

MICHAEL R. HICKS

IN HER NAME
LEGEND OF THE SWORD

(Rough Draft Sample)

Books of the In Her Name Series

Empire

Confederation

Final Battle

First Contact

Legend of the Sword
(Early 2010)

Brothers in Arms
(Late 2010/Early 2011)

This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, organizations and events portrayed in this novel are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

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FORWARD

This is a sample of the rough draft (keep that in mind, please – it’s a *rough* draft) of my next novel from the *In Her Name* series: *Legend of the Sword*, just to give you a quick idea of what’s in this latest part of the story.

Legend of the Sword picks up the story shortly after the end of First Contact, so you’ll see many of those characters return, plus a number of new ones.

I hope to have the book published in eBook format (Kindle, Mobipocket, and Smashwords) by February 2010, with the print version in March.

So, with that, read on, again keeping in mind that this is only a first draft, so you might find some bloopers here and there. Nonetheless, I hope you enjoy it!

Michael R. Hicks

ONE

Tesh-Dar, high priestess of the Desh-Ka, strode quietly along the stone paths of the Imperial Garden. Protected by a great crystalline dome that reached far into the airless sky of the Empress Moon, the stones that made up the ages-old paths had come from every planet touched by the Empire. The paths wove their way in a carefully designed pattern for leagues: had Tesh-Dar been of a mind and had the time, she could have wandered in peace for a full cycle and not fully explored it all. From lifeless rocks adrift in deep space to worlds teeming with the fruits of galactic evolution, they were here, each a testament to the glory of the Empire and the power of the Empress. Ruted sandstone to crystalline matrix, each stone was not only an exemplar of planetary geology, but a page in the Books of Time, with each one telling part of the story of the Empire's history. In Tesh-Dar's mind, each one also brought her people a step closer to their end of days.

As with the stones themselves, the flora of the Garden was made up of every species of plant that flowered, from every world. Species that were incompatible with the atmosphere natural to Her Children were also here, protected by special energy bubbles that preserved them in their native atmosphere and soil.

Many of the stones she trod upon, some of them worn smooth from thousands of cycles of footfalls, were from worlds that had been one-time enemies of the Empire, among the dozen or so species Her Children had fought in past ages. Now, the stones and flora the gardeners had preserved were all that was left of them. Some of those ancient civilizations had fought to the last against the swords of Her Children. Others, broken and beaten, consigning themselves to defeat, had been obliterated by the will of the Empress, their worlds left as nothing more than molten slag. The host of warriors and the great warships of Her fleet brought Her glory in battle, but

She did not need them to destroy that which displeased Her. The last such war ended thousands of generations before, and some living now thought the records in the Books of Time as only legend, myth. Tesh-Dar, greatest of the living warrior priestesses and blood sister to She Who Reigns, knew better.

She had made her way to a part of the path that was newly added, made up of stones from the planet the humans had called Keran. They and the flora from that world were no more or less remarkable than the countless other specimens in the Garden, save that they were taken in war. A war fought in Tesh-Dar's lifetime, a war whose birth she had witnessed, a war in which she would likely die. Now Keran, too, was part of the Empire. The many humans who had lived there, and many who had come from other human worlds to aid them, had died at the hands of Tesh-Dar's warriors, and the builder caste had reshaped the planet in a way more pleasing to Her Children. The humans had impressed the great priestess: even at the last – exhausted, desperate, and afraid – they had resisted. And those who had come from across the stars to help them, sailing in primitive starships and fighting with weapons the Empire had used tens of thousands of cycles before, had fought tenaciously for a world that was not their own. The Empress had been greatly pleased.

“Why is your heart troubled so, priestess of the Desh-Ka?” the Empress said quietly from behind her.

Tesh-Dar turned and knelt before her sovereign, her sister by blood. She had sensed the Empress approaching, of course, for She was the spiritual mother of them all, whose power reached beyond this life into the next. United by the ethereal force that was the Bloodsong, the members of their species were at once individuals and part of a greater spiritual whole. Their power and purpose for existence was embodied in this single physical vessel, which contained the souls of all the living Empresses who had come before Her since the founding of the First Empire a hundred thousand years before. All but the First Empress, the most powerful of all, the one they sought for their very salvation.

“My Empress,” Tesh-Dar said reverently as she saluted, bringing her left fist against her right breast, the smooth black metal of her armor echoing in the quiet of the Garden. She had been in the presence of the Empress many times over her long life. But each time was as the very first, a surge of primal

power, as if she were standing close to a spiritual flame. "I fear we will not find what we must in the time we have left."

"Walk with me, daughter," said the Empress. While they were in fact sisters born of the same womb, although many years apart, She Who Reigned was Mother to them all. The Empress held out her arm. Tesh-Dar gently took it, careful not to mar her sovereign's flawless blue skin with her own long black talons, and they walked slowly together along the path that was now a remembrance of their first conquest among the humans.

To an outside observer, the two were a study in contrasts. Tesh-Dar was huge, arguably the largest and most powerful of her species, with a physique that made her the equal in raw strength to half a dozen warriors. She was clad in traditional ceremonial armor that was as black as night and yet shone like a mirror, with the rune of her order, the Desh-Ka, emblazoned in cyan on the breastplate. Her hair, black as was the norm for her people, hung in elegant braids, so long now that they were carefully looped around her upper arms. That was the only way any of Her Children wore their hair, for it was more than simply a legacy from some long-forgotten biological ancestor who needed it for warmth and to protect the skin: their hair was also a complex spiritual bond with the Empress. At her neck she wore the ebony Collar of Honor, a band of living metal that all of Her Children came to wear in their youth, when they were ready to accept the Way. Every child wore at least five pendants of precious metal or gemstones that proclaimed their given name. After that, more pendants were added to show their deeds and accomplishments made to glorify the Empress. Tesh-Dar wore more than any other of her kind save one, with rows of pendants flowing across the upper half of her chest. As with all the high priestesses of the orders that served the Empress, she also wore a special device at the front of her collar: an oval of glittering metal in which had been carved the rune of the Desh-Ka, echoing the larger image that blazed from her breastplate.

The Empress was in many ways the opposite of her elder sister in appearance. She was typical in size, much the same as an average human female, and had the trademark smooth cobalt blue skin and the feline eyes shared by all Her Children. Her dress was as simple as Her spirit was complex: much like the healer caste, all She wore was a simple white robe with no adornments. Around Her neck, unlike the black collar worn by the

others of Her race, was a simple golden band. It, too, was living metal, far more resilient than gold, and stood alone among all the trillions of other collars that had been fashioned by the hands of the armorers over the ages: it was the only surviving relic of the First Empress, their only physical link to Her beyond what was recorded in the Books of Time. Passed from Empress to Empress upon each new Ascension, if there was a single object that embodied the spirit of the Empire, it would be this simple golden band.

The most striking feature of the Empress was that her hair, braided but not as long as Tesh-Dar's, was pure white. It was not a random anomaly or an indicator of age: every Empress since the First Empress, Keel-Tath, had been born with white hair. It was part of their ancestral bloodline from those days of legend. Every great cycle, a female warrior child was born with white hair and ebony talons. Not all would ascend to the throne, but none could wear the golden band unless they had those two traits. For the white hair proclaimed them as direct descendants of Keel-Tath, and the ebony talons signified that they were fertile. Warriors born with silver talons were sterile and could bear no children. In the minds of some, this was a tragedy. To others, who had endured the agonizing trials of mating, it was a blessing. None had a choice.

"I share your fears," the Empress said simply. There were no politics in the Empire, no exaggerations or lies to misdirect or conceal, no factions battling for control. These things had been left behind long, long ago. The Kreelan Way, the code by which Her Children lived and died, was harsh. It was also a world of unadorned truth. "Long have we searched for the One who shall fulfill the ancient prophesies, just as we have searched for the tomb of the First Empress, over these thousands of great cycles since Keel-Tath left us, among thousands of stars in the galaxy. Much of interest have we found, but not that which we so desperately need."

The Empress's words chilled Tesh-Dar. She did not need to hear them to know they were true, but it was one thing to believe such a thing on one's own, and quite another to hear the Empress say them.

"There is no hope, then?" Tesh-Dar asked quietly, the hand not holding the arm of the Empress clenching so hard that her talons pierced the armored gauntlet she wore, and the skin beneath. She did not notice any pain.

Stopping in the middle of the path, the Empress turned to her, lifting up Tesh-Dar's chin with one slender hand so that their eyes met. "Do not despair so, Legend of the Sword," She said, using the name She had given Tesh-Dar long ago, when she had been a child and under Tesh-Dar's tutelage at the priestess's *kazha*, or school of the Way. It was no mere label of affection, for Tesh-Dar was the greatest swordmistress the Empire had ever known in all its ancient history. Even before she became the last high priestess of the Desh-Ka and inherited her current physical form and the powers that were the legacy of that ancient sect, she had no rival in the arena. Among Her Children, Tesh-Dar was a living legend.

She gave the Empress a shy smile, something few of the peers had ever seen, her ivory incisors momentarily revealed through parted dark red lips. While her nickname was well-known throughout the Empire, none of the peers - save one - had ever addressed her as "Legend of the Sword." Not because it wasn't true, but because it was.

"Of all the powers at My command," the Empress went on, "I cannot see the river of time that flows into the future. Our time grows short among the stars, yes. Yet we have been blessed with an enemy that may provide us the first key to the prophecies: one born not of our blood, yet whose blood sings."

"And the tomb of the First Empress?" Tesh-Dar asked. The prophecies foretold that their race could only be redeemed, the ancient blood curse undone, if Keel-Tath's soul returned to take its place among the thousands of other souls inhabiting She Who Reigned. The curse left by Keel-Tath had doomed their race to eventual extinction. The clawless ones and the warriors with black talons had to mate every great cycle or they would die. Over time, the mating cycles had become unbalanced, with more males and sterile females being born. In only a few more generations their species would no longer be able to procreate. All that had been over the half million years of their recorded history would be lost, gone in little more than a single generation once they could no longer produce children. "How are we ever to find it?"

"That, My priestess," the Empress said, turning to resume their walk along the path, "even the prophecies do not reveal. Yet, I believe that if we

find the One, we are also destined to find Her tomb. The fates of the two are intertwined, inseparable. I must believe that the humans are the key.”

“You believe that the One is among them?”

“We must hope, Tesh-Dar,” the Empress said heavily. “For if not...” She did not have to finish the sentence. If the One was not found among the humans, the *Kreela* would join the races they had destroyed over the ages in dark oblivion. The chances of them finding another sentient race other than the humans in what time remained to them was infinitesimal. “The One may not yet have been born,” she went on. “We shall give the humans as much time as we may to find him.”

Him, Tesh-Dar thought. She found it disquieting that the prophecies foretold that their race would be redeemed by a male. That thought led to another as they strolled along, and Tesh-Dar said, “Thy daughter, Li’ara-Zhurah, is to have her first mating. I have tended to her spirit, yet she remains deeply disturbed over the humans. I fear her mating will be difficult.”

The Empress looked up at the Homeworld, shining full above the great crystalline dome of the Garden, but her mind’s eye was on a far away nursery world where Li’ara-Zhurah waited for her mating time. The Empress knew well of what Tesh-Dar spoke, for She could sense the feelings of all Her Children through the Bloodsong, not least of all those born from Her own womb, as was Li’ara-Zhurah. From when their spirit first cried out from the womb to beyond death in the Afterlife, She could sense the feelings of all. Their joy, their contentment. Their fear, their pain. Their anguish.

“I have no doubt it will be difficult,” She whispered. “It always is.”

Many light years away, Li’ara-Zhurah lay in her temporary quarters on one of the Empire’s many nursery worlds. To such worlds were the fertile warriors and clawless ones taken to mate and give birth every great cycle. For if they did not, should they not mate in time, they would die in horrible agony that even the healers could not avert.

Any other time she would have found a room such as this a place of unaccustomed comfort. While it was not large, it was certainly more expansive than a warrior’s typically spartan quarters on a warship or in one of

the many *kazhas*. It was well appointed with a thick pallet of soft skins for a bed, and a low table where she and any companions - should she have any - could kneel as was customary to eat and drink. A window of intricately stained transparency, made of material thinner than a hair's breadth, yet strong as steel, was set into the smooth granite walls and flooded the room with serene light from the artificial sun that warmed this planet and the others like it spread throughout the Empire.

A construct of the builders, the caste responsible for creating anything the Empress called for, this world had been created from an airless rock drifting in deep space, far from any star. The planet was surrounded by a vast cloud of particles, a form of the matrix material that the builders used to shape what they made as a potter did with clay. The cloud was the planet's primary defense and also what gave it the necessary light and heat to support life, in measure that was identical to the star of the Homeworld. While every nursery world was zealously guarded by warships of the Imperial Fleet, should one of the nurseries be threatened, the thick but seemingly insubstantial cloud of wispy white matrix material would form into a shell that was impenetrable by all but the energies released by a star gone nova. Death came easily to those who followed the Way, but not to the young of the Empire, for they were valued beyond all measure.

Indeed, this place was warm and comfortable, yet her body shivered with alternating hot and cold flashes. It was already her time before the attack on the human world, Keran, but she refused to go to the nursery world before the campaign had ended. She had fought too many challenges for the right to be there, and was willing to risk death from her rebellious body rather than give up her right to be among the first to do battle with the humans.

While she had been wounded, her back burned during an attack on a human ship and her side pierced by shrapnel from an exploding human assault boat, her true scars were inside, upon her soul. Tesh-Dar had been able to excise much of the anguish and confusion Li'ara-Zhurah had felt in the aftermath of the battle before the priestess had ordered her home, but some wounds yet lay open, beyond the reach even of the great priestess and, Li'ara-Zhurah feared, even the Empress herself.

But the torment of her body as it began to die was as nothing next to the fear of the mating ritual. Not fear of physical pain, but fear of emotional

emptiness. Fear from the certain knowledge that the creature she was soon to be joined with, one of the males of her species, was barely self-aware. Part of the curse that was the legacy of the First Empress, the males had been reduced to mindless breeding machines that only functioned a single time before dying in agony.

It had not always been so, Li'ara-Zhurah knew, for the Books of Time spoke of the ages before the Curse, when the males were proud warriors and artisans who lived alongside the females. A time when they mated with physical love, bonded for life as *trash*. In the time since the Curse, her people bonded together in pairs, female to female, in a bond that was only broken by death. They often served the Empress far apart, but their spirits were always entwined in the Bloodsong. And when one's *trash* died, it could be a soul-wrenching experience. Li'ara-Zhurah's *trash* had died some years ago, and her soul had never entirely recovered. Even now, Li'ara-Zhurah would awaken at night with her *trash's* name on her lips. She could feel a bare glimmer of her *trash's* spirit from the Afterlife, but that was all, and it was not enough to ease the pain.

The room she occupied had two doors: one that led to the corridor outside and the rest of the complex, and one - smaller, set in one of the other walls - through which the male would be brought when it was time.

A gentle knock at the smaller door startled her, and she gasped in fright.

"Come," she called through the haze fear that clouded her senses, berating herself for being unable to control her emotions. *You have fought in a true battle, she told herself, and proved yourself worthy. Be not afraid!*

But, as with the Empress herself, hers was a people to whom truth - Truth - was inescapable. Fear held her tightly.

A pair of healers entered, closing the door softly behind them. As often was the case, one was senior - as indicated by the many pendants hanging from her collar - and the other was junior. Like all of their caste, they could heal any injury or disease. The specialty of these healers, however, was in understanding what Li'ara-Zhurah was feeling now and helping her cope with what was to come.

They knelt beside her on the soft skins, and the elder healer opened her arms to Li'ara-Zhurah, offering to hold and comfort her.

With a whimper of despair, Li'ara-Zhurah threw herself into the healer's arms, burying her face in the elder's shoulder. The other healer, the apprentice, wrapped her arms around Li'ara-Zhurah, adding her warmth and empathy, helping to sooth Li'ara-Zhurah with her Bloodsong. Mourning marks, the display of inner pain, turned Li'ara-Zhurah's skin black below her eyes and flowed down her face like the wide tracks of tears as she moaned and shivered in the healer's arms.

"Be still, child," the elder healer whispered as she gently rocked Li'ara-Zhurah as if she were a young child. The healer could feel the young warrior's torment in the Bloodsong, sharp and bitter. "Be not ashamed. What you feel now is what each of us feels the first time. Even the Empress Herself."

Li'ara-Zhurah did not answer. She had her arms wrapped around the elder healer, holding her tightly. She didn't realize it, but her claws had drawn blood from the healer's sides, staining the pure white robes with streaks of crimson.

The healer was accustomed to such pain and ignored it. Her attention was focused solely on her young ward. "When you are ready, we will prepare you," she whispered as she gently stroked Li'ara-Zhurah's hair. "It will be difficult, child, but will not last long. You shall endure."

I do not wish to endure, Li'ara-Zhurah railed silently. I do not wish for any of this!

But there was no use putting off the inevitable. She was a warrior who had faced the fires of battle against worthy foes and survived. As a blood daughter of the Empress, she held no special place in the ranks of Her Children, but she would bring no further dishonor to her Mother and Empress.

"Let it be done," she rasped, reluctantly pushing herself from the healer's embrace.

The healers helped her to her feet, then carefully undressed her, peeling away the black undergarment that was what they all wore beneath armor, for the warriors, or the robes of the clawless ones like the healers. Then they removed her sandals. Shivering, she stood now wearing nothing but her collar.

“Here, child,” the elder healer said, pointing to the center of the bed of skins.

Li’ara-Zhurah knelt down as she was shown, then leaned forward on all fours, placing her elbows on the skins, her head close to the edge near the wall. She had not noticed before, but there were soft leather cuffs bound by slender but unbreakable cables that were attached to the floor. Her stomach turned at the sight, for they were much like the shackles of the *Kalai-Il*, the place of punishment that was at the center of every *kaẓha* throughout the Empire. Without thinking, she pushed herself away, back up to her knees.

“It is so you do not accidentally injure the male,” the apprentice healer, even younger than Li’ara-Zhurah, explained quietly as she and the elder healer gently pushed her back down onto the skins. “You will...not be yourself for a time.”

“It is for the best, child,” the elder healer said as she fastened the cuffs around Li’ara-Zhurah’s wrists, making sure they were fixed firmly but not too tight. “And I will tell you this, even though I know you will ignore my words: it is best not to look at the male when we lead him in. They, too, are Children of the Empress, but they are different than us in more than just gender.”

Li’ara-Zhurah had heard the stories, of course, but she had never seen a male of her race. They were kept only on the nursery worlds such as this, and were never seen elsewhere in the Empire. She knew the healer’s words were well-intended, but they left her even more frightened. She shivered uncontrollably.

“Imagine how you would like him to appear,” the junior healer advised. “And do not fight against what must be. Your body will understand what to do. Close away your mind and let your body take control.”

“Do you understand, child?” the elder healer asked.

“Yes,” Li’ara-Zhurah said through gritted teeth. Her hands, bound now by the cuffs, fiercely gripped the skins of the bed, her talons cutting all the way through to scrape against the unyielding stone beneath.

“We shall return momentarily,” the junior healer told her before the two of them left through the door through which they had entered.

Li’ara-Zhurah squeezed her eyes shut, burying her face in the warm skins, trying desperately to gain control of her fears. Her breath was coming

quickly, too quickly, as if she were still running after the great metal human war machine that had become her obsession on the planet Keran. Imagining the heat of the blast that killed the human commander of the beast, the human she had so wanted to fight, who had been denied her by a fickle twist of fate.

She heard a sound at the door. Unable to help herself, just as the healer had known would happen, she turned to look. There, standing between the two healers, was a male. It - *he* - was clearly young, for there was no use for males other than breeding, and they were bred as soon as they were of age. And once they bred, they died. She had seen images of the male warriors of long ago, of legend, but other than the blue skin and black hair typical of her race, there was little in this creature that she could recognize from those ancient scenes. He only stood as tall as the healers' shoulders, thin, and with a body that clearly had never endured the physical rigors of the *kazha*. His hair was braided as was customary for their race, but it was not very long, attesting to his young age. His maleness was alien to her, for she had never seen such, even in the images of legend.

But the worst was his face and head. While his eyes were bright and looked normal, they were set in a face that betrayed no sign of intelligence, with a forehead that sloped steeply back, part of a small skull that housed an undersized brain. From his lips began a high keening sound, for his body understood what his tiny brain did not: his purpose for existence was now before him.

Then she noticed his hands: the talons had been clipped from his fingertips, no doubt to keep him from injuring her in his witless passion.

She turned away in revulsion, fighting to keep hold of her sanity as the male eagerly moved toward her. The apprentice healer held Li'ara-Zhurah's shoulders, trying as best she could to comfort her, while the senior healer guided the male's efforts.

Li'ara-Zhurah's thoughts faded to blackness as her body responded to the male's pheromones. She cried out at the momentary pain, whimpering in her heart for the love of her Empress, and begging the First Empress - wherever She was - to return and lift this curse from them all.

What came after was blessed darkness.

Tesh-Dar stood in her quarters, part of the complex of buildings that made up the *kaꝛha* of which she was headmistress. Having returned from her audience with the Empress, her thoughts remained fixed on Li'ara-Zhurah. She could clearly hear the melody of the young warrior's Bloodsong that carried her fear and pain, and she ground her teeth at the thought that she was powerless to aid her. Tesh-Dar did not even truly understand what the young warrior was going through, for she herself had never mated. Being born sterile was both a blessing and a curse: she was not subject to the need to mate every great cycle to continue living, but she was a bystander in the continuity of her species, standing a world apart from those who could give birth.

She allowed herself a moment of guilt, for she did not feel this way for all of her wards. She cared deeply for all of them, every warrior of every generation she had helped to train here, but for a very few she found that she cared more. Li'ara-Zhurah was among them. It had nothing to do with her being a blood daughter of the Empress, for such things as favoritism had been bred out of her race eons before when the Bloodsong took hold and one's feelings were exposed to all. That had triggered the age of Chaos, when her species was torn apart by countless wars before the First Empress and Unification.

No. She felt strongly for Li'ara-Zhurah because of who she was in her heart and spirit. A part of Tesh-Dar fervently wished that this young warrior would be the one with whom she could share her inheritance from the Desh-Ka order, who could follow in Tesh-Dar's footsteps as high priestess. For Tesh-Dar was the last of her kind, the other priestesses of the Desh-Ka having died out over the ages since the First Empire was founded. After the death of the First Empress, the warrior priestesses of the ancient orders were only permitted to select a single soul as a replacement. The priestess would give up her powers to the acolyte in a ceremony that dated back to tens of thousands of years before the reign of the First Empress. If Tesh-Dar died before passing on her knowledge, the powers of the Desh-Ka, the greatest of all the warrior sects in the history of her race, would be lost forever. She was already older - nearly one hundred and fifty years - than was normal for her kind, and for those warriors who survived the rigors of the Way, there was

little warning before old age took them. There was no gradual descent into infirmity over the course of years, no time to make considered choices for an acolyte: when a warrior's body reached the time appointed by Fate, death came in days, sometimes in weeks. Even the healers could not predict when it was time to pass into the afterlife until a warrior's body began to shut down.

Dying without an heir was one of the few things Tesh-Dar had ever truly feared in her long life, and she knew that death could take her at any time. But she could not choose an heir out of fear, for it was a choice she could make only once. After she surrendered her powers to her successor, there was no turning back.

"Do not let your heart be troubled so, my priestess," a voice said softly from behind her.

Tesh-Dar turned to see Pan'ne-Sharakh standing at the open door. Of the many souls Tesh-Dar had known in her life, Pan'ne-Sharakh was truly unique. The greatest living mistress of the armorer caste, she was among the oldest of their race, far older even than Tesh-Dar. Such were her skills that she had served as the armorer of the reigning Empress, and the Empress before Her, before retiring from Her personal service as age took its toll. Unlike the warriors, the clawless ones showed their age over time, long before death came for them. Her collar bore more pendants than Tesh-Dar's, with rows hanging down nearly to her waist, shimmering against the black of her robes. Tesh-Dar had known her since she was a child. Much of their lives had been spent on opposite sides of the galaxy over the many cycles since they had first met. After Tesh-Dar had taken over as headmistress at this *kazha* several dozen cycles ago, Pan'ne-Sharakh had joined her, and since then they had been nearly constant companions whose personalities complemented each other: Tesh-Dar was the embodiment of physical power and ferocity, while Pan'ne-Sharakh represented wisdom and faith.

"Forgive me, mistress," Tesh-Dar told her with a warm but troubled smile, "but much weighs upon my heart."

"As it must in this time of war," Pan'ne-Sharakh replied as she shuffled into the room. "Something to ease your troubles, have I brought," she said with an impish grin as she held up two mugs of the bitter ale that was a favorite drink among their kind.

"You will put the healers to shame," Tesh-Dar told her, gratefully accepting one of the large mugs. After she took a long swallow of the warm, bitter drink, she said, "It is not the war with the humans that troubles me, mistress. It is my own mortality. I do not fear death, but if it comes before I have found a successor..." She shrugged. "Then my life - and that of all those who came before me - will have been without meaning, without purpose. I believe Li'ara-Zhurah may be the one, but her soul is yet stricken with grief, and anguished all the more by her first mating. She is the closest I have ever found to a worthy successor, yet I am unsure. *I must* be certain. I can make no mistake." She would rather face a *genoth*, a dragon native to the Homeworld, with her bare claws than the bitter emptiness of failure.

Tesh-Dar fought to keep the rising tide of trepidation in her soul from gaining a firm hold, for the strength of her Bloodsong carried her emotions to every soul in the Empire like tall waves upon the ocean, and it was irresponsible of her to let her worries so taint the emotions of the peers.

"To my words, you will listen, child," Pan'ne-Sharakh said in an ancient dialect of the Old Tongue that was rarely spoken anymore. She lifted a hand to caress Tesh-Dar's cheek as she explained, "In all the cycles of my long life, never have I known a greater soul than yours, save for the Empress Herself. Upon the second step from the throne do you stand, high priestess of the Desh-Ka, but not merely for your feats of glory in the arena." She placed her hand over the center of Tesh-Dar's chest, on the cyan rune of the Desh-Ka that blazed from her shimmering black armor. "What has made you great is here, in your heart, a heart that is known throughout the Empire. I know not if Li'ara-Zhurah is to be your chosen one. But know it you will, when the time is upon you. No doubt, no uncertainty will there be. All that has come to pass in the thousands of generations since the First Empress left us has been for a purpose. The strength and powers you received after the Change, when you became high priestess of the Desh-Ka, was for a purpose." Her eyes blazed as she stared up at Tesh-Dar, radiating an inner strength that the priestess could feel pulsing through the Bloodsong. "The mating cycles are becoming unbalanced, with more males and sterile warriors being born each generation, and the end of days for the First Empire looms. *Yet even this has a purpose.*"

“But what?” Tesh-Dar asked in frustration. “The end of all that we have ever done, all that we have ever created? Leaving nothing but dead monuments to half a million cycles of civilization?”

“No, my child,” Pan’ne-Sharakh said, a knowing look on her face as if she had already seen the future. “The death of the First Empire shall herald the birth of the Second.”

TWO

The conference room was small and sparsely furnished with a faux wood table and a dozen comfortable but well-worn chairs. Several vidphones that had seen better days were spread out over the table top. A large wall display, the only device in the room less than ten years old, glowed with brilliant images. The carpet had once been a regal blue that had long since faded, the deep pile worn through to the nap in several places. The odors of caustic cleaners, furniture polish, and air fresheners competed with the reek of stale cigarette smoke for dominance in the room's confines. There were no windows to air out the smell, for this room was buried a hundred meters below the surface, and the air handlers had never worked properly. It was always either too hot or too cold.

The room's shabby condition was ignored by the men and women who sat around the table. Like the room itself, they were shabby and worn. Their eyes, however, reflected hope and determination as they focused their attention on the wall display.

"Turn it up, please," said a man seated at the head of the table. In his mid-fifties, he had the distinguished look of a scholar. In fact, he had taught literature at a university on Earth for a number of years before the troubles had begun. Before he had been compelled to return to his home planet of Riga, eventually to become president of Riga's planetary government. It was a grandiose-sounding position that, in reality, left him little more than a figurehead, a lackey to the greater power that had wrested control of his planet, of his people. He tried to suppress the hope that the words he was about to hear from a woman he had never met would mean the release of his

planet from bondage and tyranny. A man who was well acquainted with disappointment, he found that he was unable to hold back a tingle of excitement. His name was Valdis Roze.

A young man with deep circles under his eyes quickly manipulated the controls for the wall display, bringing up the volume. On the wall display, the recording of what had taken place on Earth three weeks ago began to play. Roze already knew the substance of it and had asked the young man to skip forward past the pretty colors and music of the inauguration music to the speech. He wanted to see, to hear, the words of the first President of the Confederation of Humanity. He knew she had intended for everyone in the human sphere to hear her words, but not all humans were allowed such privileges. Information access for the citizens of Riga was tightly controlled by their masters on the neighboring planet of Saint Petersburg.

A rarity among even the great numbers of stars in the galaxy, the Saint Petersburg system had two habitable worlds. Saint Petersburg had been settled in the first wave of the Diaspora, the great exodus from Earth after a series of wars that had shattered the existing governments and killed untold millions. The colonists had mainly been ethnic Russians, plus many people from Russia's immediate neighbors, including the Baltic states. The colony had done well for half a century until the Russian-controlled government did what Russian governments had tended to do throughout history: it turned to tyranny. Most of the minority ethnic groups were forcibly resettled to a neighboring habitable planet that was later named Riga. The planet was habitable, but its bitter winters and titanic storms during the summer months made survival a challenge.

Riga's weather, however, did nothing to dissuade the population's masters on Saint Petersburg from retaining tight control for the next couple of centuries until a visiting dignitary of the *Alliance Française*, investigating allegations of genocide on Riga, was assassinated by the Saint Petersburg security service. That had triggered the Saint Petersburg War, with Earth and the *Alliance Française* leading a military coalition that had originally been intended only to disarm Saint Petersburg. The ruling government did not go down easily, and it took six years of bloody fighting before they were finally defeated.

The victory had left a weak government in its wake, and in the years that passed after the weary coalition forces returned home, old habits began to reemerge. Roze thought about how, over the last half dozen years, the Saint Petersburg government had quietly reasserted its hold on its former possession. Their security services no longer murdered Rigan citizens in the middle of the night, but the oppression was no less real. While Riga still enjoyed diplomatic relations with many other worlds, Saint Petersburg controlled all inter-system communications. They also held Riga's economy in an iron grip of outrageous taxation and open corruption, and none of the worlds that had helped Riga before seemed inclined in recent years to challenge Saint Petersburg on their behalf.

Now alien invaders had come.

Roze thought of his reaction – stark incredulity – at the news first of the *Aurora*, the Terran survey vessel that had brought back word that humans had encountered a sentient species, and then the annihilation of the colony on Keran. The Saint Petersburg government had flatly labeled the entire affair a hoax, but that only served to increase the odds of it being true in Roze's eyes. The video reports of the battle were too surreal even for a Bollywood production

Like the video he and his cabinet were about to watch now of the Confederation President's first speech, the reports from Keran had been smuggled from Saint Petersburg through a series of informants. St. Petersburg jealously controlled the communications buoys that stored and received information from the courier ships that carried information between systems, there being no means to rapidly send data directly from planet to planet. Riga had no direct access to the buoys and the information they relayed, but the Rigans had a well-established ring of spies and informants in the Saint Petersburg government. Oppressed they might be, but poorly informed they were not.

"That's fine," President Roze said when the young man brought the volume up. The audio was just as impressive as the image display: Roze felt like he was standing right next to Natalie McKenna, former President of the Terran Planetary Government and newly elected President of the Confederation, as she began to speak.

“Citizens of the Confederation,” she began, her strong voice a reflection of the will that had carried the Terran Planetary Government from a state of denial to a fierce determination to survive in the aftermath of the Kreelan invasion and destruction of the human colony on Keran. “*Citizens of the Confederation,*” she repeated. “While there are and have been governments in the human sphere made up of more than one world, for the first time since the Diaspora have we truly begun to look beyond our differences, to unite for a common purpose. That purpose, my fellow citizens – my fellow *humans* – is our survival as a species.

“You have all seen the reports of what happened on Keran,” she went on, her voice dropping lower. “Millions of people – of *our* people – were wiped out. The fleet of the *Alliance Française* was nearly destroyed, and Terra’s fleet severely mauled. Yet our combined fleets had almost been enough to stop them. *Almost*. We did not believe then. But we believe now. I am here to tell you that there will never again be another *almost*. Never again will we give less than our all to defend our people, to defend humanity itself. If the Kreelan Empire has come looking for a fight, we will give it one. And we will emerge victorious!”

The crowd, several million people lining the streets of old New York City on Earth, roared in support.

“Yet the battle fought at Keran showed us the importance of unity. Our fleets and ground forces could not communicate properly, even before the enemy jammed their signals. Our weapons and equipment are not standardized, making them most costly to produce and maintain. Most important of all, we have had no unified military or political leadership. Some see that as a weakness, fearing the specter of totalitarianism, or the loss of national sovereignty.” She paused, looking out over the crowd gathered below the new presidential complex. “My friends,” she said, “the Kreelans do not care about our differences. They do not care about our history. They do not care about any of our problems, any more than they care about our dreams and aspirations. They have come for one thing, and one thing only: to kill us. Unless we unite, unless we can pull together and form a common defense, we may not prevail.” Drawing herself up to stand even taller, she went on, “In that spirit, and as my first official act as President of the Confederation of Humanity, I extend an open invitation to every world to

join the Confederation. There will be commitments necessary for the common defense of human space, but your planetary sovereignty will be respected. The Confederation's purpose, reflected in its charter, is not to subdue or absorb, but to defend and protect. As president, I offer that protection unconditionally to any world that chooses to join us..."

Roze signaled the young man to stop the playback. He had heard enough. Looking around the room, he saw the answer to his unasked question – *Should we risk joining?* – written on every face. For there was much risk, both to Riga's citizens and to themselves personally. There were no Saint Petersburg security forces currently on Riga, as that had been banned under the armistice twenty years ago. Everyone around the table knew, however, that Saint Petersburg had rearmed in blatant violation of the armistice treaty, building heavy weapons and expanding their "coast guard" into a small but potent navy. They also had enough interplanetary lift capacity to land a large occupation force on Riga quickly. Riga, by contrast, had only a token paramilitary force of policemen who also trained as militia.

Roze and the others had no illusions about what the "St. Petes" could – and would – do if sufficiently provoked. Riga petitioning to join the Confederation would certainly be provocative; the only question was how strong of a response Saint Petersburg would make.

On the other hand, if they did nothing, Roze was sure Riga's lot would only become worse. There was little enough international pressure to keep Saint Petersburg in line, and with the threat from the Kreelan Empire looming, even that would evaporate. Saint Petersburg would have a free hand to deal with Riga however they chose.

"It is our best chance, Valdis," his interior minister, who also doubled as defense minister, told him. "At worst, we will only accelerate whatever the Russians are planning. At best..." he shrugged.

"At best," Roze finished for him, "we may at last have true independence." He looked across the table at his foreign minister. "Send an envoy to Earth with a petition to allow Riga to join the Confederation."

As the room filled with discussion of fears and opportunities, Roze silently wondered how long he had before the Saint Petersburg secret police came for him.

President Natalie McKenna hated the new presidential complex, particularly her main office. She appreciated that it was new and intended to support the needs of the leader not of a world, but of a union of worlds larger than any other formed in post-Diaspora history. It was huge, over four times the size of the White House that had been the home of the presidents of the old United States, with dozens of rooms and a staff that numbered in the hundreds. Fitted with every conceivable gadget, all the latest and greatest, the complex was a marvel of technology. Everything was so high-tech, in fact, that at first she was afraid of using the vidphones for fear of not being able to figure out how to work them.

No, she decided, the only thing she liked about the new complex was the view. Built near the old Terran Presidential complex in what was once old New York City, she had a better view of the water and the Statue of Liberty. She had arranged her office so that her desk faced toward the window wall that framed the statue in the distance. The sight of Lady Liberty brought her comfort and gave her strength. Today she needed more than usual.

“How the *hell* could we have let this happen?” she cursed. “I shouldn’t have to find out about a resurgent militant government on Saint Petersburg from a Rigan envoy! We should have known!”

Secretary of State Hamilton Barca, who could easily have been mistaken for a football linebacker, frowned. President McKenna only cursed when she was extremely upset. Looking across the coffee table at the woman who had been his friend and boss as they had climbed up the political ladder, he was worried for her. An African-American from the old American state of Georgia, Natalie McKenna had grown up with nothing but an unconquerable sense of determination, eventually rising to the most powerful position on Earth as the president of the Terran Planetary Government. Now, with the formation of the Confederation to rally humanity’s colonies to a common defense against the Kreelan menace, she had become the most powerful individual in the human sphere. Such power, however, was an unthinkable burden of responsibility for a single human being, and he knew the strain was slowly killing her. She had lost far too much weight, her skin now tightly stretched over her cheekbones, and her hair – raven black only two years ago – had turned almost completely gray. Her face was lined from

worry, and there were dark rings beneath her eyes from a constant sleep deficit. Those dark brown eyes, however, were as clear and sharp as ever. Right now they were looking out at the Statue of Liberty, for which he was glad. Had she turned them on him, he was afraid he would ignite from her anger and be burned to a cinder.

“It’s not Hamilton’s fault, Madam President,” Vladimir Penkovsky, former head of the Terran Intelligence Agency and now the head of the new Confederation Intelligence Service, said quietly. “We have been reporting for several years on the rearming of Saint Petersburg and the quiet return to power of the ideologies and policies that led to the war twenty years ago. The armistice left a power vacuum in its wake that was filled by a weak government, and over time that government has been suborned by the old guard. There can be no doubt: our sources have been excellent; the information is very detailed and we believe it to be quite reliable.”

Penkovsky wished he had intelligence half as good on the other problem areas he faced. Saint Petersburg was a special case: there was a great deal of yearning by many of the ethnic Russians there to have the freedoms that their Terran cousins had, and many Saint Petersburg citizens secretly provided information to the Terran intelligence services. Post-Diaspora history, however, had irrevocably separated the two peoples in terms of their governmental views.

Like the other major powers of the time before the Diaspora, Russia had been devastated by the wars that had led to a frenzy of interstellar colonization missions as the world teetered on the brink of total annihilation. China, its natural resources guttering out, launched a massive invasion of Russian Siberia to take what it needed, with a simultaneous attack against northeastern India to secure that strategic theater. Totally overwhelmed, the Russians fought back the only way they could: they obliterated the invading Chinese armies with nuclear weapons. The Indians, also reeling from China’s attack, followed suit. Once the mushroom clouds had dissipated, half the major cities in India and Russia were burning nuclear pyres. In China, no city with a population over a hundred thousand people was left standing. After the war, the Russians who were left banded together politically with the other major survivors of the wars, notably the United States and India, and the resulting unlikely melting pot had, by and large, been extremely

successful. It had been a long road back from the brink, but since then Earth's inheritors had enjoyed a kind of global peace that modern humankind had never before known.

Saint Petersburg, on the other hand, had gone the opposite direction. The colonization mission was originally led by a small oligarchy of powerful men and women who had been able to muster the resources to finance the mission. Their vision was to create their ideal of "Mother Russia" on a planetary scale, free of the external influences and threats that Terran Russia had suffered. Paranoid, ruthless, and power-hungry, successive generations fell into tyranny in a succession of guises. At last, a form of neo-Communism arose that fostered atrocities that would have made Josef Stalin proud, and eventually led to war with Terra and the *Alliance Française*. The armistice had ended the ordeal twenty years ago, but old ways died hard. Sometimes, they didn't die at all.

"If we had that much intelligence information," McKenna growled, "then why didn't we do anything about it. Why the *hell* wasn't I informed?"

"You were, Madam President," Barca told her as gently as he could, deciding to dive with Penkovsky into the vat of boiling oil, figuratively speaking. "We got the reports, and plenty of the information showed up in your daily briefings over the last several years. But none of us, least of all me, was going to make more of an issue out of it than was absolutely necessary."

"My God, Hamilton," McKenna said, turning to face him, her face a mask of shocked anger, "why didn't you?" She turned her glare on Penkovsky. "Why didn't *both* of you?"

"Economics," Barca answered bluntly. "After the war, Saint Petersburg was an economic disaster. But Korolev, the new bastard in charge, managed to turn things around by exporting strategic minerals and other raw materials that are always in critical demand. Everybody lined up for the peace dividend."

"Including us," McKenna said softly, closing her eyes. She had been in the Terran Senate then, and had voted for the trade treaty with Saint Petersburg. It had seemed like such a good idea at the time.

"And the Alliance, as well," another voice sighed. Laurent Navarre looked down at the polished wood surface of the coffee table. The former ambassador from the *Alliance Française* to the Terran Planetary Government,

he was now McKenna's vice president. Intelligent, charming, and extremely competent, he was a much-valued addition to McKenna's leadership team. "As you may recall, our economy, and Earth's, was in a very bad state in the years after the war. Korolev's government made such a handsome offer to all of us that it was impossible to refuse." He shrugged. "Without that agreement and access to their resources, it would have been at least another decade before our economies would have recovered."

"We made a deal with the Devil," McKenna grated.

"It was not the first time, Madam President," Navarre told her levelly, "and it will not be the last. It is the nature of what we must do sometimes. You know this."

"Yes, I do," she said tiredly as she sank down into the wing-back chair at the end of the coffee table, facing the others. This small group was the hardened core of her cabinet since her first administration in the Terran Planetary Government. She had brought them all with her when she won the election to become the Confederation's first president. The only one missing was Joshua Sabine, the Defense Minister, who was away with the Chief of Naval Staff to review the new ships coming off the ways in the orbital shipyards. "So, it seems we have a bit of a quandary," she told them. "Saint Petersburg has rearmed in violation of the armistice. I suppose we could count that on the good side of things, in that it potentially gives us more firepower against the Kreeleans."

Penkovsky snorted, shaking his head. "They would defend their own world, Madam President," he told her, "but they would never send forces to the aid of another system. I doubt they would even bother to defend Riga. There would be no tears shed by Korolev if Riga shared Keran's fate."

McKenna frowned. "Which brings us to the next problem: if we accept Riga into the Confederation, how is Saint Petersburg going to react?"

"Saint Petersburg's reaction is almost immaterial," Navarre pointed out, "because we do not really have a choice about accepting Riga. The Confederation charter is explicit: membership is open to every world that is willing to help provide for the common defense of humanity. If Riga is willing to meet the requirements of raising a Territorial Army and provides the designated per capita quota of manpower and resources for combat units and shipbuilding, they will be accepted. The Confederation will then be

obligated to help train, arm, and equip them. There are some stipulations to keep out the rogue worlds, but not many: a planet led by anything short of an outright dictatorship can meet the basic political requirements." He shrugged. "Saint Petersburg could join if they wanted, and we would be obligated to give them the same benefits."

"Okay," McKenna conceded, "we don't have any choice about accepting Riga. That still doesn't answer my question: how will Korolev's government react?"

"Despite the armistice conditions that made Riga independent," Barca told her, "Saint Petersburg has never really accepted it. They've made placating noises and done the minimum required to observe Rigan sovereignty, but that's it: they still believe that Riga is nothing more than a breakaway state that will someday be brought to heel." He scowled. "Frankly, I'm surprised Riga was able to get an envoy here. If Korolev had known..."

"There would have been no envoy," Penkovsky finished for him.

"Just how far is Korolev willing to go on this?" McKenna asked. "We can't afford to have a second front, a civil war, going on while we're trying to save ourselves from the Kreelans!" Fortunately, the enemy had made no further major moves against human space in the months since the fall of Keran. There had been unverified reports of Kreelan ships in many sectors, but most of them were thought to be either erroneous or even fabricated. The only attacks on shipping had been from pirates, and none of the colonies had reported anything unusual. In some quarters, this long lull was being called the "phony war," and an increasing amount of the Confederation government's efforts were being devoted to keeping the Kreelan threat foremost in the mind of a public that was easily distracted. McKenna, however, didn't believe that this lull was going to last much longer: she thought of it more as the calm before the storm.

"If we arm Riga and provide them a guarantee of protection – which applies to *any* external threat, not just the Kreelan Empire – as written in the Confederation charter," Penkovsky said with a look at Barca, "Korolev will simply not allow it."

Barca nodded in agreement.

“He’s willing to go to war with the Confederation over this?” she asked Penkovsky.

“I believe so, yes.”

“Bloody hell,” McKenna breathed.

“There may be worse,” Penkovsky ventured, clearly uncomfortable about what he was about to say. “I happened to have a report flagged for my review this morning that we recently received from a new source on Saint Petersburg. I...can barely credit the information, but in light of this discussion I cannot in good conscience not mention it.”

“Spit it out, Vlad,” McKenna ordered tersely.

“You must keep in mind that we have not yet had time to validate this source or the content of the report,” he went on hesitantly. “The source suggests that Saint Petersburg may be developing thermonuclear weapons.”

There was stunned silence around the room. Terran forces had nuclear weapons, as did the Alliance, but the stockpiles amounted to only a few hundred weapons. None had been used, anywhere, since the last wars on Earth before the Diaspora. After the devastation Earth had suffered, no one had ever wanted to unleash them again. With the threat from the Kreelans, McKenna had very reluctantly given authorization to increase the weapons stockpile, but only slowly. If the Kreelans used them first, she would give the Navy all the nukes they wanted. But she would not be the first one to open Pandora’s Box in this war.

“I do not believe it,” Navarre said carefully. “Saint Petersburg has very little in the way of accessible uranium deposits, and what nuclear material they import for their power industry – virtually all of it from the Alliance in the form of pre-manufactured fusion cores – is carefully tracked by an Alliance regulatory commission. I do not see how Saint Petersburg could be getting the uranium and plutonium they would require without smuggling it in. That would be extremely difficult, if not impossible, with the tight controls over uranium mining and production of fissile materials.”

“That is what I thought, too,” Penkovsky told him, “until I read this report. Tell me, Laurent,” he said, “with a power industry that has been based on fusion, solar, and wind generation for generations, why would they have built a few dozen massive coal-fired power plants in the last seven years? And

why put them in out of the way locations that must make getting power to the grid extremely difficult?”

Navarre sat back, thinking. He knew a great deal about the planet, having been stationed there as part of the peacekeeping force after the armistice. “Saint Petersburg has a great deal of coal, formed just as it did on Earth, and with very similar qualities. It is easy, if ecologically devastating, to mine it. But I cannot think of why they would need coal power plants: the fusion plants alone give them a net excess of electrical power. As for why they would put them in odd places, I cannot say.”

“I must have missed something,” McKenna interjected drily. “I thought we were talking about nuclear weapons here, not fossil fuel for electricity.”

“Madam President,” Penkovsky said, “a fact that was previously unknown to me is that coal typically contains between one and ten parts per million of a particular element that, theoretically, can be captured from the fly ash, which is a byproduct of burning coal.” He looked her in the eyes. “That element is uranium. And of that, just under one percent is uranium-235, which is the key ingredient for making nuclear weapons. They would need to burn a lot to get what they need. But if the source’s information is correct, the coal burning facilities they have could produce several metric tons of uranium-235 per year. They would still need to refine it, but based on the enormous quantity of coal these plants are reportedly burning, and assuming they have been producing uranium-235 for at least the last three years, they may already have a stockpile of at least three hundred weapons.” He grimaced before he went on, saying, “My analysts also say that this is a very conservative estimate. The information also suggests they are manufacturing tritium, which is a key ingredient for making fusion weapons, but he did not know where or how they were doing it.”

“Good God,” Barca breathed. “So you’re saying that if they burn enough coal and can capture the uranium from the ash...”

“Vlad,” McKenna said, careful to keep her voice level, “we simply *cannot* have a nuclear war in the human sphere. I would say that under any circumstances, but especially with the Kreelean Empire stalking us.” Penkovsky made to speak, but McKenna silenced him with a raised hand. “I know the information isn’t verified. I understand that. But you’ve got to pin this down. If the Confederation has to defend Riga against Saint Petersburg,

I don't want our forces facing nuclear weapons. Nor do I want to give Korolev the chance to use them to terrorize other worlds beyond Riga. Pull out all the stops on this one, Vlad. We have *got* to know if this is true and how far they've gotten. And if it's true, we've got to find a way to stop them."

Penkovsky, his face grim, nodded. "Yes, Madam President."

Turning to Navarre, McKenna said, "Get with Defense Minister Sabine and Admiral Tiernan on this right away to put together a contingency deployment plan. If we get hard confirmation that this information is true, I want a Navy task force and Marines ready to go in as quickly as possible..."

Lost in thought as his limousine whisked him from the presidential complex back to the newly constructed Confederation Intelligence Services headquarters building, Penkovsky came to the rapid conclusion that their best chance of finding out what was happening on Saint Petersburg lay with a particular special asset.

Her codename was SCARLET.