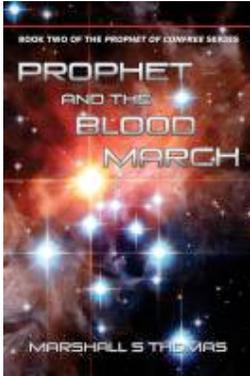


BOOK TWO OF THE *PROPHET OF CONFREE* SERIES

**PROPHET
AND THE
BLOOD
MARCH**

MARSHALL S THOMAS



The young prophets of Delta Research struggle with the consequences of their talents as ConFree draws closer to the final struggle between the titanic forces of light and darkness. Yes, they can change the future. But questions arise - will the result be what they expect? Is it treason if you die for love? Is it suicide if you die for your squadies? Or, will the Blood March consume them all? Also by Marshall S Thomas - The Black March, Soldier of the Legion, Slave of the Legion, Secret of the Legion, and Prophet of ConFree.

Prophet and the Blood March

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Prophet
and the
Blood March

by

Marshall S Thomas

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PART I

TRIBAL VOICE



Prologue

Land's End

"Oh Deadman, look at that, just look at that!" Honeyhair was clearly impressed. We stood with the Prof by the railing of the grand terrace of the Land's End Resort, looking out at the view. It was grey dark, late afternoon, icy cold and raining needles. We were bundled in coldcoats and had to lean into a howling wind to remain upright. The sky was a swirling mass of grey rainclouds hurtling close overhead; it was darkening rapidly and an uncertain sunset was visible only as a blurry pink scar on one horizon. Quaba's second sun was unseen. This was a fine end to a pretty typical Quaba day.

I held onto the metal railing and faced the wind. An endless churning cold grey ocean was coming at us from the misty horizon, gigantic super waves charging in from across the ocean, shedding foam and spray, torn by the wind but gathering tremendous momentum, heading right for those incredible black granite cliffs, gigantic bulwarks to meet the ocean, to announce the continent, to stop the waves after their incredible journey from the other side of the world, maybe thousands of K away.

Although the view was spectacular, the terrace was safely out of danger. It gave us a great wide-angle view of the immediate coastline but it was set well back of the cliffs. Now that giant wave was hurtling itself right at the coast, blasting over the jumble of shattered boulders far below, exploding violently against the granite cliff, shooting straight up and into the stormy sky. It was the ocean itself, crashing into the land. The boom sounded like artillery. In moments the sky doused us with the remnants of the wave, almost knocking us down. Honeyhair laughed in delight. I loved to see her happy, although she was so bundled up that at that moment I could only see the tip of her nose.

Honeyhair, the Prof and I were the only people crazy enough to be out on the terrace in that storm.

"Here comes another one!" I shouted. Sure enough, another great grey leviathan wave, way out there, was gathering strength and rising up as if preparing a knockout blow for the cliff.

"We're fine, Carol, don't worry!" The Prof had to shout into his comset because of the roaring wind. The Prof was our heart and soul, our fearless leader. He was a little guy, not impressive physically, but he had the heart of a lion and the soul of a saint. Carol was his daughter. She was a lovely little teen who had been driven back to their hotel suite by the violence of the weather. Probably a good move, I thought.

"Please hold this, Honeyhair," the Prof said. "I've got to get this shot!" He thrust his comset into Honeyhair's grasp while struggling with his holocam, grappling with the railing and trying to steady the camera.

"Just put it on auto, Prof," I said as the wave stuck the cliff. I swear I could feel the impact through my feet. I guess the whole scene was kind of funny, if you really thought about it. This was Quaba, a world of violent extremes, originally claimed by violent, extremist settlers and now inhabited by their extremist descendants. Yeah, we were extremists all right – but I couldn't help it. I loved this place.

"I got it!" The Prof cried out. "I'm sure I got it! What a shot!"

"That's great, Prof," I said. "I'm about to get frostbite. This is fun but let's get outta here." My teeth were chattering. Time to go!

We headed back to the resort complex, the wind pushing us along as an icy rain pelted us. The resort hotel was an amazingly luxurious series of low-slung suite complexes, partially sunk into the earth, designed to minimize resistance to the unending winds that tore at the coastline. It was a popular tourist destination and the Prof had ordered all Delta personnel to take a week's leave prior to entering into what promised to be a challenging new assignment. We were all recently returned from the war – Galinta, Dragon Shoals, Kratar and Veda. We were sick of violence and death, and needed a break.

"That was exhilarating. See you in the morning," the Prof said, splitting off for his own suite.

"Yeah, hope the pix turn out all right, Prof," I said.

"Let's get back home, jump into bed and snuggle," Honeyhair said, as we headed for our own suite. In the Legion "home" could be anything from a muddy trench to a warm barracks, depending on where you were. But Quaba had become my adopted home.

"Sounds like a plan," I replied.

"Oh! The Prof forgot his comset!" Honeyhair said, pondering the little commo device in her palm.

"Dummy," I said.

"The Prof is not a dummy!"

"I wasn't talking about him."

"Well, I can't be expected to remember everything. I keep busy enough just trying to keep track of you."

"Let me have that. I'll catch up to him."

"I'll come with you, no problem." We changed course towards the Prof's suite. It was near the aircar lot. The rain was easing off to a light drizzle. A dark airvan floated motionless up ahead at low boarding height, stationary, lights off. Several figures were huddled around it in the wet haze from the exhaust. It was evening by then and I could not make out their features. They should have lights on if power is on, I thought. Otherwise it could be a nav hazard. Something wrong with the van? They appeared to be loading a bundle of some sort into the open doorway.

The item they were loading slipped from their grasp momentarily and I saw it was a body. What the hell – a drunk? And suddenly I realized who it was.

"It's the Prof!" I shouted, yanking my vac gun from my coldcoat pocket. Then a barrage of vac burst all around us and I went down hard, right onto my back. It felt like I had been hit by a speeding aircar but it must have been a glancing blow. My entire left side was numb but I was still conscious. Honeyhair returned fire with her own vac gun, down on one knee right next to me. I forced myself up and staggered off right into their line of fire. Instant counterattack into the ambush, standard Legion drill. Of course it's more effective if you're in armor. I was firing vac non stop, shakily aiming at the shadowy figures standing over the Prof, who had fallen to the ground. As I neared them, my vac bolts and my uncertain charge seemed to be having the desired effect.

One of the figures dropped to the ground as if hit and the others leaped into the van, still firing back at me, then the car took off abruptly, shooting into the dark with no lights. Honeyhair was by my side, grasping at my arm as I slumped to the ground.

"How is the Prof?" I asked, fighting to retain consciousness.

"Are you all right? Are you hit?" Honeyhair asked.

"I'm fine. The Prof –"

"He's breathing. He's all right!"

"Call tacnet! Declare an emergency. Give them the description of that airvan. Tell them to – is that attacker conscious?" I struggled to my feet, aching all over. He was a male clad in a black coldcoat, sprawled on the ground, arms askew. I zipped the coldcoat open and discovered an A-vest. He was all set for a fight. But now he was out, stunned by the vac. He looked like a young Outworlder, but it was hard to tell in the dark. "Ask for a medevac," I added. The man was alive. Terrific, we'd be able to interrogate him and find out what this was all about. It was certainly not simple crime. We didn't have crime in ConFree and one of the reasons was that every ConFree national was armed – or everyone who wanted to be armed. I always carried a vac gun, and so did Honeyhair. It was simple and effective and non-fatal. In ConFree we were unlikely to need anything more lethal than vac.

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By the time the medevac van arrived the Prof was conscious and standing.

"They vacced me," he said. "It happened so quickly I had no time to react." He was bleeding lightly from his forehead where he had hit the pavement. Honeyhair was staunching the wound with a tissue while three emergency medics were working on the attacker, still sprawled out on the ground. It was raining lightly, the flashing red lights of the medevac van pulsing silently, casting us all in blood.

"He's gone," one of the medics announced. They had tried to revive him with cyro, then with a biotic charger. It didn't work. He was dead.

"You say he was alive and breathing before we got here," one of the medics asked me.

"Sure was. He was unconscious but breathing. I had shot him with vac. That shouldn't have killed him."

"No, it shouldn't have. He was young and healthy. This is a bit of a puzzle."

"I want a full autopsy done on this man," the Prof said. "And a brainscan. Please do the brainscan as soon as possible, before the memory patterns fade away. This is extremely important. I'll send you some techs to help with the scan."

"And you are..."

"The Professor is a Brigadier General in the ConFree Legion," I said. "He represents Galactic Information. Please do as he says."

"Yes sir. Let me take a look at that wound." The other two medics were loading the body into the van.

"Something wrong here, Karl," one of them said. The medic who had been looking at the Prof's wound turned to the van.

"He's dead," he said. "What else can be wrong?" The body was in the van but the medics seemed quite concerned about something.

"He's on fire! Deadman, he's burning up!"

"What are you talking about?" Karl joined the other two medics inside the van as the Prof, Honeyhair and I watched from the open doorway.

"His head is red hot. Look! Good lord!" A puff of smoke curled around the medics.

"This man is burning internally. Spontaneous human combustion! He's burning internally! Ow! Watch out!" Flames were spitting out from his body.

"His brain is on fire! It's his brain!"

"There's no such thing as spontaneous human combustion," the Prof said calmly. "Internal combustion, yes, but not spontaneous. There has to be an ignition source to initiate it."

The body was burning brightly now, the skin slowly charring as the flames burnt outwards. His eyes were sizzling, his hair burst into flames. A terrible stink hit us.

"What do we do?"

"Water! H₂O! What else!"

"Get him out of the van or the van will catch fire!"

They dragged out the burning corpse and laid it on the ground. It was awful watching it burn as the rain hit it hard, veiling it in steam. It did appear that the man's brain was burning – and may even have been the starting point of the fire. The head was being utterly consumed and the rain wasn't helping much. I had seen a lot of death and blood and gore, but I had to turn my gaze away from this one.

"He dies," the Prof said, "with no explanation. And then his brain catches fire internally, and brain and body are destroyed. And all because their kidnap attempt failed. Am I really that important?"

"You are, Prof," I said. I was aching all over. Honeyhair had me by one hand, watching me closely.

"But who would do this? And who has the capability to do this?" the Prof asked.

"I don't know, Professor. But I'll bet we're going to find out."

"We can't do that post-mortem brainscan – if his brain is burnt up."

"That occurred to me too," I said. "Whoever these people are, they're a damned serious bunch."

"Well, so are we," the Prof replied. "So are we."

Chapter 1

The Janitor who Rules the Galaxy

Home – at last! I was thrilled to see it, even though I had never been there before. Home was Delta Research, but this time it was on Quaba instead of Pandaravos. It had been a long journey getting there, for squad Delta. The route was via another universe, where we had to fight for survival, and then back into U1 to Veda 6, where we participated in the recent extermination campaign against the D's. Yes, that's right – another universe. Six of us – including me – were still recovering from very serious war wounds. Two of my squadies had actually died, but recovered. I know that sounds strange too, but it's one of the reasons Delta Research is in business. Four of us managed to survive without any major wounds and that is only slightly less miraculous than coming back from the dead, considering what we'd been through.

Delta Research's impressive new headquarters building was a beautiful new four-story structure built of glittering green stone, with lots of autotint picture windows to let in the light and give us the view. It was located in the outer suburbs of Quaba City, the capital of the Confederation of Free Worlds. And we – Delta Research – were damned happy to see it. We're Legion soldiers – all of us – and we've been through it all. We're pretty tight knit. You threaten any one of us and we'll kill you real quick, no questions asked. A sixty percent casualty rate tends to do that to survivors.

"Prophet?" someone asked. I was sitting behind the desk in my office. The visitor was a young Outworlder male in formal greys – the ConFree government uniform. He was clean shaven with light brown hair combed off to one side, brown eyes, a friendly demeanor.

"That's me," I said. I sure didn't feel like me, sitting behind that gleaming desk in that large, plush office. I felt like an imposter. Actually

I was nobody. I was just a young Outworlder kid who had gotten into the Legion by accident. And found myself in a squad of heroes. And that's where I found I belonged: in the mud, with the troops. But here I was – here were we all, all of Delta squad.

"I'm Jan Korchak," he said, smiling and extending his hand. I touched it with my fist – the Legion greeting. "We had an appointment," he continued, "about Frederick Willford?"

"Fred," I replied. "Yes, of course. Welcome to Delta Research."

"Thanks. It's nice to be here. Prophet. I've heard of you. You're one of the guiding lights here, aren't you? What exactly does Delta Research do, anyway? Nobody would tell me."

"It's cosmic secret. We don't talk about it. But I can assure you we're earning your tax dollars."

"Well, that's fine, Prophet. Now, about Frederick."

"Let me show you around. I want you to see what it is he does."

I got up and he accompanied me as we strolled through the fourth floor. "Fred is the janitor here. He's the senior janitor. This building was only recently constructed and Delta has only been here a few weeks – but we've all gotten to know Fred very well. As you can see there's a lot for a janitor to do here. We have office cubes for our core staff of ten, and plenty more for miscellaneous support staff. There are two conference rooms on every floor – and there are four floors above ground." I opened one of the conference rooms for him to see.

"We've got supply rooms, snack rooms, lounges, lecture rooms, a medunit, examination rooms with a lot of very complex equipment, an advanced research library with links to whatever you want, a theater, a cafeteria, an executive dining room, a slew of residential apartments and TDY quarters, lots of supply rooms, power rooms, an aircar garage, guards quarters' with an armory, a firing range, and a very nice internal open-air recreation park – as you can see." I stood by one window to give him a good view of the tree-lined park in the heart of our compound.

"That's nice," he said.

"We've also got a swimming pool and some ball courts. Plus an underground complex, quite extensive, which I can't show you for opsec reasons. But it, too, takes a lot of routine work to keep it up and

running. And Fred handles that, too. He has some help – but he's in charge."

"He sounds like a renaissance man."

"He's a jack of all trades. We like him. We all like him. He's cheerful and pleasant, never complains, shows up early and leaves late. He's a perfectionist and won't stop until the job is done."

"I'm glad he's found his niche in life."

"Now. You've seen his school record."

"Yes. Not so impressive."

"And you know his IQ."

"Yes."

"So the request does not surprise you?"

"No. Anyone can apply. We try not to be judgmental about individuals. Even those with low IQs. Things have changed since the old days. Society continues to evolve. There are only two requirements, now. First, does he make a contribution? Second, can he pass the exam?"

By then we were standing in the main lobby, on a floor of glassy green granite, surrounded by decorative columns cleverly carved to look like palm trees.

"There's no doubt that he makes a contribution," I said. "An important contribution. This is a very important installation and he keeps it functioning smoothly, allowing the rest of us to do our own tasks without distractions. He's honest, he works hard, he has respect for others and for himself. He knows his limitations but he's not bitter about it. He's proud of what he does. It's honest labor. That's what ConFree is all about, isn't it?"

"Absolutely. But I wonder – can't the lifies do anything to improve his mental condition?"

"I was told they have examined him, and they are continuing to research possibilities. Whatever that means," I said.

"All right. Well, if you and your colleagues believe he is making an important contribution, we'll assume that requirement is fulfilled. One more question. Was the application strictly his idea, or was he encouraged to do this?"

"It was entirely his idea. He came to me saying he wanted to do it. I was surprised, but after a bit of basic research I realized there was no reason he could not submit the application. I advised him of that, and he did it."

"So there's only the exam. It's not that hard, really. He either knows the material or he doesn't. But it's an absolute prerequisite. If he doesn't know the answers we can't pass him."

"Oh, he knows it all right. He knows it cold. I've been going over the material with him. He's got it."

"Then there should be no problem."

"There is a problem."

"Oh? What's that?"

"Let's sit over here," I said. I chose a table near the snack bar and pulled up a chair. He joined me.

"Fred is not good in testing environments," I said. "You've seen his school grades. If he gets nervous it doesn't matter if he knows the material or not, he's going to blow the test. He'll just freeze up and shut down. I've seen him do that. He blew the janitorial supervisor exam, even though he knew the material."

"I don't know what I can do about that," Korchak said. "All I can do is give him the test."

"Actually there is something you can do. If he thinks you are a friend of mine, who is going to go over the material with him to better prepare him for the test, then he's going to be very positive and anxious to succeed and show you how much he's learned. However, if he knows you are the man who is giving him the exam, he'll crash and burn. Guaranteed. But it's a simple oral exam, right? Ask him the questions in that spirit and see what he knows – like a friend would do. If he answers satisfactorily he passes, right? Can you do that?"

Korchak looked at me thoughtfully, then responded. "Sure. I can do that. If he knows the answers, he passes. Sure. It's a little unusual but we can do that."

"Great! Come with me. I'll take you to the cube where Fred and I usually study the material."

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Prophet and the Blood March

"Fred! Good to see you. Come on in," I said. Fred was a stocky Outworlder with a clear, clean-shaven face, hazel eyes, short blond hair and a green janitor's outfit. He was carrying his study guide, a little handbook.

"Fred, this is my buddy, Jan. Jan took the exam several years ago and knows all about it. He can help you with the preparations."

"Pleased to meet you, Fred," Jan said, shaking hands.

"Nice to meet you too," Fred said.

"Fred, you know I'm convinced that you're ready for the test but I want Jan to also talk it over with you," I said. "If he agrees that you're ready, we'll go ahead and schedule the test, and I know you'll do well. So please talk it over with Jan and show him what you know. Is that all right? Do you know the stuff now? Are you confident?"

"Oh sure. It's easy. I know it all."

"Good. Good. All right, I've got another meeting now," I said. "You can ask Jan what his test was like, and show him what you've learned. I'll be back in a bit."

"Yes sir," Fred said.

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"So you took this exam a few years ago?" Fred asked Jan.

"That's right. But it's basically the same exam. I've seen the new one – the one you've been studying."

"It wasn't so hard, right?"

"No – you just have to study it and make sure you know the answers. Prophet said you're all set. So do you think you know the answers?"

"Yes, I do. I've studied hard. I know all the questions and all the answers. My only problem is that I get all nervous when I take an exam. Very nervous. That's what my problem is."

"Well, there may be solutions to that. First let's talk about these questions. The first one, Foundation. What did the Founders see when they first approached the Outvac?"

"That's easy! They saw a gigantic cross in the vac – a beautiful, starry cross. And that was the Legion cross. And it was like it was calling them on. So they headed for it."

"Perfect! And where did they first settle?"

"They settled in the Crista Cluster. That was the cross. The first world was Quaba. This one! And then they went on to the others."

"Exactly right. They were refugees – running away from something. What were they running from?"

"Slavery! They were slaves, running away from the System!"

"Prophet is right, you know this material all right. And what did they want for their families?"

"Freedom! They wanted freedom for themselves. They wanted their own worlds. They didn't want to be slaves anymore."

The questions continued. And Fred was perfectly relaxed.



We called Fred into the conference room the following day. Everybody was there. He didn't know what it was all about. We told him to wear his formal uniform, so he did that. When he entered the room we were all in place and burst into applause. He appeared stunned to be the center of attention. When I brought him over to stand next to the Professor, he whispered to me, "Did I do something wrong?" I assured him he hadn't.

The Professor was our installation commander so it was appropriate that he should make the presentation. The Prof was a young Legion trooper just like us but he was not really just like us. He was a lot better educated, he was morally superior to us all, and he was one of the most courageous men I'd ever met. And I'd met a lot by then. He had olive skin and dark hair and a slight physique. He appeared to be a mild-mannered bookworm but he was a fanatic warrior who was afraid of nothing if he thought he was in the right. And he was always in the right. I never did figure out what race he was but that didn't matter. Whatever it was, it produced superior people. The Prof had risen from an enlisted grunt to a full Commander in four years of hair-raising combat and mind-numbing intellectual challenges.

The Prof wore the combat cross and the blood badge on his blacks. It meant he had fought and bled for ConFree. So he was the right man for this presentation.

"Fred," he said, "I am proud to present you this certificate from the Confederation of Free Worlds. We are all very proud of you." He handed a large, framed document to Fred. "Please read it, Fred," he said.

The document read:

THE CONFEDERATION OF FREE WORLDS

CERTIFICATE OF CITIZENSHIP

No. 74438002

ORIGINAL

This is to certify that

Frederick James Willford

a national of the Confederation of Free Worlds, has met all the citizenship requirements for the Confederation of Free Worlds and is entitled to be added to the citizenship roles of the Confederation of Free Worlds and is hereby declared to be

A CITIZEN

of the Confederation of Free Worlds

with all the rights and duties that it entails. In testimony thereof the seal of the Quaba City Court of Justice is hereby affixed to this document in the Year Three Hundred Eighty Four Con Free Galactic Standard, Month One, Day Fourteen.

Warren Partain

Clerk of the CF District Court.

Fred appeared a bit confused at first and stared with surprise at the document. Then he choked up and just stood there holding the frame and nodding to everyone awkwardly.

"Thank you," he said. "Thank you. Thank you all. Sir, are you sure this is right? I haven't taken the test!"

"You took the test yesterday, Fred," I said. "And you passed with honors. Congratulations, Fred. You're a citizen!"

"Really? That was the test? I thought he was just preparing me for the test."

"No, that was it. You passed it. How do you feel?"

"How do I feel? Wow! A citizen. A ConFree citizen! I feel...I feel like I rule the galaxy!"

Chapter 2

Reloading

"All right, boys and girls, let's see where we are," the Professor said. We were in a little meeting room, five of us, the Prof, me, Saka, Ice and Bees. We were relaxing in airchairs around a table that was pre-stocked with dox, tea and snacks. I was enjoying the dox, a smoky, dreamy Quaba brew I had never tried before. "We've now been here almost three weeks," the Prof continued. "And we've settled in. I hope you are all satisfied with the accommodations."

"It's far better than we deserve, Prof," I said. "Remember Paula the psycherchick? She told us we were far too happy on Pandaravos to have meaningful paranormal visions of the future. Calm down and get miserable, she said. I still think she was right. All our visions were made under great stress."

"Yes, she may be right, but Galactic Information wants you folks to be happy," Prof said. "And I believe they're right, too. This environment is meant to ensure that you are given maximum opportunity to develop your innate talents in a controlled, pleasant environment. So – any initial comments? We'll be initiating the formal program shortly, but there's nothing really formal about it. It's more like an exploratory program. And it will be adjusted as necessary. Ice, let's start with you."

Ice was a lovely pale-blond honey who still bore signs of the extensive scarring that resulted from when she was killed by shrapnel on Galinta. Her golden hair was slowly growing out around the scalp scars and a few more sessions with the gro-gel should have her achingly beautiful face back to normal. I still recalled those events with horror and shock. It was hard to look at her without feeling love for her and love for the alien Brights who had raised her from the dead on the

battlefield, and a blind, burning hatred for the alien Demons who had killed her.

"It's been quiet for me," Ice said. "I still have some strange, murky dreams, but no visions. I agree with Prophet, I know he's worried that we will not be able to produce, and we'll waste all those taxpayer credits that the Legion is pouring into this installation."

"You let me worry about that, please," the Prof said. "I have faith in you all. You have all shown us astounding talents, and saved countless lives with your visions."

"I haven't had any visions," Bees said. Bees was a slender young Cyrillian girl. She was lovely – a tall, classical beauty with black satin skin that still showed signs of the third degree burns that had almost killed her on Vezhedak. The Brights had saved her life, too, and she now shared the same DX alien brain structure that had appeared in brainscan results for me, Saka and Ice.

"No," Prof replied. "Not yet. But you've got the DX and you have displayed astounding telepathic abilities. You were reading random Bright thoughts on our journey to Veda – like I read a news scan. We're going to develop that, and you're going to read the future, too. See? I can predict future events as well." The Prof smiled. Of course he did not have Dimension X in his brain like we did but he was so smart he probably did not need it.

"But how will I know if it's a DX dream?" Bees asked.

"You'll know," Ice replied. "My vision of the D air attack on Valhalla was so realistic and scary it put me into shock. I was right there, running in terror, and the antimats were blasting women and kids apart right next to me, splattering me with blood. I thought it was real, I thought I was right there, I thought I was going to die. Even after I woke up I was still terrified. My heart was going like a trip hammer. Oh, you'll know. Don't worry, Bees, you'll know. These visions are horrifyingly realistic."

"Prophet?" Prof said. "How about you?"

"I haven't had any DX dreams since coming here," I said. "I think I know the difference between DX dreams and regular dreams by now." My own visions had begun on Galinta, not long after Ice and Saka were killed, not long after I had given that dying Bright soldier his

last drink of water, not long after I had held his hand to comfort him and felt the peace and love flooding my veins. The Legion gave me a brainscan, and discovered the Dimension X structure, and that's when my career as a prophet began.

"Your vision of Demon Hill gave the Legion a great victory, Prophet. We're going to develop your abilities, don't worry about that."

"So far all I've done here is help Fred get his citizenship."

"Prophet, that was a noble deed. God will bless you for that," the Prof replied.

ConFree citizenship had always been a privilege, not a right. But, as Korchak had said, the qualifications were loosening up. Who was to say that janitors were not making a national contribution? Not me. If Fred kept Delta Research's Hqs building fixed up, he was making a national contribution. So one more ConFree national had become a ConFree citizen, through honest labor. Good. He'd still have to keep up on recent developments if he wanted to vote, but that wasn't hard. The requirements were easy – as even Fred had admitted.

"Saka? Any thoughts?" Prof asked.

"I've got thoughts, but not visions," Saka said. "You'll remember my visions were always kind of dreamy, and lacked details that might have made them useful." Saka was a once-handsome young Assidic whose face still bore the scars of his horrific death on Galinta. I had seen that myself, just as I had seen Ice die in the same incident. Saka had been blasted by shrapnel, almost decapitated, his skull and spine shattered, his armor all chopped up. He had died instantly. And I had witnessed that Bright bring him back to life, with bloody hands, and make the sign of the cross over him. Bees claimed the Brights were angels, and the Legion Recovery Hospital claimed the Brights had used very advanced science to restore life into Ice and Saka and heal them both. I didn't know or care which it was, only that Ice and Saka had been saved and returned to the land of the living, and the Brights had done it, and I was in their debt forever for saving my comrades. I could still hardly look at Ice and Saka without tearing up. I'd have to do something about that.

"Your visions were powerful and accurate, Saka," the Prof said. "You had glimpses of our mission to Kratar, but we just couldn't quite

figure it out at the time. Don't worry, you've got what it takes and we will develop your talents. We will."

"So what's the program?" I asked.

"It will be a multipronged approach," the Prof said, "and we will adjust it as proves advisable. Right now we know very little about DX or your capabilities. One very important objective is to learn all we can about Dimension X. And what its role is in our universe and in your brains. I believe the best way to do that is to concentrate on the main objective, which is chronological viewing – prophecy. Galactic Info is charging us with obtaining accurate, actionable intelligence information on the future. Information which can save lives and counter our enemies. Three of you have shown us the capability to do that, but you don't know how you do it. Our program will encourage all four of you to further develop and to control your DX vision capabilities."

"Encourage? Will you be using torture?" I asked. I can't help it – I've always been a wiseass.

"No, we'll be using positive reinforcement. For example, choco donuts."

"Well, it worked with the D's," I said, with a smile. The Prof had recruited a hostile, captured Demon to willingly assist us, with the aid of choco donuts. He really was a remarkable man.

"Another interesting development was Bees' surprising and totally unexpected telepathic abilities. This is clearly associated with her DX brain structure, so you are all going to be getting coached in telepathy. The Legion has been using telepaths for decades. Our psychers are an invaluable resource and I am hoping you all will be able to join them."

"Those people are all ding-a-lings, aren't they?" Saka asked. "I've gotten that strong impression."

"Becoming an effective psycher involves considerable personal sacrifice and discipline. Kind of like you folks. Sometimes the mental strain shows. Please be understanding with them."

"Sorry," Saka replied. "I'll be good."

"We will also be investigating what we are calling DX neural frequencies. Your brain scans have revealed countless neural frequencies associated with your DX structures. We're working on how

to read, view or intercept these frequencies. You will all be helping in this effort.

"So – we'll have plenty of help with this project. Please be patient with them all. Doctor Dimension – known to you all – will be working closely with you. Miss Paula Deep will be tutoring you all in telepathy. You know her, too. Prophet named her 'psycherchick Paula'. For your information, Paula Deep is probably the Legion's most talented psycher. She is also a deeply troubled young lady. I'd like everyone to treat her with respect, and understanding. Perhaps we can help her out as she helps us out. Remember the golden rule: Do unto others as you would have them do unto you. Let that be Delta Research's motto."

Only the Professor could have said something like that without people looking at him like he was crazy. After all, we were with the ConFree Legion and our core mission was to kill people and break things. But I knew he meant every word. The Prof had led us into several bloody adventures in which a lot of people had been killed, but each mission was an act of sublime courage and the highest morality. He had given us another motto to live by earlier, when we were walking into battle and staring death in the face: Do the right thing.



The shipment arrived a bit late to Veils. Veils never closed, of course – it was a top of the line nightclub-bar-restaurant-holo palace, the hottest, most exciting entertainment complex in Temples, the capital city of Galgos 3 in the Gassies Coalition. But the warehouse in the rear closed down at 1800 hours and it was almost 1800 when the big OneWorld aircarrier pulled up by the still-open cargo doors.

"Come on, Errols, we're just about to shut down," the warehouse tech objected. He was a tall young Outworlder with tangled shoulder-length hair, clad in a dark blue uniform.

"Quit her bitchin', Wally," Errols said as he climbed down the steep footholds from the carrier's tall cab. "You get paid for receiving this stuff and I get paid for delivering it. Let's do it." Errols was a

slender Assidic with a shaved head and a wispy black mustache, wearing OneWorld black and silver colors.

"I didn't realize you were such an enthusiast," Wally said. "Tonton! Front & center!" Tonton, a hulking Cyrillian in warehouse blue, appeared from out of the shadows of the warehouse interior.

They unloaded two great dropboxes from the aircarrier's cargo bay and floated them into the warehouse on air effects pads.

"Where ya want 'em?" Tonton asked.

"Yeah, just a mo, what is this stuff?" Wally asked.

"Don't know," Errols replied. "Just sign here." He held out a palm screen with a receipt form showing.

"Well, what are these things?" Wally repeated. They were major drop-boxes, dinged and dirty armorite but probably invulnerable to major damage, long and rectangular, maybe two mikes long, longer than a tall man, and damned heavy according to the scales.

"It's something you ordered," Errols said. "From Lightspeed Freight Forwarding in Marcos City. There's the shipping code. Check it yourself if you really want to know."

Wally scanned the active order records on his own inventory palm screen.

"I don't have a record of that order," he said. "Something's wrong."

"Wally," Errols said calmly, "I'd like to go home now and I know you would, too. Please either sign for the receipt of these packs, or load them back in my carrier so I can return them to my own warehouse. If you hadn't ordered them, nobody would have sent them to you, dontcha think? Now are you going to sign or not?"

TonTon stared at Wally glumly. He wanted to go home too.

"All right," Wally said, affixing his thumbprint to the palm screen. "I guess we can sort this out in the morning. Just put them over there, Tonton."

"You got it," Tonton said.

"Good evening, folks," Errols said as he climbed back up to his cab.

Δ

The fire alarm went off at 0422 according to Wally's bedside chron. Damn it, he thought. Oh-dark-thirty, of course! They had experienced two minor warehouse fires in the past and they had both occurred at oh-dark-thirty. Why the hell can't these fires break out during working hours, Wally wondered. He staggered out of bed, pulled on sweaty coveralls and ran downstairs towards the warehouse, almost colliding with Tonton on the way down. The two of them had night duty, which meant they slept in guest quarters over the warehouse. They snapped open the interior door and charged into the cavernous, pitch-black warehouse. Willie hit the switches and the white ceiling lights began flickering on.

"What's going on?" It was the owner, on the comset.

"We're investigating, Boss. Tonton and I. No fire so far."

"Well, if you find a fire put it out. And if you can't handle it yourself, call the fire department. That's what they're there for. But let me know in advance whatever happens 'cause we've still got plenty of guests here and if I'm going to have to explain why the place is surrounded by the fire department, I'd like to get my story straight."

"It's here. It's the new shipment," Tonton said. His fire extinguisher had highlighted the source.

"Damn! It's hot as hell!" Wally exclaimed. The two large dropboxes were side by side, radiating a fierce, scorching heat.

"But there's no fire!" TonTon said.

"Open the damned dropboxes. The fire is inside."

"You open it! It's too damned hot!"

"All right, we open one. Crack the seal."

"Are you sure we wanna do this?"

"We've got to see what's happening before we call the fire department." Wally swung a crowbar at the dropbox's vac seal and it snapped open. A wave of superhot air burst forth and hit them like a speeding aircar. They staggered back. They could see no fire in the dropbox, but through the heat haze they could see a rectangular metal container that filled the dropbox and it was glowing red hot. Wally's face was scorching hot. He retreated further from the blast of superheated air, gasping for oxygen.

"All right, call the fire department. I'm not opening that sucker."

Δ

When the fire pros arrived they popped open both dropboxes and then got to work on one of the metal containers. They were both red hot and the scanners reported they were made of steel. They looked seamless, but a tech scan detected a seal in the first one and the fire fighters opened it. By then the warehouse was full of smoke and the two dropboxes and steel containers were hissing with steam from high pressure water jets and bubbling chem fire retardent and bursts of carbon dioxide. When the seal cracked open, the fire within blasted forth in a fierce eruption just like a volcano, shooting up to the ceiling, dropping the firefighters to the floor. They got up again and strangled the flames with foam and vac and carbon dioxide, flooding the container and whatever was in there. Then they did the same to the other steel box.

"What a bloody mess," the boss said from behind the barricades that the firefighters had erected inside the warehouse. The place looked like it had been hit by a bomb. "What a disaster. Now what the hell was that?"

"Wrong question," one of the firefighters answered him, staring grimly into the first steel container. "You mean *who* the hell was that?"

"What?"

"There's a body in there. Not much left of it – burnt to ashes. This is a steel coffin. And the body was strapped down by steel chains. Quite securely. I wonder if he was alive when they put him in there."

"There's a body in this one too," another firefighter said, peering into the other steel coffin. "Poor guy. Time to call the cops."

Δ

"That's amazing," Arie said. We were seated on the open-air Tea Terrace having a light breakfast while watching Quaba's double sunrise, and it was a stirring sight. Honeyhair was by my side, and Arie and Blondie were with us. Arie and I were clad in Legion black while

Honeyhair and Blondie wore their Civilian Support Corps outfits. We all wore uniform coldcoats as the mornings warm up slowly on Quaba. It was Senday and Senday is an offday on Quaba, even for the Legion. But Legion troopers don't sleep late so there we were.

It *was* amazing, I thought. Quaba 7 orbited a double star system, two hot white suns so bright and lovely it made your skin crawl and your eyes water. Now, watching Quaba I creeping up from a bloody pool on the southern horizon while Quaba II was starting to light up the east like a soundless white-hot nuclear blast, I felt our life was complete. The sky was a peaceful cobalt blue. It was cold and still. I sipped at my dox. Wonderful.

"We should do this more often. It's beautiful," Blondie said. "And this tea is just fantastic. They make it from real tea leaves and wow, you should try it." The Tea Terrace was a civilian shop in downtown Quaba City but it was not too crowded. Most of the people there were military, as civilians tend to sleep late, especially on offdays. As the capital of ConFree, Quaba City hosted a whole lot of Legion and Fleetcom personnel, as well as plenty of other government folks. Quaba City used to be known as Quaba Station when it was Hqs Fleetcom for the Black Fleet, and it still was that but it was also the temporary capital of the Confederation of Free Worlds. The capital rotated from world to world but as no other ConFree planet had been lobbying for the position, it remained at Quaba for now.

"What a place," Honeyhair said, gazing dreamily at the view, while I was gazing dreamily at her. My love, I thought. My lover, my wife, my obsession. She was tall and slim and lovely, long silky honey-colored hair which had prompted me to name her Honeyhair. And light green eyes, limpid magical eyes that could hypnotize me at a glance. I had fallen for her the first instant I saw her strolling with Blondie through the corridors of the *Dark Lady*, on our way to Basic Training on Providence. Arie had been at my side on that occasion, and he had been obsessed with Blondie from that moment on. And now Honeyhair was mine, and Blondie was Arie's. Or, maybe more accurately, we were theirs.

Arie was my closest comrade. We had met on our home world Eugarat, while enlisting in the Legion. His warname was Nitro. He was

a little guy who looked so young he sometimes was mistaken for a girl, but he was a first class athlete and a contact master and the last guy who asked if he was a girl got a front face kick in reply. Blondie was an angelic hot little chick who was Honeyhair's closest friend before they met us, and that had not changed. Arie and I treated them both very well. We knew how lucky we were.

The Tea Terrace had a terrific view of downtown Quaba City, which was studded with impressive low-rise government buildings, parks and monuments. The stone buildings were all of similar design, a pale greenish cast that had a very calming effect. The new air raid shelter had been constructed right in the middle of the government center in the pedestrian park, but was surrounded by trees and the architecture matched the other buildings except for the size. It was huge, but hidden in trees so it looked all right.

"I hope we don't ever get to use that thing," Honeyhair said. "Trina and I were assigned to the air aid shelter in Providence and we thought the D's were going to bomb us and we'd have to fight off Demon infantry. That was scary." Trina was Blondie's civilian name. Honeyhair couldn't stop using it, just like I couldn't stop calling Nitro, Arie.

The rising double suns were now glinting off the still lake that ran around the city's north and western suburbs, and the water was glimmering like a lake of gold. Down in the streets, aircars were gliding along serenely between the buildings. Off to the east we could see the starport. Starcraft were silently lifting off, then heading for the vac as the muffled roar floated past us. Quaba Port was the busiest starport in ConFree.

A family with kids entered the terrace and a little boy and girl ran to the metal guard rails to check out the view.

"See?" I said. "There are real people living out here, even kids. Delta Research is so comfortable we could live there forever, without ever getting out and seeing who it is we work for."

"Kids," Honeyhair said. "When are we going to have kids?"

"Kids? Um...yeah. Sure. We can have kids." It was the first time she had mentioned that.

"When?"

"When? Oh, gee, I dunno. We should kind of enjoy ourselves first, no?"

"When?"

"Ahh, maybe – twenty or thirty years, what do you think?"

"Don't talk to him, Sheila, we'll decide that one," Blondie said. "No need to involve these two."

Arie and I exchanged glances. All right, let them decide. I already knew I'd lose any argument with Honeyhair over any issue, important or trivial. But since I loved her like crazy, it didn't matter.

"So everybody's happy, right?" I asked. "This is our new Pandaravos, our new Happyland, right?"

"Sure is," Arie confirmed. "This is top-of-the-line duty. You don't even break into a sweat."

"And the medunit is perfect, for both of us," Honeyhair said. Honeyhair was now chief of the medunit and Blondie was her assistant. Both were qualified nurses and had worked for Bees in Pandaravos. But Bees had a new job now. Arie was with our security unit under Doggie, with Scout and Smiley.

We had all loved Pandaravos. We had even loved the Hole. It was a cosmic secret installation, Site 888, which ConFree had set up with the Assidics to exploit captured Demon secrets. That was quite a story but it was history now. Later the mission had morphed into Delta Research to exploit the DX visions that some of us started having after Galinta. Ice had named it Happyland. Yes, we had loved it. But Quaba seemed like even better duty. And here, the chances of getting shot in the head were pretty low. Since two of us had already been shot in the head, and didn't much like the experience, that was a real issue.

We were watching the kids fooling around. It was a real pleasure. The last kids I had seen had been sliced up by lasers as a parting gift from the D's. I preferred the live versions.

"Do you think the civilians appreciate what we do?" Arie asked.

"I don't think it matters," I replied. "They don't know what we do. But we do it for them. If we fail, they die. Sooner or later."

"That could apply to the Legion, or to Delta Research," Blondie said.

"Yes, it could. Yes to both. So we'd better get it right."

Δ

"It's good to see you all again," Doctor Dimension said. Saka and Ice and Bees and I were in the lounge in airchairs as the Doc chatted with us about the overall mission. He was always interesting. His dark eyes sparkled in a pale, intense face as his tangled brown hair brushed his shoulders. The Prof sat nearby, probably to ensure Doctor D didn't go careening off the subject, which he often did.

"Ah, and now we have a new prophet – the Black Angel, right?" Doctor D beamed at Bees.

"Just call me Bees, please." Bees smiled back at him.

"Bees? Bees? Were you a beekeeper or something?"

"No. It's a long story."

"All right, Bees. And the rest of you. Congratulations for your wonderful mutant genes, which you will certainly pass on to your children to form a new race. This is tremendously exciting! We're birthing a new race! With amazing new racial characteristics – chronological viewing, prophecy, and telepathy. And consider the source! Alien Brights – alien genes, reinforcing these ancient human genes, our own, which were partially alien anyway. What a glorious circle! You folks are certainly extraordinary!"

"Have some dox, Doctor," the Prof said, handing Doctor D a steaming cup of dox.

"Oh, am I wandering again? The Professor is too polite to mention it, but when he interrupts I know I'm off the subject. All right." He took a sip of dox. "Excellent! Thank you, Prof. Now – the mission. My own mission is Dimension X. I won't bore you with what I'm doing to research that dimension but ConFree is putting a lot of resources into the mission. And we're making good progress. When we learn anything that will assist you in your mission, we'll let you know. Your own mission is twofold, but the chron viewing part – prophecy – is first. We're not sure how to encourage these wonderful DX dreams that you've been having from time to time, but we're going to do our best to put your minds into receptive channels. We don't know how to do that yet, so please be patient."

Once Doctor D got started talking, he didn't like to stop. I tried to remain patient.

"Your visions have all occurred while you were asleep," he rambled on, "so we're going to be monitoring your DX channels while you're sleeping, as unobtrusively as possible. We're also going to be continually updating you on the galactic political situation, just to up the chances that you will recognize what the dream is about, if it is about something that's going on in the news. Once you do have a DX dream, we will use a brainscan to gather all possible details about the vision. You know how that works already."

"Are we going to have any privacy in our bedrooms?" Ice asked.

"Of course! We're going to affix some DX monitors to your scalp – they're tiny little things, you won't even know they're there. But they won't do anything until you activate them. And you'll activate them by turning on a little device on your bedside table. You turn it on just before you drift off to sleep. All it does is monitor. No pain, no fuss. Turn it off in the morning, then forget about it. If there was any activity at night, we will have recorded it and we can review it in the morning. Neat, no?"

"Do you have any idea what prompts these DX dreams?" Saka asked.

"No. Although I subscribe to Paula Deep's theory that intense worry and concern and stress are causal factors."

"So if we're happy and content, we're fighting the program," I said.

"I believe I could get you a transfer to the Legion Recovery Hospital, Prophet, if you think that would help," the Prof said, with a happy smile. The man does have a strange sense of humor.

"Just forget what I said, all right?" I shut down quickly. The Legion Neurological and Physiological Reconstructive Recovery Hospital was a first-class nightmare. We called it the House of Horrors. Saka, Ice and I had all spent time there, and had vowed never to return.

"The second focus of our program will be telepathy, that is, extrasensory psychic communication. At first we did not realize that your new DX brain structure involved telepathy but then along came the Black Angel – um, I mean Miss Bees, and her DX gave her

extraordinary telepathy, reading the thoughts of our Bright benefactors. Well, of course! The Brights are telepaths! They don't even talk – normally. So why should your DX brain structures not contain that gene? Miss Paula will facilitate your telepathic training. So pay attention to her! She's very good."

Δ

"My goodness! You're easy to read – just like Prophet!" Little Miss Paula had the two of us, Bees and me, facing each other in very comfortable airchairs while she supervised from a little glidechair. We were in an examination room, with the lights turned low and the windows darkened. "I wonder if that's DX or just your regular thought processes. But you're clear." She was addressing Bees. Paula was a pretty little thing, carelessly combed brown hair, brown eyes and full, tempting lips. She looked like a kid. "My, you really like Prophet, don't you? Be careful now – no touching! Prophet doesn't like touching. Or at least not when I was doing it. Oh, who's that? You're thinking about someone else now. Ooh, quite a stud – I mean, a real man. Who's that?"

"That's Scout – my fiancée."

"Oh good. Looks like a good catch. All right, well back to business. Let me take a peek at you, Prophet. Don't worry, I won't touch. Uh-oh, what's this? Oh, is that so? You really like Bees, do you? Yes, you do. Oh my goodness. This session could become very touchy-feely, no? Oh, and there's your wife, that classy princess. I remember her. So you're both taken, so no monkey business, all right? Here's what we're going to do. Background, Bees you have received telepathic thoughts from the Brights. But so far not from humans. Right?"

"That's right."

"So we start supposing that you should be able to receive thoughts from Prophet because he also has the DX brain structure. And if you can do that, we can go on to further develop you and then get Prophet to try the same thing. Now the best way to experiment like this is in a calm environment. I want you both to relax as best you can, just lie back in those wonderful airchairs and relax everything and Bees,

Prophet and the Blood March

I want you to see if you can receive any thoughts from Prophet. If you think you do, tell him what you hear. Prophet, you might want to throw random word-thoughts out there, slowly, just keep repeating them. I want no pressure on you for this experiment so I'm going to disappear for awhile. But I'll be checking from time to time to see if there's any progress, or to offer advice. And to ensure there's no touching." And she left the room, closing the door behind her.

"She's something, isn't she?" Bees asked.

"I hardly dare think when she's in the room. She's good. But a little...well, never mind."

"All right, I'm going to try and read your thoughts. It was easy with the Brights. But we'll see. I've never heard any thoughts from a non-Bright, as Paula said."

"Fine. I'll just lie here thinking of a word or two."

I lay there quietly, wondering what I should think about. Maybe it should be about Bees. And what words would I associate with Bees? Spirituality, certainly. She had been in charge of faith, in Delta. Nobody had appointed her to do that, at first. She had just done it. Effectively. It was like she had a direct link to God. Faith. Yes. At first I thought she was spooky. Creepy even, chanting to God when we were charging into battle. But then I had seen her faith in action. Good lord – she was like a soldier of God, fearless and faithful, speaking to God for us all. Faith. Yes, that was the word. Faith faith faith. That was Bees' word.

"I hear you, Prophet," she said quietly.

"Really? What did you hear?"

"Faith. And yes, it is my word," Bees said.

I shouted with delight, leaping out of my chair. Paula burst in the door. "What!"

"She's done it," I said. And that was the start of our telepath project.

Δ

"Tell me again how this works," Honeyhair said. We were stranding by the bed, looking over the little black device on the

nightstand. We were ready for a good night's sleep. I was in shorts and tee and Honeyhair was in a silky nightgown.

"Well, they've attached four little receivers to my scalp," I said. "And it's true, I'm hardly aware of them. They're set up to receive any neural signals from my DX brain structure. So if I have any DX dreams they should record it, and feed it to the lab. But only if this device is on. We turn it on before we go to sleep, then turn it off in the morning. They did some testing on me in the lab and it seems to be working."

"So it will record your DX dreams?"

"That's the idea."

"Is it going to record anything else that goes on in this bedroom?"

"Well, I sure hope not."

"Are you sure you need to turn that thing on to activate your DX brain?"

"It won't activate my brain. It will only record any DX signals."

"So now I'm sleeping not only with you, but with the whole lab."

"Don't be silly. All they'll see is the DX signals."

"Well, I feel like I'm sleeping with three at least. Maybe we should name him."

"Him?"

"Yeah, let's call him Oscar. Our silent companion."

"Oscar. Fine. I've got to get some sleep. Goo-night, Sweetie Pie."

"Good night, Dear. Good night, Oscar. Shall I turn him on, or will you?"

"I'll get it," I said, activating the unit.

I was exhausted. It had been a long day, struggling to activate my apparently non-existent telepath receiving skills. It was hard – very hard. What if I didn't have the correct gene or whatever was required? I tried to relax my mind but the day's events were swirling around in my head. Got to relax. Got to sleep. I started to drift off.

"Dear."

"What?" I asked.

"I want to play." She wants to play, I thought. Great.

"All right," I said. "What do you want to play? Checkers? Strato? What?" In my defense, I was totally exhausted and not thinking straight.

"Does Oscar's range extend to the sofa in the living room?" she asked icily.

"I'm sorry, Sweetie Pie." I hurriedly turned Oscar off. First things first. Honeyhair was always Number One on my list of Things to Do Now. And if I ever forgot that, she reminded me very quickly.

"I'm not your sweetie-pie!" Oh no! Now I'd have to spend at least an hour calming her down. All right, all right, I can do that. No sleep for me.

Δ

Paula was getting frustrated with me. I just wasn't "hearing" any thoughts from my DX colleagues. Bees and Ice were already reading each other's thoughts, but Saka and I were still struggling. Paula had paired me with all three, Bees, Ice, and Saka. I could transmit, all right, but I couldn't receive. Psychically challenged, she called me. But she wouldn't give up. The fact that I could "transmit" meant that my DX structure was all there, and it was just a matter of activating it correctly. I had "received" just fine, on Vezhedak when real Brights wanted to communicate with me, so I knew it could be done. So we continued trying.

Now it was Ice. We sat in the soft darkness, relaxing in airchairs, close together. Paula had left the room to avoid distracting us. Ice – my! She had successfully read my thoughts already, and was getting better at it quickly. And Bees had read her thoughts, too. But I hadn't read anyone yet.

"You all set?" she asked me.

"As ready as I'll ever be. Go ahead," I said.

I closed my eyes and tried to concentrate on the thoughts in my head. How could I know what were my own thoughts and what were thoughts from somebody else? What would Ice's thoughts be like? Would they sound like her? And what did she sound like? Quiet, guarded, private. In the old days she was hostile, angry, suspicious –

and full of hate. But she had changed – a lot. Now she was more – open. Trusting. Vulnerable. I guess getting killed can do that to you.

I tried to relax, and listen to my thoughts. Thoughts like little butterflies, fluttering around silently in the garden of my brain neurons. Could I hear anything? What would Ice broadcast? I couldn't "hear" a thing. Just silent butterflies. I thought about Ice. On Starhaven we had come across a dying slaver. He was burnt black from the airstrike, but still barely alive. Ice had shot him without a word. Was it an act of hatred, or mercy? Nobody dared ask her.

Faint faint flutters. What was that? A ghostly impression of a word. Did I hear that right? Love. Love. Could that be it? No. No, I am imagining it. I must be imagining it. Ice wouldn't send that to me, would she?

"I think I hear something," I said. "But I'm not sure."

"What did you hear?"

"I'm probably imagining it. It was very faint. Like a whisper from the bottom of a well."

"What did you hear?"

"Love. That's what I heard. Love."

"Yes, Prophet, that was me. That was my word. Congratulations! Welcome to the psycher community. You are no longer a deadhead."

I felt a great relief. Success, at last. I knew I had a long way to go, but now I was on the right road. A little butterfly, so that's what they are like. All right, I'll nail the next one.

"Ice. Any reason you chose that word?" I asked.

"Yes. That was for Delta. That's what I feel for Delta – everyone in Delta."

Δ

"Feel better?" Scout asked. Scout and Smiley and I had just finished blasting away on Delta Research's excellent indoor firing range for an hour. We were catching some fresh air on a wide balcony terrace that ran around the building.

"I feel terrific!" I said. "I love it. I just love it. I'm not sure why." I took a sip of steaming dox. We had visited the snack bar right after our shooting session.

"It's part of our genes," Scout said. "That's why. Cheers!" He raised his cup.

"That's a ten," Smiley said. "You don't ever miss, do you?" he asked Scout.

"It's why I'm still here," Scout replied. It was only true. Scout was an intense, rangy Outworlder, tall and wiry and tough as nails. I knew he had been with the Deadman Scouts on Sirrah, with the insurgency, battling the local System clones, and had fled the planet only when the insurgency was crushed. The Legion was lucky to get him.

We leaned on the guardrail, looking out at the view. We could see much of Quaba City, but it was a dark, overcast day. A cold wind blew into our faces. Dark grey clouds scudded close overhead and we could not see either of the stars that gave life to the planet.

"Look at this place," Smiley said, looking up into the sky. "Not too inviting, huh? The first settlers must have wondered if they were doing the right thing." Smiley was a young Outworlder with short blond hair and a ruddy face with freckles and a constant faint smile on his lips. It was hard to discourage him. He loved his life, he loved the Legion and he knew he was in the right place. He was a refugee from Katag, from slavery and race hate and oppression. He loved ConFree – he told me he had kissed the ground when his family had arrived in ConFree as dirt-poor refugees. He always made me feel ashamed of myself for growing up in ConFree and never appreciating it.

"It looks like the end of the world," Scout said. A light rain had begun, just a cold mist, floating in with the wind. Evil dark clouds blew past overhead, casting us into darkness. It was cold and bitter. I could see some of the government buildings not far off – seemingly embracing that dark sky.

"They were extremists," I said. "The first Outworlders to land here. They were extremists, fleeing slavery, seeking liberty. They were strong, fearless people, determined to forge their own future here. Crazy brave. Who else would have chosen a planet that orbited a

double star? Crazy. And look what they've done! They would have looked up at this sky and said, fine. That's our sky. We'll settle right here. Nothing is going to stop us. And if the System follows us, we attack them, and fight to the death. They had nothing to lose, you see. Nothing to lose. Yeah, you're right, Scout. It's in our genes."

Scout laughed. "Well said! Where did you learn that?"

"Oh, I studied history, that's all."

"Yes," Smiley said. "That's what my dad taught me, too. Secretly."

"How are the wedding plans going?" I asked Scout.

"Just fine," he said. "I'm just trying to keep out of the way. Bees is having fun, acting like a teenager – instead of like some cosmic avenger. She's enjoying herself."

"When will it be?" Smiley asked.

"I haven't been informed yet. No need to know, I guess. Um, Prophet, you're going to be best man, is that all right?"

"Why thank you, Scout, I'd be honored."

"Smiley, you'll be right up front, too. All of Delta will be there. And there will be plenty of free-roaming honeys there too, for anyone who has managed to escape the fair sex so far, like you and Doggie and Bird."

"I think Bird has been captured by that blonde nurse from Valhalla Hospital on Veda. Remember her?" I asked.

"Are they, um, still together?"

"Distance is not a problem if you have your own starship," I said. "Bird can't seem to forget her. Funny how the girls do that to us."

"Ice is going to be Maid of Honor," Scout said. "Bees will be wearing Ice's wedding gown, I've learned that much."

"The ice princess outfit. Wow. Good choice." I said.

"Bees really admires you, Prophet. You know that?"

"Well, I really admire her, too."

"She says you saved her life."

"You saved her life. Not me."

"She said...you gave her hope, at a bad time."

"*She* gave us all hope. You know that. You're lucky to have her."

"Yeah, I know. That I know."



"Good morning, boys and girls," the Professor said. He was addressing us in one of the smaller briefing rooms, standing before a large wall screen that showed the Delta Research seal, a delta entangled with the infinity symbol. There were six of us there, seated in airchairs, the project core, Ice and Saka and Bees and me, plus Doctor Dimension and Paula Deep. They were our two most important facilitators, although we had plenty of others who lectured us and interacted with us in various ways. It was a fairly relaxed meeting, with dox available for all. The only formality that the Prof insisted on was that we all wear our blacks when on duty.

"I'm pleased with the progress we've seen so far," the Prof said. "You are all growing as telepaths. It's exciting to see how fast you are all catching on. My thanks to you all for your hard work, and especially to Miss Deep for her patient guidance to her flock." Paula smiled in delight.

"Of course our primary mission is to encourage DX dreams from you, and the steps we've taken so far will, I am convinced, result in success. But we must be patient. We continue to study the DX neural pathways and if we come up with any promising new methods we will certainly introduce them to you. For the present we can only wait. In the meantime, however, we want to prepare you to be able to recognize what you are seeing, for that day when you do experience another DX dream. One thing we can do is to ensure that you are all well briefed on the current galactic situation. You must all realize what is happening all around us as the various imperfect instruments of galactic governments respond, or fail to respond, to challenges facing themselves and their populations. I feel myself capable of briefing you on this issue and I will do so, from time to time. Feel free to help yourselves to more dox or tea or whatever you want from the snack table." The wall screen flickered into a depiction of the entire inhabited galaxy, a glorious starmap with an overlay showing the political divisions.

"A wise man once said that peace is that brief moment in time when everyone stands around reloading," the Prof said. "That's exactly where we are at this particular moment in galactic history. The Demons

recently sent massive invasion forces into our universe and into our galaxy, landing on Traunair, Galinta, Dajusdevon and Veda. They were repulsed, at considerable cost – as you all know from personal experience. ConFree, the biogens and the AC all countered the D's, and the Brights intervened on both Galinta and Veda to assure a defeat for the D's. Then they returned to their own universe, without a word. And Delta Research played a big part in those events."

A big part, I thought. That's for sure. I tried not to think about that nightmare. Piracy duty, Drusweaven, Quatar, Galinta, Kratar, Vezhedak, Veda. Violence, blood, death and resurrection. Walking the immortal's unholy road, chanting to dead gods.

"We have no idea what is going to happen next," the Prof said. "Will the D's strike at us again? If so, where? And what about all the other forces, humans and aliens, that have reason to hate us, and would like nothing better than to harm us? This is why Delta Research exists. We need advance warning, for whatever may be coming. Just a hint, that's all we need. Just a hint of the event, the target, the enemy, whatever it may be, to allow us to take action to counter it, whatever it is. Hundreds, thousands or millions of lives may be saved, if Delta can alert the Legion. Like we did on Galinta, Prophet. Like we did on Veda, Ice. I am confident we will do that, again. Now – the galactic political situation – perhaps it will stimulate some DX thought but even if it doesn't, you will be better informed citizens.

"Let us begin with the Omni Swarm. These dangerous, advanced alien psychers from the universe Plane Prime established a primary base on the world Traunair, some sixty-five hundred light years from the Crista Cluster. They were advancing relentlessly into humanity's portion of the galaxy for years, killing two billion humans as they did so, when the Legion finally discovered how to counter their weapons, and repulsed them back to the Traunair Sector." The starmap expanded to allow us to view the Traunair Sector. "In 381, the Demons hit Traunair hard and landed large numbers of troops. Sometime later the AC captured the Demon weaponry that allowed us to discover the weak points in the D's defenses. We passed that info to the O's, and they used it to repulse the D's. The O's are currently in genetic

hibernation but we hope our assistance caused them to cross us off their list of things to be killed and eaten.

"Which brings us to the D's. You know all about these nasty aliens. They are from the universe Mid Haven, which we didn't even know about until they appeared here. We know quite a bit about it now, thanks to Delta Research and to captured weaponry and one cooperative Demon – again thanks to Delta Research."

"Thanks to you, Prof," I said.

"No, no, Prophet. Thanks to all of you. The D's were initially superior to us technologically, but we succeeded in countering their weapons systems, and defeated them on Galinta, Dajusdevon, and Veda. This is the most likely current threat. They seem quite determined. Despite losing their saucer starcraft factory to suicidal aliens."

That was us, I thought. That was Delta. Suicidal aliens, that was us, all right. What a perfect description.

"They may attack at any time. Any place. They are desperate. They are under attack by the Brights, in Mid Haven. They are fleeing extermination. Fleeing their own universe, under attack. So they must achieve victory or face death, for the race. And so must we. They are merciless and ruthless. They will exterminate us if they can. That's the wheel of history. Victory or death. And the strongest will survive. So let's hope we can see any new threat in advance.

"And now we have the Brights. Totally unexpected, they intervened briefly on Galinta, turned the tide against the D's, and left. And, almost in passing, revived our dead. And that created Delta Research. Then later the Brights intervened in depth on Veda, ensured our defeat of the D's, and once again disappeared without comment. You carry the Bright colors on your armor now. I understand nobody wanted to have that insignia erased. I sure don't blame you. The Brights are the biggest potential threat, because they are so far advanced we have no idea even how to begin understanding their science. Bees, the armor they gave you was clearly stripped of the more advanced capabilities, but what they left was very useful. We have duplicated their forcefield shielding and it is – well, almost miraculous. We can expect future models of Legion armor to incorporate Bright shielding.

"Now, the Brights have so far proven to be friendly and benevolent towards us, as you know. But they seem disinterested in further contact. Our worries center around their miraculous technology. Should they change their attitude toward us, we will be in deep trouble. They'll kick our asses all to hell, the way things stand now. So we'd better hope they don't change their friendly – or neutral – attitude towards us.

Δ

"Beautiful day, huh?" Smiley asked. The Prof had given us fifteen marks and Arie and Ice and Smiley and I were sipping dox around a little plex table in Delta Research's central garden park, which was lined with cooling trees and flower bushes.

"For Quaba, it's not bad," I replied. It was overcast, grey and cold. An icy mist was filtering down slowly.

"Brisk!" Arie exclaimed. "I love it!"

"The Prof is right about the Brights," Ice said. "That's a real problem. What if they show up again – and turn against us?"

We were silent.

"We all owe them our lives," Ice continued. "Not just me – but all of Delta."

"Why should they turn against us?" Smiley asked.

"I don't know," Ice replied. "But I'll not be fighting them. They brought Saka and me back from the dead, and they saved Bees as well. Back from the dead! I'll quit the Legion before I turn my E on the Brights."

"There's no sense in fretting about something that hasn't happened yet," I said. "Prof just wants to be ready for everything. Nobody has any plans to fight the B's."

"I'll fight Demons all day, all week – but not Brights. I think Bees is right – they're –"

"Calm down, Ice," I said. "It's not going to happen. We'd better get back to the conference room, it's almost time."

Δ

"So. Now we concentrate on our human enemies," the Prof continued. The screen focused in on a huge swath of space labeled INNERS, overlaid by a confusing tangle of political divisions. "Enemies. Yes." He paused, contemplating the term. "Humans, fighting among themselves. Why do we always do that? Here was mankind's origin – in the Inners. Here the diaspora began. We spread outwards to the Gassies, the Gulf and then to the Outers – all the way to the Outvac. Mankind changed, as we settled new worlds and evolved with the new environments. What ultimately happened was the Inners, Gassies and Gulf came to be dominated by the United System Alliance slave state, while the colonists in the Outers broke away, at considerable cost, and formed the Confederation of Free Worlds. Then, not so long ago, the System collapsed into a myriad of successor states. Empires always collapse. And empires based on lies cannot possibly survive.

"Let's look at the Inner states first. The System disappeared but its failed political philosophy survived. Anarcho-tyranny, totalitarianism, auto-genocide, deception, slavery, hate propaganda, brainwashing, resentment and forced redistribution of wealth forms a powerful formula which tyrants love – and it is still in use. The auto-genocide part ensures that peoples who adopt this philosophy will disappear from history, but it takes some time so we are stuck with the problem for quite awhile.

"The UMC – United Mocain Coalition – is the heart of the Inners and the direct successor of the failed System. It represents the Mocain race, which previously controlled the System. They are a warrior people who are now governing without the advice of their former Orman advisors. They have cast off many troublesome worlds and the slice of spacetime they control is greatly reduced and just a small fraction of the System's former extent. They rule over Sol, Alphard, Luyten, Orm and plenty of other worlds – billions of people. We can expect nothing but trouble from them should they make any further efforts to expand their zone of control. So far, it's quiet. Remember, we are all reloading.

"And here we have the Hyadfed." The area lit up on the starmap. "The Hyades Federation broke away from the System, first as a semi-loyal slave satellite, then as a full-fledged independent slave state,

offering only new chains to its people. The Hyades Cluster, Elidos and Eiros are the primary systems. The rulers despise us, but are careful not to get us upset. They tried that before and it didn't work out well for them. The people are mostly loyal slaves, shuffling through the usual debris of a failed slave state without even imagining that a better life may be possible. People like that are truly slaves, and deserve that status. However, one portion of the population recognized the situation, acted boldly, and is now free." The Hyades Cluster flickered and revealed an entity entitled BPSA.

"The biogens, oppressed for generations by humans, became self-aware, organized, and launched a violent insurrection. It was successful on several Hyades worlds and they now control a healthy slice of the Hyades Cluster. The Biogen People's Solidarity Accord sent troops to help ConFree when we were attacked by the Omni Horde. That was a good move. The Legion responds well to blood sacrifices. Not a single human state moved to help us when we faced the O's alone. But the biogens did. They are now our faithful ally, and under our protection. This is right in the Mocains' back yard. They must be enraged.

"Another giant nearby pain for the UMC is the AC, the Assid Confederation, located on Pandaravos circling the star Algenib, and the nearby Dajusdevon system. You know all about the Assidics and what wonderful allies they are. They broke away from the System on their own and nobody seemed willing to challenge them. They are now strong and free and fearless as well. They stood by our side on Galinta against the D's, with the Biogens. And then faced the D's again on Dajusdevon – with us at their sides. Without their help we might have lost the war with the D's. They are part of the Triple Alliance, ConFree, the BPSA and the AC. ConFree stands by its friends.

"And here – also in the heart of the Inners – we have the PPDD, the People's Progressive Democratic Distributive. Calgoran and Spartos are the primary worlds. They have adopted all the worst parts of the System's political ideology. It's the perfect form of government for parasite slugs who refuse to work but want to be supported by those who do work. Except it doesn't last long, because in no time at all the workers are gone, the government has no more money, the

parasites riot and destroy the state, and nothing is left except misery, ruins, starvation and crime. We don't expect the PPDD to last much longer. It is not seen as a threat to us.

"A bit further out in space from the Hyades we find the Pleiades Association, consisting of the Pleiades Cluster and outlying worlds. These people appear to be sincere in cleaning up the mess left over from the System, and encouraging alternate forms of government. ConFree has been encouraging a closer relationship, and giving them advice. It's too early to see what will happen here.

"Straddling the Inners and the Gulf we have the Dark Cloud Alliance, consisting of the Dark Cloud worlds, Berichros and Picos. They have denounced System political philosophy, dissolved redistribution, encouraged private property and freedom of speech. They even went so far as to enter into military cooperation with ConFree. This has certainly upset the UMC. ConFree is developing the relationship.

"Moving into the Gassies, we come to the Pherdan Federation. The principal worlds are Pherdos, Coldmark and Katag. This is one of the larger and more stable of the System successor states. They are a slave state, but relatively moderate and rational in comparison to some of the others. The Pherdan Fed and the UMC both represent real threats to ConFree, should they wish to initiate aggressive actions. We fought a major campaign against the Pherdans not so long ago, and punished them severely. They still pose a real threat, but they are likely to proceed very cautiously before going in for another round. Again, they're reloading.

"Bordering the Pherdan Fed in space-time and not far from the Outmark Frontier is the Gassies Coalition: Monaro, Galgos, Alshana and other states seeking security in the post-System chaos. The Gassies C, as they call it, still embraces the System's failed political model but they are open to reason. Galgos, for example, has always done things their way, and hosts the Galactic Free Trade Zone, which is run by ConFree and spreads prosperity near and far."

Galgos, I thought. The Free Trade Zone. That's where Doggie served, as a K9 officer, before he was assigned to Providence to head up our squad. That's where his first dog was killed.

"And here we find another major world that broke away from the System – Santos. It is now known as the Santos Freestate, or Santos Free, after a unified insurgency of Outworlders and Transgens tossed out the Orman tyranny that succeeded the System. The transgens were pig-human transplants with limited intelligence but good imagination. At first they cooperated with the Ormans in the former government, the Santos Newhuman Socialrevolutionary Diversegalitarian Democooperative. Later the Outworlders joined with the Transgens to rid history of that particular obscenity. Santos Free has friendly relations with ConFree.

"Lastly, we have the Gulf. You've had plenty of experience there, and you know what a chaotic place it is. All three major political entities there – the Asumara Holy Commune, the Gulf Union and the Pegal Stelcom – are insane psychopathic totalitarian slave state anarchy-tyrannies, ruling over populations of ignorant, terrified slaves by brute force, killing anyone who dares to oppose them. We had to fight a full-scale war with Asumara to show them there were consequences for raiding a ConFree world. We pretty much destroyed everything, but they're still there, rebuilding their infrastructure. If they hit us again, we'll destroy them again. The Gulf Union and the Pegal Stelcom are even worse than Asumara, totally isolated from the galaxy, focused mostly on inflicting rape, torture and theft on their populations. Remember, boys and girls, the galaxy is full of horror and injustice. So much of it that we cannot possibly address it. ConFree exists to look after the interests of the people of ConFree – not the rest of the galaxy.

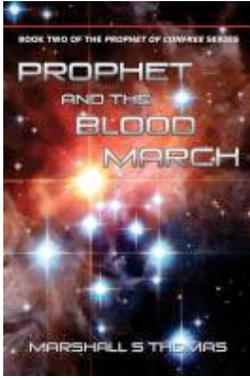
"There are plenty of independent worlds out there – in the Gulf and elsewhere – like Galinta – that answer to no one. If the Gulf states were responsible, or even rational, they should have responded to the Demon invasion of Galinta. But they did nothing. So ConFree had to act. We didn't want to get involved in the Gulf. But if the D's had taken that world without opposition, they would have built up an impregnable base to launch from, to conquer the rest of the galaxy. So that's why we had to act. And why it was the morally correct course of action.

"Now – into the out." The starmap flashed and spun over to a huge sector of space labeled OUTERS. "ConFree is the strongest, most

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stable and most successful political entity in the galaxy. That's because of our people – fierce individualists who will always fight tyranny, and never submit. Our core worlds are here, in the Crista Cluster. Scattered around the rim of the Outvac are other ConFree worlds. Dindabai and Andrion, on the other side of the Outvac, were attacked by the Omni horde, but Fleetcom and the Legion defeated them in the battle of Andrion Deep. Augusta and Camelora also had to fight off the O's, and did so successfully. Marala is no longer on current starmaps. It perished when the Legion detonated the star as final notice to the O's that they would never inherit a world from us. Everyone died on Marala – all the O's, all the ConFree inhabitants – and the Legion and Fleetcom techs who guided our doomsday weapon into the star. That's what you have to be prepared to do – to show the entire galaxy that we are a very serious bunch, and willing to die for our cause." The Professor bowed his head for a moment, as if looking over his notes. But I don't think he was looking over his notes.

"Yes. Well, we're still doing that, aren't we?" he said, taking a deep breath. "That's what you folks did on Kratar, isn't it? I am honored to be associated with all of you. Let's take a ten-mark break, all right?" And he turned abruptly and left the room.



The young prophets of Delta Research struggle with the consequences of their talents as ConFree draws closer to the final struggle between the titanic forces of light and darkness. Yes, they can change the future. But questions arise - will the result be what they expect? Is it treason if you die for love? Is it suicide if you die for your squadies? Or, will the Blood March consume them all? Also by Marshall S Thomas - The Black March, Soldier of the Legion, Slave of the Legion, Secret of the Legion, and Prophet of ConFree.

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