

The Twelfth Child

A SHORT STORY

Christopher C. Camacho

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“There shall come a day when the great ruler falls by the hand of the twelfth son of the twelfth son;”

— Excerpt from the Prophecy of the Fall

Prophecy Year 0, Calendar Year RE 1423

The world of Diumi was once a lush and verdant world. At one time it boasted of forests with trees whose size dwarfed the tallest trees found on Earth. It had much of its water locked up in permanent ice caps at both poles. The star it orbits was not unlike Earth’s sun in that it was of a similar mass and type. That was then.

The current reality is that Diumi has long lost its vast forests to plains and savannas. The ice caps have long since melted, but since they had formed over the ocean, there was no increase in sea levels. The star left the main sequence several million years ago and is currently expanding into a red giant. Diumi’s global ocean is shrinking and deserts are slowly taking over the landscape.

People have been living on Diumi for over a millennium, working and tilling the soil to grow crops native to both Diumi and Earth. Life on Diumi is tough and droughts are common, forcing the residents to harvest early and often. Occasionally, a farm will succumb to the encroaching desert. Arable land is Diumi’s most valuable commodity and is stringently controlled by the government.

It is to this planet that the Mencho clan fled when the Orion Empire waged war against the Colonial Confederation. Once an influential family, they gave up their fortunes for a safer life. Diumi’s location on the very outskirts of explored space seemed to them an ideal location; the attempt at safe harbor ultimately failed however: the Colonial Confederation eventually dissolved and was replaced by the Colonial Republic, which later merged with the Orion Empire to form the Pan-Galactic Republic.

The Menchos managed to establish themselves firmly in Diumi society. Very few centuries have passed in which a Mencho was not in the government or at the head of a corporation. Even the Mencho farmers held considerable influence among their neighbors. One farm in particular, located near the capital city, was destined to change the shape of galactic politics forever.

* * *

Mina sat in the kitchen waiting for the sun to set, its roseate rays casting long shadows over the farm. She stared into the fields and searched for signs of the men returning from a day's work tending the crops, what little there remained. Life on Diumi was hard, especially these past few years with the ongoing drought; the family struggled to grow enough food to support themselves and sell some for a little profit. Lately, they worked longer hours in the fields to repair the ancient irrigation system – the summer winds would soon come and take what little moisture remained in the soil with them and kill the crops. The news she had to give them would surely not please them.

She finally spotted her husband and two oldest sons walking from the fields. Mina stood and waited by the door. Rehl was the first to reach her. After twenty-one years of marriage, he knew when something was on her mind.

“Go inside and get ready for dinner,” Rehl ordered his sons. Turning to Mina, he looked at her quizzically.

“I’m pregnant,” she said, answering his unspoken question.

A moment of silence, then, “You’re sure?” Rehl ran his fingers through his hair and wiped the sweat and grime onto his trousers. The day was hot, and the setting sun still dominated the sky.

Mina nodded. After eleven children, she knew the signs of pregnancy well. Another child would push the family to the brink of starvation. Raising children took resources which were scarce on Diumi.

Rehl took a deep breath and let it out slowly. “We must begin preparations then. Jun and Geron can build the nursery.” Jun and Geron were the oldest of the children, men really, but not yet of land-owning age. Rehl smiled at his wife, “We will manage. We always do. Let’s tell the kids.”

Mina sat at the table while her youngest children fetched the food and drink and wondered how they would be able to afford the cost of an additional bribe so the Ministry of Family Management would not sanction them for the size of the family. *We will have to make sacrifices*, she thought. Mina was unsure they would be able to make such sacrifices during these low-yield seasons.

Rehl supervised the young ones as they brought out the food. There was always a risk that Zeni or Jup would drop something; but it was one worth taking, for it instilled responsibility and caution. Ali was yet too young to set the table. All of the children passed through the same tasks as they grew older. It would only be another season before Jun and Geron would be able to farm their own land; yet, neither had found a suitable woman to bed with. The ongoing drought kept the entire family preoccupied with keeping the crops alive. Indeed, Rehl was amazed that he and Mina had actually found time to make another child.

'This may be a mistake', he thought; a thought he kept from Mina. Mina loved children and he did not want to make her think that the next child would not be wanted. 'I pray it's a girl. Another boy may be a catastrophe I don't think this family would survive!'

Evening meal passed quickly with little conversation; such was their way. The work in the fields and the house sapped too much strength to talk while eating. When the young ones finally finished their food, Rehl set his fork down and cleared his throat. Zeni and Jup took that as their prompt to begin clearing the table.

"No," said Rehl, "your mother and I have something to discuss with you." Rehl looked to Mina, and she nodded — her signal to him that he was to break the news.

"What is it, father?" Jun asked.

"You and Geron will have a task in the very near future; most likely after harvest." Geron dropped his fork; he suspected he knew what this task would likely entail.

"A nursery?" he asked.

Rehl nodded, and the table exploded in disbelieving chatter.

"Another?"

"But we will not be able to feed another!"

"I want a sister. I'm sick of boys!"

"Ali has to change the diapers this time!"

And so it went until Rehl stood. Rehl was an imposing man, taller than most; a lifetime of farming had turned him into an ox of a man. Few could intimidate him, and fewer still were unintimidated by his stature. "That is enough," he said quietly; all talking immediately ceased.

"We are having another child, and he —or she— will be welcomed with open arms. We will survive; this drought will not last forever, and our fortunes will increase with another set of hands. Geron and Jun will be leaving us soon after the baby is born, so we will definitely have need of it. In the meantime, your mother needs your support and help."

Mina smiled at her husband, he was more than any woman on Diumi could ask for, and he was hers. "Your father is right. I will need help, especially from

the youngers.” She looked directly at Jup and Zeni, “You will have more responsibilities, for it will be your job to make sure that the baby has its needs met.”

Geron lifted his glass. “Mother and Father are right. This is a blessing for the family. Let us celebrate and rejoice. Only good will come of this!”

That settled it for the children; it would take time for them to get used to it, but they would accept another child into their ranks.

* * *

The next day found Geron and Jun looking in the storeroom. “I’m telling you,” Jun was saying, “this room will be perfect. It’s easy to reach and can be easily restored.”

Geron shook his head. “The new kid will end up sharing the room with Zeni, Jup, and Ali anyway. We put the nursery there.”

“The youngers shouldn’t have to deal with a baby crying in the middle of the night. And what if it’s a girl?”

“If we turn this into the nursery, we’re just going to have to restore it once the baby’s old enough to sleep in a bed. The youngers will be sharing responsibility for taking care of it anyway. We all did it when they were babies themselves.”

“Geron, by the time the baby is old enough to sleep in a bed, you and I will be out of the house. Ben and Wend will be doing that. Those two clowns need to learn some responsibility anyway.”

“Where are we going to put all of this stuff? We don’t have any other place to put it.” Geron waved his hand at the storeroom, which had shelves full of preserves, flour, spices, and herbs, seed sacks were stacked against the far wall, and many other incidentals of farm life. Moving the contents promised at least two hours of work.

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"From the desert to the jungle go he; a Great Reckoning will form the boy into Man, and the Man shall travel to the world of blue and white;"

— Excerpt from the Prophecy of the Fall

The first contraction awakened Mina; she'd birthed so often that she was used to the pains, but they still hurt. She lay in bed and waited for another, knowing it would soon come; with each birth, labor had become shorter. At the second contraction, she nudged Rehl.

"Mhhmnn!" he protested. He needed his rest, for it would soon be time to get up and plant seeds.

"Rehl, get up! It's time! You must fetch the midwife."

Rehl's eyes shot open, and he was instantly awake. "You're sure, it's time?" he asked, knowing the answer and not bothering to wait for it. He climbed out of bed and went to the Com. A midwife would soon be on the way.

Prophecy Year 0, Calendar Year RE 1424, Day 138

CODED TRANSMISSION FOLLOWS // RELEASE TO A.GRECO ONLY
PRIORITY: ROUTINE

THE MINISTRY OF FAMILY MANAGEMENT ON DIUMI COLONY HAS RECENTLY BEEN NOTIFIED OF THE BIRTH OF A MALE CHILD IN THE SEDORI SECTOR APPROXIMATELY 10 DAYS AGO. THE FAMILY OF THIS CHILD HAS REGISTERED ELEVEN PRIOR MALE BIRTHS OVER THE LAST 21 YEARS. THIS CHILD IS THE FAMILY'S TWELFTH. //BREAK

ADDITIONAL INVESTIGATION INTO THE CIRCUMSTANCES OF THIS BIRTH HAS FOCUSED ON THE FATHER, ONE REHL MENCHO. R.MENCHO ALSO COMES FROM AN ILLEGALLY LARGE FAMILY. IT IS POSSIBLE, THOUGH UNCERTAIN, THAT R.MENCHO IS THE TWELFTH CHILD OF HIS OWN FAMILY. //BREAK

J.MENCHO RELIED MAINLY ON MIDWIVES TO BIRTH HIS CHILDREN, SO ALL OF HIS CHILDREN ARE UNREGISTERED. R.MENCHO IS THE YOUNGEST OF HIS BROTHERS, SO IT IS THIS MINISTRY'S ASSUMPTION THAT WE ARE FACING A 12/12 SITUATION. //BREAK

REQUEST FURTHER GUIDANCE ON THIS MATTER. MINISTRY WILL HANDLE THE NON-REGISTRATION OF THE CHILD AT THE LOCAL LEVEL. //END TRANSMISSION

Prophecy Year 0, Calendar Year RE 1424, Day 146

CODED TRANSMISSION FOLLOWS // RELEASE TO FAMILY MINISTER ONLY
PRIORITY: ROUTINE

THE COUNCIL OF CLERICS HAS DISCUSSED YOUR RECENT TRANSMISSION REGARDING THE POSSIBLE 12/12 CHILD. IT IS THE OPINION OF THE COUNCIL THAT THIS CHILD MAY NOT BE A THREAT, HOWEVER CAREFUL OBSERVATION OF THE CHILD IS MANDATED. //BREAK

AS DIUMI IS NOT A DESERT WORLD, IT IS UNLIKELY THAT THIS CHILD IS THE CHILD OF PROPHECY. IN ORDER TO ENSURE THAT THIS REMAINS THE CASE, THE MENCHO FAMILY IS TO BE SEQUESTERED ON DIUMI AND ALL OFF-WORLD FUNDS SEIZED. RESTRICTIONS MAY BE LIFTED UPON THE DEATH OF THE CHILD. //BREAK

SHOULD CIRCUMSTANCES CHANGE TO INDICATE THAT THIS IS THE CHILD OF PROPHECY, A DEATH WARRANT WILL IMMEDIATELY BE ISSUED BY YOUR OFFICE. THE WARRANT MAY BE EXTENDED TO INCLUDE THOSE WHO ARE GUILTY OF HARBORING A THREAT TO A.GRECO. //BREAK

INITIATE IMMEDIATE OBSERVATION OF THIS FAMILY. CONFISCATE ALL SHIPS CAPABLE OF JUMP DRIVE IN THEIR POSSESSION. ALL RESTRICTIONS APPLY TO THE ENTIRE MENCHO CLAN. //END TRANSMISSION

Prophecy Year 9, Calendar Year RE 1433, Day 128

Cesta Mencho woke early and rushed into the coop, eager to finish his morning chores. The stars shone brightly tonight, the great band that was the Milky Way cut its way across the sky. Today, he would finish his chores early; then maybe, just maybe, he would be able to have his birthday cake before evening meal. Today was Cesta's ninth birthday.

The birds protested as he reached underneath them to gather the eggs. He was especially careful today as to which eggs he selected, for some of them would become part of his cake. One old hen pecked at his hand, but Cesta resisted the temptation to yank it back. He didn't want to drop the eggs; life was hard enough without crops.

The drought had worsened over the past few years, spreading across the globe. Most suspected it was the red giant that Diumi orbited, some feared it was just a matter of time before Diumi itself was consumed by the still-expanding star. Crops were failing all across the planet, and dust blew with the hot winds. The once fertile soil was turning to sand; only the equatorial regions were spared the devastation that the changing climate was bringing. And even there, the dust was beginning to encroach.

Cesta walked back to the farmhouse. Pausing at the back porch to look at

the stars, he spotted a shadow moving across the stars on the horizon. At the edge of his hearing, he picked up a low thrumming sound coming from the direction of the shadow. It appeared to be approaching the farmhouse. And quickly.

“FATHER! FATHER COME QUICK!” Cesta shouted, darting into the house.

Rehl shot out of bed. Cesta was a quiet child, and to hear him shouting in the middle of the night could only mean that something was amiss.

“FATHER!”

“I’m coming! Mind your voice!” Rehl scolded from across the house as he put his sleeping robe back on. Then he heard it: the thrumming of a skimmer, and from the sound of it, the skimmer was coming here.

“Who is it?” asked Cesta.

“I don’t know. Everyone get back into bed!” Rehl ordered. The family was gathering around, having been awakened by Cesta’s shouting.

Geron stared at the approaching skimmer, and recognized it. “Father, that skimmer belongs to Mek.” Mek was Geron’s only friend from outside the clan.

“What the hell is he doing, coming here in the middle of the night?” Rehl asked.

Geron shrugged, “I guess we’re about to find out.”

Moments later, the skimmer kicked up dust as its turbines brought it to a landing a few feet from the porch. A man jumped out and hurried to Rehl.

“Aron? What brings you to my home at this hour?” Rehl demanded.

“Rehl, you must listen to me! They will be coming for your son at first light!”

“My son? I have twelve of them! Which do ‘they’ want, and who are ‘they’?”

“The Ministry! I spotted a transmission on the Minister’s desk a few hours ago. I left the city to come here right away. It was a death warrant for Cesta!”

Silence.

“The Minister himself assured me that the Council saw no need to worry

about Cesta. Why is there a warrant now, and not when he was born?”

Aron Timur spread his arms at the landscape. “Look around you Rehl. Diumi is turning into a desert world. We are not suffering from a drought, but an irreversible loss of water! The sun is consuming what little water is left on Diumi. The Minister has decided that Diumi now matches the Prophecy, and —”

Rehl angrily cut him off. “The Prophecy is a fool’s myth! The ravings of a madman on the other side of the Republic almost two thousand years ago. Why the Minister ever thought my boy could pose a threat because of a *Prophecy*...” Rehl spat the last word out.

“Rehl, you must leave Diumi, and you must do it before daybreak. It’s the only way to save your family.”

“The warrant is for Cesta. I will contest it at the Judiciary.”

“You don’t understand, Rehl. The warrant is for *all those that harbor Cesta!* That is your entire family. That now includes my own, because I am warning you of it! They will come with guns. They will line all of us up and execute us, one by one. Like they do with Abrahamists!”

Cesta started shaking and clung to Mina. A nine year-old farmer knew very well what death meant, and he was now facing his own. “I don’t want to die,” he said quietly.

Rehl looked at Cesta, then back at Aron. “And how do you propose that we leave? My family is forbidden from leaving Diumi. The ministry confiscated the clan’s Jump ship years ago.”

“You will use mine.”

“No. There will not be room for your family. I will not be the reason your family is executed. There must be another way.”

“Rehl, the sky is brightening. You *do not have time to argue!* Gather your belongings and get in your skimmer. I have already reported my Jump ship stolen.” Aron climbed into his skimmer and started it. Shouting over the turbines, he continued, “You will find the ship two kilometers to the west. Away from the rising sun. I must leave now and climb into my bed. If I am discovered here, the Ministry will know I aided your family. Now *go!*”

Cesta watched the skimmer speed off into the distance, angling away from where the sun would soon appear. And from where the Ministry troopers would come. “Get your butt moving! Grab some clothes and get into the skimmer!” his father shouted.

The Mencho household was a flurry of activity for the next thirty minutes as they hurried to pack what meager belongings they would be able to take. Though on the verge of it, no one was in a state of panic. Yet.

Prophecy Year 9, Calendar Year RE 1433, Day 129

CODED TRANSMISSION FOLLOWS // RELEASE TO COUNCIL OF CLERICS ONLY

PRIORITY: URGENT

C.MENCHO HAS ESCAPED JUSTICE. THIS OFFICE SUSPECTS THE FAMILY WAS WARNED AND PROVIDED WITH A JUMP SHIP. BY SHEER COINCIDENCE, THE MINISTER'S SECRETARY REPORTED HIS JUMP SHIP STOLEN HOURS BEFORE EXECUTION OF THE WARRANT. INTERNAL INVESTIGATION INTO THE ACTIVITIES OF A.TIMUR ONGOING. //BREAK

THIS OFFICE URGES IMMEDIATE DISSEMINATION OF THIS REPORT TO MILITARY AUTHORITIES. MINIMUM TIME UNTIL JUMP BY C.MENCHO IS FOUR HOURS, FORTY MINUTES. MAXIMUM TIME UNTIL JUMP IS SEVEN HOURS, FORTY MINUTES. //BREAK

JUMP SHIP OWNED BY A.TIMUR IS OF HARRIER CLASS, CAPABLE OF 1.8 LIGHT-YEAR JUMPS, MINIMUM RESPOOLING TIME OF THIRTY MINUTES BETWEEN JUMPS, MAXIMUM OF FOUR JUMPS BEFORE ENGINE COOL-DOWN. SEARCH AREA WILL WIDEN TO A 7.2 LIGHT-YEAR DIAMETER SPHERE IN A MINIMUM OF SIX HOURS, FORTY MINUTES. //BREAK

ESTIMATED TIME OF DEPARTURE: ONE HOUR, TWENTY MINUTES AGO. TRAJECTORY UNKNOWN. COURSE UNKNOWN. HARRIER CLASS CAPABLE OF 0.9C MAXIMUM VELOCITY. MAXIMUM VELOCITY IS ESTIMATED TO HAVE ALREADY BEEN ATTAINED. POTENTIAL SEARCH RADIUS OF FORTY LIGHT MINUTES FROM DIUMI. //END TRANSMISSION

CODED TRANSMISSION FOLLOWS // RELEASE TO ALL MILITARY IVO DIUMI
PRIORITY: IMMEDIATE

ALL MILITARY VESSELS IN THE VICINITY OF DIUMI WILL IMMEDIATELY BEGIN SEARCH FOR JUMP SHIP REGISTRY #452AB8D, TRANSPONDER ID 001E52749B70. //BREAK

ORDERS ARE TO FIRE IMMEDIATELY UPON POSITIVE IDENTIFICATION. SHIP CARRIES SUSPECTED INSURGENT CELL. NO SURVIVORS ARE TO BE PERMITTED. SHIP IS TO BE COMPLETELY DESTROYED. //BREAK

BLACKOUT COMMUNICATIONS FOR 10 HOURS FOLLOWING RECEIPT OF MESSAGE. NO FURTHER COMMUNICATION WILL FOLLOW THIS MESSAGE UNTIL EXPIRATION OF BLACKOUT. NO NONSECURE SHIP-TO-SHIP COMMUNICATION PERMITTED UNTIL EXPIRATION OF BLACKOUT. NO SECURE SHIP-TO-SHIP COMMUNICATION NOT IN SUPPORT OF MISSION PERMITTED UNTIL EXPIRATION OF BLACKOUT. NO SHIP-TO-SHORE OR

SHORE-TO-SHIP COMMUNICATION PERMITTED UNTIL EXPIRATION OF BLACKOUT. NO COMMUNICATIONS WITH PORTS PERMITTED UNTIL EXPIRATION OF BLACKOUT. //BREAK

ALL SHIPS WITHIN 10 LIGHT-YEARS OF DIUMI WILL IMMEDIATELY LEAVE PORT AND BLOCKADE THE DIUMI SYSTEM. NO JUMPS PERMITTED BEYOND 10-LY RED LINE. ALL SHIPS ATTEMPTING TO JUMP BEYOND RED LINE WILL BE FIRED UPON. //BREAK

10 HOUR BLACKOUT BEGINS NOW. //END TRANSMISSION

Prophecy Year 9, Calendar Year RE 1433, Day 130

CODED TRANSMISSION FOLLOWS // RELEASE TO COUNCIL OF CLERICS ONLY

PRIORITY: ROUTINE

A.TIMUR ADMITTED DURING STRENUOUS QUESTIONING HIS ROLE IN THE ESCAPE OF C.MENCHO AND THE MENCHO FAMILY. EXECUTION OF THE TIMUR MINORS SCHEDULED FOR 1430 HOURS, LOCAL TIME, WITH A.TIMUR AND F.TIMUR IN ATTENDANCE AS WITNESSES. EXECUTION OF F.TIMUR SCHEDULED FOR 1445 HOURS, LOCAL TIME. THIS OFFICE REQUESTS PERMISSION TO STAY EXECUTION OF A.TIMUR TO PERMIT ADDITIONAL STRENUOUS QUESTIONING TO ATTEMPT TO LEARN WHEREABOUTS OF C.MENCHO. //BREAK

EXECUTION OF MENCHO CLAN IS ONGOING. ESTIMATED COMPLETION TIME 1250 HOURS, LOCAL TIME. ALL MENCHO MINORS HAVE BEEN EXECUTED AS OF 1030 HOURS, LOCAL TIME. SEDORI SECTOR INHABITANTS IN ATTENDANCE AS WITNESSES. //BREAK

MINOR OUTBREAK OF VIOLENCE AT THE BEGINNING OF THE EXECUTION OF THE MENCHO MINORS WAS QUELLED BY IMMEDIATE EXECUTION OF THE OFFENDERS. MENCHO EXECUTIONS CONTINUED AND CONTINUE UNINTERRUPTED. //END TRANSMISSION

CODED TRANSMISSION FOLLOWS // RELEASE TO FAMILY MINISTER ONLY

PRIORITY: ROUTINE

REQUEST FOR STAY OF EXECUTION IS GRANTED. EXECUTION OF A.TIMUR TO COMMENCE IMMEDIATELY UPON FINAL DETERMINATION THAT ALL NECESSARY INTEL HAS BEEN EXTRACTED. USE ALL AVAILABLE MEANS OF EXTRACTION. DETERMINATION AUTHORITY WILL BE YOUR OFFICE. //END TRANSMISSION

3

“Lo, the twelfth child slips loose the knots tied around him, for none may impede his journey into the jungle of the night;”

— Excerpt from the Prophecy of the Fall

Prophecy Year 9, Calendar Year RE 1433, Day 142

They hid. Yet, hiding in modern times is not as easy as it used to be. The first ship nearly locked onto them until Geron found the transponder and ripped it from the console. They then Pulsed at 0.3c toward a small asteroid and shut down all non-critical systems. Rehl monitored the Com, and waited for an opportunity to Jump; but the military was still searching.

Cesta watched in horror at the com screen as his cousins were shot, one by one, in the backs of their heads. Then his uncles and aunts followed until he had no more and the only Menchos that remained in the Galaxy were those on the Jump ship. The executions had taken place twelve days previous, but the Vid transmission was just now reaching them.

Mina had no time for mourning. She was busy with maintaining the systems and ensuring that the youngers ate. In a time of crisis such as this, chores were a secondary concern and she forbade the youngers to do any. Instead, she told them to play. Cesta would not; he had locked himself in a storage compartment and refused to come out. Mina feared he would starve himself or freeze to death.

Geron and Jun barely slept, sharing the same nightmare of Ministry troopers ripping Cesta from their arms and shooting the boy in the head as they watched. Over and over. They knew the dream was irrational, for that scenario had not come to pass, thanks to the foolish bravery of their friend Mek’s father. Mek had paid the price for his father’s loyalty to Rehl, as had the entire Timur family.

Zeni and Jup stayed with the other seven brothers, Wend, Assin, Ques, Bri, Nom, Ben, and Ali. No one spoke more than a few words at a time except to calm the fears of the younger children. None tried to coax Cesta from his hiding place, for they knew it would only make him stay longer.

After several days of hiding in the shadow of the asteroid, with temperatures slowly creeping downward, Rehl finally spotted an opportunity for escape. The military began to patrol the area less, and the ships no longer approached any closer than two light hours from their location. Rehl began spooling the Jump drive, and began Pulsing away from the asteroid. Having kept the Pulse drive online, they were soon Pulsing at 0.9c toward the Ecliptic South — a trajectory

that would take them beneath the Galaxy if they Jumped far enough and long enough, though Cesta would still die of old age long before that happened.

Several hours later, there was still no sign of military scout ships. Rehl brought the Jump drive online and picked a star that appeared to be distant. He pointed the ship toward it and entered the commands that would start the Jump sequence.

Cesta was curled in the dark of the storage compartment when the Universe suddenly went Wrong. Nothing about it seemed right. Up was down, left was right, inside was outside, time was nonexistent, he was everywhere at once, then he was nowhere at all. Cesta began to panic and screamed, but no sound came out.

Geron held the struggling boy and was amazed at Cesta's strength. "Cesta! *Calm down!* You're alright! It was just a Jump." Geron smacked Cesta's face once sharply. The boy immediately came to his senses and looked around him.

"A jump?" whispered Cesta.

"Yes. You're going to be fine."

"That was the worst feeling in the world," Cesta said. "I didn't like it. Do we have to do it again?"

Geron grinned at his youngest brother, "Young one, I do regret to inform you that we will be doing this many times. And you will not get used to it. None of us will, since we're not spacers. But at least we'll get away from the Republic."

"When is the next one?"

"Father says in about twenty minutes. We're going to Jump until we can't Jump anymore. Hopefully we'll find a world we can land on."

Cesta groaned and looked out of the nearest window and looked around. "Won't there be ships around here looking for us?" he asked.

Geron shrugged, "Probably, but it's been a few days since we left Diumi and we just did our first Jump. They were probably expecting us to bolt for deep space the first day. Now the odds are much better that we'll get away to some faraway world. Are you hungry?"

Cesta nodded. He was famished, actually.

"Good. Let's go join the others."

The ship was an older model, but one of the most advanced available to the wealthier families of Diumi. From stern to keel, it stretched 100 meters; port to starboard, it was 77 meters, and 25 meters tall at its highest point — more than large enough for a family of fourteen. Modifications —illegal, to be sure— to its propulsion system by Aron Timur had cut respooling time to twenty-three minutes.

Cesta and Geron walked into the galley, where the rest of the family sat. Mina smiled at the two and gestured to a pair of empty chairs. “We were about to discuss what we’re to do,” she said.

Cesta looked his mother in the eye and asked, “Why do they want to kill me? I never did nothing to them!”

Mina was at a loss as to how she should answer him, for she didn’t know why. She only knew that the Republic had been observing them since Cesta was born and was suddenly out for blood.

“It’s the Prophecy,” Rehl said.

Mina narrowed her eyes at Rehl. “You mentioned that to Aron. What prophecy is this, and what does it have to do with Cesta?”

Rehl looked around the galley at his family. The Mencho family, like the Timurs, was an Old Family, dating from the days of the formation of the Free Trade Alliance. Like all Old Families, they passed down an oral history of Man’s expansion throughout space; but Rehl had never found the time, or a reason, to pass his knowledge to his family.

Now was a good time to begin, he decided.

March 21, 3449 (Old Calendar)

Jason Thorn was not sleeping well. He had not slept well in several nights; he was plagued by dreams that he could not remember in the morning. The only thing he knew of these dreams was a sensation that he was supposed to know something; yet, that knowledge did not come. Looking at the clock on his nightstand, he gave up trying to sleep. Dawn would come soon.

Jason carefully climbed out of bed so he wouldn’t disturb Sue, his wife of forty-five years. He sat at his desk, an heirloom that dated from early 21st Century Earth, and pulled a pen and some paper from a drawer; writing always soothed his nerves when he was disturbed. Tonight, however, the thoughts did not come. Something itched at the back of his mind, and he could not figure out what it was.

Frowning at the pad of paper, Jason stood, then sat back down. He'd almost had it. Closing his eyes, he searched his mind for the words that refused to reveal themselves. After several hours, the old priest finally wrote a single word: *there*.

August 12, 3449 (Old Calendar)

As he had been doing every night for the last four months, Jason awoke with a start and rushed to his desk before the words slipped from his mind. Something important needed to be told, and he was determined to tell it before he died. He pulled the pad of paper from his drawer and quickly wrote the third line of what he was beginning to believe to be a prophecy from the gods.

Jason smiled. He was getting better at this — he was remembering more of what his dreams told him to write. Sue called to him from bed, “Dear, please come to bed.”

“Just a moment!” he snapped. He needed to finish what he was writing, for he could feel the fog surrounding his mind to suppress the message.

January 2, 3450 (Old Calendar)

Jason stared at the completed manuscript; ten months of writing had filled half a ream of paper. He was finished with it. How he knew, he could not say; but know this, he did. He shivered with dread at the message the papers contained.

It spoke of a great cataclysm that would soon befall the Empire. Such a writing could be of vital importance to the Emperor, as it would serve as a warning. Or it could mean Jason's death, as the very nature of the writing was seditious. Jason knew that he would have to ensure that it survived. He pulled fresh paper from his drawer and began to write.

February 28, 3450 (Old Calendar)

Mary and Nathaniel sat in the gathering-room. Mary's father, Jason, looked older than his sixty-seven years. Sue had recently passed away, but they knew that was not the reason Jason had summoned them.

Jason had years before disowned his youngest daughter for marrying outside the clan. That would normally not have been an issue, but she had married a *Mencho*. That family was known as sympathizers and terrorists that supported the liberation of the conquered Free Trade Alliance worlds. It was for this reason that Jason had decided to summon them — no one would suspect that he had given them anything.

“What do you want, Da? You don’t talk to me for fifteen years, then you suddenly tell me to come here with Nat... *and* you tell me not to tell anyone.”

Jason studied his daughter and son-in-law. “Did you?” he asked simply.

“Da, you may not love me anymore, but I haven’t forgotten that you used to. Of course we didn’t. Now, what is it that you want?”

Jason simply passed her a leather-bound book. “For the past year, I have not slept more than three hours a night. It is because I have been writing this, and this may mean my death. You must safeguard it and tell no one that you possess it.”

Mary passed the book to Nathaniel, for she had never learned to read. Nathaniel began to open it when Jason spoke, “No, don’t. The knowledge contained therein is dangerous. Seal the book and keep it within your family. Tell no one of it until the time comes for people to know what it contains.”

Nathaniel raised an eyebrow. “Sir, begging your pardon, but why would you entrust this to *us*, if it is so dangerous? You know my family’s reputation; indeed, that’s the very reason you have deigned not to speak to your daughter all these years. You even refused to see your own grandchildren! Why *should* I keep this quiet?”

The old priest sighed. He feared that he may have made a bad decision, but his heart told him otherwise. “Within those pages lies the overthrow of the Emperor and the collapse of the Empire. The gods spoke of it to me in my dreams. It is not a plan nor a guide, but a history of the collapse before it happens. You hold a copy; the original I will present to the Emperor in due course.”

Present Day

Rehl finished the story, and a moment later the Jump began. He gripped his chair tightly and waited for the sensations to end. Jump never lasted more than a split second, but for those who Jumped, time seemed to last ages. Coming out of Jump, Rehl shifted his eyes toward his family to make sure they were fine.

Mina was the first to speak, “Dear, was that one of your ancestors?”

Rehl nodded. “Nathaniel was executed for attempting to murder the Emperor some years after receiving the book.”

“Where’s the book?” Jup asked. “Can we see it?”

Rehl shook his head. "The book has been lost for centuries. What it contained was the Prophecy of the Fall, which supposedly foretold the death of an Emperor at the hands of the twelfth son of the twelfth son."

"That's Cesta!" Zeni exclaimed. "You're Gran-da's twelfth son and Cesta is your twelfth son!" Zeni looked at his younger brother with awe. "You're going to kill the Emperor!"

"I am not," Cesta protested. "I *like* the Emperor! Why would I do that? I won't!"

"He wants you dead, and he'll kill all of us to get to you," Zeni pointed out.

"What happened to the old priest?" asked Jup.

Rehl answered solemnly, "He went before the Emperor and read the prophecy to him. The Emperor had his tongue cut out so he could tell no one else."

"And besides, all that happened over a thousand years ago," Cesta said to Zeni. "There's *no way* it could mean me."

"Emperor wants you dead. Emperor killed our family and the Timurs. It must be you."

Mina glared at Zeni, "Stop taunting your brother."

The lights and grav units suddenly turned off. The only light came in from distant stars through the windows of the galley. Rehl was already pulling himself toward the bridge.

"What happened?" Jup cried.

Geron held his younger brother's shoulder. "It's the proximity alarm we set up. If another ship is detected, everything shuts down and we hope that we won't be detected."

Cesta glided toward a window on the port side and looked around. Being far from the sun, the stars were plainly visible and apparently motionless. Except for one bright star that slowly crossed the field of stars in the window.

It was a ship.

4

“Within the depths of the dark, a gilded serpent waits to strike; the child looks but does not see the trap, he walks past and the serpent strikes.”

— Excerpt from the Prophecy of the Fall

Prophecy Year 9, Calendar Year RE 1433, Day 145

With Diumi’s sun nearly four light-years distant, the other ship was nearly invisible, illuminated only by the distant starlight and its own exterior lights. Jup, Zeni, and Ali crowded around Cesta by the window; with zero-grav, they were able to take up positions around the window that normal grav would never have allowed.

“Is it a Republic ship?” Zeni asked. At this distance, it was impossible to tell without instruments.

Ali, the thirteen year-old, squinted his eyes at the mystery ship. “It might be, but I’m not sure. Cesta, did you bring your spyglass?” Cesta shook his head. “Damn, we might’ve been able use it and find out.

“What’s it doing?” asked Zeni. “You don’t suppose it knows we’re here, do you?”

“I hope not,” Cesta said quietly, thinking of the executions he’d witnessed over the Vid. “Can’t we Jump?”

“No. If that ship’s Republic, it’ll detect us and blast us from the sky. Our best bet’s to drift like we’re doing now; even if the ship sees us, they might think we’re a space wreck.” The boys kept watching the speck of light through the window.

On the bridge, Rehl and his eldest sons were shutting systems down, one by one. Ben, who was a year younger than Geron and Jun, monitored the passive sensors. He had to keep the receiver dish aligned with the other ship manually so that the computer could collect enough data on the ship to determine what it was. The process took time and was tedious, especially with the estimated 30 light-minute distance between the two ships. That in itself was a hazard, since they wouldn’t know if the other ship had detected them until it was too late. Active sensors would give them real-time data, but would also expose them.

“Anything yet?” asked Rehl.

“Not yet, Father. If we were closer, we could gather more data. It might not be Republic, you know.”

“Maybe it’s not, but what if it is? You saw the Vid. The Emperor’s gone spacey, if he thinks that stupid prophecy is true.”

Geron activated a thruster to avoid an approaching asteroid. “Father, what if it is? What if Cesta *is* destined to kill the Emperor?”

“If he is, then it’s the Emperor’s own damn fault for oppressing us all. Ben, any luck on that identification yet?”

“Not yet, Father. I *told* you, there’s not enough data yet. We’re not getting enough light from the...” Ben stopped and stared at the readout.

* * *

Back in the galley, the boys watched as the speck of light that had once been crossing the star field began to grow larger. “It’s coming our way,” Zeni whispered.

“Are you sure? Maybe it just looks like it,” suggested Jup.

Cesta watched the ship, and had to agree with Zeni. “It’s coming this way. Somebody’s gotta let Father know.”

Ali shook his head. “I’m sure Father already knows. They’re watching it from the bridge.”

“How do you know? You’ve been here the whole time!” scolded Zeni.

The lights and grav suddenly came on, dropping Jup and Ali unceremoniously to the floor. Rehl’s voice echoed over the intercom, “Prepare for immediate Jump!”

“Ouch. Get *off* of me, Jup!”

“Sorry Ali.”

“*That’s* how I know, Zeni. C’mon, let’s get somewhere comfy.”

The boys scrambled to the lounge chairs. As uncomfortable as Jumps were, they were more bearable in the soft leather seats (or so they’d heard from friends who were spacers). Cesta watched as the other ship continued growing larger in the window.

Two minutes ago

“We’re getting a transmission,” Ben had said. “It’s coming from the other ship.”

“Put it on, but receive mode only.” Rehl had ordered.

The voice had sounded as stern as it was authoritative. “Attention unidentified vessel. This is the Republic Ship *Gustav*, prepare for boarding and to receive assistance with your systems. In accordance with Republic regulations, your ship will also be searched for contraband. Open your docking hatch within ten minutes of receipt of this message and do not interfere with the boarding party.”

“*Damn.* Jun, how soon can we Jump?”

“I’ve been keeping the engine warm, Father. We can spool up and Jump before they get here.”

“Quit wasting time talking about it and *do it!*” Rehl had then gestured at Geron, who started turning the systems back on.

Now

Rehl was scanning the star charts in search of a destination star; but with the Republic ship rapidly approaching, he knew he wouldn’t have time to plot a proper course.

The disembodied voice came over the Com again, “Unidentified vessel, you will *immediately* cease your Jump preparations and prepare for boarding procedures. Failure to comply within 30 seconds will result in escalation of force measures.”

“Father, they’re using Jump-Coms — there’s no light delay.”

“*Dammit.*” cursed Rehl. He entered a random coordinate into the Nav system and activated the Jump drive.

The *Gustav* fired, and the ship shuddered as the weaponry struck the hull. The *Gustav* was aiming for the Jump drive. The ship shook again, and a hull breach alarm sounded.

The universe went inside-out again.

5

“The serpent strikes and pursues the child as he desperately seeks safe haven.”

— Excerpt from the Prophecy of the Fall

Prophecy Year 9, Calendar Year RE 1433, Day 150

Cesta was hungry; he'd run out of rations two days ago and was subsisting only on water. Rehl had ordered him hidden when they came out of the first Jump after the attack, and no one dared go near his hiding place for fear of being boarded. They Jumped as often as the engines would allow, yet there nearly always was a Republic ship nearby when they came out of Jump. The last two had also fired upon the ship, but they managed to avoid damage.

Cesta lost count of how many Jumps they'd gone through in the last few days, but he knew that they had to be dozens of light-years from home. *'I wonder if it's safe to go out and get some food. I'm starving,'* he thought. He was about to open the hatch when the ship shuddered violently.

* * *

“DAMMIT! How do they keep finding us?!” Rehl shouted. There were two separate shots this time. “Ben, I want to see who shot us! Geron, Jun, get that engine spooled up.”

“The engine is cooling down, Father. We're going to have to use Pulse until we can Jump,” Geron said.

Mina rushed the youngers out of the Bridge toward the interior of the ship. “I'm checking up on Cesta.”

“NO! We might be boarded, then you're risking his life!”

Mina spun and faced her husband, furious at him. “He's been cooped up in that tiny cubbyhole for five days! He's got to be running out of food, and I know he's scared to death. I'm going to see how he's doing!”

Ben interjected, “Father, I got a visual.”

A warship, sleek and powerful, appeared on Rehl's Com screen. He cursed softly. The Republic warships were unmatched in the known galaxy and could destroy their ship with a single shot — the two that had hit them must have been warning shots. “Jun, get us out of here.”

Jun took the Pulse controls and angled the ship toward Ecliptic South; he'd detected an asteroid field in that direction. The inertial controls strained to keep the family from turning into bloody smears as Jun took the ship to 0.7c. The warship followed and fired.

* * *

Cesta huddled in the far corner in a tight ball when the third shot struck the ship. Then a fourth, and a fifth. They were in trouble, and he knew it. He stifled a scream when the hatch door suddenly opened and a silhouette appeared at the open door.

"Cesta, dear? Are you in there?" Mina squinted into the dark cubbyhole.

"Ma!" Cesta flung his arms around his mother. He trembled as she held him close. "What's going on? Are we going to die?"

"Of course not. The engines will warm up soon and we can Jump away. Do you need anything?"

Cesta nodded and told her of his hunger. "I'll bring you some food soon. Go back in and don't come out unless I tell you to." The ship shook again. "Go!"

Mina shut the door behind her youngest son, and slid to the floor where she began to sob quietly.

* * *

On the Bridge, Jun struggled to evade the warship's attacks until they were able to Jump. Rehl was frantically looking for a nearby system to run to while Geron monitored the sensors and the Jump drive.

"Father, look at this," Ben said excitedly, "I don't think this is on the star charts!" He was pointing at a star that had just come into view when Geron rotated the ship to evade a shot. It was a bright yellow dwarf, and didn't appear to be very far.

"How far is it?" Rehl asked, already inputting coordinates to take the ship there.

Ben watched the computer readout as the data came in. "It's less than a light-year, it looks like. We could get there in a single Jump. It's also got a planetary disk, so there must be plenty of places to take refuge."

The ship shook violently as the warship fired another volley. "GERON! How much longer until we can Jump?"

“Two minutes.” Something exploded at the rear of the ship, and everyone lurched forward. Decompression alarms began blaring. The warship fired again, and Rehl soon heard the sound of atmosphere escaping into space from nearby.

“BEN! Close off those sections!”

“Already on it, Father.” Ben’s computer console went dead as another volley struck the beleaguered ship. “My system’s down,” he reported.

“Jump drive is online, Father!”

Rehl slammed his hand on the Enter key to send the Jump coordinates to the Nav system. The sound of another explosion reverberated through the ship seconds before they Jumped.

They came out of Jump uncontrolled and sped through empty space between two gas giants. The computer fought Geron’s commands to reduce the ship’s velocity, but they began slowing to a manageable 0.6c.

“There’s a planet in the habitable zone, Father,” Ben reported. He’d moved to another terminal that hadn’t shorted out. “It’s got an oxygen atmosphere! It supports life!”

The decompression alarms were still sounding, so Rehl ordered Jun to head to the planet as quickly as possible. Even at the ship’s maximum velocity, it would still take several hours to reach it and Rehl wasn’t certain that they would arrive alive.

* * *

Mina hurried to the interior rooms where the rest of the family was waiting; it took longer than she expected since the primary route was blocked off due to the hull breaches. She paused several times and considered going back to get Cesta despite her husband’s orders, but she knew he was right; they couldn’t risk having Cesta be discovered. They were in a solar system, she knew — she’d seen a large gas giant in the distance when she passed a window.

The ship’s flight was a struggle due to the outgassing of atmosphere in several spots that was constantly changing its course. More than once, Mina stumbled when the ship’s course was forcefully righted.

She finally reached her sons, and she hugged each of them. “Ali, I need you to take food to Cesta. He’s run out.”

Ali grumbled, “He belongs here. With the rest of us. It’s not right to leave him there.”

“Just do it, Ali!” Mina snapped. She instantly regretted it and tried to apologize, but Ali elbowed his way past her.

Zeni watched as Ali darted down the corridor. “He’s right, you know, Mother. That last ship could have boarded us but they shot at us instead. The Republic isn’t going to let this ship go in one piece. It’s better that Cesta dies with us than alone.”

“Nobody’s going to die! We escaped, and we’ll make repairs soon.”

“Then why are we going so fast? If we’re going to make repairs, the ship needs to be stopped — not darting back and forth through the middle of nowhere.” Jup said.

“We’re not in the middle of nowhere. Turn that Vid screen on. We Jumped into a solar system; there’ll be many places we can stop and hide for rest and repairs.”

The sound of a muffled explosion echoed down the corridor into the room, quickly followed by roaring wind as the atmosphere escaped into space. Mina and her sons were blown toward the room door.

“CLOSE THAT DOOR!” she shouted above the roar at Wend, the closest to the room’s entrance. Wend gripped the wall edge tightly and slapped at the door controls. The wind in the room slowed then stopped as the door slid shut.

Mina stared in horror at the door while it closed — she’d glimpsed Ali being blown down the corridor toward the breach. “ALI!” she screamed.

* * *

Three minutes ago

Ali muttered to himself angrily. “How can they possibly think that we’re doing Cesta any sort of favor by locking him in that tiny hole? He’s just a little kid.” He kicked the wall then grabbed his foot in pain. *‘Note to self: kicking a wall in your socks is not a good idea!’* he thought to himself.

Ali slid to the floor and nursed his throbbing toe. A high-pitched whistle reached his ears from a distant part of the ship. “What the hell is that?” he muttered, not realizing the danger. A breeze began blowing past him.

“I guess I’d better get going. I’ll bring him back with me. I don’t care what

Father and Mother say!" Ali stood and limped down the corridor.

He heard an explosion behind him and the breeze turned into a gale, blowing him back the way he came. Ali grabbed desperately for something to hold onto, but the relentless wind dragged him down the corridor. As he tumbled across the floor, he caught glimpses of the blackness of space he was being dragged toward. His head slammed painfully against the wall and he nearly blacked out. It perhaps would have been more merciful if he had.

Suddenly, he found purchase on the floor where a service tunnel opened. He held desperately onto the crack with the tips of his fingers and worked them further into the gap. The air roared past his ears as it fled into space. It took all of his strength to maintain his grip and avoid being blown from the ship; his arms ached from the effort. Ali pulled his body to the floor and tried to brace his feet against the two walls of the corridor.

"Help me! Somebody please help me!" shouted Ali. It was futile, for the roar of the wind drowned out his pleas. His fingers slowly slid from the gap in the floor and Ali hopelessly tried to regain his grip. He only needed another minute, he was certain, until the ship's force fields blocked off the hole in the hull.

Ali lost his hold and he started sliding across the floor back toward the breach. He screamed in despair and scabbled at the floor, but there was nothing more to hold onto. He caught a quick glimpse of the galley as he blew past, and he shouted for help again as its door was closing; but, once more, the sound of the wind overwhelmed his voice. As his body was carried across an intersection of corridors, the force field finally activated and sealed the breach.

He was on the wrong side of the field.

Then his very breath was forced from his lungs and the warmth fled his body; he didn't even have time to shiver. Ali was drifting in open space away from the ship that sped from him at near light-speed -- it was already out of sight. Unprotected by the ship's hull, he began to feel his skin burning as the unfiltered rays of the nearby star attacked him. His eyes began drying painfully and his lungs screamed for air that would never again come. A moment before losing consciousness, Ali thought, *'I don't see any stars... where are all the stars?'* Several minutes later, his brain finally shut down.

He died alone in the depths of space between planets.

* * *

Rehl held his wife tight against his chest. Mina had been sobbing nonstop for hours and nothing he said could comfort her; she blamed herself for Ali's death. The ship's safety systems had closed off the breach too late to prevent Ali

from being blown into space, but they'd searched the ship anyway on the off chance that he'd somehow managed to save himself. As expected, no one had been able to find him — he was lost and drifting somewhere between the planets, his body forever preserved in the vacuum.

The ship was still losing atmosphere, but more slowly now that the larger breaches had been sealed. The last decompression forced the ship into a collision course with a small meteoroid that disabled the Jump Drive; like it or not, the family was trapped in this system. Rehl figured that it was only a matter of time until the warship came to check this system for them. The one bright side of their situation was that the planet was less than an hour's travel time away now; but that even had a dark lining to it — Rehl wasn't positive that they would survive re-entry.

Rehl voiced none of these worries to Mina; he didn't want to upset her further. He too was mourning the loss of his son, but he was the head of the family, the one who had to put on a facade of strength, the one who needed to hold the family together; he could not show his emotion with the children present. He personally retrieved Cesta shortly after the last breach was sealed... it was best to keep everyone where he could keep watch over them.

Ben had jury-rigged an ancient projector into the external video systems so that they could all see the planet slowly grow larger as they approached it. This world was slightly larger than Earth, but was dominated by green, brown, and white instead of blue and white. Unlike Earth, this planet had seas and lakes rather than oceans and continents. There were a few deserts, but it seemed to be mainly jungle with a few mountain ranges. Without a global ocean, Ben figured that there was very little (if any) tectonic activity on it; indeed, the mountains they could detect at this range all appeared to be volcanic in origin. One particular mountain in the southern hemisphere dwarfed Olympus Mons on Mars.

Another difference the planet had with Earth, was that it lacked a moon; it was similar to Venus in that regard. If Venus hadn't had its runaway greenhouse effect early in its history, this planet is what Venus might have become. The rotation period appeared to be similar to Earth's, but they hadn't been in the system long enough yet to determine the length for certain.

The ship was traveling at near light-speed and would have to slow down considerably within the next half hour or they would be unable to enter a stable orbit. Rehl knew if he put it off too much longer, then even that time limit would make for an extremely hazardous re-entry due to the ship's speed; they'd probably burn up before getting anywhere near the surface.

"Turn off the Pulse drive," he ordered. "We need to start shedding velocity now or we'll never land safely."

“It’s going to be a rough landing no matter what, Father,” Ben said. “A lot of the systems were damaged in the last attack, and I’m pretty sure that we’ve lost quite a few tiles from the heat shield. Even if we bring the ship down to normal orbital speed, we’re still going to come in like a fireball.”

The youngsters began chatting nervously among themselves at this news.

“We’re going to be fine!” Rehl said sharply. He stood and walked toward the projection against the wall and jabbed a finger at a spot near the planet’s equator. “You see this? This is a lowland plain, and that’s a lake. There’ll be plenty of space to land, plenty of water, and I’m sure we’ll be able to eat something there. We can make a new start here. This ship has stores of grain so we can farm.

“That warship hasn’t shown up yet, and it’s been nearly ten hours since the attack. They’ve had plenty of time to look for us here, and they haven’t. If they haven’t looked here yet, then there’s no reason to think that they will. We’ve lost them, and we’re making that planet home. I need all of you to start acting like men and getting this ship ready for landing, because Ben is right — we’re in for a rough re-entry.”

Two hours later, the ship had settled into orbit around the planet and Rehl was entering the commands that would take them into the atmosphere. Another fifteen minutes, and they would begin the re-entry path that would take them to the lowland area. More detailed scans revealed it to be a savannah surrounded by cliffs; Ben theorized it was an ancient caldera. Rainforest reached to the edge of the cliffs, but inexplicably did not grow into the caldera. There wasn’t any apparent reason for the two different climate types in such a small geographical region.

Rehl’s hand hovered above the keypad; in a few minutes he could start the re-entry sequence. The family watched the planet’s projection on the wall; it seemed to be an endless sea of green foliage and white clouds. In the only body of water that came anywhere close to being an ocean, a small storm was spinning its way toward land. It was a vast and unexplored world, and it was going to be theirs.

The ship shook violently. At first, Rehl thought he’d mistakenly started re-entry; then he realized they were under attack. The proximity alarms were going off again, and the ship shook again. The warship found them.

Rehl slammed his fist down on the keypad and the ship dipped into the atmosphere. The original plan was for a normal descent, but they needed to get into the atmosphere quickly; the other ship’s arsenal was less effective in air than in open space. A roar filled the ship and overwhelmed their ears; they could hear nothing else. An observer on the ground would have witnessed a very large

fireball screaming through the sky, then seen a smaller streak of light passing it.

“BRACE YOURSELVES!” Rehl shouted. The landing was going to be very, very rough and about 100 miles off target. He didn’t take his eyes off his Vid screen as he watched the data scroll down rapidly. Seconds before the ship impacted and destroyed itself, Rehl fired the thrusters and slowed the ship.

It wasn’t slow enough.

They tore through miles of jungle before the ship finally came to a rest by a river. The trail of destruction left no doubt as to where they’d gone. Miraculously however, no one seemed to be hurt. The ship was torn open and Rehl looked up at the blue and white sky; the sun was big, bright, yellow, and directly overhead — noontime. He was about to let out a sigh of relief when he saw the warship pass overhead once, then come back for another pass before descending.

* * *

Cesta and Zeni watched from a tall tree they’d climbed. Their parents had told Zeni to take the youngsters into the jungle to hide, but not told them when it would be safe to return. They heard the troop of soldiers marching down the riverbed toward the ship before seeing them. One of the men shouted and Rehl approached slowly, with his hands held above his head.

“What’s Father doing?” Cesta whispered.

“I guess he’s going to talk to them. Maybe convince them to go away.” Zeni whispered back.

More shouting. The two boys couldn’t hear what was being said, but knew that things were not going well. The soldiers rushed into the ship, and soon forced Mina and the older brothers out of the ship. Rehl was gesturing at his family and shouting at the man who’d called for him. The boys figured this was the troop’s commander.

“What’s happening?”

“Shh, Cesta!” hissed Zeni. “If they hear us it won’t be good.”

A soldier shouted and rushed into the trees. The two boys froze in fear against the tree trunk. A few minutes later, the soldier emerged, dragging a struggling boy through the muck of the rainforest floor.

“It’s Jup!” Cesta squeaked.

“Shh!” Zeni watched the scene below.

Zeni's twin struggled to get free, but the soldier's grip was too strong. The man who'd been arguing with Rehl stormed toward Jup. Rehl shouted something but was forced back by the other soldiers. The commander shouted angrily at Rehl, then drew his gun and suddenly shot Jup in the temple; blood, bone, and brains sprayed out the other side of the boy's head. Jup's body fell into the river which turned red with his blood.

Zeni bit back a scream. Cesta stared in silence. Mina fell to her knees and held her face in her hands. Rehl lunged at the commander, who simply aimed his weapon at him and fired. Rehl clutched his abdomen and collapsed, his blood mixing with Jup's in the river. The soldiers shouldered their rifles and began executing the family.

Cesta's tears ran down his face as he watched the massacre on the riverbed. He shook with rage and frustration that he could do nothing about what was taking place. The commander was shouting something at the soldiers, and they dispersed into the trees into the area where Jup had been discovered. A half hour passed before Cesta and Zeni heard the first of two shots. The second shot came ten minutes later.

The two boys were still in the treetop hours after the sun set and darkness spread over the land. With no moon in the sky, the stars and Milky Way blazed. It was nearly midnight when they spotted the warship finally lifting into the sky and heading back to the stars.

6

“Hidden among the trees, the child patiently waits; for vengeance shall be had.”

— Excerpt from the Prophecy of the Fall

Prophecy Year 12, Calendar Year RE 1436, Day 245

Zeni lay in the soft grass and listened intently as the dawn woke up the birds. They weren't birds — not exactly anyway; they looked like reptilian birds with teeth. Instead of feathers, they had leathery wings that doubled as arms. Their behavior was nearly identical to that of birds, so that's what the boys called them.

A soft rustling in the grass near his arm diverted Zeni's attention — a small animal was foraging for food. Experience taught Zeni that this was the birds' favorite prey, so he waited. He didn't have to wait long before a dark shape crashed into the ground on top of the mouse-like animal. The bird grasped it with its hand and bit into the neck with its powerful beak.

Zeni heard the neck snap, then he lunged forward and snatched the bird before it could fly off with its prize. The bird shrieked and scratched at Zeni's hand with its clawed fingers. Zeni stuffed it into a sack then rushed back to the camp. It was time for breakfast.

“Cesta! I got a bird. It's a big one too.” Zeni called as he approached their camp. Cesta was already awake and tending to a small fire.

“I had another dream last night,” Cesta told him after they'd butchered the bird. “It was about Nom.”

“The one with the plant?”

“Not this time. It was like he wanted to tell me something but he couldn't. I think he wants me to do something for him.”

Zeni dropped a few pieces of meat into the pot and stirred it with a twig. “Nom's dead, Cesta. There's nothing you can do for him.” Zeni added a few zesty leaves and some water to the sizzling meat. A rich aroma rose from the pot as the broth began to simmer.

“He didn't have to die.”

“None of them did, but they were killed anyway.”

“We could’ve saved Nom. We should do something for him.”

Zeni took a deep breath and faced his younger brother. The last three years had changed them both. Zeni had grown from a small boy into a tall man and with no means of shaving, was beginning to grow a beard. Cesta, on the other hand, had become a wiry youth in the beginning stages of adolescence. Constant exposure to the warm sun kept them a golden tan.

“There’s nothing we can do.”

“We can bury him with the others,” Cesta said stubbornly. “It’s the least we can do.”

Zeni stirred the broth and added a tuber that Cesta had just finished slicing. “I don’t think we should go back there. It’s too dangerous.”

“Not in the daytime it’s not,”

“It’ll take two days just to get there. We’d be away from the camp, and we’d be going back into their territory. How would we even find what’s left of his body? You saw what that thing did to him.”

Three years ago

The sun beat down on Cesta’s face as he slowly woke from a restless sleep. The events of the previous night had kept replaying in his dreams. His face was streaked with tears and dirt, and as he awoke, Cesta realized he was alone in the tree. The rubbery bark was soft and provided a comfortable bed; otherwise he wouldn’t have been able to sleep at all.

Cesta sat up and looked around. As his mind slowly focused, he began to panic. Zeni wasn’t here — he’d held Cesta in his arms last night, but now he was missing. Cesta crawled to the edge of the wide branch and looked down to see if his brother had fallen. There was nothing on the ground except for leaves and other detritus.

A curious chirping caught Cesta’s attention. Standing next to him with its head cocked and eyeing him intensely, was the strangest bird he’d ever seen. It was about the size of a large crow, but with a larger head. It had no feathers and its wings were folded in front of its breast like a pair of arms. The wings had what appeared to be hands with two opposable thumbs. The sunlight glinted off the animal’s scales and cast a greenish sheen to them.

Cesta slowly reached his hand toward it, but the bird-thing hopped away from him, still keeping its eyes trained on him. “Hey there,” Cesta said softly, almost cooing at it. “I’m not gonna hurt you.”

He reached for it again, and this time the bird-thing reacted. It raised its wings up and slashed at his hand, its claws sliced Cesta's thumb and blood welled out from the wound. The bird-thing opened its beak, which Cesta now saw was lined with razor-sharp teeth, and it hissed at him. The tongue was forked, like a snake's.

Cesta put his thumb to his mouth and sucked the blood off. The bird-thing had its wings spread open and raised above its body. It continued hissing at Cesta and hopped around the tree branch, sometimes approaching him, sometimes backing away from him. Realizing it was trying to intimidate him, Cesta moved away from the bird-thing and leaned back against the tree trunk. This seemed to mollify the bird-thing and it crossed its wings in front of its breast again.

"Well, I wasn't gonna hurt you. You didn't have to hurt me," Cesta scolded it. He continued nursing his wounded thumb while watching the bird-thing. It cocked its head at Cesta and began walking toward him slowly, one step at a time. Cesta didn't make any moves this time and just let it come to him. After a few minutes, the bird-thing was next to him and looking up at him.

Cesta smiled at it and said, "So, you're not that scared of me now. What are you?"

The bird-thing cocked its head at him again and studied him intently. Letting out a chirp, it unfolded its wings and reached for Cesta's shirt, which it grasped in its clawed hands. Giving the shirt a tentative tug, the bird-thing paused, as if making a decision; then it began climbing onto Cesta. The boy stared at the animal, not sure what to do now.

"What are you doing?" he asked it. As if in reply, it chirped at him again, then settled down on his stomach and made itself comfortable. Cesta slowly reached his hand toward it, but quickly pulled it away when it hissed at him again. "Okay, you can lay there. Just no funny business."

Cesta leaned against the tree trunk and watched the bird-thing as it curiously examined his shirt. It tugged on the fabric and bit at it, as if trying to figure out what it was. After a few minutes of this examination, the bird-thing rested its wings against its body and gazed at Cesta with its big brown eyes.

Cesta heard a voice from below calling him. "I'm up here, Zeni," he answered.

"Come down."

Cesta looked at the bird-thing again. "I have to go now," he told it. It leapt from his body and took off into the air as if it had understood him.

“I’m coming,” Cesta called. He glanced over in the direction the animal had flown, but didn’t see it anywhere; it seemed to have vanished into the trees. Cesta slowly climbed down the tree, its soft bark tearing where his fingers dug in.

Soon, Cesta was on the ground and he looked around. Up in the heights of the tree, it had been easy to tell where Zeni was; but down here, the thick foliage made him lose his orientation.

“Where are you?” he shouted.

“We’re over here,” a different voice called, from behind him.

Cesta’s eyes opened wide and a grin broke over his face. “NOM! You’re okay!” The boy tore through the bushes and ignored the scratches and cuts the thorns inflicted. He came into a clearing and pounced on his older brother.

At 15, Nom was the oldest of the three brothers. He embraced Cesta and held him close as the younger boy began sobbing softly into his chest. Zeni was sitting cross-legged against a moss-covered boulder. Nom stroked Cesta’s hair and looked over at Zeni.

“Cesta, there’s something we have to tell you,” Nom said after a while.

Cesta wiped his face and looked around. “Where are Bri and Ques?” he asked.

Nom cast his eyes downward before answering, “They’re dead, Cesta. We’re the only ones left. Zeni and I buried the others while you slept.”

“I want to see them.”

Nom nodded, and led Cesta down a trail. They walked for a few minutes before they reached the river. Despite Nom and Zeni’s efforts to clean the area, Cesta spotted pieces of brown-tinted bone in the shallows of the river — fragments of Jup’s skull.

The ship lay on the river bank split open like an overripe melon that had burst. Glass shards from the shattered windows littered the ground. Behind the ship stretched a long scar through the forest, rending it in two. Patches of smeared brown were visible on the hull, a failed attempt to clean the blood from it.

“They’re over there,” Nom pointed behind the ship, away from the river. Cesta saw several mounds behind the ship — the graves of his family. He averted his eyes from the sight.

“It’s not fair,” he said. “Why did they kill them?”

Nom didn’t answer; how could he? He didn’t know why either. The ship was no longer space-worthy, and it was obvious that the soldiers knew it. Without a means of leaving the planet, the prophecy could not come to pass and therefore no reason existed for the massacre.

Tears rolled down Cesta’s face. “It’s my fault,” he whispered. “It was me they wanted. They wouldn’t have done it if —”

“Stop it!” Nom ordered. “It’s not your fault. Don’t you even start thinking that. If you want to blame somebody, then blame the emperor! If he wasn’t so blamed superstitious, he wouldn’t be so paranoid about that ridiculous prophecy.

“He’s the one who ordered your execution. Do you honestly believe that he would have let *any* of us live after you were killed? You would have just been the first; they would have lined us up afterward and shot us in the head.”

“They’re gonna be back,” Cesta said.

“I don’t think they will. Jup told them he was you. They think you’re dead.”

Cesta stared dubiously at Nom. “I saw what happened. The soldiers dragged him from over there,” — he pointed down the river bank — “and the guy shot him in the head. I saw it all. His brains exploded.”

“Jup went back to see what was going on and the soldiers spotted him and grabbed him. Ques told me and Bri to hide but I followed the soldiers. The captain asked father where you were at. He told father he’d kill Jup if he didn’t tell him. That’s when Jup said he was you. Jup saved your life. never forget that.”

Cesta realized that the two shots he and Zeni’d heard last night must have been the executions of his other two brothers. Tears again filled his eyes and his body trembled. It was too much for him to take. At only nine years old, he’d already seen more death than most people four times his age. Cesta fell to his knees and began sobbing uncontrollably; the dam had finally burst.

Nom knelt next to his brother and put an arm across his shoulders. Cesta leaned into Nom and held him as he cried into Nom’s shirt. His wail of anguish echoed through the trees and scattered a flock of bird-things that had been watching.

Present Day

“We owe it to him to at least try,” Cesta insisted. “Nom wouldn’t want to be left alone like that. He’d want to be with the others.”

“We could be caught by that thing next if we get too close to it. If there’s anything left of Nom, it’s going to be near the thing that killed him. You saw how fast it grabbed him.”

Cesta looked at the campfire, and tried another avenue of attack. “It’s just a big plant. We can burn it if it tries anything. We’ll take torches. We can stop by the ship and fill some bottles with fuel. The fuel will burn and we can spread the fire all around the plant.”

“We don’t know how many there really are. We barely got away from the first one before we ran into that one. There were vines all over the place, and they nearly caught you!”

Cesta stood and stared his brother down. “I’m going back, with or without you. It’ll work. We just need fire.”

Cesta walked to a tree and climbed to his sleeping nest where he retrieved a pack. Looking around, Cesta let a sharp whistle out and waited. He didn’t have to wait long before a bird flew from another tree and settled on his shoulder. “We’re going back, Nena. Zeni doesn’t want to go” he told it. In response, the bird dropped from Cesta’s shoulder and flew to the ground.

The bird hopped toward Zeni and gave him a peck on his leg with its beak. “Ouch! Cesta, get your damned bird under control before I cook it!”

Nena squawked indignantly at Zeni and threw a pebble at him. The bird had followed Cesta around for weeks after that first day and insinuated itself into the boys’ lives. It was obviously very intelligent and seemed to have thoughts of its own that it communicated through body language and actions. Curiously, Nena never seemed to have any issues with the boys’ consumption of other birds, and would even eat the meat with them.

“She’s telling you to come with me,” Cesta told him.

Zeni could not argue with Cesta’s conclusion of the bird’s actions. The two of them seemed to have a rapport he couldn’t comprehend, and Cesta was rarely wrong about what Nena was doing.

“I still think this is a bad idea,” he told his brother.

“That may be, but I know you’re not going to let me go by myself, so get

your pack and *let's go!*" Cesta was already shrugging his pack onto his bare torso and walking in the direction of the river. Nena cast a long look at Zeni before taking flight to Cesta's shoulder.

Zeni grumbled at his brother and wondered when their roles had switched. He was supposed to be taking care of Cesta, but lately it was apparent that reality was the other way around. Giving up, Zeni retrieved his pack and hurried after Cesta; he wouldn't be able to live with himself if something happened to his brother.

* * *

They walked for hours, mostly in silence, following a well-worn path they'd made over the last three years. Cesta was in the lead and pushed aside branches that had grown over the trail. They walked carefully — their time on this planet taught them that appearances were deceiving and that seemingly innocuous things could be deadly.

The afternoon sun shone through the jungle canopy where it could and cast dark shadows where it was unable. It was the middle of summer, the air was thick with moisture, and sweat rolled down the boys' bodies unceasingly. They stopped occasionally to take a draught of water and rest. Though the atmosphere's oxygen level was high and increased the boys' stamina, the heat and humidity drained the energy from them. Nena occasionally took off to chase down a small snack, but otherwise stayed near Cesta.

They finally reached the river when the sun was nearing the horizon. Zeni looked around and examined the nearby trees until he found one that would be suitable for sleeping in.

"Cesta, that tree over there," Zeni pointed across the river, "we can sleep there. The branches are high enough from the ground and wide enough so we won't roll off."

Nena looked where Zeni was pointing, then took off and landed on the lowest branch. She hopped around and momentarily disappeared from their sight before flying back to Cesta. She flew around him and chirped excitedly.

"Nena agrees with you," he said.

Zeni shook his head in disbelief. "Your bird is very strange," he told Cesta.

"Yeah, but I like her anyway." Cesta grinned at Nena, who was now standing in the shallows of the river and trying to grab a small fish with her clawed hands.

The boys began stripping leaves from the bushes and stuffed them into empty pillowcases they'd pulled from their packs. It would be getting dark soon, and they needed to put their sleeping nests together quickly. Their first week of sleeping in the trees had given them both itchy rashes that tormented them day and night until they figured out that they needed to cover the tree bark. They had used blankets until they were blown away during a storm; now, they used leaves.

Cesta was busy stuffing his pillowcase when Nena began squawking urgently. The sound of her leathery wings cutting through the air made him react. "Zeni! Climb!"

Both boys rushed to their pre-selected tree and began scaling it. Zeni dropped his pillowcase but didn't descend to retrieve it. Nena was flying around the tree and chiding them. They reached the first branch, but kept going when Nena nipped their ankles. She flew to the next higher branch and perched upon it, waiting for the boys to reach her.

Once safely on the tree, Cesta and Zeni leaned over the edge of the branch and looked down. They could see nothing amiss.

"False alarm, maybe?" Zeni offered.

"Nena doesn't give false alarms. Maybe it's gone." They kept watching the ground. More time passed with no sign of whatever had spooked Nena. Cesta moved from the edge and sat on the rubbery bark.

"What do you think it was?" he asked.

"I don't know. I hope it wasn't that beast we saw at the gorge." Several months ago, they'd seen a large animal that looked as if it were a cross between a cat and a baboon, but about the size of a bear. It had grabbed its prey with one arm and snapped its neck with the other.

"What was it, Nena?" Cesta asked the bird. Nena cocked her head at him and let out a series of rapid chirps.

"What's she saying?"

"I have no idea. I don't speak birdese." Cesta laughed and scooped up Nena in his hands, who squawked indignantly. "Aw don't be like that," he cooed at her. She suddenly went quiet and looked toward the ground.

Cesta and Zeni looked over the edge and saw it. The animal walked on two legs and had two long arms that ended in claw-tipped hands. It possessed a large sickle-shaped claw on each of its big toes. Its neck stretched a meter above its body, and it bore two cruel yellow eyes in its small head. Its mouth

hung open, exposing inch-long teeth perfectly designed for ripping flesh from bone. Green scales gleamed on its muscular body in the fading light.

The creature paused at the base of their tree and dipped its head to examine Zeni's pillowcase. It picked up the pillowcase with one of its hands and brought it to its nostrils for a smell. They could see its ribcage expand as the animal inhaled deeply. It snapped its head back up and sniffed at the air, obviously trying to track the source of the scent. Zeni's skin grew cold when the creature raised its eyes and spotted him. He quickly retreated to the middle of the branch when the creature hissed at him.

"What *is* that thing?" he asked, his heart racing.

"Why are you asking me?" Cesta had retreated to the middle of the branch as well. "I've never seen anything like it before."

They heard the animal stalking around the tree, as if trying to find a way up. Suddenly, they heard something crashing through the bushes which was followed by an angry growl. Curious, Cesta crawled back to the edge of the branch and looked down. The animal was picking itself off the ground on the other side of the tree. It turned around and eyed the tree before sprinting toward it. It then leapt into the air and collided with the lower branch and scabbled at the rubbery bark before falling back to the ground. It let out a frustrated roar and jumped again, this time gaining a firm hold on the branch and pulling itself up.

Cesta's eyes widened in shock. The creature rose to its feet and eyed their branch. "Climb! It's right under us!" He hurried to the trunk but was stopped by Nena, who flew at his face and dodged at the last instant each time he made a move toward it. She chirped angrily at Cesta until he backed away from the trunk.

The predator below leapt at them and fell to the ground, its claws raking the underside of their branch. It glared at them indignantly and stalked off into the bushes. Both boys stayed as far from the edges of the branch as they could the rest of the night, but neither fell asleep until long after the night had chased the sun from the sky and the stars of the Milky Way cast their light onto the jungle canopy.

7

*“Guided by anger, heedless of the danger, he shall grow into Man.
Vengeance beckons him forward.”*

— Excerpt from the Prophecy of the Fall

Prophecy Year 12, Calendar Year RE 1436, Day 246

CODED TRANSMISSION FOLLOWS // RELEASE TO COUNCIL OF CLERICS
ONLY

PRIORITY: ROUTINE

ANALYSIS OF WARSHIP TALON'S LOGS HAS BEEN COMPLETED. C.MENCHO
AND FAMILY CONFIRMED EXECUTED ON A6521+2 APPROXIMATELY THREE
STANDARD YEARS AGO. TALON'S ANALYSIS OF THE WRECKAGE OF THE
ESCAPE SHIP DETERMINED THAT IT IS BEYOND REPAIR AND CANNOT BE
USED FOR FLIGHT. //BREAK

RECENT SATELLITE IMAGERY SHOWS THAT THE LOCATION OF THE
WRECKAGE HAS BEEN RECLAIMED BY THE PLANET'S NATIVE
RAINFOREST. NO SIGN OF MENCHO BODIES; IT IS HIGHLY PROBABLE THAT
THIS IS DUE TO PREDATION AND DECOMPOSITION. NATIVE FAUNA AND
FLORA CONTAIN HIGHLY PREDATORY SPECIES; IT IS HIGHLY
INADVISABLE TO SEND FOLLOW-UP TEAMS TO THE SURFACE OF
A6521+2.//END

THE AUTHOR



Christopher C. Camacho is a Soldier in the U.S. Army who writes in his spare time. He is assigned to the 2d Stryker Cavalry Regiment (formerly known as the 2d Armored Cavalry Regiment) in Vilseck, Germany. Sergeant Camacho is currently deployed to the Diyala Province of Iraq in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom.

Sergeant Camacho spent his childhood living in four states and in West Germany during the Cold War as an Army brat. He joined the Army after graduating High School, and returned to civilian life after finishing his enlistment. After Operation Iraqi Freedom began, Sergeant Camacho considered rejoining the Service and returned to active duty in 2004 as a military paralegal. He recently re-enlisted for another 6-year term of service and is looking forward to his next assignment once he returns from Iraq.

His previous assignments include Fort Huachuca, Arizona and Fort Hood, Texas in the Military Intelligence Corps, and Fort Bliss, Texas, Fort Lewis, Washington, and Vilseck, Germany in the JAG Corps.