on this outpost. Less than five percent of the outpost's population held a job. Most of the shipyard was automated. Few workers were required to run the yards and some of that small number was off-worlders on short stays.

Suddenly from behind a support beam a figure appeared. The figure shuffled forward and Derek could make out the ragged lining of the man's coat. He was obviously homeless. There were few homeless on Derek's level. Anyone could apply for UDA government assistance and get a rat hole apartment with enough food to live off of indefinitely. But like most homeless, sation discs or designer drugs had taken this man over the edge. He could no longer function within the confines of the UDA system.

Derek heard the schwink of a plasteel blade locking.

"Th-th-throw the bag, boy."

Derek did not hesitate. He pulled the bag from his back and tossed it to the homeless man. The man moved forward and Derek caught sight of twenty centimeters of plasteel as streetlight hit the blade. The man scrambled forward snatching up the bag.

"What you got, pup. Wh-wh-what's in bag for Bornie?"

Derek spoke up and taking a guess said, "Lucy Love's latest from Earth."

The man began to shake. Derek was right. The vagrant was a sation addict. Derek did need to see the port at the man's temple to know he was equipped to experience the full sensation disks that now dominated fifty percent of the entertainment market and had challenged designer drugs as the new life parasite of the twenty second century. The man tore at the zipper, forgetting Derek was still in front of him.

Derek stood still. The man rooted with his right hand and pulled the bag to his face. A brilliant arc of light crackled out of the backpack sending thousands of volts whipping through the man's system. He and the bag dropped to the ground. Derek picked up the bag and with his hands on the outside of the nylon and reactivated the stinger coil inside. He looked down at the vagrant, a pathetic shriveled excuse of a man. Derek wondered if his mother, brothers and

sister would be able to avoid sation addiction. There were thousands of addicts occupying the lower levels of the outpost.

The vagrant addict faced one of two futures. If he beat the seven to one odds and was able to make it into a rehab he would have a ten percent chance of kicking the habit. If he didn't make it into a rehab he would be dead within two years, a conservative estimate. Derek knew from the news feeds he heard that sation addiction was one of the few sociological pattern that was offsetting Xanic's extension of UDA citizen's lives.

Derek made it to the point where he could pass from his outpost level to the one below. He stood still silhouetted in the streetlights for a moment and listened. A whistle echoed up from below and he peered over the edge of the five meters of steel. Derek dodged back quickly as Choi swung up and over the edge and landed like a cat before him. Choi was a thin, handsome Chinese youth. Derek had met him a year and a half ago and now the two were closer than brothers. Choi traveled the rest of the way with Derek to the gathering place, the two together avoiding the dangers of the outpost.

Choi and Derek finally made their last few steps to their destination, an abandoned gymnasium where forty youths were gathered. They were not a homogeneous group. Some wore plothing, plastic out-dated clothes with large company logos emblazoned on them like Derek's jacket. Plothing was free to anyone who asked and was a sign that the wearer was poor. Some wore biker leathers like Choi. Others wore the rare materials of cotton or denim. These clothes denoted status of the highest levels in the outpost.

At the center of the room a young man stood apart from the rest. He wore simple clothes; jeans, a white cotton T-shirt and a coat that bore no logos. As soon as he glimpsed Choi and Derek, he silenced the group around him and headed straight toward the two. He spread his long arms and hugged Choi tightly. Choi returned the gesture in earnest. Then the young man hugged Derek. Derek tried with difficulty not to bristle at the embrace. He could not remember the last time he had hugged any of his family, including his mother. An embrace was the only way Lucas greeted any of the members of his group. It was a part of who he was and Derek believed it had something to do with why Derek felt closer to Lucas than anyone in his family.

"Our paladin is here at last," Lucas yelled to the group behind him.

Derek followed Lucas back to the fire and made his way through a dozen youths. He sat down on the only crate left that faced the fire in the center of the room. Eleven other crates, with a youth sitting on top of each, fanned out in a circle. The rest of the group sat behind the crates, crowding around Lucas.

"When we can't's stands no more, we sit!" Lucas laughed at his own joke. "There's clean, cold water and grubs against the far wall. Help yourselves, you don't have to ask but don't forget that only fraggers take the first, last or most. Before we get to what we all came here for, does anyone have an addition to the war chest?"

The group erupted in shouts, "Seventeen", "Nineteen", "Twenty-one." The numbers rolled out and Derek called out "Twenty." Only the newbies did not call out a number.

Choi keyed the numbers into his comp set. "That's 476," he called to Lucas. "Brings our total to 2,354 creds."

Lucas spoke. "Does anyone need funds? Speak now."

A small boy, perhaps twelve or thirteen stood. "I've been breaking my bearings on this board." He held up a battered Wolf Ten grav board. "I can Ollie, acid drop ten meters and rail slide three segments of the Korgan monument. I am ready for slinging. I need flexi-cord and a harness. Ruba, if I can get it. Askin' for 270 creds." The boy slapped his grav board down and hopped on, twirling in a tight circle. The others whooped and laughed.

One of the boys stood. "I can say he's been crackin' his bones and while his vertical still miniscule, I know he'll work hard with the equipment if we give it to him."

Lucas rubbed his chin. "I know we bought boarding equipment in the past and it's important that all of us are able to move around the outpost quickly, but I have to deny this request. Jake is going off planet in just another two months. You can have his equipment then. Keep working. By the way, we received an encrypted message from Dean, serving on a Tsimshian lodge ship. He is doing well and thanks all of us for our help in getting him off of New Angelos."

Another boy stood. "I request a personal comp, delta grade. I know how to read and I have taught two others. I wants to code."

Lucas smiled, "A delta grade personal comp is a thousand creds minimum, Malcolm. That's a big chunk of change. How would this help the group?"

Malcolm shifted a bit. "I think I could learn to break and make standard code in just a few months. I could book us space to meet up in the upper levels. It would not be so dangerous for us all to get together."

Lucas paced, "You are one of the best reading guides we have. If we buy you a personal comp will you neglect your duties as a reading guide?"

"No, no. I promise not to backslash at all. "

"I trust you, Malcolm. Twelve hundred creds. Get a solid model. No fluffer chumbles. Does anyone question my decision?" Lucas gazed across the room. None of the youths spoke.

The money talks continued with another youth getting one hundred creds to buy extra food for his brothers and sisters for the month because his father was now triple dosing on Xanic.

"But enough talk of business. Let's get to what we all came for." Lucas's steps became lighter and a glorious smile spread across his lips. "When we last left off, Quell's Band was deep in the Great North. Quell had lost a finger to the cold." Lucas pointed at one of the youths. The boy sneered back at Lucas and the audience laughed. "But Quell had driven his rag-tag band of heroes farther, for he knew each step brought them closer to the seventh and last section of the Staff of Cronos. The staff that could pierce the hardened skin of the Drakolos, the creature that even now held all the villages between the Hearth Mountains and the Life River captive."

Lucas raised his arms like Dragon's wings and suddenly the brilliant young man became what every youth here had come to see - the gamemaster, the storyteller.

"You," he pointed across the line of youths, "Now stand on a frozen tundra. Ice and snow stretch in every direction but one. Before you gapes the opening to the Black Ice Caverns. Consult your character sheets. What weapons, armor, spells will you ready? What will remain in your pack?"

The twelve youths on the crates consulted their character sheets. The youths behind them huddled around the players eagerly discussing strategy, tactics, and what magic weapon could get the players the most experience points. Each player read carefully all the items on their character sheet. That they could read was what allowed them to be players and not spectators. Lucas opened the game to anyone who could read at a sixth grade level. Only the twelve boys who sat in front of him could do that. The others were studying hard to win a spot on one of the crates. With twelve players it would not be long before the group would needed a second gamemaster or even a third.

Derek had taken Lucas' lessons to heart. The UDA and the megacorps calculated to keep its citizens and its customers weak and hopeless. Derek could see it all around him. His brothers and sisters didn't play, they barely paid attention to the two hours of educational wall screen viewing they were required to complete each day. He knew Lucas was right, if he didn't fight to stay mentally sharp and physically strong he would never leave this outpost. Lucas also talked about a group of nearly four hundred thousand people traveling the

stars, fighting the UDA. Lucas's dedicated his roleplaying group to helping the AmerIndian Confederacy. The AmerIndian Confederacy needed sympathizers on the colonies and outposts. Lucas's group would be the strong, literate insurgents proclaiming the AmerIndian Confederacy's message when the time was right.

The youths called out the status of their characters.

"Short sword and buckler ready and I'm burying the two hundred gold pieces in the snow before we enter the cavern."

"Strength rated composite longbow with a silver tipped arrow at the ready."

"Long sword, no shield. All else packed."

Lucas listened and smiled. "So you have readied yourselves. You look down into gaping maw of the cavern. How do you proceed?"

CHAPTER TWENTY

Lige's fleet fired through the correspondence planes, instantly appearing before the UDA's navy headquarters. Tycho Central, a sprawling space station built in the 2060's, orbited Earth at a thousand kilometers. It housed over six million administrators, techs and programmers who ran the UDA Navy. Lige's fleet ships beamed tracking lasers to automatically dock the ships at available ports.

Lige exited *Black Mariah* through a long glasteel tube into Tycho Central. Stepping through the second airlock, Lige was nearly assaulted by a crush of media agents. The throng pushed Lige back into the airlock. Jaret burst forward and physically pushed the crowd back, "Every man and woman out of this exit area. Form a line on both sides of the Yellow. Now."

The media continued to push and Jaret quickly called two body tank troops forward to bulldoze them back without delicacy. Lige ignored the shouts and lights and made his way directly to the office of the Grand Admiral. The huge reception area for the Grand Admiral was done in pristine white marble. Lige snapped to attention in front of the thin, young female soldier/receptionist. "Admiral Lige, reporting battle outcome. Request to report directly to the Grand Admiral."

The receptionist rose and saluted Lige, flashing him an inviting smile. "The Grand Admiral is in conference, Admiral. He will be able to see you in twenty minutes."

Lige lowered his arm from the salute but otherwise remained at rigid attention. Jaret stood slightly behind in the same fashion. A few envoys came in with reports and statements for the soldier/receptionist before the large iron doors rolled open twenty minutes later. Grand Admiral Ramus strolled out. He was a barrel-chested man with thick brown hair and a healthy beard to match. He looked at Lige, turned and strolled back into his office. Lige followed and Jaret remained in the white marble reception area.

The Grand Admiral's office was twice the size of the reception area. Curiously, the office contained nothing more than three seats facing a large black oak desk. There was tension between the two men. Ramus was quite aware of Lige's talent and ambitions. He had never been able to get Lige quite under control. In turn, Lige reveled in his ability to complete an assigned task in any manner other than how he was ordered. Lige's saving grace was a penchant for raw success.

Lige began slowly, "My intelligence network gave me a lead on a possible location of the Steel Circle. I fired my fleet to the suspected location and indeed the lead was correct. We engaged 30 lodge ships and 620 outrider ships. The battle window was small, only three to six minutes of engagement, so I elected to try a new tactic. I used our Hellfire weapon. An unknown dependency allowed the AC deflector ships to send a Hellfire beam back destroying nine prime ships. Over seven hundred troops gave their lives in the line of duty. The loss was devastating and my fleet was forced to retreat. One prime ship had to be left behind because it was flanked."

Ramus stood. He had to concentrate to keep a smile from creeping across his face. Seven hundred of his troops were dead and Ramus could not think of the last time he had received such wonderful news. "How long does it take to build a standard prime ship, Admiral Lige?"

"Six to eighteen months, sir."

"Why didn't you call in reinforcements before you fired to the Steel Circle location?"

"I was not sure of the intelligence source and I know the other Admirals all have important objectives to attain. I did not wish to lead any of them on a feral goose pursuit."

"If you were not sure of the intelligence then why would you take your entire fleet in?"

"I had a strong premonition, Grand Admiral."

Ramus walked out from behind his desk and circled behind Lige. Lige did not turn to watch him. "So, you engaged every ship in the AC with out calling for reinforcement ships. Once you engaged their ships you failed tactically, allowing the AC to destroy nine prime ships and kill seven hundred UDA soldiers. And while you retreated a prime ship had to be left behind. Probably already captured by the AC. Am I correct, Admiral?"

"You are correct, Grand Admiral."

Ramus could hardly contain himself. "Lige, you have been successful for quite some time. But as I have told you before the risks you insist on taking cannot be maintained successfully over an extended period of time. I must exact a strict punishment for your failure. I believe I know what will be appropriate. A loss of this magnitude must be reported to the Race Reps as well as the President. Why don't we make that report now? You can answer the Race Reps questions yourself." Ramus sat at his desk and keyed a channel to his receptionist. "I need an Alpha Grade system link to all Race Reps."

There was an uncomfortable moment while the two waited for the link-up. They both walked to the far wall screen. All three faces of the Race Reps loomed in front of them. President Sullivan appeared to be in the lobby of an art theater. Joyce Dresden, and attractive middle-aged African woman was on the ski slopes of Vail. Manuel Cruz, a young dashing Hispanic, was seated at a magnificent antique desk.

The Grand Admiral stepped forward and as he opened his mouth Lige interjected, "President Sullivan, I apologize that I have not been able to tell you sooner but my men were successful. Alexa is safe aboard The Black Mariah and she is very eager to see you."

Sullivan's face changed instantly from annoyance at this interruption to sheer joy. He put his hand over his mouth and turned from the remote camera. "Thank you, Lige. Thank you. Please keep her aboard your ship. I will come to get her myself."

Race Rep Joyce Dresden smiled. "All hail the conquering hero."

Ramus was aghast.

Lige fielded Dresden's comment. "No, Madam President, I am afraid that the return of the president's daughter is the only good news. I regret to report that I lost nine prime ships and seven hundred men as I engaged the AmerIndian Confederacy fleet in the Periphery."

Cruz interjected, "How were you able to find the AC?"

"Decker, sir. He is my best intelligence operative. I believe he has handled some matters for your staff on occasion."

Lige watched as Cruz mentally took note of the name. Lige was sure Decker would be transferred directly to Cruz's own intelligence staff soon.

"What happened?" Dresden asked.

"My fleet came in suspecting to find nothing and we fired to a point almost too far to intercept the lodge ships. I gambled and tried a new tactic developed by Team Omega, Representative Dresden."

Representative Dresden sat forward. "Team Omega my all woman strategy team? I assembled them over a year ago and have been promoting their work for the new UDA navy every since. Their proposed strategies are completely askew from those put forward by the traditionally male-dominated strategy teams."

Lige continued as Ramus simply gaped, "I'm sorry, President Dresden. Team Omega's strategy was sound. I failed to execute it properly. We lost nine prime ships in all because I was not able to properly implement what was obviously a well-developed tactic. I have prepared my first officer and my ships are ready for new fleet assignments. I submit myself for martial punishment."

Dresden shook her head. "Nonsense, Admiral Lige. You are the best admiral the UDA navy has, without peer. We need you out there. You are the only male admiral who has reported even attempting to use the new Team Omega strategies. I

understand there will be some growing pains with their initial use. But I refuse to see you punished for showing some imagination. Don't let the loss slow you down. I am confident you can use the same ingenuity you used to find the AC this time to find them again."

Cruz added, "But this time, Lige, don't go charging off by yourself. Enlist the aid of your fellow admirals. A lone wolf cannot lead the pack." Sullivan added almost as an afterthought, "Was there anything else, Grand Admiral Ramus?"

Ramus remained speechless. "No, no, President. Nothing else."

While Ramus had not been bright enough to avoid walking head long into Lige's ambush, he knew any further attempt to discredit Lige at this point would only show himself in a bad light to the gathered dignitaries.

As if laying one last slap across Ramus's face, Dresden added, "Grand Admiral, please pull premium ships from the Targas fleet to replenish Lige's fleet."

Lige interjected, "Actually, President Dresden, I would prefer to actually relinquish a few ships. I would like to test Team Omega Theorem 111, 'Efficiency at any price.'"

"What exactly do you mean, Lige?"

"Well President Dresden, I-" Lige was briefly interrupted by Sullivan logging off. Lige was confident that the President was eager to get on a shuttle to *Black Mariah* to see his daughter, Alexa. Lige started again, "I wish to reduce my fleet to four hundred prime ships from nine hundred. I have several methods I will employ to cut the fat."

Cruz perked up at this. "You propose to show superior performance with a smaller fleet?"

Lige answered, "That is exactly what I propose, President Cruz. I believe the new theorem is correct and I plan to implement many more Team Omega changes."

Dresden beamed.

Cruz laughed, "Imagine that, an admiral that says he can do more with less. I hope you have a few more like Lige in the pipe, Grand Admiral Ramus. We could use them in this damnable war against the AC."

Ramus could not contain himself, "I'm sorry, Representative but there is no one else in my command like Lige." He forced a smile.

Cruz began to terminate the call, "Battles are lost on occasion, Admiral Lige. But you can win this war. Superb work on returning Alexa. We were all worried."

Dresden cut in, "I will forward you the rough draft of the latest theorem of Team Omega, Lige. Don't wait so long for your next visit to Tycho."

Both screen bubbles were replaced with the UDA sigil. Lige returned to his rigid stand of attention. Ramus circled in front of him, intending to launch a tirade. Instead, he stuttered and simply spat, "Dismissed."

Lige walked steadily to the double doors. As the distance between the two men widened, Lige was struck by the fact that he had inflamed a powerful enemy this day.

#

"Now before we were so rudely interrupted..." John started.

Tribals on all of the lodge ships laughed. They were in good spirits. The AmerIndian Confederacy had just laid down a cargo bay worth of defeat on the UDA and Celetain had once again proven to be a formidable prophet. The Haida held Celetain's prophecy as an important event, for it aided in quieting Cybershamanism's detractors. It was clear to most tribals that Celetain was something more than a traditional Shaman. Even the tribes that held strictly to the tenets of science (the Tsimshian, in particular) now had members excited by the power of the Celetain's prophecy. Even if they thought Celetain's prophecy was a parlor trick, it was spectacular nonetheless.

"Wovoka has been declared the White Buffalo and we are at war. The Elders Council has weighed the proposal set before us by Celetain. We were faced with the decision to seize the moment and invade Naanac, a planet that will be a challenge to live on. I know some of you believe a decision to follow Celetain's prophecy will scatter our plans for invasion of White Earth to the four winds. Some of you are asking - is there still a way to play cautious, take the victory we have gained this day against the UDA fleet, and move forward on White Earth. The Council considered these elements and has decided to invade Naanac and abandon our hopes of capturing White Earth."

A cacophony answered John 's announcements. Half the tribals applauded and half shouted questions and harangues. John set his eyes on all of the tribals before him. His image was carried by hard light displays to the other lodge ships.

The din died down and John continued. "The Elders know this decision is sudden. We regret we did not have time to put this up for discussion before all the tribes. We have spoken to every chief and have listened to your concerns."

"You have ignored our concerns," Brule Chief Satyr shouted. He was an ancient warrior, now over nine decades old. Satyr showed the clear features of pure AmerIndian heritage.

Stormseeker stood, "We have not ignored your words, Chief Satyr. You know as well as I do that the AmerIndian Confederacy's strength lies in speed and unpredictability. The Brule must put aside their angers from the White Earth Massacre. There will be plenty of battle at Naanac and I assure you that all the UDA's hated admirals - Lige, Crelland and Farlec - will be there."

Coganthan, chief of the Apache, stood. "I hear your apprehension, Brule brother, but the time is now. There are too many signs, foretold by the wise and powerful Celetain Prax, to ignore the fact that this is the critical moment. The Apache tribe supports the Elders in their decision."

Chiefs of the Zuni, Kichai and Diegueño all echoed Coganthan's sentiment. Satyr was undeterred.

"The Brule have left too much blood on the soil of White Earth to turn away and follow a boy to win a swamp. We refuse to acknowledge Wovoka as the White Buffalo. This whelp is barely a man. The Brule stand in defiance of the Elders' decision."

A hush came across every lodge ship except the Brule's who roared in support of Chief Satyr.

Stormseeker pointed. "How dare you-"

Wovoka stepped forward and raised his hand to Stormseeker. "I am not the White Buffalo at my choice or yours, Satyr. I am the White Buffalo because it is what the Grandfather's have shown the Elder Shaman. You do not have the wisdom of the Grandfathers. I call your people to war and if you as their chief will not have them follow me then I will take your chiefdom from you."

"There is only one way to settle a challenge to my leadership, boy, and that's the Brule way, the Way of Blood."

"The Way of Blood is fine, old dog."

"I will choose my champion, Wovoka. Best him and you will have chiefdom over the Brule."

"And the Brule will follow me as chief the way you have followed the Elders?" Wovoka asked.

Satyr looked struck. He had been a loyal servant of the AC for many years. It was obvious that even in his defiance he did not like to be called disloyal. He looked behind him at his assistants and advisors. He told them with a look that they would make his following statement true. "No Wovoka, Infiltrator Pack Alpha of the Apache, they will follow you."

"Then so be it. I will win your chiefdom and we will be done with this delay. But Satyr, I am the White Buffalo, and I intend to show you that. Do not

pick a champion; pick three. Every Brule must know that I have the strength of the Grandfathers. Choose quickly. I will be on your ship in five minutes."

With that Wovoka walked off the center dais, heading in the direction of the hangar bay, leaving the Elders behind.

"Wovoka, are you sure this is the best course of action? The rattlesnake does not eat three eggs at once." Keokuk said with a grin as he nearly jogged to keep up with his brother.

Wovoka whispered, "I hope it is. If the Grandfathers have chosen me, I will not fail. If I have not been chosen by the Grandfathers that will soon be apparent to everyone."

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Wovoka entered the fighter hangar and headed to a Jet Shark that was already railed. He took the helmet offered by a tech tribal and hopped down into the cockpit. The canopy clicked shut and the Jet Shark shot out of the bay. It made a tight arc and in a few seconds Wovoka was firing control thrusters and operating grav manipulators to enter the flight bay on the Brule lodge ship. The canopy popped and Wovoka pulled himself out. He was barely on the flight deck when he ordered the closest tribal, "Lead me to the challenge arena."

Brule warriors by the hundreds lined the halls that led to the challenge arena. All were silent, their stares hard. Wovoka entered the challenge arena where the two spectator decks were crammed with Brule warriors. The entrance to the challenge arena lead directly to the battle floor. The battle floor was fifteen meters in diameter and a third of a meter thick. The deck floated five meters off of the floor on anti-grav discs. Bright blue lights circled the edge of the battle deck. Between the blue lights, spaced at one meter increments were handrails that melded into the deck. Knotted flexi-cords hung from the handrails at the edge of the platform.

Without acknowledging any of the Brule gathered or the Brule hierarchy who now stood directly under the battle deck Wovoka jumped the three-meter gap to the battle deck and scaled the flexi-cord. He pulled himself on top of the battle deck and yelled, "Send the champions now."

Moments passed and Wovoka began to pace with anger. He was ready now and wanted this done. The first Brule champion, a tall well-muscled Caucasian, pulled himself over the edge. Wovoka knew him; Bo Riggs, a Notre Dame running back that had passed up a lucrative career in the IFL to join the AmerIndian Confederacy. Riggs had distinguished himself as a capable leader in less than a year.

The other two champions pulled themselves up together. Both were true bloods with traditional features; dark skin, smooth oval faces and long poker straight black hair. Wovoka recognized the two as the River twins, Parthan and James River. The Brule called them by nicknames, Fork and Eddy. Brule trainers, they were highly skilled martial artists. Wovoka started to walk to the center of the battle deck and was surprised to see Cavaho waving his arms at the side on the higher spectator deck. Cavaho made four sharp gestures in pack hand combat code. Wovoka read the code easily - "Two first ball last."

Wovoka nodded. Take the twins out first, save Bo for last. It was good advice. Both of the twins were as good as Wovoka, together they would be deadly. Wovoka now stood at the center of the battle deck and the three Brule surrounded him at equal intervals. The champions acknowledged the challenger with quick, short glances and broke to head for the weapons section. Wovoka followed. On the battle deck were four weapons - a solid steel baseball bat, a long three-meter pole, a steel billy club and a thick, heavy three-meter chain with a dull hook on the end.

On the battle deck the weapon of choice was the chain. It was the only weapon that could help a warrior stay on the deck as well as lay down significant body damage if properly used. The rules of the Brule Challenge were simple. Anyone to fall off of the battle deck to the floor below lost. Anyone standing alone on the battle deck, all opponents dispatched, won.

Wovoka picked up the long pole. Chatter rolled forward from the spectators. Each warrior took his position at one of the corners on the floating battle deck.

Eddy stood at Wovoka's left, Fork directly across, and Bo at the corner to Wovoka's right.

A loud clear chime emanated throughout the arena, signaling the start of the match and triggering the battle deck into a steady flat spin.

The Brule champions stepped forward warily. As the start signal rang out Wovoka's legs were pumping. He surged forward with the pole held tight in his hand, as a pole-vaulter would carry it.

Each of the Brule understood that caution was imperative as the deck spun. A misstep onto one of the rungs would cause a trip, a mistake your opponent would not let you rise from. Wovoka ran, each step moving slightly right to counteract the spin of the battle deck.

Eddy and Bo realized what Wovoka was doing, but too late. Fork had not distanced himself from the edge and had little room to maneuver. Wovoka barreled down on Fork with the pole, clearly intending to spear him. With nowhere to run Fork raised the billy club. Wovoka continued undaunted. The second the pole was close enough Fork swacked it away. The pole spanged away but Wovoka had the target he needed.

Simultaneously, Wovoka let go of the pole, kicked his legs up and forward. He was moving fast now and Fork was just a half-meter off his course. Wovoka's legs, waist and torso passed Fork. With speed and precision Wovoka grabbed Fork with his left hand under the chin. Wovoka's body was now traveling with all his momentum over the edge of the battle deck. He used his momentum to haul Fork off his feet and over the edge with him. But as the two began to go over the edge (Wovoka feet first, Fork head first) Wovoka shot out his right and grabbed the handrail at the edge. Wovoka stopped his momentum with shoulder jarring force. Fork flailed his arms behind and beneath his back without success to grab the handrail. He did manage to grip Wovoka's pants. The cloth pinched between his fingers as all his weight pulled him to the floor. His angry howl ended abruptly when he hit the floor shoulder first with a dull crunch.

Wovoka was already swinging deeper to the center of the bottom of the battle deck using the handholds. Above, Eddy and Bo exchanged a glance. Eddy's fury showed. The champions were less than ten seconds into the match and they were already down a fighter. Eddy cocked his thumb, motioning for Bo to go below. The deck continued to spin. Bo jogged to the edge of the deck, skooched down and pointed his but out over the edge. He grabbed two handrails tightly and hopped, kicking his legs back and extending his arms. With one clean swoop he swung down feet first, ready to kick Wovoka away if he were there.

Wovoka was meters away waiting patiently with a broad smile. Bo swung away from him, moving around the edge of the bottom of the battle deck. Suddenly, what Bo had been waiting for happened. As if on a giant spatula, the battle deck flipped like a pancake.

The battle deck was sheer vertical when Bo released his grip from the handrails and dove toward Wovoka. His orientation to the deck carried him quickly and he crashed into Wovoka. Wovoka tumbled back with Bo catching at his clothes. The two started to roll down the battle deck but a handrail jammed into Wovoka's ribs, stealing momentum. The rest of his momentum was lost as the deck swung level. The two men were no more than a meter and a half from the edge. With a cry Wovoka rolled Bo to the side and skittered out from underneath him.

Bo stood and moved quickly a few meters away to where the chain lay, magnetically held to the floor. He yanked it up and took a few steps to the right to cut Wovoka off from the pole that clung on the deck. Bo began to swing a meter of the chain in his hand. Wovoka stepped toward him. Bo whirled the chain harder and let out slack. Wovoka circled but did not move back. Bo whipped the chain forward and Wovoka hopped back, the chain passing a quarter meter from his chest. As the chain passed Wovoka moved in, bolting toward Bo. Bo had anticipated this. Wovoka reached a good clip before Bo let the chain go. It flung noisily across the battle deck beyond the spinning edge, clinking to a stop at the force field that protected the Brule spectators.

Bo spun with the arc of the chain and for a moment his back was exposed to the advancing Wovoka. With a burst of speed Bo lifted his leg high and rode the force of his full 360-degree turn. Wovoka had his right coiled back for a

devastating punch. Bo's kick caught Wovoka across the side of the head. He was pulled off his feet and he fell to the deck like a downed tree. Wovoka struggled to remain conscience. He could not move. Bo was moving toward him and Wovoka watched as the large Brule extended his arm out to grab Wovoka. Bo intended to throw Wovoka's now limp body over the edge.

Wovoka pushed forward all the fear and anger from his mind to his limbs. He reached up and grabbed Bo's outstretched hand and rolled, hopping his body off an impeding handrail. Bo's arm twisted unnaturally and he fell to his knees as Wovoka rose to his feet. Bo's teeth were bared as Wovoka yanked his arm further. His head went lower. Wovoka shot three fast hard kicks, one to Bo's stomach, one to his face and one to his ribs, without letting go of his arm. Bo was barely conscience and Wovoka kicked him hard over the side of the battle deck.

Sweat covered Wovoka's face and he ached from where the handrails had jabbed into his ribs. He thought about swinging down below but knew the spinning of the battle deck would disorient him. He stepped back slightly to his left and saw Eddy swing up onto his side of the deck. Eddy held the billy club. The fast, lithe Brule approached Wovoka.

Wovoka pulled back into the Kata III stance he had practiced a thousand times with Cavaho. Eddy came within a meter and a half and Wovoka decided not to wait. He flew a fast kick at Eddy's mid section. Eddy effortlessly slammed the kick away with the billy club and hit Wovoka with a hard jab to his face. Wovoka staggered back. Eddy whipped the billy club down at Wovoka's knee and connected. Wovoka felt the searing pain as his knee cracked.

Eddy followed with a knee to Wovoka's gut. He knew he could not match Eddy's hand-to-hand. Eddy would soon knock him unconscious, if not crack his skull like an egg, with the billy club. Wovoka felt his knee was barely able to support his weight. He could not let this fight end on the top of the battle deck. He had to make it through to the flip of the deck and then some of Eddy's advantage would be neutralized. Wovoka hit the deck and scramble rolled to the edge. Eddy followed, striking at Wovoka's hand as he scrambled away. The blow clanged on the deck and Wovoka struggled to move faster.

Eddy's second attack with the billy club was more successful and he landed a brutal hit to Wovoka's calf. It landed with a thick, sickening thud but did not break the bone. Wovoka passed by the baseball bat and grabbed it. On his back, he used the bat to ward off two more blows from the billy club and finally the battle deck flipped.

Dropping the bat, Wovoka rolled over and clamped onto two nearby handrails. Eddy staggered backward and had to drop the billy club to grab a handrail. The deck leveled and Eddy began to swing to Wovoka. Wovoka waited and did not dodge as Eddy sent a jab to his chin. The blow glanced off because the swinging Eddy had little leverage.

With one quick movement Wovoka swung into Eddy, pulled his knees up and let go of both handrails. Wovoka caught Eddy's jumpsuit with both hands. Eddy's face showed surprise for a moment and he clamped harder on the handrails to hold both of them up. Then Eddy realized since Wovoka was holding onto him all he had to do was let go and they would both fall to the floor, both would be declared losers. Satyr would remain the Brule chief and Wovoka would have failed to prove, through combat, his status as White Buffalo. The thought of letting go flashed through Eddy's mind as he felt Wovoka yank hard on his jumpsuit. Eddy's grip came loose.

Wovoka's yank was fast and calculated. As the two fell Wovoka pulled Eddy into him and did a short roll so that Eddy's back faced the hard floor. With force Eddy slammed onto the floor. His back and the back of his skull smacked onto the plasteel. Wovoka knees were tucked tight to Eddy's chest and he clutched Eddy's jumpsuit at both shoulders. Each of Eddy's ribs snapped like twigs under Wovoka's knees. Wovoka stared down intently at Eddy, ready to move

his hands from Eddy's shoulders and knock him unconscious if he moved. But the unfortunate tribal was unconscious, well on his way to death.

The spectators roared. The White Buffalo had been defeated. He had fallen to his defeat. But the other half of the crowd was pulling the cheering tribals back down to their seats pointing at the battle deck, which was still spinning. The tribals stared at the spinning battle deck's blue lights shining brightly on all sides. When the match was over the battle deck stopped spinning and all the edge lights turned red. The Brule watched as Wovoka stood, carefully keeping his feet on Eddy's body, not touching the floor. Wovoka's pain was evident but he determinedly forced himself to stand, placing his weight on his good leg. He stood precariously on Eddy's hips until the deck flipped again. Wovoka's arms were outstretched as the deck hit him from behind. The breath was knocked out of him but he clutched a handrail and the deck carried him up.

When the battle deck leveled it stopped spinning and the red lights came on.

Wovoka lay on the floor for a moment before he was able to breathe again. Slowly, fighting through the pain, he stood.

A Brule medic bounded over a three-meter bridge that had been extended out from the spectator area to the battle deck. Wovoka gestured for the medic to give him his comp set. Wovoka's voice was carried to every lodge ship. "Satyr, I have won your chieftom." Wovoka coughed and blood sprayed onto his hand. "I am the White Buffalo because the Elder Shaman speaks the voice of the Grandfathers and the strength of the Grandfathers passes through me now. I am ready to lead the AmerIndian Confederacy to the Homeland, the first of many lands our people will live in peace and harmony with nature upon. If we are to be successful we must act as one spirit, one body, one mind." Wovoka spit blood and continued, "No tribal can distrust another. No tribal can doubt the intentions or the sincerity of another. No tribal can give another a reason for doubt. We must all work tirelessly toward our goal. We must all believe that together the homeland will be ours. Satyr, I need the support and loyalty of every chief. I will not give your people a command to join in the invasion. Instead, I give you back your chieftom and I ask you as a brother to command your people in the way you see fit. Do not command out of deference to the position of legend I now hold. Command them because you know the other tribes need you to succeed."

Satyr stood and cried, "Invasion."

The crowd roared and the Brule scattered in every direction to prepare for war. The navcomps continued to calculate correspondence planes. Destination Naanac.

#

Grey halls slipped past Jaret. He nodded at the brig officer as he passed. Lige had made sure to keep Alexa Sullivan's identification a secret. The prison guards saw her simply as another prisoner, although female prisoners were unusual. The official roster showed her as a crewmember of the prime ship *Silke* who was waiting to be transferred to a penal outpost in the Privilege system for a one-year incarceration for insubordination.

"Code lock to voice pattern Jaret Tucker. Delta Zeta storage protocol."

Jaret was hiding the video feed of his meetings with Alexa in the trillions of bytes of storage in Lige's processed intelligence database. He entered the cell to find Alexa poring over a bubble display on the wall. He had cleared access to the literature sections for Alexa. She read voraciously. Once a day she was let out to use the gym facilities, alone. She used that time to swim. To Jaret's knowledge, he was the only person who spoke to her. The guards were under orders to stun her if she spoke a word in their presence. Alexa had learned silence quickly.

Jaret sat down at the end of the bench. He took out some chocolates. She smiled, took one. Jaret looked at his boots as he spoke, "I see you read all of

Dicken's work. I read a few chapters of 'Martin Chuzzlewit'. His work is slow and dry. What do you like about it?"

"The time," she said. "There lives were simple. Confrontation revolved around reputation and status, not bloodshed. I find it quaint, relaxing. I think it disturbs you because you are a killer."

He looked down at his hands. "I am not a killer. I am a soldier. You should know the difference after being with the AC for that long."

"You have a choice, Jaret. You don't have to do what you do. Or at least you could serve a cause that matters. Leave Lige. Go to the AC. With your knowledge of Lige's fleet the AC could launch a rescue attempt for me in twenty-four hours."

"I wouldn't need the AC to get you off this ship."

"Oh," she said quietly.

"But that is not something I will be doing, Alexa." It was difficult for him to understand. He realized he was her jailer. He was the only social contact she had. Jaret could tell she was attracted to him, maybe even felt something approaching affection for him. Yet she did not make any invitation to him, no requests. She never even promised anything for her release. She simply continued to tell him her release could help him if he would defect to the AC with her. He liked her measure of self-control.

Alexa put her hands in her lap and became quiet. He thought for a moment and all of the feelings surged back. He pulled closer. "I am thinking about freeing you."

She looked at him. "Would you go with me?"

He was struck by the bluntness of the question. He had thought of many different responses she would have to his statement but her question surprised him, excited him. "No, of course not."

"Why are you considering this?"

"Isn't it obvious?" Jaret leaned in closer.

"Say it."

"I love you." He looked at her. What had gone unspoken was now overt.

"I love you," Alexa said.

Jaret let the words wash over him like cool rain. He leaned forward to kiss her and she slapped him with all her strength.

"I do love you but there can never be anything between us. You choose to kill my people, who wish only for peace. There can never be anything between us." With that she turned from him.

He stood abruptly and left without another word. He had work to do to affect her escape back to the AmerIndian Confederacy.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Lodge ship *Iron Bow* was a maelstrom of activities. Tribals moved quickly through the ship setting function columns to new parameters, readying the lodge ship for war. It was easy for Broge to move unnoticed. He approached the level's weapons chamber. He finger tapped a release code and pulled a Sledge Decimator from the rack and grabbed two bandoleers of ammo clips. He also snagged a Sledge Dominator and strapped an ammo belt around his waist.

Broge had tried everything he could to avoid this situation. There was no way around it. He audio commanded his comp set. "Comp, list all forty to eighty ton outrider ships which are loaded with full armament but have not filed ready status." The ship server threw the list of three ships across the lenses of his comp set. Broge chose a sixty-five ton heavy bomber transport.

Broge ducked passed a few tribals who were transporting spread-inducer cannons to empty exterior gun ports. He was nervous, also excited, as he entered level six of Hangar 276. *Badger* sat moored by two sturdy extension rails. Two tribals, weighed down by power tools, moved across the top of the ship checking various structure variables and settings. Broge entered *Badger* after working his way down two level ladders. As a clerical assistant to Celetain Prax his usual tasks included diplomacy, record keeping, information gathering. He was not used to this type of physical exertion.

The rear airlock led Broge into a long hall running the length of *Badger*, forward bridge to engineering. Broge saw a form pass across the hall down near the catalyst chamber. He moved quickly toward the bridge passing another tribal. The young woman was in the small armory checking each weapon for a full clip. He could tell by the tribe totem embroidery on her short-cropped jacket that she was Diegueño. She was dressed in bright yellow with stark white boots.

"Assistant Broge, what brings you to *Badger*? Is there some way we can help Elder Prax?"

"Yes, there is. We have a critical breach code coming from this ship to central. I am here to investigate."

"Why wasn't a Tsimshian sent?"

"Everyone is busy with preparations for the invasion. Please lead me to the bridge so I can see what the problem is."

"No need for that." She finger tapped and displayed the ship's status on Broge's comp sets. "No, Assistant Broge, nothing reads abnormal on the ship."

Broge frowned. I would like to see the bridge, specifically where the transmitter is."

"Of course, Assistant Broge." The woman turned to lead him quickly to the bridge.

Badger's bridge was large with several seats. The Diegueño walked forward into the bridge and turned as the grip of the Sledge Decimator crashed down into forehead. The Diegueño reeled and her head crashed into the seat behind her. Broge had failed to knock her unconscious and she began to raise her head groggily. Clumsily, he clubbed her again and winced as blood flowed from her forehead. Broge cursed and slammed the black duffel down. He pulled out a coagulant patch and tore it open with his teeth. Quickly he slapped the patch unceremoniously onto her forehead. He pulled out a shiny roll of metallic tape. He pulled off a start to the roll and began to wrap it around the Diegueño's head. Broge covered every part of her face except her nose and mouth. Nervously he shot a glance over his shoulder down the hall. No one.

Broge hurried, pulling the Sledge Decimator out over his shoulder. He pointed the barrel at the back of the Diegueño's skull and began to wrap the metallic tape to the Decimator. After wrapping the length of the gun he used his left hand to wrap the metallic tape around his right hand, which now clutched the Decimator. Cutting the metallic tape with a vibro blade from the duffel he slumped into a seat beside the Diegueño.

"Comp, access Doolittle Zeta Nine. Strip code protocol. All command options transfer to bridge alone. Disable all ship input code other than those directed through my comp set. Execute on command code 765AB7D. Ship lock down immediately. Run minimal prep for launch." Broge listened and heard the clank of the airlocks and the whine of the engine.

Tribals were now jumping from the top of the ship to the floor. Seconds passed before tribals began throwing on their comp sets to contact central. "Convert to voice command only."

"Launch ready," the comp set responded in the voice of Potlatch Weaver.

"Pull out of dock and sweep 180 at first available interval." *Badger's* engines whined and the ship glided backwards, data links and oil hoses snapping off like twine holding a vault. *Badger* rolled out of the docking bay and swiveled to point away from lodge ship *Iron Bow*.

"Comp, how many people are on this ship and what are there locations?"

"Six tribals currently on board. Their locations are indicated by red circles on your comp set."

Broge studied the display on his comp set lenses. The lock down he had initiated isolated each tribal, trapping each in a segment of the ship by airlock. He noticed two tribals were together in the engineering section.

"Comp, open Airlock 19 and decompress the engineering section." Broge watched as the red circles moved out of the engineering section. He ordered the comp to use the same technique to herd all of the tribals to the compartment directly outside of the bridge.

Suddenly a crossworker's face filled Broge's comp set view. "You are in violation of the invasion silence edict. Return to the lodge ship immediately or you will be fired on."

Broge hissed, "Comp, give signal vid and audio to Central. Central, this is Anthony Victor, UDA intelligence agent, formerly Broge, assistant to Celetain Prax. I have seven tribal hostages. If any part of this ship is fired on the compartment I have my hostages in will be decompressed. I have also ensured that if I am personally injured this Diegueño will die immediately." Broge nodded down to where the assault rifle was taped at one end to his wrist and at the other to the Diegueño.

With that message Broge released the channel and checked the correspondence plane countdown on his comp set. Eight minutes, ten seconds.

#

Wovoka ran into council bridge. All of the Elders were there save Weaver.

Kugan turned and motioned Wovoka over. "We have a six minute window. Broge has seven hostages sealed tight in a stolen outrider ship. There is little we can do. If he can correspondence jump that outrider ship or send a correspondence plane fire a message back to Earth then the Naanac invasion will be severely threatened."

Celetain finger tapped. "Broge, why are you doing this? You have lived with us. You know we struggle for peace. Why are you returning to that UDA cesspool of loneliness and treachery?"

"A million creds does a lot to reduce loneliness. A man can only serve one master and I believe a million creds will release me from all my masters. I am sorry, Celetain."

"Don't do this -" John pulled Celetain back. Tears were streaming down her face. Her shoulders were slumped with the weight of the knowledge that her words, her misplaced trust in this UDA spy was responsible for the deaths of thousands of tribals over the past few years. One of Celetain's Acolytes led her down from the command area and led her to a seat. She wept.

John spoke softly, "What makes you think we won't scrap that ship, Broge?"

"Because I don't think you, Weaver or Prax have the grit for that. Stormseeker can't command it himself."

Stormseeker slammed his fist down.

Kugan finger tapped the feed from their comp sets to *Badger* closed. "It's simple. We scrap that ship, killing seven of our people, or we let him go and lose initiative at Naanac."

"Why can't the Tsimshian use the mother comp to command his outrider ship back?" Wovoka asked.

Kugan sighed, "Broge is using Celetain's codes and authorization under his own voice. Tsimshian tri-jacks are working now to break Celetain's code walls. They estimate it will take ten to fifteen minutes. He'll be gone in less than that. We can snipe him with a concentrated laser but that will kill the Diegueño hostage. The Decimator has a hair trigger option I'm sure he's using. We can have body tank warriors save the other six tribals on board though."

John opened the line again. "Broge, you served Celetain well. You were a brother to all of us. Remember the harvest celebration? You laughed so hard apple juice came out of your nose when those Tsimshian tried to join the Corn Dance. I know you felt joy here among us. Please, brother, come back. All you're returning to now is the destruction of your very self. Come back. No one has been hurt beyond healing. We will accept you back as a brother who has cleansed his heart of a sickness. Please, Broge, come back."

Broge was shaking now. "No, I was never a brother. I am sick of every Tom, Dick and Tonto asking me how I am, sharing every essence of my life, expecting me to help and listen and share as if they were a part of my family. I want money, raw cred to be wasted and squandered at my disposal. Not communal wampum. I want no obligations to help anyone but myself and I wanted the faceless masses that will leave me alone. Now back off the fighter or there will be blood. Comp, reduce vent O2 by fifty percent in the aft bridge quarter."

John turned. "Pull the fighters back."

Stormseeker shook his head but did not countermand the order.

John frowned. "We're down to four minutes. What are the options?"

Stormseeker was silent for a moment. "We can disable the Kellion Cannon on *Badger* and get the body tank troops in there. The Diegueño will die. That's a viable option. If we don't handle this situation now we can still try to take Naanac. It will simply take a few thousands of more tribals lives to do it."

John shook his head, "No, Stormseeker. I am not trading one tribals' life now for a few thousand in the near future. We do not trade lives as currency. That is what makes us different than the UDA."

Broge came back in view. "I am two minutes from correspondence jump. I want every fighter and outrider ship two thousand kilometers away from this vessel before one minute or I kill the six and the Diegueño--"

Suddenly the Diegueño rose from her seat. Broge had to stand with her. It happened quickly. Wovoka was the first to realize what was occurring. "No! Don't do it!" he screamed. "We will--"

The Diegueño was already moving. She began to walk, staggering aimlessly. Broge cursed at her "Sit down, dammit--"

The Diegueño purposefully jerked her head forward.

#

The Sledge Decimator roared and the Diegueño's head transformed into a fine mist on the far inner hull section. The body dropped to the floor. Broge gaped and let the Sledge Decimator, still taped to his hand but disconnected from the Diegueño, clatter to the floor. He was still gaping seconds later when two Apache fighters raced in firing concentrated lasers.

The concentrated lasers severed the aft bridge section down the center of each airlock door. The concentrated lasers severed the aft bridge section from the outrider ship like a chunk of carrot cut out by a master chef. Four body tank warriors, their armor gleaming from distant starlight, descended on the aft section carrying airlines. The body tank warriors carefully inserted the airlines and handled the aft bridge section like a mother cradling a child.

Twenty meters away another group of body tank warriors fell on the Broge's bridge section like wolves on a rabbit. One body tank warrior raised a beam cutter and holed the severed airlock. The rest of the body tank warriors waited with rail guns primed. The lead body tank warrior charged in as vacuum blasted into the bridge section. He threw a yellow pack of plastic at Broge. The pack hit him and exploded around him, enveloping Broge in a translucent yellow bubble. Broge gasped in the bubble's air, refilling his lungs.

One of the body tank warriors at the severed, holed airlock clacked his helmet against another warriors. Yelling and pushing the warrior's weapon down, he made it clear to that despite what any of the body tank warriors wanted Broge was going back to the lodge ship alive.

#

Wovoka shook his head. It was an ugly end. All of the Elders were struck by the brutality. Stormseeker put his arm around John's shoulder. "We are at war. The flow of blood is only beginning. The first small payment for the Homeland."

Wovoka looked over his shoulder to see the two acolytes leading Celetain out of the room. She was shaking with the force of her crying. Wovoka clenched his fist. His face twisted in rage. He pulled Stormseeker away from John. "That Diegueño will not die for nothing. We can take Naanac with twenty thousand Apache and ten thousand Brule. Send out a general announcement that no tribal is to set foot on any ship until we launch the invasion. If one footstep falls on a single outrider ship that ship is to be automatically decompressed, backed out of dock one kilometer and scrapped by lodge guns. Strip every Elder's code protocol until we are passed the correspondence jump."

Stormseeker stared at Wovoka for a moment, still not used to hearing command decisions from this Infiltrator Pack Alpha. Stormseeker nodded and headed off to take execute his orders.

Keokuk rushed onto the deck and approached his brother. "I've got three possible invasion plans from the Brule Tacticians. Start going over them now so you--"

Wovoka raised a hand to Keokuk. "This isn't a ship battle, comp jockey. I'll speak with the Brule Tacticians myself. What I need you to do is go take care of Celetain. She's a wreck. She feels responsible for Broge. But I'm going to need every Elder ready to work when we hit Naanac."

"Her Acolytes are with her now."

Wovoka shook his head, "They worship her. They won't be able to console her or help her. See what you can do. Then go with Cavaho to Alpha Grail and have him transfer command of twenty body tank warriors to Cavaho."

Keokuk opened his mouth. Wovoka told him with a look that he had little time for discussion.

#

Keokuk and Cavaho headed toward Celetain's quarters. Auto-ladders took them down twenty levels. Keokuk made his way through the tribals still prepping the lodge ship for battle. The entrance to Celetain's quarters was obvious. Neon Cybershamanism symbols crawled across the walls for five meters to either side of the large oak doors. Two acolytes stood guard.

"I'm here with a message from Wovoka, White Buffalo, for Celetain." Keokuk said politely.

The Acolyte answered Keokuk as he glanced at Cavaho who stood still and silent. "Allow me to speak with Sliver. He will decide if she is ready to receive your message." The Acolyte closed his eyes for a moment. "Sliver says you may speak with Celetain - if you are cautious and brief."

Keokuk looked at the Acolyte sideways. The Acolyte resumed his rigid stance and his companion waved his hand at the huge oak door. It opened inward slowly and smoothly without a hand being set on it. Keokuk was about to address the Acolyte when Sliver appeared. He motioned for Keokuk and Cavaho to enter.

The large circular room, twenty meters in diameter, ascended five levels. The walls held thousands of books, mostly grimoires dealing with the art and science of sorcery, witchcraft and Shamanism in hundreds of variations. The center of the room was a ritual circle laid out in brilliantly colored marble. A hard light display showing the nearest galaxies turned with an eerie slowness near the ritual circle.

Celetain sat in a large mahogany chair. She was silent. Her gaze was distant and tears streamed down her face. Three acolytes surrounded her. One acolyte shook a smoking lantern. The smoke rolled out of the lantern and created a luminescent orange haze. The other two acolytes chanted in low voices. Celetain didn't seem to notice them.

Sliver turned to Keokuk, "I have never seen her lose control like this. Please, speak to her. The invasion is pressing and we will need her guidance."

Keokuk stepped forward. "Celetain, I know you are in pain but you must know that this is not your responsibility. There was nothing you could have done."

Celetain's eyes remained the same, distant and blank. "I could have listened. Surely the Grandfathers warned me. They would not have allowed a traitor to hear every casual thought I gave to Broge in confidence. They warned me. I would not hear. I ask the Grandfather to show me the future. I ask them to show me the past. But when they showed me the danger of the present I would not see. The blood of thousands of tribals is on my hands. I betrayed them with my mouth. Killed them with my tongue. Their deaths are a coldness on my heart."

Her voice cracked and tears rolled down her cheeks. She hugged herself, showing weakness and fear.

Keokuk felt helpless, unable to help her. "As a Christian, I believe I know what the 'Grandfathers' you speak to are actually demons. I believe they are selective and cryptic when they speak to you. Am I right? Their reasons will become--"

"No, they must have showed me. They would not--" Pain racked her and she shook with grief. The acolytes and Keokuk stood still. One of the strongest women of all the tribes now wept before them, broken. Keokuk started to back away. His words could do no more.

Cavaho brushed past him, heading straight for Celetain. He knelt before her. Even directly in front of her he could see that she did not see him. Cavaho leaned forward and put his arms under hers and lifted her from the chair. The two chanting acolytes gasped and scrambled forward. Cavaho pulled Celetain up and hugged her tight, wrapping his arms around her with force.

Celetain snapped out of her weeping and her arms flailed. She was Celetain Prax, Elder Shaman, and no tribal had ever touched her without consent. Both acolytes tried in vain to pull Cavaho off of her. Cavaho's arms were like iron chords. Celetain began to have trouble breathing.

Keokuk could do no more than stare at the scene. The acolytes were now shouting and one was hitting Cavaho's back in desperation. Celetain hurt was forgotten, replaced by fury. She began to kick at Cavaho's shins. Then she felt tears falling onto her chest. She felt one warm drop after the other. Cavaho's face was now down at her neck and she released her tension and put her face down near his. The acolytes continued beating at Cavaho to no avail. Cavaho, like a great tower, beaten only by the wind, stood fast.

When Celetain saw the tears streaming down the young man's face she could not help herself. She wrapped her arms around him. Her feet settled on the floor and the two fell into each other. The acolytes slowly realized that Celetain no longer wished to be freed from Cavaho's grasp and they stepped away. Cavaho held Celetain and she held him. Then abruptly Cavaho straightened and looked into her eyes. Cavaho released her. Celetain braced herself and remained standing, on her own.

Cavaho met her gaze again for a moment and then turned. He walked quickly toward the door. Cavaho was exiting the room when Celetain walked forward to Keokuk. "Where is he going?"

Keokuk looked at her for a moment and replied, "To work." With that Keokuk turned and followed Cavaho.

Celetain stood, processing Cavaho's action and Keokuk words. She had known for a moment the hurt Cavaho carried with him every day. She also knew the workload Wovoka's infiltrator pack had carried the last few years. Celetain understood.

"Run the Bear and Fox Grimoire codes through the Tsimshian symbol shaker. We have work to do." The Acolytes hurried off at Celetain's command, each with the knowledge that their leader was back.

#

Jaret pulled his jumpsuit off and hung it carefully in his gym locker. He watched the sliding door to the locker area close behind the last soldier to leave. He pulled soft black body armor out of the locker and donned it. Pulling on armored gloves, he checked the time display on the back. Forty seconds before the run began. He pulled a black mask over his scalp and adjusted full-spectrum goggles into place. The light flexible suit of armor could absorb up a moderate laser blast and even some types of hard case ammunition. The suit bore no sigil and hid virtually every aspect of the suit's wearer.

Jaret grabbed two Sledge Challengers from the locker and closed it. He checked the energy clips and settings. The Challenger in his left was set on full-auto laser fire. The challenger in his right was set to single fire mini-grenade launch. He heard the locker room door swing open and he maneuvered to the other side of the locker set. He listened and heard someone in the locker room undressing.

Blink. The goggles flashed a clear picture of his surroundings and he moved. Jaret exited the locker room and ran down the length of the pool. A few soldiers were swimming. He ignored them and picked up speed. The gym door slid open as he bolted through it and barreled down toward the brig. He approached a soldier looking at him quizzically. Jaret toppled the soldier with a fast armored forearm to the face. He fired the Challenger at a soldier ten meters ahead. The soldier flopped as though all his bones had been removed.

At speed Jaret crossed an intersection and fired concussion grenades in one directions, sprayed fire in the other. He reached the entrance to the brig and barked out the special codes he had arranged (using a complicated task shield) through two of Lige's best coders.

Stepping to the side of the door Jaret avoided laser fire. He waited for the first barrage to stop and rolled into the brig area with a deft somersault. He sprayed the area liberally with laser fire. The energy clips emptied and the Challengers automatically clicked over to the grenades, each dispensing their eight grenade integral magazines as Jaret got to his feet. Laser fire blinked passed him as he ran down the cell tunnel. He threw himself behind a corner and slapped energy clips into both guns as fast as his gloved hands would allow. As soon as both guns were go he threw himself back into the hall firing full-auto again. Three blasts hit the suit and he saw the capacity reading drop from ninety percent to fifty-four.

Jaret turned and ran, cutting a zigzag route through the halls to Alexa's cell. He stopped, amplified his audio sensors and heard the clatter of boots. He guessed they were two corners away.

Jaret spoke through the mask. "Beta Authorization. Open and wipe. Lock to code - Gramma's Cookies."

The door slid open and Jaret jumped into the cell commanding the door to shut as he skidded to a stop. Alexa was at the terminal as usual and her eyes widened as she saw the black armored figure race into the room. Jaret placed the

rifles on the floor and slapped two energy clips and two grenade cylinders on the floor in front of Alexa.

"Load those," he commanded. He pulled at the Velcro compartments on the suit and removed three objects. The first was a cylinder three times the width of Jaret's palm. He held it out at arms length and turned it so that the bottom and top pointed at the ceiling and the floor. He clipped a button with his gloved thumb and the device fired two lines of flexi-cord ending in vibro grapples. The grapples drove deep into the plasteel of the floor and ceiling.

Jaret stepped back from the taught line of flexi-cord now extending vertically down the center of the room.

Alexa stood. "Jaret?" she asked sounding surprised.

"Yes, and I really need those Challengers loaded. Now." She stepped back and started loading the rifles awkwardly. "Are we escaping?"

Jaret talked while he worked. He set two rectangular boxes down on the floor, each on one side of the flexi-cord. "No. You are escaping."

"Where to?"

"Wherever the ship's navcomp takes you. I aimed it for earth. Did the best I could, but I'm not a gator."

Jaret snapped the boxes together around the side of the flexi-cord and then spun them around the cord as an axis. They rolled smoothly. He thumbed a button on the top of each box. Each box telescoped to triple its original length.

"In thirty seconds you will be on your way home. I love you but I can't go with you. Maybe we'll meet again. Hand me the Challengers."

Alexa did as she was told. When he was holding them, she grabbed the bottom of the mask and pulled it over his nose. He blinked at her and smiled. She kissed him. "I love you. We will meet again." She pulled the mask back down.

"Hold onto my shoulders." Alexa stepped behind Jaret and jumped onto his back. He grabbed the flexi-cord and pulled their weight off the floor above the extended boxes. With his boot he tapped the left box and the two extended boxes began to circle. A red light shone from beneath the end of each box. Two concentrated lasers cut a circle in the floor. The circle dropped smoothly crashing on the level below which had also been perfectly cut by the concentrated laser. The circles dominoed down six levels.

Jaret slid down the flexi-cord following the circles as they popped out beneath him. Alexa, clinging to Jaret, laughed as they dropped passed a soldier shaving, three soldiers huddled around a game table, a soldier dancing to blaring music in his briefs and another lost to the world with a sation disk plugged into his head. The two, clutched tight together, slammed to a stop on top a pile of six flooring circles. Alexa almost lost her grip when Jaret jumped down off the pile and dragged her to a grav lifter holding two plasteel cases.

Jaret keyed the accelerator and the grav lifter pulled forward. "Open the cases," he yelled.

The lifter picked up speed. "You steer." He let Alexa take the control stick while he emptied his Challengers to the front and rear clearing the halls of the few troopers foolish enough not to get out of the way. As the Challengers emptied he threw them away from the grav lifter and pulled out fully primed and loaded replacement from the cases. One hundred and fifty meters, sixteen energy clips and twelve grenades later the grav lifter skidded to a stop at the hangar bays. Jaret checked the countdown - thirty-three seconds remaining.

Jumping off the grav lifter he pulled Alexa with him. He charged into the hangar bay, currently empty due to a scheduled hull cleaning. *Enola Gay* sat quietly on her moorings.

"Jump," he shouted. She looked down. Five meters below a large cargo door was open on the top of *Enola Gay*. She hesitated and he shouted again, "Jump."

Alexa turned and jumped. She hit the top of the ship hard but managed to roll over to the hole above the cargo section when she caught her breath.

Jaret blasted two vidcams and ran to the other end of the hanger bay. He dove into a large empty container at the start of a supply corridor. He yanked the lid closed and waited in the dark as the last nine seconds ticked by. Jaret could not see the events in the hangar bay that he had personally orchestrated. He knew what each sound signified as the container was pulled along tracks down the supply corridor.

The cargo bay shook with the force of *Enola Gay's* impulse thrusters. The ion flames left red glowing blazes on the plasteel of the hangar bay. The ship surged forward and its Kellion Cannon fired at a point just five hundred meters from *Black Mariah*.

Even the small amount of *Black Mariah's* gravitational field would affect *Enola Gay's* correspondence jump. While *Enola Gay's* navcomp had aimed at Earth it was likely the ship would end up galaxies away in any direction but it would most likely be undamaged. Jaret had stocked the ship with six Nagaspheres for additional firings as well as a year's worth of dry rations. Much of the escape's success would rely on Alexa. Jaret had downloaded piloting and astrogation training programs onto the ship's comp. She would know enough in a few weeks to take the ship wherever she need to go if she worked hard. There was also the remote possibility she would be found by another ship.

Enola Gay gunned through the correspondence plane and was gone. A massive wave of energy bounced back out of the correspondence plane rolling *Black Mariah* twenty degrees, like a wave would rock a sea vessel. *Black Mariah's* Nagasphere semi-breached and died in a contained implosion. All of the ship's power winked off sending hundreds of soldiers scrambling for pressure suits. Jaret's empty container stopped moving when the power died.

Jaret kicked the crate open and pulled himself out. He activated low light vision on the goggles and read the section number laser engraved on the plasteel structure support near him. Hurriedly he pushed the empty container, counting the structure beams he passed. He stopped at Sector 19-G and pulled a panel out of the floor. He pulled his armor suit off and donned his uniform, which had been underneath the panel. Jaret pulled out a pressure suit and put it on over his uniform. He shoved the armor suit down and replaced the panel.

Jaret heard a howl as vacuum raced toward him down the corridor. He scrambled into the gunny tube above Sector 19-G and could hear the chaos going on in the halls. He moved quickly toward the bridge.

Soon he dropped down into a low traffic hall and ran the rest of the way to bridge. The bridge was blazing with halogen lights placed on top of blank monitors. Lige was in the center of the room. Jaret recognized him by the Admiral's sigil on both shoulders of his pressure suit. He made his way through the bridge crew, who looked confused and busy.

Lige was editing a restoration plan on a gauntlet comp. Jaret joined the group around the Admiral. "Men are going to pay for this with their lives," he hissed. "Did you capture the infiltrators?" Lige asked.

"I saw one man dart across a hall fifty meters from me. I followed but I could not catch sight of him again." Jaret lied. "How many were there?"

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

The lodge ships hit the correspondence planes and surged out six billion light years away, heading toward Naanac. Jet Tigers swarmed out of Nez Perce lodge ships, darting in sharp arcs toward the single satellite sensor orbiting Naanac. The sensor satellite constantly logged traffic around the planet (which was usually nil). Kill Spotted Horse had planned Wovoka's first entry into Naanac around the orbital path of the satellite. If a ship came within five thousand clicks the satellite fired a message through a correspondence plane back to Rowan Cartel headquarters near Earth. The sensor satellite was fired on and destroyed Jet Tigers well before any of the AmerIndian Confederacy's ships were within its range.

Wovoka stood in the command circle on board a Nez Perce lodge ship, his words being carried to all the tribes simultaneously. "I come before you asking you to accomplish a feat our people have failed to accomplish for seven hundred years. I ask you to engage in the most hard-fought battle in Native American history. Wounded Knee will be a small skirmish compared to the war we are inviting with the UDA. Fear not, Brothers. Today we will win and tomorrow we will win and the next day we will win. The Grandfathers have foreseen this. We will slay the White Man and destroy what he has wrought no matter how many men he throws at us. The Grandfathers will protect us. The time is right for the purchase of a Homeland. The only currency acceptable as payment is blood. For centuries we pretended that land could be bought with credits. We wrangled in the twisted systems of the White Man. Now we pay him the only currency he cannot refuse. Today we pay with blood. Many of use will be slain. Each fallen will be honored as the Native Americans that refused to forfeit, refused to settle for the scraps the White Man laid out for us. Today, we take for our people a Homeland where we can live in harmony with nature the way our ancestors did. I ask all of you to fight, some to die and none to quit."

Wovoka stood quiet for a moment. Potlatch Weaver's armor gleamed and none looked away from the White Buffalo. Strangely, Wovoka felt comfortable. He extended his arm and the body tank whirred.

"Let loose the dogs of war," he cried. Tribals on every lodge ship roared.

#

Wovoka grabbed a rivet gun and pushed off the platform. In zero-g he floated to the top of the new chunnel, swiveling to land on his feet upside down. Other tribals in construction pressure suits were guiding blasteel beams, twenty and fifty meters long, into place. He waited until a crew of six Apaches placed a beam and began firing rivets into the beam at half-meter intervals. He looked a little out of place in Potlatch Weaver's Classic Mako body tank but Celetain had said visibility of the White Buffalo would be important. She wanted the tribals to see him working alongside them. There was much planning to be done, decisions to be made, but Wovoka agreed with Celetain. The Elders needed him less than the tribals did.

Strong Apaches, used to constructing in pressure suits, worked quickly around Wovoka but included him in their joking banter. "I hope you are a better aim with a Decimator than you are with that rivet gun." The Apaches laughed at Wendigo's jibe. A young tribal came forward and showed Wovoka how to hold the rivet gun horizontally so it would easily slide between the rivet rails.

Construction in a pressure suit was a demanding task. The large tools were not heavy due to zero-g but the work took concentration due to the worker's constantly changing orientation and environment. The Apache construction packs were familiar with the challenge. They switched orientation and swiveled at strange angles with ease. It seemed to Wovoka that the Apache workers had forgotten that a single mistake with a tool could kill in this environment. He realized the opposite was the case. The Apache workers never forgot and worked through the difficulty with courage and precision.

Allowing speed and flexibility, the Apache workers used soft pressure suits. A power tool could nick a pressure suit with the slightest touch. The pressure suits were equipped with explo-foam packets. The small packets of oxygen-laced foam explosively filled a pressure suit if decompression occurred. The foam could be chewed to give the worker up to three minutes of oxygen before suffocation started.

Often decompressions came with a rivet accidentally being fired through a leg or arm. Cutting a bloody tribal out of an explo-foam filled pressure suit was no easy task. While the Apache were safety conscious, they drew the line at safety precautions that slowed work beyond what they deemed a reasonable pace. A half dozen Apache tribals died each year due to construction accidents. No accidents had occurred today and Foreman Wendigo was working hard to keep it that way.

The entrance to the new chunnel was finally completed. Fifty percent larger than the rest of the chunnel would be, it was brightly illuminated with extensive light rigs. Four Apache construction packs were busy installing a Nagasphere to power the new chunnel's shields. A Nagasphere would be placed every quarter kilometer along chunnel cutting through the two-kilometer thick Free Mantle. They would serve to power the chunnel's force fields or could be detonate remotely to destroy the chunnel if an unauthorized entry was attempted.

While the Rowan chunnel had relied on a semi-flexible cage design that bent and bounced boulders back away from the chunnel, the new AC chunnel would be rigid. The Tsimshian designed, Apache built chunnel would use powerful force fields to keep boulders away from the structure. The powered chunnel would use Nagaspheres quickly. (Tsimshian tech-jacks estimated a Nagaspheres would be spent every eighteen hours.)

Wendigo finger tapped into the construction frequency every few minutes to direct the Nagasphere installation packs around the work being done by the riveting teams.

Every chief and every lodge ship captain was given the command codes for detonation of the chunnel. Each lodge ship had to transmit a pass code before a shuttle or outrider ship from that lodge ship could enter the chunnel. If the pass code was not sent the chunnel would automatically detonate as a ship passed the first section.

The size of the chunnel amazed Wovoka. The chunnel was two hundred meters in diameter as opposed to the old chunnel's measurement of fifty meters. It was being built for Zeta class outrider ships, which could carry five thousand passengers. It would take some time to get hundreds of thousands of tribals down to the planet's surface. After heated debate, the Elders had decided two thirds of the AmerIndian Confederacy would be allowed to live on Naanac during the first year. The other third would have to man the 30 lodge ships, the 620 outrider ships and the 5,100 fighters that would still need to be active in Naanac's orbit and beyond.

The first six-hour shift change came and the Apache and Brule packs were efficiently replaced by new packs. Wovoka stayed and more than a few tribals smiled at Wovoka's endurance and dedication.

#

Elder John ducked his head and pulled himself into Keokuk's small workstation. The doorway was large enough to allow easy entry to anyone shorter than a meter and a half, but Keokuk had the top half meter of the door blocked with an assortment of comp modules. Keokuk pulled his comp set from his eyes, swiveled and stood as soon as he realized his visitor was an Elder.

"No, no, please sit back down, Keokuk. I am in your domain now." The old man sat on a comp crate, for there were no other seats in the cramped workspace. John looked Keokuk in the eye. "How long have you been studying fleet battle tactics?"

Keokuk hesitated. The question told him clearly that John knew exactly what had gone on between him and Wovoka at the Steel Circle battle. "Since I graduated Elementals," Keokuk answered.

"It was impressive work. You think fast."

Keokuk sighed. "Thank you. I'm used to playing on my comp set. We lost more than a few tribals in those deflector ships. I don't like having that blood on my hands."

"We could have lost many more. You made the wisest choice, considering. Actually it was your brother's command, not yours. You are quite a bit smarter than your brother, aren't you?"

The question was direct and Keokuk was immediately uncomfortable.

"No, I am not smarter than Wovoka. Perhaps, I have more imagination."

John shifted slightly on the crate. "I looked at your record. You have paved the road for your brother. Helped his pack get missions they would otherwise have passed up for. Wolf Plume's appointment to Jade Dagger was your work. Why the help?"

"I haven't done anything for Wovoka that he wouldn't have done in a little more time. He is a fantastic soldier, a strong leader."

"But once again you are in his shadow. Now that shadow is longer and darker than ever."

Keokuk looked away from John. "Wovoka is where he belongs. Of course, I am jealous. Is that what you want me to say? What does it matter? My brother and I have struggled to maintain a civil relationship for years."

John sat back, relaxed his posture. "I know that. I don't mean to press you. I'm sorry. Frankly, Wovoka needs you now and the AmerIndian Confederacy needs you to help him. I think you know that and it why you have given your brother a pass on some of the issues that are between you. Thank you for that. Let's talk about you now, thought. Your work is some of the best in the AmerIndian Confederacy. But unlike your counterparts - Sliver, Hammer, Gunsmoke - I see a quiet power in you. You can do much more than you are doing now."

Keokuk sat quietly, his discomfort growing.

John continued. "In a matter of hours there will be a decision that every tribal will have to make. Whether to go make a home on Naanac or to stay on the lodge ships and fight the difficult battles that will be required to protect Naanac. I will admit your skill would be a tremendous help to those who settle on Naanac. The tribals who go down will need imagination. But I could use you more here. There is no doubt that I am going to lose Ela, my assistant. She will want to build a home on Naanac with her husband. I want you to fill that position."

Keokuk leaned forward. "That's an interesting offer but frankly it might be a step down for me. Chief Shakespeare has given me a significant amount of control in Tsimshian matters. Also he has to smooth routinely smooth feathers over my choice to embrace Christianity."

"I am fully aware of your Tsimshian influence. I assure you that serving me will increase your influence on AmerIndian affairs. As for you proselytizing, I am not comfortable with that. Christianity has always struck me as intolerant and inflexible. Tribals have told me that when asked, you will tell them flat out that they are going to hell unless they accept salvation through Jesus Christ. I find that extremely judgmental. However, I am here because I think your strengths far outweigh your weaknesses. I am eager to use your skills, in full knowledge of the problems I will have to deal with. Think about my offer. I would like your decision when the chunnel is completed."

John rose, and Keokuk rose as well to help him out of the workspace. "I will consider this offer, Elder Wisdom and I think you will find, in time, that my Christianity is a strength, not a weakness."

#

John stood before a large hard light display of Naanac. The Elders surrounded him waiting for his words. Floating camera drones carried his image

and words to the other lodge ships. He touched the thousands of shifting asteroids on the hard light display and the Free Mantle melted, showing him the bleak grey surface of Naanac. "The distribution of sea and land on Naanac is currently sixty-five percent water and thirty-five percent land. At a comfortable population density there is enough land to support 9.6 million tribals, more than enough room for everyone.

"We are now faced with the task of finding equitable boundaries. In accordance with the beliefs and practices of Native American ancestors, no man or woman will ever own even a single meter of land on the Homeland. Each tribal will have equal right and equal responsibility to every meter of land on this world. Just as there will have to be boundaries established, so that we can live in harmony with our natural surroundings, there will have to be borders established so that tribes and tribals can live in harmony with each other.

"The following proposal is set forward by a consensus, five of the nine chiefs (including our newest chief, Vegas of the Clone Tribe). There are four primary continents on Naanac, which we have renamed Windhome, the Living Lands, Stonelake and Mother Crest. Windhome is the largest and the driest of the continents and correspondingly the most hospitable to settlers. There are forests suitable for hunting and short grass plains that the buffalo herds can be reestablished on. It is also possible, though difficult, to grow wheat on the plains.

"Windhome is to be divided. Half of the continent will remain untouched for three centuries after settlement. Only non-technology exploration and hiking will be allowed in this area. The other half of Windhome is to be divided between the Apache and the Kichai. Approximately seventy-five percent of the remaining half of Windhome will be set aside for family tribe structures, groups of fifty to three thousand tribals. Each group will have two to four hundred square kilometers of land upon which to live. The other twenty-five percent will be allocated for single-family units or tribals who wish to live alone in the wilderness. There will be fifty to one hundred square kilometers of space allocated to each small group or individual that chooses to live in this manner.

"As a new law to the AmerIndian Confederacy, no firearm of any type will be allowed on Naanac, anywhere. Only one punishment will be applied to any violator of this law, permanent banishment from Naanac and the AmerIndian Confederacy.

"The environmental laws on Windhome will be moderate. Comps and plastics will be allowed, but any waste from these units must be gathered and disposed of off world. There will be three star ports on the continent and electricity will be allowed.

"The second continent, the Living Land, is the smallest of the continents. It is covered with the densest jungle terrain found on the planet. Dangerous predators inhabit it and agriculture will be difficult. However, the biological composition of the Living Lands will be a powerful source of healing herbs and totem resources. The Haida and the Brule will settle this continent.

"The Living lands will be divided in half, the second half being untouchable for two centuries. Comps will be allowed on this continent to accommodate Cybershamanism but other synthetic materials not used for research will be discouraged.

"The third largest of the continents is Stone Lake. This continent is a flat black slate, upon which nothing will grow. On Stone Lake is a small four hundred kilometer area that has annual snow. It is the only area of Naanac that gets cold enough for snow during any part of the year. Full Tech will be allowed on this continent and it is, accordingly, given to Zuni, the Tsimshian and the Nez Perce. We trust them to control their waste and pollution."

"The fourth and last continent," the hard light display swiveled to the continent as it centered forward to Elder John, "Mother Crest, is a large area of peninsulas and islands laced by thousands of rivers. Fishing is plentiful and

the range of fish is considerable. Absolutely no tech will be allowed on this continent. This continent is given to the Diegueño. Here they will restore the Mustang herds and carefully introduce other endangered Earth species into Naanac's natural scape.

"If you are paying attention you will notice that the better the land you are given the more you will share with others. The more challenge the land offers, the more autonomy from the AmerIndian Confederacy those settlers will have. We invite comments and questions from all tribals." John became silent.

"Quill, your question please."

"And where is the land allocated for the clone tribe?"

A wicked grin crept across John's face. "The clones are the newest tribe and therefore no land was allocated." Murmurs could be heard coming from the crowd. John continued, "The Clones have from now until the settlement to choose any of the continents they wish to settle upon... The choice is yours alone."

Quill's concerned look faded and he thanked the Elders and the chiefs. The rest of the questions were handled easily, most being about encroachment of one tribe, family or individual, on another's boundaries or borders. John explained those disputes would be handled as disputes were handled now in the AmerIndian Confederacy. Investigation by a Solver would be followed by decision by a Kichai judge. He also explained that individuals would be allowed to move from continent to continent at will but would be bound by all of that continent's laws while there.

John addressed the tribals again. "Every tribal has worked hard toward this day, the acquisition of our Homeland. In accordance, every tribal has the right to settle on this planet. Each man, woman and child has the right to decide if they will settle on Naanac. However, there will be war and we need strong, quick, intelligent tribals to help defend this Homeland. We need two hundred thousand tribals for defense. The rest will begin to settle the Homeland. Each task will demand hard work. All of those who choose to settle will no longer receive wampum. It will be unnecessary on Naanac. Wampum for those who fight will be doubled."

John fielded a few more questions, actually comments, from eager young warriors anxious to let their parents and younger siblings settle while they fought. The meeting closed and the tribals continued their work and their celebrations with much discussion over the decision at hand. John was confident that the strongest and most skilled warriors, pilots and jacks would fight while the best teachers, preservationists, judges and builders would settle.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

The chunnel was going up fast and would be completed three hours ahead of schedule. Wovoka earned many new friends and the tribes were quickly warming to him. It was necessary. Soon the UDA fleets would arrive at Naanac. Wovoka took a break and called together his pack on lodge ship *Iron Bow*.

It was decided that Wolf Plume would continue to serve Wovoka, with expanded duties.

Keokuk told the group about Elder John's offer and his decision to accept. Wovoka then appointed Cavaho as his personal bodyguard. They all agreed that Slow Turtle would settle. They would honor his death in the old ways on Windhome.

#

Wovoka reported to the battle circle. All of the Elders were there save Kugan who was busy arranging the transport of two million tribals off the lodge ships and onto Naanac's surface. Morgan Weaver finger tapped as he sat next to a hard light display. While the Apache and Brule had been building the new chunnel, Zuni and Haida packs were searching and scanning around the planet to find where the Rowan inhabitants were now building an exit chunnel. They had found it four hours ago with the help of Celetain's Acolytes and were now working with Stormseeker to set up an effective ambush.

Stormseeker briefed the rest of the Elders. "The Rowan construction crews are 120 meters from the end of the Free Mantle. They will break through to outer space in about another two hours if we let them. I have Apache construction packs working in toward them now. The Apache construction packs will be pulled out when they get close enough that combat might occur. Wovoka will lead an Apache/Brule assault force to accept the Rowan construction crew's surrender."

#

Keokuk sat next to John watching events through his comp set. Wovoka's legendary body tank had a shoulder cam mounted and the comp set view showed dozens of other body tank warriors standing around him. Each had a rail gun menacingly leveled. Keokuk changed his camera feed to the forward camera of the beta class outrider ship, *Forgiveness*, now shooting along the outer edge of the Free Mantle. Wovoka and the body tank warriors were waiting in the nose of the outrider ship.

Millions of rocks whipped by as *Forgiveness* arced toward the Rowan chunnel point. Long distance probes showed the Rowan construction packs pushing the last few boulders out of the chunnel's maw. The outrider ship slowed and the pilot nosed the ship in, directly above the chunnel opening at a penetrating angle.

The Rowan construction workers stared up in shock. They remained motionless as the outrider ship edged forward slowly and the doors on the nose rolled open. Body tank warriors boosted out and rounded up each of three-dozen Rowan construction crew in seconds.

The Rowan construction crew was whisked into the ship. They were spared the sight and sounds of the mini-rockets being launched from the outrider ship to destroy the chunnel they had built.

Forgiveness reversed and headed back to the new chunnel. Eight other outrider ships fell in line behind it. The line of outrider ships approached the new AmerIndian Confederacy chunnel at speed. The ships burst out of the inner edge of the Free Mantle and headed down to the Rowan Cartel Naanac base courtyard.

The courtyard was a wide-open area used by Rowan researchers for all personnel need to gather in one location. The other outrider ships landed close to *Forgiveness*, all nine ships cramming into the courtyard. As soon as the outrider ships locked landing gear, body tank warriors poured out. The courtyard was a sea of armored warriors. A team of body tank warriors carrying a ram raced up to the huge blast doors of the cartel base. Before their impact the doors

rolled open and three men came out, their hands held high. "We surrender the Rowan Cartel's Naanac base and request safe return to Earth."

Wovoka made a quick gesture with his right hand. Eight body tank warrior packs pushed past the surrendering group to begin ferreting out all of the base's personnel and to determine if any traps had been laid. Wovoka was not worried. It appeared there would be a bloodless invasion of Naanac as Celetain had predicted.

Wovoka pulled off his helmet and walked forward. "An intelligent executive decision. We will honor your request and transport your personnel back to Earth. Which of you is in charge?"

A woman stepped forward. She was a thin, tall oriental and wore the attractive chic dress of a rising business executive.

"Show me everything." Wovoka said plainly.

The woman looked around at the men standing beside her.

Wovoka frowned. "If I cannot understand exactly what is being done here then I will raze this base. Not one wall will connect to another."

"I have full authority granted by Rowan Cartel to evacuate every person off of this planet within the hour without any resistance to the AmerIndian Confederacy if, and only if, we are allowed to remove all of our equipment and data as well without any interference." The woman stood tall and waited for Wovoka's reply.

Wovoka handed his rail gun and helmet to Cavaho. "You are saying that Rowan will evacuate everyone from Naanac without struggle if we simply allow you to take your equipment and you research without any interference?"

"That is correct." The oriental woman did not smile.

"This planet is in the Periphery. Rowan does not have a right under UDA law to lay claim to Naanac. Are you authorized by Rowan to waive any and all Rowan claims to this planet; past, present and future if we allow you to remove your equipment and research?"

"Yes."

Wovoka smiled as the AmerIndian Confederacy gained a planet without shedding a single drop of blood.

#

Keokuk pulled himself along the rails after Sliver. The two were deep in the belly of the AmerIndian Confederacy's mother comp on board Tsimshian lodge ship *Grizzly King*. Mother Comp was the most advanced comp the AmerIndian Confederacy possessed. Four Tsimshian packs were now working on code changes and hardware upgrades.

The task at hand, a perfectly orchestrated control grab of thirty UDA television server gates, was daunting. Tsimshian packs would attempt to pirate all of the transmissions sent to all UDA colonies and outposts by controlling the television server gates in Earth's orbit. Once controlled, pirated feeds would send a special message from the Elders directly to all eight UDA colonies as well as all eight hundred outposts.

Billions of viewers would witness the message. The Elders were now carefully crafting the message. Sliver handed Keokuk new memory bases. Keokuk snapped out old bases and clicked in new one without tools.

"What do you think it will be like, Keokuk. The Homeland, returning to the ways of the true fathers?"

Keokuk slid a little farther and popped a few more bases. "I think it will be paradise, Sliver. To see the buffalo run again. To hunt them and accept their gift the way the true fathers did. I think it will be an incredible opportunity. I think more than anything it will be an opportunity to relearn what our people once knew. The Shamans and the Preservationists will learn the most and gain the most."

"Do you really think there will be a place on that world for tech-jacks like you and me?"

"Honestly, I don't know what that place is now. It will take time to find our place, to find where in the harmony we belong."

Sliver handed another module to Keokuk. "I will admit, when Celetain told me that we would need your help in this whole process, I was not happy. Most Christians I have known are Bible-thumping moralists. I appreciate the sacrifices you are making to help the AmerIndian people. I know you are supporting Wovoka in something you do not fully believe in. But why have you turned you back on the religion of your people?"

"First, I do believe in the prophecies. I believe that Celetain routinely speaks with demons and they have indeed told her the future. In the end, if Celetain does not accept Jesus Christ as her savior, she will be apart from the one true God and she will see what the spirits she has dealt with truly are. I pray that will never happen. I am fully a Christian and fully a Native American. I believe in Christianity because its three basic truths are clearer and clearer to me as I grow. One. We separate ourselves from God by sinning. Two. Jesus Christ was sent as the only acceptable sacrifice to reconcile us with God. Three. God calls each and every man to accept his Son's sacrifice to pay for our sin so that he can make this one hundred years of life we are given only the small starting dot on an endless line of joyful existence with him."

Sliver shook his head. "Well, I cannot reconcile worshiping a god that lets this much suffering occur in the world. Oh, I have not forgotten what we spoke about concerning Bear Vajo's prophecy. I have asked Celetain to speak to you personally about the White Buffalo banishment section, to explain the section you are concerned about. Soon. Thanks for not upsetting Wovoka with a non-issue."

Keokuk snapped the last base in and the two rolled out again. Billy the Kid and 8088 pulled the two to their feet. A group of tech-jacks sat to watch the message over their comp sets. Keokuk finger tapped and took over remote command of their jury-rigged Kellion Cannon system, watching data bubbles pop onto his view. Each Kellion Cannon in the system was aimed to fire a tight arc-light beam at each television server gate in Earth's orbit.

Sliver started the countdown. "Tee minus five, four, three, two, one."

Comp set views filled with the image of Elder John being beamed to billion of UDA viewers. "Citizens, subjects of the UDA, I am John, Elder Wisdom of the AmerIndian Confederacy. Today I announce a new era and a time of celebration. The AmerIndian Confederacy today lays claim to the ninth habitable planet, Naanac. At this moment," the view split to show camera feed of the sprawling campus on Windhome where over a hundred thousand tribals were building homes on Naanac, "we lay claim to this land as retribution and remuneration for the continents of North and South America that were stolen from us seven hundred years ago. However, unlike the inhuman slaughtering that wrested those continents on Earth from us, this has been a bloodless invasion. Not a single man, woman, or child has been harmed in any way and not one of the people displaced claim Naanac as a home. The Rowan Cartel has only used the planet as a research facility and has agreed to find another location for their continued research.

"Again, I repeat, not a single drop of blood had been shed in this invasion. Not a single drop needs to be shed. The AmerIndian Confederacy wants no more at this point than to live in peace on this planet. I warn the UDA, however, that if our peaceful settlement of this planet is challenged with military force, then blood will be shed. Obviously, our military strength is weak compared to the military juggernaut the UDA has at its command. However, our spiritual strength is unmatched throughout occupied space. If we are challenged by military force we will invoke the Ghost Dance and spiritual warfare will be waged on every UDA colony and outpost, the likes of which has not been seen in six millennia.

"Every man, woman and child will suffer untold anguish. I urge you; I beg you as a people, reign in your bloodthirsty UDA masters. Cry out to them to not allow the spiritual holocaust that will be wrought if the sword is raised against us. Do not allow them to gamble with your lives over one small planet. A single floating rock in a cosmos that has an infinite number of planets."

Along the edges of the view, cryptic symbols scrolled. "As I speak to you I also speak," John pointed at the symbols, "to millions of AmerIndian Confederacy sympathizers. Plans laid as far back as two decades ago are now being executed. Our populace brothers will have many tasks to complete. I urge you not to disturb their work, for the colony or outpost that deters their efforts will be held specifically responsible and vengeance will be visited upon it. In closing, I simply invite you to celebrate this event with us. Let there be no anger between us. Peace to you all."

The signal terminated. A cry of joy rose from the tech-jacks. Keokuk found himself being backslapped and praised. He hugged Sliver as the results column showed they had hit twenty-six of the thirty television server gates. The rejoicing continued for a few minutes.

Celetain's face appeared on all tribals comp sets, "You have reason to rejoice, my children, for this is a momentous day. You also have reason to weep for we have opened the floodgates and a river of blood flows toward us."

#

"I am telling you clearly, you cannot simply send the fleet. It is a trap." Lige sat back in his leather chair, fingers steepled.

Admiral Lathe rose. "Do not sit there smug, Lige. This shows you really have never understood the AmerIndian Confederacy any better than the rest of us. If you could defeat them we would not be dealing with an invasion situation, would we? This is textbook simple. They have 30 lodge ships and 620 outrider ships. We have 7,000 prime ships. We send in 1,500 to destroy all of the lodge ships. Once that is done, we build a chunnel, send down body tank troops and imprison every one of those traitors. They have no way to fight us successfully."

Lige leaned forward, "The AmerIndian Confederacy does not make idle threats."

"So, Admiral Lige, you are saying we should delay routing these dogs so they won't shake a few shaman's rattles."

"I believe we should give them seven days. It will give them a false sense of security and allow time for us to gather intelligence on what ability the AC has to execute the threats they made."

Admiral Crane smiled. "Lige, we are all aware you took a hard defeat at the Steel Circle location. It stands to reason you would be hesitant to face battle again so soon." The other admirals smirked at Crane's insult. "However, we would be fools not to seize this moment; crush these pests once and for all. We have failed to defeat them in the past because they are nomadic. Like cockroaches they skitter to the far corners when the light is turned on. Now, for only the second time in three decades, they are locked down. They have people on Naanac. A large percentage of their ships will have to stay to defend the planet. This time we can battle them to the last, and that is exactly what we will do."

Grand Admiral Ramus nodded in agreement. "A threat of spiritual retaliation? We are men of science. We cannot allow the superstition-based cries of the UDA people to sway us from what we know to be the wisest course. I agree with Crane. We must strike now, hard and fast. I am dispatching ten prime ships to each colony and one to each outpost to quell any civil unrest. The remaining prime ships will be sent to Naanac. There will be no chance of escape for even one lodge ship."

Lige smiled again. "Grand Admiral, permission to speak freely."

"Speak your mind, Lige, if it is not something you have already said."

"This is not the wisest course of action. It is the simplest, most predictable response. The AmerIndian Confederacy would not have settled that planet if they were not ready to withstand this exact response. I have learned from my recent defeat that we cannot beat them by sheer number. We must out maneuver and out think them. If you insist on this course of action then I respectfully request that my fleet be assigned to garrison duty."

"Answer me this, Lige. How? How will they defeat us outnumbered twenty to one in ships without the ability to run?"

"I do not know, Grand Admiral."

"Then you are pandering to your own fears, Lige. Afraid of a specter of an enemy. I refuse your request. Your fleet will assist in the annihilation at Naanac. You will be there because you need to be there. You are a military leader and whatever has frightened you will go away once you have some AmerIndian blood on your hands. Face your fears, Lige. You will see they are unfounded."

Lige bowed his head in acquiescence. The group broke and Lige lost no time in shuttling back to *Black Mariah*. Even once he reached his ship, Lige could feel the other admiral's eyes on his back. They were enjoying this event. For once, Lige was on the outside. Grand Admiral Ramus and Admiral Crane had mocked him without reservation. Lige did not waste his time considering non-productive acts of revenge. He was sure the consequences of the Grand Admiral's decision would be punishment enough.

Lige went to the bridge and took his position on the command dais. The gator approached. "We have received the command to start navcomp calculations for destination Naanac. All colony ships are running the numbers now, Admiral."

"Dump the calculations and begin calculating a course for Therhasa A7."

The gator nodded and headed off to carry out the command. Lige slumped in his chair and thought. He would be in direct violation of the Grand Admiral's orders. Not an easy thing to side step later. He also knew he could not afford to be at Naanac. The AmerIndian Confederacy's warning was clear. His intelligence had already told him that Haida Cybershamans were capable of incredible acts. Miraculous healing was not uncommon and there were instances of clear prophecy. But the Haida had never produced an overt magical act that amounted to direct military application. No one, according to his intelligence, had ever been even harmed directly by Cybershamanism.

Lige pondered. He could not figure out how the AmerIndian Confederacy planned to survive this situation. But he knew someone who did know.

#

Wovoka walked out of the Rowan Cartel base and his eyes went to the grey skies of Naanac. At a great distance in the sky Wovoka could see a bright point of green. Like bees swarming from a nest, dozens of outrider ships filled his view, firing retro-boosters to come to a smooth landing on Naanac's surface. Thousands of tribals were now in the courtyard and the celebration was continuing; shouting, dancing, singing, pyrotechnics. Wovoka smiled as dozens of children crowded around him howling like wolves. He laughed and howled along with them. It was a special moment and he felt a strong desire to remember it. It was a beginning and an ending he knew. Through his laughter he could feel tears forming in his eyes. What indeed was he taking his people into?

#

Rain fell in torrents down the long shafts created by the block buildings. Even eighty decks below the top of UDA outpost city Aston, flashes of lightning cast long shadows. Lige walked close to the buildings, staying away from the rain the wind blew toward him. Jaret shadowed Lige closely. Both men wore unassuming garb. Dark grey overcoats with enough wear that they did not look out of place in this area.

Oblivion was what the locals called it.

Six full levels given decades ago to the city's human waste. Sation was a powerful force in Aston. A thousand immigrants arrived on the landing pads of outpost city Aston everyday. Sation, virtual reality at its most addictive and deadly, killed many of these new comers, however. Sation was now entering its fifth decade in circulation and surpassed designer drugs as the choice entertainment of the damned.

Sation was a video/audio system that sent its feed directly to the brain. The user saw and felt everything the original recorder felt. Touch, smell, sight, sound, taste. Sation junkies swore even emotions were felt as strong and clear as the original recorder felt them. A person had to have a small receiver port implanted in his or her skull to use the discs. Powerful antibiotic gels controlled bleeding and insured the port remained clean. The user could receive feed within three days of receiving the implant (which sold for fifty creds).

Recording implants were incredibly expensive at a million creds or more to create standard recordings and five million up for professional quality. If a sation user stayed with the basic rental downloads of roller coaster rides, sail boat afternoons and birthday parties then sation could be enjoyed at leisure. However, supply of sation recordings of sex, crime and an array of dangerous miscellaneous material grew each year, faster than the addiction rate.

Crime recordings were popular and murder recording were seeing a comeback with young and old alike. Triax, the megacorp controlling sixty percent of the sation market had been careful to make sure each sation disc was programmed for one use only. Doubles and triples, sticks that allowed two or three plays were not uncommon due to sales promotions by the industry. Limitless rerun discs were valued in the thousands of creds and were illegal. An industry of black market rerun discs was burgeoning. Nothing killed sation addicts faster than rerun discs.

Lige and Jaret approached the center of Oblivion. Withered husks, former husbands and daughters and taxpayers, shuffled past. Most could tell Jaret and Lige were not one of them. Lige and Jaret walked with their heads level, not with their eyes down or averted. But that did not mean Lige and Jaret were out of place. Predators, strange seekers, organ hunters and worse often visited Oblivion.

One of the skeletons shambled up to Jaret. "Disc trade. Disc trade." He coughed and stared at his bloody phlegm spackling the street.

While sation did nothing to actually physically damage the body or brain, sation junkies neglected food in its pursuit. The man pulled himself away from the phlegm and stared at Jaret anxiously waiting for his answer. Lige stepped forward and produced a sation disc. In the dim light the junkie recognized the silver hue. "A tri-tri-tri-tri-"

Lige smiled. "A triple, my good man. Yours if you tell me what I need to know."

The skeleton nodded his head continuously. He would tell Lige anything, anything at all. "I am looking for a man, older, in his fifties. Long grey hair that he keeps tucked under a baseball cap. He goes by 'Walden'."

The skeleton twitched and appeared to be straining to think. "Oh, yes, yes, yes. I know him. He, he, he, he, he, " The thin man broke into uncontrolled laughter. His eyes never left the sation disc.

Lige glanced at Jaret. Both of them smelled the skeleton's nervousness. Jaret moved like a cobra and was standing over the junkie with a pistol pressed hard against his lips.

Lige spoke softly. "If you are lying I want you to tell me now. If I think for even a moment you are not telling me the truth my assistant will put a laser through you skull and we will find another sation enthusiast to bargain with. Do you know the man I described?"

The junkie was still and quiet. He moved his head slightly. "No."

"It was wise of you to tell the truth." Jaret released the man.

"I, I, I, I, I, I know who would know him."

Lige arched an eyebrow.

The junkie spoke quickly, "Gordon. Gordon the Scribbler would know. He knows everyone here."

"Who is Gordon the Scribbler?"

"He is an, an, an, an, an, artist. Beauty in Oblivion. His art is the only beauty in Oblivion."

"Take us to him," Lige said.

The junkie scrambled to his feet. He lurched from a powerful rack that nearly bent him over. When the shake was done his hand shot out and he hissed desperately. "The triple."

Lige handed the Sation disc to Jaret. "After I have spoken with Gordon the Scribbler, it will be yours. Let's go."

The junkie tried to turn, to lead them, but his body shook again. He fell to his knees. Jaret could tell the junkie was in the last stages of the addiction. He probably had not eaten in days and yet all he craved was sation. Jaret bent and slotted the disc into the junkie's port and waited for him to finish experiencing it. With considerable effort the junkie pulled himself to his feet when it was done and thanked Lige. He led them.

The two followed his bony frame along the refuse-littered streets. Few of the city lights remained operative. Jaret and Lige were careful stepping over various hunks of trash; autocab parts, and at one point, what appeared to be a corpse. The junkie stopped them and advised, "Hold your shank, this is cannibal territory."

Six blocks deeper into Oblivion's center they came to the entrance of what appeared to have once been a movie theater. The Junkie pushed led them through an abandoned lobby and pushed against a door at the far end. At its opening, bright neon patches of light escaped. They entered the brightly lit room.

The room held no furniture, just large racks of black lights pointed at the walls. There were perhaps forty people in the room. Most were gathered in groups of six or seven around large pots of stew. They dipped bread in the stew and ate hungrily. All appeared to be sation addicts like the skeleton, most in slightly better condition. One did not appear to be a junkie. A broad shouldered man turned away from a painting. He turned off his paint gun, set it down and approached the three.

"Welcome, friends, to the Shrine of Vishnu's Lion. Good to see you again, Poitra." The man was young; twenty-five, no older. Jaret noticed he wore paint-splattered overalls, a shirt and a holster slung by a loose belt around his waist. A Nixto Lance, an expensive laser pistol favored by quick draw artists, filled the holster. Jaret was not sure if the weapon was a boastful choice or if the young man was actually proficient with. The belt was rigged and slung at the correct angle.

"Who are your friends?" the young man asked the junkie skeleton.

"Th-th-th-th-"

Lige interrupted, "I am Admiral Gavon Lige and this is my agent, Jaret Tucker."

The young man paused and extended his hand.

"I am Gordon, Guru of Vishnu's Lion. This is the Shrine I man. You are welcome to partake of dinner with us."

"We are here to find a man. Older, perhaps fifty, long grey hair that he keeps tucked under a baseball cap. He goes by the name 'Walden'. Do you know him?"

Gordon answered, "Yes."

Lige waited for Gordon to add more but he did not. "Where might I find him?"

"Why are you looking for him?"

Lige smiled. "It is a private matter, but I assure you we mean him no harm."

"A private matter?" Gordon smiled back at Lige. "Everything in Oblivion is a private matter. I will have an opportunity to see Walden soon. I will ask him if he wishes to see you. If he does, you can meet him the day after tomorrow, here."

Lige stepped forward, in front of Jaret. "That is a kind offer but we need to see him immediately. Tell me where to find him and we will trouble you no more."

Gordon backed up a step and his hand moved toward the pistol slightly. "No."

Again Lige waited for Gordon to say more. He did not. Silence gathered. "I have come here with only my aid so this man could be retrieved without violence, so no harm would come to him. If you do not tell me where to find him, I will call down twenty UDA body tank troops. They will cut through the human chaff of Oblivion like a farmer reaping wheat until they find him. If your intent is to help these people, you will tell me where to find Walden."

Gordon's hand was angled at his side, a spring pulled taught. His eyes flicked from Jaret to Lige. "I could kill you both before your hand was a decimeter from your gun but it would only hurt these innocents. I will tell you where to find Walden on these conditions. No one in Oblivion is harmed. You will not harm Walden. And you give us a Nagasphere."

Lige chuckled, "Why on prime planet Earth would I give you a Nagasphere?"

"Because to you it is nothing more than a signature on a requisition form. To us it would be heat, electricity, and power. And if you do not agree to these terms, one if not both of you will be dead at the end of this conversation."

Silence, as Lige thought over the proposition. "I agree to your terms. Where is Walden?"

Gordon relaxed, his hand moving away from the Nixto Lance. "Follow the street west for six more sectors. Climb the abandoned mag lift down two levels. Take the light traffic ally one sector right. He has a crate of a hover cycle there that he calls home."

Lige turned immediately and started heading for the door. Jaret followed.

"When will I get the Nagasphere?" Gordon called.

Lige did not stop walking or turn his head. "I'm not sure how long it takes to ship a Nagasphere to hell."

Jaret was already wheeling, his pistol drawn. He fired twice; one laser hitting Gordon's left cheek, the other carving out a section of his ribs. Not before Gordon's pistol danced out of its holster. Gordon was able to fire one shot before he fell, lifeless, to the floor. The laser sliced into Jaret's stomach. He folded and fell to the floor as well. The junkies rose to their feet.

Lige ran back to Jaret and knelt next to him. With one hand he checked Jaret's neck for a pulse and was relieved to find one. He released and grabbed the Sledge Justice from his shoulder holster. Lige clicked the weapon on and it hummed. He started firing at the junkies closest to the door first and walked the fire arc around. Dense, fast laser fire erupted from the weapon. Death blossomed everywhere he pointed.

Lige used half the energy clip before he had swept the room clean of everyone but himself and Jaret. He placed the weapon down and pulled his gloves off. He retrieved a stim patch and pulled Jaret's shirt out. He shoved his hand under the body armor and applied the stim patch. Lige could feel the heat of Jaret's wound as he pulled him to a sitting position.

Jaret's eyes fluttered. The drugs hit and he was conscious. Jaret's eyes flashed to both sides. He saw the bodies. "Are you all right, Admiral?" he asked in a worried tone.

"I'm fine, Jaret. How are you?" When Jaret moved he realized the location of the wound. He closed his eyes as the intense pain cut through the powerful stimulant. Lige sat with him for a moment, scanning the room for movement.

Jaret breathed, "OK, I think I am ready to move." He rose slowly and followed Lige. Jaret understood that for the next three hours he would perform as if he had no injury, for three days after that he would be bed ridden, probably unable to move.

The two followed the directions Gordon had given. As they made their way they passed shaking junkies trying hard to sleep, hoping for a brief escape from the hunger. Lige took the precaution of tying two meters of flexi-cord around both their waists before they climbed down the two levels on the mag lift rails. Jaret had no trouble due to the drugs coursing through his system.

Lige took a moment to brutally beat another junkie that attempted to trade with them. Jaret could tell Lige was anxious. Both men stopped when they saw the logo of Hailey Hovercycles as it was briefly revealed in the flash of sporadically blinking streetlight. Jaret drew his sidearm.

Lige drew the ratty cloth back from the entrance of the crate and saw what appeared to be legs covered by a filthy plastic sheet. He poked his head in and confirmed the person in the crate was asleep. Lige hauled the body up and out of the crate. He stood as the man flailed his arms, searching for a weapon that was still in the crate. Lige gave the man a powerful kick to the stomach. The man heaved a dry cough and stopped flailing.

Laying on his back, the man stared up at the two. When his eyes opened his forehead wrinkled in recognition. "Lige, you twisted bastard. You still have nothing better to do than to torment 'Injuns'. I was hoping the AC would have Custer'ed your ass by now."

"Oh, no old man. You know I enjoy my work. I need your help."

The old man shook his head slowly contemplating his misfortune.

"You know this tribal?" Jaret asked.

"Of course I know him," Lige laughed. "My most revered enemy, responsible for the death of thousands of UDA soldiers. I am surprised you don't recognize Potlatch Weaver, father of the AmerIndian Confederacy."

PART THREE: PAYMENT

2179 - Orbit of Colony Planet, White Earth

"Well played, Emerald Leaf. Well Played. Cut deep to center to intercept the Hoover wing coming in from the ceiling." Potlatch Weaver, Elder Creator of the AmerIndian Confederacy, stood tall, handsome and regal on the bridge of outrider ship Dawn. Flanked by his two most skilled tacticians, Potlatch Weaver led his forces to a victory close at hand.

Barbed Ice traced his finger in the air and bright yellow target circles highlighted three AmerIndian Confederacy outrider ships on each of their comp sets. The three ships were now closing on the last vestiges of the once mighty White Earth UDA garrison fleet. Even bolstered by four hundred prime ships from the Earth Main fleet, UDA Admiral Crane had been unable to beat back the sudden, devastating strike of the AmerIndian Confederacy assault fleet. "They are coming in too close. Have these three outrider ships stay back a few moments longer and pound the UDA prime ships with their heavy rail guns a bit longer." Barbed Ice looked to his companion Dre Doe for agreement. Dre Doe nodded. Potlatch Weaver gave the command, seeing wisdom in their words, lending his leadership to make their thoughts efficient action. A thousand elements of success created and stolen by the AmerIndian Confederacy were congealing at this point in time to make every tribals dream a reality. White Earth would be the Homeland of the AmerIndian Confederacy. A Homeland denied for seven centuries would be theirs again. The Elder Creator looked on and struggled to contain premature joy. By all accounts the White Earth UDA garrison fleet would be put down within the hour. Potlatch Weaver refused to allow himself to be surprised when a Zuni messenger strode into the bridge carrying dark words.

"Word from the convoy, Elder Creator."

A still blanketed the room. The fact that the AmerIndian Confederacy convoy had communicated with the assault fleet was evidence that their secret haven had been found by the UDA. It was the only possibility that would require the convoy to break the communication silence that masked their location.

Potlatch did not look at the messenger. "The word, tribal?"

"A fleet of UDA prime ships has correspondence jumped within range of the convoy. UDA Admiral Gavon Lige leads the fleet. With only thirty outrider ships left behind the convoy is now at the Admiral Lige's mercy. The message convoy sent has video from Lige attached." The messenger finger tapped and Potlatch Weaver's comp set view filled with Lige's visage.

"Potlatch Weaver, while you waged an ambush on White Earth I have found your convoy. I hold the majority of the AmerIndian Confederacy's tribals captive. Before you receive this message I will have every child transferred to one lodge ship. These children will be completely safe from harm. All AmerIndian Confederacy personnel on all of the other lodge ships are classified as terrorists, enemies of the UDA. If you do not cease your assault on White Earth immediately and correspondence jump every outrider ship to the location of the convoy for full surrender I will execute every terrorist tribal here. You have until six hundred hours, Earth time, to comply."

The Elder Creator put his hands down onto the workstation close to where he had been standing. His head ached and his stomach was a ribbon of clenching snakes. The news was too much, too fast. In seconds, fifteen years of labor and sacrifice vanished. Defeat handed to him by the one man Potlatch Weaver had continually failed to defeat, Admiral Gavon Lige.

Potlatch Weaver steeled himself and stood straight. Dre Doe fired numbers through his head. "It's 1620 hours now. If we start the navcomps immediately we will be able to correspondence jump to the convoy in forty minutes."

Potlatch's fist clenched. "They are all dead already." Barbed Ice and Dre Doe froze as they listened to the Elder Creator. "Ferez Bear will not allow a

single child to be taken from their mother. The convoy has, without a doubt, attacked Lige's fleet already. They will be slaughtered."

Other tribal bridge pack members gathered round, including Dre Doe's assistant, Broge. Potlatch Weaver showed his anger, his heavy hand slamming down at the workstation. "There is a UDA spy in our midst. It is the only that Lige could have learned the location. Half of the outrider ships will stay to destroy the remains of the White Earth Garrison. Half of the outrider ships will return to the convoy to avenge their deaths. Set the navcomps running now. Ready my body tank. I will lead the ground assault on White Earth myself."

Tribals scrambled to make Potlatch Weaver's words action. Each knew they were playing the end game and the advantage they enjoyed moments ago was gone.

Potlatch went to his body tank. The Elder Creator took his time donning the snow-white body tank crested with a golden eagle. He knew this would be the last time he would ever wear the armor.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

The large opponent flashed toward Cavaho sending a flurry of jabs and short kicks that broke through his blocks. The opponent grabbed his wrist, twisted and kicked Cavaho's legs out from under him in smooth motion. Cavaho slammed to the floor. Then instead of delivering a finishing blow, his opponent extended a hand and helped Cavaho to his feet. Cavaho nodded in approval of the tribals' proper execution of today's extended jujitsu exercise.

He grabbed the young tribals shoulders and positioned him. He then slowly echoed the movement, pausing for emphasis at the crucial points. Cavaho snapped his fingers twice and the large group of tribals paired off and began practicing the movements together. Cavaho walked around the room, stopping tribals, correcting stance, speed or delivery by demonstrating the proper execution himself. Cavaho held the classes for Brule Special Forces whenever his Infiltrator team was in from a mission on the Brule lodge ship. He typically had a turnout of fifty to a hundred tribals at the sessions.

This was the third year Cavaho held a session when all of the tribes were together and even with all the mayhem the gym was crammed to capacity with tribals. As crammed as the room was the only sounds heard were low grunts when someone hit the mat. Cavaho did not demand silence. His own silence simply spread.

Cavaho cut the session off at an hour and a half. Many tribals came to thank him. He nodded politely. A few made the mistake of asking him questions, to which he simply stared at the asker until someone pulled them away with whispered words. The gym emptied slowly. Cavaho had another seventy minutes of kata to complete and he continued. Twenty or more tribals watched him from the far wall of the gym.

He was stretching between a Judo kata and a Jeet Kun Do kata when Sliver entered the gym. He glided forward, three acolytes in tow. He stopped a few meters from Cavaho. Cavaho stopped stretching and looked at Sliver waiting for him to state his business.

"Celetain Prax, Elder Shaman, requests your presence."

Cavaho retained his blank, emotionless countenance. He nodded, turned, and entered the locker room. When he came out of the sonic shower, Keokuk was standing near his locker with Cavaho's dress whites.

Cavaho pulled on the snug, perfectly cut white pants, white shirt, and the short cropped jacket fringed with short cut leather strings. He pulled on the gleaming white boots and white leather gloves. Cavaho wrapped a white bandanna around his bald head. He pulled the white leather jacket down. In his dress whites not a single one of Cavaho's tattoos were visible. Keokuk whistled mockingly.

Cavaho walked toward the door and gave Keokuk a powerful shove that sent him crashing back into the lockers.

Cavaho presented himself to Sliver to be taken to Celetain Prax. Cavaho's attire was appropriate for a meeting with an Elder. Sliver frowned. He turned without a word and led Cavaho through the lodge ship. Sliver entered Celetain's quarters and led Cavaho to the center of the room. Without explanation he and the three acolytes exited. Cavaho stood arrow straight, waiting. He scanned the hundreds of paper volumes lining the walls.

The large oak double doors swung open evenly, soundlessly and Cavaho watched as Celetain entered. She appeared different now, softer and welcoming. Her smile was unusual and it took Cavaho a moment to take in the rest of her in the beautiful hunter green dress she wore. It was a contemporary version of a traditional Midwest tunic. Made of soft buckskin, the dress was elegantly adorned with patterns of mica. Her soft moccasins were also decorated with a rim of mica. It was the first time Cavaho had seen Celetain in anything but her

tight bodysuit Elder Shaman garb. Her hair was down, long and dark as space itself. She walked casually down the steps. "At ease, warrior."

With mechanical exactness Cavaho spread his legs to shoulder width and placed his hands in front of him. She raised her hands to her mouth to stifle a laugh. "Please, please, sit down, Cavaho." She gestured toward a plush couch.

Cavaho did not move. "It's all right, Cavaho. I called you here to simply talk-," she frowned, realizing the awkwardness of her statement. "Please sit with me."

Cavaho did not move.

Celetain looked away from him. She felt more foolish than she thought she would have. "I wanted to thank you for your kindness the other day. The position of Elder can be lonelier than I think most tribals know. It was the first time I was embraced by a man since before my mother's death five years ago. It was refreshing," she said.

He stared a moment and then gave a slight nod as if acknowledging the duty he had accomplished. His face remained blank, passive. For a second she looked pained but it passed instantly and she stepped toward a large hard light display. "I understand you are no stranger to loneliness yourself." She paced and Cavaho watched as her dress suddenly appeared out of place, a flowered sheet draped over a tiger. "I read in your service statement that your silence is a choice, that you choose not to speak because you were spurned by your fiancé." She circled back into his view and locked her gaze on him. "You have not spoken a word for four years because a woman, now married with two children, left you?"

Celetain paused waiting for an answer. Cavaho's remained still. "Answer me, warrior," she snapped.

Cavaho did not breathe. No nod, no answer.

Celetain stepped directly in front of him. "I am an Elder of the AmerIndian Confederacy to which you have pledged your complete allegiance. Answer my question."

Cavaho stared back hard but did not utter a syllable or give the slightest nod.

"You have refused the direct request of an Elder. Now I suggest you report to a contemplation cell to consider the results of your blatant, selfish insolence."

Cavaho shifted. His teeth were bared, his body tense. He broke away and walked quickly, angrily toward the wall. His white boots clicked on the marble. He reached the wall, hopped upward and pulled himself up five shelves until he could reach a large red bound book. He dropped to the floor, landing effortlessly. He stormed to her desk, threw the book down, and scanned the pages quickly. With a motion almost too quick to see he drew a knife from his boot. It whirled between his fingers a second before he stabbed it into the book. He glared at her with anger and exited.

Celetain watched him leave. She stood for a moment and ran her fingers over her forehead and through her hair in exasperation. This had not gone the way she had hoped. She walked over to her desk where Cavaho had shown his unique method of highlighting text. She read carefully. The book was a collection of poems by Ayo Kukri, "For when the light bathed me, I knew my soul was desolate. How can I give that which I have destroyed?"

Celetain slumped into her chair. She was not sure how much time passed before Sliver entered. He interrupted politely and went over several tasks she needed to complete that morning. She asked him to bring a change of clothes. She suddenly felt foolish in her dress. She donned her comp set and keying bands and finger tapped. A roster for the contemplation cells appeared. There were rarely more than ten tribals there. Only three tribals were there now. A Brule who had assaulted his superior, Broge and Cavaho. She closed her eyes but the text of the poem remained in her vision.

#

Derek's brother burst into his room panting. "The Indians invaded a planet, a colony kind of planet. They're going to put the spaceship fights on the wall screens. Some Indian came on TV and said that Naanac now belongs to them."

Derek followed his brother to the viewing room. He stared at the wall screens with the rest of his family. Unlike his mother and his siblings, however, Derek paid attention the scrolling text fragments around the image of Elder John. There. He saw it. Three symbols in specific order - Spear, Star, Sparrow. Derek had to concentrate to follow the symbols, to make sure they were in the correct order. Dozens of symbols flashed around the edge of the video message. They were all gibberish to Derek, save these three. He marveled at how Lucas had been able to weave these symbols into their roleplaying game as spell runes.

Derek understood the message. He pulled himself from the wall screen. It was time. For two years Lucas had told the group about the time when the AmerIndian Confederacy would seize land from the UDA, when war would come. Like a biblical prophet Lucas had told each of the youths to be ready, to keep a go bag packed and accessible. Derek ran into his room.

Derek threw himself onto the ground and shoved his hand deep under his bed, dragged out his go bag.

"What's matter, bigbo?"

Derek's brother Tommy was five. He would be the hardest to leave.

"No worries, Tommy. Why don't you go watch some more and call me when you think they are going to start the spaceships fights? OK, little buddy?"

Tommy jumped. "No, no, no, no. Mommy says we can watch with her. Come watch with me and Mommy. Come watch."

Derek's mind was racing. Lucas had told the group that the AmerIndian Confederacy would probably hit White Earth two to three years from now. This was a surprise. Derek scrounged through the go bag to make sure everything was packed. Until now the go bag had only been a symbol of hope. When he walked out the door it would be everything in the world he owned. He looked at Tommy and a tear rolled down his face.

"Why you cry, bigbo?"

Derek's face was now wet, but he laughed at Tommy's question, a hiccupy wet laugh. He grabbed Tommy, kissed the top of his head and hugged him close. "I love you, little buddy. I love you. Please don't forget that."

Derek calmed himself. Tommy looked frightened. "It's OK. It's OK," Derek said with a smile. "Bigbo just had a sad minute. Let's go watch with Mommy."

Derek let Tommy lead him to the view room. The whole family was there, watching file footage of the White Earth Massacre on Triax Hard Core News. Close graphic clips of infantry battle. A fast tribal threw down an empty rifle and hacked at a UDA soldier with a hatchet. The screen froze with the tribal holding the hatchet high over the UDA soldier. The image was then rendered by comp graphics into a multicolored shimmering icon. Trailer music cued in and the news snippet line slammed against the screen. "Red Death Rising." Derek shook his head. The rest of his family was too enthralled to see the gesture.

A picture perfect blonde, no doubt a clone, came on-screen looking serious as she read her prompts flawlessly. "Eleven years ago the UDA engaged the AmerIndian Confederacy in one of the UDA's bloodiest battle. The AmerIndian Confederacy, then headed by Potlatch Weaver, assaulted White Earth with four hundred outrider ships and twelve lodge ships. 'Lodge ships' is the term used by the AmerIndian Confederacy for stolen colony ships. Planet guns were used to destroy many of the lodge ships and outrider ships. However, a barrage of concentrated laser fire laid down by AmerIndian Confederacy ships destroyed all of White Earth's planet guns. The UDA traitor who gave the location of the planet guns to the AmerIndian Confederacy has never been identified. The

AmerIndian Confederacy was poised to take White Earth by a destroying the rest of the UDA ships, which had no ground support.

"While half of the AmerIndian Confederacy fleet was assaulting White Earth the other half was waiting in the Periphery until the right moment to fire into the battle by correspondence plane. UDA Captain Lige, now Admiral Lige, destroyed that half of the AmerIndian Confederacy fleet that was lying in wait. When Lige informed AmerIndian Confederacy leader Potlatch Weaver that he had destroyed half of their fleet he was so distraught that he abandoned the assault on White Earth.

"Seventeen hundred UDA prime ships were destroyed by the AmerIndian Confederacy at the White Earth Massacre. Lige's ships destroyed eleven lodge ships and sixty outrider ships in the periphery battle. Potlatch Weaver was also killed trying to escape from White Earth."

The wall screen showed three circles of chrome, each forty meters in height. A monument to the dead. "Amazingly, the AmerIndian Confederacy has grown to over four hundred thousand members over the last thirteen years and now has a fleet of thirty stolen colony ships. While the population of the AmerIndian Confederacy is still smaller than at the time of the White Earth Massacre, many experts contend that today's Confederacy is far deadlier than the force was thirteen years ago. The AmerIndian Confederacy has grown in power and wealth by serving as a mercenary force. Their soldiers have seen more battle than most UDA troops and the experts readily admit the AmerIndian Confederacy tech-jacks are of a caliber unmatched in the UDA. Sources report that an underground system of communication has allowed the AmerIndian Confederacy to build a cadre of sympathizers on almost every colony and outpost. Experts disagree on the exact number of sympathizers, but put the number between fifty and three hundred million. UDA military sources agree that we are at the brink of another significant encounter with the AmerIndian Confederacy. A critical figure in all of this is Admiral Gavon Lige. Sources reveal that Admiral Lige recently suffered a defeat at the hands of the AmerIndian Confederacy Elder Council. Nine UDA prime ships, and over seven hundred UDA soldiers were lost. Admiral Lige will be commanding his fleet as they engage AmerIndian Confederacy forces at Naanac. He will be one of nine admirals under the command of Grand Admiral Ramus. We spoke to Ramus as he prepared for battle."

The wall screen showed Ramus' gleaming smile. "The Elder Council of the AC has made a major mistake. They believe the antics of a few tech-jacks can stop the force of the UDA naval fleet. The tricks they used to devastate Admiral Lige will not work again. We will vastly outnumber AC ships. The Confederacy will submit."

"What do you have to say about their threat of spiritual retaliation?"

"I am not frightened by the inane ramblings of witch doctors. Every man can pray but the one who will walk off the battlefield alive is the one who puts his faith in his own ability to win. If you will excuse me I have a victory to secure."

The reporter turned smiling. "If confidence is a weapon, Admiral Ramus is packing a rail gun. We only hope he is right and has the ability to put down the AmerIndian Confederacy without losing too many of our boys."

The camera swept to a shot of marines loading Lawbringers. The wall screen changed again and the image of a cold beer filled the view. "Heading to the darkest corners of a distant galaxy? Near twelve hundred prime ships filled with Earth's finest troops. We are with each one of you. So tonight and every night we raise a glass to you and we are keeping a case cold for your return. Budriller Beer salutes the UDA Navy."

Derek stood and brushed his hand over the manual control panel at the rear of the room, shutting off the wall screens. The white room seemed dead without the dancing lights.

Derek walked in front of the couch, facing his family. "I am leaving."

His mother scrunched her face. "This is family viewing, Derek. Don't go out now. And was it really necessary to turn off the walls for that."

Derek breathed in. "I am leaving this family, this city, this outpost, this galaxy. I love all of you and I will come back for you when I can. Mother, you have sacrificed too much for that damn wall. You raised me to be strong enough to escape. For that I thank you. The best thing you can do is put a chair through every wall screen in this apartment."

He leaned forward and kissed his mother's forehead. She stared at him with her nose turned up as if she smelled something bad. He kissed his brothers and sister. To Tommy he whispered, "Before you turn ten, learn to read, little buddy. It's important." With that he headed out of the apartment. He slammed his grav board down and slid down the hall. As he reached the door to the stairs, hopped off and stuck his hand on the panel. The wall beeped and he looked down the hall before he entered the mag lift.

In front of the apartment he had lived in for sixteen years, he saw only Tommy. Tommy stood tall and waved at his brother. Derek waved back with the arm holding the grav board and dived into the stairwell. He was at the nearest street level within a few minutes. He weaved through the crowd quickly with his grav board and kept his eyes on the street.

He hailed a bikercab, one of the independents. He held up a silver certified cred card. The hoverbiker was a dark Jamaican with no helmet, dressed in every color of the rainbow. The certified cred card held five times the amount the three-kilometer ride would cost. "The whole card is yours if you get me to sector nineteen in less than fifteen minutes." The biker looked around. Traffic was getting heavy and the Biker realized something was going on. The biker snatched at the card. Derek deftly pulled it back.

"Aye and Aye be dare in ten minutes. Time burning. Get on. Wha happenin'?" The hoverbiker called over his shoulder as Derek strapped into the plush passenger seat. "A new dawn my friend. A reversal for fortunes."

The biker cursed something under his breath about the cryptic answer and revved the large Hailey hoverbike out on to the street. They zipped along between autocabs and private citizen cars for a block and then the hoverbiker jerked the vehicle perpendicular. The hoverbike flew right over the edge of the street and into the well between the massive building structures. He gunned the engine to keep the hoverbike from dropping down between the levels below. The hoverbiker turned his vehicle in tight circles for a moment while looking down, watching. Then the hoverbike's engine cut off at the flick of his thumb and dropped level after level like a stone.

The maneuver was highly illegal and as the bike plummeted sixty levels it passed within twenty meters of two UDA police patrol cars. With considerable skill the hoverbiker throttled his vehicle to a perfect stop at level sixty-seven. In a flash the hoverbike was darting through street turns, fast enough to lose a pro racer. The hoverbiker got Derek to sector nineteen in less than four minutes. Derek gave him the card and thanked him.

Derek turned to see half his gamer friends waiting in a nearby parking lot. A broad smile came to his face. He was happy, excited and hopeful. The pack members were all holding go bags. Lucas smiled back at Derek. In an hour he and his friends would be rendezvousing with a stolen prime ship. Derek was going to live with a people he had only read about on a planet he had never seen. He was going home.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

"Challenge fleet, go ready."

"Await command."

"Demon fleet, go ready."

"Await command."

"Dream Nine fleet, go ready."

"Await command."

"Preston fleet, go ready."

"Await command."

Admiral Crane sat quietly for a moment. "Don't mean to disturb you, Lige, but do you think your fleet will be ready any time soon?"

"Raven fleet, go ready."

Admiral Crane smirked, "Lige, I have work to do. I know you specifically requested not to be on this mission. I will grant your request to the best of my ability. Keep your fleet back out of the way. Perhaps we can use your help recovering salvage after the battle is done."

Lige could here laughter on Crane's bridge. "I assure you my fleet will be out of the way, Admiral Crane."

"All fleets go on seven. On my mark," Crane commanded.

The prime ships slowly floated forward and a light show to rivaling the Unity Day celebration occurred as hundreds of Kellion Cannons fired together. The navcomps performed their function and blinked seven fleets, over fourteen hundred UDA prime ships, a point galaxies away. The fleets appeared near Naanac like a dark wave over the horizon.

#

Wolf Plume sat at the helm of a one hundred sixty ton outrider ship, pleased that Wovoka had not insisted on his service as a liaison immediately. He watched in awe as more prime ships than he had seen in one location snapped into view. He gave the order and six Jet Tiger fighters arced out of his outrider ship, bolting toward the chunnel entrance. An incoming message played over his comp set.

"AmerIndian Confederacy fleet, I, Admiral Crane of the UDA Navy, declare your ships to be in overt violation of UDA periphery settlement laws. We overwhelmingly outnumber your ships. Offer your surrender or we will open fire in twenty seconds."

On twenty-four lodge ships thousands of tribals hurried to battle stations. A line of AC deflector ships arced forward.

Wolf Plume finger tapped and opened a link to Admiral Crane's bridge. "For the sake of your men I beg you to turn back. Please turn away."

Crane laughed. "You should be begging for your life, fool. Main guns, fire at will."

#

Celetain observed the bustle of the Naanac AC base camp. Two hundred thousand tribals were now on the surface of Naanac and more were coming. They were utterly jubilant. Women and children danced joyously on the soft damp ground. A light drizzle fell steadily but no one seemed to notice. Celetain had much to do to prepare for the Ghost Dance. She shut off the part of her mind still thinking of Cavaho. She had toyed with the idea of "freeing" him. It was absurd. Contemplation cells were used voluntarily and Celetain doubted ten men would be able to get Cavaho out of his cell.

The area being used for the AmerIndian Confederacy outrider ships to drop settling tribals off was an expanse of mossy grass circled by huge grey trees a kilometer away. At the end of the mossy expanse a wide high cliff loomed over a vast, dense jungle. An outrider ship sat a few meters away from the edge of the cliff, still in the clearing. The ship now served as platform for the work of both Haida and Tsimshian tribals who had prepared a place of power for Celetain.

Thick power lines snaked across every surface with fat black modules interspersed across the ship's surface. Force fields, array collectors and several transmitters were linked into the ship's server, which was in constant communication with lodge ships and outrider ships outside the Free Mantle. Keokuk had been involved in making sure the new AmerIndian Confederacy chunnel was equipped with powerful burst transmitters that could relay data from the Naanac's surface to orbiting ships and back as well. Runes were painted in neon across the unruly collection of tech.

Celetain started to climb to the top of the fifteen-meter high outrider ship. Immediately nearby tribals hurried to assist her. She was carefully lifted to the top. There she stood, quiet and still. Tribals near the ship turned to watch her. A murmur passed through the crowd. Soon every tribal on the field below was watching her.

Celetain's twelve acolytes moved quickly to disperse themselves at equal intervals throughout the crowd spread out below Celetain. The Elder Shaman threw her hands up straight, pointing to the rock filled sky. She pulled her arms down and a bright rune, easily visible even in Naanac's grey wet light, appeared outlining her movement. In harmony each of her acolytes made the same gesture producing the same effect with different runes. The crowd gasped and pockets of empty space blossomed around each acolyte. Celetain spoke, without a comp set or nearby audio drones. Her voice resonated from her position as well as the position of each Acolyte.

"Brothers, sisters. I call you to work once again. The defense of this planet cannot be accomplished through military strength. Our fleet is severely outnumbered by even segments of the UDA fleet. However, the time has come to show the UDA our true power. The time of the reckoning, the time of blood."

Celetain turned away from the crowd and stared across the jungle terrain. When she turned again her green leather was gone. Her dark oak colored skin changed. Her black raven hair changed. Celetain glowed white. Three thousand tribals gathered at the Naanac touchdown point raised their hands, shielding their eyes. The Elder Shaman's voice was changed now as well. "I invoke the Ghost Dance. The UDA will not allow us peace and so the Ghost Dance must commence until they attack. We culminate the dance at the first wave of UDA laser fire on our ships. We will strike a deathblow against the UDA that will not be forgotten for a millennium. I invoke the Dance of Prophecy, foretold by the wise and tragic Wovoka, the Great Native American hero our White Buffalo is named for. Know that once the dance begins its pillars must stand until the culmination or until their sacrifice."

With these words Celetain's white glow disappeared and only her hunter green leather showed as she crumbled, falling heavily to her knees. Tribals swarmed to her, and also to each of the acolytes who fell in the same manner. The tribals gently helped her up and offered her water, which she drank greedily. Vegas, the Clone chief, was the first to begin organizing large groups of tribals into circles. The first dance circle consisted of nine tribals, one representing each tribe. At an interval of four meters another circle began. Tribals lined up somberly. The older tribals knew what was starting. John was now walking through the crowd stopping every now and then. At the seventh dancer position, he moved tribals, putting the youngest and strongest into pillar position.

The pillars were dancers who served as the spiritual support of the Ghost Dance. Once the dance began the pillars would have to dance until all of the power of the Ghost Dance was released or until the pillar died from exhaustion. If the pillar died dancing, sacrificing their life, it intensified the Ghost Dance. Celetain was prepared to absorb all of the power produced by the dance, prepared to release the power when the moment came. Out of the three thousand tribals still at the Naanac touchdown point, seven had taken position as dancers. One hundred of those were committed as pillars, dedicated to dance

until the rituals culmination or their death own death from exhaustion. If even one of the pillars chose to stop dancing, the Ghost Dance would fail. John had chosen the pillars carefully.

Sliver's comp projections supplied Celetain confirmation of her theory of the powers a Cybershamanism Ghost Dance would produce, but nothing was certain. The Ghost Dance had not been attempted with for purpose of offense since Wounded Knee on Earth over four centuries ago. Never had the Ghost Dance been attempted with so many tribals, or any planet but Earth.

The dance began and Celetain was pleased to find Naanac's energy was easy draw. A concern rose in her. Was it too easy to draw? The only humans that had ever walked on this planet were a few hundred Rowan Cartel personnel. Celetain had Wovoka conduct a thorough destruction of the Rowan base. The Rowan personnel had packed up all of their research and comps in a matter of hours. Wovoka worked with the same Apache crews that built the new chunnel to tear down every laboratory, hanger and building to the foundations with gravdozers and autohaulers. All of the wreckage was then transported out of the new chunnel on shuttles. Celetain could still feel the scars Rowan's facilities left on Naanac, but the cleansing by the White Buffalo working alongside the Apache would be enough to purify that land.

Celetain was gambling the Ghost Dance would not build any significant power in the first two hours. She estimated the dance would be primed at eight to ten hours. At fourteen hours the Ghost Dance would begin to lose power unless the pillar dancers were strong. It was now an hour and a half after Elder John's announcement was sent out across the grid. Celetain trusted Stormseeker's opinion that the UDA would respond between three and eight hours after the announcement, if they responded at all. The Elder Council was convinced the UDA would take the predictable action of launching their fleets to quell the Naanac invasion, despite the AmerIndian Confederacy's warning.

Celetain adjusted her position on top the outrider ship with the assistance of a few tribals. She spread her arms high in the position of Wambli, a position for drawing power she had used many times before. Sliver stood beside her, holding a large circular drum that served as an input device for the server of the ship Celetain stood on top of. He struck the drum once. A loud dull boom resonated from the drum as well as the drums held by the other Acolytes spread throughout the dancers' circles.

The first circle of dancers, dressed in full regalia of black, grey and white, changed the direction of their circling. A pillar dancer shrieked, a sharp hawk cry that set the circle to faster dancing. They swayed and dipped, spun and lunged their shoulders toward the ground. One of the twelve Acolyte drums changed the beat and other drums flowed into its new rhythm like streams joining a river. The second circle of dancers changed the direction of its circling. Another drum and another boomed and new song echoed across the plain with seven hundred tribals dancing and singing to its powerful, deadly pattern.

Haida Cybershamans monitored the gathering power through comp equipment Sliver had pioneered. A bright aura now surrounded Celetain. The gleaming image of Wambli, the great eagle grandfather enveloped her. Surrounding tribals gazed in amazement. Celetain pulled her concentration in and willed herself to allow hours to pass continuing to draw power from the dancers, the pillars and Naanac. Suddenly Celetain began to think not about gathering power but how she would control it.

In the fifth hour, the Ghost Dance was in full sway. Lightning arced from the sky, grounding around the ship Celetain stood on. Immeasurable power coursed through her and it frightened her. The Elder Shaman prayed the UDA attack would come soon. Bright lightning arced from the center of the dance circles, each ribbon of electricity licking at Celetain. Celetain could feel gates being flung open. A tremendous force was being held in her mind, controlled by Sliver's code, and Celetain struggled to contain it, longed to unleash it with a thought.

Her body shook, convulsed with force. There could be hours left before the attack came, she thought. She had to control the power, contain it until the time of release. Sliver beat syncopated beats and adjusted the code to assist Celetain. She screamed as she realized she must vent some of what she held or be torn apart physically. She concentrated.

Blinding white beams shot from thick jungle trees at the edge of the plain. Wet limbs flew forward and beams of raw energy arced out of the trees. Tribals screamed as they clamored to get away. The beams shot away, each finding a target. Each beam plowed into a tribal, flinging them randomly, knocking away other tribals with concussive force. The dancers and pillars, entranced, conscious only of the dance, took no notice of the event.

When the struck tribals landed the crowd swarmed around them. Each of the tribals was burning with an intense white flame. The intense heat kept the other tribals back. The flame consumed clothes and hair. After the flames dissipated, the bodies appeared clean, no signs of burns or trauma. The heat coming from the bodies kept the crowd away for a few minutes. When the surrounding tribals could get near, they rushed forward with blankets. All of the tribals struck by the energy beams had a pulse and were breathing but they could not be brought back to consciousness.

#

Near the cliffs, Haida tribals set up healing tents. The crowd turned their eyes back to Celetain. She appeared serene, her arms outstretched without effort as if she had been holding them up for five minutes, rather than five hours. Tribals entered the dance, relieving older dancers and being careful not to disturb any of the pillars, embracing those they relieved before rolling into the rhythm. The pillars danced uninterrupted and alone.

Towanqua, a pillar in the seventh circle danced furiously. Sweat poured off him. He danced without reserve, feeling urgency. When he saw Celetain's visage, an earth-locked angel, he danced harder. He felt the gathering power and his clone brothers in his circle set their pace to his. Before long he was heaving and choking, desperately trying to pull air into his lungs. Even as he coughed blood onto the wet ground he pushed harder, forcing himself past the pain, passed the boundaries his body insisted upon. He jerked and his body moved slower, jauntily as if strings suspended him. He bobbed a few more steps before slumping to the ground. Tribals from around the dance ran in to replace those close to Towanqua who had stopped dancing. They backed away from his corpse, fearing and revering his sacrifice.

#

Celetain's body went rigid as her held power doubled. Sliver beat frantically at his drum. Sweat poured from his brow. Now stronger, Celetain fought the urge to vent again, able to hold the power. Towanqua was the first pillar to fall that day. Three more would follow in the next few minutes. A Kichai weapons procurer, a Tsimshian soft-jack and an Apache sniper. By the seventh hour when Jet Tigers streaked through the chunnel, Celetain Prax, Elder Shaman of the AmerIndian Confederacy, held more power than any shaman had ever possessed.

The fighter itself was not visible but the brilliant lance of sequenced light it stretched for ten kilometers behind it was visible to every tribal on the ground. The signal declared that Naanac was under attack by the UDA and the Ghost Dance must be culminated, the power released.

Celetain was absorbed; holding the power the Ghost Dance had gathered. Sliver put his drum down, stood and pushed into the hard light corona surrounding her. He shouted, "Release, release." Sliver pushed himself back out. Celetain's eyes were closed and he could not tell if she had heard him or not. Her eyes opened wide again, but it was clear she was looking at something beyond this world. She spoke and out of her mouth came the voice of a Grandfather.

"The end has come and your dance has been earnest and true. Finish well now, the release has come."

The chant grew louder. Pillar and dancers, all beaten and worn, surged hard, dozens dropped dead of exhaustion and Celetain gathered all that they offered. The light around Celetain increased and her far off gaze shifted. Her eyes darted from Sliver to the Acolytes in the dancers' circles. She was frightened and it could be seen clearly on her face. Her arms remained up as her body twitched. She was wracked with some unknown pain. Sliver turned away, unable to witness her suffering. He knew helping her he would destroy everything she had endured to produce. Her body spasmed and she was free of the power. A tired, resigned look came across her face.

Initially, there was no sign of what had occurred. Suddenly, a wave of energy shot out from her in every direction. Every tribal surrounding Celetain was pushed off their feet and thrown two meters. Ripples of light blue energy were apparent as the wave hit the Free Mantle and continued. Laser fire, missiles and mayhem reigned across the outer space of Naanac. The wave hit the AmerIndian Confederacy lodge and outrider ships first and fighters were tilted by the wave. Every ship blacked out as power from Nagaspheres vanished in an instant. The wave plowed into the UDA ships and there it slowed. Red sparks and lightening shot off the surface of each UDA ship and vessel.

When the wave had passed over each ship it spread forward in every direction at the speed of spirit carrying the blackness with it, shutting down every fusion and electrical power source on every UDA colony and every UDA outpost. In one last quick and frightening visual, billions of UDA citizens watched on their wall screens as the UDA ships blinked into darkness seconds before the same darkness passed over their home. On each of the eight UDA colonies and all eight hundred outposts chaos erupted. Billions scrambled for pressure suits. The few who had weapons readied them. UDA citizens did not know they had received only the least of the Ghost Dance's effect.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Wolf Plume locked his body tank. Air swooshed in and out of the suit as it pressurized. With no power in the outrider ship every tribal had less than six minutes to get suited up in a pressure suit or body tank. No life support was running. Wolf Plume's comp set, drawing power from the body tanks individual power source, was already squawking with orders from the ship's pack alphas. Wolf Plume cut into the line. "All wrench monkeys scramble to power up positions, tech-jacks assist as needed. We have got to get the shields back up or we're scrapped. Hustle, Hustle."

Wolf Plume felt the ship. It was a skill he had learned over decades of piloting. All power was down, no server fed ship status data to his comp set, and yet Wolf Plume knew no lasers played across the hull. He knew the hangars were quiet; no fighters darted in or out. He could feel it. Wolf Plume commanded silence on the communications line, "This is Wolf Plume. Turquoise Dragon Pack, leave post and take the repair chutes to the outer hull. I need a visual report ASAP."

Tribals around him moved. Wolf Plume stood silent listening only for the report. He had a suspicion of what was going on but he needed confirmation. "Wolf Plume, this is Crystal Branch, Turquoise Dragon Alpha. Visual report. No ships visible. It appears everything is power down. Every lodge ship, prime ship, outrider ship, fighter, UDA and Confederacy. All powered down. Black as night."

Wolf Plume subconsciously put his hand up to stroke his beard. The plastic of his glove touched artificially to the glasteel of his helmet. He shook his head in slight frustration. "It's a race, drooks, whoever gets power up first gets to carve their opponent like a Halloween pumpkin. Load the solar sail ship up with body tank warriors and launch her by manual push out from the lower bay. Once under way target the Delta grade UDA prime ships. Go. Go. Go. I want launch in three minutes."

A palpable tension fell. Wolf Plume could tell many, perhaps most, of the tribals on his outrider ship were frightened. Why were the Nagaspheres had powered down. Why had the Ghost Dance hit the AmerIndian Confederacy ships as well as the UDA ships? Did the Ghost Dance do nothing more than set the tribals up for defeat? Were they on cusp of a second White Earth Massacre?

#

Able to traverse the two hundred and twenty kilometers between Wolf Plume's outrider ship and the closest UDA prime ship in less than an hour and a half, the solar ship made good time. It used no other fuel than the starlight shining on its sails. Autumn Sky, an experienced body tank warrior, stood poised before the solar ship's open airlock. The airlock of the UDA prime ship they were connecting to was wide open.

Autumn Sky sensed something was terribly wrong. The airlock being open was wrong. The solar ship reaching the UDA prime ship without conflict was wrong. There should have been some response from the UDA soldiers by now. She leveled her Sledge Violator toward the airlock. The two body tank troops strained their mobile armor.

Autumn Sky opened fire into the dark hole. Her pack to her lead and rained laser fire in as well. The pack continued firing until Autumn Sky heard the beep signaling a quarter of her e-clip had been emptied and ordered cease-fire.

Laser fire died and body tank pack moved forward. Autumn Sky was surprised her pack had not been pummeled by return enemy fire. She wasted no time feeling foolish for the wasted ammunition and e-clip charges pocking the far wall. Fortunately, the hull of the UDA ship had not been breached. Autumn Sky circled her hand above her head and pointed forward signaling the pack to follow her into the dark halls of the UDA prime ship. Autumn Sky pushed off into the zero-g

of the UDA prime ship and led her pack down a hall until they approached open heavy blast doors.

Autumn Sky's Second, Clipper, broke silence. "By standard UDA ship blueprints this next room should be level headquarters. Right turn here will lead us to small weapon holds." Autumn Sky pushed off a nearby wall and entered the level headquarters. The pack moved in unison to the side of the door and waited for fire that did not come. The room was dark and only the starlight optics on her comp set allowed her to see. The room was full of UDA soldiers. Their corpses floated silently.

Clipper answered Autumn Sky's question before she asked it. "Clear line, sapphire spread, Alpha. Sensors confirm all UDA soldiers on this room are dead."

Further investigation showed that every airlock on the ship had been opened simultaneously. The Ghost Dance had killed every UDA soldier on the ship. Autumn Sky used a shotgun communications unit on the solar ship to beam the information back to a temporary receiver bolted to the exterior of Wolf Plume's outrider ship.

#

Reports came in from the other AmerIndian Confederacy solar ships. Wolf Plume felt a relief and sadness wash over him. Sixteen thousand UDA soldiers were killed by the Ghost Dance. Every soldier on each of the fourteen hundred prime ships was sacrificed on the UDA's alter of aggression. It was the greatest military victory ever achieved by the AmerIndian Confederacy. Naanac was now and forever the Homelands. The blood price paid in full.

Wolf Plume sat. He felt weak, the enormity of what had just occurred weighing on him. More people died here today than lived on some outposts. It was a considerable loss of life and though they were his enemies, Wolf Plume felt sorrow for the loss to their families.

Nothing any of the Nez Perce engineers and techs tried would restore power. Brand new Nagaspheres yielded no power. The blackness lasted for exactly sixty-seven minutes when power surged back into all of the ships. With power restored Wolf Plume got to work organizing skeleton crews to pilot the UDA prime ships to Naanac's orbit where they could be emptied of the thousands of corpses. Wolf Plume dispatched a single shuttle to Naanac to inform the Elders of the developments in orbit.

#

Elder John looked unusual wearing a thin long rain slicker and heavy boots. While these items would have normally caused him discomfort, he was willing to wear them to live on this wet, glorious land. Diegueño tribals had built a roaring fire and the overhead trees kept the damp drizzle off the fire.

John was amazed at how it felt to walk on the damp ground of Naanac. He relished the soft squish of the soil under his boot. Just a few meters away the Apache were already erecting a handsome wooden lodge for the Elder Council. Seated on logs surrounding the fire were Stormseeker, Morgan Weaver, Keokuk, Wolf Plume and Wovoka.

John considered where the other key players were now. Kugan was away working with the Kichai to take full economic advantage of the chaos that would sweep through when the Intergalactic Stock Exchange was reopened. Assets to defend and opportunities to harvest. On all nine of the UDA colonies Kugan had top-notch Kichai broker packs ready to trade. Celetain was in critical condition and the best Haida healers were attending her. Her body and mind had been ravaged by the ordeal of the Ghost Dance.

John spoke evenly, "The Ghost Dance was effective. Sixteen thousand UDA soldiers died in Naanac's orbit. Investigation shows that each UDA prime ship received AmerIndian Confederacy code before they decompressed. Also each UDA prime ship fired its Kellion Cannon but it is unclear what was transmitted. The seven UDA fleets that were sent, all fourteen hundred prime ships, are ours. It appears that the airlocks on every ship were simultaneously opened and all power

on the ships was cut off. Death was quick for those aboard. All of the UDA colonies and outposts lost power for sixty-seven minutes. The death toll on those UDA colonies and outposts will take months to determine. Hospital patients who lost power to their medical equipment, outpost inhabitants that did not have non-electrical air-supply source and other situations abound. We need to communicate with the UDA again as soon as possible."

Stormseeker tossed a small damp branch onto the blazing fire. "It's what the Zuni live for, politics and intelligence handling. Give it over to Chief Koqua. Leave it to her discretion."

Morgan Weaver nodded and Elder John went on to the next issue. "They would be fools to try, but if the UDA sends another wave of ships, what is our response?"

Keokuk answered. "Sliver told me the Acolytes could not repeat the Ghost Dance without Celetain. Tsimshian tech-packs are working with skeleton crews put together by the Nez Perce. They should be able to get ten to twenty empty prime ships to mirror the actions of one fully crewed prime ship. So we can use the fleet we just gained. It will be unwieldy though."

John shook his head hoping such a scenario would not play out. "Weaver, what is the state of the tribes? How are they reacting to the effects of the dance?"

Weaver warmed his hands near the fire and spoke while staring at the back of his hands. "They are ecstatic. They feel powerful and in their minds, Naanac is theirs. Many saw the pillars fall and they believe that they were prophesied 'blood payment' for our Homeland. The Apache and the Brule are riled, wanting a bigger fight. They think there will be another wave of ships. The Diegueño and the Tsimshian on the other hand are too relaxed, thinking the UDA will not possibly respond. I want to meet with the chiefs and balance the field, get everyone pointed in the same direction."

It was a good suggestion, sensible and helpful. John and Stormseeker were surprised to hear it come from Morgan Weaver. John smiled at Weaver and Stormseeker agreed that a meeting was in order. The group gave the matter a few more ruminations. It was a waiting game at this point. The Elder's stopped rolling hypotheticals and decided it was better to help with the work of turning this swamp into a home.

Keokuk and Elder John went to the World Building meeting. Black Crow, the AmerIndian Confederacy's best geologist and something of a legend in the field of terraforming, was now going over options the tribes had. He laid out ways to bring about climate changes to benefit the various animals the AmerIndian Confederacy wished to introduce to Naanac. Discussion, suggestions, questions, curses and jokes continued throughout the day. Many tribals argued the changes Black Crow suggested were invasive and unnatural. Black Crow answered that it was man's nature to change his environment, irrigation as an example, so there was nothing unnatural about these suggestions. He also pointed out that all of his plans were tempered with a respect and reverence for the land.

Every tribe was holding talk circles, meetings where a dozen issues affecting the settlement of Naanac would be decided. Other tribals, however, thought the time for talk was over. Shuttles of various size were still landing on the open fields of mossy grey-green grass a few hundred meters from base camp and the main throng of AmerIndian. Diegueño tribals joyfully unloaded stallions, colts, ponies, wolves, bears and mountain lions. The animals were rounded into large laser fenced area as the Diegueño leaders carefully considered how the animals should be released.

Keokuk and Wovoka walked together taking in the madness. They laughed as they saw Great Stone's boys all riding bare back on stallions. The crowd parted before them. Decker, a thin whip of a boy, galloped close to Keokuk. He strained to stay on his beautiful horse. With a short abrupt hop the horse threw the boy,

depositing him as a flailing bunch of arms and legs. Keokuk and Wovoka rushed over to find the boy laughing harder than his brothers as they galloped off. Keokuk grabbed cider and pemmican and shared with his brother as they made their way to help with the Tee Pee cluster the clones were erecting. The scene was disorganized, a hundred celebrations going on at once. Keokuk and Wovoka enjoyed the chaos of their new home together as brothers.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Lige made his way into the large austere office of President Sullivan. He dragged the disheveled and bound form of an old man. Jaret strode silently behind Admiral Lige, his hand resting casually on his katana. Lige kicked the old man forward onto the floor before the President and his advisors.

The old man was bleeding and unclean. The advisors were not used to the sight of blood and it unnerved them. Lige bowed deeply to the five figures in the room. Jaret mirrored him.

President Sullivan looked both worried and relieved to see Lige. The president's two consuls looked perturbed. Grand Admiral Ramus' mouth was open, shocked showing plainly on his face. Lige was supposed to be thousands of galaxies away, dead. The last of the five was a thin man dressed in what appeared to be dark clergy garb of an indeterminable religion. Lige gave him a quick glance and then addressed the group.

"I am here to claim what has been denied me for far too long; control of the entire UDA Navy. By now you have read my objections to the Naanac Response and should understand why I chose to disobey a direct order from Grand Admiral Ramus."

Ramus stammered. "The end does not justify the means. You are court marshaled and stripped of -"

President Sullivan waved his hand casually at Ramus. Ramus stopped talking abruptly. "You've played the game long enough, Ramus, to know the end always justifies the means. Who is this bloodied man, Lige?"

The thin man in the dark robes sat forward eager to hear Lige's reply. Lige gave the bound man a quick hard kick. "While Ramus sent sixteen thousand UDA soldiers to their death, I used my time a bit more productively. This is Potlatch Weaver." Lige said no more.

The advisors looked at each other. Each man waited for the others to explain to Lige that this disheveled sack of human could not possibly be Potlatch Weaver.

"Potlatch Weaver has been dead for thirteen years, fool." Ramus spat.

Lige shook visibly, anger boiling over. "Against my advisement you have lost twenty five percent of the Navy, handing fourteen hundred prime ships in perfect condition to the AC. For that alone I am contemplating beating you to death with my bare hands right here and now. You should refrain from referring to me as anything but your replacement. The DNA tests that this is Potlatch Weaver are conclusive, but irrelevant." Lige pulled the old man's head up by his hair. President Sullivan and the robed man's eyes went wide. They had seen this man's face on vids more time than they could count and both men had met him in person over two decades ago. It was Potlatch Weaver, without question.

"How?" President Sullivan asked, amazed.

"The Great Elder was not killed at the White Earth Massacre. Elder John, then chief of the Zuni, faked Weaver's death at Weaver's command. Elder John got him off of the lodge ships to the nearest outpost. Weaver could not handle his defeat at my hands. Seems it took all of the spirit to lead out of him. Since the White Earth Massacre he has been playing leap frog, living as a hermit on a dozen different outposts."

President Sullivan smiled broadly. "Excellent work Lige, prepare your fleet for -"

"First things first, President Sullivan. There is the matter of Grand Admiral rank. Let's settle that now."

The President paused. He looked at Grand Admiral Ramus. "You are deposed as Grand Admiral and hereby replaced by Lige."

Ramus gaped. He had seen this moment coming for more than five years and yet the fact that his career was ended with the uttering of a single sentence was still shocking to him.

"Take a hint from this defeated enemy," Lige kicked Weaver again. "Lose yourself on a distant outpost, Ramus, before this day is out or no law will protect you. I will handle this debacle with AC, President Sullivan. Save your orders for the lackeys who need them."

With that Lige and Jaret scooped up Weaver and were gone.

#

In the founder's body tank Wovoka clunked up to the outrider ship Celetain had released the Ghost Dance from. It seemed unreal as Wovoka looked out over the crowd. He had struggled for this moment all his life, fought to attain the dream of his father. A week ago, he thought it would be a decade or more before he gained the chiefdom of the Apache. Now he led the AmerIndian Confederacy. Tears of joy, loss and exhaustion rolled down his face.

Fear of addressing the massive gathered crowd laced his stomach. He settled himself, knowing all he had to do was speak the truth. Over five thousand tribals peered up at him. He knew his image was being projected to other areas of the planet to be viewed on comp sets. Tribals were crammed together as far as the eye could see and dozens of bon fires and torches lit up their turned faces in a flickering warm light. Fortunately, the drizzling rain hid his tears.

"Brothers and sisters, I am not a great speaker. My words are not beautiful and inspirational like our founder, Potlatch Weaver, or our Elder Wisdom. But today beautiful words are not needed. Only the truth. I will not thank you for sacrificing for the AmerIndian Confederacy because you did not do it for me. We, together, did it for the AmerIndian Confederacy. We fought for over two decades and carved out a new and ancient way of living. We can now return to the lives of beauty and balance our forefathers showed us. This is now our planet, our Homeland, paid for in full with blood.

"Here we will build a place of harmony where we will live in balance with nature, not ignoring and shunning the new ways of technology, but using them in a way that is responsible and balanced. We will enjoy the sweet serenity that only a life of harmony with nature, working with the land, can give. We can continue our spiritual journey as a people. Technology will once again become a tool, not a shackle. There will be struggles. Be prepared. Who will defend this land?" A roar rose from the crowd.

No one slept that night. There was only rejoicing, dancing, singing and feasting. Outside the Free Mantle thirty lodge ships, 620 AmerIndian Confederacy outrider ships and dozens of manned and hundreds of remote-controlled UDA prime ships guarded the planet.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Darkness ebbed slowly away and light played carefully along the edge of Alexa's consciousness. The fall into the ship had knocked her unconscious and so the journey through the grav hole had been oblivion to her. Now she could feel her arms and legs around her. She snapped upright, quickly opening her eyes wide. It was a strange sensation. As she opened her eyes the darkness returned. Her eyes were wide open but seeing nothing.

Alexa felt around her and realized she was lying on a soft mattress. Alarmed, she wondered who had put her in bed? No one should be on this ship but her. Throwing her legs over the side of the bed she tried to stand, falling immediately to the floor. Her alarm intensified. The floor was cold, hard. She tried to scramble back to her feet but hit something as she rose. The crash of steel and the breaking of glass erupted in the small dark room.

Breaking glass? She had only heard the breaking of glass one other time in her life. She remembered her father, President Sullivan, angry over a failed political maneuver throwing a two hundred year old vase against a wall. A beam of light, orange and flickering, spread across the room. Cold liquid now covered her, clinging to her light robe.

A figure stood before her. The figure bent and as Alexa's eyes adjusted, she saw a man. His head was shaved and he was dressed in a heavy black robe. She scrambled away from him picking up a large piece of the broken glass. In a flash she was on her feet brandishing the long slice of glass that had already cut her hand.

The man backed away quickly. "No, No. We mean you no harm. You are safe, you are safe."

Alexa looked around. Lit only by the torch the man held, she could see the room was small and windowless. A bed, a nightstand, a desk and chair were the only pieces of furniture. The furniture seemed to be wood. She also made out that the cold, hard floor was stone. The walls were made of stone as well.

"Where am I?" she demanded.

The man spoke softly. "You are at the Monastery and you are not in danger. We have not harmed you, nor will we harm you in any way. Please put the shard down. You are injuring yourself."

She glared at him and raised the long slice of glass. "Where am I?"

"You are in Amanth Sector, fifth planet from the solar source. We received you and your ship two days ago. Please, look around. You were not restrained and there is no lock on this door. You are safe. Put down the glass and let me help you."

Alexa looked around the room. There was no sign she was being held by force. It occurred to her that if the man had wanted to harm her the torch he held was more of a weapon than the shard she held. She dropped the shard and startled when it broke on the floor.

The robed man stepped forward slowly. "Please relax. Sit on the bed. I am Michael, the first advocate, the healer of this monastery." Alexa realized the man was handsome, tall with raven hair. The healer took a small case from his robe. He then took her hand gently and began to bandage it.

"Thank you," she said.

"Please, wait here and I will bring you some clean dry clothes." The monk exited quickly and Alexa was alone. She studied the room. The walls were made of black wood, rubbery and dense, with a smell Alexa did not recognize. She discovered to her surprise the desk had a comp unit in its face. She activated it by standard "Comp on" command. It was a high-end model, beautiful resolution on the screen. She asked questions but discovered quickly the comps parameters were locked and would allow access only to the entertainment functions.

The handsome monk returned and gave Alexa a thicker robe of the same design he wore. He waited outside while she dressed. When she was done, she came out of the room into the hall.

"I'm sure you have a thousand questions. Come with me. I will take you to the man who can give you the answers."

A walk through stone halls brought the two to a set of large double doors. The monk opened them and light bathed Alexa. Abruptly, the stone and wood of the monastery disappeared.

Before her loomed a hanger bay. Alexa and the monk looked down on a bustling area of war preparation. Four highly customized prime ships hovered in the air. The ships were surrounded by dozens of fighters being repaired, loaded or armed. Alexa knew immediately that she saw was not looking at any kind of UDA operation. Most likely, this was a Periphery base run by outpost pirates. How the monastery played into what she saw was beyond her.

A wide, chunky hovercraft floated up to the double doors. Another handsome young man piloted the craft. Alexa looked again at the monk and could see the all too perfect features of a clone. The monk gestured toward the hovercraft, which was now snuggled close to the wall. Designed to carry up to six passengers the hovercraft was convertible. Alexa took the monk's hand and stepped down into the front seat next to the pilot. The monk sat behind her and addressed the pilot, "We are expected by Command." The pilot nosed the vessel down and made his way through the hanger bay.

"What is this place?" Alexa could see rock outcroppings at the front of the hanger bay, which was open to cold vacuum space. A sophisticated grav shield held the atmosphere of the hanger bay in.

"New Eden," the monk said without comment.

The trip to the bottom of the hanger bay was short. The monk climbed out of the craft and helped Alexa down. Alexa stood on the floor of the hanger bay and looked back at the now the distant double doors she had exited a moment ago. The monk led her over to an older man dressed in unassuming, simple coveralls. He stood over a battle table. Alexa had seen a battle table before in her father's office. A two-meter oval with a view screen over a dedicated comp, a battle table allowed detailed tracking of ships and or troop movements in remote locations. The older man's eyes met hers. She knew he was set apart, a leader here. He flashed a dangerous smile. With a fast hand he grabbed her chin and turned her face to a slant, examining it. Alexa gritted her teeth but something told her not to struggle.

"Meat" he said and released her. She shook her head feeling a slight pain in her jaw where he had clutched her. She scrunched her nose at the comment.

"Clones, you are all clones," she said.

The older man's smile broadened.

"My god, you are Octavias, head of Humanitace. You are UDA public enemy number one. Well, I guess you numbers lower than that considering the AmerIndian Confederacy Elders."

Octavias nodded curtly. "Public enemy number one? It's all politics. I sow more havoc in a week than the AmerIndian Confederacy has been responsible for in years. I just hide my tracks better. Now while we're disclosing, you are Alexa Sullivan, daughter of UDA President Sullivan. The low end model."

"You know I was replaced by a clone?"

"Of course we know. Gavon Lige is quick, but we can tell our own," he sniffed, "regardless of falsified tests."

"I ended up in the periphery? My ship was supposed to be headed for Earth." Alexa began to feel nervous as the monk gestured to the clones in the area to find tasks to do elsewhere.

Octavias leaned against the battle table and folded his arms. "Oh no, your jump was excellent. Your ship came out of its correspondence plane within two million kilometers of Pluto. Just happens your ship, with you sleeping like a

baby inside, was found by an ice tug with a Humanitace captain. He had to kill the rest of the crew because one of them recognized you on sight. He brought you here to Humanitace HQ."

"Why? Why go to all the trouble to bring me here?"

"The answer to that is complex. There is currently a very delicate shadow combat being waged. The AmerIndian Confederacy, Gavon Lige and the UDA are the participants. Each is a fulcrum for political and military power. The outcome will determine the destiny of billions."

Alexa looked puzzled, "Lige and the UDA? No, Lige serves the UDA."

"Lige serves the UDA no more than the lion serves the gazelle. I would sooner have your father call an intergalactic blood hunt for me than receive a dinner invitation from Gavon Lige. He is a more dangerous than the Race Representatives or any other member of the UDA government. I need to know where you fit in. All I want is your complete and honest story. It will answer many questions and prepare me to be in the right position when things shake out. If you give me your full and complete story I promise you I will return you unharmed to the AC. If you withhold a single detail I need - well I will not hesitate to slice you into six pieces and send each to a different galaxy."

She could not look away from his gaze and she had no doubt he would carry out his threat. "Why are you doing this? The AmerIndian Confederacy treats clones fairly. Clones are accepted and respected as full tribals."

Octavias paused before speaking. "True. Many of my brothers and sisters have taken refuge with the AC. However, they are in severe, unfortunate denial of their true nature. The tribals treat them as equals; tell them they may enjoy all of the rights and privileges of a full human. It is telling a prince he may serve as a stable hand. We are not equal to humans; we are superior in every facet. Humans rut like filthy dogs creating random, inferior stock at best, deformed and witless at worst. We are planned. Created in clean, beautiful form, sound and superior in mind, body and spirit. The Harmony League, the only other clone rights group of significant power, wishes clones to live as equals, integrate and work with humans. Did homosapiens integrate with neanderthals? Evolution has spoken clearly. We are the new generation and the sooner we wipe away your kind, the sooner the human race can progress to its proper condition."

Octavias turned and walked under one of the hovering prime ships.

Reluctantly Alexa followed him. He stopped before a grouping of large red cases piled neatly on top of one another, three cases high. Recognizing the case as containers for Nagaspheres, Alexa move forward to get a better idea of how many cases there were. "You are the group who has been supplying the AmerIndian Confederacy anonymously with Nagasphere when they ran low. Why? Why would Humanitace do that?"

"Why? It should be evident to you. The AC is currently the lesser of the two evils. The enemy of my enemy is my friend. For now. The actions of the AC serve our purposes in a round-a-bout manner. There is a balance of power forged by the struggle between the AC and Lige. The AC could defeat the UDA with Lige. Lige would now rule the UDA if the AC did not exist. Without the AC or Lige the UDA will crumble without purpose or direction."

Alexa nodded. There was some truth to his words.

Octavias pressed the release on the first case. It hissed open showing the gleaming mirror surface of a Nagasphere. "Now please, you are a lovely, charming girl and it would pain me to carve you like a spiral ham, but if you cause me the slightest delay or inconvenience that is exactly what I will do. Your story please."

Alexa smiled back at him. "It all began..." The President's daughter spoke steadily. Octavias would not allow her to stop talking for two more hours. His questions were many and she was surprised at how much he already knew of AmerIndian Confederacy operations. Finally, she told him the story of how Jaret freed her. Octavias now looked tired, but at this particular tale he perked up

and devoured every detail. Alexa finished and felt a strange calm wash over her as she closed her story. Octavias was silent. His aid bent and whispered something into his ear.

"What happens now?" Alexa asked.

"I am returning you to the AC. With you I am sending a care package. One thousand Nagaspheres, which the AC is in desperate need of at this juncture. You will also carry a message for me to Stormseeker."

Alexa nodded. "Courier of the clones. I can do that."

#

Before Grand Admiral Lige stood eight squads, the best body tank troops gathered from every colony and outpost in the UDA. These sixty-four men would be all he needed to settle his problem with the AmerIndian Confederacy once and for all.

Lige walked slowly, visually inspecting each man's mobile armor as he passed. "Your commanders have failed. You have failed. Time and time again we have been turned back by a band of thieves. Today, that will change. Today, you will have only men of the highest caliber at your side. Weak, indecisive leaders will not hinder you. The man next to you will be quick, lethal and efficient. Today, we will deliver a blow to the AC that will break the foundation of their ramshackle organization."

Lige stopped and took in the soldiers. They were indeed strong, sharp and deadly. They would serve as the weapon he needed. One man, his head looking small poking out of the massive suit with the helmet held in his left hand, looked concerned. "What is wrong, soldier?"

"Nothing, sir." The soldier replaced his slight frown with a soldier's standard, determined visage.

Lige walked forward. "Permission to speak freely, soldier. What is your concern?"

The soldier hesitated a moment. "How are sixty-four men going to beat the AC when sixteen thousand UDA soldiers were slaughtered?"

A broad smile came across Lige's face. "A fair and astute question, soldier. Each and every man here needs to understand that what occurred at Naanac was a military blunder of significant proportion. The AC waltzes in and takes possession of Naanac and the UDA's response is simply to send hundreds of ships to take the planet back by force. The UDA response was completely predictable. It was the one and only response for which the AC could plan perfectly. The last Grand Admiral," Lige said the title in contempt, "led his men headlong into a trap. I will not do the same. Here, today, I am relying on each man to carry out his duty. Each of you has been hand picked for this mission. Soldier, what is the main driving force behind the AC? What have they consistently established as a goal for their Homeland?"

The soldier thought for a moment. "Preservation of natural resources, sir."

"That is correct, soldier. They wish to establish a clean, unpolluted environment. So instead of bloodying our noses by fighting them head to head we will simply deny them what they are fighting for."

Jaret stepped forward. He pressed a button on a long black box and with great care held it out to Lige. Lige plucked a long tube out of the box. He held it up over his head. The tube, made of a clear plasteel alloy caught the light and glowed an iridescent pink. Lige spoke slowly, staring at the tube. "Anthrax. The deadliest, fastest spreading virus in existence. Spreads from one living host to another by physical contact. Once released on Naanac, Anthrax will spread from blade of grass to blade of grass at a rate of half-meter a second killing every single living organism down to the last cell. The planet will be transformed from a new habitable planet, teeming with life, to one of billions of lifeless periphery rocks in a matter of days.

"Before this day passes we will release Anthra Sweet on Naanac. Plans have been laid to get each one of you onto the planet with Jaret and I as we meet with the AC Elders. When the signal is given you will create enough chaos to allow Jaret and I enough time to don our body tanks. The Anthra Sweet cylinder is equipped with a release mechanism that will trigger the second both Jaret and I have sealed our body tanks. Once the virus is spreading all units will then leave Naanac through the Free Mantle via shuttle, rendezvousing with our waiting prime ships. Does everyone understand?"

"Yes, Grand Admiral," the soldiers shouted in unison.

"Is there any man here who does not believe he can complete this mission?" Silence answered Lige's question. "Success awaits us."

Lige turned and headed toward the bay ramp on his prime ship. Jaret reported as the turbo lift raised them toward the bridge. "All parameters are go, sir. Prisoner is prepped and healthy." Lige nodded.

Jaret stepped forward. "Sir, there may be a smaller window for success on this mission than we planned for. I believe you should reset the Anthra Sweet cylinder to release when your suit alone is sealed."

Lige turned to Jaret. The young Kentucky samurai was stunned by what he saw on Lige's face. It was the look of a father's love toward a son, pure and strong. It was the look of approval and pride he had looked for in his own father's eyes, but had never seen. "Jaret, I am now at the head of the UDA fleet. You of all people should know how close I am to ascending to the power that should be mine. I will soon take control of the weak coalitions that abound on the colonies and outposts. My product will be a nation strong enough to rule all of the seven settled galaxies, strong enough to open the Periphery to safe settlement again and control them as well. Caesar and Alexander the Great will be my inferiors. With the force of my own will I will build an empire to last ten millennia."

Lige set his hand on Jaret's shoulder. "I will need leaders for my military, men I can trust, men who understand and share my vision. Jaret, you have been the first of my servants. You have been my most trusted aid since the day you attempted to sacrifice yourself for me on Preltas. We will leave Naanac together. Together. Alive. Victorious. That is the only way I will leave that planet. But from this day forward you will no longer be my servant, but my son."

Jaret stood not knowing how to respond. "Thank you... Father." It was all Jaret could think to say. All that was necessary.

CHAPTER THIRTY

Alexa shook her head to dispel the queasiness she felt after traveling through a correspondence plane. She peered out the bridge windows and jumped when she saw a pattern of Jet Tigers streaking past her UDA prime ship. Her comp set beeped and she finger tapped to listen. "You are in AmerIndian Confederacy controlled space. State your reason for being here."

Alexa grinned. "I am Alexa Sullivan, member in good standing of the AmerIndian Confederacy, Diegueño tribe. My ship is carrying important cargo for the AmerIndian Confederacy. I also carry an important message for the Elder Council."

Silence. "Welcome home, Alexa. Prepare for docking. We will send a pack over to search the ship. If all is as you say we will escort you to the surface of the AmerIndian Homeland, Naanac. The cargo will stay in orbit, for now."

#

Autumn Sky led the search of the ship and then escorted Alexa to her pack's shuttle. The shuttle hit the chunnel at speed and the view amazed Alexa. She had never seen anything like the free-floating asteroid field surrounding Naanac. The chunnel cored through the maelstrom of flying rock. The shuttle passed through the end of the chunnel and Alexa saw only grey as they shot through a kilometer thick cloud. Suddenly her view was filled with the grey green forests and black mountains of Naanac. The colors were drab, muted, but the planet had it's own unique beauty. Streaking down, the shuttle passed over the teeming camp that stretched for ten kilometers in a wide circle. The shuttle hovered directly over an area where tribals were conducting a barbecue. Finally, tribals poured water on the fire and grabbed up the meat to go find another spot as the shuttle set down.

"This is incredible," Alexa said to Autumn Sky.

"Yes, it is history in the making. The people are in love with the land already. Come." Autumn Sky led Alexa and the pack down the steps of the shuttle. Alexa's took in the delicious smell of roasting meats. Tribal drum music could be heard from different directions. Alexa felt joy all around her. She took in the sights, smells and sounds of people making and enjoying a home. Tribals trotted by on horses and two dark skinned boys chased a wet puppy, the ground squishing under their feet.

Autumn Sky led Alexa to a large tent. Under the well-staked tarps a small fire crackled and Wovoka, Keokuk, Stormseeker, and John sat eating. The men talked low and their mood was somber in stark contrast to those surrounding them. Autumn Sky approached and John noticed her. "Yes, Autumn Sky?" The others looked up as Alexa stepped forward.

Elder John jumped to his feet. "We were worried about you. Where were you taken? How did you escape? Oh, excuse me. Please, sit down."

Alexa took the place next to John. "I was captured on the Dorimian excursion due to the betrayal of Zuni Snow Blind. She is a double agent for the UDA and the reason for our defeat at Nomar Hax. Lige held me as prisoner for, I think, three months. He cloned me."

Elder John nodded, "Cloned you? We thought you were dead."

"I had a friend who came to see me each day at the cell where I was being kept. He helped me... Actually there was no help involved. He single handily facilitated my escape."

Stormseeker's suspicious gaze fell on Alexa. He suspected Alexa was a clone sent by Lige. Stormseeker, as an Elder, respected customs. He could not challenge Alexa. The simple DNA test that could be completed in moments could not be asked of any tribal. The tribes lived under the idea that clones were human in every way. If Alexa was a clone, it mattered not. All that mattered was if she was loyal and that could only be shown by actions.

"Ah, a traitor in Admiral Lige's ranks." John grinned. "Your 'friend' was Dark Strider, a deep cover Zuni that has served on *Black Mariah* for four years now. He is a brave warrior. I am glad he was there for you." Stormseeker nodded in agreement.

"No, Elder John. It was Jaret Tucker, Lige's right hand."

"The Kentucky Fried Samurai? That's impossible," Stormseeker frowned.

"It is the truth, Elder Stormseeker. He killed no less than ten UDA soldiers getting me off *Black Mariah*. He set up a prime ship to correspondence jump from a hundred meters off *Black Mariah's* stern. The correspondence jump was calculated for Earth but the proximity to the other fleet ships set it off and I came out near Pluto. An ice tug came across my ship and picked me up. The captain was Humanitace. He brought me to Humanitace HQ in the periphery."

"The periphery," Keokuk said, surprised.

"Yes. I'm not sure where. I met with Octavias, the leader of Humanitace and he gave me both cargo and a message. The ship I came in is carrying a thousand Nagaspheres. Humanitace has been our anonymous benefactor all along."

Elder John's hands dropped into his lap. "The Nagaspheres have been coming from Humanitace. We may not be able to use them this time, knowing the source."

Stormseeker locked his eyes on Alexa. "What message did Octavias give you?"

Alexa hesitated. "Octavias wants to call in a marker for the thousands of Nagaspheres they have supplied and for what they are supplying now. Octavias wishes the AmerIndian Confederacy to grant Humanitace an embassy on Naanac, twenty square kilometers of land, at any place we choose. Octavias says his people will live by our laws and no military presence will be kept here. In exchange we get an additional one thousand Nagaspheres a month and one hundred next-gen clone birth chambers with ten to follow every year there after. He wants this to tie our organizations in a bond of peace. If we refuse he has an alternative offer for Admiral Lige."

The group let the news wash over them. Alexa noticed the absence of Celetain, but decided not to ask.

Stormseeker was the first to speak. "There is no question here. Octavias is a terrorist. We do not condone his methods or support his goals. His offer leads down a dangerous road. Every hour we hold this planet cements our process from being a band of thieving rebels to a legitimate intergalactic government. If we deal with Octavias we lose credibility with the UDA colonies, outposts and elements in the Periphery."

John looked at Stormseeker and grinned. "Fine line between terrorist and freedom fighters, we of all people know that. We have an opportunity to make a powerful ally or give our greatest enemy one. The very fact that we have this planet demands we accept the terms. We need supplies. We will not have the luxury of cut and run raids anymore. The steady flow of Nagaspheres will be invaluable. From a practical standpoint, we need those supplies."

Wovoka interjected, "Octavias knows that, which makes us vulnerable. I agree with Stormseeker, we need to back away from this on principal. It is a deal with a dark spirit."

Keokuk shook his head. "It's really not that simple. Those supplies are critical. Elder John is right we can't be stealing from the UDA if they are to recognize us as a sovereign intergalactic government. If we are to have peace. If our ships stop moving, we lose the ability to defend ourselves, trade and communicate."

Wovoka came back fast at his brother, "Trade and communicate what and with whom. This planet is our natural home, balanced and in harmony. How much trade and communication do we need with the UDA or Periphery?"

"Don't be naive," John said in a surprisingly harsh tone. "Defense must now replace our offense. We will need allies. Diplomacy and establishing an intergalactic political presence--"

"Intergalactic political presence? For Wambli's sake, you sound like a UDA spin doctor," Stormseeker spat.

John leveled his hands. "I am simply saying we need to be realistic and make our decision with all concerns addressed, not just a knee-jerk reaction."

"It is out of the question, this is beyond discussion, we have been on this land for not even a day and you want to make a treaty for our land. Well, make sure you get a whole lot of shiny beads." Stormseeker threw his heavy mug into the fire. Embers kicked up and swirled in the slight breeze. He walked off pushing his aid aside. The rest sat quietly.

John frowned, "Celetain's absence is hurting us. She calmed him. We all need to part and give this some thought. Lets meet in the new Elder Hall in three hours. We'll make a decision then. Keokuk, I want you to inform all of the chiefs and Celetain of what is going on." Keokuk nodded and left immediately to complete the task given him.

#

Wovoka walked aimlessly, taking in the blur of activity of base camp. He could see some tribes were considerably busier than others. The Apaches, the Confederacy's builders, were pressed, breaking out construction tools, planning. A pack of Apaches made quick work of cutting down a tall jungle tree with a diamond-coated moly-saw. Despite the fact that the moly-saw was not powered, the tool was efficient. Other tribals carried off sections of trees to a lodge house already half done.

Wovoka looked over at a group of Zuni. The tribals sat quietly, a few rechecking inventory. They looked out of place here on Naanac. Their espionage skills had been invaluable in acquiring this planet and now settling it, their expertise was next to useless. Wovoka could see the challenge they all faced. Warriors could quickly grow distant from those they protected. Wovoka sighed. He saw the obvious joy of the tribals here and knew defending a home would not be an impossible transition from fighting for one.

There was so much to do, so much to decide, and the decisions were critical. Too much tolerance from the Elders and chiefs could ruin the AmerIndian Confederacy's chances of successful settlement on Naanac. Wovoka wiped moisture from his face. He continued to walk, preoccupied in thought. "White Buffalo?"

Wovoka looked down at a young man. A teen, he judged. It was hard to tell with tribals who came over from UDA colonies or outposts after years of age-affecting Xanic drug use.

"Wovoka, tribal. Wovoka," he corrected.

"Oh, no, sir. I'm not a tribal, not yet. But I will be soon. My name is Derek. Autumn Sky told me what you did to get us here and I wanted to thank you. I lived on UDA outpost New Angelos all my life. I belonged to an underground AC sympathizer group that helped transfer messages to and from the shipbuilding outpost. We were really just a group of kids, I suppose. I have never seen an animal bigger than a dog, and I didn't see many of those. But I read about them. This is an opportunity I dreamed about. I want to thank you. I'm looking forward to a life with something other than Xanic and fourteen hours of wall screen viewing a day. Thank you."

Wovoka smiled. "I am glad you could make it, Derek. I know this can all be very intimidating. It is a lot of change, all at once. Come with me."

Wovoka walked slowly and pointed out AmerIndians of different tribes to Derek, telling him how to differentiate them. Wovoka stopped at a small tarp. Underneath, a group of boys were shooting razor tipped arrows at targets twenty meters off.

"Torque," Wovoka called. "This is Derek. He traveled galaxies to get here. Served among the Ghosts before he came to us. Make him at home."

Torque smiled and walked over to Derek and embraced him. "Welcome, brother. I bet the closest you've ever come to using a bow is on a wall screen game of Eternal Warrior. Am I right?"

Derek laughed, "Yeah."

"Well that's about to change, brother." One of the other tribal youths handed Derek the bow. Derek smiled and joined the boys. Wovoka watched and his melancholy dissolved. Wovoka saw the beginning of the end and the end of the beginning.

#

Cavaho shielded his eyes as the door slid open. Contemplation cells were kept dim and after twenty-four hours his eyes were sensitive to light. He pulled himself up fast and Wolf Plume offered a hand, which Cavaho ignored. Wolf Plume noticed a pressure suit in the corner of Cavaho's contemplation cell. He guessed tribals had brought suits to those in the contemplation cells. "You stayed in this cell even after the power went off and on? By Wambli, you are a stubborn bastard. Wovoka is down on Naanac now. The Ghost Dance was effective. Naanac is ours."

Cavaho stood and exited the cell ahead of Wolf Plume. He set a steady pace, leaving the old dog behind him.

"The dance took its toll on Elder Celetain, however. She is in a coma."

At this Cavaho stopped, listened.

"She's on Naanac at the temporary Haida lodge house, surrounded by Haida healers."

Cavaho continued to stare at Wolf Plume.

"What?" Wolf Plume asked.

Cavaho turned and ran to the release area of the contemplation cells. Impatiently, he collected his gear and hurried to the nearest grav platform. He pulled his keying bands on and finger tapped the command for the platform to drop. In moments he was near the bottom of the lodge ship making his way through the hangers toward a Jet Tiger. He quickly keyed in a request to Wolf Plume's comp set to set up a release for the fighter to go through the chunnel and down onto Naanac.

Cavaho monkey swung on the gantry out to a prepped Jet Tiger fighter. He finger tapped a fighter authorization for his position as an Infiltrator (and noticed Wovoka's ascension to White Buffalo had increased his access to AC resources considerably). Cavaho carefully piloted the bristling Jet Tiger passed the grav interior shield in the hanger bay and out into open space. Cavaho opened the throttle and blasted toward the chunnel entrance.

Despite his haste it took the choice-mute Brule another hour to set the fighter down and find the new Haida lodge house. The lodge house was only three quarters finished and large cloth blankets sewn together with loose plexi-line covered one end of the building. Cavaho approached and glared at the two Haida tribals sending well-wishers away. Nilva, a traditional shaman, had healed Cavaho more than once and recognized him. She stood before the make shift flap in the blankets, blocking his entry. "Cavaho, how can we help you?"

Cavaho stood motionless, frustration building. Cavaho succeeded in his extreme lack of communication because he cared for nothing but his service to Wovoka. It mattered not what food Cavaho ate, what equipment he was given, what mission he was assigned to. None of it mattered. He served Wovoka and there was no more discussion needed between Wovoka and Cavaho than between Wovoka and the spanning tool he used to gap cryo-filters on the Trighter. Now Cavaho was being challenged, severely.

The young silent warrior had sat in the dark alone for the last twenty-four hours thinking about why he had hurt Celetain. In the emptiness of his contemplation cell there had been no way to avoid the answer. Cavaho had hurt Celetain because she had tried to reach out to him. What now frustrated Cavaho

was that he wanted to reach out to her. Now Celetain lay injured, hurt by who knows what forces.

When Cavaho continued to stand not answering, the Haida healer did what almost everyone did for Cavaho. Spoke for him. "Did you want to see one of the Acolytes? They are all very busy." Cavaho closed his eyes for a moment and then looking Nilva in the eye, took her hand. He held it and nodded. She stepped aside and he walked passed.

He made his way through the congested lodge house toward the center. He squeezed his way through, being careful not to jostle anyone. The center area was thronged with healers. Celetain's bodily sacrifice had cemented the victory over the UDA. The Elder Shaman had handled more power than had been manifested in five centuries. Her acolytes were all here, their normal stoic calm now replaced with nervousness and anger. Two acolytes argued with Nez Perce medics. The Nez Perce doctors wanted Celetain taken off Naanac and brought to the intensive care unit on lodge ship *Yamato*. The doctors argued that the Acolytes had failed to help her over the last six hours and had, in fact, done her harm.

The dance had affected Celetain's Acolytes. Four had died at the moment of the Ghost Dance's release, killed by the overflow of power that Celetain channeled. The remaining Acolytes were tired and confused when they rushed to help her. The Acolytes had tried to bring Celetain out of her coma with an algorithmic cleansing ritual. When they were done Celetain could not breathe and had to be resuscitated by Nez Perce medics.

Cavaho squeezed his way forward and caught Creta's eye. Creta had been the only Acolyte that did not attempt to pull Cavaho off of Celetain when he embraced her. Creta grabbed Cavaho's hand. "You came. You must see her. Perhaps your presence will help."

A huge weight lifted off Cavaho's shoulders. This was what he came for and he had known someone would have to do the talking for him. Give him what he wanted without asking for it. To see Celetain, help her. It often surprised him the effort people expended to put words into his mouth, the urgent help his silence often produced. Creta pulled him forward.

Cavaho saw Sliver heatedly arguing with a Nez Perce. "That was hours ago. We are rested and ready to care for her ourselves. I will not discuss this further. She remains here," Sliver was close to the face of the tall Nez Perce.

"Chief Rail has charged us to care of her. We will take her where she can be helped efficiently. You will release her. An Acolyte does not supersede the wishes of a chief. The Acolytes will be given unlimited access to her on *Yamato*. Now certainly you realize we are being reasonable."

Sliver near growled. "You think your chief has any say over the care of the Elder Shaman?"

Sliver's eyes lighted on Cavaho. The Nez Perce stepped back; alarmed to see Sliver could possibly get angrier than he already was.

"You! You've already had your chance to hurt her. On your way, grunt." Sliver, frayed at the ends, spoke with derision.

Creta raised a hand. "No, no, Sliver. Celetain wanted to see him the other day and I believe his presence could help. Let him through."

"You are insane, Creta. This man will not be the first thing the Elder Shaman sees when she wakes. She jailed him, for Wambli's sake. Take him away!"

Another Acolyte stepped forward, "Sliver, I believe she is right. The Elder Shaman's reaction to this man was strong. It cannot hurt to let him see her."

"Do not question me now! Cavaho, go back to whatever gun port you crawled out of."

Cavaho's lips curled back slightly. He lifted his hand and motioned for Sliver to step aside.

Sliver grinned mockingly. "No, grunt, hand gestures and scowls will not suffice as communication with me. A smile or a nod would have spared the Elder

Shaman many tears, but you were too proud." Sliver continued like a grav train with too much momentum to stop, he bared his teeth in open defiance to Cavaho. "Now move on, grunt. I got more to worry about than the likes of you right now. Unless, perhaps, you can act like a normal human being and simply ask to see her. Say her name and I will let you pass."

Cavaho's oath of silence was not a secret among the tribals and had become widely known since Wovoka's rise to prominence. Everyone in the room remained still, waiting to see if Cavaho would speak. Cavaho glared at Sliver, his fists automatically clenching and releasing. The crowd was now crammed back on itself. Less than two meters separated Cavaho from Sliver. Cavaho started forward. Sliver bellowed, "No!" Cavaho stopped out of sheer surprise at the intensity of Sliver's shout. Before Cavaho recovered, Sliver traced a gloved finger in the air, a single rune. Sliver held his forward, oddly crooked. Cavaho recognized it as a clear threat. The Acolytes could see the symbol hanging in the air and knew exactly what Sliver intended.

"It is forbidden," Creta said evenly. Cavaho stepped forward, refusing to be threatened. A twitch of Sliver's hand and a wave of concussive force slammed into Cavaho. He was thrown off his feet and slammed heavily against the far wall, sending tribals toppling on his way. Creta screamed and the Acolytes stepped back.

Many facets of Sliver's action were surprising to the crowd. Sliver had willfully done violence to another tribal, an act forbidden by the first of the three AmerIndian Laws. Even more shocking was Sliver's attack. The Acolytes each swore to Celetain to use their Shaman powers aggressively only against AmerIndian Confederacy enemies. This was the first time an Acolyte had attacked another tribal using Cybershamanism. Every tribal in the room knew AmerIndian Law would demand Sliver's banishment.

Cavaho lay crumpled on the floor. Sliver stepped back. The shocked look on the faces of the tribals collected around him pulled him back to his senses. He lowered his hand and anger melted from his face, replaced with sadness. Tribals crowded around Cavaho, pulling him to a sitting position.

Sliver approached to discern if Cavaho was badly injured or merely stunned. The healers around Cavaho blocked him. Sliver stepped closer and suddenly the healers surrounding Cavaho were parted. Cavaho was low, both hands in front of him, his powerful legs curled behind him. Sliver had failed to incapacitate Cavaho with his first strike. There would be no opportunity for a second.

Cavaho's moved to launch himself at Sliver was abruptly interrupted.

"Cavaho?" Celetain sat forward.

Cavaho froze.

Celetain grimaced and regarded her Acolytes. "Is this how you act when I am not with you?"

Celetain's Acolytes hung their heads.

She turned to Cavaho and her face softened. Then the pain she carried was again evident. Wearing a white cotton gown, her hair back in a loose ponytail, three wires hanging loosely off her arms, Celetain was now just a patient again.

Cavaho stepped forward and she collapsed into his arms. He held her, embracing her as much as he dared. He relaxed his hold and looked down at her, a soft smile coming across his face. He kissed her and she folded into him.

The room burst back into activity, tribals rushing out of the lodge house to get the word out that Celetain was conscious again. It would be welcome news to every tribal and precious words to every Haida. The Nez Perce medics started to coax Celetain to lie back down. When she refused Cavaho gently pushed her shoulders back and kissed her on her forehead. He backed away and let the Nez Perce medics tended to her.

The Alpha medic thanked Cavaho. "Just a few tests and a few more hours of rest and you will be able to enjoy our new home, Elder Shaman." Celetain nodded

at the Alpha medic and reached for Cavaho's hand. She smiled weakly. Cavaho looked down and grasped her hand. "Thank you," she said. "Go to Wovoka. He may need you. I will see you again soon." He bent and kissed her again and made his way out of the lodge house to find the White Buffalo.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

Construction of the Elder's Hall was completed in less than forty-eight hours. The Apache's most significant challenge had been laying the foundation. A dozen construction packs laid down purple granite (from Theltas II). Cut logs went up in a steady stream after that. The building, the first and largest permanent AC structure on Naanac, was impressive. Standing fifteen meters high and spanning forty meters from wall to wall; the Elder Hall had nine equal sides, each bearing the Totem of one tribe. One-meter wide windows of rose-colored glasteel ran from floor to ceiling. Apache artisans carved long, sweeping patterns into the glasteel. Naanac rain flowed down the patterns creating an enchanting vertical river. A large fire pit dominated the center of the hall. In the ceiling above the pit a ten-meter open area allowed light raindrops to fall like wet diamonds into the hall. The fire crackled high and the warm smell of a hearth permeated the Elder Hall.

Celetain entered with Sliver walking behind her at a distance. Her eight remaining Acolytes were now searching Naanac on horseback for points of power, areas lending themselves to ritual magic. She accepted the greetings of the Apache construction foreman and lavished him with praise for his efficiency and the quality of his work.

Elder John entered the Hall alone. He laughed when he saw her and accepted a light kiss on his cheek. "So good to see you! Stormseeker has been a raging bull while you were out." John pulled Celetain in close, "I thought we lost you, precious one. I'm glad you are well." His voice held the passion of his friendship. She touched his face, "Thank you, John. I am well and we achieved what our ancestors dreamed we could accomplish. We have obtained the Homeland. Now we must hold it."

The Elders took their places on the floor with their backs to the fire. Each Elder had a section of colored granite designated for them. The nine chiefs sat in colored sections surrounding the elders, facing them. It was a tradition that Potlatch Weaver had instituted that chairs would not be used when the Elders and chiefs met. Instead they would sit on the ground where it was uncomfortable. This helped the chiefs and Elders remain alert and discouraged dallying over decisions. The chiefs were informed of the Humanitace situation reported by Alexa.

Wovoka walked into the Hall with Keokuk and stood on the outside of the chiefs and Elders' circle. Elder John began the meeting by chanting a line from the Seven Eagles Dance. Everyone quieted. "Each of you has been told of the challenges and decisions we now face. We are in need of Nagaspheres to defend our newfound Homeland, communicate with sympathizers on the colonies and outposts and negotiate with the UDA. Humanitace, the preeminent militant clones rights group, is offering us one thousand Nagaspheres now, one thousand Nagaspheres a month and one hundred next-gen birth chambers with ten to follow every year here after. In exchange, Humanitace asks for twenty square kilometers of land anywhere we choose on Naanac. Humanitace claim they will use this land as an embassy on our Naanac. If we refuse Humanitace leader Octavias threatens that he will extend an alternate offer to UDA Grand Admiral Lige. The Elders have gathered the chiefs here for a collection of thoughts before the Elder Council chooses action. The Elder Council will hear each of you and we will decide our course before three suns set on our new home. Are there any questions before we begin?"

Apache Chief Coganthan began in a low voice, "What exactly is our current inventory of Nagaspheres? What resources do we have to buy Nagaspheres and what relationship's do we have to current Nagasphere suppliers."

Elder Kugan leaned forward. "The AmerIndian Confederacy currently has 3,700 Nagaspheres. We have 620 outrider ships and 1,400 captured prime ships that require Nagaspheres. One round trip for each of our ships will expend our

inventory. We also need a minimum of seven hundred Nagaspheres to communicate with sympathizer groups on the UDA colonies and outposts for the next three months. The AmerIndian Confederacy currently has four billion liquid UDA credits, two billion in gold and seven billion in equipment. We are strong financially. We currently have two sources to buy Nagaspheres from, Grell and Hovinha (both major players in the Periphery black market). We have dealt successfully with them in the past. It is uncertain what inventory they now possess or if they can actually deliver in the near future due to the unstable business environment the Ghost Dance has created."

John waited for additional questions. None came. It was evident the chiefs had found the answers to their most of their questions before they sat at the circle and came ready to express their views. Zuni Chief Koqua spoke first. Her pleasant, full voice carried well in the Elder Hall. "I have discussed this with the greatest thinkers of my tribe and they believe the advantages Humanitace offers would make the risk worth accepting their offer. The Crow, our own clone tribe, could influence them. Humanitace has an intelligence network that could double our own resources overnight. The Crow could produce four hundred premium clones per year, who may all become valued tribals. I believe not accepting this offer would be an affront to the clone tribe. We need the Nagaspheres now more than ever. For a scrap of land smaller than any one tribal can request right now it would be foolish to turn away Humanitace. If we do not deal with them, there is no question Lige will."

Kichai Chief River Bull and Tsimshian Chief Shakespeare echoed their agreement with Koqua.

Crow Chief Vegas stood before he spoke. The chiefs and Elders sat forward, eager to hear the first official words of the new clone chief. "The Crow agree with Chief Koqua that the advantages are clear. We believe a wise decision will have the AmerIndian Confederacy deal carefully with Humanitace. Our concern, however, is the offer and the price. Once we grant even a small portion of land to Humanitace our own intelligence resources will have to be used to monitor their activities. In addition none of us know why the Humanitace want this land. What are their goals? We are creating a vulnerability, one I believe we can manage with caution, but a vulnerability nonetheless. I propose the AmerIndian Confederacy extend an alternative offer to Humanitace. Ten square kilometers on Naanac in return for eight hundred clone births and two thousand Nagaspheres per month."

River Bull, Shakespeare and Koqua all nodded in agreement. Elder John graciously thanked Chief Vegas for his word, encouraging him in his first political expression. Brule Chief Satyr rose before Elder John had finished speaking. It was evident he was suppressing the rage that helped him control the deadliest of the AmerIndian Confederacy's tribes. "The Brule have studied the paths of our fathers. The Brule have learned from their mistakes. The Brule have refuse to mock the wisdom of our fathers with the action these tribes suggest. The fathers traded land for resources, beads, liquor, food and blankets. They paid for that foolishness with their lives and with the lives of generations to follow. No one will get so much as one square centimeter of our land for any price if the tribals will simply remember the past." Brule chief Satyr accepted the quiet nods of support from Apache Chief Coganthan, Nez Perce Chief Rail and Diegueño Chief Sequoya.

Elder John rose and circled behind the chiefs. "I believe the words spoken here today are the product of careful thought. Divergent views, yet all of us wish the best for the tribes."

Haida Chief Auspice was the last to speak and she stood as Elder John motioned for her to do so. "As with any offer, there are options. The Haida are not averse to dealing with Humanitace. They are extremists who have used violence to promote their beliefs. Claim what you will, the AmerIndian Confederacy is no different. What must be recognized, however, is that they are dangerous to the

extreme, just as we are. The Haida agree that the clone births and the Nagaspheres are needed but land is too high a price to pay. We took this planet with the powers of Cybershamanism and 620 outrider ships. Now we have fourteen hundred prime ships gained through the Ghost Dance. There are three planetoids within fifty billion kilometers of this planet. The Haida propose the AmerIndian Confederacy claim all fifty billion kilometers surrounding Naanac and offer the Humanitace an outpost on one of the outer planets as well as a thousand captured prime ships. The Haida also echo the Brule sentiment that not 'so much as one square centimeter of our land' can be traded." All of the chiefs, including Brule chief Satyr, laughed as Auspice duplicated the tone and sound of Satyr's voice.

Elder John continued to circle behind the chiefs. "Thank you all for your input. Some innovative solutions have been proposed. The Elders have listened with our minds and hearts. Please excuse the Elders for a moment and we will announce our decision within the hour."

#

The chiefs waited outside the Elder Hall talking, receiving and sending messengers away at a dizzying pace. There was much to discuss concerning transfers of supplies from one tribe to another. Distribution of many resources had been uneven due to what could and could not be stored on the outrider ships and shuttles small enough to come through the chunnel. Several of the tribes carried cargo in lodge ships for other tribes. Within the hour, Elder John called the chiefs back in.

The dignified, careful man waited patiently for each chief take their seat. Again John circled the chiefs on the outside. "The Elder Council has given due thought to each of the proffered views. I defer to Celetain to give our decision." John helped Celetain to her feet.

Despite her weakness Celetain stood straight. Her beauty and presence were not diminished by her recent struggles. "The Brule were correct. We, and a thousand generations before us, have fought too hard and long to allow anyone but a member of the AmerIndian Confederacy to live in the Homeland with sovereignty. Our blood paid for it and our blood shall keep it. The Elder Council vows not make any arrangement with Humanitace that will grant them any land on Naanac. We will refuse their initial offer. The Council will, however, allow Humanitace to build an outpost at distance no closer than 40,000 kilometers from Naanac in exchange for 600 clone births and 2,000 Nagaspheres per month for five years. After five years the outpost will once again become property of the AmerIndian Confederacy and negotiations will be opened to extend Humanitace' right to stay on the outpost if they wish. If Humanitace does not accept this offer the AmerIndian Confederacy will name them as an ally of the AmerIndian Confederacy if they do not deal with Lige. If Humanitace chooses to deal with Lige we will name them as enemies of the AmerIndian Confederacy. "Further, the Elders have decided that no AmerIndian Confederacy land will ever be sold, leased or traded. We wish to seal these decisions in a vote of unanimous brotherhood of all the tribes. Take it before your tribals. Consider it yourselves. We believe unity of the tribes is critical to our goal of successfully holding Naanac. Thank you for gathering. The Elders will remain at your disposal for questions and feedback."

Celetain joined Stormseeker and John and listened to the concerns of the chiefs on the dozens of issues that were now becoming evident for the tribes on Naanac. Kugan and Morgan Weaver both disappeared shortly after the announcement of the decision. Late in the evening Celetain broke with the others and found Keokuk still in the Elder Hall.

Celetain approached Keokuk carefully because his comp set was opaque. She looked down at him, his back pressed against the hewn logs as information scrolled across his lenses. His fingers tapped at a speed achieved only by Tsimshian tech-jacks. Keokuk was working on the daunting task of creating new

pack types to carry out the multitude of task settlement required. New judge, healer and agrarian pack types were needed. Elder John had given Keokuk the task because he had written the most of the programs the AmerIndian Confederacy used to track the specific skill set of each tribal. Pack Alphas kept the skill list up to date. Keokuk's programs had been used for years to help AmerIndian Confederacy leaders put together packs to complete the tasks necessary to convoy maintenance and mercenary work. New programs were needed quickly build new packs with the needed skill sets.

"Keokuk." Calling Keokuk's name triggered his comp set lenses to go translucent. Keokuk finger tapped the program off.

"Celetain, how may I serve you?"

Celetain smiled. "Actually, I wanted to see if I could help you. How are you holding up in all this?"

"Honestly, it has been difficult. I am a tri-jack and I believe I have had as much responsibility as any chief over the last few days. I feel I am pulled away from my obligations to the Tsimshian tribe more everyday. I filled an important role for them."

Celetain slumped down beside Keokuk placing her arms over her knees. She looked relaxed and casual and it struck Keokuk how much his life had changed that an Elder now came to him for conversation. "Actually I wanted to talk to you about exactly that. What do you think will come of you and your brother now?"

"I've thought a lot about that recently. Wovoka is the fulfillment of prophecy to all the tribes and I expect many tribals will look to him for leadership. Of course, my main concern is the prophecy that he will be banished. It obviously has not happened. Perhaps the prophecy will be played out in some unexpected way. Perhaps he will be banished from the AmerIndian Confederacy decades from now-

A young Brule tribal burst into the Hall. "Ships in orbit. Lige is approaching Naanac!"

There was a brief moment of stillness in the hall before the room exploded into activity. Keokuk followed Celetain out into the rain. A Stryker Five shuttle, newly acquired by the AmerIndian Confederacy, set down nearby to transport chiefs and elders who wished to go out to orbit. It was unusual, due to his position as a tri-jack, for Keokuk to see infantry scrambling. He watched as warriors snatched up and prepped their weapons and strapped on armor. Keokuk's first thought was that it was useless for the warriors to rush. The Free Mantle ensured that only AmerIndian Confederacy ships could come through to Naanac's atmosphere, let alone land on the surface. They probably hurried out of habit more than necessity, he thought.

Keokuk made his way down a muddy path passed dozens of tents. He saw Morgan Weaver heading over to the shuttle. The path was slick and difficult and Keokuk fell twice before getting close to the shuttle. Keokuk watched as Wovoka appeared out of nowhere, Cavaho a shadow behind him. Wovoka jumped onto the shuttle's ramp, which was already closing. Stormseeker's aid caught Cavaho's arm and pulled him up.

Keokuk's grimaces as the shuttles lifted off without him. He watched the shuttle blasting toward the gate with Morgan Weaver, who had also been left behind.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

Lige's smaller fleet had correspondence jumped into Naanac's vicinity with shields down, all communications channels open. Lige commanded his communication officer to open a channel, "This is Grand Admiral Lige of the UDA. I request discourse with the Elder Council."

Wolf Plume looked tired as he came on screen. "This is Wolf Plume, Alpha of the AmerIndian Confederacy Fleet. Power down all weapons immediately."

"No weapons will be powered down. However, we will not fire first. I am approaching with the intent of communicating with the Elder Council in person." Lige commanded the channel muted.

Jaret came to his side, where the floating camera drone did not pick him up. "Our shuttle is go, every inch is shielded and the signature wraiths are operational with tight parameters."

"Excellent." A view of the shuttle hiding his body tank troops came up on the center wall screen. Sixty-four body tank troops were nestled inside the hull of the shuttle in every available space. Sixty-four breakaway hatches were positioned on the outside of the shuttle so that in seconds the body tanks could be dispatched, surrounding the shuttle. Lige waited patiently for Wolf Plume's response. He knew what concerns plagued Wolf Plume.

Normally AmerIndian Confederacy commanders would be coordinating firing paths and launching additional fighters by now. Today the rules were different. With the AmerIndian Confederacy declaring settlement rights on Naanac, they had had called for recognition from the eight UDA colonies and eight hundred UDA outposts. As an intergalactic government calling for their sovereignty to be recognized, the AmerIndian Confederacy display dedication to replacing guerrilla tactics with diplomacy. Wolf Plume had no choice but to stand down as long as Lige did not fire first.

Lige reestablished the link to Wolf Plume as he came back on screen. Wolf Plume frowned as he spoke. "Word has been sent down to Naanac. The Elders will consider your request. I am sending outrider ships to escort you closer into Naanac orbit at eighteen thousand kilometers. Have each fleet ship follow the escorts exactly or your movements will be read as flanking maneuvers."

Lige nodded, "An escort will be fine, Alpha. Let us know when an audience has been granted." He commanded the communications channel closed without waiting for a response.

#

Keokuk sat tensely across from Celetain in the Elder Hall. The waiting was aggravating, not knowing what was happening above. Celetain leaned forward, "Where is Cavaho?"

The question surprised Keokuk, seeming inappropriate considering the circumstances. "He is with Wovoka. Where else would he be?" Keokuk coupled his answer with a wicked smile.

"Wipe that smile off your face, comp jockey. I am your Elder."

Keokuk injected more respect into his face. "I apologize, Elder Shaman."

Celetain looked at him and nodded silently saying, "You damn well better apologize." Then her face softened and she looked back at Keokuk sheepishly. "He is a good man."

Keokuk frowned. "No, Elder, he is not. He was a good man at one time. Now he is a killer. Nothing else is in him now. Cavaho is dangerous in every way and you should understand that before you get any closer to him. The only thing that keeps Cavaho functional is his service to Wovoka."

Celetain opened her mouth to contradict him but as she looked into Keokuk's eyes she could see his warning was sincere.

Stormseeker raised his hand at the center of the Hall. Those gathered quieted and comp set views shifted to show the visage of the Confederacy's

greatest enemy, Grand Admiral Gavon Lige. Stormseeker pushed down his anger enough to speak. "We are here, Lige. What do you have you come to our Homeland?" Lige stepped closer, his face growing larger. "I have come to discuss terms of your occupation of Naanac. I have been delegated full authority by the UDA. There are issues to be settled."

"Have you been authorized to recognize us as a fully sovereign intergalactic government, separate from the UDA?"

"More or less."

"I am not in the mood for witty banter, Lige. If you are not authorized to recognize us as a fully sovereign intergalactic government, separate from the UDA, then there is nothing for us to discuss and you can start your navcomps calculating your way back home."

Lige paused. "Honestly, no. I do not have that authority. But I can offer you something close. Regardless, I request Ambassador status as the delegate of the UDA."

Stormseeker chuckled. "Grandfather Stone will crumble to pebbles before you step one foot on Naanac soil, Lige."

"Really? Let the crumbling begin. I have brought a guest who I believe can only be properly greeted by the AmerIndian Confederacy Elder's on Naanac's surface. I have brought Potlatch Weaver."

Stormseeker's face scrunched into a quizzical frown until Jaret wheeled a longhaired aging man into view on a grav chair. Potlatch Weaver was locked down with metal clamps.

Lige stooped so his face was next to Weaver's on screen. "He is no clone. We're sending our bio test data now. Run it against what you have on file. It will match. But if that's not enough..."

Potlatch's Weaver's mouth was taped and he looked away. Shame emanated from him. With three fingers Lige straightened Potlatch Weaver's head toward the remote cam.

Stormseeker growled, "You fool. Potlatch Weaver was killed thirteen years ago at the White Earth Massacre. You should remember, Lige. You were there."

"Oh, I saw what you saw. Weaver's body tank lanced by concentrated laser fire and then four body tank warriors scooping him up into an outrider ship. Legend has it he died in the arms of Torquan, then Brule chief. Torquan is my witness if DNA code is not conclusive enough for you. I don't believe he can lie to another generation while the proof of his deceit stares him in the face. Bring him forward."

Stormseeker did not move as he took in the image in his comp set. It would not have been difficult for Lige to create a clone of Potlatch Weaver. A UDA spy could have stolen the DNA code. As Stormseeker looked at the man, he knew Lige was not lying. There had been mysteries surrounding Potlatch Weaver's death, questions left unanswered. Through gritted teeth Stormseeker said, "Bring Torquan in." A Tsimshian bi-jack contacted Torquan through his comp set and fed his view to the others present.

Stormseeker explained the situation as quickly as possible to the retired chief and asked. "Does Lige speak the truth?"

Torquan stood stunned. A secret he had buried over a decade ago now loomed before him. As Lige predicted the DNA code flowed up the side of comp set view. The man that created the AmerIndian Confederacy was before the Elders now.

"Potlatch Weaver," Torquan said. His voice choked as he released the word. Potlatch shook his head furiously and his denial of his own identity made Celetain gasp. His hair flew around his head and he stared through the strands just as he had years ago.

Stormseeker asked Torquan, again insistently. "Did Potlatch Weaver die at the White Earth Massacre?"

Torquan steadied himself. "No. He survived. He was broken by our defeat, ashamed to face the brothers and sisters of the tribes, the survivors. Potlatch

Weaver believed his dream had brought only blood. I helped Potlatch Weaver leave *Shoeless Joe* undetected. The body burned on Earth as Potlatch Weaver was an unidentified Brule killed at the White Earth Massacre."

Lige's face was close to Potlatch Weaver's. "I have a shuttle ready. I am prepared to trade Weaver's life for some concessions on the settlement of Naanac. Prepare to escort us to the surface."

Stormseeker was still recovering, grappling with the fact that the Elder Creator was still alive. Potlatch Weaver's writings were sacred text to the AmerIndian Confederacy. He was inspiration and legend. Seeing his tear-stained face staring back, helpless, was a powerful blow. Stormseeker steeled his resolve. "Potlatch Weaver is dead to us, Jackal. The Elder Creator would not wish us to waste our breath spitting at you. You cannot think we will bargain with you for his life. Get your navcomps calculating. I want you a mega-klick from Naanac within five minutes or we will scrap every ship you brought with you. This discussion is over, hound."

Next to Lige's face, Weaver was now shaking his head up and down, frantically agreeing with Stormseeker. Lige pushed Potlatch Weaver's face aside. "Oh no, old man. If this discussion is over, you can loose the cannons now. Be aware that for every laser you fire I will send you an decagram of your leader." The metallic call of Jaret's diamond-coated wakazashi could be heard clearly over the open channel, the floating camera drone panned out. With no more effort than he would expend cutting cheese, Jaret smacked the blade down on the armrest of the chair, two fingers rolled off Weaver's left hand, dropping unceremoniously to the floor.

"Gather those and jettison them, Jaret. Prepare a dozen more containers of various sizes. Weapons systems are go?"

Celetain gasped and ran forward to the floating camera drone. Elder John intercepted her and addressed Lige. "Power down your weapons, bring your shuttle in and for Wambli's sake reattach those fingers now. If you harm him again then there will be battle here and now."

"No, this is wrong-" Stormseeker roared.

"Shut up, Stormseeker," Celetain cried. "Please, Lige, bring in your shuttle and do not harm the Elder Creator."

Keokuk shook his head. He knew a dark decision had been made and lives would pay for Celetain and John's compassion. Tribals rushed out of the Elder Hall running to tell their families that Grand Admiral Gavon Lige was descending to the surface of their new Homeland.

Keokuk pulled close to Celetain. "Lige survived the Ghost Dance because he knew that when the UDA sent their fleet, as we expected them to, we would slaughter them. Now we are doing exactly what he expects us to do. Tribals are going to die because of this decision."

Celetain turned to him and with a cold hardness he had not see in her before. "Yes, they will. But Potlatch Weaver won't."

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

Wovoka's shuttle trip to meet Lige in orbit turned out to be premature. He now stood back on Naanac with the Elders, five body tank warriors (including Cavaho) next to him. Three thousand tribals surrounded Wovoka and the Elders at a distance of two hundred meters. The clearing was sufficient for Lige's shuttle to set down safely. Elder John had urged all tribals to stay away, not to gather. He had known his words rang hollow. He and Celetain were the voices that cried for this act of madness. Words of caution rolled off his tongue with the clear taste of hypocrisy and anticipatory guilt. Thanks to Keokuk's efficiency, well over three quarters of the settling tribals were now dispersed across Naanac, out of range to see Lige personally.

The Elders stared up as Lige's shuttle descended. Intricately crafted, vibrantly colored blankets flared around Elder John as the shuttle's boosters fired, slowing the vessel's approach. Lige's shuttle came to a heavy rest twenty meters from the Elders. With a hiss it depressurized, venting spent air and taking in fresh. Lige made his way down the extended ramp as jets of air shot out and away from the ship. Jaret followed. A pair of UDA body tank troops brought Potlatch Weaver out in the grav chair. Lige approached carefully, stopping a few meters from the Elders. "The UDA is prepared to recognize the AmerIndian Confederacy's sovereignty in governing Naanac if the Elders agree the AmerIndian Confederacy you will comply with all UDA tax codes and trade regulations."

Stormseeker stepped forward, pointing at Lige. Celetain pushed him back physically and spoke, "Send Potlatch Weaver over as a measure of good faith. Then we will continue to speak."

Lige turned toward Potlatch Weaver. "Potlatch Weaver's release can be tied to the successful completion of our negotiations." Lige walked forward offering a small container. "Weaver's fingers. The sooner we can wrap this up the sooner you can address his current difficulties."

Stormseeker growled, "Those terms are unacceptable and if you think you can hold a tribal bleeding in front of us for another minute without repercussions you are sorely mistaken."

"The UDA is reasonable. What concessions are you willing to make?"

There was silence for a moment and Stormseeker said clearly, "None."

Silence resumed. A smile crept across Lige's lips. Instinctively, the AmerIndian Confederacy body tank warriors moved closer to each Elder and Wovoka. Lige whispered, "Now."

Every surface on the shuttle rippled, panels blowing off in every direction like shards from a shattered glass. UDA body tank troops shot from the sides and bottom of the shuttle, exploded out of the top and rained to the ground. Without hesitation, each AmerIndian Confederacy body tank warrior grabbed an Elder. Cavaho moved to snatch up Wovoka and carry him to safety. Body tank's gauntlets were capable of crushing plasteel like Styrofoam and yet each body tank warrior gripped an Elder with the gentleness of a mother's touch. The body tank warriors darted, carrying each Elder away. Body tank warriors exposed their back to the sixty-four UDA body tank troops that now surrounded Lige's shuttle.

In seconds, each Elder was well clear of Lige's shuttle. Only Wovoka and Cavaho stood before the mayhem. Wovoka had seen the situation unfolding and had acted on instinct born through years as an Infiltrator. The UDA body tank troops on the ground were unleashing mini-rockets and rail guns on the tribals at the edge of the two hundred meter circle.

Cavaho had positioned his body tank carefully to block fire from the UDA body tank troops. A mini-rocket struck his mobile armor and sent Cavaho hurtling ten meters away.

Wovoka, now shieldless, flung himself to the safest point in the maelstrom, at Lige. A few steps built momentum and Wovoka hurled his feet forward. Lige went for his knife when he saw the White Buffalo's intent. Wovoka's body passed by Lige's torso and caught Lige under the chin as he passed. His momentum carried him, crashing into Potlatch Weaver. The grav chair rose and toppled. Lige's shoulder hit at a hard angle and his face ground into the wet grass. Potlatch Weaver strained against the metal clamps on the grav chair, to no avail. Wovoka kicked at the nearest UDA body tank and toppled the troop onto himself, Weaver and Lige.

#

Jaret's first impulse was to dive in and slice everything but Lige to ribbons with his diamond-coated katana. He resisted the impulse and scanned the scene. Six UDA body tank troops were focused on the human pretzel. Jaret figured that was enough. The rest of the UDA body tank troops were turning outward, moving toward the outer ring of tribals, firing with relish. Jaret watched as two-dozen tribals were cut down on the left. He heard the familiar streak of Jet Tigers approaching. To Jaret's right he saw four UDA body tank troops carrying opened body tanks for Jaret and Lige. He judged he had ten seconds. His blade flashed out.

Jaret pounced forward, blade swinging back. He was forced to abort his attack, landing carefully, releasing the tension in his arms. Wovoka stood from the mass of bodies holding Lige's own knife to the Grand Admiral's stretched throat. A trickle of blood flowed down Lige's neck. Anyone of the six body tanks could have killed Wovoka from their angle. If Wovoka was not completely incapacitated, the slightest abrasion from the diamond-coated knife could kill Lige.

Wovoka screamed. "A UDA body tank troop takes Weaver out or Lige dies. Now. I count to three. One, two, - "

Jaret swept his sword up to one of the body tank troops. The body tank troop grabbed Weaver's grav chair without righting it and carried it over to the now fanning teams of other UDA body tank troops. The five remaining body tank troops approached, carrying Lige and Jaret's opened body tanks. As Jaret looked back to see how close the body tanks were he saw chaos erupting at the circle's edge. The UDA body tank troops were moving out in a smooth and steady circle. Jaret could see dozens of tribals were dead. Tribals were running like cattle. Save one. Jaret could see one tribal in a large loose blanket flapping as the figure ran toward the UDA body tank troops. Jaret did not have time to continue to watch the tribal fall, as he surely would.

Jaret stepped closer to Wovoka. "Get Back," Wovoka pulled in closer to Lige to improve the Grand Admiral's use as a shield. Jaret circled and motioned for the body tank troops to back up. "I released Weaver. Now release Lige."

Wovoka looked around nervously, realizing the UDA body tank troops were backing up. When he released Lige the UDA body tank troops would riddle him so full of holes there would be little chance of identifying his corpse. Jaret saw the concern on Wovoka's face. "Release him, no man here will fire on you." He shouted, "On my command, no man will fire on Wovoka."

Wovoka shoved Lige forward and stood defenseless. Wovoka waited for the first laser to burn his flesh, the first rail ammunition to pass cleanly through him. Lige rolled in the damp grass, came up fast. He stood and grabbed a rail gun from the nearest power, leveling it at Wovoka. Jaret stepped in front of the barrel, "No, get in your body tank. I gave my word." Lige glared at Jaret and hesitantly cast aside the rail gun. He turned to climb into his opened body tank.

Jaret turned to Wovoka and leveled the katana. Wovoka shifted his grip on the diamond-coated knife and took a fighting stance. Jaret looked at the knife, his katana. Jaret gripped the katana, spun it and planted it cleanly in the ground. Wovoka circled, trying to read the move. Jaret then pulled his wakazashi

and advanced. Wovoka understood Jaret was offering a fair fight but knew it would not matter. He sensed the lack of skill and confidence in himself compared to his opponent, the feeling he had when faced Cavaho in hand-to-hand. Wovoka, stiffened and remembered he was on a battlefield.

Jaret advanced on him, slicing twice with his diamond-coated Wakazashi. Wovoka let go of his fear, turning it into adrenaline. He blocked both slashes with the knife and moved in toward Jaret. Wovoka bolted his elbow up and forward, crashing the bone into Jaret's mouth.

Jaret bolted back, refusing to acknowledge the blood that flowed from his mouth. Instantly he shifted the wakazashi and closed again. The two clashed together this time, Wovoka thrusting fast with the knife, a move Jaret was forced to counter. Once Wovoka's thrust was countered the two were close. Jaret vindictively slammed his elbow into Wovoka's mouth at the same time he shoved his right foot between Wovoka's legs. With a twist and throw he sent Wovoka to the ground. With speed and accuracy that humiliated Wovoka, Jaret plucked the knife from his hands as Wovoka gasped to bring air into his lungs and spastically blinked.

Jaret flicked his wrist and raised his arm. The wakazashi flashed, poised to deliver the killing blow.

Wovoka waited for his death as doubt flashed through his mind. "Celetain was wrong. I am not the White Buffalo, only a man born to die at the hands of a superior warrior," he thought.

The teams of UDA body tank troops continued forward, firing furiously. They had taken down more than a hundred tribals now. The deadly circle of body tank troops parted slightly and the approaching tribal Jaret had seen earlier was close enough to be seen and heard.

"Jaret." The voice was soft, but it carried to Jaret as though whispered in his ear. He turned to see Alexa. Her hair blew back with the camouflage cloth that had covered it. Jaret slowed, stopped.

"This time I'm not asking you to come, but to stay." Alexa extended her hand.

Lige snapped the last clamp on his body tank. His helmet remained open but an uttered command would close and seal the body tank. Two UDA body tank troops held Jaret's open body tank close by.

Jaret loomed above Wovoka, his wakazashi still poised. Lige walked close, glancing at Alexa. He saw the way Jaret was staring at her, considering, deciding.

"The escape from *Black Mariah*," Lige said slowly. "The way the soldier moved? It was you."

Jaret remained frozen, the blade held aloft like a question mark.

"Forget Wovoka. Forget Alexa. Suit up." Lige said it plainly, commanding his soldier, the way he had done countless times before.

Alexa spoke softly. "Please, Jaret. Lige is not you. He is not part of you. Stay."

Jaret turned from Alexa. He lowered the blade and started toward the troops holding his open body tank. "I am sorry, father." In one clean cut with the wakazashi, Jaret severed his opened body tank shoulder to hip. It would not be able to seal. The automatic release of the virus could not be triggered. The roar of approaching Jet Tigers could be heard.

"You are my greatest betrayal. You will be my greatest victory." Lige grabbed Jaret's katana from the ground and plunged it deep into the chest of the body tank troop carrying the virus. The body tank troop staggered and dropped heavily to his knees. The sword had penetrated through his chest to the cylinder carried on the back of his armor. A thick bubble of liquid began to coagulate on the bottom of the cylinder. The UDA body tank troops knew further combat was superfluous. They pulled Lige with them as they bounded back to the shuttle. The signal was given and the circle of slaughtering UDA body tank troops was called

back. Hatches were wide open across the shuttle and the UDA body tank troops packed in.

Jaret saw the bubble of virulent liquid tremble before it dropped to the crushed moss below. He shouted, "Run, run." He grabbed Alexa's hand. Wovoka rolled to his side, all he could manage before Cavaho, his body tank still smoking, lifted and carried him off like a child.

"Anthra Sweet. It will spread like a ripple on a pond. Get shuttles down. Get your Elders away." Jaret yelled to Alexa. She finger tapped the words to the nearest shuttle.

There was no visible reaction for five seconds after the drop of Anthra Sweet hit the ground. Then quickly it spread. Every fleck of green moss on the ground turned white, dying instantly. The virus spread like dye across a clean cloth.

Alexa, Jaret and Cavaho, carrying Wovoka, reached the edge of the open plain. They had to jump over dead tribals to get close to the shuttles that were busily being prepping for launch. Stormseeker ran to them and took Wovoka from Cavaho. He helped Wovoka stand on his own feet.

Jaret spoke in a rush. "It is spreading at half a meter every seconds, the virus will kill every tribal gathered here in a few minutes."

Stormseeker pulled Wovoka's arm over his shoulder. "Get on the shuttle, all of you. Wovoka, stay with me long enough to give one command." Celetain began to protest. Stormseeker interrupted her. "We are in battle, Elder Shaman. Heed my wisdom. Move." Celetain raced away with Jaret and Alexa toward a ready shuttle.

"Wovoka, it is time to fulfill prophecy. It is time to pay the real price for this planet. It was not the blood of the UDA fleet crews that paid for Naanac. You will make the payment now. We have to cauterize the wound. You have to command me to detonate a Nagasphere right here, right now. It will kill everyone here and anyone carrying the virus. You have about another thirty seconds to decide. If you don't make this command, the virus will turn Naanac into a wasteland. What do you command, White Buffalo?"

Wovoka's head spun. He knew in his heart Stormseeker was right. The virus would kill every living thing on Naanac. One of the nine planets in existence that could support life would be snuffed out if he did not make the command. And yet Stormseeker was asking him to command the slaughter of at least three thousand tribals, his brothers and sisters. Wovoka looked at Stormseeker as he gave the command. "I command you to detonate a Nagasphere at this location."

Cavaho stood behind Wovoka and caught Stormseeker's subtle gesture. With blinding speed the old Elder Warrior slammed his fist into the already weary Wovoka's face, knocking him unconscious. Cavaho knew it was the only way they would get Wovoka onto a shuttle. Cavaho carried Wovoka away.

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Stormseeker holstered his Sledge Violator. "I need forbidden dropped at my feet, Razor Eight. Put the blossom on a Jet Tiger. Drop in 150 seconds. Get as many shuttles down on the ground as you can. The shuttles are only to pick up tribals on the outskirts of this field. They must cut off pick-ups when I give the command. Move fast, warriors."

Stormseeker dropped his head and finger tapped his god-code. His voice poured out of every speaker on every shuttle, in the air or on the ground. "Brother and sisters, we are infected. I must sever the hand or the body will die. Please grant me your trust and let me do what must be done. Everyone who can leave in the next few moments must go. I will remain with those who cannot leave. Please recognize my wisdom and my love and do not waste time or lives. What I do now, I do at the White Buffalo's command."

Stormseeker looked back across the field and saw white death spreading only a hundred meters away. He ran farther out and climbed to the top of one of the grey leafed trees surrounding the field. The Elder Warrior settled on two

branches near the top and watched the scene from his new vantage point. He saw shuttles boarding chiefs and tribals alike. He also watched as Lige's shuttle arced across the sky toward the chunnel. Stormseeker grimaced as he watched Lige's shuttle crew evade, attack and penetrate their way to escape.

Stormseeker turned and concentrated on the task at hand. Out of the three thousand tribals on the ground only two thousand had reached shuttles in time to lift off safely. He watched the remaining thousand tribals run for their lives to the last four shuttles still on the ground. The white death spread constantly, evenly, getting closer to the tribals and shuttles. Stormseeker saw three Jet Tigers sail above the crowd, their bellies facing him. He fingered tapped a channel to all of the fighters in the sky and the grounded shuttles. "Attention: all grounded shuttles. Your passengers may be carriers of the virus. Do not lift off. Active Jet Tigers, all shuttles that are contamination free are in the air. All shuttles that lift off from this point on are to be shot down."

Stormseeker heart soared as he saw the engines for two of the shuttles flame out, their crews signing their own death warrants in exchange for the safety of their brother and sister tribals. One of the other two shuttles that he could see through his comp set optics closed its ramp and lifted off. The other shuttle kept its engine hot.

Stormseeker frowned. "Obsidian Buck, Lead Wing, descend and scrap Shuttles 608 and 409."

These were Nez Perce pilots. Their response to an order was usually immediate. "Those shuttles are carrying women and children, Elder Warrior."

Stormseeker blinked and swallowed. "I am aware of that, troop. I need you to carry out your order without delay."

There was silence for a moment.

"Cut loose, Flow. I have this," the pilot said. Stormseeker watched as the wingman reluctantly curved away. The lead Jet Tiger picked up speed. All of the fighter's shields were down and all energy for the lifting shuttle was being poured into escape speed. All four of the Jet Tiger's Cobra Strike missiles flared from the belly of the fighter and cruised to the engine-on shuttle on the ground. The shuttle exploded into thin fragments and rained to the white, dead ground below it.

The lasers on the Jet Tiger would not take down escaping shuttle. The Jet Tiger's lasers would penetrate the shuttle's hull, but not down it. It appeared the lead fighter had no way to take the last shuttle down. Stormseeker cursed. The pilot had made a mistake. Stormseeker's eyes widened, however, once he understood. The lead fighter accelerated and curved, slamming headlong into the shuttle's side at top speed. The shuttle and Jet Tiger detonated brilliantly, spraying wreckage across the sky, at once a horrific and beautiful act.

Tribals screamed as they were caught by the spreading virus and heaps of bodies calcified at the touch of the invisible killer. Tribals ran, in futility, trying to keep distance. It hurt Stormseeker to see this. His tribals, mad with fear, all intelligence and organization gone. They were his people. He had seen tribals face death individually with bravery and defiance. But he knew their reaction to death now was warranted. This time death came to them without a face, without any chance of escape. Worst of all, their sacrifice was not for all the tribes but for one man, Potlatch Weaver, who had pleaded wordlessly for his own death instead.

Stormseeker shook his head. John and Celetain had made the wrong decision. Lige had defeated them utterly and thousand of tribals would pay the price for their misplaced compassion. The Elder Warrior knew, however, if he hesitated, if he thought in the same soft, weak manner that created this situation, then the number of tribals lost would triple or quadruple and Naanac could be destroyed.

Stormseeker gave the last command of his life. "Obsidian Rage Pack Alpha. Drop Forbidden at my feet."

There was a cold silence broken by the Nez Perce pilot. "I will meet you at the delta of the great river, Elder Warrior." The pilot's Jet Tiger was already streaking toward its mark. The fighter reached the detonation point. The Nagasphere-turned-bomb mounted on the bottom of the Jet Tiger was not visible to Stormseeker, but he could feel its presence. "Now we pay the price that has always been demanded for land. We pay it in full."

The Nagasphere, designed to let the energy of a nuclear explosion seep out in trickles, released all of its fury. Eight kilometers in diameter of Naanac disappeared in an instant. A blue-white wave of energy vaporized everything in a perfect circle. For five seconds every molecule in the space was separated from those surrounding it and then wiped of all memory of its former being. A thousand tribals (including one Elder and two chiefs) died in that moment. The land that had contained the deadly virus was now the most pristine area on Naanac. There would be no corpses to bury. Nothing would grow there ever again.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

Thousands of tribals stood around the path Wovoka walked as he headed back to the Elder Hall. The last two days had been spent hearing the stories of Wovoka, Celetain and John with the Elders and chiefs asking many questions. Now was the decision would be handed down. Wovoka kept his eyes straight ahead.

"Where is Jaret?" Wovoka asked coolly.

Keokuk sensed the undercurrent in the question. He walked quickly to keep pace with Wovoka. "He is on the Diegueño land. He and Alexa have been isolated in a remote area."

"The Elders imprisoned Alexa with him?" Wovoka asked incredulously.

"No, neither of them are imprisoned. Jaret has been isolated to protect him from angry tribals."

"Well, when are they getting Jaret off planet, back to the UDA?"

Keokuk didn't look at Wovoka as he answered. "They're not. In a week, Jaret goes into path trial to become a full tribal."

Wovoka's stride quickened. "That's insane. He is responsible for the death of thousand of tribals."

"So are you."

Wovoka let the comment fall and entered the Elder Hall with Keokuk. It felt like it had all been a dream. Numbness continued as he and his brother took their place next to Celetain Prax and Elder John. The four stood with their backs to the far wall of the Elders hall. Nine chiefs, two brand new to their positions, sat before them.

Morgan Weaver stood and walked slowly. He spoke quietly and yet in the cavernous hall his voice was heard clearly. Misty rain fell through the hole in the top of the roof but the fire blazed with light and warmth. "The chiefs, the people, have had a difficult time calculating, weighing what has been lost and what has been gained. Naanac was quite firmly in our grasp."

Wovoka struggled to process that Wolf Plume sat before him as a chief. The Nez Perce chief had given his life trying to get tribal children onto the departing shuttles before the Nagasphere was detonated. Wovoka shook his head at the oddity of a Russian Nez Perce chief. Odder still, the Nez Perce had embraced a non-black chief.

Morgan Weaver's words were correct. After the Nagasphere detonation the AmerIndian Confederacy had sent a very clear, short message to Earth. "Naanac and the surrounding fifty billion kilometers are territory claimed by the AmerIndian Confederacy. If one UDA ship enters that space without authorization directly from the Elder Council one third of the population of all outposts and colonies will be annihilated by a second Ghost Dance. We demand all UDA citizens wishing to come and join the AmerIndian Confederacy be allowed freedom to do so."

Riots erupted on all eight colony planets and on many outposts. UDA citizens made it clear to their leaders that Naanac meant nothing to them and the AmerIndian Confederacy should be left alone. Not a single ship approached the AmerIndian Confederacy's claimed space. The AmerIndian Confederacy now indisputably controlled Naanac and even a dozen or more outposts due to masses of AmerIndian Confederacy sympathizers. Privilege Colony officially recognized Naanac as an AmerIndian Confederacy settlement and begun trade talks. It was a posturing gesture because the UDA did not allow any trade or diplomatic contact by colonies to enemies of the state. The direction of sentiment concerned UDA leaders nonetheless.

It could not be ignored, however, that UDA Grand Admiral Lige delivered the greatest blow to the AmerIndian Confederacy since the White Earth Massacre, forcing them to detonate a nuclear device on their own land, their own people. No one in the UDA knew exactly what had happened. Stories ranged wildly from one newscast to the next.

Morgan Weaver stopped walking. "We have gained our Homeland. Every AmerIndian Confederacy tribal has worked tirelessly toward that goal for over two decades. It was the preeminent task facing all tribals. All else was secondary and all else could be sacrificed toward that goal. Now the Elders and chiefs are gathered to sit in judgment of each of you. Yet we are obligated to thank each of you for your role in accomplishing what the human race had thought impossible, claiming a Homeland for the Native American people, dispossessed for seven centuries. You will be remembered in song and in tales of every generation to follow. Thank you."

There was a moment of quiet and each chief nodded in thanks, echoing Morgan's words. Morgan stared ahead. Water trickled down the carved flow paths of the hall windows. The luminescent glow of the neobigui trees outside highlighted the gentle streams. "But we have also suffered the greatest loss of life since the White Earth Massacre, all for one man, a man who would have given his life for anyone of those tribals. Lige defeated us because of a foolish, selfish decision that the Elder Warrior Stormseeker rightfully advised against. You, Elder Shaman Prax, made that decision and you, Elder John, supported it. However, we as a body, do not question your passion for or your loyalty to the AmerIndian Confederacy. We know your decision was made out of love for our Elder Creator, Potlatch Weaver. You will retain your status as honored Elders and there will be opportunities for you to erase the damage you have caused." Morgan Weaver waited, looking at Celetain and John.

Celetain and John nodded. Accepting the chiefs and Elders decision.

Morgan Weaver continued. "The Elder Council is broken and a new circle must be forged. An Elder Warrior must be chosen. We as Elders try to listen to the clear and direct will of the tribals. Potlatch Weaver, we ask you serve the AmerIndian Confederacy again and search among our number for the tribal to assume Stormseeker's duties. The tribals crave your love, your words, your guidance and you this service you will be among them again. Perhaps their love can heal your wounds as well, father."

Potlatch Weaver, seated away from the group, began to shake his head. "I am not worthy and I have never been wise. I should not choose-

"The man who has no desire to bend others to his will is best suited to lead." Morgan said the words with a smile. They were a direct quote from *Words of a Tribal*, Potlatch Weaver's first work.

"I will serve," Potlatch Weaver said flatly.

Morgan turned to Wovoka. "Wovoka, you have served most valiantly as White Buffalo. Now the prophecy will be fulfilled in full. You alone ordered the death of a thousand tribals. Harm from one tribal to another is always answered with banishment. It is with shame and pain that I command you to leave the Homeland and the tribes and never return."

Gasps rose from those in the room. The news passed outside the Elder Hall in seconds and a din of outrage and triumph erupted from the thousands of tribals waiting outside. Cavaho strode forward to stand next to his banished leader. His position made it clear that Wovoka's

banishment would also be his own. Only Keokuk noticed Celetain turn away, her face showing only loss.

Wovoka stepped forward. "You are a wise council. You have made the right decision. I will leave Naanac immediately and I shall not return to you for as long as I live."

Cavaho stared at each of the Elders and chiefs with barely controlled rage.

With the same decisive manner he had used to lead the tribes, Wovoka ended the meeting by turning and exiting the Elder Hall. Cavaho shadowed him. Apaches opened the doors for him and others got down on one knee as he passed.

Thousands of tribals hushed as the White Buffalo appeared before them. "Tribals. I have been banished as the prophecy declared. I am not ashamed or angry because of this. I am the White Buffalo and the Grandfather's chose the path I now follow. I chose to pay the price that has always been demanded for land. I will never forget the tribal blood that I have shed and I will never regret my decision. I leave you now and wish only peace and harmony for you from this day forth."

Wovoka strode forward, the crowd parting before him reverently. Keokuk ran to walk with him. "I will come with you, Brother."

"No, Keokuk. Your place is here. I cannot enjoy what I gained for the tribes but you can protect it. Your place is here."

Keokuk knew Wovoka was right. Thank, God, our mother is settled on Windhome, Keokuk thought. Seeing this would break her heart. The tribals surrounding them were continuing to bow before Wovoka but there were also the baleful stares of many that felt the loss of their children, brothers, sisters, wives, husbands, lovers.

Keokuk hurried to keep up with his brother's pace. "We regain the Homeland after seven centuries and the Elders and chiefs condemn you leading them to it," Keokuk shook his head.

Wovoka did not take his eyes from the tribals along the path as he walked, but concentrated on remembering the feel of the ground beneath his feet. "I deserve to be banished. I am only worried for Celetain and John. I am not sure they will be able to enjoy what they have won. I think John is provoked that Potlatch Weaver is the only Philosopher King of the AmerIndian Confederacy. Perhaps he will use his time to write. I myself am looking forward to going over Potlatch Weaver's work during his missing years. John told me it is brilliant and may be added to the sacred texts. I do not know how Celetain will fair."

Keokuk looked up as the White Buffalo's outrider ship blasted down to land on Naanac's wet surface. The chunnel had been expanded by the Apaches to allow even the largest outrider ships to come through. The Nez Perce's finest outrider ship was the vessel Wolf Plume had chosen to send Wovoka off in. It was crewed with tribals loyal to Wovoka, crew that would serve him for the rest of their lives, unable to return to Naanac. Wolf Plume had to choose from thousands of tribals that had asked for the privilege to serve the White Buffalo, even in banishment.

The ship's ramp extended down and tribals pulled close to the last point their greatest hero and most dangerous leader would stand on Naanac.

Wolf Plume made his way through the throng. He wrapped his arms tight around Wovoka. "I will miss you, tovarisch. You did well, what had to be done." Tears streamed down the old Russian's face. "Spasibo for letting me serve with you. You gave an old man the adventure of his life." Wovoka hugged hard before letting Wovoka go.

Keokuk embraced his brother. "I will protect what you have gained for us."

Celetain stepped forward and wrapped her arms around Wovoka. "I am sorry." It was all she said.

She turned abruptly to Cavaho. He met her eyes and she ran to him, burying herself in her arms. She clutched and kissed him. He released her and she backed away. They would be apart now. A love never given time to blossom, challenged from the start. Celetain ran away, the crowd swallowing her.

Potlatch Weaver stepped forward and the crowd hushed to hear his words. "Your father served the AmerIndian Confederacy all of his life and then gave his life without hesitation. He would be proud of you because you achieved the goal despite the cost. You are your father's son and you are the White Buffalo. I thank you for what you have done, the sacrifices you have made and I wish you all of Wambli's freedom and beauty in your life. However, as my son has said - you are banished. No tribal will ever again heed your words, nor will you walk on the Homeland again. Make your way, White Buffalo."

Wovoka stared into Potlatch Weaver's eyes a moment before he bent to the ground. He placed his cheek against wet moss, spreading his arms wide to embrace the Homeland. He rose and walked up the ramp of his outrider ship. His crew had sacrificed their right to ever be called tribals again to serve on his ship. Serve how? What would be the direction of his life now that he had been banished from the only people and home he had ever known?

Wovoka walked to the observation deck of his ship and watched as the grey-green planet he had killed three thousand tribals to save fell away. His outrider ship hit the chunnel at speed and the rocks that filled the sky streaked across Wovoka's view through the glasteel. Stars exploded into view and the ship arced forward into outer space.

Autumn Sky approached. Cavaho stood between her and Wovoka instinctually. Wovoka touched Cavaho's shoulder lightly and he stepped aside. Autumn Sky wore the dark uniform without insignia. Behind her stood a thin teenager that Wovoka recognized as Derek, the new AmerIndian Confederacy sympathizer from New Angelos. Wovoka smiled at the boy and the boy beamed back.

"Where shall I take her, White Buffalo?" Autumn Sky asked.

Wovoka turned back to the waiting stars. "Deep Periphery."

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Bio

J. Scott Garibay is the author of AmerIndian 2192. He is a Native American who is proud of his Mattaponi ancestry. He strives each day to excel in his roles as Christian, husband and father (in that order).

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