

The Dark Cloud War is an endless nightmare for Prophet and his squadies. The alien Choakar are slaughtering millions with GX bioweapons. Prophet's exhausted comrades are dropping out of their old fellowship. Prophet discovers a shadowy effort to destroy ConFree with alien doomsday weapons of cosmic annihilation.

Prophet and Deadman's Dogs

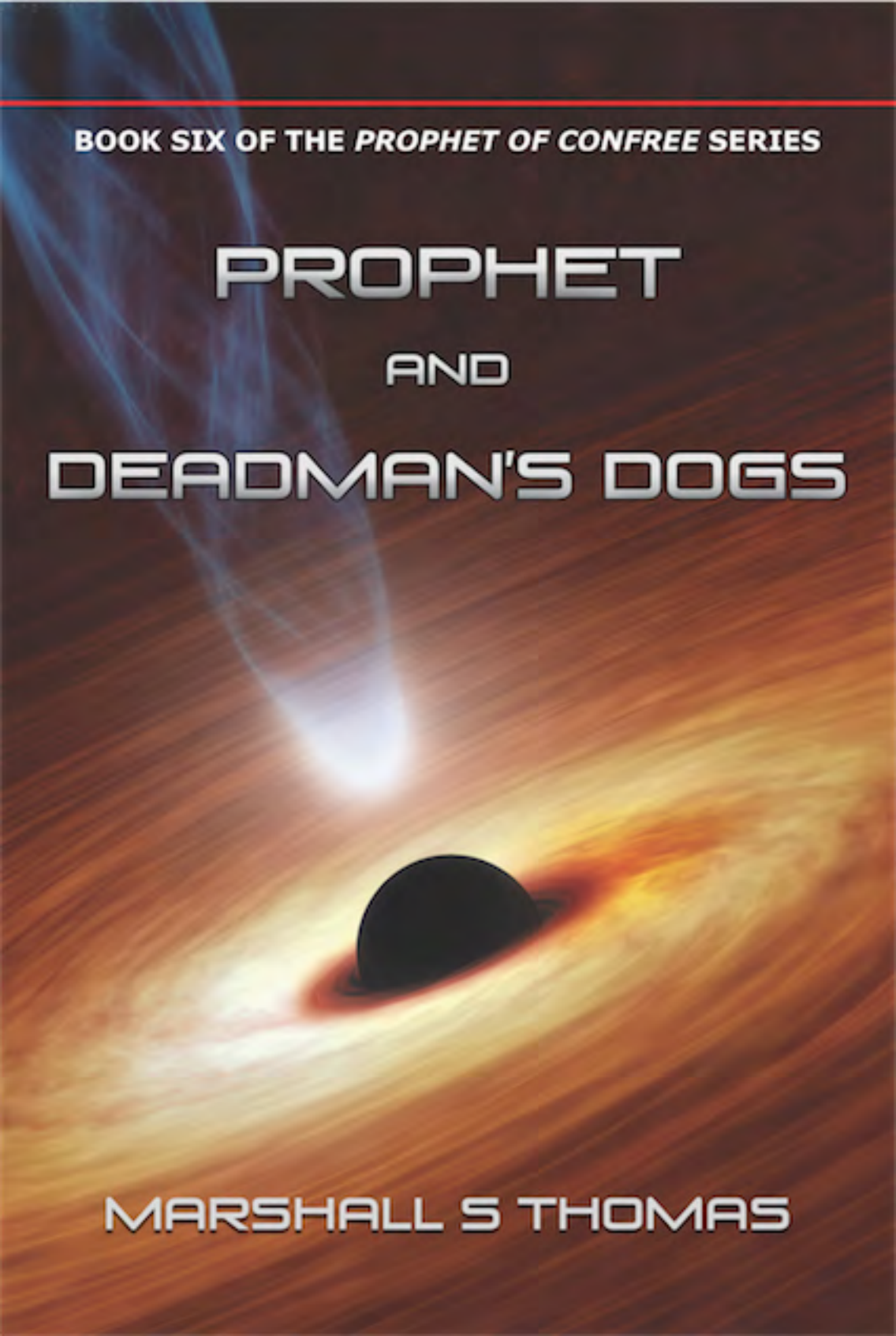
by Marshall S Thomas

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BOOK SIX OF THE *PROPHET OF CONFREE* SERIES

PROPHET AND DEADMAN'S DOGS

MARSHALL S THOMAS

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ISBN: 978-1-63492-733-8

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Published by BookLocker.com, Inc., St. Petersburg, Florida.

Printed on acid-free paper.

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BookLocker.com, Inc.
2017

First Edition

Layout design by Chris Thomas

Editing by Carol Woods

Starmaps by Hatton Slayden

Shields and seals by Chris Thomas

Galactic Info shield by Michael J Sullivan

Cover photo – Image Credit: NASA/JPL-Caltech. Black Holes: Monsters in Space (Artist's concept). Public domain.



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Prologue

Saint Angels

Lena knelt on the gritty tile floor, trying hard not to move. She was a lovely little Assidic girl of eleven, with pale brown flesh and silky black hair that reached almost to her shoulders. Dressed in her school uniform of a white blouse and blue skirt, she balanced a hefty book on her head. The tiles hurt her bony knees – a lot. Although it felt as if the book would fall at any moment, Lena was not allowed to touch it. Her schoolmates, gathered around in a big circle, were staring at her. Miss Mouse, clad in a long black robe, searching for any sign of weakness, glared at her; she also watched the other girls in the circle, much like a hawk in search of prey. The girls called her Miss Mouse because that's what she looked like, but never to her face because of her bad temper. She taught mathematics and Lena was one of her worst students. The book was a math book, and the idea was that if it sat on her head long enough the contents might seep down into her brain. Nobody really believed that, but they understood it was a disciplinary method to make you work harder.

Saint Angels Orphanage for Girls was actually a paradise for Lena and the other girls. She was used to the occasional personal humiliation imposed when Miss Mouse decided a student did not study hard enough. Lena actually worked quite diligently but

mathematics was beyond her. She had another interest, a world of dreams, which she kept to herself. And she loved Saint Angels; it was her entire existence, all that she had ever known, a great compound surrounded by massive walls which shut out the world. The school was in the main building, a three storey, cream-colored edifice with God's holy cross carved on the front. Many other cream-colored buildings nestled under great shady trees in this tropical garden of fruit trees and flowers and palms that whispered in a light breeze. The towering trees sheltered all the varied fruits in the world – tingle tongue, mango, popmelon, guava and more. When the wind blew, the fruits came crashing down through the branches and the girls feasted on the food of the gods, the tangy hot sunshine bursting in their mouths.

Saint Angels was cloaked in flowers, and flower petals covered the shady ground. The girls put white jasmine blossoms in their hair, and the faint scent lingered in the air when they passed. Perhaps it was true that their lips tasted of jasmine, but nobody really knew. Males were not allowed to enter Saint Angels.

When the torture session was over, Lena rejoined the other girls. These were her friends and despite their complaints, most of them were happy at Saint Angels. They mocked their teachers, the Sisters in Black, but they all studied as diligently as they could. They knew education was the path to success and if you studied hard enough and were pretty enough, maybe you could marry a wealthy gentleman rather than a fisherman or a farmer.

Lena worried a lot about the future, but her concern was not about who she would marry. She knew what was happening, not far away, and every day it got closer and closer. She could see it clearly. At first she thought her world of dreams was just that, but she learned long ago that it was not dreams. It was reality. She dared not tell anyone, not even Ying-Yang or Tweaky, her best friends. It was her deep, dark, scary secret. She was different. Nobody else could see what she saw.

That night she saw the capital city, Berasa, burning brightly, overrun by barbarian hordes armed with the latest automatic weapons. Anxious to make peace, the government had given them those weapons. Lena watched it all in her head, in graphic detail, that night when she should have been sleeping. The barbarians behaved like big fierce monkeys. They burned homes, churches, schools, factories, public buildings, hotels, restaurants, homeless shelters, the starport. They burned everything. They looted the banks and danced in the streets. The police and army retreated, under orders to not take any action.

Lena watched as they killed everyone who moved except for young females. They bound the girls and dragged them away into captivity. Sometimes they raped young girls right in the street and Lena had to close her eyes, but that did not shut out the visions.

She watched as a group of the barbarians marched up the Highland Road leading to Saint Angels. She wanted to tell Sister Marie, the High Priestess, but dared not.

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The morning following Lena's dream, Sister Marie gathered all the girls together in the front courtyard and lined them up in two columns near the massive front gate, which was firmly locked.

"Attention, children," she said. The rest of the staff stood by her side, all the teachers, dressed in black robes. "'We are expecting some visitors. These are the United Mountain Clans. We must welcome them to our home. God says we must turn the other cheek if strangers misunderstand us. We must not resist. The Clans recently visited Berasa, and there was violence. The government orders us to show the Clans that they have no reason to fear us. We must welcome them with open arms, and invite them to dine with us. Now, children, take a handful of rose petals from the baskets and when our guests enter toss the petals onto their path to welcome

them." The teachers passed two baskets of rose petals among the girls.

Oh no. Oh no, Lena thought. She knew what would happen. How could adults be so stupid? What kind of a government wants its own people to die?

"Sister Marie! Sister Marie!" Lena could not help herself. She waved her arms frantically.

"Yes, Lena. What is it?" Sister Marie glared at her. Lena was terrified, but she spoke.

"They have not come here to visit us, Sister Marie. They have come here to kill us!"

Sister Marie paled, gasped. "Silence! You evil child! You spawn of Satan! Have you learned nothing from us, nothing about God's love for all creatures? About your duty to God and country? You shut your nasty mouth right now! You are insane! Children, we will welcome our visitors!"

They could hear the visitors approaching, firing their weapons into the air, a rolling, staccato thunder. Then a hungry roar, cheers and shrieks and howls. The United Mountain Clans had arrived.

Sister Marie trembled, but she and the rest of the teachers opened the great gates wide and stood there, awaiting the clans. The children remained paralyzed behind them in two columns, fists still clutching rose petals.

The first ranks of the clans paused to gape at the black-robed sisters. The intruders were huge, strong, hairy, dark warriors. The leader was obvious, a giant with a leathery, weathered face, long dirty red hair and a wild, bristling red beard, furious yellow eyes and a snarling mouth filled with yellow fangs. Colorful tattoos covered his bulging muscles. He was not an ape, he was human, but to Lena he sure looked like a great ape, the King of the Apes, leading his troop of fearless subhumans right into Hell. He was clad in animal

skins over chain mail. He balanced an E on his hip and hanging knives and axes festooned his wide leather belt.

The shooting stopped as Sister Marie confronted the chief barbarian.

"Welcome to our home," she said calmly. "We welcome you with open arms. Peace be with you."

The King of the Apes laughed. He had not seen anything this funny in a long time. He raised his E and fired auto X right into Sister Marie and her black-robed teachers. All died instantly, torn to shreds, blood splattering everywhere. The two lines of girls shrieked and scattered like a flock of little birds. Rose petals floated to the ground.

"Cease fire, bozos!" the King of the Apes ordered. "Look at that! They're all girls – juicy young girls! No more shooting! Scoop them up. All of them! Don't miss a one. These little bitches are worth millions! And keep your nasty little friends inside your pants! Touch one girl and I'll lop off your ding-a-ling. We're going to have all these kids examined and the virgins will make us filthy rich. We'll own the world! Now go get 'em!"

Lena hid in the laundry room but it did no good. One of them dragged her out by the legs, laughing. "Gotcha! Gotcha! Gotcha!"

My life is over, Lena thought. She knew she would never forget Sister Marie's last words – "Peace be with you."



Chapter 1

No Return

"Lots of activity," I said. It was a cold, wet, miserable night and we were in the heart of the Tangles, a particularly thick portion of the Odura forest. Odura leaves were an important export product for Berichros, but that was lost on me as we pondered the images on our faceplates. It was raining hard, crashing down onto the forest of gigantic trees, rushing down the trunks and flooding the thick undergrowth. An antimat had ripped up the forest here, leaving a jagged gash in the canopy and an almost impenetrable jumble of shattered, burnt logs. It had also torn up the undergrowth and forest floor and unearthed a portion of the combat tunnel that the Darks had constructed below.

"We need a better view," Saka said. He whispered into his mike and the eyemote maneuvered closer to the target. We were both cloaked and armored and armed and pretty much invisible to all – unless we ran into any Darks with the latest generation anti-cloaking tech. And chances were good that would happen, sooner or later. Then things would be even – we would die, or they would.

The eyemote was some way up the tunnel, and we were still in the forest, awaiting results. But somebody was there, all right, below. Shadows. I knew the eyemote would clear that up, and we

would follow it up. Imminent murder did not bother me now the way it had before. My heart was cold and patient. I felt no fear or hatred. I felt nothing at all.

"Dark armor," I said. "It looks like allied issue. Armed with Flash lightning. Yes! These must be humans – Satan's Galactic Rangers."

"Cannon fodder," Saka said. "Good. Likely they won't have the latest anti-cloaking tech."

"And who's that with them?"

"Humans for sure – unarmored. A-vests, comtops and Starguard battle rifles. Primitive!"

"Prob they're local traitors," I said. "Dark Cloud Alliance nationals, turning on their own people for money or power. And look what the C's did to their people. Can you imagine that? Traitors – I don't even consider them to be human."

Saka was quiet as heavy rain danced on our helmets and ran down our faceplates. It was very cold, the only sound that of the deluge.

"Tenners, let's kill some Darks – and anybody else who moves," he finally said.

"Fine, but don't laugh at the Starguard, it can kill us very dead," I replied.

Saka was my squad Delta blood brother, a handsome Assidic with exotic slanted eyes and high cheekbones. He was a commander, like me, and a born combat officer. We had been together since basic and been through a lot together. We had both been killed in action, and returned to life. We didn't want that to happen again, but here we were. I knew some things were worth fighting for, and some things worth dying for. I sure as hell did not want to die again – I remembered it as an eternity of dreams. And this time, if it happened, I also knew there would be no return to the land of the living.

"All right, let's go," I said.

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We clambered carefully over the wild tangle of shredded tree trunks and branches, lowering ourselves cautiously down past the jagged edges of the underground cenite tunnel and into the dark. Even with no lights down there we could see it all, one eye on the eyemote readout and the other on our own enhanced reality. I was armed with an AI micromag and a shorty E. Saka carried a Bright battlestar. ConFree and our allies kept us well armed. This was the biggest, baddest brawl we had ever been in. It surpassed even the battle of Quaba in terms of participants. Our enemies were the invading Choakar Imperium, lizard-like aliens from the far side of the universe, the whole race, come to conquer the Dark Cloud Alliance, and then the rest of humanity, and their new-found allies of the Realm, consisting of Darks, Demons loyal to Satan, spirits from the Army of the Spirit of the Realm, the newly formed Satan's Galactic Rangers and a host of other captive peoples and spirits from Dimension X. On our side was ConFree, the Dark Cloud Alliance, the Brights, the Assid Confederation, the Biogen Peoples Solidarity Accord, the Free Tribal Union of rebel Demons, the AI peoples of Farharbor and our own Ghost Legion of D2 spirits.

The enemy motto was Victory or Death. So was ours.

"Closer," Saka said. We crept forward, keeping to the tunnel walls. Nobody was guarding our entrance point. Not even any eyemotes – we had checked. But somebody was there. I could see them through the micromag scope.

"Close enough," I said. The Prof had put Saka in charge of this mission but that meant nothing. We were so close by then and our actions were so instinctive, it was almost like we were both baptized with the same blood. It was almost like we were one person. Our mission was long-range recon but it was more like recon strike. We were not to silently observe and report back, but to attack and destroy any enemy targets we might acquire, then run. We were far behind the lines, although there was always a question about exactly

where the lines were. Actually, the situation was so fluid that no permanent lines existed. But we sure as hell were not in friendly territory. I thought of it as random recon. We often did not even bother to report back, unless the action seemed particularly significant.

I guess it would be honest to say that we accepted our fate. The Prof had told us that we were not expected to return from this mission, unless we were recalled. No return, I thought. Fine. I knew there would be no return when I had enlisted in the Legion, so long ago.

We settled in, prone, like a couple of invisible phantoms in the muck, peering through our sights. The micromag brought it right up to me. It was virtually like they were just a few mikes away. A swirl of movement – two humans in A-vests and comtops, some other forms on the deck – shadows. The guys in the A-vests were not cloaked and they had little shoulder lights that faintly illuminated the scene. It was to be a fatal error in judgement. In the background three soldiers in first-generation Dark armor, probably also humans, were heading off down tunnel.

The eyemote moved closer to the two in A-vests. Now it became clear. Two, no, three civilian girls lay at their feet, arms and legs bound. Subteen Outworlders, maybe ages eleven or twelve. A blonde and two brunettes, dirty and bruised and evidently exhausted. The eyemote brought us the dialogue.

"Let's move, man, the rangers will leave us behind."

"What's the rush? Nobody's gonna bother us here."

"What about the girls? Are we gonna kill them? You heard the rangers." He sounded nervous.

"Kill them? Sure, but we have some time first. Hey, Blondie, you wanna have some fun? You want to live or die? Speak up!"

She could only croak in agony. They were children, caught up in a horrific, unimaginable world-wide catastrophe.

"We don't have time for this, man!" the nervous one said.

"Are you kidding? Look at these little bitches. They remind me of midschool, all those snotty, rich brats that would just sneer at me. Not so hot now, are you, bitches? I got the blonde, Ace, you take whoever you like." He snatched at the blonde girl and pulled her to her feet.

"I'll take the one with the blonde," I said quietly to Saka. "You fire after I do, get the other one."

"Tenners."

I switched to the E. Micromag was fine; it would explode the target's body from the inside, but I had more confidence in the E. If it ID'd the target as an enemy, it would hit it dead on with no collateral damage to nearby innocents.

The E's laser sight projected a bright red dot right on his forehead. It was invisible to him, of course, but not to me. He was ripping off the girl's clothing. I got a good look at his face. He was a young Outworlder in the service of Satan – a contemptible pervert, a rapist of children, a traitor to his race and to his country.

I caressed the trigger gently, just like a lover. His head exploded, spraying blood and brains everywhere. Saka hit the other man with Battlestar X and he also dropped immediately in an explosion of blood.

"Are we outta eyemotes yet?" Saka asked.

"Not yet."

"Send some downtunnel to recon the installation in detail for the Prof. And warn us who's coming."

I did it, snapping the eyemote release tab.

"Are the defense eyes still on duty?" That was a reference to the killer eyemotes that hovered over our position ready to attack and destroy any approaching enemy eyemotes.

"Still with us," I replied.

"All right. We free the girls, then run. The Darks should be coming at us right quick. And those Galactic Ranger folks, too."

"How about an ambush?"

"No. There's no time. Look! Dark armor, on the way."

We ran to the girls, who were still bound. The blonde was on her knees; the other two were on the deck. They were covered with blood spatter. I cut them loose, then decloaked. My sudden appearance terrified the girls. Saka stood by, cloaked, awaiting the hostiles.

"I'm with the ConFree Legion," I said. "What's the matter with her?" One of the brunettes was on her back, shivering, covered with sweat, eyes closed.

"Blackblood fever," the blonde said. "Can you help her? Please? I think she's dying."

"We don't have time," Saka told me on the net. "We grab the girls and run – now!" I snatched up the sick one.

"Follow us or die," I said, and then activated cloaking. It ran over the girl in my arms as well.

"We can't see you! How can we follow you?"

"Run! Just run!" I ordered. Saka launched a burst of lightning and downtunnel flashed blue-hot and crackled wildly, pulverizing whoever was down there into shredded meat. I ran, the sick girl in my arms. The remaining two girls ran after me, and Saka covered us from the rear.

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"Drink," I insisted. "More!" I forced the canteen to her lips until she choked, then I pulled it away. She was lying on my sleeping bag, the other two girls were on their knees, looking on. We were well hidden in the heart of the forest, no fire, no lights. The rain had slacked off. It was a cold, wet night. "You'll have to keep her well hydrated," I said. "Blackblood Fever is endemic here, in the forest, but we've countered the autoimmune reaction. We're giving you this bottomless canteen. Keep her drinking, or she could die yet."

"Can't we stay with you? We don't know where to go, we don't know what to do," the blonde objected. She was wearing an E-jacket from the medaid kit. So were the other two.

"Who's the oldest girl here?" I asked.

"Me," the blonde said.

"How old are you?"

"I'm twelve."

"Well, it's time to grow up. You are now in charge of these two girls. It's entirely up to you whether they live or die."

"I'm only twelve! I don't know anything! We want to stay with you two!"

"We have to get on with our mission. And you cannot accompany us."

"What's your mission?"

"We have to find more enemy, and kill them. And we have to keep doing it until we're killed ourselves. If you accompany us, it's certain death for you. Your only hope is to run."

"Where do we run?"

"Here's a geolocation satmap." I slapped the little device onto her palm. "You cannot use it to communicate with anyone but you can see at a glance where you are and where you're going. Set it to thirty-two degrees. Travel only at night, sleep during daytime. No fire, no lights, no noise. Keep to the thickest part of the forest. Avoid roads or trails or inhabited places. Don't trust anybody. Keep your sick friend warm and well hydrated. When you reach the Great Milky Gorge by the Blood Rust River, your journey is over. Just wait by the edge of the forest and when you see an armored aircar with a Legion cross, step out into the sunlight."

"How long will it take to get there?"

"That depends on how fast you move. I'd advise caution, not speed."

Saka dropped a backpack full of supplies at her feet.

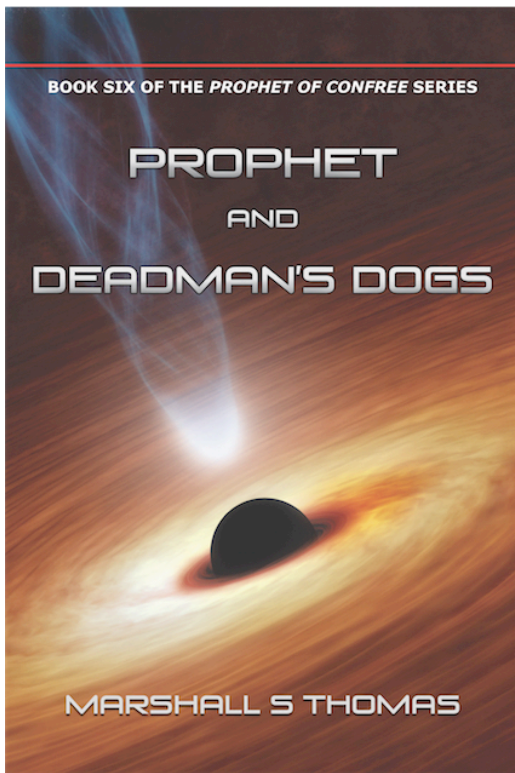
"Get moving," I said.

"Right now?"

"Right now. It's night, time to travel. Get on with it."

She picked up the backpack and in moments was moving slowly away from our zero with her two companions, looking anxiously back at us. She was still spattered with the blood of her enemies.

"Goodbye, Twelve," I said. "Good fortune to you. And welcome to the ConFree Legion."



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