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THE FALCON OF TECORA

(chapters 1-3)

by

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Part I: The Unseen Fear

Chapter One: Pony Tails

“I seek refuge in the Lord of Daybreak from the mischief of His creation; from the mischief of the night when she spreads her darkness; from the mischief of conjuring witches; from the mischief of the envier, when he envies.”

-The Holy Quran, 113:1-113:6

With a shrill whistle blast, several metal clangs pierced the cold air as the gates swung open. The ground shook as forty separate hooves started a cacophony of rumbling beats. Ponies huffed and puffed, their hot breath fogged into the cold air. Excited cries of the jockeys, boys and girls, resonated through the cheering crowds of parents, relatives, coaches, managers, and general observers like the chirps of tiny puppies.

Right out of the gates, the flamboyant eleven-year-old Hamza bin Khalil grabbed hold of the lead. Not many yards behind him rode a younger rider on an almost night

black pony. A long, dark and braided tail flipped through the headwinds from underneath the rider's cap as the little horse beat through the shrill air. Riding goggles sheathed piercing blue eyes, tight lips betrayed utter determination. She drove the pony named Windchaser with trust and grim resolve. Reins and legs communicated with the young animal in perfect unison. Ellen Rilus steeled herself for nothing less than victory.

Though the talented Hamza had a two year advantage in development on Ellen, her father's words ran through her mind. "Sheer will supported by positive action can achieve impossible tasks." Before the gates had flown open, she could recite the whole sentence in her mind. As the frozen air particles and wind blasted into her face and she struggled to maintain control of her volatile mount, only key points now came to the surface of thought.

Sheer will. Sheer will. Positive action. Positive Action. Accomplish anything.

The first jump fast approached. She came close to Hamza's tail, or rather that of his pony. The first three-foot log wall was suddenly upon her, and Hamza slipped away from her mind. Windchaser leapt and cleared his legs over it, but landed with a frightening wobble and nearly lost his balance. Ellen's pony bled precious momentum and Hamza gained a few yards on them.

Ellen pushed him hard, driving him with more grit and fury. At five yards distance from Hamza, Ellen and Windchaser cleared the second jump with perfection. After making the third jump, thirty-five yards from the second, they came back up on Hamza again.

Approaching the fourth wall, she caught a glimpse of someone in the pavilion at the jump point. There he was, her father, Ibrahim Rilus himself. Pride swelled in her chest, and love gripped her heart.

He stood, his clean and handsome face gaunt and firm. Dark brown, close-cropped hair framed his same-colored eyes, always filled with powerful demanding.

A smile almost crept onto her face, but then she saw him raise his hand, lift his finger and point forward. She could see his lips utter, "Shoef."

Ellen suddenly realized how close she was to the next jump – three feet of logs only inches beneath Windchaser's nose. He leapt of his own accord, but his hind legs didn't clear and he tumbled head forward. Half of his equine face planted into the snowy track.

Cold air bit at Ellen's face as she soared through it. The reins slipped out of her fingers as her steed tumbled forward. She felt herself lifted up. Icy wind replaced her saddle seat. In less than a second she was completely freed from her companion.

Panic gripped Ellen's body, yet faded almost as soon as it rose. A heated rush went through her, bones chilled with seething fire. She tucked her elbow and readied herself to shoulder roll into the snowy ground.

With a resonating crunch she plowed into the icy powder, rolling end over end into the soft substance. Wet, cold crystals flung into her face and burned the skin of her exposed arms as she tried to shield herself from the full impact of the ground. The stop was sudden and unexpected, for the tumble felt like it was to last forever.

"By the Grace of Allah! Ellen!" cried Theodora, Ellen's mother, from the crowd. Her father silently shook his head.

“Oh, no,” announced the commentator. “Looks like little Rilus took a tumble!” His words echoed over the loudspeaker. The ringing staccato brought Ellen to the realization that she was still alive.

With an inward grunt, Ellen rose to her feet and checked her ability to function. She was okay, apparently, but the race was over for her now. One tumble equaled disqualification. She was riding right on the leader’s tail, but everyone had passed her by the time she rose to her feet. Ellen reckoned it had been a miracle she wasn’t squashed by any of them. Self-scolding surfaced in her heart. Her love for her father, and her search for a sign of pride in his face had cost her just that pride she sought.

“Ellen,” said her mother under her breath as she stopped her desperate sprint toward her daughter. Ellen was almost oblivious to her presence. “Are you all right?”

Yet the young girl walked past and ripped off her goggles, feet storming through the thick snow to the steed she had enough trust in to take her to the championship as the youngest contender at nine local years of age. The hooved beast already recovered his footing and now pawed the snow looking for grass.

“Oh, is that it? Have I not fed you enough!” she shouted. The pony’s head reared back and he snorted at her. “Maybe I shouldn’t feed you ever again. This was the championship! What were you thinking?”

The little horse snorted and huffed in rebuttle.

“To think I trusted you.”

Ellen felt her father’s hands place themselves on her shoulders from behind, calming her fiery spirit as he had always done. Her mother was still panicked and shaken by Ellen’s fall, but her father was only momentarily phased. He knew of her rock

steadiness more than Ellen did herself. She wasn't as malleable and breakable as any other child her age – from his own teachings.

“Life sucks sometimes, doesn't it?” he asked in his deep, casual voice, and chuckled.

Ellen sneered. But he was right. There seemed to be no more appropriate phrase, even though she knew Ibrahim Rilus was a much more elegant man than that.

“Now, let's get off the track,” he said as looked at the crowd around them.

“I suppose there's no other reason for it,” Ellen said as she recovered the reins and moved off the track and back toward the stables. “I could've won so easily. Over the next two jumps I would've had him!”

“Do I take it you want to retire ol' Windchaser now?” her father asked.

Ellen deliberated for a moment and looked up at the black pony beside her.

“No,” she said thoughtfully. “It wasn't his fault, or completely his fault at least.”

“Good,” her father said. “To tell you the truth, our family has no better pony. Of course, we have no better rider either.”

Ellen felt warmth in his words, his honesty, and was filled with a raw determination to win the next season's race. Just a little, bad fall had cost her the work of the last year. Controlling such a comparatively powerful beast was difficult enough for a small girl to handle, but she did it well enough to become a contender in the Bir Hakim Valley Races. She was, in fact, the youngest contender ever to participate by about three months. She still had a chance to be the youngest to win.

Ellen looked out toward the end of the track, several hundred winding yards away. Past the track she saw the open end of the Aleppo and Takrit mountains misted

over in the low, thick clouds of the Tecorani sky. This planet, stuck in an ice age that never seemed to end, often had those low skies. The image mirrored the dreariness in her chest.

No matter. There were other things in life to make her mark at – including the skiff races. She showed excellent mechanical aptitude and had phenomenal reflexes for her age, a product of genome modification. Who knew what she could accomplish at twelve? The minimum age to enter the skiff races was fourteen. She could do it. That was just how she was.

“Don’t sweat it, Ellen,” said her brother, Herod, only a year older. “Everyone knows that you could have done it.”

“But they’ll never say it, Herod,” she said. “No one will ever admit it. My pony didn’t clear the wall!”

“Allah has reasons for everything,” her mother said attempting to comfort. “Perhaps it is better for your character.”

“Thanks, Mother, but I’d prefer the trophy.”

“Next time,” said her father, “pay attention.”

They were silent as they left the racing area.

“Father, do you have to go to the meeting this afternoon?”

“Of course, Ellen,” he said. “I am a council member.”

“That’ll take all afternoon!” Ellen became slightly distracted as Windchaser stopped and started to paw through the snow again. She gave some gentle, yet impatient tugs and the pony started moving again.

“I’m sorry, Ellen. Today’s pretty busy for me. There’re a lot of important things to take care of.”

Ellen turned her head down, nodded, then looked back up into his eyes.

“I believe in you.”

“And I believe in you.” He turned to his wife and son. “All of you.” He paused in the warmth of the moment. “Now, let’s get out of the cold and have a hot lunch. It is the ice age on Tecora, y’know.”

They all smiled at each other.

“Before then, however, why don’t you three take Windchaser back to the stables and I’ll get us a table at the Trackhouse?” They agreed and Ibrahim went ahead alone.

###

The race had just barely ended by the time Ibrahim entered the Trackhouse, usually filled to capacity during the races. Throughout the seven-day, multi-tiered event, horses of all breeds and people of every age went through a series of different races, a celebration of the fabled companion the people had brought with them across the stars over six centuries earlier – in much darker times.

The Trackhouse was one of the first long-term quality buildings constructed on the colony. Surrounding it was a four-foot stone fence opened through three shiny brass gates. Intricately laid stone sidewalks led to the nearly ten thousand square meter foundation of the Trackhouse itself. The old-fashioned stone and mortar exterior was merely a thin cover over the thermo-steel frame emitting heat when in contact with cold temperatures.

The Trackhouse was older than even the Governance Council of which he was a part. Inside was equally anachronistic, with a splendid wood and brick décor, candles mixing with electric light.

He followed the hostess and seated himself at a table large enough for his family. Not long after, a hand slapped down on his shoulder from behind, almost startling him into a trained defensive response which would have broken the man's wrist. He managed to resist the urge, instead turning his head and eyes to the visitor. Ibrahim was met with a somewhat wrinkled old face with a beaming smile, curly dark brown hair adorning it all.

“Mandras!” Ibrahim snapped. “Don't do that to me.”

The smile disappeared, and Mandras rolled his eyes. “Oh, please,” he sighed. “You still have that mercenary brainwashing going around in your head?”

Ibrahim was still unpleasant with the man he had known since childhood. They had never been friends, yet not estranged enough to be enemies. “That mercenary brainwashing is what helps defend our country. As a new senior officer in the militia, it would do you well to listen to Colonel Saffir and learn as I did.”

“Psh.” Mandras rolled his eyes again.

Ibrahim always wanted to smash his knuckles into the bastard's beak-shaped nose whenever he did that.

“I've got my skiff factories to run. Two years of service in the militia. Ridiculous.”

“Is it?” Ibrahim snapped. “You realize you're talking to a man who would still be in the militia if I had my choice in the matter?”

Mandras raised a hand and blinked. “Look, I apologize for my rashness. I’m sorry. But look here,” he swung around to the opposite side of the table and sat. “My Nadi is pregnant.” His face brightened with ecstasy.

Ibrahim turned away and gave an obvious inward sigh.

“Abraham, this is great news!” Ibrahim stopped trying to get Mandras to pronounce his name in Arabiya years ago.

“Allah be Merciful, Mandras,” Ibrahim growled. “She’s twelve years younger than you!”

Mandras had a look of confusion and dissatisfaction in his face. “Why can’t you understand how important this is to me? I could have a son now.”

“Women are more than baby-making machines, Mandras. They don’t spit sons out by the ton like the vehicles at your foundries.”

“Don’t you judge me, Abraham Rilus,” Mandras now growled. “I care for Nadi dearly, and I take good care of her. You have your son, you have nothing to worry about.”

That comment struck a humorous chord in Ibrahim’s heart. True, he had a son, but Mandras had little knowledge of the truth. Though he tried to show equal love, Ibrahim knew that the greater half of his heart lay with Ellen. Herod was behind in just about everything – math, writing, reading, just about every skill children his age were taught – and spent hours being quiet, daydreaming away and doodling. No doubt he may create a priceless work of art one day, but Ellen had the promise of being unstoppable.

“But do not judge me,” Mandras continued. “The Lord Christ has taught us you cannot judge any man lest you be free from sin yourself. And no man is.”

“You’re not a preacher, Mandras, and are definitely not fit enough to be giving sermons. Read your book and I’ll read mine. We left those foolish hostilities back on the Origin.”

A child-like giggle and a distant murmur of his wife’s voice signaled the coming of his family before they came across his eyes.

“Our conversation is over, Mandras,” declared Ibrahim.

“Oh, no,” said Mandras. “It’s only postponed until the next time.”

###

Five thousand dinari, the voice said again in Jason Alexandros’s mind. Five thousand dinari. Five thousand dinari. Because of that unfortunate loss on the wrong horse, Jason probably wouldn’t be able to pay for all the drinks he planned to drown himself in. That was the last straw. Every paycheck he made from now on would go the Track Commissioners until his debt was paid off. This happened to him once before, just a few months ago. His young wife, Yasmina, ended up leaving him. He just never learned.

He slammed the shot glass, one of many, down on the Trackhouse bar and slurred, “Ano’erp, lease.”

The bartender, a burly dark brown man with a balding head and long pony tail came up to him as he scrubbed down a glass.

“Don’t you owe me money?” he said.

“Huh?” Jason grunted.

“You owe me money,” the man said as he put down the glass and leaned into Jason’s comfort sphere. “Five thousand dinari on the Rilus kid.”

“She wat my coufin,” Jason said, putting his hands out. “I pay you back, na’am. Lemme drink it.”

“This’ll just run up your debt to me,” the man continued. “I own the Trackhouse and the commissioners. Everything you lost, you owe me.”

“Fine, fine,” he said and belched. “I’d just want ano’er drink. More debt, gimme.” He waved his hands toward the Trackhouse owner like an indignant toddler.

“You say that little girl’s your cousin?” the bartender asked, almost on a search for a reason to give the man a drink – more debt from someone else was not always a bad thing.

“Na’am, my coufin,” Jason said and tapped his chest.

“So you’re related to Ibrahim Rilus, the Council?” the man asked as he leaned down on one elbow.

Jason pulled himself up onto the bar and stared the man into his eyes. “Yep. Gimme drink.”

“Don’t think I’m intimidated,” the man growled. “I voted for Rilus, he’s a good man. Respectable, with dignity. He believes in strength.”

With one meaty hand he grabbed Jason’s thin shoulder.

“You’re debts go bad,” he started, “no relation to a Council will spare you. You understand, my friend?”

Jason cringed under the pressure on his shoulder, the grip apparent even through the numbing of the alcohol. He nodded with a shaky grin.

With his other hand, the bartender reached for a shot glass and slammed it on the wood next to Jason. He poured in some amber liquid and tapped Jason on the shoulder.

“Stay out of trouble,” he warned and let Jason be.

###

The issue of defense expansion for the colony was sensitive to the Tecorani people. For centuries, the only threat the colonial people had faced was the abu sarhan, the wolves, out of the southern mountains and forests. Some thought the bear-sized lupines were actually a form of primitive sentient life-form, not unlike the Neanderthal men the evolutionists spoke of.

Now, a desperate cluster of five human cities on the planet Sennacherib, collectively called the Goths, were threatening them with more and more intensity. The Tecorani Governance Council had hired Intrepid Opportunitues, a group of five hundred mercenary fighter navigators with deep space capable fighters to keep the solar system clear of raiders. They did a good job for the past three years, but the Goths, particularly the Visigoths from the cities Aragona and Castilla, had been pressing the Intrepids with heavier probes and attacks. This was something only the council knew, and was just the kind of thing Ellen was trying to pry from her father’s mind.

“Father,” she said over her meal, “what is the the meeting about today?”

Ibrahim quickly finished the piece of surha steak rolling around in his mouth, then answered her. “It’s about taking care of all of you, of course.”

“Father, please don’t patronize me,” she said.

“He wasn’t patronizing you, Ellen,” said Theodora. “They hold these meetings to find the right course for the country. They take care of all of us.”

Ellen quieted for a minute and went back to eating. Ibrahim, however, saw the look in her eyes and knew she wasn’t finished. She was never finished. Ellen wasted no

time with anything. She was filled with bounding, curious energy coupled with an undaunted desire to learn about everything around her.

Although Ibrahim considered this a good thing in a child, especially if it continued unhindered into adulthood, she seemed to get curious about the most compromising things. After taking a couple more bites from her meal and a swallow of juice, she started up again.

“It’s about building more fighters?” she asked after the silence.

Ibrahim stopped cold.

“Wuh?” asked her brother.

Her father knew the compromising nature of such a sensitive subject, but Ellen’s intentions were innocent enough. In addition to being curious and willful, she had an unquenchable desire for speed. Ellen ran all the time and made the ponies run as well. Currently, her legs and ponies were her only means of achieving those exciting velocities, but she had an undying love for military hardware. The thought of high performance military spacecraft and assault armor flying around the skies naturally excited her.

With full knowledge of the implications, however, Ibrahim didn’t cough up the information she desired. He looked her dead in the eye and threw her off balance with one word. “Sure.” He stabbed another piece of his steak again and popped it in his mouth.

“Sure?”

“Why wouldn’t we talk about it? We talk about a lot of things.”

“Are you going to be talking about it today, though?”

“Perhaps. It’s all about priorities.”

Ellen slouched back into her seat with disappointment and seemed done eating. “We need those fighters.”

Ibrahim stopped eating as well. “I’ll do whatever it takes to protect you. If that means making a bigger defense force, I’ll get it done.”

He looked her deep in her eyes for a moment, happy to find she found some comfort in his words. Ibrahim took a drink from his glass, and they all began to eat again.

###

Jason Alexandros stumbled out of the Trackhouse and nearly tripped over his own momentum as the door swung away from him. A sudden gush of freezing air chilled his nearly numbed skin before he realized his thermal jacket was open. He mumbled an “uh, shit,” then proceeded to try and zip it up. He couldn’t feel his fingertips, and his spinning vision kept veering away from where his hands were.

Cold air wrapped itself around his sweaty head, and his hands went from the quest for his zipper to pulling up his hood. For some reason, it didn’t seem to be there.

“Eh?” he squeaked. He was too inebriated to tell his hood had become tucked inside. Usually it would have been uncomfortable, but he couldn’t even tell he was standing on a sheet of smooth ice covered with thinly packed snow.

He tugged again and again at the shoulder of his jacket, thinking it was his hood, until he pulled himself too hard, slipped on the ice sheet and planted himself on the ground with nose-crunching force. Time was no longer a factor, and he might have laid on the ice for half an hour for all he knew. Blood gushed from his nose and froze to his skin as he pulled his face off the ground. He couldn’t keep his head up, though.

He just lay there prostrate and mumbled. “Five thousand dinari. Damn . . .
coufin.”

Chapter Two: The Defenders

Tecora Orbital Defense Platform, B223C

Kahlil bin Caiaphas, elected head of the Tecorani Governance Council, looked down at the cold, ice age planet three hundred million people called home. Despite the harshness of their environment, the colonials of Tecora had made their lives prosperous and, thanks to the colonial militia and General Demeti's Intrepid Opportunities, peaceful as well. Multiple attempts to breach the Tecorani solar system defenses – mostly by the Goths – had been kept at bay and trade continued.

General Demeti, a battle hardened mercenary and former Assembly legionnaire, had gathered some five hundred hotshot youths to train hard and fly harder in order to make a good living as mercenary protectors. Their original mission was to patrol the solar system and keep it clear of commerce raiders. To date, they had destroyed over six hundred and ninety of the Goths' expensive and very hard to acquire Hawks, along with three hundred other privateer ships. Though no small task, they had performed only one funeral in space for a fallen navigator.

The raiding problem still remained, though. Goth activity was increasing.

Khalil turned back to the military conference table. Seated around General Demeti were his dark-skinned tactical advisor, a mysterious veteran with a half cybernetic face who went by no more than "Eagle One," as well as his three top squadron commanders, Captain James Harris of Tiger Squadron, Captain Eleazar Ahmazda of Lion Squadron, and Captain Emil Jacoby of Osprey Squadron. All were veterans and had known the general for a very long time.

Khalil bin Caiaphas was a rather slight man without an imposing posture. Everything about him contrasted with these stalwart, sturdy men. Though well beyond them in years, his image of himself at their age was quite different. He was a religious leader and his greatest hardship, besides the cold, was playing sports when he was young. His sense of fair play and religious gentleness came into spirited clashes with these men who lived a bleak warrior's life.

Nevertheless, it was his station as Senior Councilman to "liase" with these men who defended his people – but at the same time he didn't want any relationship with them.

"Are you ready to hear our latest intelligence, Councilman?" asked Demeti.

Bin Caiaphas sighed and nodded. He took his seat before the professional warriors and readied himself.

"As usual, our information is gathered from merchants and other sources which pass through the solar system almost daily. This is what we have compiled from this last month."

Bin Caiaphas sat still and attentive as General Demeti started off.

"First report was from a merchant trading on Sennacherib." He paused, then inquired of the councilman, "Have you heard of the Sons of Santiago?"

The councilman furrowed his brow, vaguely remembering the name. Ultimately, he shook his head, unable to recall what or who they were. "No," he said. "Should I?"

The mercenaries maintained their usual, blank composure but the air seemed electrified with negative emotion. Bin Caiaphas felt a subtle anger from their lack of expression, like the scent of sweat in the wind. Demeti took a muffled, uncomfortable

deep breath before he explained the vital information the Senior Council should already know.

“Well, a little bit about Goth history. Five ships became isolated on Sennacherib around five hundred Tecorani years ago, about the same time this colony was settled.”

“Yes, yes, yes,” the councilman interrupted. “And Sennacherib’s nearly intolerable radiation levels make for a difficult time leading the Goths to become a very aggressive, territorial people. I know this.”

“Well, then,” Demeti continued, “you also know the immediate colonies in the solar systems surrounding Sennacherib were much more successful, and the Goths have been preying on them since the colony began.”

“I know this too. You’re saying these Sons of Santiago, however, have something to do with that dominance?”

“They did initially,” said Demeti. “Eagle One?” He turned to his enigmatic second.

“Yes, sir,” said Eagle One, leaning forward onto the table. “The Goths did not have the ability to administer distant conquered territory from Sennacherib, nor could they transplant their entire population to these territories. They relied on terror tactics to maintain submission and keep the flow of resources coming to their colony. They’ve been hanging on this thread for five hundred years.”

“And the Sons of Santiago?” The councilman started to grow impatient, and they all fixed him with stares of subtle scorn. Bin Caiaphas tried to ignore them.

“The Sons of Santiago are named after the now non-existent sixth Goth city. It used to be one of their most populous cities until the women’s dome leaked and the

radiation made all of them infertile. The city became defunct and the men found no reason to continue on with it. They decided they would serve the colony best by turning themselves into a standing army that would maintain their grip of terror.”

“I take it there’s something special about them I should know?”

Eagle One gave an affirmative grunt. “Historically, amongst fighting men, only a small percentage of combatants are actually willing to take the life of an enemy. Amongst riflemen, for example, only ten percent will pull the trigger. Given that the Santiago men only numbered some fifty thousand, they were hopelessly outnumbered. The only way they could gain an overwhelming advantage was if they all underwent psychological alterations.”

“You mean, they removed the natural resistance to murder?” Eagle One nodded. “How?”

“Drugs,” added General Demeti.

“Only these drugs,” Eagle One continued, “of what kind we are not sure, became a genetic heritage. All of their male children are born sociopaths, held in check only through a lifetime of military discipline, able to maintain perfect mental harmony in combat. Most frightening, though, is that they inherit the memories of their predecessors up to the point of conception. Each man is born with lifetimes of combat experience.”

The councilman was totally dumbfounded. His skin went pale and he felt the palms of his hands go clammy.

General Demeti continued again. “There are possibly as many as a million Sons of Santiago today. They’ve operated as nomadic mercenary regiments for the past five

and a half centuries, willing to fight any enemy just for the continued experience to pass on to the next generation of perfect killers, as well as the pay.”

“They’ve been away from home for all these centuries, but because of the inherited memories, they remember their people and the suffering they go through,” Eagle One continued. “Now, they’re returning home, en masse, to form an army.”

“Why are they returning now?” asked bin Caiaphas.

“That brings us to the merchant’s report, finally,” said the general as he gently patted the table. “The Goths have been surveying other worlds recently, with the plan that, once they’ve found one that could permanently support them, they would call in every resource available and conquer it by whatever means necessary.”

The councilman nodded in nervous understanding.

“You see, the Goth cities have never been united. They come from a split ethnic background and were never quite unified. There are now four ethnic distinctions, Visigoths, Metigoths, Ostrogoths and Ventigoths. However, centuries of living in the same dire circumstances have formed a combined common language and a much more singular identity. They’re coming together, all five million of them, with another million in the Sons of Santiago. Soon, there may be only one government calling together all of them.”

“Now, this world they were looking for?”

“Is this one,” the general finished with the tap of a finger. “They have their eyes set on Tecora. It is the only Origin-compatible planet within a three thousand light year circumference.”

The perturbed councilman sat back in his seat, trying to subtly wipe away a bead of sweat sliding down his forehead, but they all caught him.

“I take it you’re going to be discussing the issue of defense improvement this afternoon?” Demeti said, almost smiling.

The councilman steeled himself, as if he was readying to take a blow. “Are you implying something?”

“Well, I was wondering if you would allow us in on this meeting.”

“Absolutely not.” The councilman waved an authoritative finger through the air.

Demeti couldn’t help but ask through gritted teeth, “Why the hell not?”

“I have my reasons. I always do.” For one, he recapped in his mind, you are foreigners and the influence you would gain would be too much in addition to your nuclear armed fighters. “You cannot debate, for one, since you were not elected by the people.”

“We don’t want to debate,” interrupted Captain Harris, breaking his scornful silence. “We just want to present the situation. We can probably do it better than you anyway!”

Bin Caiaphas took in a hot breath, incensed.

Scolding finger jabs emphasized his words. “Do not presume anything above your station!”

“Oh, I’m not presuming anything,” the Squadron Leader seethed back.

“Captain!” shouted the general. “Another word and you’ll be relieved.”

Harris slumped back in his chair and kept quiet.

“This meeting is over,” bin Caiaphas said and slipped out of his chair. Before exiting the wardroom, he turned back. “This colony was settled on the basis of following certain principles, ones laid down by Allah. Our goal, since the beginning, is to act as perfect Muslims and Christians in the way that mankind has failed throughout the ages. Do not bring your violent corruption upon us!”

He left and the five men let out a collective sigh as they rested back in their chairs, contemplating the horrible possibilities facing them in the future. Demeti’s gaze rolled over to his outrageous squadron leader. Harris’s eyes glanced at his, and he couldn’t help but say, “It won’t happen again, sir.”

The general chuckled. “Don’t worry. You were just saying what we’re all thinking.”

“They’ll never get us what we need,” added Captain Jacoby. “We’re already stretched too thin. Five hundred fighters is not enough to effectively defend an entire solar system without an integrated sensor net.”

“Goddamn religion,” mumbled Harris. “What a bunch of hypocrites, hiring combat contractors to do what they wouldn’t do themselves.”

“Whoa!” blurted Captain Ahmazda. “What about that local boy in your squadron? I thought you had nothing but good stuff to say about him.”

“Paterus was an orphan. He never knew his parents. He’s hardly anything like the locals.”

“You sure?” mused Captain Jacoby. “You just gave me an idea.”

“Really?” asked General Demeti. “Thinking’s never been one of your strong points. What of it?”

“Well, sir,” the captain began. “Along the lines of the Paterus boy, not everyone down there can be in total agreement with that brainiac.”

“And you’re point being?”

“If we find the right sort, someone with foresight and some guts, we might just get a voice in that council who could speak for us.”

Chapter Three: The Hostility of Friends

Aleppo, Tecorani Colonial Capital

Ibrahim deployed skids and touched his skiff down with a gentle thud on the sleet-covered parkway. Before him, four ninety-six story capital buildings stretched into the low cloud cover, their roofs not even visible to his eyes. Each held the offices of their respective departments – Treasury, Faith, Labor, and Council. Causeways connected them at every tenth floor until ninety, and again at the very peak.

Ibrahim stepped out of his skiff dressed in a dark blue thermal suit with strips of black netting on his sleeves. A black cotton turtleneck zipped up to the top. He dragged his suitcase from the passenger seat, shut the door, and walked toward the great monolith of the Council. His confident stride hid well the anxiety he felt. As the snow and ice crunched beneath his micro-grip soles, his gaze pierced the very air before him with focused intensity.

As a man in high position he knew the threats which faced his world, his people, and his family. At least, he knew what the Council majority told him. That information alone concerned him enough to try and make these changes. Somehow, he had the feeling the situation was drastically worse than what he was told. His instincts nagged at him.

Today they were debating the allocation of public funds to raise more effective defenses – to create a corps of professional soldiers rather than militia with limited tours of duty, heavy weapons, and, most importantly, the retooling of manufacturing plants to build and design weapons. Ibrahim knew he was outnumbered, a critical factor in democratic decision-making. Everything he knew would be used to change their minds.

His own mind was a torrent of thought as he entered through the main entrance. The tension, exacerbated by the movement of the lift heading toward the heavens, was almost dizzying. He turned off the heater fabrics of his thermo-jacket and opened up the front with a huff. There were enough things heating him up.

He entered the council dome atop the great spire of glass and steel to find the chambers in their usual pre-meeting disarray. Three hundred seats formed a crescent topped by a curving balcony of another one hundred seats. All these filled the chambers beneath the glass dome which could sometimes see the sky above the clouds – common on Tecora since space-faring Muslims prayed to the stars. Each had their own consoles for electronic documents and voting panels. Today, the sky was just as gray at twelve hundred feet as it was in Aleppo proper.

As Ibrahim readied himself at his console-seat, one of his supporters, Jason Medes, met him.

“We sticking it to them today?” he asked with a mock punch on Ibrahim’s shoulder.

“We’re gonna have to,” said Ibrahim. “From this day on, we don’t let up on this subject.”

“Well, you have my vote and the rest of the Defense Action Councils.”

Ibrahim slid into his seat and flipped up his console, making himself comfortable.

“How many do we have right now?”

Medes bit his lip, forgetting a recent case of frostbite and grimacing as he did.

“About twenty-five.”

“Out of three hundred.” Ibrahim sighed.

Medes nodded. “Rather be back in the militia?”

“Allah be merciful! No,” he started. “Well, yeah I do, but if there’s going to be anything important done, it’ll be here.”

Ibrahim had met Medes when they were performing their stints in the militia. They were elected to be officers and served the standard two years – enlisted were only obligated for six months. Without strenuous basic training, six months was what it took for the militiamen to gain an understanding of their mission. Sometimes the men had to be shifted around into different positions, some multiple times, and, as such, they were almost as clueless about their jobs at the end of their tours as when they were first conscripted. As part of a more serious-thinking cadre of officers, both Ibrahim and Medes found this frustrating. Every season they raised a new unit, then watched it fade away when the service tours were up.

“Bin Caiaphas met with IO’s senior officers this morning,” said Medes.

Ibrahim nodded. “So I’ve heard. Do you think he’ll tell us everything they told him?”

“You know we need our own link with IO. They’re the only ones—”

“All come to order!” came the call.

Medes gave Ibrahim a hopeful nod as he went to take his seat.

“The noble and blessed Senior Council Khalil bin Caiaphas,” presented the Master of Chambers. “Rise in respect.”

A dull rumble reverberated through the council chambers as the kaleidoscope of ages, creeds, and motivations made an uncoordinated effort to rise to their feet. Bin

Caiaphas took his seat in the middle of the ten Mid-Councils facing against the vast Popular Councils. He began with a few simple words.

“A storm gathers against us,” he began. However, the tone of his words portrayed no sense of urgency.

Ibrahim felt the statement cloaked in the Senior Council’s usual vagueries. He couldn’t help but roll his eyes, cross his arms, and let out a long, audible sigh.

“The Visigoths continue to make plans for our downfall. May this never happen, insha’allah. We must, within the Law, guide our people through these troubles.”

He paused then, and, with arms spread out, asked, “What shall we do? Thoughts?”

Ibrahim stood first, his voice as a gentle thunder. “What is the nature of their preparations?” He awaited an answer. When none came, he continued, “Would you say we may rest easy tonight, knowing we are safe?”

“Oh, doubt not, Fair Council Rilus,” said bin Caiaphas. “Our skies will be peaceful tonight. Of this I have no doubt.”

“Of this night you may have no doubt. Do you have reason to doubt the next night, and all nights henceforth?”

Bin Caiaphas raised his hands. “There will be a night of their coming.”

“Of this, I have no doubt,” said Ibrahim, then he turned his words to the general council. “In light of this threat I am at haste to make proposals. Would these be to the liking of your ears?”

The council sounded a collection of dreary “hears” like an impotent tidal wave. Undaunted, Ibrahim continued his memorized movements for defense improvements.

“In this Fair Council, I motion for the creation of a standing, professional militia with enlisted terms of service, henceforth mandatory for all able-bodied men aged in years between seventeen and twenty-five, and to be selected for as long as may be needed, elite men to serve as officers.”

Collective boos, hissing, and general anathema rampaged across the majority of the seats in the council. Bin Caiaphas raised his arms and waved them down, uttering balanced yet firm words to silence the dissenters.

Back straight, shoulders square and face portraying the steel will of his convictions, Ibrahim continued. “I make a motion that our factories and industrial centers undergo modifications which will be necessary for the design and construction of weapons used for the defense of the populace and sovereign lands of the noble people of Tecora.” The council continued to moan, and whispers of their planned rebuttles circulated throughout. Ibrahim knew the storm was gathering against him.

“With the restructuring of essential industrial centers completed as heretofore mentioned, I propose that these factories, through the database files contained with the noble Intrepid Opportunities, we build sixteen regiments of heavy artillery, fourteen armored cavalry regiments and mecha regiments, ten permanent standing rifle divisions and all supporting organizations as required for territorial defense. We must also support IO in solar system defense by the building of an additional one thousand Hurricane class fighters to be navigated by territorial Tecorani citizens.”

Ibrahim then went silent. The council erupted into a flurry of protest. To Ibrahim, they were like a strong, chilled wind which he had learned to ignore. His turn ended. Now he would have to endure their rebuttals.

“Fair Council Ibrahim,” said bin Caiaphas, “what are the reasonings for such a massive conflagration? Explain these faculties to us.”

“Good, my Senior Council, do you not already know the reasons? Were you not with the general just this morning?”

“My talks with the general give no arbitration for the measures you propose, Fair Council.”

“Would the Good Senior Council please tell the details we are wont to be shared?”

“In due course, but now rebuttal must be made. If the Fair Council would take his seat?”

Ibrahim bowed and sat, ready to listen to the opposing arguments. Much discussion was made across the council chambers until they all gathered their support around Patriarch Krytos Pilonius. He stood proud and tall in his Orthodox robes, a heavy cross draped from his neck which reached to his plump belly.

“Good Council Ibrahim,” he began in a tone as jubilant as it was smug. “One needs not be a superior mathematician nor a leading banker to know that what you propose in all haste for the reckless defense of the territories will no doubt divert much capital away from the people’s affluence.”

Ibrahim stared blankly and blinked.

“Not only that, Fair Council,” Krytos continued, emphasizing his points with flamboyant gestures. “If you take into consideration the personnel needed to operate all the machines our retooled industries produce, for the demographic you chose, there will no doubt be a drastic shift in the way our colony operates. Now, if the Good Senior

Council, the noble Khalil bin Caiaphas, wise and benevolent, does not see a threat in the new preparations of the enemy that our current defense cannot handle, then what brings you to even propose such a drastic measure?"

Ibrahim shook his head and looked down, unable to bear the sight of the man.

Krytos then addressed bin Caiaphas. "In counsel with the defenders this morning, does the Good Senior Council see the need for the measures Fair Council Rilus proposes?"

Ibrahim then locked his eyes dead on bin Caiaphas.

With his hands together, hunched over in his chair and returning Ibrahim's gaze, he uttered one word.

"No."

Krytos then raised up his arms. "It is then settled. Are we good for a vote?"

All settled in their seats and opened their electronic voting ballots in their consoles. Ibrahim tried not to grit his teeth as he put in his vote to pass the Defense Action, for the second time. The first time he had not proposed as large a radical change.

Anger swelled inside him. The severity of this situation was the greatest they had ever faced. The danger stared them in the eye, yet the majority were content to do nothing, hoping to come through the crisis and preserve the free markets and unaltered peace of their ancestral territories. Ibrahim didn't believe it could happen that way.

The votes came in. Of the three hundred councils, two hundred and seventy-four voted against the Defense Action.

This day is over, he thought. He logged out of his console and resigned himself to the day's defeat. Although expected, Ibrahim's fears worsened. The council's decision

only reminded him of the absolute calamity coming toward his entire culture. Before he managed to leave, however, bin Caiaphas intercepted him with unforeseen intentions.

“Senior Council,” he addressed respectfully.

Bin Caiaphas stayed him with a hand. “I know, Council Rilus, that the dangers you foresee are great—”

“Than why didn’t you tell the rest of the council what you know?”

“Let me finish!” he interrupted, trying to keep his voice down from the Councils who hadn’t yet left. “Now, there is no way to accomplish what you ask without destroying ourselves. I mean, look at it. What you propose would redirect almost three million people away from the markets and industries. To provide them with shelter, food, clothing, equipment.” He paused with anxiety. “You’re talking about shattering the very fabric of our society!”

“No, Khalil, we will be strengthening it,” Ibrahim returned. “What is the cost of restructuring our society if it survives? Nothing. All you’re talking about is money. I’m talking about survival.”

“And if what you propose ends up standing for more than two generations, you would have completely militarized our society. We were founded on openness and freedom. To turn Tecora into another gun-toting neighbor, we will lose the trade of other colonies and the markets will vanish. After that, your war machine will do nothing but suck our wealth dry. Qe will be ruined. I cannot allow this, so I will fight you tooth and nail to make sure that this never passes.”

Ibrahim shook his head and his eyes narrowed in disdain. “What will it take for you to understand the reality of the situation? Markets? Trade? The majority of the

colonies around us are held under the Goths' sway out of fear. They trade with us today, but all the Goths have to do is say 'stop' and we will be finished. We have to show our strength."

"Our strength lies in Allah. Our people have survived the bitter winters of this ice age and we have prospered because of our faith, Ibrahim. You, of all people, should know this, for you are more devout than any." Bin Caiaphas raised a finger. "It's surprising that you even dream of these things."

The two men fell silent, then bin Caiaphas bade him a good night. Ibrahim watched for a moment as the Senior Council walked away. As he reached the exit, Ibrahim sent some words after him.

"You will be the end of all of us."

Bin Caiaphas stopped, but did not turn. After a moment, he continued around the corner and disappeared from Ibrahim's sight.